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After listening to Beautiful Jade sing for a while and drinking a few cups of wine, Qian Long had begun to feel a little sleepy.

Beautiful Jade smiled. "Would you like to lie down?" she asked. He nodded in answer, and she helped him take off his clothes and boots, led him over to the bed and covered him with the bed clothes.

"I'll just go out for a second, then come back to you," she said. Feeling lulled and drowsy from the scented pillow and sheets, Qian Long heard a faint sound in front of the bed.

"You mischievous girl," he said with a smile. "What's the hold up?"

The curtain opened and a head appeared. Under the candlelight Qian Long could see it had a pock-marked face, and thick sideburns, very different from Beautiful Jade's fair features. He rubbed his eyes in disbelief and looked again just as the intruder placed a shining dagger by his neck and said quietly in Cantonese: "Damn your ancestors, you bastard Emperor, make one sound and I'll use this."

Qian Long's lust dissipated in a flash as if he had been doused with a bucket of iced water. The man said nothing more, but stuffed a handkerchief into Qian Long's mouth, then rolled him up tightly in the eiderdown and carried him off.

Unable to move or make a sound, Qian Long's eyes stared at the blackness and felt himself being carried down a flight of steps. His nose caught the musty smell of mud and dank humidity, then after a moment, he felt himself being carried upwards again. He realized the man must have emerged from a hidden tunnel in the room.

He felt himself being shaken and heard the sound of wheels starting to move, and knew he was in a carriage. In his terror, he wondered who had kidnapped him and where they were taking him.

The carriage travelled for a long time. After a while the road became uneven, and the carriage shook and bumped about, indicating they had left the city. Finally they stopped, and Qian Long felt himself lifted out of the carriage and carried upwards, one step after another endlessly until he thought they must be ascending a high peak. He was so frightened, his whole body quaked, and surrounded by darkness inside the quilt, he almost began to cry.

Finally, he was put down with a bump. He waited quietly, not daring to speak, but a long while passed without anything happening. He slowly pushed aside the quilt in which he was wrapped and looked out to find everything in total darkness. He fancied he could hear the sound of waves breaking a long way off, and concentrating he also heard the wind rippling through fir trees and the clear, steady chime of a brass bell. The wind became stronger and stronger, gusting angrily, and he thought he felt the structure he was in rocking slightly. Even more afraid, he moved as if to stand up.

"If you want to live, don't move," a deep voice close by growled. Qian Long jumped in fright and stayed as still as he could.

Gradually, the wind subsided and it began to grow light until he could see he was in a small room. Having climbed for so long to reach it, he wondered if it was a house on the peak of a mountain. He heard a series of snuffling noises, and listening carefully, realised the guards were eating noodles. From the sound of it there were two of them, chewing great mouthfuls with relish. Having been awake all night, he felt hungry and his appetite sharpened as the smell of the noodles wafted over to him.

The two finished eating. One of the guards walked over and placed a full bowl of prawn and eel noodle soup about five feet from his head.

"Is that for me?" Qian Long wondered to himself. But the guards said nothing, and despite his hunger he did not dare to open his mouth to ask.

"That bowl of noodles is for you," one of the guards finally said. "There's no poison in it."

Qian Long was overjoyed. He sat up to get the bowl, but a wave of cold struck his body and he remembered that he was naked. He hastily lay down again and wrapped himself in the quilt. How could he stand up in front of strangers without a stitch on?

"Damn your ancestors, so you're afraid of poison are you?" one of the guards said. "All right, I'll eat it to show you." He picked up the bowl and guzzled its contents down.

Qian Long looked at his scar-covered face in fright. "I am not wearing anything," he said. "Please get me some clothing."

Even though he said please, his words still smacked of an Imperial order. The man grunted. "I don't have time," he replied. It was 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi.

Qian Long's anger surged up, but remembering his life was in their hands, he swallowed his Imperial pride.

"Are you Red Flower Society men?" he asked. "I want to see your leader, Chen."

"You had our Brother Wen treated so badly, his body is a mass of wounds. The Great Helmsman is busy finding a doctor to help heal him. He has no time to see you," Shi replied. "Maybe when Brother Wen has recovered, we'll think about it."

Qian Long wondered how many months or years it might take for Wen to recover.

"And if Brother Wen doesn't recover," said the other guard, 'Iron Pagoda' Yang, "that's it for you. A life for a life."

Qian Long pretended he hadn't heard.

The two guards began talking at once, cursing the Manchu invaders for seizing the lands of the Chinese people, and the officials and landlords for the way they oppressed the common folk. Qian Long was shocked by the hatred evident in every word. At noon, two other guards arrived to relieve them, and as the new pair ate, they discussed the sadistic ways in which magistrates punished and tortured honest citizens, describing in great detail how slivers of bamboo were forced under finger nails, buttocks branded with red-hot iron bars and bodies stretched on racks.

"When we have seized all these corrupt officials," said one, "we'll give them a taste of their own medicine."

"First we have to deal with their leader," replied the other.

To Qian Long, that day seemed as long as a year. Towards evening, the Twin Knights took over. First, they drank in dour silence. Then, when they were slightly drunk, they began discussing the cruel and unusual methods used by the fighting community to take vengeance on enemies: how Black Tiger Kao had once been arrested, and later went back and gouged out the eyes of the official responsible; how White Horse Tan had avenged his brother's death by burying alive the murderer's family.

Hungry and frightened, Qian Long covered his ears, but every word still found its way in. The twins displayed great staying-power, and talked until morning, cursing the "Turtles" an untold number of times. The candlelight flickering on the Twin Knights' features made them look like living ghosts, and Qian Long was unable to close his eyes once during the night.

The next morning, 'Buddha' Zhao and 'Leopard' Wei came. Qian Long looked at the kindly face of Zhao and the handsome face of Wei, very different from the demon-like guards they replaced and he relaxed slightly. But his hunger was becoming too much to bear.

"I want to see your leader, Chen," he said to Zhao. "Please pass on the message for me."

"The Great Helmsman is busy today," Zhao replied. "Maybe in a few days time."

Qian Long wondered if he would still be alive after a few more days of such treatment. "Well, please get me something to eat first to ease my hunger."

"All right," replied Zhao. "His Imperial Highness wants a banquet," he shouted at the top of his voice. "Make preparations quickly!" Wei bowed and left.

Qian Long was overjoyed. "Get a set of clothing for me," he said.

"His Imperial Highness wants some clothes! Bring a gown for him quickly!" Zhao bawled out again.

"You're a good man," said Qian Long. "What's your name? I will reward you well later." Zhao smiled slightly but did not answer. Qian Long suddenly recognized him. "Ah, now I remember," he said. "You're the one who is so good at Dart Kung Fu."

Meng brought a set of clothing in and placed it on the quilt. Qian Long sat up, then saw it was a suit of Chinese clothes in the style of the Ming dynasty which the Manchus had overthrown. He hesitated.

"That's the only set of clothes we have," Zhao said. "Wear them or not, as you like."

Qian Long considered the situation. How could he, as the Emperor of the Manchu dynasty, wear a set of Ming dynasty Chinese clothes? But if he didn't put something on, he would not be able to eat, and after one day and two nights of hunger, he dispensed with his misgivings and donned the garments.

The clothes felt unfamiliar, but there was something dashing and elegant about them. He walked the few steps over to the window and looked out, and started involuntarily. Forests and fields were spread out before him like a chess board, and in the far distance was a great river spotted with sails. He realised he was at the top of a tall pagoda, and from its position and design, recognized it as the famous Six Harmonies Pagoda near Hangzhou.

Several more hours passed before someone came to announce: "The banquet is ready. Please come down and eat."

Qian Long followed Zhao and Wei down one floor where a large round table had been set up in the centre of the room. All the seats around the table were already occupied except for three, and as Qian Long descended, the diners stood up and saluted him. Qian Long was secretly ecstatic at this sudden display of respect.

"Our Great Helmsman says Your Highness and he have been close friends ever since you first met," said Priest Wu Chen. "As a result, he has invited you here to stay for a few days to provide an opportunity for the two of you to have a discussion. However, important matters have suddenly come up which require the Great Helmsman's attention and he has asked me to convey his sincere apologies."

Qian Long grunted noncommittally. Priest Wu Chen invited him to take a seat, and Qian Long took the guest of honour's place.

A servant brought up a flask of wine and the priest took it from him.

"We brothers are very uncouth, completely incapable of waiting on Your Highness properly. Please do not be offended," he said, pouring wine into Qian Long's cup. But as it reached the rim, his face darkened.

"His Majesty must have the very best wine," he shouted angrily at the servant. "How dare you bring us this tepid spirit?" He picked up the cup and threw its contents into the servant's face.

"This is only wine we have here, sir," replied the servant apologetically. "I will immediately go to the city and buy some of better quality."

"And be quick about it," shouted Priest Wu Chen. "Wine such as this is all right for coarse people like ourselves, but how can you offer it to His Highness?"

'Mastermind' Xu took the wine flask from him and poured out a cup for everyone else, leaving only Qian Long's cup empty, apologising effusively as he did so.

A moment later, another servant brought in four steaming dishes of food, one of lightly-fried shrimps, another piled with salted pork ribs, a third with steamed fish, and a fourth of fried chicken slices. Qian Long breathed in the fragrant aroma of the food, but Priest Wu Chen frowned.

"Who cooked this food?" he demanded. A man took two steps forward. "I did," he said.

"What sort of object are you? Why didn't you arrange for His Majesty's favourite cook, Zhang Anguan, to come to prepare some dishes? How can you expect His Majesty to eat such rough Hangzhou food?"

"These dishes look delicious," protested Qian Long. "They certainly cannot be called rough." He picked up his chopsticks and stretched over to pick up some food. Lu Feiqing, sitting next to him, stretched out his own chopsticks and caught Qian Long's between them.

"These dishes are too coarse for Your Highness. You would not wish to have an upset stomach," he said, and applying a slight amount of pressure, snapped Qian Long's chopsticks in two.

Qian Long's face flushed deep red and he slammed the chopstick ends down onto the table. The others pretended not to notice and began eating.

"Go and get His Highness's personal cook to prepare some food quickly," Xu shouted. "His Highness is hungry, do you hear?"

The cook hastily retired. Qian Long knew they were playing with him. Hunger burned in his stomach as he watched the others eating and drinking voraciously. He was livid with rage, but he could not risk displaying his feelings. When they had finished, a servant came in with some tea.

"This tea is not too bad," said Xu. "Your Highness may like to drink a cupful."

Qian Long drank the cup dry in two mouthfuls, but it only served to aggravate his hunger. 'Crocodile' Jiang rubbed his belly appreciatively and said: "I'm full!"

"We are making arrangements for a proper banquet for you, Your Highness," 'Buddha' Zhao said.

Priest Wu Chen stamped his foot and exclaimed that the Great Helmsman would be very displeased to find his honoured guest had been kept waiting.

Lord Zhou began clicking his iron gallstones together. "Are you hungry, Your Majesty?" he asked. Qian Long said nothing.

"What do you mean, hungry?" asked 'Crocodile' Jiang. "I'm full!"

"The well-fed never appreciate the anguish of the hungry," added Xu. "There are countless millions of common people who are starving, but when have those in authority ever spared a thought for them? Having been a little bit hungry today, perhaps Your Highness will in future understand more about how the common people suffer when they starve."

"Some people are hungry for months and years on end. Some never eat their fill once in a whole lifetime," said one of the Twin Knights. "What's so special about not eating anything for a day or two?"

Most of the Red Flower Society heroes had been born into poverty. Their anger rose as they thought of the past and they all began talking at once, swapping stories.

Qian Long's face went pale as he listened. He found himself moved by their sincerity. "Could such misery really exist in the world?" he asked himself. The more he heard, the more embarrassed he felt, and finally he rose and went back upstairs. The heroes did not try to stop him.

A few hours later, he smelt the aroma of mutton with onions and green peppers wafting up from below. This was a speciality of the Imperial chef, Zhang Anguan, and just as Qian Long was wondering if it could really be him, Zhang Anguan ran up and kowtowed, saying: "Please come and eat, Your Highness."

"What are you doing here?" Qian Long asked in amazement.

"Your slave was watching an opera performance in a park yesterday when I was kidnapped. Today, I was asked to wait on you, and your slave was delighted to have the opportunity."

Qian Long nodded and went downstairs. The table had been set with a number of dishes including the mutton, all them his personal favorites. As well as the main dishes, there were also a dozen or so plates of small delicacies, and his heart leapt for joy at the sight of the feast. Chef Zhang filled a bowl of rice for him.

"Please eat, Your Highness," said Priest Wu Chen.

Qian Long wondered whether they would allow him to eat this time. He was just about to raise his chopsticks when a young girl came in carrying a cat.

"Daddy," she said to Lord Zhou. "Kitty is hungry."

The cat struggled to free itself and jumped onto the table. The animal ate a couple of mouthfuls from the dishes spread before Qian Long, then it suddenly went rigid, dropped onto the table top, dead.

Qian Long's face went white, and Chef Zhang, shaking from fright, knelt down and said: "Your Highness...Your Highness...the food...they've poisoned the food...don't eat it!"

Qian Long laughed out loud. "You have committed rebellion and other heinous crimes. Now you wish to assassinate me," he said. "If you are going

to kill me, do it cleanly. Why go to the trouble of poisoning the food?" He pushed his chair back and stood up.

"Your Highness, are you sure this meal is inedible?" asked Priest Wu Chen.

"You traitorous thieves!" Qian Long shouted, his anger breaking through. "We'll see what sort of an end you all come to!"

Priest Wu Chen slammed his hand down on the table. "For a real man, life and death are decided by Heaven!" he shouted. "If you won't eat, then I will! Who has the guts to join me?"

He picked up his chopsticks, took some food from one of the dishes the cat had tried, and began chewing noisily. The other heroes sat down again too, all saying: "If we die, we die. What does it matter?" Qian Long was stunned at the sight of these criminals eating poisoned food.

The heroes, who had fed the cat poison in advance, ate all the dishes clean in a trice, and suffered no ill effects. Qian Long, having failed to eat even one mouthful, had lost yet another round.