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When they arrived in the town of Tai'an in Shandong province, they were met by the local Red Flower Society Helmsman who informed them that 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi had also just arrived from Beijing. The heroes were delighted and went to see him. Xin Yan ran on ahead and shouted "Twelfth Brother! The traitor's dead!" Shi looked at him blankly. "Zhang Zhaozhong!" Xin Yan shouted.

Shi's face lit up. "Zhang is dead?"

"Yes, he was eaten up by wolves."

Shi bowed before Chen and the others.

"Twelfth Brother," said Chen. "Have your wounds fully recovered?"

"Thank you for your concern, Great Helmsman, completely recovered. You and the others have had a long, hard journey."

"Is there any news from the capital?"

Shi's expression turned grim. "None from the capital. But I have hurried here to report that Master Muzhuolun's entire army has been destroyed."

"What?" Chen's face went white and he stood up.

"When we left the Muslim regions, General Zhao Wei and the remains of his army was competely surrounded," Luo Bing said. "How could the Manchus score another victory?"

Shi sighed. "Reinforcements suddenly arrived from the south. From what the Muslims who managed to flee say, Master Muzhuolun and his son fought to the death. Mistress Huo Qingtong was ill at the time of the attack and was unable to direct the defence. No-one knows what happened to her."

Chen slumped down into his chair.

"Mistress Huo Qingtong has an excellent command of kung fu," Lu Feiqing said. "She would not come to harm at the hands of the Manchu troops."

They all knew he was just trying to ease Chen's anxiety. It was difficult to see how a sick girl could protect herself in the confusion of battle.

"Huo Qingtong has a sister," Luo Bing said. "The Muslims call her Princess Fragrance. Did you hear any news of her?"

"Nothing at all," Shi replied. "But she is a well-known person. If anything had happened to her, there would be bound to be reports circulating in the capital. I heard nothing, so I presume she is all right."

Chen was embarrassed by their elaborate concern for his feelings. "I will go inside and rest for a while," he said, and walked to his room.

"Go and look after him," Luo Bing whispered to Xin Yan. The boy ran after his master.

After a short while, Chen thrust aside the curtain to his room and strode out again. "We must eat quickly, and get to Beijing as quickly as possible," he said.

A new note of determination in his voice surprised the heroes. Wen raised his thumb in agreement and dug into his food with increased gusto.

As they travelled on, Chen forced himself to smile and chat with the others, but his features became more haggard as the days went by. Before too long, they arrived in Beijing. Shi had rented a large residence in Twin Willows Lane. Priest Wu Chen, the Twin Knights, 'Buddha' Zhao and 'Pagoda' Yang were there waiting for them.

"Third Brother," Chen said to 'Buddha' Zhao. "Please go with Xin Yan to see the Emperor's chief bodyguard, Bai Zhen. Take the lute that the Emperor presented to me and the jade vase that Luo Bing stole and give them to him to pass on to the Emperor, to let him know that we are here."

Zhao and Xin Yan left and returned several hours later.

"We went to Bai Zhen's home to look for him and he happened to be at home," Xin Yan reported. "We gave Zhao's name card to one of his servants, and he rushed out to greet us. He dragged us inside and insisted on us drinking several cups of wine before letting us go. Extremely friendly."

Chen nodded.

Early the next morning, Bai Zhen paid them a visit. He chatted with 'Buddha' Zhao for a while about the weather, then asked respectfully if he could see Chen.

"The Emperor has ordered me to take you to the Palace," he whispered to Chen when he appeared.

"Good," replied Chen. "Please wait here for a moment."

He went back inside to discuss things with the others. They all thought he should take strict precautions.

Several of the heroes accompanied him into the Forbidden City, while Wen and the rest stationed themselves outside the palace walls to await their return.

With Bai Zhen leading the way, Chen and the others walked through the palace gates, passed guards who respectfully bowed to them. They were overawed by the imposing atmosphere of the palace: its thick, sturdy walls, the heavy defences. They had walked for a good while when two eunuchs ran up to Bai Zhen.

"Master Bai," said one. "The Emperor is in the Precious Moon Pavilion, and orders you to take Master Chen there to see him."

Bai nodded, and turned to Chen. "We are now entering the forbidden area of the palace. Please ask everyone to leave their weapons here." Despite their uneasiness at this, the heroes had no alternative and did as he said, placing their swords on a nearby table.

Bai led them through halls and across courtyards and stopped in front of a large, richly-decorated pavilion.

"Announcing Chen Jialuo!" he called out. Chen straightened his cap and gown and followed the old eunuch into the pavilion while Priest Wu Chen and the others were forced to remain outside.

They climbed up the stairs to the fifth floor, and entered a room in which they found Qian Long, seated and smiling. Chen knelt down and kowtowed before him respectfully.

"You've come," said Qian Long. "Excellent. Please be seated." With a wave of his hand he dismissed the eunuchs. Chen remained standing where he was.

"Sit down and let us talk," Qian Long repeated. Only then did Chen thank him and take a seat.

"What do you think of this pavilion?" the Emperor asked.

"Where else would one find such a building but in the Imperial Palace?"

"I told them to build it quickly. From start to finish, it took less than two months. If there had been more time, it would have been even more elegant. But it will do as it is."

"Yes," replied Chen. He wondered how many workers and craftsmen had died of exhaustion during the construction.

Qian Long stood up. "You have just returned from the Muslim areas. Come and look. Does this look like a desert scene?" Chen followed him to a window, and as he looked out, started in surprise.

To the right, was a classic Imperial Chinese garden, filled with purples and reds and twisting paths, a sumptuous scene. But looking left, towards the west, the view was entirely different. For about a third of a mile, the ground was covered in yellows and, arranged into small sand dunes. Looking closely, Chen saw the signs of pavilions having been knocked down, water pools filled in and trees and bushes uprooted. The scene naturally lacked the majesty of the endless desert, but it was a good likeness.

"Does your highness like desert views?" he asked.

Qian Long smiled. "What do you think of it?"

"A lot of work has been put into it," Chen replied. There were a number of Muslim tents staked on the sand with three camels tied up nearby and with a sudden heartache, he thought of Princess Fragrance and her sister. Looking beyond, he saw several hundred workers demolishing several more buildings: the Emperor had obviously decided he wanted a bigger desert.

Chen wondered why on earth Qian Long would have had a piece of dry, desolate desert constructed in the palace grounds. Incongruously placed in the middle of such a lush Chinese garden, it looked simply ludicrous.

Qian long walked away from the window and pointed to the antique lute he had given Chen, now lying on a small table.

"Why don't you play me a tune?" he said.

Chen could see the Emperor did not wish to discuss the important business at hand, and he could not raise it himself, so he sat down and began to pluck the strings. As he played, something caught his eye, and he looked up to find the jade vases decorated with Princess Fragrance's image smiling at him across the room. With a twang, one of the strings broke.

"What's the matter?" Qian Long asked. He smiled. "Do you find yourself a little afraid, here in the palace?"

Chen stood up and replied respectfully: "Your humble servant has disgraced himself in front of your Celestial Majesty."

Qian Long laughed., greatly pleased by this. Chen lowered his head and noticed Qian Long's left hand was bound with a white cloth as if it was wounded. Qian Long's face flushed red and he hurriedly put the hand behind his back.

"Did you bring the things I wanted?" he asked.

"They are with my friends downstairs," Chen replied.

Qian Long picked up a small hammer and rapped the table with it twice and a young eunuch ran in. "Tell the gentlemen accompanying Master Chen to come up," he ordered, and the eunuch returned a moment later with the six heroes.

Chen stood up and shot them a glance and they had no option but to kneel down and kowtow before Qian Long.

"You stinking emperor!" Priest Wu Chen thought as he did so. "We almost scared you out of your wits that day in the pagoda in Hangzhou, but you're still just as damned arrogant. If it wasn't for the Great Helmsman, I would kill you this instant."

Chen took a small, sealed wooden box from 'Buddha' Zhao and placed it on the table. "They are in here," he said.

"Good. That will be all," Qian Long replied. "When I have looked at them I will send for you." Chen kowtowed again. "And take the lute with you," he added.

Chen picked up the lute and handed it to 'Leopard' Wei. "Since Your Highness has already subdued the Muslim areas, your servant pleads with you to be merciful and to order that there be no indiscriminate killings there," he said.

Qian Long did not answer, but simply waving them away with his hand. Bai Zhen led them to the palace gate where Wen and the others were waiting.