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That afternoon, the heroes had a large meal and then waited for the time to leave. At about four o'clock, Bai Zhen arrived with four bodyguards to accompany them. The heroes put on formal gowns, and rode to the Lama Temple. Bai Zhen noticed with relief that none of them were carrying swords.

At the temple gate they dismounted, and Bai Zhen led them inside. Three tables had been prepared in the Hall of Tranquillity, and Bai Zhen solemnly invited the heroes to be seated. Chen sat at the head of the middle table while Bald Vulture and Master Lu took the head seats on the other two tables. Underneath a statue of the Buddha, a fourth table had been set up with one large chair covered with satin and brocade, obviously the Emperor's seat. The heroes began to weigh up the distances in preparation for the assassination attempt.

Dishes of food were brought out and placed on the tables and the heroes quietly awaited the arrival of the Emperor. After a while, footsteps sounded outside and two eunuchs marched into the hall with a senior military official whom the heroes all immediately recognised as Li Keshou, the former Commander-in-Chief of Zhejiang Province. Yuanzhi gripped Yu's hand and almost cried out in surprise at the sight of her father. She wondered when he had been transferred to the capital.

"Here is an Imperial pronouncement!" one of the eunuchs shouted, and Commander Li, Bai Zhen and the other officials present immediately knelt down. Chen and the rest of the heroes had no alternative but to do likewise.

The eunuch unrolled a scroll and announced: "On the orders of the Heaven-ordained Emperor, the following proclamation is made: We are benevolent in order to encourage talent just as our ministers and the common people should strive for merit in order to gain rewards. Chen Jialuo and the others have been loyal citizens and deserve to be honoured. Accordingly, I bestow upon Chen Jialuo the title of Successful Candidate of the Imperial Civil Service Examination, while the others are to be given good positions in the Board of Rites and the Military. We invite you to dine at the Lama Temple. The Commander-in-chief of the Imperial Forces in Zhili Province Li Keshou will host the banquet." The eunuch looked up from the scroll and shouted: "Express thanks for the Imperial benevolence!"

The heroes realised with a shock that the Emperor had cheated them and was not coming.

Commander Li walked over to Chen and bowed before him.

"Congratulations, Master Chen. You are honoured to be so highly favoured by the Emperor. It is truly unexpected." Chen replied with a self-deprecating remark.

Yuanzhi and Yu walked over together. "Father!" Yuanzhi said quietly.

Commander Li turned to find his lost daughter standing beside him, as if she had dropped out of nowhere. He grasped her hand, tears welling into his eyes.

"Yuanzhi," he said, his voice shaking. "Are you all right?" She nodded. "Come, come and sit with me," he added, and pulled her over to a table on the side.

The two eunuchs, obviously kung fu experts, walked over to the central table and stood before Chen. One of them saluted with his fists, then turned and shouted: "Boy!"

Two young attendants entered carrying a tray on which was placed a pot of wine and several cups. The eunuch lifted the pot and filled two cups, then picked one of them up. "I drink to you!" he said to Chen, and drained the cup at one draught. He picked the other one up and offered it to Chen.

But Chen had been watching intently, and had noticed two small holes on the side of the wine pot. The eunuch had put his thumb over the left hole when he poured the first cup of wine, and had moved it to cover the right hole as he poured the second cup. Chen guessed the pot was divided into two compartments inside, and that the flow of wine from each could be controlled by covering one or other of the holes. He glanced at the eunuch in distaste and knew that if it had not been for Princess Fragrance's warning, he would have drunk the cup down.

He saluted with his fists in thanks, and lifted the cup as if to drink it. Expressions of delighted anticipation sprang to the faces of the eunuchs, but then Chen put the cup down again, picked up the wine pot and poured out another cup. This cupful he drank then offered the original cup to the second eunuch.

"You drink a toast as well, sir," he said.

The eunuch turned pale as he realised Chen had seen through the trick. His right foot shot up and kicked the cup out of Chen's hand and the other eunuch shouted: "Get them!" Several hundred Imperial bodyguards and guardsmen sprang into view from every side.

"If you gentlemen don't wish to drink, then don't," said Chen with a smile.

"His Imperial Highness decrees," one of the eunuchs shouted, "that the Red Flower Society has engaged in rebellion and continues to harbour evil intentions, and that its members must be immediately seized and killed."

Chen waved his hand and the Twin Knights leapt over to the two eunuchs, paralysing each with a blow to the neck. The Red Flower Society heroes brought out their weapons from under their gowns, and Priest Wu Chen charged for the door with the other heroes close behind. He seized a sword from one of the guards and killed three others as he passed.

Commander Li grabbed his daughter's hand and dragged her after him as he directed his forces to stop the heroes, but Yuanzhi pulled herself free and ran off shouting: "Look after yourself, father!"

Commander Li stared after her for a moment, then began urgently calling: "Yuanzhi, come back!" But she had already left the hall and had joined Yu who was fighting fiercely with five or six guardsmen in the courtyard outside.

Flames were licking up towards the sky from a nearby hall, and the noise of the battle was deafening. As Chen and the other heroes broke out of the Tranquillity Hall into the open, they were surprised to find several dozen Lama monks fighting with a group of Manchu soldiers outside the burning hall. From the look of things, the monks could not hold out for long, but as they watched, Bai Zhen led some of the Imperial guards over and helped them force the Manchu troops back into the hall. Chen had no knowledge of the enmity between the Emperor and the Empress Dowager, but he immediately recognised the fight as an excellent diversion and quickly ordered the heroes to escape over the temple walls.

As they touched the ground, the heroes involuntarily sucked in their breaths: in front of them were rank upon rank of Manchu troops, all with bows drawn or with swords in hand. The scene was brightly lit by several thousand torches.

"He has arranged things very carefully," thought Chen. Priest Wu Chen and Bald Vulture charged into the Manchu ranks, killing as they went, and a hail of arrows descended on them.

"Everyone try and make a break for it!" shouted Huo Qingtong. The heroes fought like demons.

Priest Wu Chen noticed seven or eight Imperial Guardsmen attacking Zhang Jin, and he leapt over to help him. He stabbed three of them in the neck, and the rest howled and retreated.

"Tenth Brother, are you all right?" he asked.

Zhang Jin looked up at him and dropped his wolf's tooth club. "Second Brother, I'm finished," he said. In the fire-light, Priest Wu Chen saw he was covered in bloody wounds. With only one arm himself, the Priest could not support him.

"Lie on my back and hold on," the priest said between clenched teeth. He squatted down, and Zhang Jin put his arms round his neck. He felt the warm blood spurting out of the hunchback's wounds, but stood up and charged off again with sword raised to continue the killing.

Chen could see things were going badly and ordered the heroes to return to the wall to regroup.

"All right, Tenth Brother, get down," said Priest Wu Chen as they reached the comparative safety of the wall. Zhang Jin did not move. Luo Bing went over to help him, but found that his body was stiff and his breathing had already ceased. She threw herself onto his corpse and began to sob.

Just as the Manchu troops moved in for the final attack on the heroes, their ranks parted and several dozen monks fought their way through, their yellow robes glowing in the firelight. Leading them, his long white beard dancing and shaking, was Lord Zhou.

"Come with me, all of you!" he shouted to the heroes, and they charged after him through the Manchu blockade, and found Heavenly Mirror and the monks battling fiercely with the Manchu troops.

Huo Qingtong surveyed the situation with dismay. The heroes were killing large numbers of the enemy, but no matter which direction they went, they were always surrounded. She looked around for some possible solution and spotted a dozen or so people standing on a nearby Drum Tower.

"One of those men must be the commander," she shouted to the others, pointing at the tower. "Let's seize him."

The heroes immediately saw the wisdom of her words.

"Let's go," Priest Wu Chen roared. Wen and the Twin Knights ran after him. They quickly reached the foot of the Drum Tower, and leapt up onto the balcony just as several dozen guards moved to intercept them. Wen, however, dodged nimbly past them and charged straight for an official standing in one corner who wore a red cap signifying senior rank. As he caught sight of the official's face in the firelight, he almost called out "Great Helmsman!" He was almost an exact twin of Chen's. Wen remembered his wife telling him about the resemblance of Qian Long's favorite, Fu Kangan, to Chen. This must be Fu, he decided.

It was indeed Fu, who was also the Beijing Garrison Commander. Wen deftly dodged the swords of two surprised bodyguards and lunged at Fu with Priest Wu Chen close behind. Down below, the Manchu troops ceased their attack and stood watching the drama above them.

Fu knew no kung fu and he cringed in fear as Wen lifted him bodily into the air. A gasp went up the Manchu troops. By this time, the Twin Knights had killed the last of the bodyguards on the tower balcony and ran over beside Wen. Fu raised his command flag and shrieked: "Stop, all of you! Return to your units!"

Three bodyguards bravely charged forward, but Priest Wu Chen placed the tip of his sword on Fu's throat and smiled at them. "Come on," he said. "Don't be shy."

The bodyguards hesitated, glanced at each other, then withdrew.

Wen squeezed Fu's arm and he screamed in agony. "Retreat!" he shouted. "Back in position, all of you!" The Manchu troops did not dare to disobey and immediately formed up at a distance.

Chen gathered the heroes and the Shaolin monks together on the Drum Tower balcony. He counted up the casualties and found that apart from Zhang Jin who was dead, eight or nine of the others had been wounded, only one of them seriously. He surveyed his followers in the lights of the flames from the temple.

"Let us attack the Palace and kill the Emperor to avenge Tenth Brother!" he shouted. The heroes roared their approval, and the Shaolin monks joined in.

"The Shaolin Monastery has been destroyed by him," Heavenly Mirror added. "Today, the Commandment against killing is suspended."

"What?" asked Chen, shocked. "The Shaolin Monastery destroyed?"

"Yes, it's been burnt to the ground. Brother Heavenly Rainbow died protecting the sacred scriptures."

The news compounded Chen's anger. With Commander Fu as their hostage, the heroes marched through the ranks of Imperial Guards encircling the Lama Temple. When they had passed the last rank, they saw Xin Yan and a number of the Society's followers standing at a distance with several dozen horses. They ran over and mounted up, one or two to each horse, and with a defiant shout, galloped off towards the Imperial Palace.

Xu rode up alongside Chen and shouted: "Has an escape route been planned, Great Helmsman?"

"Ninth Brother has gone with some of the others to the West Gate to wait for us. What are you and the monks doing here?"

"Those Manchu devils!" replied Xu, his voice full of hatred. "They came one night and sacked the monastery. Heavenly Rainbow would not leave and was burned to death. They even kidnapped my son! We have been looking for the officers responsible ever since, and the chase brought us to Beijing. We went to Twin Willow Lane and they told us you had gone to the Lama Temple."

By this time, they had arrived at the Forbidden City with the Imperial Guardsmen pressing in on them from behind, loath to leave them alone even if they did not dare to attack.

Xu looked over at the Twin Eagles. "If the Emperor gets wind of this and hides somewhere in the depths of the palace, we'll never find him. Could you two go on ahead and investigate?" he asked.

The two old people were delighted to have the opportunity to show their worth, and immediately agreed. Xu took four flare rockets from his bag and gave them to Bald Vulture.

"When you catch sight of the Emperor, kill him if you can, but if he is guarded too tightly, signal us with these," he said.

The Twin Eagles leapt over the palace wall and ran swiftly across the courtyard inside and then up onto the rooftops. As they raced along, they saw the heavy palace gates and the endless courtyards and pavilions, and wondered how they could ever hope to find the Emperor in such a place.

"Let's grab a eunuch and question him," Madame Guan said.

"Good idea!" replied her husband, and the two jumped down to the ground and hid themselves in a dark corner. After a while, they heard footsteps approach and two figures walked quickly by.

"The thin one knows kung fu," Bald Vulture whispered.

"Let's follow and see where they go," Madame Guan replied.

The Twin Eagles silently shadowed the two figures, one very thin, the other fat and much slower on his feet. The thin man had to constantly stop to wait for him to catch up, and at one point said: "Faster! Faster! We must report to the Emperor as soon as possible."

The Twin Eagles were overjoyed when they heard this. They passed through doorways and courtyards and finally arrived in front of the Precious Moon Pavilion.

"You wait here," the thin man said and disappeared upstairs, leaving the fat man standing alone by the front door. The Twin Eagles crept round to the side of the pavilion and climbed up onto the roof. Then, with their feet hooked onto the eaves, they hung down over a balcony smelling of fresh paint and flowers and saw a row of windows, one of which glowed with the faint light of a candle. They slipped onto the balcony, just as a shadow passed across the window paper. Madame Guan carefully wet the paper with her finger, making a hole and then looked through to find Qian Long seated in a chair, a fan in his hand, and the thin man kneeling before him: it was Bai Zhen.

"The Tranquillity Hall in the Lama Temple has been burned to the ground and not one of the soldiers guarding it escaped," he said.

"Excellent!" exclaimed Qian Long, very pleased.

Bai Zhen kowtowed. "Your slave deserves to die. The Red Flower Society bandits eluded capture."

"What?"

"They saw through the attempt to poison them with the wine, and they escaped while I was dealing with the guards."

Qian Long grunted and hung his head, deep in thought.

Bald Vulture pointed at Bai Zhen and the Emperor, indicating to his wife that he would attack Bai Zhen while she killed Qian Long, and the two were just about to burst through the window when Bai Zhen clapped his hands twice and twelve bodyguards slipped noiselessly out from behind cupboards and screens, each one carrying a sword. The Twin Eagles knew they were no match for so many expert fighters and decided to summon the other heroes first. Bai Zhen whispered something to one of the bodyguards who left and brought the fat man back with him.

The fat man, wearing the yellow robes of a Lama priest, kowtowed energetically before the Emperor.

"You have done well," Qian Long said. "Are you sure you left no clues?"

"Everything was done according to Your Highness's wishes. Nothing is left of the Tranquillity Hall or what was in it."

"Good, good, good! Bai Zhen, I promised that he should be made a Living Buddha. Go and see to it."

"Your Highness," Bai Zhen replied with a bow.

The Lama kowtowed again.

As they walked out of the pavilion, Bai Zhen stopped the Lama. "Show your gratitude to his Highness, abbot," he said.

The abbot looked at him in surprise, but unwilling to disobey an Imperial bodyguard, he knelt down again and kowtowed in the direction of the Precious Moon Pavilion. Then he felt an icy coldness on his neck, and started in shock.

"What...what's happening?" he asked, his voice shaking.

Bai Zhen laughed coldly. "The Emperor said to let you become a Living Buddha, so I'll send you to the Western Heavens where you can be one."

He twitched his hand and the blade did its work. Two eunuchs brought a carpet over, wrapped the abbot's corpse in it and carried it away.

Suddenly, Bai Zhen heard shouting in the distance. He turned and ran back into the pavilion.

"There are bandits outside causing a disturbance, Your Highness," he said. "Please retire to the inner palace."

Qian Long had seen the Red Flower Society fighters in action in Hangzhou and he knew that his bodyguards were no match for them, so without questioning Bai Zhen further, he stood up.

Just then, Bald Vulture released a flare, and with a 'whoosh' it scrawled a path of white light across the night sky.

"Where do you think you're escaping to?" he roared as they burst through the window into the room. "We've waited a long time for this!"

The bodyguards around the Emperor stared for a moment in surprise at the red-faced old man and white-haired old woman who had suddenly appeared in their midst, then rushed at the intruders. Bai Zhen slung Qian Lung over his back and with four bodyguards protecting the front and rear, ran for the stairs. But Madame Guan forced the bodyguards back with a fistful of projectiles and lunged at Qian Long with her sword. Bai Zhen leapt backwards in fright.

Meanwhile, Bald Vulture was fighting with three guards simultaneously. Bai Zhen gave a whistle and four other guards joined the other three and completely surrounded Bald Vulture. But he fought like a demon and kept all seven at bay for a while, until one of the guards lashed out with a whip which cracked loudly against his right arm. In great pain, Bald Vulture switched his sword over to the left hand and forced the bodyguards back.

Seeing her husband was wounded, Madame Guan went over to help him, and the two retreated towards the second floor of the pavilion. Bald Vulture

knew they could not tie down so many top-class kung fu fighters for much longer, so he slipped over to the window and shot off another flare. He and his wife blocked the stairs, retreating a step at a time when the pressure was too great. Luckily, the staircase was narrow and only three or four bodyguards at most could attack at one time. Even so, the strain of having to fight against an enemy which always had the advantage of height was very wearying.

Bai Zhen could see things were going badly. "Brother Ma," he said to one of the bodyguards. "Put His Highness on your back." The bodyguard squatted down and the Emperor climbed on. Bai Zhen gave a shout and charged at Bald Vulture. The two began to fight, and Bald Vulture cursed his luck. The longer he fought, the more painful the wound on his right arm became. Bai Zhen by himself was as much as he could manage, let alone the other four or five bodyguards that also surrounded him. Bai Zhen's hands dived and flew, every move accurate and deadly, and Bald Vulture, completely absorbed in fending him off, was unprepared for a cold-blooded attack from behind. A bodyguard thrust his sword deep into Bald Vulture's back.

Bald Vulture knew instantly that he would die. He swung his elbow back with all his strength and smashed his attacker's skull, then with a huge roar, he raised his sword and threw it forcefully across the room at Qian Long. The bodyguard Ma who was carrying the Emperor, saw the blade flying towards them and with no time to dodge out of the way, put his hand up to stop it. But this was a throw by a man on the verge of death, backed by incalculable strength and outrage and the sword sliced off half of his hand and plunged through his chest and out the other side.

Bald Vulture was content, assuming that the sword must have entered Qian Long. Exchanging his own life for that of an Emperor made death seem worthwhile. Madame Guan ran to her husband as Bai Zhen hurriedly picked Qian Long up off the floor.

"Your Highness, are you all right?" he asked.

Qian Long was scared out of his wits, but he struggled to control himself. "At least I was well-prepared," he replied with a smile.

Bai Zhen could see the tip of Bald Vulture's sword extending six inches out of Ma's back and the rip on the front of Qian Long's gown, and he wondered in awe how the Emperor had avoided injury.

"Your Highness is very fortunate," he said. "Truly, the Son of Heaven has the protection of a hundred Gods."

What he did not know was that Qian Long had been so fearful of an assassination attempt as a result of his decision to break his pact with the Red Flower Society that he decided to wear a metallic vest at all times. It had saved his life.

Bai Zhen looked round and saw there was no longer anyone blocking the steps. He lifted Qian Long onto his back, the bodyguards fell in around him and they all ran straight downstairs. But just as they were about to pass through the pavilion's main entrance, Qian Long gave a shout of alarm and struggled free of Bai Zhen's grasp: standing in the doorway was Chen Jialuo. Behind him, their torches dancing and swords glinting, were several dozen kung fu fighters. The Emperor turned and ran straight back up the stairs. The bodyguards swarmed like bees after him with the Red flower Society heroes on their heels. Two of the guards who were slightly slower than the rest were intercepted by the Twin Knights and instantly killed.

Chen and the other heroes had had to fight their way through the palace to the Precious Moon Pavilion, and they were delighted to find that in spite of the delay, the Emperor had not yet escaped. Shouting in triumph, the heroes galloped up the stairs. Chen assigned men to watch the various exits. Priest Wu Chen stood with his sword at the ready at the head of the stair well on the third floor, while the Twin Knights guarded the bottom of the stairs. 'Buddha' Zhao and three of the Shaolin monks took up positions by the windows.

Huo Qingtong saw her teacher Madame Guan in a corner embracing Bald Vulture, blood welling in great surges from the gash in his back. She went over with Master Lu who took out some ointment. Bald Vulture smiled bitterly and shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said to Madame Guan. "Because of me, you've been unhappy for all these years. When you return to the Muslim areas you must marry ... marry Brother Yuan ... and then I will be content in the afterworld. Brother Lu, you must make sure for me that this happy event takes place..."

Madame Guan's eyebrows flew up in outrage. "Do you mean to say," she demanded, "that you do not know how I have felt towards you in the past few months?"

Lu was just about to suggest it would be better for her to say a few comforting words to her dying husband rather than start another argument, when she jumped to her feet and shouted: "Well, I'll rest your mind at ease!" She raised her sword and drew it firmly across her throat. Lu and Huo Qingting were standing at her side, but neither was quick enough to save her.

Bald Vulture let loose a wail of grief which was cut short as he also died. Huo Qingtong threw herself onto their corpses and sobbed uncontrollably.

Chen pointed his dagger at Qian Long. "Even forgetting the pact we made in the Six Harmonies Pagoda, we agreed on the dyke at Haining never to harm each other. And yet you use poisoned wine to try and get rid of me. What do you have to say?" He stepped forward and pointed the dagger's blade, glinting coldly, directly at Qian Long's heart. "You have decided to throw in your lot with the barbarians. You have cruelly oppressed the common people. You are the enemy of all good men under heaven," he announced in a formal tone. "Our fraternal bond is broken forever. Today, I will drink your blood to avenge all those who have been killed in your name."

Qian Long's face turned deathly pale and his whole body quivered with terror.

Heavenly Mirror strode forward. "We of the Shaolin Monastery led a simple life," he shouted. "We had no quarrels with the world. What justification did you have to send your evil underlings to burn our monastery to the ground? Today, I will disregard the sacred commandment against killing."

Chen helped Huo Qingtong up and placed his dagger in her hand. "Your father and mother, your brother and sister and countless members of your tribe died at the hands of this man," he said. "You kill him."

Huo Qingtong took the dagger and walked towards Qian Long. One of the bodyguards moved to intercept her, but Wen stopped him and with eight or nine swift blows broke all his ribs and his spine, so that he fell limply to the floor in a heap. A hubbub of voices rose from outside. 'Buddha' Zhao looked out and saw a sea of torches and faces around the pavilion.

Wen walked over to the window. "The Emperor is here," he called. "If anyone dares to come up here, I will kill him immediately." His tone was forceful and commanding, and a hush fell over the crowd. The heroes in the Precious Moon Pavilion also fell silent, and stared fixedly at the gleaming blade in Huo Qingtong's hand as she advanced step by step towards Qian Long.

Suddenly, a figure darted into the room and in front of Qian Long. Huo Qingtong stopped in surprise as she saw it was a Manchu officer holding a baby. He smiled and held up the white, chubby baby which was sucking its little fingers.

"Give me back my baby!" Zhou Qi screamed and lunged forward.

"Come on, then," the man shouted. "If you want a dead baby, come and get it."

Zhou Qi stopped in her tracks and stared at him in a daze.

The officer, surnamed Fang, had been commander of the troops sent by Qian Long to destroy the Shaolin Monastery. He knew of the Emperor's wish to get rid of the Red Flower Society, and during the night attack, his men had snatched Zhou Qi's baby son. Fang had recognised this as an achievement of great merit and made his way to Beijing for an audience with the Emperor.

Qian Long had questioned him closely that evening, wanting to ascertain for certain that no evidence relating to his origins could have survived at the Shaolin Monastery. When the Twin Eagles appeared, Fang had dodged behind a curtain, but he now recognised an opportunity to gain even greater merit.

"All of you leave the palace and I will return the child to you," Fang said.

"You devil!" Huo Qingtong shouted at him. "It's just a trick!" In her excitement the words came out in the Muslim and Fang looked at her uncomprehendingly.

The heroes had thought they finally had the Emperor in their grasp. But one man, clearly ignorant of kung fu and holding a baby, had left them powerless. They turned to Chen, waiting for his decision.

Chen looked at Huo Qingtong and thought of how Qian Long had forced Princess Fragrance to suicide. How could the deaths of her whole family remain unavenged? Looking round, he caught sight of the corpses of the Twin Eagles of Tianshan. Then he saw Xu's face, full of fear for his son, and glanced back at the child in Fang's arms. It was only two months old and was gurgling happily, stretching out its little fingers to feel the knobbly hand holding its neck. Chen looked at the other heroes: Heavenly Mirror's eyes radiated compassion, Lu Feiqing sighed and Lord Zhou's white beard shook as he trembled. Zhou Qi was standing with her mouth wide open, a crazed expression on her face.

Chen knew Lord Zhou's last son and heir had died as a result of the Red Flower Society and that the baby before them was his sole hereditary lifeline. But if they did not kill the Emperor today, they were unlikely to ever have another opportunity to gain revenge. So what to do?

Huo Qingtong turned and handed the dagger back to Chen.

Chen nodded. "All right," he said to Fang. "We will not harm the Emperor. Give the child to me." As he spoke, he replaced the dagger in its sheath and stretched out his hands.

"Huh! Who'd believe you?" Fang replied darkly. "I'll return the child only after you have left the palace."

Chen was furious. "We of the Red Flower Society hold to our word," he said. "Why would we bother to cheat an animal like you?"

"That's why I don't believe you."

"All right," Chen countered. "Then you leave the palace with us." Fang hesitated.

As soon as Qian Long heard Chen say that his life was spared, he was ecstatic with happiness and didn't care less what happened to Fang. "Go with them," he said. "You have gained great merit today. I will naturally not forget it."

Fang shivered as he heard the Emperor's tone, and realised that he was talking about honouring him posthumously. But all he could say was: "Thank you, Your Highness, for your benevolence." He turned to Chen. "If I leave the palace with you, what chance have I got to live?" He wanted Chen to promise to spare him.

"You've already done enough evil," Chen replied angrily. "You should have been consigned to Hell long ago."

Qian Long, worried that other complications could arise, and that Chen might change his mind, urged Fang on: "Quickly, leave with them now."

"But I'm afraid that once I've gone, they will try and harm Your Highness," Fang added.

"So what do you suggest?" Chen asked in exasperation.

"Allow his Imperial Highness to leave first and then I will accompany you out of the palace."

Chen could see they would have to let him go. "All right," he said to Qian Long. "Leave."

Qian Long did not concern himself further with the bearing an Emperor should maintain, and fled for the door as fast as his feet could carry him. Suddenly, Chen stretched out his right hand and grabbed him as he ran past, and boxed his ears sharply with his left hand --'bang, bang, bang!' the sound ringing out crisp and clearly. Qian Long's cheeks immediately began to swell

up. The heroes were taken by surprise, and there was a brief silence before they roared out their approval.

"Do you still remember that poisonous oath you swore?" Chen demanded, but Qian Long did not dare to make any reply. With a contemptuous wave of his hand, Chen dismissed him, and Qian Long stumbled out of the room and down the stairs.

"Get the child!" Chen shouted.

'Buddha' Zhao was holding his poisonous darts and looking out of the window, waiting for the right moment. As soon as Chen had hold of the child, and Qian Long appeared down below, he would fire off several dozen projectiles at the Emperor's body.

Fang, meanwhile, was frantically looking around, trying to think of some way out for himself. "I want to see with my own eyes that His Highness is out of danger before I'll hand over the child," he said, shuffling slowly towards the nearest window.

"You Turtle! You're already a dead man," snarled one of the Twin Knights. They shadowed him, waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Qian Long emerged from the main door of the pavilion, and the bodyguards waiting down below surged forward.

"You traitor," 'Buddha' Zhao muttered to himself. "You traitor."

Fang saw the several dozen bodyguards gathered below, and decided it was better to take a risk than to simply wait to die where he was. So in a sudden movement, he embraced the child and threw himself out of the window.

Taken completely unawares, a cry of surprise went up from the heroes. One of the Twin Knights flicked out his Flying Claw and hooked it round Fang's left leg, then tugged with all his might. Fang's body flew up, the baby left his hands and the two began to fall. 'Buddha' Zhao crouched down and launched himself like an arrow out of the window. As he flew through the air, his head pointing down and his feet up, he stretched out his left hand and grabbed hold of one of the child's tiny legs while at the same time throwing three of his poisonous darts at Fang, hitting him squarely on the head and chest.

A shout went up from both the heroes in the pavilion and the bodyguards down below. Zhao steeled himself, hugged the baby to his chest and landed firmly on his two feet. The Twin Knights, Lord Zhou and some of the other heroes jumped down from the pavilion and surrounded Zhao and the baby to

protect them. Zhao looked down at the child in his arms and saw it kicking and waving its arms about, chuckling away in delight. It obviously thought the leap a moment ago that had almost ended its life had been great fun and wanted to do it again.

Chen pushed their hostage Commander Fu to the window and shouted: "Do you want him to live?"

Qian Long, once more under the protection of his bodyguards, caught sight of Fu in the torchlight. "Stop! Stop everything!" he shouted. The guards turned and waited for his directions.

Fu was in fact Qian Long's illegitimate son. The Emperor's first wife was the elder sister of a senior minister, whose beautiful wife Qian Long had spotted when she came to the palace one evening to pay her respects to the Empress and he had had illicit relations with her which resulted in the birth of Fu. Qian Long had many sons, but for some perverse reason he loved this illegitimate one more than all the rest. The great physical likeness between Fu and Chen was therefore the result of the fact that they were uncle and nephew.

Chen knew nothing of this, but was aware that the Emperor doted on Fu. He and the other heroes escorted their hostage downstairs. Zhou Qi ran over to Zhao and took the baby from him, almost crazy with happiness.

On one side, were the Red Flower Society heroes and the Shaolin monks, on the other, the mass of palace guards and Imperial bodyguards. Commander Li could see his forces vastly outnumbered the enemy, but he also knew how the Emperor felt about Fu.

"Great Helmsman Chen," he shouted. "Let Commander Fu go and we will allow you to leave the city peacefully."

"What does the Emperor say?" Chen shouted back.

Qian Long's cheeks were painful and swollen like over-ripe peaches as a result of Chen's blows, but seeing his beloved son in the hands of the enemy, he could only wave his hand and say: "You can go, you can go."

"Commander Fu will see us out of the city," Chen said, then looked straight at Qian Long and announced in a loud voice: "All the common people under Heaven would be happy to eat your flesh and make a bed out of your skin. If you live another hundred years, may they be one hundred years of fear-filled days and tormented, sleepless nights!" He turned to the heroes. "Let us go," he said.

The heroes pushed Fu forward and made their way towards the palace gate, carrying with them the bodies of the Twin Eagles and Zhang Jin. The Manchu guards stared at them fixedly as they passed, but did not dare to stop them.

Soon after the heroes passed out of the palace, they spotted two horsemen galloping after them, one of whom was Commander Li.

"Great Helmsman Chen!" he called as they drew near. "There is something I wish to discuss with you."

The heroes reined in their horses and waited for Li and his lieutenant, Deng Tunan, to catch up.

"His Highness says that if you allow Commander Fu to return safely, he will agree to anything," Li said.

Chen's eyebrows shot up. "Huh! Who would believe a cursed word the Emperor said any more?"

"Please, Master Chen. I ask you to express your wishes so that I can return to report."

"All right," Chen said. "Firstly, I want the Emperor to rebuild the Shaolin Monastery with his own funds, making the golden statues of Buddha even larger than before. The court and government must never harrass the monastery again."

"That is easy to arrange," said Li.

"Secondly, the Emperor must not increase the military burden on the common people in the Muslim areas and all the Muslims taken prisoner must be released."

"That is not difficult either."

"Thirdly, the Emperor must not bear a grudge against the Red Flower Society or seize any of its members no matter where they may be." Commander Li was silent. "Huh! If you really did try to seize any of us, do you think we would be afraid? Did not Master Wen here spend some time as a guest in your own military headquarters?"

"All right. I will rashly agree," Li said finally.

"Exactly one year from today, if all three demands have been fully met, Commander Fu will be released."

"All right. We will so arrange things," replied Li and turned to Fu. "Commander Fu. Great Helmsman Chen's word is very precious. Please do not worry. His Highness will certainly issue orders to see that all three

requests are met. I will not allow a moment to pass without thinking of your safety, and will make sure everything is done as quickly as possible in the hope that Master Chen may see fit to release you early."

Fu said nothing.

Chen suddenly remembered how they had seen Bai Zhen and Commander Li's forces had mysteriously attacked the Banner troops guarding the Hall of Tranquillity in the Lama Temple. He did not understand the circumstances of the incident but knew it must involve a very dark secret. He decided to scare Li a little.

"Tell the Emperor that we know everything about the Hall of Tranquillity affair," he said. "If he is treacherous again, it would not be beneficial."

Li started in surprise and hastily assented.

"Commander Li, we will take our leave of you," Chen continued and saluted with his fists. "When you are promoted and become rich, take care not to oppress the common people."

Li saluted in reply. "I would not dare," he said.

Yuanzhi and Yu dismounted and walked over to Li and knelt down in front of him. Li realised sorrowfully that he would never see his daughter again.

"Look after yourself, child," he said quietly. He stretched out his hand and stroked her hair, then turned his horse round and rode back to the palace. Yuanzhi began to cry as Yu helped her onto her horse.

The heroes galloped to the city gate where 'Pagoda' Yang and 'Leopard' Wei were waiting for them. Fu ordered the city gate to be opened. The huge bell in the bell tower above sounded, ringing out the start of the fourth watch.

As they passed out of the city, the heroes saw an expanse of reeds beside the city moat flailing about in the pale moonlight. A bit further on, they came upon a graveyard, and noticed a crowd of people there wailing and singing a Muslim funeral dirge. Chen and Huo Qinging rode over to investigate.

"Who are you mourning for?" they asked the crowd.

An old Muslim man raised his head, his face coursed with tears, and said: "Princess Fragrance."

"Princess Fragrance is buried here?" Chen asked.

The old man pointed at a new grave, the yellow mud on which was not yet dry. "There," he replied.

Huo Qingtong began to cry. "We cannot allow her to remain buried here," she said.

"You're right," Chen replied. "She loved that Jade Pool in the heart of the White Jade Peak, and said how much she would like to live there forever. Let us take her remains and bury them there."

"Yes, I agree," Huo Qingtong said, swallowing her tears.

"Who are you?" the old man enquired courteously.

"I am Princess Fragrance's sister," Huo Qingtong replied.

"Ah!" another of the Muslim suddenly shouted to the other mourners. "It's Mistress Huo Qingtong!"

"Let us open up her grave," she said, and Chen and the heroes started work helped by several of the Muslims. They shifted the earth as fast as they could and in a moment, had uncovered the stone slab placed over the grave. They lifted the slab up and a perfumed fragrance emerged. But when they looked inside, they found the grave was empty.

Chen took a burning torch from one of the mourners and held it over the grave opening. On the floor was a small pool of blood and the piece of jade that he himself had given her.

"We brought Princess Fragrance's remains here and buried them ourselves," said the Muslims. "We have not left this spot since. How could her body have disappeared?"

"She was so wondrously beautiful. Perhaps she was a spirit that descended to earth," Luo Bing suggested. "Now she has returned to Heaven. Don't be distressed."

Chen bent down into the grave and picked up the piece of jade. Suddenly, he began to cry, the tears running down his face like rain. She was so beautiful, so pure. Perhaps she was a spirit.

The people sighed and covered up the grave once more, and as they finished the work, a large jade-coloured butterfly appeared and began dancing to and fro above the pile of earth.

Chen turned to the old man. "I will write a few words. Please ask a master carver to erect a stone engraved with the inscription on this spot," he said.

The old man nodded, and Xin Yan gave him ten taels of silver to cover the cost. Then he took writing implements from his bag and handed them to Chen.

Chen raised his writing brush and wrote: "Fragrant Tomb" in large characters. Then after a moment's thought, he wrote:

"Vast, vast sadness,
Boundless, boundless loss.
The song has ended,
The moon has been snatched away
In the midst of the mournful city
There is a patriot's blood.
Patriotism is sometimes exhausted
Blood sometimes runs dry
But the thread of your fragrant spirit has not been snapped!
Is it not so?
You have become a butterfly."

The heroes stood for a long time in silence. Only when the eastern sky was already light did they mount up and ride off westwards.

THE END