

Chapter

6

A NOVEL BY JIN YONG

Mysterious Happenings on the Summit of the Cliff

Legend of the Condor Heroes

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Chagatai, Tchila'un, Jebe and Guo Jing at last reached the hill. Their companions rained arrows on their pursuers who did not dare to launch a frontal attack, and for the moment, waited out of range.

Mysterious Happenings on the Summit of the Cliff

Remaining in the ger, the ‘Six Freaks’ quietly conferred with each other. “This man taught a superior Nei Gong ⁱ to our Jing’er,” Han XiaoYing said. “He can’t possible want to hurt him...”

“Then why doesn’t he want us to know about it?” Quan JinFa asked. “And why he doesn’t tell to our Jing’er that it’s Nei Gong that he’s teaching him.

“I fear that he’s someone that we know,” Zhu Cong said.

“Someone we know?” Han XiaoYing wondered. “If it’s not a friend, it can only be an enemy!”

“Amongst our friends,” Quan JinFa confirmed, “No one has kung fu this exceptional.”

“But if it is an enemy,” Han XiaoYing pursued, “What reason would he have to teach our Jing’er?”

“Maybe there is a devilish plan behind it.” Ke Zhen’E said with a cold voice. The others froze thinking about his words.

“Tonight,” Zhu Cong said, “Sixth Brother and I will follow Jing’er discreetly to see who the expert is.” The five approved.

That night, Zhu Cong and Quan JinFa hid themselves not far from Guo Jing and his mother’s ger. After a half-hour wait, they heard the young man say in a high voice, “I’m going, mom!” He left the ger, discreetly followed by his two masters, who were surprised at the speed of his leaving. Fortunately, there weren’t many obstacles on the arid plain and they could see him from afar. Arriving at the bottom of the cliff, he climbed it without slowing down.

By this time, Guo Jing had made huge progress in his lightness technique. Since he climbed the cliff every evening, he didn't need the help of the Taoist anymore and went to the top very quickly.

Zhu Cong and Quan JinFa were more and more astonished and stood for a long time in silence until the other 'Freaks' arrived. Afraid of falling into the hands of enemies, they brought their weapons and their hidden projectiles. Zhu Cong explained that Guo Jing was already up the cliff. Han XiaoYing raised her head and saw the summit of the cliff lost in the clouds and shivered. "We'll have a difficult time getting up there," she said.

"Let's hide in the bushes," Ke Zhen'E said, "We'll wait for them to come down again." The other five agreed.

Han XiaoYing thought about the night ten years ago when they fought the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. She and her six brothers hid, waiting for enemies. It was as cold a night as this one and the wind cut to the bone. The lonely moon, the desolate hill, the swirling of sand, and the silence of the night only broken by some distant sounds... The only difference was that now she wouldn't see Zhang A'Sheng and his always smiling face. She felt sadness in her heart.

The hours passed and they didn't notice any movement on the cliff. Day broke and there was still no trace of Guo Jing or of his mysterious teacher. They tried looking up but couldn't see anything.

"Sixth Brother," Zhu Cong said, "Let's see what's up there."

"Will we be able to climb it?" Han BaoJu asked.

"I'm not sure; we'll only know after we try," Zhu Cong said. After running back to the ger, he returned bringing back two long ropes, two axes and several big nails. Quan JinFa and Zhu Cong attached themselves to each other with the rope and began the climb. They dug some holes and planted the nails in them in order to provide sure hand and foot-holds. Sweating, they finally arrived on the summit. Hardly had they put their feet on the top of the cliff when they exclaimed loudly and became pale with fear.

Next to a big rock, they saw nine white skulls perfectly stacked - five at the base, three in the middle and one on the top. It was identical to the arrangement once made by the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. Examining the skulls, they saw that each also had the five holes in the forehead. The edges of the holes were very clean and without any breaks as if cut with a blade. Obviously, the power of the fingers of the 'Killer' had increased considerably when compared to the ones they had seen ten years ago. With their hearts thumping like drums

they cautiously examined the surroundings, but saw nothing else unusual. Then they climbed down to tell the others what they had seen.

Seeing the look on their faces, Han BaoJu was worried.

“It’s Mei ChaoFeng!” Zhu Cong said. The other four froze.

“And our Jing’er?...” Han XiaoYing asked.

“They must have come down the other side,” Quan JinFa answered. Then he told them what they had seen.

“Who would have guessed,” Ke Zhen’E sighed, “That for eighteen years, all of our efforts only served to feed a snake amongst us!”

“Jing’er is an honest, straight-forward boy and good as gold,” Han XiaoYing disagreed, “He would never betray us.”

“Honest and straight-forward?” Ke Zhen’E sneered. “How could he learn those martial arts from that witch for two years and not tell us anything?”

Han XiaoYing stayed uneasily silent, not knowing what to say.

“Unless,” Han BaoJu said, “A blind Mei ChaoFeng wants to use Jing’er to harm us?”

“That’s probably what she’s planning,” Zhu Cong confirmed.

“Even if Jing’er has bad intentions,” Han XiaoYing protested, “He would never agree to betray us like that!”

“Maybe,” Quan JinFa suggested, “The witch hasn’t decided when the moment to inform him has come.”

“Ok, let’s admit,” Han BaoJu said, “That Jing’er’s lightness technique is good and he has a good basis in Nei Gong; but what of martial arts? He still is far behind us. Why didn’t the witch teach him any techniques?”

“The witch only uses him,” Ke Zhen’E explained, “She doesn’t want to make him good! Didn’t her husband die by Jing’er’s hand?”

“That’s it! That’s it!” Zhu Cong exclaimed. “She wants us all to die by Jing’er’s hand, and then she will kill him. That way full vengeance will be gained!” They all shivered, struck by the logic of this reasoning.

Ke Zhen'E struck the ground with his staff and quietly said, "Let's go back and act as if we don't know anything. When Jing'er arrives, we will eliminate him. Afterward, when the witch arrives to train him, we will take care of her. Even though she may have become stronger than before, she can't see anything; with the six of us together, we should be able to get rid of her once and for all."

"Eliminate Jing'er?" Han XiaoYing exclaimed, frightened. "And what of the challenge we made with Qiu Chuji?"

"Which is more important," Ke Zhen'E replied coldly, "To keep our lives safe or to go to that challenge?" All remained silent.

"No," Nan XiRen suddenly said. "We can't do it."

"What can't we do?" asked Han BaoJu.

"We can't eliminate him." Nan XiRen said, shaking his head.

"I agree with the opinion of Fourth Brother," Han XiaoYing said. "It's necessary to interrogate him in depth in order not to make an irreparable mistake."

"The problem is too serious," Quan JinFa said. "If we hesitate and show the slightest weakness and he benefits from that to secretly betray us, what will happen to us?"

"If we don't make the right decision," Zhu Cong said, "The consequences may be terrifying. Do not forget that our adversary is Mei ChaoFeng!"

"What do you think, Third Brother?" Ke Zhen'E asked.

Han BaoJu wasn't sure which way to decide, but he saw tears in the eyes of Han XiaoYing. She seemed so sad: "I'll take Fourth brother's side," Then he said, "I won't ever be able to kill Jing'er."

Thus, three 'Freaks' were of the opinion to use violence on Guo Jing; the other three wanted a more measured approach.

"If Fifth Brother was still among us," Zhu Cong sighed, "It would be possible for him to break this deadlock..."

Hearing him mention Zhang A'Sheng, Han XiaoYing was heartbroken again. Holding back her tears, she quietly said, "How could we not want to avenge our Fifth Brother? Let's obey our Elder Brother's wish!"

“In that case,” Ke Zhen’E said. “Let’s go back to the camp.”

Back in their ger, they stayed silent, the air of death surrounding them.

That night, when Guo Jing arrived at the summit of the cliff, the Taoist was already there. Seeing the young man, he spoke to him in a low voice and showed him something next to the big rock where they usually trained.

“Look!”

Guo Jing approached and saw in the moonlight the pile of nine skulls. He jumped back. “The ‘Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’!” he said with a trembling voice. “They’ve come again!”

“You know of the ‘Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’?” the Taoist asked.

The young man told him of the terrifying fights that night, in the course of which his Fifth Master lost his life. He also told of how he frantically struck out with his knife and killed Chen XuanFeng. The visions of that night were so vivid in his mind that he could not stop himself from shivering. When he stabbed ‘Copper Corpse’, he was very young, but the terrifying images had been engraved deeply in his memory.

“‘Copper Corpse’ caused so much suffering,” sighed the Taoist, “Yet he died by your hand!”

“My Masters often speak of the ‘Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’. My Third Master and Seventh Master say that ‘Iron Corpse’ should be dead...But Eldest Master always says: ‘Not for sure! Not for sure’! For these nine skulls to be here, ‘Iron Corpse’ can’t be dead...” He shivered. “Did you see Mei ChaoFeng?” he asked.

“I arrived here not long ago,” the Taoist answered, “And I immediately noticed this pile of skulls. Has ‘Iron Corpse’ come here to take revenge on your Masters and you?”

“The Eldest Master made her blind,” Guo Jing said, “We are not afraid of her.”

The Taoist took a skull in his hand and carefully examined it. “This person has a kung fu of terrifying power,” he said while nodding his head. “I fear that your six masters are not strong enough to face her. Even if I lend them some assistance, we still may not defeat her!”

He was so sure of what he was saying, that Guo Jing was stunned. “Ten years ago,” he said, “She was not blind and yet she did not succeed in defeating my

Seven Masters. Today, we are eight...You...will you help us in this danger or not?"

"I've thought about it for a little while," the Taoist answered after a moment of silence, "But I don't understand how her fingers can be this powerful...As says the proverb: 'Those that wish you well don't come to find you, those that come to find you don't wish you well'! Since she dares to come to take revenge, she is very sure of her chances."

"What reason did she have for arranging the skulls here? Won't we be extra cautious after seeing them?"

"I imagine that it must be a part of the ritual of practicing the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw'...Because it is so difficult to climb, she must think that no one comes to the summit of this cliff. By sheer luck, we stumbled on it!"

Fearing that Mei ChaoFeng might already be going to fight his masters, Guo Jing said, "I am going to warn my Masters."

"Well thought," the Taoist approved. "Tell them that you pass on a message from a good friend; they are to keep themselves aside for a while and take time to find the best solution...There's no reason to face her needlessly."

Guo Jing agreed; but at the very moment he was going to let himself slip down from the cliff, the Taoist grabbed him and jumped behind a large rock where they hid themselves. Guo Jing was going to ask him what was going on when the Taoist put his hand over his mouth. He shrank against the rock, not daring to make a sound, only risking a quick look.

A short time later, a shadow moved up the other side of the cliff. In the moonlight, long hair floated in the wind: it was Mei ChaoFeng. The other side of the hill was even steeper than the cliff; because she was blind, she probably wouldn't have noticed the difference. That was a stroke of luck, because the 'Six Freaks' were hidden on this side. If she had come up here, she would not have failed to meet them, and they would be fighting already!

Mei ChaoFeng turned around suddenly; a frightened Guo Jing lowered his head quickly. Then he remembered that she was blind, and he stood up slowly. He saw that she was sitting with her legs crossed on the big rock where he trained every day. Then she began breathing exercises. He now understood that this way of breathing and mastering the breath constituted the practice of the Nei Gong. He felt a sudden appreciation for the Taoist's teaching.

A little later, he heard crackling coming from the body of Mei ChaoFeng; at first occasional, then faster and faster, just like when one grills peanuts in a

wok and they explode. The noise came from the inside of her body that remained immobile. Guo Jing didn't know that it was a strange and superior form of the Nei Gong, but he was still very impressed.

The crackling lasted for a long time. Then the rhythm slowed until it stopped completely. Guo Jing saw her rise slowly, her left hand took something from her waist that she swung like a long silver snake. Startled at first, he then saw that it was a very long whip.

The 'Golden Dragon Whip' of his Third Master Han BaoJu didn't exceed half a zhang ⁱⁱ, but this one had to be more than two zhang long!

She turned around slowly and the light of the moon illuminated a face that still was very pretty. With her long hair and her eyes closed, she seemed sinister and frightening. In the silence, one could hear her sigh and whisper, "My bastard husband, could it be that in the Hell, you also think of me every day?"

Holding her whip by its middle section, she quietly laughed and began to train. This whip seemed to dance in a curious way; the movements were slow and didn't make any noise. She made a stroke to the east, followed by an astounding one to the west; every strike more unbelievable than the last. Suddenly her hand slipped and caught the end of the whip so that all of its length reached a big rock. It wrapped around and raised it, as if it was a hand. Guo Jing was stunned by this. The whip, after flinging the rock far away, moved back towards his head. In the moonlight, he could see distinctly that the end of the whip held about ten very sharp hooks.

Guo Jing was already holding his knife. Seeing the whip coming his way, he was going to avoid the stroke, without even thinking about it. Then he felt his arm go numb and a hand pushed him to the ground. Like silvery lightning, the end of the whip passed above his head. Covered with a cold sweat he thought, "If my Taoist friend had not stopped me in time and my knife touched it, the whip would certainly have smashed my skull!" Fortunately, the Taoist did it efficiently and quietly and Mei ChaoFeng didn't notice anything.

She trained for a while, and then replaced the whip at her waist. From her bag she took a piece of cloth or leather that she unfolded and spread on the ground. She touched its surface, thought, then stood up to sketch some movements. She knelt again to feel the thing and to think again. Finally, she put it back in the bag and went away to the other side of the hill.

Guo Jing sighed and stood up.

"We'll follow her," the Taoist said in a low voice. "Let's see what mischievous plan she's preparing for us!" He caught the young man by the belt and the two

slowly slipped down from the hill. When they reached bottom, they saw Mei ChaoFeng already far away to the north. The Taoist put his arm around Guo Jing who immediately felt a lot lighter and the two of them went at a great speed across the steppe, following 'Iron Corpse'. As dawn began, they saw a camp of several score large gers far away. Mei ChaoFeng's shadow soon disappeared among them.

They accelerated their pace, avoiding the sentries and patrols, until they arrived at a big yellow ger. Guo Jing dropped to the ground and raised the flap of the ger slightly to take a look inside. He saw a man draw his large knife and strike a huge man, who collapsed to the floor. As he fell, his face was in the field of vision of the Taoist and Guo Jing. Guo Jing recognized him; he was Temujin's personal bodyguard! He was stunned. "How could it be that he came to be killed here?" He wondered raising the flap of the ger a little more. At this moment, the murderer turned around and Guo Jing recognized Senggum, the son of Ong Khan.

Senggum wiped the blade on his shoe's sole and said, "Now you don't have any more doubts, do you?"

"My brother Temujin is intelligent and courageous," answered a man, "This plan will not be easy to achieve."

Guo Jing recognized him; it was Jamuka, Temujin's sworn brother.

"Since you like your sworn brother so much," Senggum sneered, "You could go and warn him!"

"You," Jamuka said, "Are also my sworn brother. Your father has treated me with kindness, I won't betray you. Besides, Temujin has ambitions of absorbing my soldiers into his army, this I know very well. It is only because of our oath of brotherhood that I haven't broken our relationship yet."

"Could they be plotting against Temujin?" Guo Jing wondered. "How is it possible?"

"The one that takes the initiative always has the advantage," another man said. "If you wait for him to attack you, you are lost! After the victory, all of Temujin's goods, his herds, his wives, and his treasures, will come to Senggum. His men, on the other hand, will be incorporated into Jamuka's army. Accomplish that, and you will receive the title of 'Conqueror General of the North' from the Jin Empire."

Guo Jing could only see his back, so he crawled in a little further in order to see him better. He was clothed in a sumptuous yellow brocade tunic covered with

sable. He knew the man, but he took a little time to remember his identity. “Ah yes, he’s the Sixth Prince of the Jin Empire.”

Jamuka seemed convinced by his words. “If my adoptive father, Ong Khan, gives me the order,” he said, “I will obey.”

“Since you put it like that,” a very happy Senggum said, “If my father doesn’t give the order, he will offend the Jin Empire. In a little while, I will ask him, he won’t be able to refuse the Sixth Prince.”

“Soon,” Wanyan HongLie continued, “The soldiers of the empire are going to descend on the south to conquer the Song Empire. At that time, each of you, at the head of twenty thousand men, will be able to participate in the invasion. After the victory, others rewards will await you!”

“I’ve always heard,” Senggum exclaimed joyfully, “That the south was a marvelous world, paved with gold, and where all women look like flowers. If the Sixth Prince takes us along, it would be perfect!”

“Nothing could be easier,” Wanyan HongLie said, smiling, “I only fear that there might be too many beautiful women in the south and you won’t see all of them!”

They exploded in laughter.

“Now,” pursued the prince, “Tell me how you intend to take care of Temujin... In fact, I already asked him to help us to destroy the Song, but he refused. He’s a clever man; we can’t give him any reasons to doubt us. That is why we need to double our precautions.”

At that moment, Guo Jing felt the Taoist pull him by the sleeve. He turned around, and saw Mei ChaoFeng a little way off. She had caught someone and seemed to question him. “Whatever this witch’s intentions,” he thought, “My Masters aren’t threatened for now. First I am going to find out more about the plot against the Khan and then decide what to do.” Then he turned again to the ger.

“He promised his daughter to my son,” Senggum said, while looking at the body on the floor, “And I sent an emissary to agree to the date of the marriage. I’ll ask him to come here to confer with my father. He will surely come without much of an escort. I will place some men in ambush along the way; even if he had three heads and six arms, he won’t escape alive!” He exploded in laughter.

Jamuka said, “As soon as Temujin is eliminated, our armies will invade his camp.”

Guo Jing was filled with anger and concern: “How could the man’s heart be so cruel, even to the point of plotting against his sworn brother!” He was about to listen again, but the Taoist pulled him out by his waist. He moved back and was lightly touched by Mei ChaoFeng, who was leaving very quickly, holding someone by the neck.

The Taoist took Guo Jing by the hand and the two moved away from the gers.

“She’s trying to find out where your masters are.” the Taoist said in a low voice. “We must go there immediately; otherwise it will be too late!”

The two used their lightless technique and ran briskly. When they arrived at the ger of the ‘Six Freaks’, it was already close to noon.

The Taoist said, “I didn’t want to be seen, that is why I ordered you not say anything about me to your masters. But now there is an emergency, and I cannot worry about such details any longer. Go to them and say that Ma Yu, of the QuanZhen Sect, asks to see the ‘Six Valiant Heroes of JiangNan’.

For two years, Guo Jing had seen him every evening, but it was only at this moment that he learned his name. Without knowing who precisely this character ‘Ma Yu, of the QuanZhen Sect was, he obeyed and ran in the ger shouting, “Eldest Master!”

As soon as he entered, his wrists were clutched brutally, and he felt a sharp pain in his knees that made him fall to the floor. He saw that it was his Eldest Master, Ke Zhen’E, who had knocked him down with his heavy iron staff. Completely terrified, he didn’t even try to struggle or defend himself. He closed his eyes and waited for death. He heard the clank of two weapons clashing, and then felt someone throw themselves over him. He opened his eyes and saw his Seventh Master, Han XiaoYing, protecting him with her body, while shouting, “Older Brother, one moment please!” Her sword, with which she had blocked the stroke, had flown away.

Ke Zhen’E sighed, and thrust his staff down heavily on the floor, “Seventh Sister has always had too tender a heart!”

Guo Jing then realized that Zhu Cong and Quan JinFa had seized his wrists! He didn’t understand anything anymore.

“Where is the person who teaches you Nei Gong?” Ke Zhen’E asked with severity.

“Him...He...” Guo Jing stammered. “He is...there...outside...He asks to to see you...”

Surprised at Mei ChaoFeng's coming to find them in daylight, the 'Six Freaks' hurried outside, weapons in hand. But all they saw was a white-haired Taoist, hands joined in salute. There was no Mei ChaoFeng!

"Where is the witch Mei ChaoFeng?" Zhu Cong shouted, without releasing Guo Jing's wrist.

"I first saw her last night," the Taoist answered, "I fear that she may come soon!"

The 'Six Freaks' looked at Ma Yu with puzzlement. He advanced briskly and greeted them. "For a long time I've admired the 'Six Valiant Heroes of JiangNan'. Today, I finally meet them; it is a huge honor for me."

Zhu Cong, still holding Guo Jing, nodded his head in answer to the salute and said, "We don't dare to ask for the respected name of the Master Taoist."

Guo Jing remembered that he had not announced the visitor and hastened to say, "He's Ma Yu, of the QuanZhen Sect."

The 'Six Freaks' were hugely surprised. They knew that Ma Yu, who had the nickname 'Scarlet Sun', was the first disciple of the founder of the QuanZhen Sect, Wang ChongYang. After the death of the founder, Ma Yu became the Elder Master of the Sect. Qiu ChuJi, 'Eternal Spring', was his younger martial brother. Since he usually lived a reclusive life in the temple, dedicating himself to meditation, he hardly ever set foot in the 'Rivers and the Lakes' regionⁱⁱⁱ. For this reason, his reputation in the world of the martial arts didn't equal Qiu ChuJi's. As for the power of his kung fu, no one had ever seen him in action and could not judge how strong he was.

"We meet the Elder Master of the QuanZhen Sect," Ke Zhen'E said. "We are much honored. What brings the Master Taoist up into the steppe of the north? Does it relate to the competition in JiaXing and our challenge with your martial brother?"

"My impetuous younger brother, when he should be dedicating himself to the practice of the Way, likes to duel with others. He often tries to win and impose his viewpoint; that is quite contrary to our principles. I've reprimanded him time and time again about this. I don't have any intentions of interfering in his bet with you, the 'Six Valiant Heroes', since it doesn't have anything to do with me. Two years ago, I met this child by chance. Finding him to have a pure and good heart, I took the liberty of teaching him some ritual formulae to fortify his body and to feed his character. This also has the virtue of encouraging longevity. It is true that I took this initiative without having asked for approval

from the ‘Six Valiant Heroes’ beforehand; I hope they won’t be angry because of it.”

“I didn’t teach him any martial techniques and we don’t have a master - disciple relationship. We could say that I merely made myself a young friend and that we never broke any rules of the martial world.” After saying this, he smiled warmly.

The ‘Six Freaks’ were very surprised, and could only accept his explanation. Zhu Cong and Quan JinFa then released Guo Jing’s wrists.

“So my pupil,” a happy Han XiaoYing said, “It was the Senior Taoist who gave you some lessons? Why didn’t you tell us about him earlier? We judged you wrongly!” She tenderly patted him on the shoulder.

“He...” Guo Jing stammered, “It was him who told me not to say anything...”

“How can you say, ‘he’, ‘him’?” Han XiaoYing reprimanded. “Jing’er, that is very disrespectful, you need to say ‘Master Taoist’...” She scolded him, but her happy face showed her true feelings.

“Yes,” Guo Jing agreed submissively. “The ‘Master Taoist’...” For two years he always treated Ma Yu on equal terms, without having ever thought to speak to him in the third person as a sign of respect. Ma Yu had never taken offense.

“I travel like a cloud,” Ma Yu said, “Without a schedule or final destination, and I don’t like to impose on others. That is why, even though I was a neighbor, I didn’t come to greet you. I ask you again to forgive me.” He saluted them again.

In fact, after discovering the circumstances behind the journey of the ‘Six Freaks’ to Mongolia, he felt great admiration for them. He interrogated Yin ZhiPing, who confirmed that Guo Jing didn’t have any Nei Gong. As a Senior of the QuanZhen Sect he knew perfectly the principles of Taoism. He didn’t want Qiu ChuJi to impose this challenge on the ‘Six Freaks’. He tried to convince his martial brother repeatedly, but Qiu ChuJi would not hear of it. As last resort he came to the steppe to try to help Guo Jing without telling anyone. Otherwise, how could he have met the child, by accident, in the immensity of the northern plain? What other reason would he have for dedicating two years of his life to give Guo Jing this precious instruction? If Mei ChaoFeng had not re-emerged unexpectedly, he would have discreetly left for the south once assured that Guo Jing’s Nei Gong foundations were well established. The result would have been that neither the ‘Six Freaks’ nor Qiu ChuJi would have suspected anything.

For displaying so much nobility and humility, which contrasted with the bravery and contrived arrogance of his martial brother, the 'Six Freaks' bowed and saluted him. They were going to ask him about Mei ChaoFeng when they heard the sound of horses galloping. They saw several riders heading towards Temujin's large ger.

Guo Jing realized that it was Senggum's emissaries who had come to entice him into a trap; he began to panic. "Eldest Master," he said to Ke Zhen'E, "It is necessary that I leave for a short time."

Ke Zhen'E had almost seriously injured him a while ago and regretted it. He felt even more protective of this disciple and feared he'd meet Mei ChaoFeng if he left. Therefore he said, "No, you remain close to us!"

Guo Jing was going to explain to him why he had to leave, but Ke Zhen'E had begun to discuss the titanic fight against the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' with Ma Yu. In spite of his anguish, the young man didn't dare interrupt his Oldest Master, who got angry for the smallest of reasons. He hoped to be able to benefit from a pause in the conversation to explain the urgency of the situation. Suddenly, a horse arrived at a gallop. The rider was Hua Zheng wearing a short jacket of black fox fur. She stopped a zhang away, making signals. Fearing punishment from his Masters, Guo Jing didn't dare move away, but signaled her to approach. The girl had red swollen eyes, as if she had cried a lot.

"Dad," she said while sobbing, "Wants me to go marry that Dukhsh..."

"Quickly," Guo Jing said, "Go warn the Khan that Senggum and Jamuka have prepared a trap and want to kill him..."

"Is it true?" Hua Zheng asked and stunned from what she heard.

"Absolutely true," answered Guo Jing, "I heard it with my own ears. Go warn your father quickly."

"Okay!" Hua Zheng agreed. With a face filled with joy, she got back on her horse and left at great speed.

"Someone wants to murder the Khan and you seem happy?" Guo Jing wondered. Then he understood; she would not have to marry Dukhsh. He cared for the girl like a sister and had always protected her. He had wondered if she was going to be able to avoid this disgraceful marriage; now he was delighted for her and he smiled.

“I don’t mean to glorify the enemy nor to belittle us,” Ma Yu said, “But Mei ChaoFeng knows the essence of the Senior of Peach Blossom Island’s teachings. Her ‘Nine Yin White Bone Claw’ is practically invincible, and the strokes of her ‘Silver Whip of Two Zhangs’ nearly unstoppable. If we unite our strength, we may not lose, but we certainly won’t defeat her without suffering some harm.”

“That woman is dangerously effective,” Han XiaoYing said, “But we, the ‘Six Freaks of South’, avow her an implacable hate.”

“Someone told me,” Ma Yu said, “That your Fifth Brother, Zhang A’Sheng the Valiant Knight, as well as ‘Divine Dragon Soaring Through the Sky’, the Valiant Ke PiXie, had both been killed by Chen XuanFeng. But since you killed ‘Copper Corpse’, one could consider that the debt has been paid. As the Ancients say: ‘It is better to unknit a hate than to tie it’. Mei ChaoFeng is a lone woman, affected by a serious handicap, and deserves some pity...”

The ‘Six Freaks’ stayed silent for some time.

“She’s mastered this perverse and dangerous martial arts,” Han BaoJu said, “That will cause the deaths of innumerable innocents! Master Taoist, even though you are moved by compassion, you can’t let her go with impunity...”

“This time,” Zhu Cong said, “She came looking for us and not the opposite...”

“And even if we avoid it this time,” Quan JinFa said, “If she wants to take vengeance on us, we will never be safe.”

“I’ve thought of a small stratagem,” Ma Yu said, “But it is necessary that the ‘Six Valiant Heroes’ be magnanimous and have mercy on this poor wretch. Let her have the possibility of redemption.”

Zhu Cong didn’t want to speak, letting Ke Zhen’E make the decision.

“We, the ‘Seven Freaks of South’,” Ke said, “Have a coarse and direct temperament. We only know how to fight the barbaric ones. If the Master Taoist wants to show us a path, we would be very thankful. You only have to speak.” From listening to Ma Yu, he understood that, during these past ten years, Mei ChaoFeng had made considerable progress. It appeared that the Taoist was trying to save the life of ‘Iron Corpse’, but in reality he was trying to save the face of the ‘Six Freaks’. His real intention was to show them a way to escape the terrifying claws of Mei ChaoFeng. The other ‘Freaks’ thought that their Oldest Brother had become merciful and were astonished.

“By showing mercy, Senior Brother Ke Zhen’E,” Ma Yu said, “You will receive the blessings of the Heavens. There is something else that is very important. According to my inquiries, during these past ten years, Mei ChaoFeng received more of the teachings of Huang YaoShi.”

“But they say,” Zhu Cong wondered, “That the ‘Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’ were renegade disciples of the Peach Blossom Island Senior. How would Huang YaoShi justify teaching her again?”

“This is what I also believed,” Ma Yu said. “But according to the description of the fight you had, her kung fu was much lower than what she displays today. If she didn’t receive the instruction of an illuminated Senior, it would be impossible for her, training alone, to arrive at her present level. If so, and if we kill ‘Iron Corpse’ today, we risk Huang YaoShi’s anger...”

Ke Zhen’E and Zhu Cong had already heard of the martial arts of Huang YaoShi, often in such exaggerated terms that they had difficulty believing in the man’s power. The QuanZhen Sect represented the orthodox martial arts. If Ma Yu felt fear regarding Huang YaoShi, it was evidently something to take into account.

“Master Taoist thinks of everything,” Zhu Cong said, “We can only be filled with admiration. Please make us part of your undoubtedly wise plan.”

“This miserable plan,” Ma Yu said, “May appear a little snobbish I’m afraid; I ask the ‘Six Valiant Heroes’ not to laugh at it.”

“Master Taoist is too modest.” Zhu Cong said, “The reputations of the ‘Seven Disciples’ of Wang ChongYang are so well established that the admiration is general in the martial realm!” Zhu Cong felt a genuine respect for Ma Yu. Indeed, he would not hold such respect for Qiu ChuJi, who was also one of the ‘Seven Masters of QuanZhen Sect’.

“Thanks to the virtues of our deceased founder,” Ma Yu said, “The seven martial brothers benefit from a small reputation in the world of martial arts. I think that Mei ChaoFeng would not dare to come against us alone. This is why I thought of a ruse to make her leave, based on the belief in our vain reputation. This stratagem lacks nobility; but since our intention is good, the end justifies the means, and it won’t harm the reputations of the ‘Six Valiant Heroes’.” He then explained the deception. The ‘Six Freaks’ found it rather depreciating. They thought to themselves that even though Mei ChaoFeng had made great progress, and even if Huang YaoShi came in person, what would they risk? At most they would lose their lives, as Zhang A’Sheng had ten years before. Ma Yu undertook to convince them. Finally the ‘Six Freaks’, out of respect for him and recognition for everything that he had done for Guo Jing, accepted.

After having sharing some refreshments, they moved towards the cliff. Ma Yu and Guo Jing undertook the climb ahead of them. The ‘Six Freaks’ noticed that the Taoist didn’t try to show off his skills as he slowly climbed behind Guo Jing. But his steps were firm and his movements displayed great stability, showing the power of his kung fu. “He is certainly not weaker than Qiu Chuji, so why is Qiu Chuji’s reputation so great, whereas one hears practically nothing about Ma Yu? The explanation must be their difference in character...” Arriving at the top, Ma Yu and Guo Jing dropped long ropes, and then pulled the ‘Six Freaks’ to the summit. There on the rocks they could examine the traces left by Mei ChaoFeng’s whip. They were stunned, and finally believed Ma Yu’s words.

The eight sat down and waited. Night had fallen and it was already late. Han BaoJu began to lose patience, “How come she’s so late?”

“Quiet!” Ke Zhen’E urged, “There she is!”

They all listened carefully, without hearing anything. Only Ke Zhen’E, with his incredibly developed hearing, had discerned the footsteps of ‘Iron Corpse’ while she was still several li away. But she was coming. They saw, in the moonlight, a blurred black shadow that approached at a very quick pace. In the blink of an eye she’d reached the foot of the cliff and she began to climb with agility. Zhu Cong exchanged a glance with Quan JinFa and Han XiaoYing; he saw that their faces were pale and full of anguish. He thought that his must look the same.

Very quickly, Mei ChaoFeng reached the summit. She carried on her back someone who wasn’t moving and they couldn’t tell if the person was alive or already dead. Guo Jing had the impression that this person wore clothing that was familiar to him. He watched more attentively and recognized Hua Zheng’s short black fox jacket. Alarmed, he was going to call out when Zhu Cong, with the quick eyes and fast moves, put his hand over his mouth, while saying in a high voice, “That vicious witch, Mei ChaoFeng, if she falls into my hands, I, Qiu Chuji, won’t let her escape!”

Surprised at hearing a voice on the summit, ‘Iron Corpse’ was even more astonished to hear the name of Qiu Chuji and her own. She hid behind a rock to listen to the conversation. Ma Yu and the ‘Six Freaks’ clearly saw her intentions and, in spite of the tension, wanted to laugh. Only Guo Jing, worried about the safety of Hua Zheng, trembled with anguish.

“Mei ChaoFeng arranged these skulls here,” Han BaoJu said, “She is certainly going to come, and we only have to wait for her.”

Not knowing how many powerful enemies were gathered in this place, she remained immobile behind the rock.

“She certainly caused us a lot of pain, but the QuanZhen Sect is always compassionate and merciful towards others. Let’s give her the option of repenting.”

“The ‘Sage of Tranquility’ has always had a tender heart,” Zhu Cong said while laughing. “It’s not surprising that Master always said that you can reach the Way easily!”

Wang ChongYang, the founder of the QuanZhen Sect, had seven disciples, whose reputations are well established in the world of martial arts. The first in rank was Ma Yu, called ‘Scarlet Sun’, the second Tan ChuDuan, called ‘Eternal Truth’, followed by Liu ChuXuan, called ‘Eternal Life’, Qiu ChuJi, called ‘Eternal Spring’, Wang ChuYi, called ‘Jade Sun’, Hao DaTong, called ‘Infinite Peace’, and finally the last disciple, Sun Bu’Er, was called ‘Sage of Tranquility’, and had been the wife of Ma Yu before she entered the Taoist religion.

“Brother Tan,” Han XiaoYing asked, “What do you think about it?”

“Her crimes deserve an extreme punishment!” replied Nan XiRen.

“Brother Tan,” Zhu Cong said, “Of late you’ve made much progress in your technique the ‘Finger Calligrapher’. When this evil one arrives, will you give us a demonstration?”

“It’s better to let Brother Wang show us his technique the ‘Foot of Iron’,” Nan XiRen said. “One kick and he will send her down the cliff where she will lose both body and soul.”

Among the ‘Seven Masters of the QuanZhen Sect’, Qiu ChuJi was the most well known, then came Wang ChuYi, ‘Jade Sun’. Once, on a bet, he stood close to an abyss on one foot, swaying back and forth in a violent wind that blew his large sleeves wildly. Several heroes of ShanDong and HeBei watched this event and were astounded. This exploit earned him the nickname of ‘Foot of Iron’. He had lived as a recluse in an underground cave for nine years, dedicating himself to the practice of martial arts. Even Qiu ChuJi appeared to much admire his kung fu. He had dedicated a poem to him, in which he told of the ‘Nine summers standing in the sun, three winters laying down in the snow’ celebrating the power of his Nei Gong.

All of this conversation between them had been studied in advance. Only Ke Zhen'E, who had previously spoken to the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds', remained silent, so that Mei ChaoFeng wouldn't recognize him by his voice.

'Iron Corpse' was more and more astonished. "Apparently, the 'Seven Masters of the QuanZhen Sect' are here! I am not really certain of being able to beat a single Taoist, how would I withstand the seven united! If they discover me, I am dead!"

At that moment, the moon illuminated the summit clearly. Zhu Cong said,

"This night, black clouds cover the sky, one can't even see the fingers of his hand! Everybody be watchful so that the witch doesn't take advantage of the darkness to escape!"

"It's a good thing that it is a black night," Mei ChaoFeng reassured herself, "Otherwise they would have discovered me already. I give thanks to the Heaven and Earth, so long as the moon doesn't appear!"

Guo Jing had not stopped looking at Hua Zheng. He suddenly saw that she had opened her eyes. Delighted to see her regain consciousness, he made signals with his hands hoping that she would remain calm. However, the girl had also seen him, and yelled, "Help...Help!"

"Don't say anything!" Guo Jing shouted.

These shouts surprised Mei ChaoFeng. She immediately pushed a finger onto one particular point on Hua Zheng's body which made the girl mute. But suspicions were aroused in her mind.

"Yin ZhiPing," Zhu Cong said, "Was that you that spoke?"

Indeed, Guo Jing was supposed to play the role of the young Taoist Yin ZhiPing. "Yes...Yes, it was me..."

"I believe," Zhu Cong said, "That I heard a woman's voice."

"Precisely," confirmed Guo Jing.

"If this is a trap," Mei ChaoFeng thought, "Is it likely that the 'Seven Masters of the QuanZhen Sect' would be together on the steppe and on the summit of this cliff? What a coincidence that would be! Maybe someone is trying to deceive me and take advantage of my blindness."

Ma Yu saw her slowly standing up behind her rock and understood that she had become suspicious. If she discovered the scheme and immediately went to the attack, he himself probably wouldn't risk much; but Hua Zheng would certainly die and the 'Six Freaks' would, without a doubt, suffer some injuries. He was therefore quite upset. He'd never had a quick mind and he didn't know what to do.

Seeing Mei ChaoFeng with her long silver whip in hand, seeming about to attack, Zhu Cong hastened to say, "Senior Brother, for all these years you've practiced the most sophisticated techniques taught by our founder, you must have gotten extraordinary results. Would you demonstrate it for us?"

Ma Yu knew that Zhu Cong was asking him to show the power of his martial arts, in order to impress Mei ChaoFeng. "I am certainly the eldest of our brothers," he then said, "But my slow nature makes me less capable than you. The formulas transmitted by our founder, I am ashamed to say, I hardly understood a sentence of it..." He pronounced each of his words very slowly, while feeding them his breath fully. The tone was quiet and humble, but the voice carried very far. He had not finished pronouncing his last words when the echo of the first came back with winds, like the growls of tiger and the screams of dragons.

Witnessing this demonstration of extraordinarily powerful Nei Gong, Mei ChaoFeng, impressed, lowered herself slowly behind her rock.

"I have heard" Ma Yu said, "That this woman has lost her mind and that she is worthy of pity. If she repents her past sins, if she promises to no longer harm the innocent, we might be merciful. Should she also promise that she will not trouble the 'Six Freaks of the South', then we could let her continue to live because of our departed master's respectful relations with the 'Master of Peach Blossom Island'. Brother Qiu Chuji, you are the friend of the 'Six Freaks'; you should speak to them, and ask them to no longer seek a reckoning with her. If both parties make an effort, the vendetta can extinguish itself." This time, he spoke without using his internal energy, so that there did not appear to be such a great power difference between himself and the others.

"That will be easy," Zhu Cong replied. "But the real problem is knowing whether or not Mei ChaoFeng will agree to redeem herself."

Suddenly, they heard an icy voice. "Many thanks to the QuanZhen Seven for their benevolence! I, Mei ChaoFeng, am here!"

Suddenly and surprisingly, she came forth. Ma Yu had hoped to frighten her and make her leave, regretting her deeds and would mend her ways. But,

confident of her new power, she had the audacity to come and confront her opponents directly.

“Being a woman,” Mei ChaoFeng said, “I would not dare to test myself against the Taoist masters. But for a long time I have admired the martial arts of the ‘Sage of Tranquility’; I ask for the honor of measuring myself against her.” Armed with her whip, she stood at the ready, waiting for Han XiaoYing’s response.

All the while, Guo Jing was acutely aware that Hua Zheng had fallen motionless to the ground. He’d grown up with her and felt the affection of an elder brother for the girl. Without a moment’s thought, without even worrying about the terrifying presence of Mei ChaoFeng, he leaped out and freed Hua Zheng. With a quick move, ‘Iron Corpse’ seized his left wrist. Guo Jing had practiced orthodox Taoist internal energy with Ma Yu for two years and his healthy body was strengthened by this natural force. With his right hand, he propelled Hua Zheng towards Han XiaoYing, while he pivoted his left hand with force and released himself from Mei ChaoFeng’s control. She possessed extremely swift skills so when she felt Guo Jing escape she moved her hand immediately to recapture him. This time, she held him firmly, compressing the point of the principal artery in his arm so precisely that he could no longer move.

“Who are you?” she demanded in a terrible voice.

“Yin ZhiPing,” Zhu Cong called, “Listen!”

Guo Jing, who had panicked because he could not free himself, was going to reply instinctively “I am Guo Jing!” when he heard Zhu Cong’s warning.

“I am...” he stammered, “I am Yin ZhiPing...Disciple...disciple of the QuanZhen...Spring.” Although he had repeated those words thirty or forty times, in his panic he was not able to say it without stammering.

“He is only a simple apprentice,” Mei ChaoFeng said to herself, “Yet his Nei Gong already is capable. Not only did he succeed in saving someone from under my nose, he was even able to release himself from my first hold! I think it is better that I retreat this time.” She dropped his hand. Guo Jing recovered and hastily returned to his masters. Five finger marks were deeply indented into the flesh of his left arm! He knew full well that she had not used all of her power; otherwise his wrist would have been broken.

Mei ChaoFeng no longer dared to challenge the false Sun Bu’Er, played by Han XiaoYing. She suddenly asked, “Master Taoist Ma Yu, what is the meaning of ‘Lead and mercury preserve well’?”

“Lead is heavy,” Ma Yu responded automatically, “It resembles the kidneys; mercury is liquid, it is a metaphor for internal warming. ‘Lead and mercury preserve well’ means that it is good to stabilize the kidneys and to extinguish the internal fire, in order to obtain results from meditation.”

“And what is the meaning of ‘Baby of the girl Cha’?” Mei ChaoFeng pursued.

Ma Yu suddenly became aware that she was asking him to explain secret formulae of Nei Gong! “Heretical witch,” he shouted, “Do not try to extract the secrets of my sect from me! Leave quickly!”

Mei ChaoFeng laughed, “Thank you for your answer, Master Taoist!”

She suddenly jumped forward, armed with her silvery whip, and glided to the bottom of the cliff at unbelievable speed. Those remaining looked on, relieved to have escaped a conflict. Far away on the steppe, a shadow sped away like a phantom.

Ma Yu unsealed Hua Zheng’s accupoints which returned her ability to move. The girl lay on a boulder resting.

“In ten years,” Zhu Cong said, “That woman made so much progress, that if the Master Taoist had not lent us a strong hand today, our accounts would have been settled!”

Ma Yu responded modestly, but he was frowning, as if an inner worry tormented him.

“If there is some task to finish,” Zhu Cong said, “Even though we are not capable of great things, we can at least do your bidding. Do not hesitate to ask it of us.”

“Because of my inattention,” Ma Yu said, “I was tricked by that crafty woman!”

“Were you injured by a secret weapon?” the ‘Six Freaks’ asked.

“No,” replied Ma Yu, “It is nothing like that. When she asked me a question, I replied without thinking, and I fear that it might result in further evil.” His friends were perplexed and seemed not to understand. The Taoist explained, “The external technique of ‘Iron Corpse’ has already reached a level that we cannot even imagine. Even if my brothers Qiu ChuJi and Wang ChuYi really had been present here, we might not have been able to overcome her. That the Master of Peach Blossom Island succeeded in producing a disciple of such strength...proves his own power. Only the Nei Gong of Mei ChaoFeng is not at

all advanced. I do not know where she succeeded in finding the secret formulae to practice Taoist Nei Gong, but without pointers from a master, she was not able to understand them. When she asked me to explain a formula, it was because the lack of understanding had arrested her progress. I realized something was wrong and did not reply to her second question; but my first explanation will allow her to make great progress with her Nei Gong.”

“Let us hope,” Han XiaoYing said, “That she will regret her past crimes and do no more evil.”

“May it be so!” Ma Yu said. “If her Nei Gong should become stronger, she will be more difficult to contain... Ah, this is my fault, I was too naïve and should have distrusted her...” After a moment’s thought, he continued, “One thing intrigues me. The skills of the Peach Blossom Island are completely different to those of Taoism. Nevertheless, these two formulas that she quoted correspond precisely with our Taoist Nei Gong. How is that possible?”

Hua Zheng suddenly leapt off her boulder, “Ah!” she cried, “Guo Jing! Father did not believe me, he left to visit Ong Khan!”

“Why?” Guo Jing asked.

“I explained to him,” Hua Zheng said, “That Uncle Senggum and Uncle Jamuka plotted against him. He burst out laughing, saying that because I don’t want to marry Dukhsh, I invented lies! I said to him that you had heard it with your own ears; but he didn’t want to believe it. He even said that he would punish you on his return. I saw him leave with my three elder brothers and a small escort. I hurried to come to find you, but on the way, that blind woman caught me. She wanted to bring me to see you, isn’t that right?”

“If we had not been here,” one the ‘Six Freaks’ said ominously, “You would have had five holes in your skull by now!”

“When did the Khan leave?” Guo Jing demanded anxiously.

“A long time ago,” Hua Zheng responded, “Father said that he wanted to get there as soon as possible. He didn’t even wait for sunrise. Their horses are very fast; they must be far away by now. Is it really true that Uncle Senggum wants to harm Father? What will we do?” She began to weep. This was the first time in his life that he found himself confronted with a matter so grave and he was distraught.

“Jing’er,” Zhu Cong said, “Descend the cliff quickly and take your little red horse and rescue the Khan. Even if it is not true, we’ll send someone to

ascertain Senggum's intentions. Hua Zheng, will you ask your brother Tolui to muster soldiers and follow to rescue your father."

Guo Jing understood and quickly descended the cliff. Ma Yu, holding on to a long rope, went next descending with Hua Zheng.

The young man dashed to his ger, mounted his horse and set off at a frantic gallop. At that moment, the sun started to rise. Guo Jing, very worried, muttered to himself, "I fear that the Khan might already have fallen into Senggum's trap; then it will be impossible to rescue him!"

The small red horse loved to run without its bridle and its heart danced with joy. It galloped more and more quickly on the plain. Fearing that it would fall, Guo Jing tried to rein it in a little; but the animal resisted and rushed on whinnying with joy. Besides, even galloping at great speed, it showed no signs of fatigue. After more than two hours of galloping, Guo Jing slowed his mount to rest a little. Then they continued on their way. One hour later, they saw in the distance three groups of riders, three squadrons, it seemed. While approaching, he recognized the standards of Ong Khan. The riders advanced, arrows strung and sabers drawn, ready for battle.

"The Khan is further ahead," Guo Jing lamented, "But his line of retreat is already blocked!" He pressed his thighs and his horse raced on like an arrow, passing Ong Khan's soldiers. They called for him to stop, but he was already long gone.

Guo Jing did not dare dally. He saw another three squadrons lying in wait, before he saw, far away, the high plume of white feathers that signaled the presence of Temujin. Escorted by several hundred riders, they rode tranquilly north.

Guo Jing rose to his full height and called, "Great Khan! Stop, you mustn't go on!"

Temujin, taken aback, halted, "Why not?"

Guo Jing recounted to him what he had heard in Senggum's ger, and explained that his line of retreat had been cut. Temujin glanced at him skeptically, not knowing whether he should believe him, "I never got along well with that fool Senggum," he said to himself, "But my adopted father Ong Khan needs me now. Jamuka is my sworn brother; how could they plot against me...unless the Sixth Jin Prince is trying to sow dissension!"

He hesitated, and Guo Jing said, "Great Khan, you have only to send someone back the way you have just traveled and you will see..."

Since childhood, Temujin had lived in the middle of plots and treacheries; he had survived hundreds of battles thanks to his bravery and his caution. Even though he had said that it was absolutely impossible that Ong Khan and Jamuka could have allied themselves against him, he said: "To be careful ten thousand times is not excessive; but to die through carelessness one time is." He then ordered his second son, Chagatai, to leave with Tchila'un. The two men went back the way they had come.

Temujin observed the lay of the land and ordered, "Let us go up that hill and make ready!" His escort was only made up of some hundreds of men, but they were all elite soldiers and officers. Without needing other orders, they dug trenches, raised barricades, and got ready to withstand a siege. Shortly after, they saw dust clouds rising in the south, raised by several thousand riders galloping in pursuit of Chagatai and Tchila'un. Jebe had particularly good eyesight and recognized the banners of the pursuers.

"They are Ong Khan's soldiers," he shouted.

They had divided themselves into several detachments and tried to surround Chagatai and Tchila'un. The two men leaned forward on their saddles and desperately whipped their mounts.

"Guo Jing," Jebe cried, "To their aid!"

Both of them descended the hill. The small red horse, glad to meet its herd mates, arrived quickly in front of Tchila'un. Guo Jing loosed three arrows with a rush of wind, cutting down the three closest pursuing soldiers, before interposing himself between the pursuers and the pursued while continuing to fire his arrows in all directions. Jebe had arrived also and his arrows flew as well, swift and deadly. Nevertheless, Ong Khan's men, too numerous to overcome, rushed forward like an irresistible tide.

Chagatai, Tchila'un, Jebe and Guo Jing at last reached the hill. Their companions rained arrows on their pursuers who did not dare to launch a frontal attack, and for the moment, waited out of range.

Standing on the hill, Temujin observed the surroundings. Soon, Ong Khan's regiments came rushing in from all directions. Under a yellow flag, a man rode on a great horse; it was Senggum, son of Ong Khan. The Khan well knew that it was impossible to break the encirclement and that it was better to stall for time. "Why is Brother Senggum afraid to approach and parley?" he called.

Under the protection of his guards, who covered him with their shields, Senggum approached, confident and arrogant, "Temujin, make your retreat!"

“How,” Temujin demanded, “Did I offend my adopted father Ong Khan, so that you attack me?”

“For generations and generations,” Senggum said, “The Mongolians lived in separate tribes, at the heart of which the flocks were spread and divided in common. Why do you want to run counter to the traditions of our ancestors, by mixing the tribes? My father has often said that you are wrong to want to do that.”

“We Mongols,” Temujin replied, “Are subordinate to the Jin Empire that demands of us each year, a tribute of tens of thousands of cattle. Is this just? If that continues, all of us will starve to death! If we did not fight amongst ourselves, why should we be afraid of the Jin Empire? I have always maintained good relations with my adoptive father; there is no hatred between our two families. It is the fault of the Jin, who wants to sow disunity between us!”

Senggum’s soldiers, hearing this debate, thought that his words had merit.

“We Mongolians are valiant warriors,” Temujin continued, “Why should we not go and take the treasures of the Jin? Why should we furnish tributes to them every year? Amongst the Mongolians, there are some that work hard to husband the herds, and then there are lazy ones. Why should those that work tire themselves nourishing those that do nothing? Why should those that sweat not have more cattle and sheep? Why do they not leave the lazy ones to die of hunger?”

At that time, the Mongolians lived according to a type of tribal socialism. Their principal wealth, cattle and sheep, belonged to all. During the last few years, the flocks had increased in size. The tribes had learned from the Han to work iron for the manufacture of tools and weapons. Most of the animal herders wished to keep the wealth that they produced for themselves; just as the warriors that, at the risk of their lives, won battles and did not want to divide prisoners and loot with those that did not go to war. These matters went straight to the hearts of all the soldiers.

Seeing that Temujin was beginning to influence his men, Senggum cried, “Lay down your weapons at once and surrender! Otherwise, it will take but a signal from my whip to rain down ten thousand arrows! You have no chance of escape!”

Guo Jing saw that the situation had become critical, but did not know what to do. Then he saw, at the foot of the hill, a young officer, his armor covered by a coat of grey fur, with a saber in his hand, proudly parading back and forth on his war horse. It was Dukhsh, the son of Senggum, with whom he had fought in

his childhood. He was the villainous rascal that had wanted to unleash leopards on Tolui. Guo Jing did not really understand why this was happening, and especially why Ong Khan, Senggum and Jamuka wanted to plot against Temujin. “The Khan and Ong Khan have always lived in harmony,” he said to himself, “It must mean that Dukhsh, at the instigation of the Sixth Jin Prince, has spread misleading and malicious lies. If I capture him and force him to admit his lies, then everyone will be able to reconcile!” Spurring his small red horse, he descended the hill and, taking advantage of the surprise, forced his way to Dukhsh.

Attacking with his blade, Guo Jing leaned out of his saddle, the blade held above his head, and with his right hand he trapped the principal artery on Dukhsh’s wrist. It was a movement of the famed technique ‘Disconnect the Muscles and Separate the Bones’ perfected by Zhu Cong and Dukhsh could not withstand it. With a pull, Guo Jing snatched him out of his saddle. He heard the hissing of heavy projectiles from his left, about to fall upon him. He pressed lightly with his knees; the small red horse obeyed immediately and flew like an arrow towards the hill.

Senggum’s soldiers called, “Fire arrows!” Guo Jing placed Dukhsh behind him, using his body as a shield, so well that the enemy did not dare to fire.

Arriving at the summit of the hill, Guo Jing threw Dukhsh to the ground laughing, “Great Khan, this rascal is surely the person responsible for this treachery! Let us make him acknowledge it!”

Temujin, very happy, pointed his lance at Dukhsh’s chest and shouted in the direction of Senggum, “Move your men back two hundred zhangs!”

Senggum, upset and worried to see his well armed son fall into the hands of the enemy, could do nothing but back up his army. He ordered them to encircle the hill with ordered ranks of wagons, so that Temujin’s horsemen would be unable to sally out.

On the hill, Temujin praised Guo Jing warmly, and ordered him to tie the prisoner’s hands behind his back.

Three times Senggum sent a messenger to negotiate. If Temujin released Dukhsh and left, his life would be spared. Each time, the Khan cut the ears off the messenger before he returned them to their master.

The sun moved towards the horizon. Fearing that Senggum would use the dusk to attack, Temujin ordered that everyone should double their vigilance.

Towards midnight, a man clothed in white approached the foot of the hill. "I am Jamuka," he called out. "I wish to see my sworn brother Temujin."

"You may come up!" the Khan said.

Jamuka ascended slowly and saw Temujin standing at the top of the slope. He advanced and made as if to embrace him, but the Khan, not letting his guard down, said roughly, "You still consider me a Brother?"

Jamuka sighed and seated himself cross-legged. "Brother," he said, "You are already the chief of a tribe, why do you have this ambition to unify all of the Mongols?"

"What do you believe?" Temujin replied.

"The chieftains of the tribes say: 'our ancestors lived this way for hundreds of years, why does Temujin want to change tradition? Heaven will not allow it!'"

"Do you remember the history of our ancestor Lady Alan Qo'a?" Temujin said. "She had five sons that lived in discord. She asked all of them to come and eat with her. Then she gave an arrow to each and asked them to break it. This they did very easily. Next, she tied five arrows together, and asked again that they break them. Each tried in turn, but none were able to break the five arrows. Do you recall what she said to them then?"

"If you are not united," Jamuka said in a low voice, "You can be broken by those of no importance, just like a single arrow. If you unite, you will be as solid as the five arrows and no person will break you."

"So," Temujin said, "You remember that. What happened next?"

"The five sons united their efforts and conquered an immense territory. They are the ancestors of our Mongol tribes."

"Exactly! Both of us are brave and heroic; why not unite all of the Mongolians? If we do not quarrel amongst ourselves, we will be strong enough to destroy the Jin Empire!"

"But how?" Jamuka asked, "The Jin Empire is powerful and its armies and wealth are immeasurable; how can we Mongolians defeat them?"

"Then you prefer to remain submissive to the Jin?"

"The Jin Empire does not oppress us," Jamuka protested. "The emperor has even made you a 'Northern Ambassador'!"

“At first,” Temujin said honestly, “I also believed that they had good intentions. But the greed of the Jin has no limits, and they demand more from us each time. First they want cattle, next horses, and now they ask that we send soldiers to help them make war. The country of the Song is far removed from our lands! Even if the Song Dynasty falls, all the lands conquered will belong to Jin alone. We will lose warriors, to win what? Since when would our cattle stop eating the green grass of our plains to go eat the sand on the other side of the mountains? If we must battle, it should be against the Jin Empire only!”

“Ong Khan and Senggum do not want to betray the Jin.” Jamuka said.

“To betray?” Temujin mocked. “Betray? And you?”

“I beseech you, Brother, do not let your anger get the better of you; release Dukhsh, and Senggum and I will guarantee to let you leave safely.”

“I have no confidence in Senggum; now I have no confidence in you!”

“Hear the words of Senggum,” Jamuka said. “If a son dies, other sons will be born. If Temujin dies, there will never be another Temujin! If you do not release Dukhsh, you will not see another sunrise!”

Temujin knew well the characters of Senggum and Jamuka. If left in their hands, he knew that he would have no chance of survival. If Ong Khan was there, he might possibly live. He brandished his saber and whirled around.

“I would rather die in battle,” he cried, “Than to surrender! Under heaven, there is a Temujin who will die on the field of honour and no Temujin that flees!”

Jamuka said, “You give all of the loot to the warriors, saying that it belongs to them and not to the whole tribe. The chieftains of the tribes say that you do wrong; that you run counter to our traditions.”

“But the young warriors are delighted!” Temujin said harshly. “The chieftains pretend that the treasures of war cannot be distributed equitably to each warrior, so they keep it all for themselves. Such practices insult the warriors who risked their lives to support them. When we are at war, do we need stupid and greedy chieftains, or do we need young courageous warriors?”

“Brother,” Jamuka said, “You’ve always acted on your own and never listened to the leaders of the other tribes. Don’t call me ungrateful or traitor. These past days, you’ve been sending people to convince my soldiers to join your army by telling them that, once back home, the resources gained in battle belong to the ones that fought for them. They won’t be distributed amongst all the tribe’s members. Did you think that I didn’t know of it?”

“If you are aware of it,” Temujin thought, “Then we won’t ever live in peace with each other.” He then took a small bag out of his clothing and threw it at the feet of Jamuka. “Here are the gifts that you offered me when we swore, three times, loyalty to each other. Take them. Later, when you cut off my head with your saber, you will only kill an enemy and not a sworn brother. I am a hero, you are also a hero. The plains of Mongolia are vast, but it cannot contain two heroes.”

Jamuka picked up the bag. He then took a small leather bag from his own clothing, dropped it at Temujin’s feet in silence, and moved down the hill.

Temujin looked at him as he moved away; then he stood a long time in silence. He slowly opened the bag, withdrew the stones and the arrowheads from it, and remembered the games that they’d played when they were children. He sighed, dug a hole with a dagger and buried the gifts he’d given to his former sworn brother in it.

Guo Jing was next to him, also feeling heartbroken. What Temujin buried, he well knew, was an infinitely precious childhood friendship.

The Khan stood up and studied the scene. As far as he could see there were fires lit by the armies of Senggum and Jamuka illuminating the plain, looking like the myriads of stars in the sky. He remained divided in his thoughts. He turned around and saw Guo Jing close to him. “Are you afraid?” he asked.

“I was thinking about my mother,” answered the young man.

“Indeed, you are a brave son,” said Temujin, “A true brave son!”

He pointed to the thousands of fires on the plain, “They also,” he continued, “Are brave! We Mongols have so many brave sons, but we spend time making wars on ourselves. If we could unite them, we could take over the world and make it a huge field for our herds!”

Guo Jing, hearing these very ambitious words, felt even more admiration for Temujin. He stuck out his chest and said, “Great Khan, we are surely going to win, because we cannot be beaten by a coward like Senggum!”

“Precisely,” Temujin answered with a smile. “Let’s remember what we say tonight. If we manage to survive, henceforth I will consider you as my own son.” He then hugged the young man.

As they spoke, the new day had begun. Horns sounded repeatedly in the ranks of the enemy.

“Help won’t come,” Temujin said. “Let’s prepare ourselves to die on this hill.” They heard, in the adversary’s army, the jangle of the weapons and the neighs of horses; the attack was imminent.

“Great Khan,” Guo Jing suddenly said, “My red horse is extremely fast. Take it and bring back help. In the mean time, we will remain here to face the enemy.”

Temujin smiled and stretched his hand to caress the hair of the young man.

“If Temujin,” he said, “Was capable of abandoning his friends and his men to run away in fear for his life, he wouldn’t be worthy of being your Khan!”

“That’s true, Great Khan,” Guo Jing acknowledged, “I was wrong...”

They hid themselves behind protective mounds of earth, ready to fire arrows at the attackers.

Shortly thereafter, three men left the enemy’s ranks preceded by a yellow standard and moved forward. On the left was Senggum, on the right, Jamuka, and in the center, surprisingly, was the Sixth Prince of the Jin Empire, Wanyan HongLie! He was covered with armor, a golden helmet and had a shield of gold on his arm. He shouted, “Temujin, do you dare betray the Jin Empire?”

Jochi, Temujin’s eldest son, shot an arrow at him, but a man in his escort seized it from the air with astounding speed.

“Capture Temujin!” Wanyan HongLie shouted. At these words, four men hurried up the hill. Their movements were a surprise to Guo Jing. He noted that the newcomers, who used a lightness technique, were experts in martial arts and weren’t warriors of the plains. Arriving at mid-hill, they avoided with agility the rain of arrows that Jebe, Borchu and the others shot. “We have officers and brave men of great strength here,” Guo Jing worried, “But they won’t be a match for experts in martial arts! What can we do?”

One among them, clothed in black, bounded to the summit of the hill.

Ogedai tried to stop him, but the newcomer hit his neck with a dart and swung down with his saber at the injured man. However, as quick as lightning, a sword came down to hit his wrist with a great speed and precision. The movement so well executed that he was forced to move back three steps. Surprised, he saw a young man with a strong build standing in front of Ogedai. Not expecting to find an expert swordsman amongst Temujin’s soldiers, he exclaimed, in Han, “Who are you? What is your name?”

“I am called Guo Jing!”

“I’ve never heard anyone speak of you! Surrender now!”

Guo Jing took a look around and saw that the three other attackers were on the summit of the hill and already engaged in an unarmed fight with Tchila’un, Borchu and the others. He struck again at the man with the saber who defended, then retaliated.

Just as Senggum’s soldiers got ready to assault the hill, Muqali put his saber on the nape of Dukhsh’s neck. “If you come,” he shouted, “My blade will be without mercy!”

Senggum, very worried, turned toward Wanyan HongLie and said, “Lord Zhao, tell your men to come back, we will find another way! There’s no reason to sacrifice my child!”

“Don’t worry,” Wanyan HongLie smiled and said, “Nothing will happen to him!” But in reality he wanted to force Temujin to kill Dukhsh and create a lasting hate between the two tribes.

Senggum’s men didn’t dare move, while those of the Prince were in a violent fight.

Guo Jing used the techniques of the ‘Sword of the Yue Maiden’ that Han XiaoYing had taught him. After several exchanges, he was faced with danger. His opponent’s saber was powerful, his strength abundant and all his techniques were backed with internal energy so he was not a weak adversary. Guo Jing’s long sword made swift movements and seemed to have turned into flashes of light. His sword tip was aimed at the critical places on his adversary and every technique was intended to harm his opponent. Guo Jing’s opponent felt a bit overwhelmed by his fast attacks and became flustered.

His three companions, who had already defeated several Mongol officers, saw him in difficulty. One among them, armed with a big spear, approached with a jump, “Big Brother, I’ve come to give you a helping hand!”

But the man with the saber shouted, “Don’t move and admire the dexterity of your Older Brother!”

Taking advantage of his distraction, Guo Jing, delivered a stroke “The Phoenix Flies off and the Snake Bounds”, as he pointed the tip of his sword at the lower part of his opponent’s body. The man moved back, but the blade had already split his left sleeve.

The man with the saber moved back and shouted, “Who is your master? Why do you look for death here?”

Guo Jing remained in a defensive posture and answered in the language of the Rivers and Lakes region taught by his masters, "I am the disciple of the 'Seven Freaks of the South'. What are your honorable names and surnames?" He had practiced these polite forms of address for a long time, but this was the first time that he'd actually used them.

"Our names," the man with the saber said, while casting a glance towards his brothers-in-arms, "Even if I told you, you would not know them. Defend yourself!"

After the first clashes, Guo Jing truly felt that his adversary was stronger than him. But the techniques taught by his Seventh Master were extremely sophisticated and provoked a lot of apprehension in his enemy; so much so that he could take the initiative and attack without moving back. The man with the saber used the stance "Survey the Sea and Behead the Dragon" as his saber slashed towards Guo Jing's legs. In a matter of moments they had exchanged twenty or thirty stances. Both sides intently observed the fight. The man with the saber began to get nervous and his strokes became more and more violent. Suddenly, he attacked Guo Jing's waist. Guo Jing twisted and replied with a stroke called "Turn Around to Pick the Fruit" towards the arm that held the saber. His adversary, seeing that he didn't bother about defending, believed that his hour had come: "When your sword touches its goal," he thought, "My saber will have already cut you in two!"

However, Guo Jing, sure of his strong Nei Gong, moved his waist to the side without moving the rest of his body, and avoided the saber and planted his sword in the man's chest.

The man screamed, released his saber and struck the blade of the sword with his hand causing it fall to the ground. But the tip of Guo Jing's sword had already penetrated a half inch into his chest! He had saved his life, but his palm was cut and bled profusely.

He then heard the hiss of a weapon behind him and heard Jebe shout, "Watch out, behind you!"

Without even looking back, Guo Jing executed a backwards kick and blocked the stroke that came at him. At the same time, he grabbed the fallen saber and executed a saber cut at the hand of the enemy. Guo Jing delivered the stroke "Advancing a Pace to Seize the Basket", deflecting the lance with his left hand. He turned his left palm and seized his opponents spear while his right hand holding the saber hacked towards the spear wielder. The man used all his strength to pull back his spear, but when he saw the saber about to hit him, he released his grip and retreated.

With this victory, the young man felt renewed again. With a flourish, he threw the saber to the foot of the hill, and picked up the lance. The fourth man jumped at him shouting and attacking with his two short axes. Guo Jing's spear techniques were taught by Quan JinFa. After several exchanges Guo Jing feigned a flaw that the man with the axes was thrilled to see and he hacked at him. Suddenly, he felt pain in his stomach; he had been kicked by Guo Jing. He flew backwards while the force remaining in his left hand moved his axe towards his own head. The third martial brother of the axe man blocked it with his iron whip. When the two weapons met there was a "clang" and sparks flew. The man released his axe when the weapons collided and sat down on the ground with a frightened look on his face, dumbfounded but alive. The man was a fool and it took him a minute before he realized that he had lost. He shouted angrily and picked up his axes to attack again. After a few axe slashes he hacked Guo Jing's spear into two pieces. Guo Jing had lost his weapon, so he used his palms to counter him. The man with the iron whip came to his martial brother assistance and Guo Jing saw that he was at a disadvantage but had no choice but to keep fighting.

This provoked indignation amongst the soldiers. Mongols are simple and direct and respect men of courage. They were scandalized to see these four men taking turns fighting Guo Jing, and now, they were pitting themselves two against one unarmed man! They regarded that as dishonorable, and shouted for them to stop. Guo Jing was a worthy opponent and they cheered him.

Borchu and Jebe drew their sabers and joined the battle; they did so well that the other two assailants also joined in the battle. The two Mongolians were invincible on the battlefield, but they were out of their depth in single combat against experts in martial arts. They fought only a couple of exchanges with great difficulty before they were disarmed and had to retreat. Guo Jing saw that Borchu was in danger and stormed towards him to attack the man that used the saber. Guo Jing struck a palm towards the back of the eldest martial brother who used his saber to hack at Guo Jing's wrist. Guo Jing retracted his palm and used his elbow to attack the second martial brother to save Jebe. His attempts to provide some assistance to them proved futile.

The four assailants had only one obsession, to kill Guo Jing. They doubled their efforts to attack Guo Jing. The soldiers on the summit and at the foot of the hill redoubled their shouts and insults; but the four turned a deaf ear on them. The spearman had collected a javelin from the ground. Coming at him Guo Jing saw, at the same time, a saber, javelin, whip and axes! Since he was unarmed, he could not parry or reply, so his only option was to avoid the blows employing his Qing Gong^{iv}. He moved back and forth and avoided numerous attacks in him.

For another twenty odd stances the men continued their attacks on Guo Jing. His arm, cut by the saber, was bleeding and he was in a dire position.

Suddenly a disturbance disrupted the ranks of Senggum's army as six individuals nimbly brushed through the soldiers and ascended the hill. The Mongolians thought that they were more lackeys of Wanyan HongLie coming to lend assistance to their comrades, and noisily voiced their disapproval.

Temujin's men prepared to shoot arrows at them to prevent their approach when Jebe, whose vision was particularly acute, saw that it was the 'JiangNan Freaks'. "Jing'er," he cried, "Here come your teachers!"

Guo Jing, nearly unable to resist any longer, was cheered up.

Arriving first, Zhu Cong and Quan JinFa realized right away the perilous position their disciple was in. Quan JinFa jumped forward and struck the four weapons with a blow of his balance scale, "Have you no shame!" he cried.

Feeling great pain in their hands, the four men realized that a more powerful opponent had just arrived and drew back. Zhu Cong had rescued Guo Jing. Meanwhile, the other 'Freaks' arrived.

"Shameless scoundrels," Quan JinFa scolded. "Be off! Have you no face?"

The man with the saber was well aware that they had lost their advantage, and if they continued the fight, they would be defeated. But if they backed down, they would lose face and could no longer dare to serve the Sixth Prince!

"Are you the 'Seven Freaks of the South'?" he demanded, to give himself some breathing space.

"Indeed," Zhu Cong replied, laughing. "Who are you?"

"We are the disciples of the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group'."

The 'Freaks' were very surprised, for, given that these individuals had openly abused their numerical superiority, they believed that they must be vagabonds without a master. But the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group', Sha TongTian, is a weighty personality in the martial arts world.

"Are you misusing that name, or not?" Ke Zhen'E demanded in an icy voice. "The 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group' is a renowned personage, how could he have disciples as miserable as you?"

“Misusing a name?” the axe man said. “This is Elder Brother Shen QingGang, nicknamed ‘Saber Breaks Down The Soul’; this is Second Brother, Wu QingLie, nicknamed ‘Lance Seizes Life’; this is Third Brother Ma QingXiong, nicknamed ‘Whip Captures Spirit’; and I, Qian QingJian, am nicknamed ‘Axe Buries Family’.”

“So,” Ke Zhen’E said, “It seems to be true. You really are the ‘Four Demons of the Yellow River’. You occupy a certain position in the JiangHu world; how could you lower yourselves to attack four against one?”

Wu Qinglie said cunningly, “What, four against one?” he argued. “Isn’t your disciple helped by all these Mongols? Indeed, we are four against several hundred!”

“Third Brother,” Qian QingJian demanded of Ma QingXiong, “This blind person appears to be very boastful. Who is he?”

He had asked the question in a low voice but Ke Zhen’E heard him. Very upset, he leapt forward and struck with his staff at Qian QingJian. Grabbing him by the collar he threw him to the bottom of the hill. Ke Zhen’E, already among them, grasped them one after the other and pitched them far away. The Mongolian soldiers called out joyfully. The ‘Four Demons of the Yellow River’, covered with sand, rose painfully to their feet with their limbs aching and shame on their faces.

At that moment, immense dust clouds rose in the distance, as if tens of thousands of horsemen were coming. A flutter of nervousness immediately moved through Senggum’s army.

Temujin, delighted to see reinforcements arriving, knew that iron discipline reigned in the army of Jamuka. Its officers and soldiers were all battle hardened. Senggum, protected by the reputation of his father, was a less formidable commander in chief. Temujin pointed to the left wing of Senggum’s army and shouted, “Attack in that direction!”

Jebe, Borchu, Jochi and Chagatai signaled the first ones. One could hear the faraway cries of the warriors of the relief column. Muqali swept his saber down on the nape of the neck of Duksh and shouted, “Get out of the way! Get out of the way!”

Senggum, who was going to order his men to intercept them, hesitated upon seeing that his son menaced. In a wink, Temujin’s small troop moved to the foot of the hill. Jebe carefully aimed and loosed an arrow headed for Senggum’s head. He shielded himself quickly, but the projectile struck his left

cheek and he tumbled down from his mount. Seeing their chieftain fall, his men made their escape in pitiful disarray.

Temujin and his companions broke out of the siege, firing arrows at those that pursued them. Several li away, in the cloud of dust, was Tolui and his soldiers. The pursuers had always feared the bravery of Temujin. Now that they no longer had the advantage of numbers, they turned tail.

It turned out that because Tolui was young, the chieftains and generals refused to obey him since he didn't have Temujin's command seal. He could only convince a few thousand young soldiers to follow him here. He then conceived the idea of attaching branches to the tails of the horses, so that quantity of dust thus raised concealed the number of his soldiers. The ploy was a success.

Temujin's army returned to his camp. On the way they met Hua Zheng leading a small company of soldiers. When she saw that they were unharmed, she was so happy that she wouldn't stop talking.

That evening, Temujin gave a large banquet to reward his soldiers, but he placed Dukhsh in the place of honor, which caused general indignation. The Khan offered three toasts to pay homage to Dukhsh and said, "Ong Khan, my adoptive father, and my brother Senggum have always treated me well. There is no reason for hatred between our families. Please present my excuses to them, which will be accompanied with gifts of great value. I won't hold a grudge against you because of what you have done. After you return, you will prepare for your marriage to my daughter. We will hold a great feast and we will invite the chiefs of all the tribes. There will be great rejoicing. You will be my son-in-law and thus my son. From now on the two families must be united as one and not let themselves be divided by gossip."

Dukhsh, relieved at not being killed, accepted all that was offered. He noticed that when Temujin spoke, he kept his right hand on his chest under his tunic, and coughed nonstop. He wondered, "Could it be that he's wounded?"

"This day," the Khan said, "I was hit by an arrow. It will take three months to recuperate before I'm healthy again; if this hadn't happened, I would accompany you back myself. He withdrew his hand from under his tunic; it was covered with blood! "There's no need to wait for my wound to heal before you get married. Otherwise...otherwise you'll have to wait too long."

All the officers present were amazed and outraged to see their Khan afraid and apprehensive about Ong Khan, and much too eager to marry Hua Zheng to Dukhsh. The son of the division commander that was part of Temujin's escort had been killed defending the hill. The commander, insane with anger,

unsheathed his saber and wanted to kill Dukhsh. The Khan had him seized and beaten in front of Dukhsh, until he fainted, covered with blood.

“He will be imprisoned,” Temujin ordered, “And he will be beheaded with all of his family in three days time!” The following day, Dukhsh returned home, taking along two carts filled with gold and furs, a thousand fat sheep, one hundred war horses, and escorted by fifty soldiers. Temujin also sent an emissary known for his eloquence, to plead his cause with Ong Khan and Senggum. At the time of the departure, Temujin, who seemed not to have the strength to ride a horse, arrived on a stretcher and bade him farewell, still coughing.

Eight days later, Temujin brought his officers together. “Gather your soldiers,” he ordered, “We will attack Ong Khan!” All the officers looked aghast. He continued, “Ong Khan has a very large army, whereas we are few. If you can’t win a frontal battle, a ruse is needed. I let Dukhsh go, heaping him with gifts, while I pretended to be wounded by an arrow and near death. I did all that to take him off guard!”

The officers expressed their admiration. At this moment, Temujin freed the commander he had beaten and gave him a large reward. Learning that the army was going to attack Ong Khan, the commander felt joy. He knelt down to express his thanks and asked for the honor of commanding the vanguard, which Temujin granted him. The army of the Khan was divided into three columns, which marched during the night using little used trails and bivouacked during the day. When they met shepherds, they took them captive and brought them along, to avoid any indiscriminate talk.

In the beginning, Ong Khan and Senggum, fearing that Temujin would come to seek revenge, kept their guard up. But the triumphal return of Dukhsh, the gifts he brought back, the servile remarks of the emissary and the news of the serious wound to the Khan reassured them completely. They even withdrew their forward sentinels and spent their time feasting with Wanyan HongLie and Jamuka. One night, the three columns of Temujin’s army fell on them like lightning! The many soldiers of Ong Khan and Jamuka, panic stricken, lost much of their combativeness and the battle turned into a rout. Ong Khan and Senggum fled towards the west where they were killed shortly after by the Naiman and Liao. In the confusion, Dukhsh was trampled by horses.

Wanyan HongLie, for his part, escaped in the middle of the night, in the protection of the ‘Four Demons of the Yellow River’ and headed back to the Jin capital. Abandoned by his soldiers, Jamuka took refuge at TangNu Mountain with his five bodyguards. They betrayed him and brought him to Temujin. Temujin was furious, “Bodyguards who betray their master!” he

cried. “How can I let such people live?” He ordered them decapitated in front of Jamuka. Then he turned to Jamuka, “Shall we become friends again?”

“Even if you spare my life,” answered Jamuka with tears in his eyes, “I haven’t the honor left to live in this world. I only beg that you let me die without bloodshed, so that my soul will not leave my body.”^v

Temujin remained sadly silent for a long time. “Well,” he finally said, “I agree to such a death and I will bury you at the place where we played as children. Jamuka knelt before him, then rose and left the ger. A few days later, Temujin united the tribes on the banks of the Onon River in a “kuriltai” (general assembly). The river’s fame stretched beyond the steppe, and the tribes, warriors and all the shepherds fear and revere it. Ong Khan and Jamuka’s men had been integrated into Temujin’s army. During the “kuriltai”, Temujin was acclaimed Grand Khan of all Mongolia; he carried, from that time on, the title of ‘Genghis Khan’, which meant ‘Supreme Chief’.

Genghis Khan rewarded the most deserving soldiers: the ‘Four Aces’, Muqali, Borchu, Boroqul, Tchila’un, while the officers, Jebe, Jelme and Subotai were made generals. During the battle, Guo Jing had rendered exceptional service and he was made a general as well! A young man, who had not yet reached twenty years of age, was regarded as an equal to officers of great reputation! During the banquet, Genghis Khan accepted homage from his faithful ones and drank without restraint. Slightly drunk, he said to Guo Jing, “My good boy, I will give you the most valuable thing I have.” Guo Jing knelt down to thank him. “I give Hua Zheng to you,” Genghis Khan said. “From tomorrow onwards, you will be the Golden Saber Prince (Jin Dao Fu Ma)”

All the warriors let out cries of joy and congratulated the young man, “Son-in-law, wearing the large golden knife! Well done, hurrah!”

The happiest with all this was, without any doubt, Tolui, who embraced his sworn brother. But the person at the center of interest remained dazzled. He had always regarded Hua Zheng as his sister and he did not feel any other kind of love. He had devoted all his time to martial arts; when had he time to think of other things? The words of Genghis Khan distressed him and he didn’t know what to do. Seeing him speechless, everyone burst out laughing.

After the banquet, Guo Jing went to inform his mother. Li Ping remained thoughtful for a long time, and then asked him to invite the ‘Six Freaks’ from JiangNan to their ger. They were delighted to see their beloved disciple covered with honors and they congratulated his mother. But she did not say a word. Then she fell suddenly to her knees in front of the ‘Six Freaks’.

“Please rise,” they protested. “If you have something to say to us, do so, why such ceremony?”

Han XiaoYing helped her up. “Thanks to the teachings of the Six Masters,” Li Ping said, “My child finally became a man. I can never express my gratitude to all of you. But now, I face a difficulty and I need your enlightened counsel.” She then told about the marriage which had been arranged by her late husband and his sworn brother, Yang TieXin. “That the Khan wants my son to be his son-in-law,” she began again, “Is of course a great honor. But if Brother Yang had a girl and I do not keep my husband’s promise, how could I, in the underworld, face my husband and Brother Yang?”

“You don’t have to worry,” Zhu Cong said laughing. “The honorable Yang actually has a descendant, but it is not a girl...it’s a boy!”

Li Ping was astonished and delighted at the same time. “How do you know, Master Zhu?”

“A friend, who remained in the Central Plains, wrote to inform us. By the way, he wishes that we take Jing’er to JiangNan to meet the son of Yang, and to compare their kung fu.”

The ‘Six Freaks’ had never made known to Li Ping and her son about the challenge with Qiu ChuJi. Whenever Guo Jing raised questions about the young Taoist Yin ZhiPing, they merely murmured something without really answering. Knowing the kind nature of their disciple, they thought that, were he suddenly to know the story of Yang Kang, he would not show all of his potential at the time of the combat; it would distort the competition irretrievably.

Zhu Cong’s words charmed Li Ping. She asked if Mrs. Yang was still in this world, and asked questions about the character of Yang Kang, but the ‘Six Freaks’ were unable to answer her. Li Ping and the ‘Six Freaks’ decided that they would take Guo Jing to JiangNan to meet Yang Kang. At the same time they would try to find Duan TianDe and seek vengeance. Afterwards they would come back and Guo Jing would marry Hua Zheng.

Guo Jing went to report this arrangement to Genghis Khan.

“Well,” Temujin said. “Since you go to the south, will you bring back the head of the Sixth Jin Prince, Wanyan HongLie, for me? My sworn brother Jamuka betrayed me and lost his life, and it’s the fault of that scum. How many men do you need to achieve this mission?”

After unifying the Mongolian tribes, Genghis Khan posed a serious threat to the Jin Empire. Confrontation would take place sooner or later, it was inevitable. Having met Wanyan HongLie on several occasions, Temujin knew his intelligence and his competence, so it was important that he be gotten rid of as soon as possible. As for his break with Jamuka, the true reasons were elsewhere; he had uprooted traditions, had left the spoils of war to his own warriors, and had sought to attract Jamuka's soldiers to his own army. The truth was, they both broke their oath of fidelity and they did not want to recognize their responsibilities and preferred to blame it on Wanyan HongLie.

Throughout his childhood, Guo Jing's mother had told him stories about the past and he had developed a great hatred towards the Jin. This was reinforced by his battle with the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' who were employed by Wanyan HongLie. Thinking of an answer to Genghis Khan's question, he said to himself, "If my Six Masters will lend me a hand, certainly my mission will be a success. If I take along brave soldiers who do not know martial arts, they are likely to be a hindrance." He then answered, "If my Six Masters accompany me, I won't need anybody else."

"Very well," Genghis Khan said. "We are still weak at the moment and we cannot face the Jin Empire directly. It will be necessary for you to be careful and not to let them guess our intentions."

Guo Jing agreed. The Khan gave him ten taels of gold for his journey and offered the 'Six Freaks' a part of the spoils plundered from Ong Khan. Learning that he was to leave on a mission to the south, all of Guo Jing's Mongol friends also offered gifts to him.

"My Anda," Tului reminded, "The people of the south don't keep their word, you must be careful, and not get duped ..."

At dawn three days later, Guo Jing and his Masters left for the grave of Zhang A'Sheng to pay homage. Then they returned to bid farewell to Li Ping before taking the road to the south. Li Ping watched the tall silhouette of her son riding the small red horse as it disappeared on the steppe. She thought of his birth on that desolate battlefield, and felt her heart tighten with concern and sadness.

After riding about ten li, Guo Jing saw two white eagles soaring in the sky. Tului and Hua Zheng had come to bid him farewell. Tului offered him a valuable coat of flawless black sable which he had taken from Ong Khan.

Hua Zheng, with glowing cheeks, looked at her future husband without saying anything.

“Oh go ahead, little sister,” Tolui said, “Speak to him! I will not listen to what you’ll say!” He burst out laughing and moved away.

Hua Zheng bowed her head, not finding anything to say...“Return quickly!” she finally murmured.

Guo Jing nodded his head. “What else do you want to say to me?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Then, I’ll go ...”

She lowered her head without saying another word.

Guo Jing leaned over, lightly pressed her to him, then rode towards Tolui and hugged him also. Then he urged his horse into a gallop in order to catch up with his Six Masters who were already far ahead.

Him being so formal and not showing any tenderness, even though they were promised in marriage and he was traveling faraway, Hua Zheng felt a surge of anger. As she rode off she violently whipped her horse even though the poor animal had nothing to do with the situation...

ⁱ Nei Gong could be regarded as a form of internal martial arts involving controlled breathing, meditation and the awareness of what’s happening inside one’s own body and to some extent controlling it. It can be used as an aid in the recovery of one’s health from illness or injury and improves the skills of external types of martial arts.

ⁱⁱ 1 zhang = 3.3 meters or about 11 feet.

ⁱⁱⁱ JiangHu

^{iv} Lightness kung fu or a form of Chinese martial arts that will allow the practitioner the ability to jump higher many times that of the human body and further or the ability to run faster than an average person with a flitting continuous motion.

^v According to the beliefs of the Shamans, the soul resides in the blood. Princes that are to be killed but still honored were put to death by strangulation.