

Chapter

2

A NOVEL BY JIN YONG

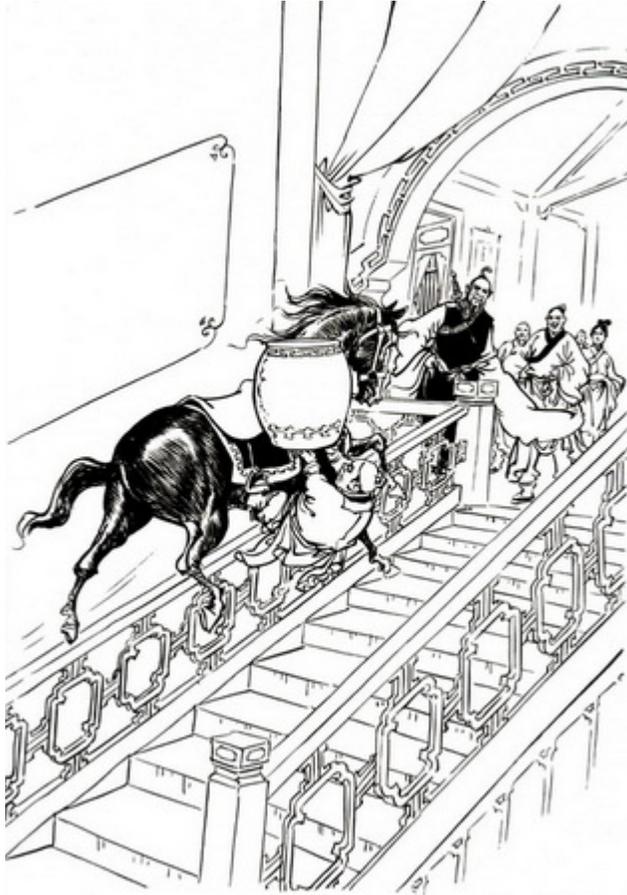
Seven Freaks of the South

Legend of the Condor Heroes

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The 'Horse God' Han BaoJu's body was actually underneath the belly of the horse with his left foot in the stirrup and his right foot and both of his hands were holding the vat, balancing it neatly on the saddle. The horse was fast and steady, as if the stairs were flat ground to him.

Seven Freaks of the South

Just as Yan Lie walked out of the door, he saw a middle aged scholar walking his way in the hallway, dragging his feet and yawning constantly. He was sort of smiling but not really and kept on giving him curious looks, all the while looking very relaxed and lazy. He was covered with dirt and oil and his clothing was a mess. He obviously hadn't taken a bath in a long time. He had an old broken black oil paper fan in hand that he was fanning himself with as he was walking.

Seeing such an obviously refined scholar looking so dirty, Yan Lie frowned and picked up his pace in fear of getting some dirt on himself. Suddenly the scholar began laughing dryly; a laugh that was very harsh on the ear. As he was walking by him, he casually reached out with his fan and patted Yan Lie on the shoulder. Even though Yan Lie knew martial arts, he was not able to get out of the way in time, this set him off and he shouted: "What do you think you're doing?"

The scholar laughed dryly again as he kept on walking, dragging his feet all through the hallway. He approached the manager and said: "Hey, fellow, even though I look really rough, I have lots of money. You have to watch out for some people though; they trick people with their nice and refined looks. They put up a show for everyone, seducing women, eat free food, live in inns for free, you know the type, so be on the lookout for them. To be safe, make them pay the bill beforehand." He didn't wait for the manager to respond before walking off, still dragging his feet. Yan Lie got even angrier, knowing that that whole conversation was aimed at him.

After that little comment from the scholar, the manager turned his eyes toward Yan Lie; he now couldn't help but feel a little suspicious. Walking up to Yan Lie, he yawned a little, smiled and said: "Sir, please don't mind too much, it's not that I want to be impolite..." Yan Lie knew what he meant as he humphed and replied: "Put this money in the drawer!" He put his hand into his shirt to take the money out and was shocked. There had been at least forty or fifty taels of silver in his shirt, but, now that he was reaching for it, there was nothing there. The manager saw the expression on his face and actually thought that the

scholar's words were true. Immediately his expression became less polite as he thrust his chest out and asked: "What? No money?"

Yan Lie replied: "Wait here, I'm going to get some right now." He thought that he had forgotten his money because he was in a hurry to leave. As it turned out, when he went back to the room and looked into the bag that he had with him, even the taels of gold he'd had were gone as well. As to where his money went, he had no idea at all. He thought: "Just a bit ago Madame Bao and I both went to the water closet, but that only took several minutes or so, how could anyone have entered and messed around with the room? The thieves here in JiaXing are really getting good."

The manager stuck his head in through the door and looked around; seeing that he did not have any money, he got angry: "Is this woman your wife? If you're doing something indecent, then don't come here because it'll bring us trouble as well!" Bao XiRuo was thoroughly embarrassed and her face turned burning red. Yan Lie took one quick step towards the door and swung his arm, slapping the manager so hard that his face was covered with blood and he lost several teeth. The manager had his face in his hands as he began to scream: "I see! First you don't pay, now you want to fight!" Yan Lie added a kick to his behind and the manager went tumbling out of the room.

Shocked, Bao XiRuo suggested: "Let's get out of here; we can't stay here any longer." Yan Lie smiled: "Don't worry, if we don't have any money then we'll just ask them for some." He grabbed a chair and sat down by the door. Not long afterwards, the manager came back with twelve or so men, each with a club or stick in hand as they charged into the room. Yan Lie let out a big laugh and shouted: "So you men want a fight?" He suddenly jumped forward and confidently grabbed a stick from one of the men; faking left and hitting right, in a blink of an eye he had already knocked four or five men down. These ruffians usually got by using intimidation and bullying the weak, but seeing that their opponent was actually a match for them, they immediately threw down their weapons and scrambled out of the room. Those who were on the floor were crawling and rolling with all their might in fear of being left behind and hit again.

Bao XiRuo, who had been frightened a long time ago, said in a shaky voice: "Things are getting out of hand and the authorities might catch wind of this." Yan Lie smiled and replied: "I want the authorities to show up." Bao XiRuo could not figure out his plan, so she decided to stay quiet and see what happened.

In less than an hour's time, a ruckus occurred outside as ten or so government officials came bursting in with iron sabers in hand. The rings on the sabers were banging against each other, making all kinds of noise; they shouted above the

cacophony: “Not only kidnapping, but assault as well, how dare he? Where is the scoundrel?” Yan Lie sat there motionless in the chair. Seeing his fancy clothing and his proud arrogance, the officials didn’t really dare to charge up to him.

The leader of the group shouted: “Ay! What’s your name? What are you doing here in JiaXing?”

Yan Lie shouted back: “Go get Gai YunCong!”

Gai YunCong was the governor of the prefecture of JiaXing; hearing that he dared speak their superior’s name directly, the government officials were both shocked and furious. The leader shouted: “Are you crazy? How dare you shout the Honorable Prefect Gai’s name in public?” Yan Lie took out an envelope from inside his shirt and put it down on the table; he looked up at the ceiling and said: “Take this to Gai YunCong and see if he comes or not!” The leader took the envelope, seeing the words on it, he took a step back in shock; unsure if it was real or not, he whispered to the other men: “Look after him, don’t let him get away.” He then went flying off. Bao XiRuo just sat there in the room nervously, not knowing what would happen next.

Soon another ten or so government men came running in, along with them came two men wearing official uniforms that scrambled in front of Yan Lie and knelt while saying: “Humble Prefect Gai YunCong of the city of JiaXing and District Magistrate Jiang Wen of the district of XiuShui are honored to meet your Excellency. Your humble servant did not know that your Excellency had arrived, so please forgive us for not welcoming you properly.” Yan Lie waved his hand a little and shifted his weight slightly: “I lost a little bit of money in this county and would like to request that you two brilliant judges investigate the matter.” Gai YunCong immediately nodded: “Yes, of course.” He then waved his arm, two of the followers came walking up with a plate in each of their hands; one of them was glowing yellow because of the gold yuan bao¹ on it, the other one, needless to say, had silver yuan bao on it.

Gai YunCong spoke up: “To think that there are such brazen thieves in my jurisdiction, it is my fault as well. I hope your Excellency will accept this as a slight compensation.” Yan Lie smiled and nodded. Gai YunCong reverentially held up the envelope and said: “Your humble servant has just cleaned up my humble dwelling and would be honored if your Excellency and Madame would move there.” Yan Lie replied: “This place is suitable; I enjoy the peace and quiet.” His face suddenly darkened, “Don’t come around disturbing us anymore.” Gai YunCong immediately nodded and said: “Yes, yes of course! If your Excellency still needs anything, then please do not hesitate to ask your humble servant.” Yan Lie did not reply, he only shook his head and waved his arm repeatedly. The two men quickly led the other men away.

The manager was scared out of his wits as the owner of the place dragged him into the room. The owner kneeled down and kowtowed asking for mercy for them both. He said that as long as they are left alive, they would be willing to accept whatever other punishment might come their way. Yan Lie took out a silver yuan bao from the plate, threw it down on the floor, and said smiling: "Take it, it's a reward. Now get out of my sight." The manager couldn't quite believe it all, but the owner saw that Yan Lie had no ill will in his expression, so he immediately picked up the silver yuan bao, kowtowed a couple of times, and dragged the manager out of sight in fear that Yan Lie might change his mind.

Bao XiRuo could not quite believe what she had just seen: "What kind of magic does that envelope hold? How come the authorities were frightened out of their wits when they saw its contents?" Yan Lie smiled: "I actually have no power over them really, but these officials are hopeless. Zhao Kuo only has this kind of people serving him; if he doesn't lose this country, then there is no justice in the world."

Bao XiRuo asked: "Zhao Kuo? Who is that?"

Yan Lie casually replied: "The present Song Emperor NingZong."

Shocked, Bao XiRuo immediately admonished: "Quiet! How can you say His Majesty's name out loud like that?"

Seeing that she cared about his safety, Yan Lie was ecstatic; smiling, he said: "It's no big deal if I say it out loud. Up north, what would we call him if we don't call him Zhao Kuo?"

Bao XiRuo was confused: "Up north?"

Yan Lie nodded and was about to explain when hurried hoof beats suddenly come from outside as ten or so riders came and stopped in front of the inn. Some color had just returned to Bao XiRuo's white face; but upon hearing the hoof beats, the events of that night all came back to her. This made her face turn white as a sheet again. Yan Lie was frowning, looking as if he wasn't very pleased.

Then came sound of boots as several soldiers in fine clothing came walking in. Upon seeing Yan Lie, their faces immediately broke out in smiles as they simultaneously shouted: "Your Majesty!" All of them kneeled down and saluted. Yan Lie smiled: "So you're finally here." Hearing that they called Yan Lie "Your Majesty", Bao XiRuo was both surprised and puzzled. As those men got up off the floor, she noticed that they were all very strong and well built. Yan Lie waved his arm and said: "Go wait outside." The soldiers answered and

quickly left. Yan Lie turned to Bao XiRuo: “How do you think my men compare with those Song soldiers?”

Bao XiRuo was even more surprised: “They are not Song soldiers?”

Yan Lie smiled: “I guess I have to be honest now, they are all Great Jin’s elite soldiers!” He could not help but laugh out of pride.

Bao XiRuo suddenly realized: “Then...you...you are...”

Yan Lie smiled and answered: “To tell Madame the truth, my surname needs one more word: ‘Wan’ and my given name also has one more word: ‘Hong’. Wanyan HongLie, the Sixth Prince of Great Jin, and titled the Prince of Zhao, at your service.”

Ever since she was a kid, Bao XiRuo had heard from her father the devious ways that the Jin used to take the land of her Great Song. The shame caused by the capture of the two emperors, and the cruelty with which the Jin torture and treat the Han peasants up north. It was the same after she married Yang TieXin, who hated the Jin even more. To find out that the person that she had spent all this time with these last couple days was actually a prince of the Jin, she was left speechless.

Seeing the expression on her face change, Wanyan HongLie smiled and continued: “I have always been fascinated by the south. Last year I asked my father to let me travel down to Lin’An as the good will ambassador for the New Year celebrations. Besides, the Emperor of Song still owed a couple hundred thousand taels of silver in annual tribute, so father wanted me to collect that on my trip as well.”

Bao XiRuo interrupted: “Annual tribute?”

Wanyan HongLie replied: “Yes, the Song Emperor, in order to convince us not to invade, pay us a tribute every year in silk and silver. But they always complain that not enough revenue was generated through taxes, so they never gave us the tribute on time. This time I didn’t leave any room for Han TuoZhuo to fall back on. I told him that if he didn’t get all the money together within the month, I would personally lead an army down to collect them ourselves: then he wouldn’t have to worry about it anymore.”

Bao XiRuo interrupted again: “What did Chancellor Han say?”

Wanyan HongLie proudly replied: “What can he say? By the time I left Lin’An, the silk and silver were all north of the river! Ha...ha!” Seeing Bao XiRuo was looking downwards and not responding he went on: “Actually, this

tribute stuff didn't really need me; any emissary could have done the job. What I really wanted was to see the south, to experience its beauty and to meet its people for myself. Who knew that I would meet Madame, I dare not hope for such good fortune." Bao XiRuo was at a loss as to what to make of the situation and still did not reply. Wanyan HongLie offered: "I'm off to buy some clothes for Madame now."

Bao XiRuo replied with her head down: "No need."

Wanyan HongLie smiled and said: "The traveling money Chancellor Han gave me under the table wouldn't be gone if I bought a new set of clothes for Madame every day for a thousand years. Madame, don't worry, my soldiers are stationed all around this place, no one would dare to trouble you." After he finished, he walked off. Bao XiRuo thought about all that had happened since she met him; a royal prince such as Wanyan HongLie, treating her as politely as he does, what does he plan to do? Then her thoughts drifted to her husband's love and caring for her, yet he was killed and left her here alone. She really didn't know what she should do or could do. In desperation, sadness and confusion, all she could do is clutch her pillow and cry her heart out.

Wanyan HongLie, having put the gold and silver into his shirt, walked out onto the street. Seeing the friendly attitude of the place and the people, even though most of them were peasants, there were still many refined and educated people, he could not help but be impressed. Suddenly, hurried hoof beats came from ahead of him as a horse galloped through the streets towards him. This street wasn't very wide to begin with and now it was filled with people and merchants; added to that, people had sent up small vendor booths on both sides of the street, how could a horse gallop through it? Wanyan HongLie immediately dodged to the side of the street and, in the blink of an eye, a yellow horse came bursting through the crowd of people. This was no ordinary horse; it was tall and fit with muscles rippling throughout its body, obviously it was a very rare thoroughbred. Wanyan HongLie was admiring the horse and when he looked up at the rider he was surprised yet again. Such a beautiful horse, but its rider was a sorry looking fellow who was both short and fat; he looked like a giant slab of meat riding on that horse. This person's arms and legs were amazingly short, he did not have a neck, yet his head was extraordinarily big, as if his neck was sucked into his shoulders. It seemed rather odd that horse was galloping through the crowd of people at full speed, yet it did not run into a single person or knock over a single object. Its hooves landed on the ground softly and nimbly, jumping over pottery, side-stepping vegetables; it seemed to be flashing through some non-existent gaps in the crowd, as though this crowded street was a wide open plain. Wanyan HongLie could no longer contain himself and shouted out loud: "Excellent!"

Hearing that praise, that short chubby fellow turned his head and glanced at him. Wanyan HongLie noticed that his entire face was covered with red spots caused by drinking too much wine; his big and round as well as equally red wine nose looked as if there was a red tomato stuck on his face. He thought to himself: "Such an excellent horse; I have to have it, no matter the price." At this moment, two kids playing tag ran onto the street just in front of the horse. They came out of nowhere and gave the horse quite a scare as it had no room to get out of the way. The horse's left foot was just about to land on one of the kids when the rider lifted up the reins and jumped off of the saddle. Suddenly becoming lighter, the horse's stride became higher and longer, easily flying over the kid's head. That rider then softly and gently landed back onto the saddle.

Shocked, Wanyan HongLie immediately decided, that even though there were a great number of skilled riders among the Jin, none were a match for this man. If he could get this man to go back with him to train the cavalry, then his cavalry would be almost invincible; this was something much more important to him than a great horse. On this trip south, he made mental notes on where an army could be stationed and where the rivers could be crossed; he even asked around about the skills and names of every administrator in the counties he crossed. Seeing the amazing skill of this short fellow, he couldn't believe how stupid the Song authorities were for letting a talent like this go to waste. He decided then and there that he was going to somehow convince this man to go back to YanJing with him. Having made the decision, he immediately started running after them, fearing that, with the horse's speed, he would lose him. He was just about to shout at them when he saw the horse had run to the corner of the street and stopped. This was quite unexpected as he figured that, with the speed that the horse was running, he would have to slowly come to a stop, yet this horse was able to stop instantly. This is something he had never ever seen before; even some great martial arts practitioners wouldn't be able to come to a complete stop when they are exerting themselves like this. The short, fat fellow jumped off the horse and charged into a building.

Wanyan HongLie hurried to the front of the building, inside the building was erected a large wooden sign: "Handed Down from Venus"; it was a two-storied restaurant. Looking up, a huge sign hanging from the roof had the words "Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal" written on it; the calligraphy was very elegant. On the side was written, in smaller characters, "By Resident DongPo".ⁱⁱ Seeing the grandeur of this restaurant, Wanyan HongLie thought: "Since he is here, then I might as well invite him to a great big meal; that way I can become great friends with him and everything after that would be simple." All of a sudden that fellow came running down from upstairs to the horse's side with a wine jug in hand. Wanyan HongLie immediately got out of the way.

Now that he was standing on the ground, the fellow looked even more out of proportion. He wasn't over 1.5 meters tall, yet he was almost 1.5 meters wide as well. The horse was very tall in stature because of its long legs and the man's head was barely as high as the stirrup from the saddle. He placed the wine jug in front of the horse, gently hit the jug a couple of times, and then casually picked the top half of the jug off, turning the jug into a gigantic bowl of wine. The horse reared up on its hind legs and let out a loud neigh before coming back down and drinking from the bowl. From the sweet smell in the air, Wanyan HongLie could tell that the wine was actually the famed wine Nu'Er Hong or the "Blushing Daughter" from ShaoXing County in ZheJiang province. From the fragrance, it had been left aging for more than ten years.

The short, fat fellow walked back into the restaurant and tossed a huge silver ingot onto the owner's desk: "Prepare three tables of the best food; two of them can have meat and wine, the other one can't."

The owner smiled and replied: "Right away, Master Han. We just received four Sai Lu fish from the Song River; they are the best when served with wine. Please take the money back Master Han, we'll sort all that out later."

The short, chubby fellow rolled his eyes and shouted: "What's the matter? Eating and drinking are free? Do you think I'm broke and just beg off of other people?"

Still with a smile on his face, the owner argued no further as he turned and shouted: "Men, prepare some really good stuff for Master Han!" The cooks and waiters around the place answered and went about their jobs.

Wanyan HongLie was taking all this in: "Although he's dressed plainly, he spends money like a wealthy man; judging from how everyone is treating him with such manners, he's probably a powerful man in JiaXing. It would seem that convincing him to go up north with me to teach horse riding is going to be quite difficult. Let's see who the people are he's inviting to lunch before going any further." So he went into the restaurant, sat down at a table by the window, and ordered a couple of small dishes along with a bottle of wine.

The Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal was situated on the shores of the South Lake. The lake surface was covered by a light fog and several small boats were slowly making their way around the lake. Green and smooth looking water caltrop leaves (water chestnut) cover about half of the lake. Seeing such a sight, he immediately felt relaxed and at peace. JiaXing is a famous city of the ancient State of Yue; the plums grown here were sweet and delicious like the best wines. During the Spring and Autumn Period this place was called ZuiLi, meaning Drunken Plums. It was also here that the famed King of Yue, Gou Jian, had thoroughly defeated the famed King of Wu, He Lu. This place was the

point at which travelers and merchants from the two states came together. The South Lake was famous for another thing, the green water caltrops grown in it. Not only are the fruit of the caltrops sweet and smooth, they are also crunchy and refreshing, deservedly proclaimed as the best in the world. This resulted in a lot of caltrop being grown in the lake. It was right in the middle of spring, the lake was clean and the leaves were green, as if someone had covered a sheet of jade glass with small pieces of jadeite.

Wanyan HongLie was just enjoying the scene when he suddenly noticed a single boat come flying into view. This boat was unusually narrow in width and the bow of the boat was extraordinarily high. Along the sides of the boat there were two rows of waterfowl. At first he didn't pay much attention to it, but in a blink of an eye, the boat had overtaken another boat that was far ahead of it. The speed at which the boat was going was astounding. As soon as it got closer, Wanyan HongLie saw that there was a person sitting in the middle of the boat; another person wearing a straw cape sat in the back steering the boat, surprisingly it was a girl. She had only to lightly flick the oar in the water and the boat would shoot forward like an arrow. That one flick had to be at least powerful enough to move a 100 jin object. It was odd enough that a girl would be so strong, but how could she exert such a force through a wooden oar? A few more strokes and the boat neared the pavilion. The sun shone down onto the oar which appeared to be made of copper. The girl tied the boat to one of the wooden posts beside the stone staircase next to the pavilion and nimbly jumped ashore. The man sitting in the middle of the boat put a pole with a load of firewood on each end onto his shoulders and followed her ashore. The two of them walked up into the pavilion.

The girl shouted happily at the chubby fellow: "Third Brother!" She proceeded to sit down next to him.

The fat man greeted the two people: "Fourth Brother, Little Sister, you two showed up early."

When Wanyan HongLie sized the two newcomers up, he noticed that the girl was about seventeen or eighteen years of age with a slender body, big eyes, long eye-lashes, and snow white skin; she was obviously a local girl from south of the YangTze. She had the copper oar in her left hand and took off her straw hat with her right hand, revealing a head of soft, shining, black hair. Wanyan HongLie mused: "Although this girl isn't as beautiful as Madame Bao, she is still very attractive in another way."

The man carrying the firewood was about thirty or so; his clothing was green colored with a belt made of straw around his waist and straw sandals on his feet. His hands and feet were huge and his face appeared without emotion. He put down the two loads of wood and rested his carrying pole against the table.

“Errrrr”! The entire table was pushed several centimeters down by the weight of the pole. Shocked, Wanyan HongLie inspected the pole closely, but there seemed nothing out of the ordinary with this pole. It was black and smooth all over with a slight curve in the middle and two little caps on either end. For this pole to be that heavy, it had to be made of iron or some other kind of heavy metal. A wooden ax hung from the man’s waist and there were some noticeable dents on the blade of the ax.

The two of them had just sat down when the sound of footsteps came from the stairs as two more men came walking up. The girl shouted: “Fifth Brother, Sixth Brother, did you two come together?” The first man was big and tall, at least 260 or 280 jins ⁱⁱⁱ, he wore an apron around his waist. His body was naturally oily and the top of his shirt was open, revealing some of what must be a chest full of hair. His sleeves were all rolled up as well and his arms were covered with black hair that was several centimeters long and hanging from his waist was a foot-long knife. From his appearance he was a butcher. The one behind him was unusually short with a small felt hat on his head and a small scale and bamboo basket in his hands; he looked just like a street vendor. Wanyan HongLie could not help but wonder: “These three people obviously know martial arts, yet they call these two average city dwellers brothers?”

Suddenly there came a constant clunking outside on the street, like that made from metal hitting stone. The clunking slowly came up the staircase, and a blind man dressed in ragged clothing followed. He looked around forty years of age; his lips were thin and his cheekbones prominent. His face looked gray and seemed full of hate and anger.

The five people sitting at the table all stood up and greeted: “Big Brother!”

The girl lightly knocked on the seat of one of the chairs: “Big Brother, you sit here.”

The blind man replied: “Alright, is Second Brother here yet?”

The man that looked like a butcher replied: “Second Brother has arrived in JiaXing, so he should be here any time soon.”

The girl laughed: “Speak of the devil!” The sound of someone dragging his feet as he walked came from the staircase.

Before Wanyan HongLie figured it all out, up the stairs appeared a dirty torn fan which was flicked a couple of times, and only then did a poor, lackadaisical scholar come walking up. The very one that he had met earlier in the inn. A thought popped in Wanyan HongLie’s mind: “He must have been the one that took my money...” Just as his anger was rising, the man shot a smile at him and

then stuck his tongue out and made a face; only then did he turn to the others and greet them. It seemed that he was second among them. Wanyan HongLie speculated: “Looks like every one of them is a martial arts master; if I can somehow take them under my wing, they would be an enormous amount of help for our endeavors. As for the small matter of the poor scholar taking my money, that could easily be forgiven. It would be best to see what’s going on first.” The poor and pedantic scholar downed a cup of wine, and then proceeded, still shaking his head from one side to the other, to loudly orate: “Dishonorable riches...let it go...The Jade Emperor ^{iv} will get mad!” As he was reciting these lines, he reached into his shirt and took out one gold or silver yuan bao after another and neatly lined them up on the table. In total there were eight of silver and two of gold.

From these yuan baos’ color and shape, Wanyan HongLie knew that these were his. But he did not get mad; on the contrary, this piqued his interest even more: “Entering my room and stealing the money wasn’t hard; but he only tapped my shoulder one time with his fan, yet he was able to steal all the money that was inside my shirt without my noticing. That magical hand skill of his is indeed something rarely seen in this world.”

From the actions of these six men and a woman, it seemed like they were doing the inviting, and had invited two tables of men here for a drink. Because the guests hadn’t arrived yet, the seven of them were only drinking some light wine and the dishes hadn’t been brought out either. On the other two tables was only one pair of chopsticks each; that meant there were only two guests. Wanyan HongLie mused: “These seven freaks are waiting for guests; I wonder what kind of weird guests they’ll have?” After waiting for about the time it would take to boil a pot of water, a voice came up from downstairs: “Amida Buddha!”

The blind man spoke up: “The Venerable Monk JiaoMu (‘Burnt Wood’) is here!” He stood up; the other six freaks followed him as they all stood up in preparation to welcome the guest. “Amida Buddha!” The voice said again as a monk that looked every bit like a burnt piece of wood came walking up the stairs. This monk was about forty or so, he was wearing a yellow monk’s robe and in his hand was a piece of wood with one end burnt black. It’s unclear what it’s used for.

After the monk and the seven of them went through the formal greetings, the poor scholar led him to one of the empty tables and all of them sat down. The monk rose slightly out of his seat in respect and said: “When that person came all the way to our gates, I knew that I was no match for him. Now that the ‘Seven Valiant Heroes of the JiangNan’ are willing to lend a hand, I could not be anymore grateful.”

The blind man replied: “Venerable Monk JiaoMu, you do not need to be so polite. We seven brothers and sister have all been dependent upon the monk’s hospitality now and then; now that Monk JiaoMu is in trouble, how could we not get involved? Besides, that man came and, relying entirely upon his martial arts skills, made trouble for the monk for no reason. It is clear that he thinks nothing of us here in the martial world from this area. Even if the Venerable Monk did not ask us, we would have come had we found out about...”

He hadn’t finished what he was going to say when the stairs started groaning as if they were going to collapse. It was like a huge, heavy beast, like an elephant, or at least a huge water buffalo, was walking up the stairs. The owner of the place and the waiters were all screaming downstairs: “Ay! You idiot, you can’t take that up there!” “The stairs are going to collapse!” “Quick, quick, stop him, get him back down here!” But the sound of wood bending got louder and louder. “Crack”! One of the wooden stair treads snapped. Soon two more snapped as well.

For a moment Wanyan HongLie wasn’t sure he believed what he was seeing; a Taoist priest came walking up the stairs with a huge copper vat in his hands. After taking another look, he was frightened out of his wits; the Taoist priest was the ‘Eternal Spring’ elder Qiu ChuJi.

Wanyan HongLie’s mission as emissary to the Song Imperial Court was to coerce some of the officials of the Song court, so that when they eventually invade the south, there would be agents lending a hand from the inside. The Song Emissary, Wang DaoQian, who accompanied him down from YanJing^v was greedy and corrupt; he had already secretly sworn allegiance to the Jin Empire. When they arrived at Lin’An, he was the one that did the legwork for Wanyan HongLie. But unexpectedly he was killed suddenly by a Taoist priest; even his head, heart, and liver was gone. Shocked and in fear that someone had found out about his plan, Wanyan HongLie decided to lead his bodyguards and, with the best city guards of Lin’An leading the way, personally chase down the assassin. When they chased him to Ox Family Village they caught up with Qiu ChuJi. Unexpectedly, this Taoist priest was a martial arts master. Wanyan HongLie hadn’t even made a move before he was pierced through the shoulder by an arrow that Qiu ChuJi threw back. The men that came with him were all killed. If Wanyan HongLie had not quietly crawled away during the confusion of the battle and was then rescued and treated by Bao XiRuo, the dignified and honorable royal prince of the Jin Empire would have died there in a farm village without even really knowing how he had been killed.

Wanyan HongLie forced himself to calm down, and noticed that Qiu ChuJi glanced at his face for a moment before moving his attention entirely onto Monk JiaoMu and the group of seven; obviously, he had not recognized him. Figuring that this was because he had been injured as soon as he showed up that

night so Qiu ChuJi was not able to see his face clearly, only then did he feel a little better. But when his eyes moved back to the copper vat, he was shocked again, so much so that he almost jumped out of his chair.

This kind of vat was common in temples and shrines and was commonly used for burning papers, incense and fake money for the dead. It was more than a meter across and was probably around 400 jins^{vi} or so. From the vat came the sweet smell of wine, obviously it was filled with expensive wine, which without a doubt added a lot more weight to the vat. But he did not seem to be using any strength in his arm at all. Every step he took the floorboards moaned and bent from the weight. Panic engulfed the bottom level as the owner, waiters, cooks, all the patrons, and everyone else scrambled out, fearing that the entire floor would collapse on top of them.

Coldly, Monk JiaoMu spoke up: “I am honored that my Taoist brother would show himself here, but what’s the point in bringing the paper burning vat from our humble little temple? Let me introduce you to the ‘Seven Valiant Heroes of the JiangNan’!”

Qiu ChuJi made a respectful gesture with his left hand and said: “This humble Taoist has just visited your holy temple where I heard from the other monks that the Venerable Monk was inviting me for a drink at Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal. I figured that you would have undoubtedly invited some other friends; it turns out I was right. I have long admired the ‘Seven Valiant Heroes of the JiangNan’; I am fortunate today to make your acquaintance.”

Monk JiaoMu turned to the seven people and said: “This is elder ‘Eternal Spring’ Qiu ChuJi of the QuanZhen Sect, I’m sure everyone has heard of him.” Turning around to Qiu ChuJi, he pointed at the blind man and continued, “This is the head of the ‘Seven Valiant Heroes’, the hero Ke, ‘Flying Bat Soaring through the Sky’ Ke Zhen’E.” He followed by introducing the others, all the while Wanyan HongLie giving this all of his attention and memorizing their names. Number two in rank was that poor and downtrodden looking scholar that stole his money, named ‘Magic Hands Scholar’ Zhu Cong. The fat, short fellow that arrived first was ‘Horse God’ Han BaoJu, he ranked third. The peasant that carried the load of firewood was number four; his name was ‘Wood Chopper of the Southern Mountains’ Nan XiRen. Ranked number five was that huge man that looked like a butcher, ‘Smiling Buddha’ Zhang A’Sheng. The little fellow that looked like a merchant was surnamed Quan, JinFa was his given name, and his nickname was ‘Hidden Hero of the Bustling City’. The fisher girl was called ‘Yue Maiden Sword’ Han XiaoYing, obviously the youngest of the ‘Seven Valiant Heroes’.

All the while Monk JiaoMu was introducing everyone, Qiu ChuJi would very respectfully bow a little as a sign of respect, but his right hand was still holding

up the vat and there was no sign of fatigue at all. A few of the braver ones of the people downstairs saw that there was no immediate danger and actually walked back in to see what was going on.

Ke Zhen'E spoke up: "People call us seven brothers and sister the 'Seven Freaks' because we are a rather odd collection of characters; we dare not assume the name 'Seven Valiant Heroes' that Monk JiaoMu called us. All of us have long admired the famed 'Seven Masters of QuanZhen Sect', especially the elder 'Eternal Spring', who's many chivalrous deeds we have all heard of. Monk JiaoMu is a most warm and friendly man; we can't understand how he could have offended elder Qiu. If the elder thinks anything of us, then please let the seven of us be a mediator for the dispute. Besides, even though Taoism and Buddhism worship different types of deities, you two gentlemen are still both monks or priests and members of the martial world. Why don't we forgive and forget so we can just gather here and have a nice little drink together?"

Qiu ChuJi replied: "I have never met the Venerable Monk JiaoMu before, nor is there any gratitude or grudges between the two of us. As long as he hands over two people, then I personally will immediately go to the FaHua Monastery to ask for forgiveness."

Ke Zhen'E asked: "Which two people?"

Qiu ChuJi replied: "I have two very good friends who were killed by corrupt officials working with the Jin. Their widows are all alone in the world. Hero Ke, do you think that I should step into this matter?" When Wanyan HongLie heard this, the cup in his hand suddenly shook and some wine spilled onto the table.

Ke Zhen'E replied: "It wouldn't even matter if they are widows of the priest's good friends. Even if none of us have ever met them, if we knew about something like this happening, we would step in and do the best we can to take care of them. This is something that should be done without any hesitation."

Qiu ChuJi loudly replied: "That's right! I just want Monk JiaoMu to hand those two widows over to me! He is a monk, how could he keep two widows in his monastery and not hand them over? The Seven Valiant Heroes here are reasonable and righteous people; please do the right thing!" When he finished saying this, not only did Monk JiaoMu and the 'Seven Freaks' were shocked, Wanyan HongLie was quite surprised as well. He thought: "Is he not talking about Madame Yang and Madame Guo but someone else?"

Monk JiaoMu's face was burnt yellowish to begin with, now it was even more burnt looking. He could not bring himself to reply for a while as he could only stammer: "You...you...are talking nonsense...nonsense..."

Qiu ChuJi was furious: “You are a man of the martial world too, how dare you do such a shameful deed!” He pushed with his right hand and the several hundred kilogram heavy vat with the wine in it went flying towards Monk JiaoMu. The monk immediately jumped aside.

The people that gathered at the end of the stairs were frightened out of their wits and all of them turned around and pushed their way down the stairs in a panic.

‘Smiling Buddha’ Zhang A’Sheng figured that, although the vat was heavy, he would still be able to handle it with his strength. So he stepped up, channeled some inner strength into his arms, and waited until the vat arrived before he, with a shout, grabbed a hold of it. The muscles on his back and his shoulders bulged out as he was actually able to control the vat all by himself. As he lifted the vat up over his head, the amount of force exerted under his feet was too great and with one loud ‘crack’, his left foot went through the floorboards, causing the crowd downstairs to scream. Zhang A’Sheng took two steps forward, bent his arms slightly, and, with the move ‘Opening the Windows to View the Moon’; he threw the vat back at Qiu ChuJi. Qiu ChuJi caught the vat with his right hand and laughed: “The ‘Seven Freaks of the South’ are just like the rumors say, very deserving of their fame!” Then his expression darkened as he turned to Monk JiaoMu: “What happened to those two widows? You are forcing two widows to live in your monastery, what for? If you dare to touch a single strand of their hair, I’ll smash your bones until they are dust and burn down that monastery of yours!”

Zhu Cong flicked his fan and said while shaking his head: “Monk JiaoMu is an honorable and respected monk, how could he do such a shameful thing? Elder Qiu must have heard of this from someone shameless and despicable. This kind of gossip can’t be trusted.”

Qiu ChuJi was still furious: “I saw it with my own eyes, how could it be untrue?” The ‘Seven Freaks’ were surprised by this. Monk JiaoMu finally spoke up: “If you want to come here and make a name for yourself here south of the YangTze, that’s fine. But you don’t need to drag my name through the dirt... you...you...go out into JiaXing and ask around, see how many people think I would do such a thing?”

Qiu ChuJi snickered: “Alright, you’ve got helpers and want to win by sheer numbers. I am involved in this matter now, so there’s no way you can get away from this. You are using the sacred ground of your deity to hide women, that’s bad already, but the women’s husbands are the descendants of patriots and they were murdered.”

Ke Zhen'E spoke up: "Elder Qiu accused Monk JiaoMu of hiding two women, but Monk JiaoMu denies it. Why don't all of us go to the temple and see who's right and who's not. Although I'm blind, my ears are still working fine." His six brothers and sister immediately agreed with him.

Qiu ChuJi sneered: "Search the temple? I have already searched it inside and out. But two women walked in and apparently disappeared. The only possibility is that he hid them. I will forget this if the monk hands them over."

Zhu Cong replied: "What if it turns out that those two women aren't women?"

Qiu ChuJi was confused: "What?"

Zhu Cong answered with a straight face: "They are fairies and either know how to become invisible or become one with the earth!" The other Six Freaks couldn't help but laugh at that remark.

Qiu ChuJi was furious: "So you are mocking me? Alright, it seems like you people are taking the monk's side, true?"

Ke Zhen'E righteously replied: "Although our martial arts might be laughable in the eyes of a master from the QuanZhen Sect, we still have a bit of a name here south of the YangTze. Ask around, people will say: 'The 'Seven Freaks of the South'? They may be crazy, but they are not cowards.' We wouldn't dare bully others, but we can't let others bully us either."

Qiu ChuJi replied: "I have heard much about the good name of the 'Seven Valiant Heroes of the JiangNan'. This matter does not concern you so please do not get involved in this sticky matter. Let this monk and I settle it between us. Monk, follow me." He reached out toward Monk JiaoMu's wrist. Monk JiaoMu dipped his wrist and dodged this move. Seeing that the two of them have started to fight, 'Horse God' Han BaoJu shouted: "Master Taoist Qiu, why are you being so unreasonable?"

Qiu ChuJi stepped back and asked: "What do you mean?"

Han BaoJu replied: "We trust Monk JiaoMu, if he says there aren't any women then there really aren't any women. Which man living in the martial world would lie?"

Qiu ChuJi replied: "If he isn't lying, then am I causing him trouble for no reason whatsoever? I saw it with my own eyes! If I'm wrong then I'll dig out these two eyeballs and give them to you. I am definitely going to see this to the end. It seems like the seven of you are definitely getting involved right?"

The 'Seven Freaks' answered simultaneously: "Right!"

Qiu ChuJi replied: "Alright, I'll drink a toast of wine to all 'Seven Valiant Heroes'. Let the fight get started after we are finished toasting." He dipped his right hand and lowered the vat to his mouth. After taking a good gulp, he shouted: "If you please!" With one flick of the hand, the vat went flying towards Zhang A'Sheng again.

Zhang A'Sheng thought to himself: "If I catch it over my head like I did last time, then it would be impossible for me to drink out of it wouldn't it?" So he took two steps back, held his hands in front of his chest, and waited for the vat. Once it arrived, he threw his arms to the side and let the vat hit him straight in the chest. He was born chubby so his chest was covered with layers upon layers of fat and muscle, which acted like a cushion as the vat hit his chest. He immediately took a deep breath, flexed his chest muscles, brought his arms along the side of the vat, and caught the vat. He then lowered his head and took a huge gulp of the wine: "Excellent Wine!" He praised as he suddenly retracted his arms back to the front of his chest and, before the vat could fall onto the floor, executed the move "Mountain Moving Double Palms", sending the vat flying back towards Qiu ChuJi. This move was quick, powerful, and fast, obviously a move from a master of martial arts moves. Wanyan HongLie was secretly shocked by what he had just witnessed.

Qiu ChuJi caught the vat and took another gulp before shouting: "A toast to Big Brother Ke!" And the vat went flying towards Ke Zhen'E.

A thought shot across Wanyan HongLie's mind: "This man is blind, how is he supposed to catch it?" But it turned out that not only was Ke Zhen'E the head of the 'Seven Freaks', his martial arts were also the best and he could easily tell where the smallest of weapons were from the sound they made, so this huge vat was no problem for him. He just calmly sat there as if he didn't notice anything until the vat was just about to hit his head. Only then did he suddenly raise his right arm and hit the bottom of the vat with his staff. That vat spun endlessly at the top of the staff, just like those plates at the end of an acrobat's stick. Suddenly his iron staff moved a little off-center and the vat began to lean as if it was going to fall onto his head. For some reason the vat could not fall over and it stayed there, tilted. As the wine in the vat poured out of it in a neat little stream, Ke Zhen'E opened his mouth and the wine flowed neatly into it. After taking three or four mouthfuls, his iron staff moved and was again in the middle of the vat bottom. He pushed his staff upwards and the vat flew straight up; with a swing of the staff, he smacked the vat back towards Qiu ChuJi with a loud "Bang!" The echoes could still be heard when Qiu ChuJi caught it again.

Laughing, Qiu ChuJi commented: "Hero Ke must like to spin plates in his spare time."

Ke Zhen'E coldly answered: "When I was little, I used to live off of the money I got from that little trick."

Qiu ChuJi observed: "Not forgetting where he comes from is the sign of a real man! Fourth Brother Nan, a toast!" He took another gulp from the vat and threw it at him.

Nan XiRen didn't say a word as he waited for the vat to arrive and then lifted his carrying stick to block. "Bang!" The vat was stopped cold in mid-air and began to fall. Nan XiRen cupped his hand, scooped up some wine from the vat, and downed it. While holding his carrying stick flat, he knelt down on his right knee with the middle of the carrying stick resting on his left knee. He pushed down on one end of the stick with his right hand and caught the bottom of the vat with the other end, flicking the vat up in the air once again.

He was just about to hit the vat back to Qiu ChuJi when the 'Hidden Hero of the Bustling City' Quan JinFa laughed and said: "I make a living selling stuff, so I like taking advantage. I might as well get a bit of wine without doing anything." He ran up to Nan XiRen's side and, when the vat fell back down again, scooped up a bit of wine and downed it. Suddenly he jumped up, curled his legs so that the bottom of both of his feet were on the vat, and as he pushed in midair, he caused his body to take off like an arrow and the vat to fly off in the opposite direction towards Qiu ChuJi. His body landed on the side of the wall and he lightly clambered down. The fan in 'Magical Hands Scholar' Zhu Cong's hand did not stop flicking and he could not stop from commenting: "Beautiful, beautiful!"

Qiu ChuJi caught the vat and took another big gulp before saying: "Wonderful, wonderful! And now a toast to Brother Zhu!"

Zhu Cong shouted in desperation: "Ai yo! Don't do that! I'm not even strong enough to subdue a chicken, and I can't hold my alcohol at all! I'll surely drink to death if I'm not squashed to death first..." Before he finished, the vat was already heading his way. Zhu Cong was shouting at the top of his lungs: "Someone's going to be smashed to death! Help! Help..." He made a scoop with his fan into the vat and brought it up to his mouth. Then he turned the fan around and hit the bottom of the vat with it and sent it flying off.

"Crack!"

The floorboards beneath him suddenly collapsed, forming a huge hole in the floor and he fell through it, all the while screaming: "Help! Help!" Everyone present knew that he was just playing around so nobody was really surprised or worried. Wanyan HongLie however, seeing that he was able to flick away a

huge vat with a small fan and with a force that was no weaker than that which came from Nan XiRen's stick, was once again shocked.

The 'Yue Sword Maiden' Han XiaoYing shouted: "My turn for a drink!" She hopped off with her right foot and she took off like a bird. Just as she flew over the top of the vat, she lowered her head and took a gulp before nimbly and gently landing on the windowsill on the opposite side of the room. She was skilled at Qing Gong and swordplay but her strength wasn't up to par with the others; she figured that there was no way she would be able to catch this vat when it came flying toward her. Tossing it back towards Qiu ChuJi was even further out of the question; so she seized the opportunity and took her turn using her Qing Gong.

Meanwhile the vat was still flying out the window and into the street. With the street crowded as it was; it would be disastrous if the vat landed outside. Qiu ChuJi was a bit worried and was just about to jump out onto the street to catch it. He suddenly heard a whistle as a person in yellow ran past him. Another whistle and the yellow horse that was downstairs ran out onto the street.

To the people gathered around, it looked as if the huge ball of meat suddenly hit the vat and fell as one with it. The ball of meat and the vat both landed on the back of the yellow horse. The yellow horse ran forward a couple of zhangs ^{vii} before turning around and running back into the pavilion and up the stairs.

The 'Horse God' Han BaoJu's body was actually underneath the belly of the horse with his left foot in the stirrup and his right foot and both of his hands were holding the vat, balancing it neatly on the saddle. The horse was fast and steady, as if the stairs were flat ground to him. Han BaoJu jumped back onto the horse, and then he put his head into the vat and took a huge mouthful before pushing the vat off onto the floor of the room with his left hand. Letting out a hearty laugh, he cracked his whip and the horse jumped out of the window and, like a Pegasus, gently landed in the middle of the street. Han BaoJu jumped off his horse and walked back up the stairs along with Zhu Cong.

Qiu ChuJi complimented: "The 'Seven Valiant Heroes of the JiangNan' are really as good as the rumors say! I am speechless at the display of martial arts I have just seen. Giving the 'Seven Valiant Heroes' face, I promise not to cause this monk anymore trouble if he hands over the two women and I will leave at once when he has."

Ke Zhen'E replied: "Elder Qiu, you are in the wrong here. Monk JiaoMu has been meditating and has cleansed of worldly emotions for several decades now, he is a truly enlightened monk. He is someone that all of us have admired for a long time. The FaHua Monastery or Temple of Oriental Zen is also one of the

famous sacred Buddhist landmarks here in the city of JiaXing. How could any females, not to mention widows, possibly be hidden inside it?”

Qiu ChuJi replied: “In this world, there are always those people who are hypocrites and do not deserve their reputations.”

Trying to control his anger, Han BaoJu shouted back: “So is the elder saying that he doesn’t believe us?”

Qiu ChuJi replied just as loudly: “I much rather believe my very own eyes.”

Han BaoJu replied: “So what is elder Qiu planning to do now?” Even though he was short, he still was quite intimidating and heroic in his own way because of his loud and clear voice.

Qiu ChuJi replied: “This matter originally had nothing to do with you seven, but since you are insisting on jumping into this matter, you are obviously quite confident of your abilities. Forgive me for daring to challenge the ‘Seven Valiant Heroes’; if I lose, then I’ll do as everyone here wishes.”

Ke Zhen’E replied: “If the elder insists on going through with this, then would the Master Taoist please choose how we should settle this matter.”

Qiu ChuJi thought for a moment and said: “We never had any grudges previously nor have we ever wronged each other. I have long admired the heroic name and reputation of the ‘Seven Valiant Heroes of the JiangNan’. I don’t think any of us want to start fighting with swords or fists, so how about this?” He shouted: “Inn keeper! Bring fourteen big bowls!”

The inn keeper had been hiding on the floor below, but upon hearing his instructions and noticing that it had been quiet for a while upstairs, he immediately went to bring the bowls up. Qiu ChuJi instructed him to place the bowls in two rows and fill them to the brim with wine. Turning to the ‘Seven Freaks’, he said: “I challenge everyone to a drinking contest. For every bowl you guys drink, I will drink one as well until there is a winner. What do you say?”

Han BaoJu and Zhang A’Sheng were both huge drinkers, so they immediately agreed without any hesitation. Ke Zhen’E frowned and replied: “This is one against seven; even if we win we didn’t win it fairly. Could Master Taoist please choose something else?”

Qiu ChuJi frowned: “What makes you so sure that you’ll beat me?”

Even though Han XiaoYing was a girl, she was still quite macho, so she immediately answered back: “Alright, let’s go at it then! This is the first time I have met someone that dares to look down at us so much.” As she talked she grabbed a bowl of wine and downed it in one breath. It was obvious she drank it too quickly as her face flushed red immediately.

Qiu ChuJi complimented: “Miss Han really is a man among females! Everyone...please!” The other six of the ‘Seven Freaks’ each picked up a bowl and drank it. Qiu ChuJi responded by downing seven bowls of wine in an instant; each with just one gulp and without a single pause for breath in between. The inn keeper immediately shouted praise for everyone and filled up the fourteen bowls, which the eight finished off immediately.

By the third round of drinks, Han XiaoYing could only drink half a bowl before having to pause because her hands were shaking. Zhang A’Sheng took the bowl out of her hand: “Sister, I’ll finish this for you.”

Han XiaoYing inquired: “Elder Qiu is that alright?”

Qiu ChuJi replied without hesitation: “Of course, it doesn’t matter who drinks it as long as it is seven bowls.” Another round and Quan JinFa had to back out as well.

Seeing that after twenty-eight bowls Qiu ChuJi was still looking sober and normal, the ‘Seven Freaks’ were quite shocked. Wanyan HongLie thought as he looked on: “Hopefully this Taoist will get drunk and these ‘Seven Freaks’ will finish him off before he can do anything.”

Quan JinFa calculated that his side still had five men left, each a heavy drinker and could probably drink three or four more rounds, the opponent could not possibly be able to hold another twenty or so drinks in his belly...or could he? Even if he really could not get drunk, his belly could only hold so much. Figuring that victory was in hand, he was feeling pretty good; then he accidentally glanced down at the floor and saw that the floorboards under Qiu ChuJi’s feet were obviously soaked through. Shocked, he whispered to Zhu Cong: “Second Brother, take a look at his feet.” Zhu Cong only looked down for a moment before muttering: “Not good, he’s using his inner strength to force the wine out through his feet.” Quan JinFa quietly replied: “That’s right; I didn’t think that his inner strength would be so powerful, what should we do now?”

Zhu Cong thought to himself: “With this little trick, he could go a hundred more bowls without any problem. I have to come up with another contest or something.” He took a step back before suddenly falling through the hole in the

floorboards that he caused earlier and then climbing back up through the hole, all the while shouting: “So drunk, I am so drunk!”

Another round of drinks and now the floor boards under Qiu ChuJi’s feet were saturated with wine and a little bit of a fountain squirted out from the boards onto the floor below. By now Nan XiRen, Han BaoJu, and everyone else had noticed, and everyone was secretly admiring such a powerful display of inner strength.

Han BaoJu put his bowl back onto the table and was just about to admit defeat when Zhu Cong shot him a look and turned to Qiu ChuJi: “Elder’s inner strength is almost god-like and we can’t but admire such a display. But it is still five against one; it doesn’t seem quite fair really.” Qiu ChuJi was a bit surprised and asked: “Then what does Second Brother Zhu suggest we should do?” Zhu Cong smiled and said: “I say let the two of us battle it out to see who’s best.”

All the spectators were rather baffled by this; Zhu Cong was the one, of the group of five still going up against him, who was obviously losing, why would he go and lower his odds even more? But the other six Freaks knew that although this brother of theirs doesn’t seem to take anything seriously, he’s full of ideas and tricks and his actions were often pure genius. Figuring that he must have a plan in mind, the six of them didn’t object.

Qiu ChuJi let out a little laugh: “The ‘Seven Freaks of the South’ really do want to look good no matter what. How about this? If Second Brother Zhu finishes the wine left in this vat with me, if neither is losing, then it’ll count as a defeat for me...how about it?”

By now the vat was a little bit less than half full, with many bowls remaining; this would mean that only two drunken Buddha’s with their big bellies could hold all of it. But Zhu Cong didn’t seem to mind that as he smiled and said: “Although I am not a very big drinker, I once beat several pretty big drinkers during one of my adventures. A toast,” he said waving his fan in his right hand and his left shirt sleeve, he downed a bowl.

So the two of them downed one bowl after another; in between drinks, Qiu ChuJi asked: “What kind of big drinkers?”

Zhu Cong replied: “Well, once I traveled to India and the king dragged out a water buffalo ^{viii} to challenge me in a drinking match. But in the end neither of us won or lost.”

Knowing that Zhu Cong was poking fun at him, he just snorted in response and downed another bowl. However, he noticed that even though Zhu Cong was

waving his hands all over the place while talking nonsense, he was still matching him bowl for bowl. There wasn't any wine spilling out from his hands or feet, so obviously was not forcing the wine out of his body with inner strength; but there was a huge bulge in his stomach so he figured that Zhu Cong may know how to expand and retract his stomach at will. He was feeling rather puzzled when Zhu Cong spoke up again: "The year before last I went to Siam, ha, now that's even more ridiculous. This time the King of Siam got an elephant to challenge me. That huge thing drank seven vats! How much do you think I drank?"

Even though Qiu Chuji knew he was just making stuff up, he could not help but ask: "How much?"

Zhu Cong's face suddenly turned dead serious as he lowered his voice and said: "Nine vats!" Suddenly he raised his voice again and shouted: "Drink up, drink up!"

So he just went on like this, sort of drunk but not really, kind of crazy but kind of not, and soon the two of them had finished off the entire vat. The rest of the Freaks had no idea that he could hold all of that wine and all of them were pleasantly surprised.

Qiu Chuji gave him thumbs up: "Brother Zhu really is amazing!"

With a smile, Zhu Cong replied: "To keep the wine out of our bodies, Master Taoist used inner strength, but I had to resort to merely outer techniques. Here, have a look." With a hearty laugh, he suddenly did a back flip and when he landed there was a wooden bucket in his hand. With a slight wave of his hand, the fragrances of the wine that filled half the bucket came pouring out. All of the people present were martial arts masters and, with the exception of Ke Zhen'E, were sharp enough to pick up on any trickery or fake moves, yet not a single one of saw where the bucket came from. Looking down, Zhu Cong's belly had suddenly returned to its normal flat shape; obviously the bucket was hidden underneath his robe. The 'Seven Freaks of the South' all burst out laughing and Qiu Chuji was shocked.

As it turns out, Zhu Cong was best at trickery and illusions and that was where the nickname 'Magical Hands Scholar' came from. This little trick that he just pulled was passed down by magicians all the way to today. A magician would walk onto the stage with nothing in hand, with one back flip a goldfish bowl would be in his hand, another back flip and a bowl filled with water appeared; this would go on until there were enough bowls on stage and suddenly there was one goldfish in each bowl. This is absolutely astounding when witnessed firsthand and has to be seen to be believed. The second time Zhu Cong fell through the hole was when he hid the large bucket underneath his robe. All the

crazy talk was to distract Qiu ChuJi. When a magician does his trick right, even hundreds upon hundreds of pairs of eyes could not spot how the trick was done. Qiu ChuJi did not even suspect that he would be pulling this kind of trick and was not able to catch him pouring one bowl after another into the bucket underneath his robe.

Qiu ChuJi snorted: “Hmph! You call this drinking?” Zhu Cong laughed: “And what you did was? The wine I drank is in this bucket, the wine that you drank is on the floor, any differences there?”

He paced back and forth as he talked, suddenly he accidentally slipped on the puddle of wine by Qiu ChuJi’s feet and fell towards Qiu ChuJi. Qiu ChuJi caught him and let Zhu Cong balance himself. After pacing back and forth once more, he suddenly said in a loud voice: “Wonderful poem! Such wonderful poetry! Mid-Autumn have always...moon most bright, cool winds lead the way...for refreshing night. A day’s fortunes...sink man and silver, the dragons in four seas...leap out water...” His voice was slowly dragging out as he began to sing the lines.

Shocked, Qiu ChuJi thought to himself: “That’s the poem that I started but didn’t finish last Mid-Autumn; I always have it by my side in case I ever think of the next four lines. Nobody else has seen it, how does he know it?” Reaching into his shirt, he found that the scroll that contained the poem was missing.

With a smile, Zhu Cong unrolled the scroll and laid it out on the table: “Not only are elder Qiu’s martial arts among the best in the world, his poetry and style is as well. Amazing...truly amazing!” He had slipped and fallen on purpose, enabling him to use those magical pick-pocket skills of his to steal the scroll from Qiu ChuJi.

Qiu ChuJi thought to himself: “I didn’t notice it at all when he reached into my shirt and took the scroll out. If he didn’t intend to take my poem but was instead trying to stab me, would I still be alive now? Obviously he had my life in his hands and let me live.” Now that he thought about that, the anger in him subsided and he said: “Since Hero Zhu has finished this entire vat of wine with me, I will do as I promised and admit defeat. In this little match today in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal, Qiu ChuJi lost to the ‘Seven Valiant Heroes of the JiangNan’.”

Amid smiles, the ‘Seven Freaks of the South’ replied: “No, no, that’s ok. This kind of game can’t be taken seriously.” Zhu Cong added: “Besides, Master Taoist Qiu’s inner strength is miles above all of us.”

Qiu ChuJi continued: “Although I have admitted defeat, those two widows have to be rescued.” He saluted with his hands and lifted up the vat: “I’m heading off to the FaHua Monastery to get them.”

An angry, Ke Zhen’E demanded: “You have admitted defeat, why are you still troubling Monk JiaoMu?”

Qiu ChuJi replied: “Lives are at stake, it has nothing to do with winning or losing. Honored Swordsman Ke, if your friend met an unfortunate end and his widow was suffering in the hands of others, would you do all you could to save them?” Suddenly his expression changed and he shouted: “Oh I see how it is, you had more people coming! Even if you get the entire Jin army here I’m still going to see this to the very end, even if it means giving up my life!”

Zhang A’Sheng replied: “There’s just the seven of us, no need for more people.” But Ke Zhen’E had heard several dozen of men running in this direction as well as the clanking of their weapons, so he immediately stood up and commanded: “Everyone back off!” Zhang A’Sheng and all the others hid their weapons since all of them had heard the footsteps by now. Before long, several dozen men came running up the stairs.

These men were Jin soldiers. Qiu ChuJi respected the ‘Seven Freaks of the South’ and figured that they were being kept in the dark by the lies of Monk JiaoMu. He was careful of what he said so as not to offend them too much. But suddenly seeing dozens of Jin soldiers showing up, he could not control his anger any longer and he shouted: “Monk JiaoMu, ‘Seven Freaks’, how dare you people actually befriend someone, then ask the Jin for help against them! How can you still call yourself righteous men of the martial world?”

Han BaoJu shouted back: “Who’s asking the Jin for help?”

These soldiers were actually the personal guards of Wanyan HongLie; they followed him into town and became unsettled because Wanyan HongLie had been out of sight a long time. Upon hearing that there was fighting in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal and fearing the worst, they came running.

Qiu ChuJi snorted: “Hmph! Alright, alright! Please forgive me for not staying any longer! This matter between us is not over yet!” He picked up his vat and started to walk toward the stairs.

Ke Zhen’E stood back up: “Master Taoist Qiu, there’s some misunderstanding here.”

Still walking, Qiu ChuJi replied: “Misunderstanding? You people are supposedly righteous heroes? Why ask Jin soldiers to help you in a fight?”

Ke Zhen'E replied: "But we didn't."

Qiu ChuJi rebuked: "I can see what's going on in front of me, I'm not blind."

What Ke Zhen'E hated the most was the fact that he was blind and anything that reminded him of it. He slammed his iron staff onto the floor and demanded: "And what if I am blind?" Qiu ChuJi didn't answer as he lifted up his left hand and struck a Jin soldier on his forehead with his palm. The soldier did not even have a chance to mutter a sound before his head split open. Qiu ChuJi shouted back: "He is a good example!" Flipping his sleeves in the 'Seven Freaks' general direction, he walked down the stairs.

Seeing one of their own die, the Jin soldier's actions immediately became chaotic as several of them charged at Qiu ChuJi with spears pointed at his back. He did not even turn around and, as if there were eyes on the back of his head, he knocked each of the lances down one by one. The rest of the soldiers were just about to charge up from below as well when Wanyan HongLie ordered them to stop. Turning to Ke Zhen'E, he said: "This Taoist bastard is intolerable, why don't all of us sit down and have a nice drink while we discuss how to take care of him?"

When he ordered the Jin soldiers to stop, Ke Zhen'E had figured out that he was the leader of the soldiers, so he shouted back: "Damn it! Get out of my face!" Wanyan HongLie hadn't even recovered from this shock when Han BaoJu added: "My Big Brother told you to get out of his face!" He bumped Wanyan HongLie on his waist with his right shoulder. Wanyan HongLie stumbled back several steps as the 'Seven Freaks' and Monk JiaoMu quickly filed out.

Zhu Cong was trailing behind them. As he walked by Wanyan HongLie, he gently tapped him on the shoulder with his fan and asked with a smile: "Have you sold off that girl? How about selling her to me? Ha...ha!" As he hurried down the steps he was still laughing. Although Zhu Cong did not know anything about Wanyan HongLie, he could tell from the way that he was treating Bao XiRuo that they were not a couple. Then he overheard him bragging about his wealth, so he had to take a bit of his money, just to cause a little trouble. But now that he found out that he's a leader of Jin soldiers, how could he not take more of his money?

Wanyan HongLie reached into his shirt and, as expected, all the money that was in his shirt had, inexplicably, disappeared. Not only was he worried about the fact that all these men were such great martial arts masters, but if they somehow found out that he had Madame Bao with him, what a disaster that would be? Luckily, since Qiu ChuJi and the 'Seven Freaks' still haven't worked out their misunderstanding, this was the perfect time for him to get out

of town. He immediately went back to the inn and headed north with Bao XiRuo that very night. They traveled until they arrived back at the capital of the Jin Empire, YanJing.

As it turned out, after that night in which Qiu ChuJi killed Wang DaoQian and met the two men, then killed another group of Jin soldiers, he arrived in HangZhou in great spirits. He spent several days in a row by the lake. The Ge Peak at the north end of the West Lake, besides being a famous Taoist retreat, it was the place where Ge Hong concocted his medical pills at that time. Qiu ChuJi spent his mornings enjoying the land and the people and his afternoons inside the Taoist temple on top of Ge Peak, making medicine and practicing martial arts.

One day, he was walking on a pier on the shore of Qing River when he suddenly saw a group of ten or so government soldiers walking by in a very sorry state with their armor falling apart and their weapons broken. Obviously they had just lost a battle. He was rather puzzled: "We aren't at war with the Jin nowadays, and I haven't heard anything about any ruffians or uprisings around here. Where in the world did they lose this battle?" He asked around but nobody knew about it either. His curiosity piqued, he followed the soldiers back to their camp at Command Post Six.

He waited until after midnight before he snuck into the camp and dragged a soldier out into a small alley to interrogate him. That soldier was in the middle of a dream when suddenly, out of nowhere, a sharp blade was put up against his throat. In shock and fear, he did not hide a thing and he spilled all the secrets about going into Ox Family Village to capture two men and everything else that happened that night. Qiu ChuJi could not believe it when that soldier told him that Guo XiaoTian had died that night, and Yang TieXin, gravely wounded, was missing and most likely dead as well. The soldier kept on saying that the two widows had been captured, but on their way back, out of nowhere, they had run into another group of soldiers and, for some weird and stupid reason, they fought and lost. Qiu ChuJi was about to lose his temper when he realized that this man was merely a soldier who was following orders and not truly responsible for what happened. So he demanded: "Who's your superior?" The soldier answered: "The commander's...s...surname is Duan, given name TianDe." Qiu ChuJi let him go and snuck back trying to find Duan TianDe, but to no avail.

The next morning, a pole was erected in front of the commander's house; a head was dangling off of the top of it, as a warning to other criminals. Qiu ChuJi only took one look and recognized that it belonged to Guo XiaoTian. In sadness and anger, he thought: "Qiu ChuJi, Qiu ChuJi, this man is a descendent of a patriot. Out of kindness, he asked you to have a drink with him, yet you

brought upon him such calamities. If you do not find justice for him, how can you go on pretending to be a man?"

After forcing himself to wait until nightfall, he climbed up the pole and took down Guo XiaoTian's head. He dug a hole on the shore of the West Lake and buried the head there. After several kowtows, he wiped the tears away from his face as he silently swore: "I promised to teach the two heroes' children martial arts. I've kept every promise I have ever made and if I cannot turn your children into heroes among men, then let me never see my brothers in the afterlife; I will no longer deserve such an honor." He calculated that the first thing he needed to do was find that Duan TianDe and get revenge for his two dead sworn brothers. After that he would rescue the two widows and take them to some place safe, so that the two kids could be born and leave a legacy for those two heroes.

For two straight nights, he searched through Command Post Six, but was not able to find Duan TianDe at all. He became worried that this man, because of greed and corruption, did not follow military regulations and might not spend time with the soldiers under him at all. On the third night, he stepped out in front of the command post and shouted: "Duan TianDe! Come out here this instant!"

Because of the fact that Guo XiaoTian's head had been taken, Duan TianDe was inside interrogating Li Ping about any other criminal masterminds that her husband might know when, suddenly, there was chaos outside. He stuck his head out of a window and saw a big, tall Taoist, with incredible ferocity and style, grabbing a soldier with each hand and tossing them out of the way as he made his way through the crowd of soldiers. One of the commanders repeatedly shouted: "Let loose the arrows! Let loose!" In the chaos, some of the soldiers grabbed a bow but couldn't find any arrows while other soldiers gathered some arrows but did not grab a bow.

Furious, Duan TianDe pulled out his saber and charged forward screaming: "Want to rebel?" He swung at Qiu ChuJi's waist. Seeing that he was an officer, Qiu ChuJi did not budge at all. Instead he tossed aside the soldier that was in his hands and, with one simple motion of his left hand, grabbed Duan TianDe's wrist and demanded: "Where's that bastard Duan TianDe?"

Writhing in pain, Duan TianDe immediately replied: "Is Master Taoist looking for Mr. Duan? He...he's drinking by the West Lake; don't know if he's going to make it back today."

Believing him, Qiu ChuJi let him go. Duan TianDe turned to two soldiers by his side and ordered: "Take the Master Taoist to the lake shore so that he can find the commander." The two soldiers didn't catch on, so he shouted: "What

are you standing there for? Hurry! The Master Taoist will get mad!” The two men finally caught on and began walking. Qiu ChuJi followed them off.

Not daring to stay a moment longer, Duan TianDe took several guards and Li Ping and headed straight towards the Eighth Command Post. The commander was his drinking pal and, upon hearing what had happened, immediately offered to dispatch some help for him to catch this mad Taoist. He was just about to dispatch his troops when his camp suddenly broke out in chaos as one of the soldiers ran in and reported that a Taoist had come charging into camp. Turned out the soldiers that were with him couldn't take the pressure and told him about the places that Duan TianDe frequently went to.

Being the alert man he was, Duan TianDe did not hesitate and he grabbed Li Ping and ran. He ran to the Second Command Post outside of the city, figuring that he could lose Qiu ChuJi because of its remote location. After he settled down, the images of that Taoist rampaging through the army haunted him. By this time his wrist began to hurt and swell again. He went to an army doctor in the camp and it turned out that two bones in his wrist had actually snapped. Too frightened to go home, he decided to stay in the Second Command Post for the night. He slept till midnight when a disturbance outside woke him up, apparently one of the soldiers standing guard had disappeared.

Duan TianDe jumped out of his bed, somehow knowing that the guard must have been kidnapped by that Taoist. Deciding that no matter where he hides in the army camps, the Taoist would eventually find him, he had to find something else to do! This Taoist had already met him and was only coming for him and him alone. Even though there were lots of soldiers in the army, he was probably not going to come out unscratched. He was about to break down in a panic when he suddenly remembered that his uncle, who's martial arts were quite good, had retreated to the YunLou Temple or Cloudy Pavilion Temple to become a monk. Why not hide there? Figuring that this Taoist's attacks probably had something to do with Guo XiaoTian, he ordered Li Ping be changed into a soldier's uniform and then dragged her to the YunLou Temple with him in the middle of the night. He thought that if he really got into trouble he could use her as leverage against the monk.

His uncle, given the Buddhist name of KuMu or 'Withered Wood', became a monk a long time ago and had become the Abbot of the YunLou Temple. Before that he had been an army officer and his martial arts training came as a disciple of XianXia Sect that was prevalent in the provinces of ZheJiang and JiangSu and could be considered a branch of ShaoLin martial arts. He had never approved of Duan TianDe's character and kept a distance between them. Seeing him stumbling into the monastery in such a sorry state in the middle of the night, he was quite annoyed and asked coldly: "What are you doing here?"

Knowing that his uncle hated the Jin to the bone, Duan TianDe knew that if he told the truth his uncle might kill him on the spot himself, so on the way here he had already thought of a lie. Seeing his uncle's cold stare at this moment, he immediately knelt down and kowtowed: "Someone is troubling me, please help me uncle!"

Buddhist Abbot KuMu replied: "You are an army officer; it's a miracle if you don't go troubling others, who would dare to trouble you?"

With an innocent look on his face, Duan TianDe replied: "I'm no good, but I'm hiding here and there from this Taoist bastard. I hope that uncle will, for the sake of late father, save me."

Out of pity, Abbot KuMu asked him: "Why is the Taoist chasing you?"

Duan TianDe knew that the more repentant he sounded the better off he was, so he said: "It's all my fault...my fault! Two days ago I went to the Wah-Zi on the west side of Clear Coolness Bridge..." Abbot KuMu snorted and his face dropped. "Wah She", or "Wah-Zi", was the slang word for brothels back at that time; from that came the saying "Wahs gather when time comes, Wahs scatters when time goes", which is used to describe something that comes easily and goes just as fast.

Duan TianDe continued: "There was someone there that I had met on many occasions and she was in the middle of a song when a Taoist suddenly burst in and said that she had to entertain him because her song was so good..."

Abbot KuMu abruptly cut in: "Bull! What is a priest doing in a place like that?"

Duan TianDe replied: "That's what I said and then I told him to leave. But it turned out that Taoist was a low-life and cursed me for enjoying myself in spite of the fact that I would lose my head in the next couple of days."

Abbot KuMu asked: "What is he talking about?"

Duan TianDe replied: "He said that the Jin army was going to cross the river and invade south soon and was going to kill every single one of us Song soldiers."

Furious, Buddhist Abbot KuMu demanded: "Did he really say that?"

Duan TianDe nodded: "Yes! I guess my temper was not really good either and I got into an argument with him, saying that if the Jin really did invade, we would at least all die fighting and wouldn't necessarily lose." This really rubbed the Abbot KuMu the right way, so much so that he could not help but

nod in approval as he thought this was the best thing that this nephew of his ever said. Seeing him nod, Duan TianDe's hope lit up and he continued: "We just kept on arguing until we began to fight, but I wasn't a match for the Taoist. He came chasing after me; I had nowhere else to go, so that's why I came here. Uncle, please help me!"

Abbot KuMu replied: "I am a monk, I'm not getting involved in this kind of name-seeking matters that you men get yourself into."

Duan TianDe begged: "Just this one time, uncle, I will never do anything like this again."

Remembering his brother of yesteryear and quite angry at the Taoist for saying what he said, the Venerable Abbot KuMu finally relented: "Alright, you can hide here for a couple of days. I don't want any kind of trouble from you." Duan TianDe agreed to everything and anything he demanded. Abbot KuMu sighed: "An honorable army officer, pah...utterly useless! If the Jin army really does invade, then what will we do? Ay! Back then, I..."

Frightened by threats from Duan TianDe, Li Ping just stood there by his side through all his lies, not daring to say a single word.

The next afternoon, the guest attending monk (Zhike Seng) ran in and reported to Abbot KuMu: "There's a Taoist priest out front, shouting all kinds of stuff and creating havoc, saying something about making Duan...Commander Duan, come outside."

Abbot KuMu went and got Duan TianDe and told him. In a panic, Duan TianDe said: "It's him, it's him!"

Abbot KuMu asked: "Which sect does this vicious Taoist belong to?"

Duan TianDe replied: "I don't know which hole that barbarian crawled out of, but his martial arts don't seem that great, it's just that his arm strength is enormous. The only reason I lost is because I didn't know any martial arts at all."

Abbot KuMu replied: "Alright, I'm going to go meet him in person." Walking out to the Main Hall, he ran right into Qiu ChuJi who was trying to break into the temple. The guard monks were trying their best to slow him down, but they were failing. Abbot KuMu walked up to him and gently pushed Qiu ChuJi's shoulder, using a bit of inner strength; he figured he would just push Qiu ChuJi out of the Main Hall. But, to his surprise, it felt as if he was pushing down on a pile of cotton, there was nothing there that he could actually push against.

Knowing he was in trouble, he immediately tried to pull back. But it was too late as he stumbled back out of control and backed into the offerings table.

“Crack!”

“Boom!”

Half of the offerings table collapsed and all the offerings on it were scattered and fell onto the floor.

Shocked, a thought ran through his mind: “This Taoist’s martial arts are truly amazing, much more than just enormous arm strength, undoubtedly.” He immediately held his palm up and saluted: “May I ask why Master Taoist has come to visit our humble monastery?” Qiu ChuJi replied: “I’m looking for an evil criminal with the surname of Duan.” Knowing that he himself was no match for Qiu ChuJi, KuMu replied: “We men of religion should always be merciful and forgiving, why is the Priest stooping to the same level as laymen?”

Ignoring him, Qiu ChuJi walked into the Inner Hall. By now Duan TianDe had already hidden himself and Li Ping. YunLou Temple’s incense was very popular and it was the Spring Pilgrimage season, so the hall was filled with believers of both genders. Realizing that it was impossible to search thoroughly, Qiu ChuJi snorted and walked out.

When Duan TianDe came out from his hiding place, Abbot KuMu demanded angrily: “Barbarian? If he wasn’t holding back, I would be dead by now!”

Duan TianDe replied: “That barbaric Taoist is a spy for the Jin; why else would he make a point of specifically troubling us officers of the Great Song?”

The Zhike Seng came back in and reported that the Taoist had left. Abbot KuMu asked: “Did he say anything as he left?” The Zhike Seng replied: “He said that he would never give up until we turn over that...that officer named Duan.”

Abbot KuMu shot an angry look at Duan TianDe and said: “Judging from what you said, I can’t figure out why you are hiding. This Taoist’s martial arts are really too strong. You probably won’t come out alive if you fall into his hands.” After quietly thinking for a while, he continued: “You can’t stay here any longer. My younger martial brother Monk JiaoMu’s martial arts are better than mine. He’s the only one who has a chance of stopping that Taoist; why don’t you go and hide with him for a while?” Duan TianDe didn’t even dare to utter a single word fearing that he might anger his uncle. Later his uncle handed him a

letter to give to Monk JiaoMu explaining the situation. He immediately rented a boat and headed for JiaXing in the middle of the night.

How could Monk JiaoMu have guessed that the person he dragged in with him was actually a woman? Since he had the letter from his elder martial brother, he naturally allowed Duan TianDe to stay. When Qiu ChuJi found out about this, he came pursuing as well. He even spotted Li Ping in the back gardens of the temple. But by the time he'd burst into the temple, Duan TianDe had already dragged Li Ping into the underground storage room with him. Qiu ChuJi, still thinking that Li Ping was in the temple, demanded that she be handed over. Since he saw her with his own eyes, he did not believe any answers that Monk JiaoMu came up with, and their argument got worse and worse. As soon as Qiu ChuJi revealed a bit of his martial arts, Monk JiaoMu knew absolutely he was no match. Having always been a good friend of the 'Seven Freaks', he set up a meeting with Qiu ChuJi in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal. That huge vat that Qiu ChuJi had with him came from that very FaHua Monastery. When he ran into the Jin soldiers in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal, Qiu ChuJi's misunderstanding got even worse.

Monk JiaoMu really did not know much about the truth of the matter. On the way back to the FaHua Monastery from the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal, he told the 'Seven Freaks' about the two men that his martial brother Abbot KuMu sent to him. He added at the end: "I have heard that all of the 'Seven Masters of QuanZhen Sect' are masters of martial arts, each receiving the direct teachings of Master ChongYang. Among them, elder 'ChangChun Zi' was known as the best, and it turns out that he's as good as they say. Even though he's rather rude, he doesn't seem to be the kind who doesn't care for reason, and there aren't any enmities between the two of us. There must be some great misunderstanding at work here."

Quan JinFa suggested: "I think the best thing to do is to bring out the two men that your martial brother sent to you so we can sort this out." Monk JiaoMu acknowledged, "Good point, I haven't really interrogated them very well yet." He was just about to send some people to go get Duan TianDe when Ke Zhen'E spoke up: "That priest Qiu ChuJi's temper is really something, quite explosive. He obviously does not consider us people in the martial world south of the YangTze as worthy of respect. His QuanZhen Sect may be able to act like bosses up north, but we can't allow them to act like bosses when they come down south like this. If we can't clear up the misunderstanding, then we have to sort this out with martial arts. If we go up against him one-on-one, none of us are a match for him. But he didn't come here with good intentions."

Zhu Cong added: "Let's gang up on him together!"

Han BaoJu commented: "Eight against one? Not very heroic don't you think?"

Quan JinFa reasoned: “It’s not like we are going to kill him, we are only trying to calm him down so he will listen to Monk JiaoMu’s explanation.”

Han XiaoYing was rather worried: “If it gets out that Monk JiaoMu and the ‘Seven Freaks of the South’ ganged up on someone, wouldn’t that tarnish our name?”

The eight of them hadn’t worked out what to do yet when a thunderous noise came from the Main Hall of the temple followed by the thundering of metal banging on metal. Qiu ChuJi was banging the huge bell that hung from the ceiling of the Main Hall with the bronze vat. After several hits, the vat began to crack. The look on his face was furious. The ‘Seven Freaks’ didn’t know that Qiu ChuJi wasn’t always this rash and unreasonable. He had been so frustrated by his own inability to capture Duan TianDe that he was about to lose control; that, added to his deep-seated hatred of the Jin, led to his behaving this way. The ‘Seven Freaks’ all thought that he was trying to bully them with his reputation, so they decided to fight it out. The more famous the ‘Seven Masters of QuanZhen Sect’ were, the more determined the ‘Seven Freaks’ were not to back down and appear to be bullied. If Qiu ChuJi had been some unknown martial arts practitioner, this situation would have, ironically, been much easier to resolve and probably already would have been.

Han BaoJu shouted: “Sister, let’s take the lead.” He was Han XiaoYing’s first cousin on her father’s side and, of the seven, had the least amount of patience. In one motion, the ‘Golden Dragon Whip’ that was around his waist was now in his hands and he swept a “Wind Swirling the Crippled Cloud” causing the whip to snap toward Qiu ChuJi’s right hand which was holding up the vat. Han XiaoYing unsheathed her sword as well and thrust toward the center of Qiu ChuJi’s back. Attacked from both fronts, Qiu ChuJi rotated his wrist, causing the whip to hit the vat instead. Then he turned his body slightly sideways and let the sword pass by his side.

In the last years of the Spring and Autumn era, the States of Yue and Wu were mortal enemies. The King of the State of Yue, Gou Qian, in order to remind himself of the shame of defeat and to motivate himself to excel, tortured himself by sleeping on a straw bed and tasting everyday a gall-bladder that he hung from the ceiling. Nevertheless, the King of Wu had a general under him named Wu Tzushi who, being a disciple of Sun-Tze’s school of war, was a great tactician and trainer. Seeing that his army was still no match for his enemy’s, Gou Qian got more and more depressed. One day, a beautiful young girl with amazing sword skills suddenly appeared inside the Yue borders. Happy beyond words, Gou Qian immediately asked her to teach his soldiers her skills and was finally able to defeat the Wu army because of it. JiaXing, being the meeting place between the two states, was a place where several battles occurred. It was no surprise that the entire sword technique was passed down in

this area. The only problem was that the sword skill was designed to be most effective on the battlefield. It was mostly used to chop down numerous soldiers and bringing down horses in a crowd. It was not nimble or agile enough when used against martial arts practitioners in the martial world. It was only in the last days of the Tang Dynasty that this sword technique received a much needed upgrade from a swordplay genius from this area. This sword master made the moves much more complex and speedier. Although Han XiaoYing hadn't yet mastered the entire repertoire that she learned from her master, she was still very deadly. Her nickname 'Yue Sword Maiden' was a reference to this.^{ix}

After only a few moves, Qiu ChuJi had figured out her repertoire and decided to beat its speed with even more speed. She was fast, Qiu ChuJi was even faster. Using his right arm to block Han BaoJu's whip, his left hand came shooting out in an attempt to snatch the sword out of her hand by sheer force. In an instant, Han XiaoYing was forced to retreat to the side of the temple's statue of Buddha.

Nan XiRen and Zhang A'Sheng charged in and attacked from both sides. Nan XiRen was just as quiet as can be and let his carrying stick make all the sounds. But Zhang A'Sheng was completely opposite, shouting and screaming all kinds of street talk and all in his south YangTze accent. Qiu ChuJi didn't understand any of it, so he just pretended he didn't hear it.

In the flurry of the fight Qiu ChuJi's left palm suddenly came straight out right at Zhang A'Sheng's face. Instinctively, Zhang A'Sheng bent himself over backwards to avoid it, but the move turned out to be a decoy. Qiu ChuJi's right foot came flying out hitting Zhang A'Sheng's right wrist, knocking his knife loose. But Zhang A'Sheng is much better with nothing in his hands, so he did not miss a beat as he balanced himself with his left leg, faked with a right hand, and attacked with his left fist.

Qiu ChuJi let out a shout of approval before dodging out of the way and uttering: "Pity, pity!"

Zhang A'Sheng had to ask: "What?"

Qiu ChuJi replied: "Pity that you, such a martial arts expert, would bring on shame to yourself by befriending evil monks and serving the Jin."

Made furious by that accusation, Zhang A'Sheng shouted back: "Bastard Taoist, you are the one that's serving the Jin!" He took three swings at Qiu ChuJi in quick succession during that exchange. Qiu ChuJi dodged out of the way and tilted the vat, causing two of Zhang A'Sheng's punches to actually land on the vat.

Seeing that they were still losing despite of their four to one advantage, Zhu Cong made a gesture towards Quan JinFa and the two of them charged into the scuffle. Quan JinFa's weapon was a huge hand scale with which he used the scale handle as a bat, the scale hook as a flying hook, and the scale weight as a mace; literally tree weapons in one. Zhu Cong, on the other hand, excelled at hitting pressure points. That dirty and broken fan of his was actually made of iron which he used like an extension of his arm. This facilitated hitting pressure points and deflecting other weapons or enemies coming at him.

Qiu ChuJi spun and tilted the vat in his right hand at will, making it a huge shield that guarded his front side while using his left hand to fight back and attack. With such a huge burden in his hand, he could no longer move around as nimbly as he should, but it was still quite advantageous for him because he could use the vat to block many of the attacks coming towards him.

Monk JiaoMu, seeing the fight quickly getting out of hand, figured that someone could be seriously hurt any moment now. He tried to get everyone's attention by shouting as loud as he could: "Everyone please stop! Please listen to what I have to say!" But who would actually stop in the middle of a fierce fight?

Qiu ChuJi shouted back: "Hypocrite! Who wants to hear you talk? Watch this!" Suddenly his left hand turned ferociously towards Zhang A'Sheng as it shifted between fist and palm over and over again without rhyme or reason. This move, called "Flying Mountain Outside the Heavens", was based on strange form and incredible speed, and was meant to take an opponent by surprise, as it did Zhang A'Sheng.

Monk JiaoMu shouted: "No! Master Taoist! Please don't!"

Qiu ChuJi had been fighting for so long and against so many able opponents that he was afraid that the fight would last too long. Since there were two men standing on the sidelines waiting to jump in at any moment, he was worried very much about his own life. Now that he had found an opening in his opponent's defense, how could he just let it go? Therefore he put all his strength and power behind this move.

In his martial arts training he trained his body specifically to strengthen the toughness of his skin. The fact that he liked to wrestle with wild bulls and buffaloes for work and as a hobby, Zhang A'Sheng's body was covered with a layer of thick and hard muscles, which resembled the thick skin of bulls. Even though he knew that this strike packed quite a force, and since he figured that he couldn't get out of the way, he immediately gathered his inner strength and prepared himself for a strike on his shoulder and shouted: "Come on!" Hence,

he caught the palm full on. “Crack!” Incredibly, his collar bone, despite of all his preparation, snapped under the pure inner force of the QuanZhen Sect.

Shocked, Zhu Cong attacked aggressively with his iron fan, aiming right at a pressure point on Qiu ChuJi. As the saying goes, offense is the best defense; Zhu Cong attacked to protect his sworn brother from further harm now that he was injured. But Qiu ChuJi, having just gained the upper hand, immediately began trying to seize some of the weapons that were flying around him. “Ai-Yo!” Quan JinFa shouted as Qiu ChuJi got a hold of his scale. With a jerk, Qiu ChuJi pulled him a meter closer. This put him between Qiu and the two other attackers, Nan XiRen and Zhu Cong. Qiu ChuJi’s left palm flew toward Quan JinFa’s scalp.

Han BaoJu and Han XiaoYing both immediately jumped in and thrust their weapons at Qiu ChuJi’s head in an attempt to stop him. Qiu ChuJi had no choice but to dodge out of the way and let Quan JinFa escape. Having just escaped death, Quan JinFa was covered in sweat; nevertheless he took a kick to his side that made him writhe on the ground in pain, unable to get up.

Monk JiaoMu didn’t want to actually come to blows. He’d hoped that his misunderstanding with Qiu ChuJi would have been peacefully worked out by now. Seeing the friends that had come to his aid were going down one by one, he had to join in the scuffle. He tossed his long sleeve, raised the piece of burnt wood in his hand, and lunged at Qiu ChuJi. Qiu ChuJi thought: “So it seems that this monk is a master at hitting pressure points.” He put up his guard against him.

Ke Zhen’E figured from all the shouting that his sworn brothers and sister were hurt, so he grabbed his iron staff and was about to charge into the fight when Quan JinFa shouted: “Big Brother, fire your projectiles! First at ‘Jin’, then go for ‘Xiao Guo’!” Before his voice even died down, two projectiles flew directly toward Qiu ChuJi’s forehead and right hip.

Qiu ChuJi was shocked. It’s not often that one meets a blind man able to fire projectiles so accurately, even with a person on the side telling him where to fire them. He immediately spun the vat in his hand and knocked the two projectiles down. These projectiles are used only by Ke Zhen’E, and had corners on all four sides like a diamond, but as sharp anyone could make them. He learned to use them after he was blinded because the projectiles were heavy, making it easy for him to be accurate. After knocking the projectiles down with the vat, Qiu ChuJi actually felt the vat shake! He thought: “Amazing, what strength!”

By now all the other Freaks had dodged out of the way. Quan JinFa still kept shouting: “‘Zhong Fu’, now ‘Lie’!... Good, now the Taoist has moved into ‘

Ming Yi”...” He had done this with Ke Zhen’E so many times over the years that it almost seemed as if his eyes were Ke Zhen’E’s. He was the only one among Freaks that could do this.

Ke Zhen’E was firing as if he could see and in an instant he had fired dozens of projectiles. So many that Qiu ChuJi was now forced to fend off the projectiles with no opportunity to fight back whatsoever.

Suddenly a thought came to Ke Zhen’E: “He’s hearing sixth brother as well, so he’s prepared every time, no wonder I can’t hit him.” Quan JinFa’s voice was getting softer and softer with moans sandwiched in between, obviously in great pain. Ke Zhen’E did not hear Zhang A’Sheng make a single noise at all and nobody was quite sure whether or not he’s alive. Quan JinFa struggled to get out: “Hit...hit... ‘Tong Ren’...” But this time Ke Zhen’E did not follow his advice, instead he threw up both arms and fired four projectiles, one each at the “Jie” and “Sun” positions right of “Tong Ren” and the other two heading for the “Feng” and “Lie” position left of “Tong Ren.”

Not expecting Ke Zhen’E to suddenly use trickery, Qiu ChuJi took a big step left and dodged the “Tong Ren” position as two people suddenly screamed in pain. Qiu ChuJi’s right shoulder was hit, but the projectile aimed towards the “Sun” position hit Han XiaoYing’s back. Surprised and pleased, Ke Zhen’E shouted: “Little sister, come here!”

Knowing that her big brother coated his projectiles with a virulent poison, Han XiaoYing immediately scrambled to his side. Ke Zhen’E took out a small, yellow colored pill from his bag, stuffed it in her mouth, and instructed: “Go to the yard outside and sleep, do not move, I’ll come and attend to you later.” Han XiaoYing immediately got up and ran towards the yard. But Ke Zhen’E shouted: “Don’t run! Don’t run! Walk slowly!” Han XiaoYing immediately understood and cursed at herself for being so stupid. Because her blood will circulate faster when she ran and if the poison was carried into the heart, there would be no way she could be saved. She stopped and slowly walked out.

After being hit, Qiu ChuJi just ignored it because it was not very painful and just kept on fighting against the rest of the group. However, in the midst of the fight he suddenly heard Ke Zhen’E shout “Don’t run!” several times. A chill went through his heart as he suddenly noticed that his arm around the wound felt very numb. He realized that the projectile had poison on it. Not daring to hesitate, he collected his strength and aimed a punch at Nan XiRen’s face as hard as he could.

Noticing that the punch coming his way, Nan XiRen bent his knees, held his iron carrying stick across his chest, and pulled a move called “Iron Chain Across the River” to block the punch. Qiu ChuJi did not pull the punch at all.

On the contrary, he actually took a deep breath and put even more force into the punch, hitting the stick squarely in the middle. Nan XiRen's body shook violently and he had to drop his stick as the part of his hand between his thumb and index finger split open and blood began rushing out. As it turned out Qiu ChuJi wasn't keeping anything in reserve in an attempt to bring the fight to a speedy end so he could save his own life. He pretty much put everything he had into this punch, causing massive internal injuries to Nan XiRen. Feeling weak on his feet, numbness in his mouth as well as seeing stars, Nan XiRen suddenly fell to the floor throwing up blood.

Although he had taken down another foe, the numbness in Qiu ChuJi's shoulder was getting worse and worse, causing him to start having trouble controlling that huge vat in his hand. So with a shout, he swept his left leg, making Han BaoJu leave his feet to dodge the attack. "Where do you think you are going?" Qiu ChuJi yelled as he pushed the vat off so that it came down on top of Han BaoJu. Because he was in midair, Han BaoJu could not do a thing other than performed a half flip. By then the vat had already covered his head. In an attempt to avoid any serious injuries, he immediately put his hands over his head and curled up into a ball.

"Bang!" The vat hit the floor and conveniently and neatly covered up Han BaoJu.

As soon as he let go of the vat, Qiu ChuJi unsheathed his sword. With a little kick against the ground with his toes, he jumped up and cut the rope that held the huge bell to the ceiling. At the same time, he gave the bell a little push to aim the bell directly at the vat, making it come down right on top of the vat. Now Han BaoJu was truly stuck. However, Qiu ChuJi had really expended a huge amount of energy with these last two moves and as a result, all of his extremities were beginning to feel numb and huge drops of perspiration were beginning to bead on his forehead.

Ke Zhen'E shouted: "Drop your weapons and stop now! If you wait any longer, your life could be in danger!" But Qiu ChuJi figured that since the monk was in league with both the Jin and the Song soldiers and hid women in his temple, then his friends, the Freaks, could not be anything better. He would rather die than to submit to these bastards. So he turned around and began to try and fight his way out.

With only Ke Zhen'E and Zhu Cong still unharmed and the condition of the others still unknown how could either one of them let him get away? So Ke Zhen'E held up his iron staff and stood in front of the door, blocking his way out. Desperate to get out any way he could, Qiu ChuJi stuck his sword out right at Ke Zhen'E's face. Ke Zhen'E's nickname 'Flying Bat Soaring through the Sky' came about for a reason, so he easily heard what was going on and parried

the sword with his staff, almost knocking the sword out of Qiu ChuJi's hand. Shocked, Qiu ChuJi said to himself: "How strong is this blind man's inner strength? Could it possibly be stronger than mine?" He immediately followed with another thrust, which was parried again. But Qiu ChuJi had found out that it wasn't because Ke Zhen'E's inner strength was stronger, it was because his right arm was wounded and therefore he could not exert his full force through it. He switched the sword over to his left hand and began using a skill that he'd never used in combat before, 'Swordsmanship of Common Demise'. The sword flashed as one move after another came flying towards the vitals of Ke Zhen'E, Zhu Cong, and Monk JiaoMu; he wasn't defending at all, every single one of his moves was an attack.

The name 'Swordsmanship of Common Demise' was designed for a person to fight for his life against a much more powerful opponent. Every move is designed to attack the enemy in a vital spot with incredible force and without the slightest care for one's own life. Although this is a highly refined sword skill, it's actually very similar to those scraps between ruffians and the lowlifes of the streets. As it turns out the QuanZhen Sect has a nemesis that resides in the western regions. This man was much more powerful than any of the 'Seven Masters of QuanZhen Sect', and he was as ruthless as he was powerful. At one time only the disciples' master could subdue and control this man, but now that the master had passed away, there was a chance that this man could come back to the Central Plains at any time and destroy the entire QuanZhen Sect. The 'Seven Masters of QuanZhen Sect' do have a 'Big Dipper Formation' that could contain this man; however, this formation only works with all seven disciples present. There was the possibility that they might run into this man without every one being present. This 'Swordsmanship of Common Demise' was meant to be used against this man, especially in single combat, in the hopes that the two combatants would both perish and thus preserve the sect. Poisoned and surrounded by three martial arts masters, Qiu ChuJi had no choice but to use this skill.

After about a dozen exchanges or so, Ke Zhen'E's leg was hit. Monk JiaoMu shouted: "Big Brother Ke, Brother Zhu, why don't we just let him go on his way?" But because of this little distraction, his right rib was hit, causing him to fall to the ground screaming.

By now, Qiu ChuJi was having trouble keeping his balance as well. His eyes were bloodshot; Zhu Chong exchanged several more moves with him, all the while cursing at him nonstop. Ke Zhen'E, not being able to see, was completely baffled by the sound created by Qiu ChuJi's sword and was hit again, this time on his right leg, and he fell to the ground.

Zhu Cong cursed: “Dog of a Taoist, bastard Taoist! The poison in your veins has reached your heart by now! Why don’t you try and make three more moves with me?”

Furious, Qiu Chuji simply came charging at him, but Zhu Cong’s lightness martial arts were very good and he flew around the hall. Knowing that he could not keep this up any longer, Qiu Chuji stopped and sighed. Suddenly everything turned dark in front of him. He tried to shake his mind clear and was just about to look for a way out when suddenly something smacked his back. It was a shoe that Zhu Cong had taken off.

Even though the shoe was soft, it still carried quite a bit of force with it because of Zhu Cong’s inner strength. Qiu Chuji teetered as he fought hard to maintain consciousness. Suddenly something else hit the back of his head. This time it was a wooden fish * that Zhu Cong had found laying in front the Buddha statue.

Fortunately, Qiu Chuji’s inner strength was very strong; a normal person would have undoubtedly died from that hit, but he did almost black out from it. Qiu Chuji yelled at the top of his lungs: “Forget it, forget it! ‘Eternal Spring’ Qiu Chuji shall die today at the hands of these shameless bastards!” Feeling his knees suddenly give away, he collapsed onto the floor.

Fearing that he might jump back up again, Zhu Cong reached down to hit the pressure point in the middle of Qiu Chuji’s chest when he suddenly saw Qiu Chuji’s left hand move. Knowing that he was in trouble, Zhu Cong immediately tried to bring his right arm back in front of his chest to block the blow. But a huge force came up from below his belly and shot him away. He was spitting out blood even before he landed. Even though he could not move, Qiu Chuji had put all the strength left in him into this strike. There was no way in the world that Zhu Cong could take such a force.

None of the other monks in the temple knew any martial arts; in fact, none of them even knew that their master knew martial arts. The sudden chaos in the main hall had sent them fleeing for their lives a long time ago. Only after things had quieted down for quite a while did a couple of the braver monks stick their heads out to see what had happened. What they saw was, blood everywhere, bodies everywhere; this sent them screaming and scrambling to Duan TianDe.

Duan TianDe had been hiding in the underground storage room the entire time and was ecstatic on hearing the news that both sides were completely destroyed in the fight. Making sure that Qiu Chuji was among those fighting, he told the monks to go and check whether or not the Taoist had died. Only after the monks came back with the news that the Taoist was lying on the floor with his eyes shut did he finally feel safe and dragged Li Ping to the main hall.

He gave Qiu ChuJi a kick, causing Qiu ChuJi to let out an almost imperceptible moan. Duan TianDe pulled out his saber and shouted: “Do you have any idea how much suffering you have caused me you Taoist bastard? Well now your foe is going to send you on your way to the Western Paradise!”

Even though he was greatly injured, Monk JiaoMu summoned all his strength and shouted: “Don’t...don’t harm him!”

Duan TianDe asked: “Why not?”

Monk JiaoMu, still recovering from the shout, got out between breaths: “He’s a good man...just a little im...impatient, so there was some misunderstand...”

Duan TianDe replied: “A good man? Who cares? Let me kill him!”

Monk JiaoMu angrily rebuked: “Are you going to listen to me or not? Put...put down your saber!”

Duan TianDe laughed heartily at that remark and shouted back: “Put down my saber? Then what? Become enlightened on the spot?” He lifted up his saber and began to swing it down at Qiu ChuJi. ^{xi}

Furious, Monk JiaoMu summoned up all his strength again and tossed the piece of burnt wood in his hand at Duan TianDe as hard as he could. Duan TianDe tried to dodge out of the way, but his martial arts were just not good enough and it caught him on the side of his mouth and knocked out three of his teeth. In pain and humiliated, Duan TianDe, ignoring the fact that he owed his life to Monk JiaoMu, lifted his saber and tried to chop off the monk’s head. However, a small monk who was right beside him grabbed onto his right arm and held on for his life while another one grabbed his collar. In fury, Duan TianDe swung his saber back and brought it down upon those two monks.

Even though Qiu ChuJi, JiaoMu, and Freaks were all martial arts masters, every single one of them was gravely injured or kept from the battle and could not do a thing to stop him.

Li Ping screamed: “Bastard! Stop! Stop!” She had been dragged all over the place by Duan TianDe and had been patiently waiting for an opportunity to present itself to her to avenge her husband. Seeing the ground covered in blood and this man about to commit more murders, she could not hold back any longer. She charged up to him and began to fight him for all she’s worth.

The others had thought she was just an underling of Duan TianDe because of her uniform. Everyone was quite surprised when she suddenly attacked Duan TianDe.

Being blind, Ke Zhen'E's hearing was especially sensitive and knew that she was female as soon as he heard her. He turned to JiaoMu: "Monk JiaoMu, we are all going to die because of you. You really did have a girl hidden in your temple!"

After a moment of surprise, Monk JiaoMu understood what had happened. He thought that because of one slight oversight on his part, he had not only got himself hurt, he had taken his friends down with him as well. In anger and humiliation, he punched the ground with both hands to help him stand up and charged at Duan TianDe with all his might. Seeing him coming with such ferociousness, Duan TianDe immediately dodged out of the way in fear. Not being able to control his own body because of the injury, Monk JiaoMu ran straight into one of the temple's columns head first and died on the spot.

Frightened out of his wits, Duan TianDe grabbed Li Ping and ran off as fast as he could. Li Ping's shouts for help got further and further away.

ⁱ Boat shaped ingot

ⁱⁱ One of the greatest scholars of the Song Dynasty as well as all of Chinese history.

ⁱⁱⁱ Around 130 to 140 kilograms/285 to 308 lbs.

^{iv} Yu Huang Da Di, the Supreme Deity of Taoism.

^v Present day Beijing.

^{vi} Approximately 200 kilograms/over 400 lbs.

^{vii} 1 zhang = 3.3 meters or 10 plus feet.

^{viii} Derogatory term for Taoist priest.

^{ix} The entire story regarding this sword technique is covered in another Jin Yong short story, Sword of the Yue Maiden, or Yue Nu Jian.

^x The wooden fish (MuYu) is a wooden percussion instrument that Buddhist priests use to keep rhythm while chanting.

^{xi} Duan TianDe's becoming enlightened remark is a reference to a Buddhist saying that one could put down his weapon and become enlightened on the spot.