

Chapter

3

A NOVEL BY JIN YONG

The Winds of the Steppe

Legend of the Condor Heroes

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Furious, Jochi began to hit Guo Jing with his horse whip again, causing him to roll around in pain. He rolled next to Jochi's legs before suddenly jumping up and grabbing his right leg. Jochi tried to throw him off with a kick, but the boy's grip was surprisingly strong and he couldn't get him off.

The Winds of the Steppe

The monks were crying because of the Venerable Monk JiaoMu's death but some of them were still able to take care of the wounded by bandaging up their wounds and carrying them into the guest rooms.

Suddenly there came an incessant banging from the vat underneath the huge bell. Not knowing what kind of monster was present, the monks looked at each other with blank faces. Not knowing what to do started to chant the 'Sutra of the High King' (Gao Wang Jing). But the banging continued through all the chants of 'Help the Sufferers' and 'Amida Buddha'. Finally, a dozen or so of the more courageous monks pulled the huge bell back up again with a huge thick rope. As soon as they lifted the vat, a huge ball of meat came rolling out from underneath it. Scared beyond words, the monks scattered. That ball of meat suddenly stood up, it turned out to be Han BaoJu. Being covered for the last half of the fight, he had no idea what had happened. Looking around, he noticed monk JiaoMu had died and all his sworn brothers were greatly injured and almost panicked. He walked over to Qiu ChuJi and was about to strike down at his head with his 'Golden Dragon Whip'.

"Third Brother, no!" Quan JinFa shouted.

"Why not?" Han BaoJu demanded in anger.

"You...just can't," was all Quan JinFa could get out because of the pain in his abdomen.

Even though both of his legs were wounded, Ke Zhen'E's mind was still working fine. He took out the antidote for his poison and instructed the monks to give the right amounts to both Qiu ChuJi and Han XiaoYing, all the while explaining what had happened to Han BaoJu. Enraged, Han BaoJu was about to go chasing after Duan TianDe when Ke Zhen'E shouted: "We'll find that bastard sooner or later. First help those of your brothers who suffered internal injuries."

Both Zhu Cong and Nan XiRen had suffered severe internal injuries and that kick to Quan JinFa's stomach was quite a blow too. Zhang A'Sheng's collar bone was broken and his chest was hit as well, knocking him out temporarily. Once he woke up, it turned out he wasn't in any mortal danger. He immediately began helping others in the temple.

The monks of the Temple of Oriental Zen sent a couple of errand runners to report the events to Abbot KuMu at the Cloudy Pavilion Temple and also began to make funeral arrangements for Monk JiaoMu.

After several days, the poison in Qiu ChuJi and Han XiaoYing's body was eradicated. Being the medical expert that he was, Qiu ChuJi immediately began combining herbs and treating Zhu Cong and others as well as massaging and snapping bones back into place. Luckily, everyone's martial art base was strong enough so that the internal as well as the external injuries were not serious. After several more days, everyone was able to sit up again. One day, all eight of them gathered in one of the monk's rooms and reflected on how they were manipulated into fighting each other, resulting in the death of Monk JiaoMu and injuries to all parties. All of them were silent, not knowing what to say.

After a while, Han XiaoYing finally broke the silence: "Everyone knows about Master Taoist Qiu's intelligence and wit, and the seven of us didn't exactly begin wandering the world yesterday. Yet we were all manipulated into this by some little nobody. If this ever gets out, everyone in the martial world will laugh at us. Master Taoist, do you have any idea as to how to clean up this mess?"

Qiu ChuJi had been blaming himself for the last couple of days, thinking that if only he had sat down and calmly talked with Monk JiaoMu then all of this could have been avoided. So, in deference, he turned to Ke Zhen'E: "Big Brother Ke, what do you say?"

Ke Zhen'E's temper was bad to begin with; after his eyes were blinded it got even worse. The fact that Qiu ChuJi himself brought down all seven of them combined was, in fact, what he considered to be one of the biggest embarrassments of his life. Coupled with the fact that the pain in his legs from the sword wound was still throbbing, he was barely able to hold back his indignation. He sneered and replied: "Priest Qiu uses his sword skills to take down anyone in his way and never needs to respect anyone. Why consult us over this matter?"

Qiu ChuJi was taken aback for a moment, but immediately realized that he was still angry about the matter. He stood up, cupped his fist, and bowed to the 'Seven Freaks'. "I was wrong in my actions; I was too rude and headstrong. This entire matter is entirely my fault and I ask you all for your forgiveness."

Zhu Cong and the rest of the Freaks returned the gesture. Ke Zhen'E pretended not to notice and coldly replied: "I say the seven of us have lost all of our rights to meddle in the affairs of the martial world. We should settle down here, fishing, chopping wood, or whatever. As long as Priest Qiu does not come around again, we would at least be able to spend the rest of our lives in peace."

Qiu ChuJi blushed a little from that verbal slash. After a brief pause, he suddenly stood up and said: "Since I was at fault this time, I will never dare step into this area again. As for retribution for Monk JiaoMu's death, it will all fall on my shoulders and I will kill that bastard with my own hands and avenge him. Having said all that I need to say, it's now time for me to leave."

Qiu ChuJi bowed towards everyone again and began to walk out.

"Stop!" Ke Zhen'E shouted.

Qiu ChuJi turned around and said, "Does Big Brother Ke have something else to say?"

"You have injured all of us," Ke Zhen'E replied, "And you expect all of this to just disappear because you said a couple of words?"

"Then what does Big Brother Ke want? As long as it is within my abilities I will try my best to do it."

"We just can't let this slide right now," Ke Zhen'E answered, "So it would be nice if Master Taoist gives us something more."

Although the 'Seven Freaks' were all very righteous and moral individuals; they were also very proud and acted very strangely, making them well deserving the title of "Seven Freaks". Each is a master of martial arts and they always worked together, so they had never come out on the short end of a struggle when going up against others in the martial world. Several years ago they got into a fight with the HuaiYang Clan; the seven of them killed over one hundred or so of the HuaiYang Clan members on the shores of the YangTze. Back then Han XiaoYing was still a child, but she still managed to kill two foes. The name 'Seven Freaks of the South' became famous throughout the martial world. Defeat by the hands of Qiu ChuJi did not go down very well with any of them. Add that to the fact that Monk JiaoMu, a good friend of the Freaks, died, one could argue, because of Qiu ChuJi's rashness. But there was still the fact that a woman was hidden inside the temple and she was the widow of Guo XiaoTian, as Qiu ChuJi had claimed. This made the Freaks partly to blame; however, at this moment, the Freaks had forgotten about that.

“I was hit by your projectile,” Qiu ChuJi replied. “And if it wasn’t for Big Brother Ke’s antidote, I would have been dead a long time ago. So for this fight, I wholeheartedly admit defeat.”

“If that’s the case,” Ke Zhen’E replied, “Then leave that sword that you carry on your back and you can go.” He knew that if the two sides fought again at this time only the Han siblings would be able to put up a fight and that victory for his side was impossible. But all of the Freaks would rather die than to let the matter pass like this.

This angered Qiu ChuJi greatly: “I have already given you people a lot of face and that should be enough. I also admitted defeat, what else do you want? The sword is for my protection,” he continued, “Just like that staff Big Brother Ke carries around.”

“Are you poking fun at my blindness?” Ke Zhen’E shouted back.

“I dare not!”

“We are all injured right now, so it’s hard to actually fight at this moment.” Ke Zhen’E shouted angrily. “So I invite Priest Qiu to come and duel with the seven of us a year from today at the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal.”

Qiu ChuJi frowned at that remark. He thought, “Because the ‘Seven Freaks’ weren’t bad people, there was really no point in keeping this grudge going between us. The day after the Venerable Monk JiaoMu died, Han BaoJu could have killed me easily once he got out from underneath the bell. Besides, this whole matter was caused more or less by my own rashness. A real man knows what’s right and wrong. If he’s wrong then he should admit it. To sort all this out with the Freaks won’t be easy either.”

After thinking silently for a bit, an idea suddenly came to him, “If you really want to determine who is better between us, then we could do that,” he said. “But only according to the rules I lay down. Otherwise, I have already lost to Swordsman Zhu at the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal, and I lost again fighting here in the temple. I have already lost twice and would inevitably lose the third time as well, there’s no point in going any further.”

Han BaoJu, Han XiaoYing, and Zhang A’Sheng immediately stood up, the other four could not stand but all sat up as much as they could. They answered in unison: “When the ‘Seven Freaks of the South’ duel with someone, we always let our opponent chooses the time, place, and method.”

Seeing how competitive they were, Qiu ChuJi smiled: “So I decide how we should fight no matter what?”

Figuring that no matter what dirty trick Qiu ChuJi would come up with, it wouldn't necessarily mean defeat for them, Zhu Cong and Quan JinFa answered simultaneously: "That's right!"

"A man's word..." Qiu ChuJi replied.

"...wild horses can't bring back!" Han XiaoYing finished, but Ke Zhen'E remained silent. ⁱ

"If you people feel that my way is unfair in any way," Qiu ChuJi continued, "Then I will admit defeat right here and now." Obviously planning to gain ground by giving up a little, he knew that the Freaks would never let him admit defeat that easily because of their competitiveness.

"There's no need to play all these word games to anger us, just tell us what it is," Ke Zhen'E replied, as expected.

Qiu ChuJi sat down and began to explain: "The method I have in my mind might be a little bit dragged out, but what it really measures is abilities and skills and is susceptible to some temporary mishaps or conditions. Everyone knows any martial artist can fight with blades and fists. We all have names in the martial world and absolutely cannot stoop down to the level of lowly underlings."

"What's left to fight with if we can't do it with blades or fists? Are we having a drinking contest again?" All of the Freaks wondered at that comment.

"This huge contest between us, you seven against me, will not only measure our martial art skills, but also our will, determination, and wit. With this contest, we will see once and for all who the real hero is."

This entire conversation had all of the 'Seven Freaks' shaking in anticipation and excitement. "Stop stalling, tell us!" Han XiaoYing demanded. "The harder it is the better!"

"If we are competing meditating, making medicine, fortunetelling, or ghost-banishing, then we are no match for Master Taoist Qiu at all." Zhu Cong said with a smile.

"And I don't really want to compete with Second Brother Zhu in stealing chickens or taking sheep." Qiu ChuJi replied with a smile.

This caused a little bit of laughter from Han XiaoYing, who quickly went back to urging Qiu ChuJi on: "Come on, say it!"

“At the very bottom of all of this and the misunderstanding that led to our fight, was saving the descendants of a couple of good men. This matter would be best ended in that way as well.” Qiu ChuJi went on to tell how he met with Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin all the way to how he pursued Duan TianDe to this temple. Throughout his entire explanation, the Freaks could not stop cursing the Jin as well as the Song government for its corruption.

After he finished the story, Qiu ChuJi went on: “That woman that Duan TianDe dragged away was Guo XiaoTian’s widow, Madame Li. Other than Big Brother Ke and the Han siblings, I’m sure the other four of you saw them.”

“I remember her voice,” Ke Zhen’E interrupted, “I will never forget that voice!”

“Great.” Qiu ChuJi continued, “As for Yang TieXin’s widow, Madame Bao, there is no clue as to where she might be. I have seen her before, but you people haven’t. So what I propose we do is...”

“... the seven of us would go rescue Mrs. Li while you go save Mrs. Bao and that whoever succeeds wins. Right?” Han XiaoYing eagerly cut in.

Qiu ChuJi smiled and replied: “Saving people, while definitely not easy, can’t really be used to determine who’s a hero and who’s not. What I have in mind is much harder and more troublesome.”

“So what are you suggesting?” Ke Zhen’E demanded.

“Both of the women are pregnant,” Qiu ChuJi explained. “After we save them, we must make sure they settle down nicely and allow them to give birth. After that I will teach the Yang child while the seven of you teach the Guo child...”

The ‘Seven Freaks’ were getting more and more amazed with every word that he said. They were practically mesmerized when Han BaoJu cut in: “Then what?”

“After eighteen years, when the kids are both eighteen, all of us, as well as invited friends from all over the martial realm, shall gather at the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal once again for a huge feast. Then, when we are all sufficiently full and merry, we’ll let the two kids duel to see whether it is my disciple who is better or is the disciple of the ‘Seven Valiant Heroes’ really the best.”

The ‘Seven Freaks’ stared at each other, completely speechless.

Qiu ChuJi continued: “If the ‘Seven Valiant Heroes’ fight me once more and defeat me, then it could easily be because you outnumber me; not much glory there. But if I pass all my martial arts to one person and the seven of you pass all of your martial arts to one person, then whichever one wins must mean that their master or masters were better.”

Filled with pride, Ke Zhen’E slammed his iron staff onto the floor: “Alright! That’s what we’ll do!”

“What if that bastard Duan TianDe has already killed Mrs. Li? What then?” Quan JinFa asked.

“That’s just the luck of the draw,” Qiu ChuJi replied. “The heavens wanted me to win, what more could be said?”

“Alright!” Han BaoJu pitched in with his opinion. “Rescuing widows and orphans was the right thing to do to begin with. Even if we weren’t competing against you we would do it.”

Qiu ChuJi gave him a thumbs-up and declared: “Third Brother Han is exactly right. If the ‘Seven Valiant Heroes’ are willing to care for the Guo child to adulthood, then I would like to thank everyone for my late Brother Guo.” He bowed to each of them again.

“This idea of yours is rather cunning,” Zhu Cong observed. “With those several sentences of yours, we brothers and sisters would have to give up eighteen years of our lives?”

Qiu ChuJi’s face changed color a little and he suddenly let out a loud laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Han XiaoYing demanded.

“I have long heard and admired the name of the ‘Seven Freaks of the South’, Qiu ChuJi replied. “Everyone says that the ‘Seven Valiant Heroes’ are truly righteous heroes who are always there when you need them. But today, I see that the rumors were greatly exaggerated.”

This made all of the Freaks furious. Han BaoJu slammed his fist down onto the bench that he was sitting on and was about to say something when Qiu ChuJi cut him off: “Since ancient times, for real heroes and men, making a friend was for life in every way and giving one’s life for a friend would be no big thing if loyalty and friendship called for it. Nobody has ever heard of Jing Ke and Nie Zheng haggling about some small thing. The Yang and Guo family are in need of help right now, how could anyone start haggling about it?”ⁱⁱ

After that little speech, Zhu Cong's face was flushed with embarrassment. He flicked his fan and replied, "Master Taoist is right, I realize my mistake now. The seven of us will take on this matter!"

Qiu Chuji stood up and said: "Today is the twenty-fourth of the third month, eighteen years from today at noon, we'll meet again upstairs in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal. There, in front of the entire martial art world, we will find out who's the real hero!" With a flick of his sleeve, he walked out of the door.

Han Baoju shouted: "I'm off to look for that Duan TianDe now, if he's crawled into a tortoise hole and disappeared, we are going to have to waste a lot of energy."

He was the only one among the 'Seven Freaks' that wasn't injured, so he charged out of the door, mounted 'Wind Chaser', his yellow horse, and began to go chase after Duan TianDe and Li Ping.

"Third Brother...Third Brother!" Zhu Cong shouted. "You don't know what they look like!" But Han Baoju wasn't the patient type and with 'Wind Chaser' well deserving of his name, he was long gone.

Once he was out of the temple, Duan TianDe ran as fast as his legs would carry him, all the while dragging Li Ping. Only after he was sure that nobody was chasing after him did he finally stop and take a breath. Then he ran to the bank of the nearest river and jumped on the first boat that he saw. Taking out his saber and putting it up against the neck of the fisherman, he ordered the man to start moving the boat. The rivers and canals south of the YangTze were as dense as a spider web and boats were the everyday mode of transportation; as common as horses and carriages were up north. Hence the saying: "Northerners ride horses, Southerners ride boats." With Duan TianDe looking as vicious as he did, as well as being dressed like an official, how could the fisherman dare disobey? He immediately undocked and guided the boat out of the city.

"What a mess! If I go back to Lin'An, if nothing else, my uncle will kill me on first sight." Duan TianDe thought to himself. "Probably the best thing would be to head north to get away for a while. Hopefully that Taoist bastard and those 'Seven Freaks' have all died from their injuries and then my uncle will get so angry that he passes away. Then I can return and get my position back."

Once he made up his mind, he instructed the fisherman to start heading north. Even though Han Baoju's horse was faster, he was nevertheless searching on land, and thus let the two of them slip through.

Duan TianDe switched boats a couple of more times as well and changed his clothes and forced Li Ping to change hers. After ten days or so, he arrived in YangZhou and decided to check into an inn. He was hoping to be able to settle down in the city for a while and wait out the storm. By an extraordinary coincidence, he just happened to overhear someone inquiring about his whereabouts. Shocked, he peeped through the little crack in the door and saw an amazingly ugly, short, and fat guy with a beautiful young girl. Both of them had a JiaXing accent. Guessing that they were some of the ‘Seven Freaks’, he immediately grabbed Li Ping and ran out of the back door. Luckily, the YangZhou native at the front desk did not quite understand their dialect and didn’t understand what they were asking about. This made it possible for Duan TianDe to get away and rent another boat. Not daring to stop even for a second, he made his way north, up the Grand Canal, all the way to the shore of LiGuo Post on the shores of Mount Wei Lake inside the borders of ShangDong Province.

Li Ping, who was quite plain looking and whose stomach was bulging by now, was spending days on end cursing and crying. So even though Duan TianDe was by no means a gentleman, he never had any inclinations towards her. All the two ever did was fight and curse at each other; there wasn’t a moment of peace between them.

After several more days, that ugly dwarf and pretty girl showed up again. Duan TianDe had hoped to hide in the back of their accommodations. Li Ping, knowing that her rescuers were near, began to shout at the top of her lungs. Duan TianDe immediately stuffed a wad of cotton into her mouth and beat her. Li Ping struggled and shouted for all she was worth. Even though she wasn’t successful in her attempt to get their attention, it was too much of a close call for Duan TianDe.

At first, Duan TianDe brought Li Ping along hoping to use her as a hostage and thereby help him get out of a jam should it ever come to that. But the situation had changed. Figuring that it would be much easier if he was by himself and that this feisty woman was a disaster waiting to happen, he decided that it would be best to kill her. Once the Han cousins had left, he took out his saber.

Li Ping had been waiting the entire time for an opportunity to avenge her husband’s death. However, she was tied up every night, making it impossible. Now, upon seeing the murderous look in his eyes, she prayed: “Xiao Ge ³, please protect me and allow me to kill this monster. Then I will join you.” She reached into her shirt and placed her hands on the dagger that Qiu ChuJi gave her. She had hidden the dagger very well and was able to slip it past Duan TianDe’s search.

With a chuckle, Duan TianDe raised his saber and swung down at her. Prepared to die, Li Ping summoned all her strength, pointed the dagger at Duan TianDe, and charged. Feeling a burst of murderous cold air upon his face, Duan TianDe flicked his saber in an attempt to knock the dagger out of her hand. Unexpectedly, the dagger was so sharp that, with a loud ping, it sliced the saber in half. The saber fell onto the floor as the tip of the dagger touched Duan TianDe's chest. Shocked, Duan TianDe instinctively jumped back. Nevertheless, the front of his shirt was slashed wide open. In complete shock and panic, he picked up the chair at his side and shouted: "Put that down this instant or else I'll kill you!"

Li Ping was exhausted and the baby in her belly was kicking non-stop. Not able to fight any longer, she fell onto the floor and tried to catch her breath. But she was still clutching the dagger tightly.

Duan TianDe was afraid that Han BaoJu would come around again. If he ran off by himself, he was afraid that Li Ping would reveal where he was going to those chasing him. So he immediately forced her onto another boat and went further north up the Grand Canal, passing LinQing, DeZhou, and arrived in HeBei Province.

Every time he set up camp, no matter how remote the location, before long there would be several men arriving to look for him. Eventually, the ugly gnome and the girl were joined by a staff wielding blind man. Luckily, none of them recognized him, so he was able to escape every time.

Soon another troublesome thing happened; Li Ping suddenly began acting crazy. Every time they stopped somewhere, she would periodically begin shouting and screaming nonsense. Sometimes, she would even start to tear and rip at her clothes and make all kinds of weird faces and gestures. At first Duan TianDe thought that she really had gone crazy, but after a few days he suddenly figured it out. As it turned out, she was afraid that her pursuers had lost them and was purposefully leaving a trail for them to follow. This was what was making it even harder for him to lose them. By now the end of summer had passed and the cool breezes began to blow. In order to avoid capture, Duan TianDe went well up into the North Country. The money he had taken with him was about to run out, yet the Freaks were still close on his trail.

"Back in HangZhou, I was important, I was somebody. Meat, wine, money, women, I had it all. But I had to get greedy and go to Ox Family Village and kill this bitch's hubby and get myself into this mess." He cursed himself.

Several times, he was on the verge of leaving Li Ping and running off by himself. But each time, he could not summon up enough courage to do it. Every attempt to kill her ended in failure as well. What was supposed to be protection

had somehow turned into a curse that he just could not get rid of. On top of everything else, he had to be constantly on guard against her attempts to avenge her husband. He was frustrated, frightened, and angry; yet there was nothing he could do.

Before he realized it, he had arrived at the capital of the Jin Empire, YanJing. Duan TianDe thought for a bit and decided to try and find an out of the way place and finish off Li Ping. In such a huge and bustling city, there was no way those who were chasing him could find him.

Happy that things were finally going to work out, he made his way towards the city. Unexpectedly, just as he arrived in the front of the gate to the city, a team of Jin soldiers came walking out from inside. Not even bothering to ask any questions, they seized both him and Li Ping, handed them each a carrying stick, and commanded them to carry cargo for them. Because Li Ping was short and a woman, her load was reasonably light. But Duan TianDe was given two 100 jins^{iv} loads and they were practically forcing him to his knees.

This group of soldiers followed an official as they headed north. As it turned out, that particular official was an emissary who was being sent out to present Royal Warrants from the Jin Emperor to the Mongolian subjects of the Jin Empire. The Jin soldiers that accompanied him were seizing any random Han people that they ran into, forcing them to carry their heavy cargo and food supplies so as to save themselves from the labor. Duan TianDe argued back a couple of times and was immediately answered by several stinging lashes to his head. This situation he had seen many times before so it was all quite familiar to him; but before, he had been the one that was doing the whipping, not receiving it.

By now, Li Ping's belly was huge and doing all this heavy work was on the verge of killing her. However, so determined was she to get revenge that she tried her best not to let the Jin soldiers find out about her condition. Fortunately, she had been working on a farm ever since she was able to walk, and this made her strong and used to this kind of grinding work. Having basically resigned herself to death, she was barely able to manage the dozen of days they spent walking through the freezing and miserable steppe.

Even though it was only October, being as far north as they were, a blizzard hit one day that not only brought snow, but also a sandstorm. Having nowhere to hide from the sand and the snow, the entire group, all three hundred or so of them, lined up single-file and continued to make their way through the endless grasslands of the steppe. Suddenly, faint shouting could be heard approaching from the north. Through the sand filled air, an army of countless horsemen came charging at them.

Before any of them realized what was going on, the army had arrived. As it turned out they were an army from some unknown tribe from the north that had just lost a battle. Chaos descended on the group as everyone tossed their weapons away and began running for their lives. Some of those who did not have horses were quickly trampled by those who had.

The Jin soldiers, seeing that defeat was inevitable, immediately scattered. Li Ping was originally at Duan TianDe's side, but lost him during the chaos of the attack. She threw off her share of the cargo and ran as fast as she could in the direction where there seemed to be the least number of people. Luckily, everyone was so concerned with their own survival that nobody harmed her.

After some running, her stomach began hurting intensely. Not able to go any further because of the pain, she lay down behind a sand dune and fainted. After what seemed like forever, she began to slowly come around. In the back of her mind, there seemed to be the crying noises of a baby. Not completely coherent, she still wasn't quite sure whether or not she was dead or alive. But the crying gradually got louder. She twitched and suddenly realized that there seemed to be a warm object between her legs. By now it was after midnight, the snow had just stopped and the moon had finally appeared from behind the parting clouds. She snapped wide awake and began to cry. In this impossible situation, the baby in her womb was born.

She immediately sat up and took the baby in her hands. It was a boy. Overjoyed and crying, she used her teeth to bite off the umbilical cord and hugged the baby as tightly as she could. In the moonlight, she saw that the infant's eyes were huge and bright and looked very much like her deceased husband and his crying was incredibly loud. Under normal circumstances, there should have been no way that she was going to survive after giving birth in such harsh conditions. But upon seeing her child, she suddenly found strength that she didn't know she had and she slowly got up on her knees and with one hand, crawled into a small ditch close by to escape from the cold. Looking at the baby and thinking of her husband, bittersweet memories and emotions overwhelmed her.

The two of them spent the night in that ditch. The next morning, hearing nothing around her, she summoned up enough courage to climb out of it. Amongst the white snow and yellow sands, the ground was covered with discarded weapons and corpses. Nobody alive was to be seen.

She scrounged some preserved food from one of the dead soldiers as well as a fire making stone and knives. After carving some horse meat and cooking it, she searched around for some thicker clothing. She wrapped some around her baby and put some on herself as well. Luckily, the weather was so cold around this time of the year that nothing rots, so the horse meat was able to last her for

a good few days, during which she was able to recover her strength. Then, carrying her baby, she began walking confidently towards the East. Even though she had lost the hated Duan TianDe, all the hatred in her heart submerged and turned into love and tenderness. All she wanted was to protect her baby's face from the harsh steppe winds.

After several more days, she noticed that the plant life around her was getting denser. This particular dusk, she suddenly spotted two horses galloping towards her. The riders noticed her and stopped to ask her what happened. Making wild gestures with her arms, she described her experience of meeting the defeated army and giving birth in the snow. These two riders were Mongolians. Even though they couldn't understand her at all, they, being the friendly and hospitable kind of people Mongolians are, felt sorry for her and invited her to spend the night with them in their Mongolian ger. Mongolians are a nomadic group of people, migrating along with their herds and the seasons. They live in huge shelters called 'gers' that are easily put up and taken down. The next morning this particular group of nomads departed, but they decided to leave her four small sheep to help her survive.

After much suffering and labor, Li Ping settled down on the steppe. She erected a little hut using tree branches and reeds and obtained food through barter using the sweaters she knitted from wool of the sheep.

Time flew, and the little boy was soon six years old. Following the wishes of her former husband, Li Ping gave him the name of Guo Jing. The boy was rather slow and only began to speak at the age of four. Luckily, he was a very strong boy and was able to herd the animals by himself. The two of them, mother and son, relied on each other, surviving on only the barest of essentials and leading a very simple and happy life. Both of them had learned Mongolian, and only when they were alone with each other did they speak in the Lin'An dialect of Chinese. Seeing the manly face on her son and hearing him speaking everything in the Lin'An dialect of her home frequently made her feel a bittersweet sadness: "Your father was a man among men in ShanDong, you should by all means speak the ShanDong dialect as well. But we weren't together a long enough time and I couldn't learn it from him, so I can't teach you."

It was October and the weather was slowly becoming colder and colder. Guo Jing climbed onto his own little pony and set out, with a shepherd dog, to herd the sheep. Around noon, a huge black eagle suddenly appeared in the sky and dove down towards the herd. A particular young sheep was frightened and began to run for its life towards the east. Guo Jing shouted several times at it to make the sheep stop, but it just kept on going.

Guo Jing immediately climbed onto his pony and went chasing after it. After 4 or 5 li ^v or so, he finally caught up to the little sheep. Just as he was about to head back, he suddenly heard a very loud and constant rumble. Startled, he could not figure what the rumble was, even though he suspected that it might be thunder. The rumble got louder and louder until, after a while, he was able to detect the sounds of horses neighing and humans screaming within the rumbling. Having never heard such things before, he was frightened and hurriedly led his little pony and the sheep into a clump of bush on top of a nearby hill top. Only then did he dare to stick his head out to see what was going on.

What he saw was dust covering the sky as countless numbers of chariots rushed about. Several leaders were shouting out commands as the armies were lining up. One was to the east while another one was to the west and both contained more people than Guo Jing thought there were in the whole world. Everyone was wearing a white-colored bandana on their heads; some even stuck colorful feathers in them. By now Guo Jing wasn't frightened anymore; he was too curious and excited.

After another pause, from the left there suddenly came the sounds of horns and several rows of soldiers charged. They were led by a tall and thin looking young man wearing a blood red cape. He was holding his saber above his head, ready to strike at anyone he happened upon. The two armies clashed and gruesome fighting ensued. The attacking side was outnumbered and was slowly being overwhelmed and began to retreat. But reserves soon came in support and the fighting escalated to a deafening level once again.

It looked as if the attacking armies were about to collapse once again when the ten horns that had signaled the start of the battle suddenly came to life again, making the noise level even more deafening than it had been. The attacking soldiers shouted: "Temujin is here! The Great Khan Temujin is here!" Even though the two armies were still fighting relentlessly, everyone's head periodically turned toward the east, where the horns were located.

Following their gaze, Guo Jing looked toward the east as well. Through all the sand and dust that was filling the sky, he saw a group of riders galloping forth. Within the group there was a huge pole, on which there was several white feathers. The cheering got louder as the riders got closer and the attackers seemed to fight more and more fiercely. The formations of the defending army were torn apart instantly. The huge pole slowly moved toward the very hill that Guo Jing was hiding on; he retreated even deeper into the bush, but was still peeking out with his huge, bright pair of eyes. He noticed a very big and tall middle-aged man in the midst of the riders who ridden onto the hill. He was wearing an iron helmet on his head and had a brown tuft of beard on his chin. His eyes were beaming with energy and force. What Guo Jing didn't know was

that he was the leader of the Mongolian tribe, Temujin; but even if he did know, he wouldn't have known what a "khan" was.

On his horse, Temujin, accompanied by several riders, calmly surveyed the battle that was occurring at the foot of the hill. After a while, the young man with the red cape rode up the hill. "Father, there are too many of them, should we retreat a bit?" He shouted once he made it up the hill.

By now Temujin had already finished surveying the battlefield. In a low voice, he commanded: "Take your team and fall back to the east."

"Muqali, go with the Second Prince and fall back to the west. Bogurchi, you and Tchila'un retreat to the north. Kublai, you and Subotai take your army and head south." Temujin continued, never taking his eyes off the battlefield. "When you see my banner raised up high, that's my signal. Immediately sound the horns, turn around and counter-attack!"

All the officers rode off with their orders. Within seconds, the Mongol troops began retreating on all fronts.

The enemy soldiers let out a great collective howl and, upon seeing Temujin's White Feathered Banner being raised high on the top of the hill, shouted in unison: "Capture Temujin...Capture Temujin!" Like ants, the opposing army began charging up the hill, completely ignoring the retreating Mongol troops. Horses and men charged with abandon; a yellow fog surrounded the hill from the dust they kicked up.

Temujin stood at the top of the hill, not moving and resolute. A score of foot soldiers held up their shields and were protecting him from arrows flying from all directions. Temujin's sworn brother Kutuku and standout General Jelme, along with three thousand elite troops, were defending the base of the hill with everything they could muster, determined to the last man.

Amid the flashing of blades and spears, the cries of battle were shaking the earth. Witnessing this, Guo Jing was at the same time excited and scared.

After an hour or so of intense fighting, and under the relentless charges of tens of thousands of enemy troops, Temujin's elite guard of three thousand had suffered about four hundred casualties while cutting down more than ten thousand enemies. Looking out, Temujin saw that even though the battlefield was covered with enemy bodies and rider-less horses running aimlessly, the number of enemy arrows flying in was still intense. On the northeastern end of the battle, the enemy attack was especially fierce and the defense looked closer and closer to collapse. "Father," Ogedai, Temujin's third son, anxiously asked, "Is it time to raise the banner?"

“Their troops aren’t tired yet!” Temujin answered gravely, not moving his eyes away from the battle, even for a moment.

By now there were three black banners at the northeast end of the battle, indicating that the enemy had gathered three standout generals there to command the troops. The Mongol defenders were steadily dropping back. Up the hill came Jelme, shouting at the top of his lungs: “Khan, we can’t hold them any longer!”

“Can’t hold them?” Temujin angrily shouted back. “What kind of man are you?”

Jelme’s expression changed and he grabbed a saber from one of the foot soldiers. With a shout, he charged into the enemy formation. Fighting with utter abandon, he carved a path of blood to the black banners. The enemy commanders, seeing his ferocity, immediately pulled hard on their reins and backed away. Jelme, with three swings of his saber, cut down the three men that were carrying the banners. Throwing down his saber, he wrapped his arms around the three banners, took them back to the top of the hill, and stuck them into the ground upside down. Seeing this incredible display, the enemy’s morale was rocked. The Mongol troops responded with fury and the hole in the defense on the northeast end was quickly plugged.

After more fighting, an enemy general with a black cape suddenly appeared in the southwest corner. Not wasting a shot, he quickly took down a dozen or so Mongol soldiers with his bow and arrows. Two Mongolian officers turned and charged at him with their spears. Using only two arrows, he easily shot the two officers off their horses.

“Such amazing skill!” Even Temujin had to praise him after seeing that.

By now, the general with the black cape had fought to near the foot of the hill. With the faint twang of a released bow, an arrow hit Temujin in his neck. Another arrow quickly followed, heading straight for Temujin’s stomach. Realizing that he had been hit and another arrow was coming, Temujin immediately pulled hard on his reins, making his horse rear up on its hind legs. The arrow buried itself into the horse’s chest all the way to the feathers, knocking the horse to the ground. Seeing the leader hit and falling, the Mongol troops were shocked. Screaming at the top of their lungs, and pouncing on the opportunity, the enemy charged forward like floodwater.

Ogedai had just finished helping his father pull out the arrow in his neck and was tearing off his shirt to bandage up the wound when Temujin shouted: “Forget about me, defend the hill!” Nodding quickly, Ogedai turned and immediately shot down two enemy officers.

Kutuku was commanding his troops guarding the west side of the hill, but, because they had run out of arrows and spears, he had to retreat. Jelme's eyes turned red as he saw him: "Kutuku, are you going to run like a scared rabbit?"

"Who's running?" Kutuku smiled back, "I ran out of arrows."

Temujin, still lying on the ground, took a handful of arrows and tossed them over to him. Kutuku quickly put an arrow onto his bow and shot the closest black bannered general off his horse. Quickly charging downhill, Kutuku grabbed that general's horse and returned.

"Brother, you are really something!" Temujin praised.

Covered with blood from head to toe, Kutuku quietly asked: "Can we raise the banner and sound the horns?"

"The enemy still isn't tired yet, just a bit longer." Temujin said, blood streaming down his palm that was pressing hard on the wound in his neck, trying to stop the bleeding.

Upon hearing that, Kutuku dropped to one knee and begged: "We owe our lives to you and have no reservations about dying here. But Khan, please, you have to take care of yourself."

Temujin shakily stood up, took the reins of the horse from Kutuku, and struggled mightily before finally mounting the horse. Waving his saber and shouting, "Hold the hill!" at the top of his lungs, he cut down three enemy soldiers that had charged up the hill. Seeing Temujin reappear, the opposing army's morale was shaken once again and the momentum shifted and they began to fall back down the hill.

"Raise the banners! Sound the horns!" Temujin commanded, seizing on the fact that their enemy's morale was at a low.

The Mongol army let out a collective howl as an officer climbed onto a horse, stood up, and raised the white feathered banner up as high as he could. The horns from all corners sounded. Immediately, the screaming of men drowned out the horns as row after row of Mongolian soldiers suddenly appeared from far away and approached with lightning speed.

The enemy outnumbered the Mongols, but they were gathered around the hill. As soon as the soldiers on the outer edge began to fall back, the middle of their formation became chaotic. The general in black, noticing that the tide was turning, immediately began giving orders in hopes of rallying his troops. But the formation had already collapsed and the soldiers had no desire to fight any

longer. Within an hour, the army had been smashed into pieces; those who weren't killed were running for their lives. The general in black, riding his black horse, turned and joined them.

"50 taels of gold for the man that catches that scoundrel!" Temujin shouted. This immediately sent several score of Mongolian elites after him.

The general in black, not missing a shot, turned and shot down about a dozen or so pursuers one after the other. The rest of the pursuers did not dare get too close and, in the end, let him get away. Seeing all this from inside the bushes, Guo Jing was in awe of that general's bravery and skill.

The battle was a complete victory for Temujin, destroying more than half of his nemesis, the Tatars, army. Surveying the battlefield, Temujin's memories of his past flashed before his eyes again: the poisoning of his father, being captured by the Taijiuts, and all the torture and shame he went through at their hands. Although his mental wounds were still not healed, his joyful heart was filled with the sweet taste of revenge. Unable to hold it in any longer, he leaned back and laughed in triumph. Every soldier joined in with cheers, which shook the earth as they began to organize into formations and leave the battlefield.

Guo Jing waited until even the gravediggers had left due to darkness before he came crawling out of the bush. It was midnight when he got home and his mother, who was on the verge of a nervous breakdown waiting for him to come back, was overjoyed to see him. Guo Jing described what had happened to his mother, as best as he could. Li Ping, seeing his face alight with joy and amazement and without a trace of fear, thought to herself, that even though he was just a kid and a bit dim-witted, he was still very much like his father in this respect. Bittersweet feelings filled her heart.

Two mornings later, Li Ping went off to the marketplace 30 li away with two handmade wool blankets. Guo Jing was guarding the sheep out in front of his house when his mind wandered back to what he had seen two days ago. Deciding to have a little fun, he raised his shepherding whip and began waving it around. Riding on his little horse, shouting at the top of his lungs, and moving the flock around, he felt just like a general commanding his own troops into battle. Just as he was really getting into it, he suddenly heard the sound of horse hooves from the east. A solitary horse slowly approached with a person lying on its back. The horse got close and stopped, causing the man on the back of the horse to lift his head and look up. The sight of the man made Guo Jing shriek in fear.

The man's face was covered with mud, dirt, and blood. It was the general in black that he had seen the day before yesterday. In his left hand was the bottom half of what had been a saber, which was stained purplish red with blood. The

bow and arrows that he had fought so many foes with were gone. It looked as if he had another encounter with his enemies after escaping two days ago. His left cheek had been slashed open and was bleeding profusely. His horse was injured as well. His body shuddered as his blood-shot eyes fell upon Guo Jing, muttering in a hoarse and exhausted voice: "Water, water...some water?"

Guo Jing immediately ran into the house and brought out a bowl of water from the water tub. That man grabbed it out of Guo Jing's hand and drank it all in one gulp. "More!" He demanded.

Guo Jing retrieved another bowl for him. He drank half before the blood dripping off of his face turned the water red. The man let out a loud laugh, then suddenly, his face twitched and he fell off his horse and fainted.

Guo Jing panicked; he didn't know what to do. Luckily, the man came to after a while. "Give my horse some water too," he said, "And do you have anything to eat?"

Guo Jing brought out some roasted lamb for him and got a whole bucket of water for the horse. After gulping down the hearty meal, the man was thoroughly refreshed and got up off the ground.

"Thanks, brother." He said as he took off the gold bracelet he had around his wrist and held it out at Guo Jing. "Here, take it."

Guo Jing shook his head: "Mom said that we should take care of guests and not ask for or take anything in return."

The man laughed at this and commented: "You are a good kid!"

He put the bracelet back on his wrist, tore off half of his sleeve, and began to attend to both his and his horse's wounds.

Suddenly, from the east came the faint rumblings of horses galloping. The man's face dropped: "Huh, looks like they are not going to let me go!"

The two of them ran out of the door and saw that the land in the distance was covered by dust kicked up by countless horses heading this way.

"Kid, do you have a bow and arrows in the house?" The man asked.

"Yah, sure." Guo Jing replied just before darting back into the house.

Hearing that, the man looked somewhat relieved, but that soon changed when he saw that Guo Jing had just brought out his own little toy bow and arrow. He

let out a little laugh before frowning: "I need the fighting kind, the big one." Guo Jing merely shook his head.

The pursuers were getting closer, their banners could be faintly seen waving in the distance. The man figured that, with his horse injured, he wouldn't be able to get away. While hiding is always dangerous, he had no alternative. "I can't beat them all by myself, so I've got to hide." He said, turning to Guo Jing. He looked around and noticed that there was nowhere to hide in or around the hut. In desperation, he settled on the big pile of grass outside.

"I'm going to hide in there. Could you chase my horse as far away as you can? Be sure to find a good place to hide for yourself too and don't let them catch you." He instructed as he dug himself into the grass pile. Traditionally, as soon as the scorching summer has passed, Mongolians would immediately cut down all the available tall grass and pile it up. During the harsh winters, Mongolians relied on these grass piles for feed for the animals as well as fire for warmth. Often these grass piles would be bigger than their gers. The man was actually very well hidden inside the grass pile and probably wouldn't be discovered without careful inspection.

Guo Jing turned and gave the black horse a couple of good lashes, causing the horse to gallop off. Only until it was almost entirely out of sight did it finally stop and started to graze. Guo Jing jumped onto his little horse and took off to the west.

The pursuers, noticing that someone was there, sent two advanced scouts forward to give chase. Guo Jing's pony wasn't fast and the two scouts soon caught up. "Kid, did you see a man riding a black horse around here?" One of them demanded.

Guo Jing didn't know how to tell a lie, so he couldn't find the words to answer the question. The two scouts asked several more times, but there was still no answer. "Let's take him to the First Prince!", one of them finally suggested, seeing blank looking face on the kid. The two scouts took hold of Guo Jing's reins and led him back to the hut.

"I just won't say." Guo Jing made up his mind on the way back.

A good number of Mongolian soldiers surrounded a tall and skinny young man. Guo Jing recognized the face, he had seen him on the hill two days before. Noticing that the soldiers were all obeying his commands, Guo Jing decided that he was an enemy of that black robed general. "What did the little kid say?" The First Prince shouted.

"This kid is scared stiff; he hasn't said a word."

The First Prince looked around and suddenly noticed the black horse grazing in the distance. "Is that his horse? Go and bring it here," he quietly ordered. Ten Mongols split into five groups and quietly surrounded the horse. By the time the horse noticed and tried to escape, it had already run out of places to run.

"Isn't this Jebe's horse?" The First Prince asked rhetorically in an arrogant voice. "Yes sir, it is!" The soldiers answered in unison.

The First Prince, using his riding whip, lashed the side of Guo Jing's head and shouted: "Where is he hiding? Spit it out. Do you think you can fool me?"

Hiding in the pile of dried grass, Jebe held his broken saber tightly. Seeing Guo Jing getting hit and a huge welt immediately starting to develop on his head, his heart began to beat wildly. He knew that this was Temujin's eldest son, Jochi, whose cruelty and savagery was famous throughout the entire steppe. He figured that the kid would undoubtedly be frightened into telling where he was hiding, and then he would have to jump out and fight to the death.

Guo Jing wanted to cry, but, trying with all his might, he kept back the tears. Holding his head up high, he asked: "Why did you hit me? I didn't do anything wrong!" He knew kids only get beaten when they did something wrong.

"Trying to be tough huh?" Jochi shouted angrily before he whipped Guo Jing again, making Guo Jing burst out crying.

By now other soldiers had already given Guo Jing's house a thorough search. Two of the soldiers even poked about the grass pile with their spears. Luckily, the grass pile was huge and they didn't hit Jebe. "The horse is still here, he couldn't have gone far. Kid, are you going to tell or not!" Jochi continued as he lashed at Guo Jing's head three more times. Guo Jing reached out and tried to grab the riding whip, but how could he?

Suddenly, they heard horns sounding from afar. "The Khan is coming!" All of the soldiers shouted as Jochi stopped and turned to greet his father. "Father!" He shouted as an army with Temujin at the head came galloping in.

The wound that Jebe inflicted on Temujin turned out to be severe. During the battle Temujin was able to fight through it, but after the battle was over he actually fainted several times from the pain. His trusted General Jelme and third son Ogedai took turns sucking the bad blood clots out of his wound. The officers and his sons waited by his bedside for an entire night until he was no longer in mortal danger. The next morning, swearing to catch Jebe and quarter him so as to avenge this wound to the Khan, the Mongol soldiers spread out in all directions. By dusk on the second day, a small scout team finally ran into Jebe, but was decimated by him. However, Jebe was injured as well in the

melee. Upon hearing the news, Temujin immediately sent his eldest son Jochi after him before taking his other sons with him as a rear guard.

“Father, we found that bastard’s horse!” Jochi reported, pointing at the black horse.

“I don’t want the horse, I want him!” Temujin replied.

“Yes father, we will find him.” Jochi answered before returning to Guo Jing’s side. Pulling out his saber, he swung it in the air a couple of times and shouted: “Are you going to tell me?”

His face covered in blood from the earlier beating, Guo Jing actually got feistier and shouted back: “I’ll never tell! I’ll never tell!”

From that response, Temujin noted how innocent the kid was, replying with “I’ll never tell” instead of “I don’t know”, giving away the fact that he knew where Jebe was hiding. So he turned to Ogedai and whispered: “Go and trick it out of him.”

Smiling, Ogedai walked up to Guo Jing, removed two gold studded peacock feathers from his helmet and said: “If you tell me, this is yours.”

“I’ll never tell!” Guo Jing still replied.

“Let loose the dogs!” Chagatai, Temujin’s second son ordered as the soldiers immediately brought forth six huge hunting dogs.

Mongolians love to hunt and all of the aristocrats or people of wealth own hunting dogs and falcons. Chagatai especially loved dogs and this search for Jebe presented a perfect use for his dogs. So he ordered the dogs be taken around the black horse a couple of times before letting them loose to find where Jebe was hiding. The dogs barked wildly as they ran in and out of the hut repeatedly.

Guo Jing had never met Jebe before, but two days ago he had greatly admired his bravery and skill on the battlefield. Being whipped several times by Jochi had brought out Guo Jing’s natural stubbornness and feisty nature. He called his shepherd dog. By now Chagatai’s hunting dogs were getting very close to the grass pile, so, on Guo Jing’s command, the shepherd dog positioned itself between the grass pile and the hunting dogs, not letting any of them get closer. Chagatai gave a loud shout and all six huge hunting dogs leapt forward and the air was quickly filled with the cacophony of dog barking as the seven dogs fought. The shepherd dog, smaller to begin with and battling one against six, was quickly covered with bite marks but still fought back ferociously, not

backing down one bit. Guo Jing was cheering his shepherd dog on loudly between sobs. Seeing this, Temujin, Ogedai, and everyone present knew that Jebe must be hiding in the grass pile, so they just smiled and enjoyed the show of the dog fight.

Furious, Jochi began to hit Guo Jing with his horse whip again, causing him to roll around in pain. He rolled next to Jochi's legs before suddenly jumping up and grabbing his right leg. Jochi tried to throw him off with a kick, but the boy's grip was surprisingly strong and he couldn't get him off. The other sons, seeing their older brother in such an awkward and embarrassing state, began to laugh loudly. Even Temujin began to snicker a bit. His face flushing blood red, Jochi unsheathed his saber and brought it down toward Guo Jing's head. Just as it looked as if the kid was about to be hit, a broken saber suddenly struck out from inside the grass pile.

“Clang!”

The two sabers collided and Jochi, feeling his hand go numb, almost dropped his saber. The soldiers let out a collective gasp as Jebe jumped out of the pile. Pulling Guo Jing behind him with his left hand, he sneered: “Bullying a little kid, have you no shame?”

The soldiers immediately readied their spears and surrounded Jebe. Seeing that he had nowhere to run, Jebe tossed aside the broken saber. Jochi charged at him and landed a punch on his chest with Jebe not even trying to protect himself.

“Kill me now!” He shouted, but then he added with in a quiet and heavy voice: “Pity that I cannot die at the hands of a true hero!”

“What did you say?” Temujin cut in.

“To die on the battlefields, at hands of the hero that beat me, is dying with no regrets. But today the eagle has fallen onto the ground and was bitten to death by ants!” Jebe replied with fury in his eyes and let out a tremendous howl. Chagatai's hunting dogs, who had collectively pinned Guo Jing's shepherd dog onto the ground and were relentlessly biting it, jumped at the howl and ran away whimper behind their trainers.

“Khan, don't let this little bastard boast like that.” A person stepped out from beside Temujin and shouted. “Let me duel with him!”

“Alright, have a duel with him.” Temujin replied, happily discovering that the man was Bogurchi. “We don't have much of anything else, but we do have some heroes.”

“I’m going to kill you by myself, so that you can die with no regrets.” Bogurchi took a few steps forward and shouted at Jebe.

“Who the hell are you?” Jebe shouted back, noticing that the challenger was very well built and had a very deep and loud voice.

“I’m Bogurchi! Heard of me before?”

A cold feeling shot through Jebe’s heart: “So this is him; rumors say that Bogurchi is the hero of heroes among the Mongols.” Not wanting to reply, he simply shot a sideways look and hunched.

“You boast about your skills with the bow and arrow, and others even call you Jebe. Why don’t you and this friend of mine have a little shooting contest?” Temujin declared. In Mongolian, “Jebe” means both “arrow” and “divine archer.” Jebe ^{vi} had another name, but because of his incredible skill with the bow and arrow, everyone called him Jebe and his real name had long been forgotten.

“So you are a friend of his?” Jebe shouted at Bogurchi. “Then I guess I’ll kill you first.”

This remark caused all of the Mongol soldiers to let out an audible laugh, for everyone of them knew that Bogurchi was unbeatable as a fighter and was famous throughout the entire steppe. Even though they saw how great Jebe was with the bow, claiming to be able to kill Bogurchi was just a bit too much for them to stomach.

Back when Temujin was still a boy, he was once captured by the Taijiuts, who placed him in a wooden neck collar. The many tribes of the Taijiuts gathered at the Onon River to celebrate by drinking and whipping him at the same time. After the gatherers were sufficiently drunk, Temujin knocked his guard unconscious with his collar and escaped into the nearby woods.

The Taijiuts conducted a massive search trying to find him. It was then that he met a young man named Tchila’un who, in spite of the enormous danger, took him into his house. It was Tchila’un who smashed the collar off of him and threw it in the fire; and it was also Tchila’un who hid him in a cart of fleece. When the Taijiut scouts came around and searched Tchila’un’s house, they came upon the cart of fleece and began to take it off layer by layer.

Just as Temujin’s feet were going to be revealed, Tchila’un’s father suddenly interrupted: “Such a hot day, how could anyone hide in a pile of fleece? If he did he’s probably roasted to death by now.”

It was dead in the middle of summer and everyone was sweating profusely. The scouts thought what he said made sense and didn't look any further. Temujin's life was filled with dangerous moments and close calls, but this was the most dangerous and closest call of them all.

After he ran away, Temujin lived a squalid existence along with his mother and brother and they were forced to rely on captured prairie squirrels and marmots to survive. One day, the eight white horses that Temujin had were stolen by a small group of thieves from the Taijiut tribe. As Temujin rode after them all by himself, he ran into another young man who was milking his horse. When Temujin stopped to inquire about the thieves, he learned that the young man's name was Bogurchi.

"Our lives are full of the same hardships," Bogurchi said, "Let's be friends."

The two of them rode off together. It was three days before they finally caught up to the thieving tribe. The two of them, by themselves, took on a couple hundred foes and took back those eight horses. Temujin offered to split the horses with him and asked him how many he wanted.

"I did this as a friend, so I won't take a single one." was Bogurchi's answer.

From that day forth, the two of them worked together and Temujin continued to insist on calling him his good friend. Theirs was a true friendship forged in times of trouble.

Bogurchi and Tchila'un, together with Muqali and Boroqul were the four foremost founding generals of the Mongolian Empire.

Knowing how great Bogurchi was with the bow, Temujin handed his own bow to Bogurchi and hopped off his white colt. "Ride my horse, use my bow and arrows, then it'll be as if I killed him."

"Yes sir!" Bogurchi hopped onto Temujin's treasured horse with bow and arrows in hand. Turning to Ogedai, he said: "Let Jebe use your horse."

"Well, lucky him." Ogedai commented before hopping off and ordering a guard to walk the horse over to Jebe.

"I am already surrounded," Jebe turned to Temujin after securing himself onto the saddle, "if you wanted to kill me, it would have been easier than killing a sheep. Since you have already showed mercy by letting me duel him with the bow, I dare not ask for anything more. Therefore I ask only for a bow and no arrows."

“No arrows?” Bogurchi shouted feeling insulted.

“That’s right. I can kill you with just a bow!”

This time the laughter from the Mongolian soldiers was even louder. “What a braggart!” One of them shouted as Temujin ordered him to hand over his best bow to Jebe.

Bogurchi had seen Jebe in action during battle and knew very well what a great marksman he was and didn’t dare to take him lightly. However, with no arrows, how could Jebe apply his great skill? Bogurchi, knowing that Jebe must be planning to use the arrows that he himself shot, gave his horse a good squeeze with his legs, urging it into a gallop. Not only was this particular colt fast, it had been through many a battle and was especially perceptive to the whims of its rider. It’s because of this, Temujin had taken quite a liking to it.

In response of the opponent’s speed, Jebe pulled on the reins, making his horse slowly back up. Bogurchi fitted an arrow onto the bow and, aiming directly at Jebe’s face, let loose. Jebe tilted his body and with incredible hand-eye coordination grabbed the arrow by the shaft out of mid-air.

“Oh that’s good.” Bogurchi muttered under his breath and shot another arrow.

Hearing the arrow’s feathers slicing through the air, Jebe knew that he would not be able to catch this one. He leaned forward, laying his body flat against the neck of the horse. The arrow flew over his head, barely missing grazing him. Immediately he made his horse gallop forward with a little kick and sat back up. But what he didn’t know was that Bogurchi was a master at shooting arrows one after another and two more arrows bore down on him. Not expecting such skill from his foe, Jebe was forced to immediately slip off his saddle and, hooking his right foot through the stirrup, leaned almost to the ground. The horse was still galloping at full speed, making it look as if there was a dancing bird at its side. Jebe twisted his body around. He had already loaded that arrow he had just caught onto the bow when he was barely half around, and let loose aiming at Bogurchi’s belly. Then he immediately flipped back up onto the saddle.

“Excellent!” Bogurchi shouted as he aimed at the coming arrow and let loose. The two arrows met nearly head on and shot off in different directions before both arrows, still carrying a great force, stuck into the ground with their feathers up. The exchange caused Temujin and all other spectators to cheer in amazement.

Bogurchi feigned shooting to the left, waited until Jebe reacted to the right before suddenly letting off a shot towards the right. Jebe flicked his bow with

his left hand and knocked the arrow down onto the ground. Bogurchi followed with another three shots, all of which were dodged by Jebe. Jebe, speeding his horse up, suddenly slipped off the saddle, reached down, picked up three arrows off the ground, sat back up, and shot one of them all in one motion.

Wanting to show off a bit of his own skills, Bogurchi jumped onto his saddle. Keeping his balance with his left leg, he kicked away the arrow with his right foot. Then, still standing, he used the height advantage and let loose an especially fierce shot. Jebe pulled his horse to the side to dodge the shot and responded with another shot, which, with a “crack”, split the arrow, that Bogurchi had shot, in half along the shaft.

“He doesn’t even have any arrows and yet we are fighting to a draw up to now. How can I get revenge for the Khan?” Bogurchi thought to himself.

Getting impatient, Bogurchi began to shoot arrows one after another nonstop, so much so that it all became a blur to the spectators. Not having enough time to grab the arrows, Jebe was forced into just dodging them. However, the arrows just kept on flying in and they kept on getting faster and more numerous until finally, he was hit in his left shoulder. Seeing this everyone present cheered in unison.

Ecstatic, Bogurchi was just about to shoot several more arrows and end Jebe’s life when he reached down into his arrow bag and came up empty. He had actually used up all of his arrows while he was showering Jebe with them. He always brought a tremendous number of arrows with him when he entered a battle, two quivers on his side and six more on the horse for a total of eight quivers filled with arrows. However, this time he was using the Khan’s own supply of arrows and, in the midst of battle, he had forgotten that there was a limit on arrows and resorted to his habitual way of using them. Shocked to discover that he had used all of his arrows, he immediately turned his horse around and reached down to pick up some arrows from the ground.

Clearly seeing all of this, Jebe pounced on the opportunity. Before the sound of the arrow piercing through the air had faded from everyone’s ears, the arrow had already hit Bogurchi’s back, right where his heart was. The spectators gasped in shock. But strangely, even though this arrow was shot with great force and caused a wave of pain to shoot through Bogurchi’s back, it didn’t penetrate his clothing and fell off onto the ground. Bogurchi reached down, picked up the arrow, and inspected it. It turned out that Jebe had actually taken off the arrowhead as a show of mercy. He flipped himself back onto the saddle and shouted: “I am seeking revenge for my Khan. I don’t need your mercy!”

“I, Jebe, never show any mercy to my enemies! That last arrow was to exchange one life for another!”

When he saw Bogurchi was hit, Temujin was devastated. However, now that he realized that Bogurchi was not dying, he was overjoyed. At this moment he would have absolutely been willing to trade all of the sheep, oxen, and horses in his tribe in exchange for Bogurchi's life without the slightest bit of hesitation. Hearing Jebe's remark, he immediately answered: "Alright, there's no need to go any further. You let him go so I'm letting you go. His life for your life."

"I'm not asking to exchange my life for his life."

"What then?" Temujin was puzzled.

"I'm asking for an exchange for his life!" Jebe answered, pointing at Guo Jing, who was standing by the door of the hut. "I ask that the Khan not trouble this boy further."

"As for me..." He continued, raising one of his eyebrows higher. "I wounded the Khan and deserve whatever punishment that comes to me. Bogurchi, come on!" As he finished, he pulled the arrow from his shoulder and, with blood still dripping off of it, fitted it onto his bow. By now, Bogurchi's underlings had re-supplied him with six more quivers of arrows. "Alright, let's try this again!" Bogurchi replied as he showered Jebe with arrows. The arrows were coming so fast that they seemed almost connected, creating a chain of arrows in the air.

Seeing the situation, Jebe, holding himself up by hooking his foot through the stirrup, flipped himself beneath his horse's belly. Leaning sideways so as to not hit the ground, he aimed and fired a shot at Bogurchi's stomach. The white colt, not waiting for his master to pull the reins, instinctively dodged to the left. Unfortunately, the shot from Jebe was much faster than any normal shot and the colt was not able to get out of the way in time. With a thud, the arrow hit the colt in the head and instantly brought it down.

Lying on the ground, Bogurchi dare not risk Jebe shooting a follow up shot; he immediately twisted around and fired another shot, snapping the bow in Jebe's hand. Losing his weapon, Jebe cursed the fact he wasn't able to fight back any longer, and he had to resort to zigzagging in an effort to dodge Bogurchi's shots. The Mongolian soldiers present all began to shout and cheer for Bogurchi as he loaded another arrow onto the bow. "He really is quite a hero!" Bogurchi thought as he aimed for Jebe's back and let loose.

A great marksman never misses when it matters and this arrow hit Jebe on the back of his head. Jebe's body shook and he fell off the horse, the arrow falling to his side. Bogurchi, not able to bring himself to kill such a hero, had also taken the arrowhead off of his arrow. Bogurchi loaded another arrow onto his

bow and aimed at Jebe before turning towards Temujin: “Great Khan, I ask you to show mercy and let him go!”

By now, Temujin had grown to admire Jebe’s courage and skill, so he shouted: “Are you still not going to surrender?”

Seeing Temujin sitting there in all his glory and magnificence, Jebe was suddenly won over. He ran over as fast as he could and, with his head lowered, knelt down in front of Temujin.

Temujin let out a hearty laugh: “Wonderful! Wonderful! From now on, you are with me!”

Mongolians frequently sing to express their feelings and thoughts. At this moment, still kneeling on the ground, Jebe began to sing: “Oh Great Khan, you showed me mercy and let me live. In the future, be it jumping into boiling water or walking on fire, I will do it. I would cross the black seas and crush the mountains to protect the Great Khan. Conquering foes, digging out their hearts! Just ask of me and I will do it. For the Khan I would lead charges and run one million li a day!”

Ecstatic at the turn of events, Temujin took out two gold ingots and give one each to Bogurchi and Jebe. Jebe thanked him and asked: “Great Khan, is it permitted that I give this ingot to that boy?”

“My gold I can give to whoever I want,” Temujin replied with a smile, “Your gold you can give to whoever you want!”

Jebe walked over to Guo Jing and held out the ingot. But Guo Jing just shook his head: “Mom said that helping guests is the right thing to do and that it’s wrong to take anything from guests.”

Temujin had grown to like Guo Jing because of the unyielding toughness the boy showed earlier. Hearing those words now, he liked Guo Jing even more.

“Bring the boy into our tribe as well.” He instructed Jebe before leading the soldiers back. Several of the soldiers stayed behind to put the white colt’s corpse on the backs of two horses before leaving as well.

Able to save his own life and find a master at the same time, Jebe was overjoyed and tired. So he lay down on the ground, rested until Li Ping returned from the market, and explained to her what had happened.

“Now that’s a good son,” Li Ping said to Guo Jing upon hearing of how courageous and loyal he was, even though she was greatly distressed by all the

wounds on his face. “That’s how a man should act and behave.” She figured that joining the army and going through the vigorous training would be much better for Guo Jing than shepherding, especially if Guo Jing was to avenge his father. So the mother and son followed Jebe into Temujin’s tribe.

Temujin made Jebe a Squad Leader under the command of his third son, Ogedai or Wo Kuo Tai. After meeting with the Third Prince, Jebe met up with Bogurchi. Fueled by mutual respect, the two of them became fast friends. Feeling he owed Guo Jing a debt of gratitude, Jebe took great care in looking after the mother and son. He decided that he would begin teaching Guo Jing about the bow as soon as Guo Jing got a little older.

On one particular day, Guo Jing was just tossing some rocks around with a couple of Mongolian kids when they saw two Mongolian riders flying into the camp, obviously carrying urgent news for the Khan. Not long after the two riders had entered Temujin’s ger, the horns started to sound, causing the soldiers to pour out of their gers. Temujin had an iron fist when it came to the training and discipline of his army. Ten soldiers were organized into a squad, which was led by a Squad Leader. The squads were ordered into platoons made up of ten squads that were led by a Hundred Men Commander, Ten Hundred Men groups were led by a Thousand Men Commander, which were then organized under one of the few Ten-Thousand Men Commanders. When Temujin gave an order, it was as if he just moved his fingers and no order was disobeyed or not carried out.

As Guo Jing and the other children looked on and at the end of the first blow of the horns, all the soldiers had already picked up their weapons and mounted their horses. When the horns sounded for the second time, the world shook from the sound of men and beasts moving. By the time the third sounding of the horns came to a stop, the plain just outside of the main gates of the encampment was covered with some fifty-thousand mounted men and soldiers in formation. Other than the snorting of horses, there wasn’t another sound, neither chattering noises of conversations nor any sounds of weapons colliding.

Temujin, escorted closely behind by his three eldest sons, walked out of the main gate. “We have beaten many foes and news of our feats has reached the Great Jin Empire.” He shouted at the top of his lungs. “At this moment, the great Emperor of the Jin has sent the Third Prince and Sixth Prince here to officially anoint your Khan as a Jin officer!”

The soldiers, in unison, raised their sabers and shouted with joy. At that time, the Jin controlled Northern Central Plains with a fierce and strong army. Their empire was famous and powerful. On the other hand, the Mongols were just a small tribe among many in the middle of the steppe. That was the reason why Temujin would feel honored to be an official of the Jin Empire.

Temujin ordered the eldest son Jochi to take ten-thousand men with him to welcome and escort the guests while the other forty thousand men lined up in formation, waiting.

In reality, the JurChen Emperor at the time, Wanyan Jing, who took the title of Zhang Zong, was apprehensive of growing power of some tribes on the steppe such as Temujin's tribe, the Toghri, Ong Khan's tribe and the Kerait. Fearing that his northern neighbors would grow to be troublesome, he sent the Prince of Rong, his third son Wanyan HongXi, and the Prince of Zhao, his sixth son Wanyan HongLie to anoint the leaders as officers of Jin. But in addition to tightening the ties of the tribes to Jin and increasing tributes, the princes had another mission: to scout the tribes and make note of the weakness of each so as to be able to gain the upper hand in case of future conflicts. The Prince of Zhao, Wanyan HongLie, was the same one that had traveled to Lin'An, was wounded by Qiu Chuji at Ox Family Village, and met the 'Seven Freaks' at JiaXing.

Guo Jing and the kids stood at a distance, trying to catch a glimpse of this happening. After a long wait, a cloud of dust appeared on the horizon as Jochi met up with Wanyan HongXi and Wanyan HongLie. The Wanyan brothers had with them ten-thousand elite soldiers, each wearing silk capes, iron armor and carrying a spear in the left hand and a wolf-fang club in the right hand while riding on their horses. The clanging of the armor could be heard for many li around. As the army got closer the silk shone and the armor glowed even more under the bright sun, creating a spectacular scene. The two brothers approached shoulder to shoulder, while Temujin, his sons and generals waited by the roadside to welcome them. Seeing Guo Jing and all the other kids standing there staring at him, Wanyan HongXi burst out laughing. He reached into his shirt and took out a handful of gold coins and tossed them towards the crowd of kids. "A gift for you kids!" He shouted with a laugh, figuring that the kids would undoubtedly cheer and scramble around on the ground for the money which would show off of his own magnanimity and wealth.

However, host-guest etiquette and respect was of utmost importance to the Mongolians. Not only were his actions inappropriate for the occasion, it was very disrespectful. The Mongol generals and soldiers were left aghast at his actions. Every one of the kids was a son or daughter of the Mongolian soldiers and generals. Even though they were little, each of them had a sense of self-respect. As a result, none of them picked up the coins. His joy dampened, Wanyan HongXi tossed another handful of gold coins and shouted: "Come on! Fight over them little devils that you are!"

This caused an even bigger stir upon the Mongols. Even though the Mongolians had no written language at the time and little culture, they placed a great deal of importance on politeness and respect, especially regarding guests. Mongolians,

traditionally, never curse, even when facing a lifelong nemesis or just joking around. When someone enters their gers, no matter if the person was a friend or not, that person would be treated with great respect and honor. By the same token, the guest must absolutely not to disrespect his hosts either, for it was considered the greatest of insults. Even though what Wanyan HongXi shouted was in JurChen and none of the Mongols understood it, everyone could tell that he was cursing at the kids from his body language and the tone of his voice.

Constantly being told stories of how the Jin rape, pillage, and steal from the people of Han; of how the Jin corrupted officials and had Yue Fei killed, Guo Jing's young heart had long been filled with hatred for the Jin. Now, seeing how rude this Jin Prince was, he picked up a couple of gold coins from the ground and, taking a little run, threw them at Wanyan HongXi with all his might. "Who would want your money?" He shouted. Wanyan HongXi tilted his head sideways to avoid the coins; but nevertheless, one of them hit him squarely on the cheekbone. Even though Guo Jing wasn't strong and it really didn't hurt, he was still made to look bad in front of tens of thousands of people. Every Mongolian from Temujin downwards cheered on the inside.

Wanyan HongXi was furious. When he was in Central Plains, he had many times killed people at his slightest displeasure. Never had he been humiliated like this. As his temper flared up, he grabbed a spear from the guard that was riding at his side and threw it at Guo Jing's chest with all his might and shouted: "You want to die you little bastard?"

"Third Brother...no!" Wanyan HongLie shouted, knowing this was ill-fated. But he was too late; the spear was already on its way. Just as it looked as if Guo Jing was about die from the spear, an arrow suddenly shot out of the Mongolian army to the left. Like a meteor shooting around the moon, the arrow hit the spear dead on the head with a loud "Bang!" Packed with incredible strength, the arrow was able to deflect the spear away despite being many times lighter. Guo Jing immediately scrambled away. The Mongolian soldiers all cheered in unison, shaking the steppe. The person who shot the arrow was none other than Jebe.

"Third Brother, don't bother with him anymore!" Wanyan HongLie whispered to his brother. Seeing and hearing the might of the Mongolian army, Wanyan HongXi was a bit shaken, so he just shot a mean look at Guo Jing and cursed under his breath: "Little bastard!"

At this point, Temujin and his retainers had come forth to formally welcome the two Jin Princes and took them into the main ger. There they served up koumiss ^{vii} and vast quantities beef and lamb. There were translators on both sides, translating between JurChen and Mongolian. Wanyan HongXi read the royal decree out loud, granting the title of 'The Northern Ambassador of the

Empire of the Jin' to Temujin. Temujin, who knelt on the floor during the reading, humbly accepted the official document and the Golden Belt, which signified his allegiance to the Jin Emperor.

That night the Mongolians celebrated with a huge feast to entertain the honored emissaries.

"Tomorrow, my brother and I are going to bestow a post on Ong Khan." Wanyan HongXi, somewhat under the influence of koumiss, said to Temujin. "Will the Ambassador join us?"

Temujin was overjoyed at the news and immediately agreed to come along. Ong Khan, a Toghril, was the leader among the tribes on the steppe. His tribe was the richest and most powerful; furthermore, he was a good man, always treating others as equals. It was no great exaggeration to say that he was respected and liked by every tribe. Ong Khan had once been the sworn brother of Temujin's father. After Temujin's father was poisoned by his enemies and Temujin had nowhere to go, it was Ong Khan who took him as a step-son. Not long after Temujin was married, his wife was taken away by the Merkits. It was only because of Ong Khan and Jamuka, Temujin's sworn brother, joining him that he managed to defeat the Merkits and save his wife.

That was the reason Temujin was elated on hearing that Ong Khan would be granted a title as well. "Is the Great Jin Empire going to grant titles to anyone else?" He asked.

"No, that's all." Wanyan HongXi replied. "But that's entirely because, up here in the north, there are only two great heroes: Ong Khan and the Great Khan yourself." Wanyan HongLie immediately added onto his brother's statement. "None of the others are worthy."

"There is another person around here that perhaps Your Excellencies haven't heard of." Temujin replied.

"Really? Who?" Wanyan HongLie asked.

"He just happens to be your humble servant's sworn brother, Jamuka. He's a righteous man who is very adept at commanding an army. I humbly request that the Third Prince and the Sixth Prince consider granting him a title as well."

Temujin and Jamuka were childhood friends who grew up together and at that time they became sworn brothers. When Mongolians become sworn brothers, they call it swearing "anda", which was Mongolian for sworn brother. Mongolian tradition dictates that when swearing anda, the sides must exchange gifts. At the time, Jamuka gave Temujin a granite stone that resembled a deer

thighbone while Temujin gave Jamuka a granite stone that looked like it was made of brass. Mongolians used small granite rocks to hunt rabbits, but Mongolian kids often played catch with them and competed to see who threw them the furthest. After the two became andas, they went and threw rocks on the frozen Onon River. The next Spring, while the two of them were out shooting arrows with their own little wooden bows, Jamuka gave Temujin a noisy-arrowhead ^{viii} that he carved himself using two little ox horns, Temujin returned the gift with a cypress tipped arrowhead and the two of them swore to become anda once more.

After they grew up, both of them lived with Ong Khan's tribe and were still very close. Every day they would compete to see who got up earlier; whichever one got up earlier would get to drink one cup of koumiss out of Ong Khan's own jade cup. Later, after Temujin's wife was kidnapped and was rescued with the combined help of Jamuka and Ong Khan, Temujin and Jamuka exchanged gold and horses and became sworn anda to each other for a third time. The two of them drank out of the same cup in the day and slept in the same ger at night. However, having to migrate with the changing weather and rain, they and their tribes parted. As Temujin's tribe rose in fame and power, Jamuka's tribe was growing nonstop as well. Their friendship was still as strong as ever and was deeper than blood brothers. That's why Temujin, realizing that his brother was not being honored, would ask for him to be honored as well.

"There are so many Mongolians, where can we find all the titles if we give one to each of them? How many titles do you think we have?" Wanyan HongXi, half drunk, casually answered back without much thought. Wanyan HongLie shot his brother numerous meaningful looks trying to get him to stop, but was ignored.

Feeling slighted because of the remark, Temujin offered: "Might Your Excellencies consider giving your humble servant's title to him instead?"

"Are you belittling the titles of the Great Empire of the Jin?" Wanyan HongXi smacked his leg and shouted.

Temujin slammed his palm down on his table and stood up in anger. Finally, barely holding back his fury, he did not say another word and grabbed his cup and drank its conger in one gulp. Wanyan HongLie immediately told a joke and changed the subject.

The next morning, Temujin and his four sons organized five-thousand troops to escort Wanyan HongXi and Wanyan HongLie to Ong Khan.

By the time the sun was barely peeking over the distant horizon, Temujin had already mounted his horse and the five-thousand soldiers had already lined up

in perfect formation. The JurChen soldiers and generals, however, were still fast asleep.

At first, Temujin was impressed by the JurChen army's grandeur and organization. But after seeing what an undisciplined and fun seeking group they were, he humphed and turned to Muqali, "What do you think of the Jin army?"

"A thousand of us Mongolian troops can defeat five-thousand of theirs!" Muqali observed.

"I've thought so too," Temujin replied with a smile. "But it's said that the Jin Empire has an army of over one million strong. We only have fifty thousand people."

"A million troops can't enter battle all at once," Muqali responded. "Divide and conquer, we can take down ten thousand today and then sweep another ten thousand tomorrow."

"When it comes to military strategy, your opinions are always the same as mine." Temujin smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "A hundred jins man can eat ten cows that weigh over five thousand jins. He just won't do it in one day." The two men burst out in laughter.

Temujin settled back straight in his saddle and suddenly saw that Tolui's horse was rider-less. "Where's Tolui?" He shouted in fury.

Tolui was just nine years old, but Temujin had always been a harsh disciplinarian whether he was training troops or bringing up sons; he never showed mercy to anyone who violated his rules. With him shouting so loudly in anger, all the generals and troops immediately got a bad feeling in their stomachs. General Boroqul, Tolui's mentor, almost panicked and offered: "The kid has never overslept before, let me check."

Just as he turned his horse to gallop off to search for Tolui, he saw two kids come running up hand in hand. One of them, with a silk bandana on his head, was Tolui while the other turned out to be Guo Jing. Tolui ran straight towards his father and shouted: "Father!"

"Where were you?" Temujin demanded in a harsh tone.

"Guo Jing and I just became andas down by the river. Look, this is what he gave me." Tolui replied, waving a red handkerchief with a flower embroidered on it in the air. It was something that Li Ping made for Guo Jing.

Reminded of the time he and Jamuka became andas as kids, Temujin's face immediately became calm. "What did you give him?" He asked the two cute and innocent kids standing in front of him.

"This!" Guo Jing replied, pointing to the top of his head, where Temujin saw the golden necklace that his youngest son often wore.

"Now you two have to help and look after each other in the future, you hear?" Temujin said with a smile.

Both of the kids nodded.

"Now get on your horses," Temujin ordered, "Guo Jing can come with us too."

Ecstatic, Guo Jing and Tolui both mounted their horses.

After another period of waiting, the Wanyan brothers finally finished dressing and exited their gers. Wanyan HongLie, seeing the Mongolian soldiers were already in formation, immediately ordered his soldiers to fall in. However, Wanyan HongXi, determined to put the Mongolians in their place, took his time slowly drinking several cups of wine and ate a little breakfast before finally climbing onto his horse. After another hour of general chaos, the ten thousand Jin troops were finally in formations.

The army marched northwards for six days before meeting up with Ong Khan's welcoming committee, comprised of Ong Khan's son Senggum and adopted son Jamuka. Upon hearing that Jamuka was here, Temujin immediately rode forth to meet him. The two men hopped off their horses and bear hugged each other. Every one of Temujin's sons rode forth to greeting their adopted uncle as well.

When Wanyan HongLie first laid eyes upon Jamuka, he saw a tall and skinny man with a few strands of gold in his mustache and a pair of eyes that were filled with energy and enthusiasm. He looked strong and spirited. Senggum, on the other hand, was fat and pale, probably from living in luxury all of his life and not at all like someone who grew up on the steppe. Not only that, he had an arrogant look on his face and seemingly ignored Temujin whenever he felt like it; a stark contrast to the warmth of Jamuka.

After another day of riding, they were very close to Ong Khan's encampment when two of Temujin's advanced scouts suddenly returned with news. "There are Naimans blocking the way ahead. About thirty thousand of them," they reported.

“What do they want?” Wanyan HongXi asked, panicking a bit after hearing the news through his translator.

“From the looks of it, they want to fight,” the scouts reported.

“They...they have...they really have thirty thousand troops?” Wanyan HongXi stuttered. “That...that’s more than us...this...this...”

“Go and find out what’s going on,” Temujin ordered Muqali, not waiting for Wanyan HongXi to finish his sentence.

Muqali headed off with ten bodyguards while the rest of them stopped and waited. Muqali returned not long after. “The Naimans said that since the Great Jin Princes granted a title to our Khan, they want to be granted a title too,” he reported. “If not, then they say they will take Your Excellencies the princes as hostages until they too are granted titles from the Great Jin Empire. They also said that they want a title that’s higher than our Khan Temujin’s.”

“Demanding titles by force? That...that’s rebellion! What do we do?” Wanyan HongXi’s face went pale on hearing this news. Wanyan HongLie began organizing troops into fighting positions in case of any unexpected escalations.

“Brother, those Naimans frequently steal our livestock and cause trouble for us. Are we really going to let them get away with this?” Jamuka said to Temujin. “I don’t know what the Jin Princes would have us do?”

By now, Temujin had thoroughly surveyed the surrounding landscape and was confident of victory. “Let’s show the Princes how the two of us do things around here!” He replied to Jamuka before letting out a howl and cracking his whip in the air twice, causing the five thousand Mongolian soldiers to simultaneously howl in response and startling the unprepared Wanyan brothers.

A cloud of dust had appeared ahead as the enemy slowly approached, forcing the advanced scouts to return.

“Brother, order our boys to charge now!” Wanyan HongXi said. “These Mongols are of no use now.”

“Let them fight first,” Wanyan HongLie whispered back.

Immediately understanding his brother’s intentions, Wanyan HongXi simply nodded and sat back. The Mongolian soldiers let out another loud shout, but did not move. “What on earth are these Mongols doing shouting like rabid dogs?” Wanyan HongXi frowned. “It’s not like they are going to scare the enemy away no matter how loud they are.”

On the left side of the formation was Boroqul. "Follow me and don't fall behind. See how we defeat our foes," Temujin instructed Tolui, who, along with Guo Jing, were shouting at the top of their lungs just like the others.

In a heartbeat, the approaching army emerged out of the cloud of dust only a few paces away. Yet the Mongolians still did nothing but shout.

This time it was Wanyan HongLie who got nervous, seeing how spirited the Naimans were. Fearing his formation would be broken if they continued unimpeded, he ordered: "Fire arrows!"

The Jin army discharged several volleys, but because of the distance between the two armies, most of the arrows fell onto the ground before reaching the enemy.

Frightened by the ferociousness showing on his enemies' faces as they gritted their teeth and charged at full speed, Wanyan HongXi began to panic. "Why don't we just give them what they want; give them some bullshit title and be done with all this?" he turned around and suggested to Wanyan HongLie. "So what if the title is a little big? It's not like we are going to lose anything."

Suddenly, Temujin cracked his whip in the air several times. The Mongolian army immediately stopped shouting and split into two groups. Temujin and Jamuka who each led a wing immediately headed towards the high ground on either side. The two of them leaned down into their horses and galloped along with their troops, shouting out orders as they rode. The Mongolian troops split up into smaller and smaller groups so that, in a very short amount of time, they occupied the high ground in every direction. With the height advantage, the Mongols loaded arrows onto their bows and aimed at the opposing army, but not firing.

The leader of the Naimans, sensing that he was in a disadvantageous position, ordered his troops to head straight for the high ground. The Mongolian troops set up soft walls made of several layers of fleece to shield themselves from arrows. The bowmen shot from behind the walls as the troops stationed on nearby high ground fired arrows in support as well. With the enemy on either side of them, confusion descended upon the Naimans as they tried to attack both sides.

"Jelme, attack the rear!" Temujin shouted, seeing the opposing army had become disorganized from his position on the left.

With a huge saber in hand, Jelme led a group of one thousand soldiers down in a charge and cut off the enemy's retreat. Jebe, determined to slay the enemy general in order to show his gratitude to Temujin for sparing his life, was at the

front of the charge with his spear sticking out in front of everyone. Being hit head on by a charge like this, the Naiman rear collapsed in chaos, and their forward units were shaken as well. The Naiman general was at a loss as to what to do next, when Jamuka and Senggum began to charge down from their positions as well. Attacked from both sides, the Naiman army completely collapsed before long. The leading general turned around and tried to escape, followed by several retainers as they headed back in the direction they had come from.

Jelme didn't order a pursuit and let most of the opposing army go by. Only when there were about two thousand enemies left did he order his army to charge out and block their retreat. With nowhere to go, the brave Naiman soldiers that were left either fought to the death or laid down their weapons and surrendered.

In this brief battle, the Mongols killed over a thousand foes and captured over two thousand while sustaining only a little over one hundred casualties.

Temujin ordered all captives be stripped of their armor and split into four equal groups, one for the Wanyan brothers, one for his adopted father Ong Khan, one for sworn brother Jamuka, and one for himself. All Mongolian families that had a relative die in the battle received five horses and five captives as slaves as compensation.

Only now did Wanyan HongXi finally calm down from his fright. "They want a title? Brother, why don't we give them the title of 'Ambassador of the Defeated Losers?' Ha...ha!" He could not stop talking about the battle that just occurred.

The Mongolian victory, in spite of being outnumbered, made Wanyan HongLie even more nervous than he was before the battle. "At this moment, the only reason that our northern borders are safe is because the northern tribes are battling amongst themselves. If Temujin or Jamuka ever brought all the tribes on the steppe under their rule, our Great Jin Empire would no longer have any peace." he thought to himself.

Other things troubled him as well. Even though his own troop of ten thousand did not enter into battle, their formation began to waver when the Naimans initially charged and there was fear on every one of their faces. The battle had not yet begun but the outcome had already been determined. Such courage and efficiency displayed by the Mongolians represented a huge threat in the future. He was still pondering things over in his mind when a cloud of dust appeared up ahead as another army approached.

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- ⁱ The saying “A man’s word can’t be brought back by wild horses” is a famous saying in China about keeping one’s word. When a person says it, it means that he will not go back on his word.
- ⁱⁱ In popular Chinese lore and most versions of Chinese history, Jing Ke and Nie Zheng were two great friends that had helped the Lord of Qi during the beginning of the Spring and Autumn Period. Their friendship was legendary and, in the view of most Chinese, including Confucius, the epitome of what friendship should be.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Xiao Ge is an affectionate term used by Li Ping with Guo XiaoTian.
- ^{iv} About 50 kilogram/over 110 lbs.
- ^v 1 li = .5 kilometer.
- ^{vi} According to Mongol records, when he first entered Temujin’s tribe, Jebe gave his name as Jirgadei.
- ^{vii} Koumiss is a very strong Mongolian alcoholic drink made from horse milk.
- ^{viii} Noisy arrowheads are arrowheads that are carved with slits in them so that they create a very loud screeching noise once they were shot. These arrows are often used to relay messages and orders in battle.