

Chapter

4

A NOVEL BY JIN YONG

Twin Killers of the Dark Winds

Legend of the Condor Heroes

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Han BaoJu felt the power of that palm strike arriving and he knew he wouldn't be able to resist it. He let go of his whip and somersaulted down from the tree. Meanwhile, 'Iron Corpse' won't let him escape and followed after him with the five fingers of her claw bearing down upon his back. Han BaoJu seemingly felt an icy breath on the nape of his neck and he immediately threw his body forward to avoid the attack. At the same time, Nan XiRen and Quan JinFa were letting loose a torrent of projectiles at their enemy from underneath the tree.

Twin Killers of the Dark Winds

Wanyan HongXi proclaimed out loud, “Alright, let’s fight again!”

Unexpectedly, the forward scouts came back with a different report. “The Ong Khan is here to personally welcome the two Jin Princes!” Temujin, Jamuka, and Senggum immediately rode forward to greet him.

From the dust clouds an army emerged. With several hundred personal guards with him, the Ong Khan rode up, rolled off of the back of his horse in one easy movement, then with his adopted sons Temujin and Jamuka at his side, approached and kneeled before the Two Princes. He was a rather chubby man with glittering silver hair. He wore a robe made of the finest black leopard furs that was held in place by a golden belt around his waist. The way he carried himself was one of great dignity and confidence. Wanyan HongLie hurriedly got off his own horse and returned the gesture, but Wanyan HongXi remained on his horse and merely replied by cupping his fists.

“Your humble servant just heard the news of the Naimans’ rudeness and was worried that Your Highnesses might have been disturbed. Your humble servant brought a force here as soon as possible. But fortunately, due to Your Highness’s awe-inspiring presence, the three kids were able to defeat them.” The Ong Khan spoke.

Next, he took the lead and courteously led the Wanyan brothers all the way back to his own ger. The inside of his ger was covered with leopard and fox furs and well fitted with the finest furniture and wares. Even his personal guards were dressed in more luxurious clothing than those of Temujin’s guard, not to mention Temujin and his son. The bellowing of horns continuously sounded for several li¹ surrounding the ger; men and horses bustled about, giving an atmosphere of something great going on. Never had the Wanyan brothers seen anything approaching such grandeur since they’ve been outside the Great Wall.

After the ceremony of bestowing the title was finished, everyone settled down. That night, Ong Khan held a huge banquet in the big ger to celebrate the arrival

of the Wanyan brothers. Scores of female slaves danced for entertainment as the banquet progressed late into the night; it became quite lively, and was miles apart from the simple and slightly backwater reception they received from Temujin's tribe. Wanyan HongXi was having one hell of a time; two female slaves had caught his fancy and he was pondering ideas in his head. It never occurred to him to talk to Ong Khan.

After about half of the koumissⁱⁱ had been consumed, Wanyan HongLie turned to the Ong Khan. "Your heroic deeds are known far and wide; even we who reside within the Great Wall have long admired your greatness. But I really want to meet some of the heroes of the younger generation of Mongolians." He said.

"Well, my two adopted sons just happen to be the two greatest heroes of Mongolia." The Ong Khan responded with a smile. Senggum, his own son who sat to one side, did not react well on hearing this and began downing one cup of koumiss after another.

"Your own son is another hero, why aren't mentioning him?" Wanyan HongLie asked, taking note of Senggum's displeasure.

"After I die, he will naturally take over my tribe." The Ong Khan smiled and replied. "But can he compare with his two adopted brothers? Jamuka is smart and intelligent. Temujin is even more brave and courageous; he started with nothing and made himself into what he is today with his own hands. What Mongol warrior wouldn't want to put his life in their hands and serve them?"

"Does that mean that the generals under hero Ong don't compare to Temujin Khan's generals?" Wanyan HongLie queried. Noticing that there was a hint of instigation in his words, Temujin shot a look towards Wanyan HongLie and mentally prepared himself for what might come next.

The Ong Khan slowly stroked his beard and did not reply. Instead he took another gulp from his cup of koumiss.

"The last time, when the Naiman came and stole several thousand of my livestock, it was only because of Temujin and his 'Four Aces' that we were able to get the livestock back. Even though he doesn't have many men under him, each and every one of them is skilled and brave. Your Highnesses must have witnessed that first hand today." Senggum's face turned even angrier as he slammed the gold cup in his hand onto the table, causing a loud bang.

"What good am I really? What I have today is simply because of the attention and care that my adopted father showered on me." Temujin hurried to add.

“His ‘Four Aces’? Who are they? I want to meet them.” Wanyan HongLie changed the subject as well.

“Why don’t you summon them inside?” The Ong Khan asked Temujin. Temujin lightly clapped his hands and four men walked into the ger.

The first one looked gentle and scholarly with a white, clean face; he was the master of strategy, Muqali. The second man had a strong, sturdy build and his eyes were as piercing as an eagle; he was none other than Temujin’s good friend, Bogurchi. The third man was short but agile and his steps were light and swift; he was Tolui’s master Boroqul. The last one’s face and hands were covered with battle scars and his face was blood red; this was the man who had saved Temujin’s life so many years ago, Tchila’un. The four of them were the founding generals in rise of Mongolia and were called the ‘Four Aces’ by Temujin.

After looking at them, Wanyan HongLie praised each one some what, and then awarded all of them with a big cup of koumiss.

“On the battle field today, there was a general with a black cape who led the charge through enemy formations, nobody could stop him; do you know who he was?” Wanyan HongLie inquired after the ‘Four Aces’ had finished their drinks.

“That’s a Squad Leader that I just recruited,” Temujin answered. “Everyone calls him Jebe.”

“Then why don’t we invite him in for a drink as well?” Wanyan HongLie suggested. Temujin turned and issued the command.

Jebe entered the ger and properly gave thanks for the reward of a drink. He was just about to drink when he was interrupted.

“How dare you, a measly Squad Leader, drink from my gold cup?” Senggum shouted. Jebe was shocked and furious, but stopped the cup as it came up to his lips. He looked over at Temujin for the proper course of action. In Mongolian culture, stopping someone from drinking is an enormous insult. Not to mention that this was done in front of all these people, how could anyone bear such an insult?

“For my adopted father’s sake, I’m going to let Senggum get away with this insult.” Temujin decided turning to Jebe.

“Bring it over here. I’m thirsty, let me drink it!” He took the cup from Jebe’s hands and drank all of its contents in one gulp. Jebe shot an angry look towards Senggum, turned, and began to walk out of the ger.

“Come back here!” Senggum commanded fiercely, but Jebe just ignored him and walked out of the ger with his head held high.

“Even though Brother Temujin has his ‘Four Aces’, I have something that could defeat all four of them as soon as I let it loose.” Unhappy that things were not working out to his liking, Senggum changed the subject. He chuckled when he said that. Even though he called Temujin brother, he was not an anda of Temujin; he only did it because his father was Temujin’s adopted father.

“Really? What could that be? What could be that powerful?” Wanyan HongXi’s interest was piqued by that statement.

“Well, we can go outside and I can show you.” Senggum said.

“We are having a good time drinking, what are you trying to stir up now?” Ong Khan objected.

“Just sitting here and drinking is getting boring, let’s see something different.” Wanyan HongXi very much wanted to see some trouble started, so much so that he had already stood up by the time he finished his sentence and walked out. The others had no choice but to follow him.

The Mongolian troops had started several hundred camp fires and were celebrating beside them. When the Khans exited the ger, there was a huge rumble as the large section of troops to the west stood up immediately. They were lined up in perfect formation, not one of them was moving. They were none other than Temujin’s troops. To the east, the Ong Khan’s troops, slowly and disorganized, picked themselves up from the ground; there were even faint sounds of joking to be heard within their ranks.

“Even though the Ong Khan’s troops are much more numerous, they can’t compare with Temujin’s troops!” Wanyan HongLie concluded upon seeing this display.

“Wine!” Temujin called. He had noticed, in the glow of the fire, that Jebe’s face was still showing fury. So he ordered that a big jug of wine be brought to him.

“Today’s tremendous victory over the Naiman was a result of everyone’s hard work and dedication!” He loudly declared to everyone.

“It’s because we were led by Ong Khan, Temujin Khan, and Jamuka!” All of the soldiers answered in one voice.

“Today, I saw someone who was especially brave, charging the enemy’s rear no less than three times. He shot down several dozens of the enemy, who was he?” Temujin asked.

“Squad Leader Jebe!” The soldiers answered again.

“No, not Squad Leader, but company Commander Jebe!” Temujin corrected. Everyone was momentarily taken aback before realizing what he meant and began to cheer.

“Jebe is a great warrior! He well deserves to become a Company Commander!” They all shouted with approval.

“Bring my helmet to me!” Temujin instructed Jelme. Soon Jelme returned with the helmet and presented it to him.

“This is the helmet that I wear onto the battle field! This is the helmet that I wear as I kill my enemies!” Temujin raised the helmet high above his head for everyone to see. “Now this will be a cup for a warrior to drink from!”

He opened the jug of koumiss and poured all of its contents into the helmet. Bringing it up to his lips, he took a huge gulp from the helmet, and then offered it to Jebe.

Overwhelmed with gratitude and with lowered head, Jebe knelt down on one knee to receive the helmet and finished the rest of the koumiss.

“Even the most precious diamond studded gold cup in the world cannot compare with my Khan’s helmet.” He said in a low voice. Temujin smiled as he took his helmet back and put it back onto his head.

The Mongol troops had all caught word of how Jebe had been humiliated by Senggum and felt bad for him; even those troops under the Ong Khan had thought that Senggum was wrong in what he did. Now, seeing how Temujin treated him, they all burst out with a great cheer.

“What a man among men this Temujin is! At this moment Jebe would gladly die one thousand times for him!” Wanyan HongLie thought to himself. “Back in the Imperial Court all the officials insisted that the north is populated by brainless barbarians; it’s obvious that they have grossly underestimated these people.”

But Wanyan HongXi was only concerned with finding out what was that thing that Senggum claimed could defeat all four of the 'Aces'.

"So what is it that you have that's so powerful that it could defeat all four of the 'Aces'?" he said, as he casually sat back down onto the tiger-fur covered chair that his personal servants had carried out.

"I invite Your Highness to get ready to see something very special. 'Four Aces' my foot; they probably won't even measure up to those two bastards of mine." Senggum quietly said with a smile before turning around to the troops and loudly asked. "Where are my Brother Temujin's 'Four Aces'?"

The four men came walking up and saluted their superiors. Senggum turned and whispered something to the trusted servant at his side who nodded before running off. Soon after, the sound of roaring beasts could be heard as a pair of huge golden leopards came gracefully out from behind the ger. As they slowly approached in the darkness, the leopard eyes glowed like a pair of jade lanterns. This gave Wanyan HongXi quite a fright as he immediately gripped the handle of his saber tightly. Only when the leopards walked close to one of bonfires did he see that, in fact, there was a leash and collar around their necks and each leopard had a big fellow on the other end of the leash. Both had a long stick in their other hand, and, as it turned out, they were specially charged with raising and taking care of the leopards. Mongolians love raising leopards for hunting purposes. Not only do leopards run faster than hunting dogs, they are especially feisty; being caught by the leopard means instant death for whatever they are set upon. The only drawback was that the leopards consumed a great deal of food; so only royalty or top officials could afford to keep leopards. Although the leopards were restrained by men, they were still snarling and clawing while glaring viciously at everyone. The muscles on their bodies looked as if they contained boundless energy within them, ready to explode at any moment. Wanyan HongXi felt his heart get a little fluttery and he was exceedingly uncomfortable. From the power and might that these two leopards were showing, it looked as if they could easily break out of the grip of their masters should they choose.

"Brother, if those 'Four Aces' of yours are truly great warriors and can subdue these two leopards of mine bare handed; then I'll be truly convinced." Senggum said, turning towards Temujin.

The 'Four Aces' were furious as the same thought ran through their minds. "You humiliated Jebe, now you are going to humiliate us? Are we just game? Are we wild wolves? Why should we fight your leopards?"

Temujin was far from happy about this whole proposal as well. "I love my men like my own life, how can I let them fight a leopard?"

“Is that so?” Senggum burst out with a loud laugh. “Then why claim to be ‘Four Aces’ or whatever you want to call them. They’re not even brave enough to fight my leopards!”

Of the ‘Four Aces’, Tchila’un’s temper was the shortest and he could not stand such an insult any longer. He took a huge step forward. “My great Khan, it doesn’t matter if they laugh at us, but we cannot allow you to be shamed.” He said to Temujin. “I’ll fight the leopards!”

Wanyan HongXi was ecstatic to hear this. So much so that he removed a bright red ruby-studded ring from his finger and tossed it on the ground, proclaiming, “If you can beat the leopard, then that’s yours.”

Tchila’un did not even give the ring a look before lunging forward, only to be held back by Muqali. “Our names are known throughout the steppe because we have defeated so many foes. Can a leopard command an army? Can a leopard ambush or surround enemies?” Muqali reasoned loudly.

“Brother Senggum, you win.” Temujin said as he bent down, picked up the ring, and placed it in Senggum’s hand. Senggum immediately put the ring on one of his fingers and let out a triumphant laugh as he raised his hand to show off his newly won ring. Ong Khan’s troops began to cheer in response. Jamuka stayed silent throughout but was frowning heavily. Temujin kept a calm expression on his face. The ‘Four Aces’ bitterly retreated back to their ranks.

Disappointed and terribly unhappy about not seeing a man versus leopard fight, Wanyan HongXi asked Ong Khan for two female slaves and retired to his own ger.

Next morning, Tolui and Guo Jing ran off to play. Hand in hand, they made their way far from the main camp. Suddenly a white rabbit ran by right in front of them. Tolui brought up his little bow and arrow, aimed, shot, and hit the rabbit squarely in the belly. Because he was so young the arrow lacked power, so even though it was a direct hit, it was not immediately fatal and the rabbit scuttled off screeching with the arrow imbedded in it. The two little kids, screaming at the top of their lungs, chased after the rabbit.

After running for quite a while, the rabbit finally collapsed. The two kids let out a simultaneous cheer and were just about to retrieve the rabbit when seven or eight kids suddenly came pouring out from the woods from one side. One particular kid, who was of about twelve years or so, was quick to recognize the situation and grabbed the rabbit. He pulled the arrow from the rabbit’s belly, threw it on the ground, shot a fierce look in Tolui and Guo Jing’s direction, before stomping off with the rabbit.

“Hey, I shot that rabbit, why are you taking it?” Tolui shouted. The kid whirled around and came back. “Who says that you shot it?” He laughed.

“Well, this arrow is mine isn’t it?”

The older kid’s eyebrows suddenly rose and his eyes bulged out. “This rabbit was my pet, you are lucky I’m not asking you to pay for it!” He shouted back.

“You are lying, this is obviously a wild rabbit.” Tolui shot back.

The kid became even angrier and he walked up and shoved Tolui. “Watch out who you are accusing! My grandpa is the Ong Khan, my dad is Senggum; do you know that? Even if you did shoot this rabbit, I’m taking it anyway; what can you do?”

“My dad is Temujin!” Tolui proudly answered.

“Pei! So what if he’s Temujin? Your dad’s a coward! He’s scared of my grandpa and scared of my dad!” The kid’s name was Dukhsh and he was Senggum’s only son. After having a daughter, Senggum had to wait several years before finally having a son; after him he had no other offspring. He had always spoiled his son, letting him bully as he pleased. Temujin, Ong Khan, and Senggum had not met for a long time; even though their sons had met before, this was, for all practical purposes, their first true meeting.

Hearing someone make fun of his father, Tolui was filled with anger and proudly shouted back: “Says who? My dad’s not afraid of anybody!”

“When your mom was kidnapped, it was my grandpa and my dad who went and took her back for your dad. You think I didn’t know that? So what’s the big deal if I just take this measly little rabbit of yours?”

Even in the past, Senggum was envious of Temujin’s fame. When they helped Temujin that one time, Senggum made sure to tell everyone about it; even his son had heard it many times.

Temujin had always viewed that event as an incredible embarrassment for himself, he naturally never told Tolui about it. Hearing this at this moment, Tolui was so mad that his face turned purple. “You’re a liar! I’m going to tell my dad!” He angrily threatened before turning around and walking off.

“Your dad’s afraid of my dad, so what if you tell him?” Dukhsh laughed at Tolui. “Last night, when my dad brought out his two leopards, your dad’s ‘Four Asses’ were so afraid they couldn’t even move!”

Of the 'Four Aces', Boroqul was Tolui's master. Hearing this only made Tolui even angrier. So angry he could barely speak. "My master isn't even afraid of tigers, why would he be afraid of leopards? He just didn't want to fight wild animals." He finally stuttered out.

Dukhsh took a step forward and suddenly slapped Tolui squarely on his face. "How dare you talk back to me? Aren't you afraid of me?" He yelled. Tolui was startled as his cheeks instantly turned blood red. He wanted to cry, but would not let himself.

Guo Jing had been seething on the side all this time, but now he could no longer hold back. He suddenly lunged forward and rammed his head squarely into Dukhsh's stomach. This caught him by surprise and knocked him flat on his back.

"Yay!" Tolui clapped for joy for a moment before grabbing Guo Jing's hand and trying to run away.

"Kill those two boys!" Dukhsh screamed, still on the ground. Dukhsh's companions ran up to the two boys and a fierce fight quickly broke out. Dukhsh picked himself up from the ground and angrily charged into the fray. Dukhsh's gang was older than the boys to begin with and also outnumbered them; they were able to pin down Tolui and Guo Jing very quickly.

"Give up? Give up?" Dukhsh shouted as he continually rained punches onto Guo Jing's back. Guo Jing tried with all his might to get back up, but was weighed down by his foe's weight. At his side, Tolui was also being ganged up on by two kids.

It was at this precarious moment that the sound of horse bells could be heard coming from just over a sand dune as a small group of riders appeared. The leading rider was a short, fat fellow riding on a yellow horse. Seeing the kids fighting in the distance, he let out a little laugh.

"Hah, fighting!" Only when he rode closer for a better look did he realize that it was seven kids bullying two much smaller kids. They'd pinned them down on the ground and were beating them. The two smaller kids' faces were already full of bruises.

"Shame on you, let them go!" He shouted.

"Piss off!" Dukhsh shouted back. "Do you know who I am? I'll beat up whoever I want to, and you can't do anything about it!" His father was one of the most powerful men in the north, so he was used to bullying everyone and nobody dared to challenge him.

“How dare you act like that? Let go of them!” The rider on the yellow horse yelled back. By this time, the rest of his group had joined him.

“Third Brother, stop meddling in affairs that don’t concern us, let’s go.” There was a woman in that group.

“Look at them, what kind of fighting is this?” The rider on the yellow horse replied.

These riders were the ‘Seven Freaks of the South’. They had followed Duan TianDe all the way north onto the steppe before losing his trail. These past six years, they had roamed up and down the steppe in search of Duan TianDe and Li Ping. All seven of them had actually learned Mongolian by this time, but they still could not find any clues as to the whereabouts of Li Ping. The ‘Seven Freaks’ were all stubborn characters, and very competitive as well, so even if faced with ordeals ten times more difficult and more dangerous than this, they would not concede this bet to Qiu ChuJi. Without ever conferring, the seven of them had the same plan, even if they never find Li Ping, they would still search until the eighteen years was up. At that time they would go to Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal in JiaXing and admit defeat to Qiu ChuJi’s face. Besides, Qiu ChuJi might not find Yang TieXin’s widow either. If neither side could find their widow, then a tie would result and then maybe another challenge would be issued.

“Two against one, we can’t allow that.” Han XiaoYing hopped off of her horse and pulled the two kids that were sitting on Tolui’s back off of him. Suddenly realizing that all the weight was off of his back Tolui struggled to get up. Dukhsh paused for a moment and Guo Jing took advantage; he flipped his body violently and crawled out from between Dukhsh’s legs. The two, having finally freed themselves, immediately tried to run away.

“Go after them!” Dukhsh yelled as he led the rest of his gang in hot pursuit.

Seeing these little Mongolian kids fight reminded the ‘Seven Freaks’ of all the misadventures that they had together when they were little, causing them to smile quite fondly at the memories.

“It’s time to go. Let’s get to the market ahead before it disperses, or else we will miss a chance to ask the people there!” Ke Zhen’E suggested. By this time, Dukhsh’s little gang had caught up to Tolui and Guo Jing once again and surrounded them.

“Do you give up?” Dukhsh demanded. Tolui, still looking very angry, did not reply but instead fiercely shook his head.

“Well you asked for it!” The kids converged upon one another yet again.

Suddenly there was a cold flash as a little dagger suddenly materialized in Guo Jing’s hand. “You want some of this?”

Li Ping, out of love for her son, had already given him the dagger, that her husband left her, to carry around. She felt that this object was good for warding off evil and had intended that this dagger protect her son from evil spirits. Because of the bullying Guo Jing was receiving, he pulled it out.

Seeing that he had a weapon with him, none of Dukhsh’s gang was brave enough to challenge him.

‘Magical Hands Scholar’ Zhu Cong was already on his way when a sudden flash caught his eyes. The way the dagger reflected the sunlight lit up his heart.

“This reflection is incredibly strong; I’ve got to see what this precious little toy is.” Having stolen from government treasuries and rich gentry’s vaults all his life, he was quite an expert at discerning precious objects. He immediately pulled his horse around and saw that one of the kids had a dagger in his hand. The dagger reflected a blue light that flickered endlessly, obviously an extremely rare weapon. But how did it end up in the hands of a little kid? Looking over the kids again, he noticed that other than Guo Jing, all the other kids were wearing expensive shirts made of leopard skins. But Guo Jing made up for it by having a golden crown-looking ring on top of his head. Obviously the kids were all members of wealthy and influential Mongol families.

“The kid probably stole his father’s favorite knife to play with. Stealing from kings and aristocrats won’t cause too much harm.” Once he made up his mind, he jumped off of his horse and smiled sweetly as he approached the kids.

“Come on everyone, stop fighting. Play nice.” As he was talking, he suddenly flashed into the circle of kids and grabbed the knife. Having devoted an incredible amount of training to capturing weapons with bare hands, only the best martial arts masters could hope to stop him from taking their weapons, never mind a small kid like Guo Jing.

As soon as the dagger was in his hand, Zhu Cong immediately scuttled out of the circle and hopped onto his horse. With a jerk of the reins, he laughingly galloped off and caught up to the rest of his group.

“Well, today wasn’t a total loss; I ended up with this little gem.” He laughed quite heartily at his success.

“Second Brother, you won’t ever get rid of that stealing habit of yours will you?” ‘Smiling Buddha’ Zhang A’Sheng joined in on the laughter.

“What little gem? Let me see it.” ‘Hidden Hero of the Bustling City’ Quan JinFa, being a merchant by trade, was curious. With a flick of his arm, Zhu Cong tossed the dagger over.

A streak of blue shot across the sky in the sunlight; the light from the dagger wavered, looking as if a small rainbow had just materialized, causing everyone present to shout in praise.

“Excellent!” Quan JinFa involuntarily yelled as the dagger flew towards his face, sending a shiver down his spine. He reached out and caught the dagger by the handle. He mumbled endlessly in admiration as he examined the dagger. When his attention moved to the handle, he saw the characters ‘Yang Kang’ carved onto it. “This is a Han name! How did this dagger end up here in Mongolia?” A question shot through his mind. “Yang Kang, Yang Kang? I have never heard of a hero named Yang Kang. If he isn’t a martial arts hero, why would he have such an exceptional weapon?”

“Big Brother! Do you know who Yang Kang is?” He called out.

“Yang Kang?” Ke Zhen’E searched through his memory for a while and shook his head. “I have never heard of him before.”

‘Yang Kang’ was the name that Qiu ChuJi had given to the baby that was still inside of Bao XiRuo. The two fathers had exchanged daggers and that was how Li Ping ended up with the dagger that had ‘Yang Kang’ carved on it. Of course, the ‘Seven Freaks’ did not know of this matter. Of the seven, Ke Zhen’E was the oldest as well as the most knowledgeable. If he did not know, then there was no way that the other six did.

“Qiu ChuJi is searching for Yang TieXin’s widow, could this Yang Kang have something to do with Yang TieXin?” Quan JinFa’s attention to detail made him ask.

“Well, if we find Yang TieXin’s widow, we would still have one-upped that Bull Nose.” Zhu Cong joked. But having searched endlessly and fruitlessly for the past six years, this seemingly remote and completely unrelated lead was something that none of them were willing to let slip by.

“Let’s go back and ask that kid.” Han XiaoYing concluded.

Han BaoJu’s horse was the fastest, so he arrived back where the kids were first, only to discover that the kids were at it again. Tolui and Guo Jing were, once

again, pinned down to the ground. Han BaoJu ordered the kids to break it up, but none of them heeded his words. Getting impatient, he grabbed a couple of kids and threw them off to the side.

“You two dogs come back tomorrow and we’ll fight again!” Dukhsh threatened Tolui, because he was too scared to carry on fighting.

“OK...tomorrow!” Tolui shouted back as Dukhsh led his gang away. He already had plans for what to do; he would go and ask his third brother Ogedai for help as soon as he got back. Of all his brothers, Ogedai was the nicest to him, and strong as well. He would surely help if asked.

“Give it back!” Despite having his face covered with blood from his nose, Guo Jing put his hand out to Zhu Cong.

“Sure, no problem,” Zhu Cong waved the dagger back and forth in front of Guo Jing’s face. “But you have to tell me where you got this dagger.”

“My mom gave it to me.” Guo Jing answered, wiping blood away from his still bleeding nose with a sleeve.

“What’s your dad’s name?” Guo Jing never had a father and was caught speechless by the question. All he could do was shake his head.

“Is your surname Yang?” Quan JinFa asked. Once again, Guo Jing shook his head. Seeing that this kid was rather slow, the ‘Seven Freaks’ were quite disappointed.

“Who’s Yang Kang?” Zhu Cong probed further. Guo Jing still only shook his head.

The ‘Seven Freaks’ had always valued their integrity above all else, so they always kept their word, even to a kid. Zhu Cong handed the dagger back to Guo Jing.

“You can go home now.” Han XiaoYing took out a handkerchief and wiped off the blood from Guo Jing’s face as she tenderly told him. “Don’t fight anymore. You are still small, you can’t beat them yet.”

Afterwards, the seven of them climbed back onto their horses and began to leave. Guo Jing just stood there, watching them ride off to the east.

“Guo Jing, let’s go back.” Tolui suggested.

The ‘Seven Freaks’ were already quite a distance away, but Ke Zhen’E’s hearing was incredibly sensitive. When he heard the name ‘Guo Jing’, his entire body shook violently; he immediately jerked his horse around and rode back to the kids.

“Boy, your surname is Guo? You are a Han and not Mongolian, right?” He anxiously asked.

Guo Jing grunted an assertion, sending Ke Zhen’E’s mind into the clouds with joy. “Who is your mother?” He hurriedly asked.

“Mom is mom.” Guo Jing answered, making Ke Zhen’E scratch his head for a bit. “Can you take me to your mother?”

“My mom’s not here.”

“Sister, you ask him.” Ke Zhen’E suggested, realizing that there was some hostility in Guo Jing’s responses. Han XiaoYing hopped off of her horse and walked up to Guo Jing.

“Where’s your father?” She asked in a warm voice.

“My dad was killed by bad people; when I grow up, I’m going to kill them and avenge my father.”

“What was your father’s name?” Han XiaoYing was so excited that her voice was trembling. But Guo Jing just shook his head.

“Who killed your father?” Ke Zhen’E asked.

“His...his name is Duan TianDe!” Guo Jing could barely contain his anger as he said that name.

Because Li Ping knew that in such a desolate and remote place as the steppe, any moment could bring with it many dangers. She knew that her chances of ever returning to the Central Plains were nearly nonexistent. If something should happen to her suddenly, her son would never know the name of his mortal enemy, and that would not do. She had long ago told her son, over and over again, the name and appearance of Duan TianDe. She was an illiterate farm girl and had always called her husband ‘Xiao-Ge’. She had heard other people call him ‘Brother Guo’ but had never cared about what her husband’s real name was. This was why Guo Jing had only ever known his father to be his ‘dad’ and did not know that he had other names.

‘Duan TianDe’. That name did not come out of Guo Jing’s mouth very loudly, but when the ‘Seven Freaks’ heard it, the shock rendered them speechless. Even if three bolts of lightning suddenly struck beside them on this clear and sunny day it would not have shocked them as much. In the blink of an eye, it felt as if the earth beneath them shook, as if the wind and air around them became colored. Only after a very prolonged silence did Han XiaoYing suddenly let out an ecstatic shout. At the same time, Zhang A’Sheng was beating his fists onto his chest like a mad man. Quan JinFa had thrown his arm tightly around Nan XiRen’s neck and Han BaoJu was doing back flips on his horse’s saddle. Ke Zhen’E reared his head back and laughed crazily, while Zhu Cong was spinning like a top. Seeing them act like this, Tolui and Guo Jing could not decide whether they were funny or just plain crazy. Only after a long time did the ‘Seven Freaks’ finally, slowly, calm down, but their faces were filled with joy.

“Merciful Bodhisattva, thank you, thank you!” Zhang A’Sheng knelt down and prayed.

“Little brother, let’s sit down and talk.” Han XiaoYing said to Guo Jing. Anxious to get back and ask his brother Ogedai for help as well as having a bad feeling about these seven strangers with their strange accents and even stranger behavior, Tolui did not want to stay any longer. Even though these same strangers had just helped them in a fight, Tolui incessantly urged Guo Jing to start heading back.

“I need to go now.” Guo Jing finally relented and began to walk away hand in hand with Tolui.

“Hey...hey! You can’t go now. Let that little friend of yours go back by himself.” Han BaoJu almost panicked and yelled at the top of his lungs.

The two little kids were scared of the man’s ugly complexion and immediately started to run as soon as he began to yell. Han BaoJu chased them and was just about to grab the back of Guo Jing’s neck with his fat hands when Zhu Cong cut him off.

“Third Brother, don’t be so rude.” Zhu Cong lightly parried Han BaoJu’s hand and stopped it in mid-move, much to Han BaoJu’s surprise. Picking up a little speed, Zhu Cong quickly got in front of the two little kids.

“I’m going to do some magic, you guys just watch, ok?” He smiled at the kids as he picked up three stones. Guo Jing and Tolui’s curiosity was immediately piqued and both of them stopped and watched him.

Zhu Cong held his right hand out for all to see and placed the stones in the middle of his hand.

“Gone!” He shouted as he balled his hand into a fist. When he opened his hand again, the stones were gone, shocking the little kids.

“Get in there!” Zhu Cong pointed at the old hat that was on top of his head before taking it off. The stones were sitting right in the middle of the hat. Guo Jing and Tolui let out a loud cheer and applauded with joy.

At this moment, a flock of wild geese flew toward them in a spear formation. This gave Zhu Cong an idea.

“Now we’ll let my Big Brother show you a trick.” He fished out a handkerchief, handed it to Tolui, and pointed at Ke Zhen’E. “Put this blindfold on him.”

“Is it hide and go seek?” Tolui hopefully wondered out loud as he put the blindfold on Ke Zhen’E.

“No. He will shoot a wild goose out of the sky while blindfolded.” Zhu Cong answered as he produced a bow and an arrow.

“How could he? I don’t believe you.” Tolui concluded.

While the conversation was going on, the wild geese flew straight over head. Zhu Cong flicked his arm and tossed the three stones in his hand up at the geese. Because of his powerful hands, the stones shot up and startled the geese, causing the lead goose to honk several times as he readied to lead the formation in a different direction. But Ke Zhen’E had already determined its location, drew his bow to the fullest, and let loose. He hit the goose squarely in the belly and the goose, with the arrow still in it, tumbled down onto the ground.

Tolui and Guo Jing exploded with another cheer. They ran off to retrieve the goose and brought it back to Ke Zhen’E, their young hearts filled with admiration.

“Remember how the eight boys ganged up on you two earlier? Well, if you know some martial arts, then you wouldn’t have to worry about there being more than one of them.” Zhu Cong told the kids.

“We will fight some more tomorrow and I’m going to get my older brother to help.” Tolui told him.

“Get help from your older brother! Hmph, that’s something that useless kids do. I’ll teach you a couple of moves that I guarantee will help you win tomorrow.” Zhu Cong replied.

“You mean the two of us beating the eight of them?” Tolui asked.

“Yes!”

“Yay! Come on, teach me!” Tolui was greatly excited at the prospect of beating Dukhsh.

“How about you, don’t you want to learn too?” Zhu Cong asked him. He’d noticed that Guo Jing was standing to the side, seemingly uninterested.

“Mom told me that I shouldn’t fight others; if I learn how to fight, then my mom will be unhappy.”

“Little chicken!” Han BaoJu lightly berated him.

“If that’s true, why were you in a fight just now?” Zhu Cong asked again.

“Because they started it.”

“So what are you going to do when you see your enemy, Duan TianDe?” Ke Zhen’E asked in a heavy tone.

“I’ll kill him to avenge my father!” Just hearing that name made a fiery glare flash from Guo Jing’s young eyes.

“Your father was an expert in martial arts yet was still killed by him; how could you kill him if you don’t know any martial arts? How can you get your revenge then?” Ke Zhen’E rendered Guo Jing speechless with those questions.

“See? You have to learn some martial arts.” Han XiaoYing concluded for him.

“See that peak over there?” Zhu Cong pointed at a deserted mountain top to his left. “If you want to learn martial arts and get your revenge then come to the top of that mountain tonight at midnight. But you have to come by yourself. Besides this little friend of yours, you can’t let anybody else find out about it. Brave enough to do it; afraid of ghosts?”

Guo Jing was still stupidly standing there, but Tolui was getting impatient.

“Come on, teach me, please!”

Zhu Cong suddenly grabbed his wrist, hooked his left foot behind him, and gently tripped him, sending Tolui onto the ground.

“Why did you trip me?” Tolui angrily demanded once he got back up off the ground.

“That was martial arts, did you learn it?” Zhu Cong smiled as he answered. As it turned out, Tolui was quite smart and understood right away. He mimicked Zhu Cong and showed the move against an imaginary foe.

“Teach me something else.” He said to Zhu Cong. Zhu Cong faked a punch toward Tolui’s face. Tolui dodged to the left, but Zhu Cong’s right fist was waiting there for him. This punch had no force behind it and stopped the moment it touched Tolui’s nose.

“Yay! Teach me something else!” Tolui was ecstatic. Zhu Cong suddenly braced himself and gently bumped his shoulders squarely into the little kid’s stomach; sending him flying off. Quan JinFa jumped up, caught him in mid air, and gently put him back onto the ground.

“Mister, teach me something else!”

“If you master those three moves, most adults won’t be able to beat you, enough is enough.” Zhu Cong smiled and told him before turning towards Guo Jing. “Did you get them?”

Guo Jing was still dumbstruck and not really thinking of anything as he absent mindedly shook his head. When compared to the smart and intelligent Tolui, Guo Jing seemed incredibly stupid and slow to the ‘Seven Freaks’, who were very disappointed at this turn of events. Han XiaoYing let out a long sigh and her eyes reddened.

“I say that we stop wasting energy and just take the mother and son back south and hand them over to Qiu Chuji. As for the competition, let’s just admit defeat.” Quan JinFa observed.

“This kid’s make up is just too hopeless; he’s not the martial art practicing type.” Zhu Cong agreed.

“There isn’t a bit of fight in him; I don’t see how it’s going to work either.” Han BaoJu also agreed and the ‘Seven Freaks’ began discussing the matter amongst themselves in their JiangNan dialects.

“You two can go home now.” Han XiaoYing waved at the two little kids. Tolui grabbed hold of Guo Jing’s hand and they happily skipped off.

Having searched for six long and hard years all over the boundless steppe, the 'Seven Freaks' were joyous beyond description when they finally found Guo Jing. As it turned out, the joy was only temporary; when they discovered that the kid was so dumb that it would be incredibly difficult for him to ever amount to much as a martial artist. They could not help feeling defeated. This set back could only be matched by the one they would experience had they, in fact, never found Guo Jing. Han BaoJu, whip in hand, was relentlessly beating the ground, trying to vent his frustration and nobody could get him to stop. All this time, only the Wood Chopper of the Southern Mountains, Nan XiRen, remained silent.

"Well, what do you think, Fourth Brother?" Ke Zhen'E asked.

"Very good." Nan XiRen replied.

"What's very good?" Zhu Cong inquired.

"The kid's very good," he added.

"Fourth Brother always acts as if speaking costs him money." Han XiaoYing said, letting the frustration get to her. "He will never say a word more than he has to."

"I was also very dumb as a kid." Nan XiRen gently smiled. He was always very quiet and every word that he spoke had already been carefully thought over, meaning that he was rarely wrong.

Hearing him, the other six Freaks found a glimmer of hope and instantly became more confident.

"Right...that's right! Since when have I been smart?" Zhang A'Sheng agreed, looking in Han XiaoYing's direction.

"Let's wait and see if he's got the guts to come tonight." Zhu Cong suggested.

"I say most likely not." Quan JinFa replied. "I'm going to go find where he lives first."

He jumped off of his horse and trailed far behind Tolui and Guo Jing until he saw them walking into their own gers.

That night, the 'Seven Freaks' waited on the deserted mountain top. It was fifteen minutes to ten and the Big Dipper had noticeably changed its position, but Guo Jing was nowhere to be seen.

Han BaoJu sighed, “The ‘Seven Freaks of the South’ never lost to anyone in our lives. But in the end, we lose to that Taoist priest.”

Zhu Cong said, “The QuanZhen Sect is fighting the JurChens in the north and helping the poor Song citizens there. Everything the sect does is chivalrous and admirable. The ‘Seven Masters of QuanZhen Sect’ are great martial arts experts and honorable individuals, Qiu Chuji is even said to be the most exceptional one of the ‘Seven Masters’. Losing to him won’t damage our good name. Furthermore, we are trying to save the lives of survivors of an honorable man, which is a good deed. When people in Wulin ⁱⁱⁱ learn of this, they can only praise us and say: Well done!”

The other six Freaks agreed and felt better.

Looking to the west, dark clouds were gathering on top of each other off on the horizon. But above their heads not a cloud could be seen in the dark blue sky. The winds were swirling around them from the northwest; sometimes it would gust, other times it would be still. In the middle of the sky hung the bright moon, but a faint yellow ring could be discerned around it.

“Looks like there’s going to be a storm tonight.” Han XiaoYing observed. “The kid is not going to come.”

“Then let’s go to him tomorrow morning.” Zhang A’Sheng replied.

“Being a little slow is not a big problem. But if this kid is afraid of the dark... Ay!” Ke Zhen’E sighed and shook his head.

The seven of them were just wandering around when Han BaoJu suddenly spotted something in a bush. “Hey what’s that?” He pointed at three piles of white objects that looked awfully strange in the moon light.

Quan JinFa walked over to investigate only to discover that they were human skulls placed neatly in three piles.

“It must have been those little kids that piled up the skulls like that.” He laughed before suddenly noticing something else. “What...Second Brother, come quickly!”

The sudden change in the tone of his voice was easily noticeable and unsettling for everyone. Other than Ke Zhen’E, the other Freaks made their way over to him.

“Look at this!” Quan JinFa picked up one particular skull and handed it over to Zhu Cong. When Zhu Cong inspected the skull closely, he noticed that on the

dome of the skull there were five holes positioned as though they were made by fingers. He tried with his own hand and the five holes were positioned properly for his fingers. The hole for his thumb was a little bigger than the others, while the hole for his pinky was a little smaller. It seemed as if somebody had carefully carved the holes into the skull to match a particular hand. Obviously it was not a child's toy that the little kids had left here. Zhu Cong's expression changed dramatically. He bent over and picked up two more skulls and discovered that they also had these holes in them.

"Could somebody have made these holes with their fingers?" He wondered. But there had not been anybody in the world with martial arts skills so powerful as to be able to smash holes through bone just using fingers. With this realization, he was rendered silent and awestruck.

"Could it be some man eating beast or monster that lives around here?" Han XiaoYing said, almost yelling.

"That's right, it must be a monster." Han BaoJu concurred.

"But if it is some beast, then why would it or could it put the skulls in such neat piles?" Quan JinFa asked, deep in thought.

"How are they placed?" Ke Zhen'E said, after making his way over to them.

"In a three pyramid formation; every pile consists of nine skulls." Quan JinFa answered.

"Are they stacked in three layers, with five skulls on the bottom layer, three in the middle layer, and one on the top?"

"Yes!" Quan JinFa was shocked. "Big Brother, how did you know that?"

"Go one hundred steps northeast and northwest and tell me what you see!" Ke Zhen'E did not answer his question but instead, anxiously directed them.

His demeanor was one of extreme anxiety, almost bordering panic. This was so different from his normal calm steadiness that the other Freaks did not dare waste one second and in threes, they headed off in the two directions. Soon, Han XiaoYing, who went to the northeast, and Quan JinFa, who went to the northwest, yelled out at the same instant.

"There are skull piles here too!"

“This is a matter of life and death!” Ke Zhen’E literally flew over to the pile of skulls at the northwest and forcefully, but quietly ordered. “Don’t raise your voice, no matter what!”

The three Freaks were quite taken aback by his words and weren’t quite sure what to make of them. Ke Zhen’E quickly made his way to Han XiaoYing’s group to the northeast and told them the same thing.

“Is it monsters or mortal enemies?” Zhang A’Sheng asked, with a hushed voice.

“They are mortal enemies of mine. They are formidable experts and they killed my brother.” By this time the Freaks in the other group had made their way over as well. Hearing his words, all of the Freaks were quite surprised.

The ‘Six Freaks’ knew that Ke Zhen’E’s brother, Ke Pixie had higher skills than Ke Zhen’E and was also a very intelligent and cautious man. His killer must have been a lethal nemesis. The ‘Seven Freaks’ talked about everything with each other and about two years ago they learned of the death of Ke Pixie. But Ke Zhen’E never revealed how his brother died or who was responsible.

Ke Zhen’E picked up a skull and ran his hands over it inspecting it. After finding the holes he took his right hand and tried out the holes with his fingers. “They did it. They did it. They actually mastered it.” He mumbled to himself before turning to the other Freaks. “There are three piles here as well?”

“Yes!” Han XiaoYing answered.

“Are there eight skulls in every pile?” Ke Zhen’E inquired.

“One pile has nine; the other two piles have eight.” Han XiaoYing again answered.

“Go and count the other groups as well.” Han XiaoYing swiftly ran over to the other group and then returned just as quickly. “There’s a pile of seven over there; they are all decapitated heads and the flesh has not decomposed yet.”

“Then that means they will be here very soon.” Ke Zhen’E concluded quietly and handed the skull over to Quan JinFa. “Carefully return this to where it was, and don’t leave any trace of our presence.”

Quan JinFa quickly placed everything back in their original positions and returned to Ke Zhen’E. All of their eyes were upon Ke Zhen’E as they quietly waited for his explanation.

“It’s ‘Copper Corpse’ and ‘Iron Corpse!’” Ke Zhen’E looked as if he was looking up at the sky and his face twitched continuously.

“But aren’t they dead? Can they still be alive?” This news shocked Zhu Cong tremendously.

“I thought they were dead as well. But it turns out that they have been hiding here training their ‘Nine Yin White Bone Claws’,” Ke Zhen’E said. “Brothers, quickly mount your horses and ride south as fast as you can and don’t come back! Wait for me after you have gone five thousand li. Wait for ten days. If I don’t show up on the tenth day, then you need not wait any longer.”

“What are you saying Big Brother?” Han XiaoYing anxiously asked. “We have all tasted each other’s blood when we swore to live and die together! Why are you telling us to leave now?”

“Go! Leave!” Ke Zhen’E repeatedly waved his hand. “You don’t have any time to waste!”

“What do you take us for; a bunch of heartless bastards?” Han BaoJu angrily rebuked.

“If the seven of us lose, then we’ll just end our lives together. That’s what we have always said.” Zhang A’Sheng said, voicing his objection. “Since when have we ever run away?”

“These two possess incredible martial skills. Now that they’ve mastered the ‘Nine Yin White Bone Claws’, the seven of us are definitely no match for them. Why stay here and waste your life for no reason?” Ke Zhen’E protested.

The other Freaks knew how proud Ke Zhen’E was and that he would never admit defeat. Even when facing a master like Qiu ChuJi he would still throw caution to the winds and fight with abandon. To hear him talk about these two people like this, it could be inferred that their power was something beyond comprehension.

“In that case, let’s leave together!” Quan JinFa proposed.

“They condemned me to a life of suffering; but that I can deal with.” Ke Zhen’E coldly replied. “However, I have to avenge what they did to my brother!”

“Share the blessings, share the hardships!” Nan XiRen declared. He never says much, but he need say nothing more.

Ke Zhen'E thought about it. He knew that his sworn brothers and sister were people who valued honor and would never consider running to save their own lives. The words he just said were based on his worry for their lives and he now realized that they bordered on being offensive to them. With this thought, he sighed. "Alright, if that's the case, then please be careful," he said. "'Copper Corpse' is a man, 'Iron Corpse' is a woman and they are husband and wife. They are called the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. About two years ago, the two of them were just starting to train the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws'. They killed a lot of innocent people. My brother was invited to join a posse against them, so he sent someone to inform and invite me to join them as well. However, at that time the seven of us were in ShanDong and HeBei Provinces looking for Li Ping. We'd just found some clues about her whereabouts. It seems that some years back someone saw a military commander and a pregnant woman in man's clothes shouting and screaming in the streets. That woman was seemingly mad and shouted that she wanted to kill that commander for killing her husband. They were on their way north, so it must have been Li Ping and Duan TianDe. I couldn't just leave and join the posse, especially since we'd finally found some clues about where Li Ping went. When we were up north, we lost track of Li Ping and Duan TianDe. It was years later before we found out that Li Ping was in Mongolia and had given birth to Guo Jing. Last year in the spring, a messenger came to tell me that my brother had been killed in the posse against the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. It was also that messenger who informed who the 'Twin Killers' were and where they came from and what styles of martial arts they practiced. I knew that I would be unable to avenge my brother then and decided not to tell you and we continued our search for Guo Jing."

Ke Zhen'E looked very serious now and said, "What all of you need to watch out for is those claws of theirs. Sixth Brother, go one hundred steps to the south and see if there's a coffin there."

Quan JinFa, as quickly as he could, counted his steps. When he made it to one hundred, he did not spot a coffin. But upon closer inspection, he suddenly noticed that there was a corner of a stone slab protruding out of the ground. He pulled on it, but the stone slab did not budge. So he turned around and waved his arms; soon the other 'Freaks' joined him. Zhang A'Sheng and Han BaoJu both got down and, together, could barely lift the stone slab. In the moonlight, they were able to see that there was a grave hidden beneath the stone slab. In the grave lay two bodies, both of them dressed in Mongolian attire.

"Those two monsters will come soon and use these corpses for practice." Ke Zhen'E hopped into the grave. "I'll hide here and ambush them. You hide yourselves around here and make sure that they don't find you. Once you hear that I have began fighting with them, attack at once and try to catch them off guard. Please don't hold anything back. This type of ambush might not be

righteous, but our foe is too powerful this time. Ambush is the only way; otherwise, none of us may make it out of this alive.”

The other six ‘Freaks’ listened intently to his every word.

“They are also extremely attentive and intelligent. They will spot even the slightest trace of disturbance from far away.” Ke Zhen’E continued. “Put the stone slab back and just leave a small slit for me.”

The ‘Six Freaks’ nodded and gently placed the slab back where it had been. Afterwards, they grabbed their weapons and hid inside bushes and behind trees in the area immediately surrounding the grave.

Seeing Ke Zhen’E worry like she had never seen before, Han XiaoYing was worried as well as curious. When she looked for a hiding spot she made sure to find one close to Zhu Cong.

“Who are ‘Copper Corpse’ and ‘Iron Corpse’?” She asked him as quietly as she could.

Zhu Cong answered, “Two years ago, Master Ke Pixie sent a messenger to contact Big Brother. Big Brother was afraid the news would leak out and asked me to go with him to talk to that messenger. He also wanted my opinion as to whether that messenger was real or was trying to deceive him. According to that messenger, ‘Copper Corpse’ and ‘Iron Corpse’ are disciples of the ‘Master of the Peach Blossom Island’ in the Eastern Sea...”

Han XiaoYing softly interrupted, “Disciples of Peach Blossom Island? That makes them people from ZheJiang Province, just like us.”

Zhu Cong nodded and said, “Yes, it is said that they were disowned by the ‘Master of the Peach Blossom Island’. They are highly skilled and very vicious; they are also very secretive and cautious. After they killed Ke Pixie and some others in the posse, they suddenly disappeared. Everyone thought that they’d paid for their crimes and were killed somehow. Little did we know that they were hiding here in Mongolia.”

“What are their real names?” Han XiaoYing asked.

“‘Copper Corpse’ is a man; his name is Chen XuanFeng. He has a burnt yellow complexion like copper, and never showed a bit of emotion on his face, like a corpse. That’s why everyone referred to him as ‘Copper Corpse’.”

“So does that woman, ‘Iron Corpse’, have a dark complexion?”

“Yes, her surname is Mei, full name Mei ChaoFeng.”

“Big Brother said that they were training something called the ‘Nine Yin White Bone Claws’. What kind of martial art is that?”

“I haven’t heard of it either.”

Han XiaoYing looked over at a pile of skulls near her and saw that top skull was positioned in such a way that the holes where the eyes were faced directly at her, as if it was staring at her. She shuddered involuntarily and turned away, not daring to take another look.

“How come Big Brother never brought this up?” She asked. “Could it be...”

She had not finished when Zhu Cong suddenly covered her mouth with his left hand and pointed to the bottom of the hill with his right hand. Han XiaoYing followed his finger and looked out from behind the bush. In the moonlight near the horizon, a faint black shadow could be seen quickly approaching at incredible speed.

“I should be ashamed!” Han XiaoYing reprimanded herself. “I was too busy talking to Second Brother and did not watch for the enemy.”

In a blink of an eye, the black shadow had made it to the foot of the hill. By now they could discern that it was actually two figures, which was why it looked so broad from afar.

“The ‘Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’ truly do have a bizarre martial arts.” The ‘Six Freaks’ thought to themselves. “Running at that speed yet they were still able to stick together so closely to each other; it really is as if they are inseparable!”

The six of them held their breath and cowered even lower, quietly waiting for them to come up the hill. Zhu Cong clutched tightly to his pressure point hitting fan. Han XiaoYing quietly buried the blade of her sword in the dirt so as to avoid giving herself away because of reflections off the blade; nevertheless, her right hand held a tight grip on the handle.

The sounds of sand and rocks being kicked could be heard as feet traveled up the hill. Each and everyone’s hearts pounded with every step and each moment seemed to last an eternity. By this time, the northwest wind had picked up as well. The dark clouds to the west looked like individual mountain tops as they came rolling relentlessly in.

A few moments later, the sound of footsteps ceased. On the open space, on the top of the hill, two silhouettes could be seen. The first, immobile, with a leather hat on its head, looked like a Mongol; the second, with long hair floating with the wind, was visibly a woman.

“Here are ‘Copper Corpse’ and ‘Iron Corpse’,” thought Han XiaoYing. “Let’s see how they train themselves.” They saw the woman slowly move around the man, and heard her joints crack quietly. Then she accelerated and the crackling became drum-like; increasingly loud and closer together.

“Is her internal strength truly that strong?” Han XiaoYing wondered. “It’s not surprising that Older Brother acts so prudently!” The woman moved her hands back and forth and, each time, the joints in her arms crackled. Her long hair was streaming nearly horizontally from the speed, and it gave her a terrifying presence.

Han XiaoYing felt a chill in her heart and the hairs began to bristle on her body. Suddenly, the woman raised her right palm and struck the man’s chest with her left palm.

“This is strange”, the ‘Six Freaks’ thought, “Could it be that her husband’s body is capable of resisting her palm strokes?” The man fell backwards, but she had already sped behind him and hit his back. Going back and forth at high-speed, she hit him with eight palm strokes, each time quicker, and each time more powerful. The man didn’t make a sound. After the ninth stroke, she suddenly leaped very high, then, coming down like an arrow, raised the man’s leather hat and planted the five fingers of her right hand in his head!

Han XiaoYing fought back a scream. The woman dropped to her feet and exploded with laughter. The man, who had collapsed on the ground, didn’t move. She stretched her hand, spotted with blood and brain matter, and examined it in the moonlight still laughing. She turned her head, and Han XiaoYing saw that her face, although a little dark skinned, was rather pretty and she seemed to be about forty years old.

The ‘Six Freaks’ now understood that the man was not her husband, but had been captured as a living target for the purpose of her practice. The woman must be ‘Iron Corpse’, Mei ChaoFeng.

She stopped laughing, stretched out her hands and tore at the dead man’s clothing. In the north, where the weather was extremely cold, everyone wore thick leather coats. Yet she tore these very resistant clothes as if they were paper, without any effort. Then she plunged her hand into the poor wretch’s chest and withdrew the internal organs one by one, which she examined attentively in the moonlight. Afterwards she threw them on the ground. Even

from a distance, the six of them could see that all the organs, heart, lungs, liver, spleen, had been completely destroyed. They now understood the intent of this practice: she had hit the body of this man with nine palm strokes and had succeeded in smashing the internal organs without breaking the bones of the skeleton. By examining the damaged internal organs, she could see the progression of her strength.

Very angry, Han XiaoYing wanted to attack immediately. She raised her sword ready to attack, but Zhu Cong silently restrained her.

“For the moment,” the ‘Magical Hands Scholar’ thought, “‘Iron Corpse’ is alone. Although she seems dangerous, the seven of us should be able to make an end of her. If we get rid of her first, it will be easier to take care of ‘Copper Corpse’ later. We would be absolutely incapable of facing the two of them at the same time...But ‘Copper Corpse’ might be hidden, ready to fall on us unexpectedly. Older Brother knows well the habits of these two monsters; it’s better to follow his instructions and wait for him to launch the first attack...”

After inspecting the internal organs, Mei ChaoFeng seemed satisfied. With a smile on her lips, she sat down cross-legged facing the moon, and began to practice the regulation of breathing. With her back turned to Han XiaoYing and Zhu Cong, they could see her shoulders rising and falling as she inhaled and exhaled.

“If I use the stroke ‘The Lightning Illuminates the Big Sky,’” Han XiaoYing considered, “I am nearly certain I’ll be able to pierce her right through. But if I miss my stroke, our entire plan will be compromised!”

She was unable to decide what to do and her body trembled.

Zhu Cong didn’t dare move either; he felt a trickling sensation down his back as he broke out in a cold sweat. Raising his eyes, he noticed that the black clouds coming from the west had covered half the sky, like a sheet of rice paper that someone had spilled ink on. Inside the dark clouds lightning flashed, increasing the anguish and fear in the hearts of the ‘Six Freaks’. The thunder roared dully, as if it was suppressed by the thickness of the clouds.

After practicing the breathing exercises for a period of time, Mei ChaoFeng arose; then she dragged the dead man behind her towards the grave where Ke Zhen’E was hidden. She bent down to raise the stone slab.

The ‘Six Freaks’ tightened their grip on their weapons, ready to attack her as soon as the slab was removed.

Mei ChaoFeng, hearing a rustle of leaves that didn't seem caused by the wind, turned her head suddenly and saw a human shape at the top of a tree. Releasing a long scream, she leaped in that direction.

The man hidden in the tree was Han BaoJu. Taking advantage of his small size, he had hidden himself perfectly in the foliage, but, as he got ready to jump, he made a slight move which alerted Mei ChaoFeng. Her leap at him came with irresistible force! Han BaoJu delivered a stroke "The Black Dragon Inhales Water", slashing down with his whip at Mei ChaoFeng's wrist. The woman, contrary to all expectations, did not try to avoid the stroke, but instead seized the tip of the whip. Han BaoJu, who was very strong, pulled her quickly toward him. This was to her benefit since it brought her nearer and she counterattacked with a lightning palm.

Han BaoJu felt the power of that palm strike arriving and he knew he wouldn't be able to resist it. He let go of his whip and somersaulted down from the tree. Meanwhile, 'Iron Corpse' won't let him escape and followed after him with the five fingers of her claw bearing down upon his back. Han BaoJu seemingly felt an icy breath on the nape of his neck and he immediately threw his body forward to avoid the attack. At the same time, Nan XiRen and Quan JinFa were letting loose a torrent of projectiles at their enemy from underneath the tree.

A 'Piercing Bone' awl came from the first and a dart (fei biao) hidden in the sleeve from the second. She swept them away with a flick of her left hand, while her right hand tore off a piece of clothing from the back of Han BaoJu. The small man touched the ground with his left foot and rebounded away immediately. However Mei ChaoFeng, as agile as wind, was already in front of him.

"Who are you?" She shouted. "What did you come here to do?"

At the same time, she planted ten fingers in his shoulders. Han BaoJu felt the lightning flash of pain, as if ten iron awls had suddenly pierced his flesh. He sent a kick toward 'Iron Corpse's' stomach that she avoided while delivering a stroke with her right hand, nearly breaking his ankle. Barely escaping from her, he threw himself to the ground and rolled to clear himself.

As Mei ChaoFeng was about to trample him, a heavy black rod struck her foot; it was Nan XiRen, the 'Wood Chopper of the Southern Mountains'.

Abandoning Han BaoJu, Mei ChaoFeng quickly moved back to avoid the rod. In an instant, she found herself surrounded by enemies. A scholarly looking man, holding an iron fan, tried to hit the vital points on her meridians; while a girl handling a sword attacked from the right.

A big strong paunchy man armed with a large knife and a small skinny fellow with a weird weapon came from her left; facing her was a vigorous looking peasant-type moving his iron rod. The sound of footsteps behind her had come from the man with the whip. All these people were completely unknown to her, yet they seemed to be eminent experts in martial arts.

“They are too numerous,” Mei ChaoFeng thought, “It will be necessary to use strong methods and eliminate some of them without delay. No matter what their names or their origins...Aside from my beloved master and my bastard of a husband, I will kill anyone in this lowly world!”

She jumped, all claw-like fingers extended, at Han XiaoYing. Seeing the power of this attack, Zhu Cong, fearing for her, jumped forward pointing his iron fan at her vital point ‘Sinuous Pond’ situated in the hollow of her elbow. However, it didn’t seem to bother her. She stretched out her right hand while Han XiaoYing defended herself with the stroke “White Mist on the Stream”, with the intention of hitting her arm. But ‘Iron Corpse’ turned her wrist, trying to catch the sword with her bare hand, as if she didn’t fear the blade. Han XiaoYing was afraid of this and moved back. At this moment, the fan of the Scholar accurately hit her ‘Sinuous Pond’ accupoint. This is a very important vital point on the human body and Mei’s arm should have been paralyzed immediately. Zhu Cong was delighted at having succeeded with his stroke until he saw her arm suddenly move down and her dangerous nails were practically on his head! He moved back at the last moment and escaped death by a hair!

“Doesn’t she have any vital points?” he wondered, surprised and afraid. Han BaoJu had collected his whip by now, and the ‘Six Freaks’, moving their weapons, surrounded Mei ChaoFeng. However, she didn’t seem at all impressed. Her bare hands, with which she tried to seize their weapons, appeared as efficient as claws made out of steel. The ‘Freaks’ were particularly worried since it seemed that their adversary’s nickname was not exaggerated. ‘Iron Corpse’ appeared to have, effectively, a body of iron! She had just received two strokes on the back, inflicted by the weighing scales of Quan JinFa, without apparently causing her any injury. They knew that she had succeeded in pushing the resistance of her body to an extreme. Apart the sharpened tip of Zhang A’Sheng’s large knife and the sword of Han XiaoYing, she seemed to not fear any of the other weapons. She didn’t even try to avoid them! Her only desire was to attack.

She increased speed and seized Quan JinFa’s arm who was too slow trying to escape. The other five moved quickly, but were too late; Mei ChaoFeng, with a violent stroke, pulled a piece of flesh from his arm.

“All those that practice the iron body technique,” Zhu Cong thought, “Must possess a nodal practice location which is impossible for them to protect using

this technique. This point is particularly vulnerable and a small touch is sufficient to severely wound or kill them...Where could this shrew's nodal location be?" He bounded to the right, to the left, moving the fan, trying successively to touch the meridian point 'Meeting of the Hundred' on the top of the head, the point 'Screen of the Spring' on the throat, then the point 'Tomb of the Mind' in the hollow of the navel, followed by the point 'Hollow of the Middle' on her back...He tried about ten points, all the while thinking that, if she takes particular care to defend a point...that will be her nodal location.

The significance of his back and forth movements didn't escape Mei ChaoFeng. "Lowly 'Scholar'," she shouted, "My technique is perfect to the point that I don't have a nodal location!"

She struck and seized Zhu Cong's wrist. Although surprised, this man fortunately had a quick mind and agile hands. Before Mei ChaoFeng could plant her nails in his flesh, he had pulled back his wrist and slipped his fan into his adversary's hand while whispering, "Careful, there's poison on the fan!"

Suddenly feeling a hard object in her hand, Mei ChaoFeng, speechless and afraid of the poison, threw the fan to the ground.

Zhu Cong used this opportunity to escape and move several steps back. He looked at his hand, the back of which showed five bloody grooves, and felt a flush of cold sweat. The fight had only lasted a short time and not only had the Freaks not finished her off, but three of their numbers were already wounded. If 'Copper Corpse' arrived, they would all lose their lives. Zhang A'Sheng, Han BaoJu and Quan JinFa were already quite tired and covered with sweat. Only Nan XiRen, whose Nei Gong^{iv} was more powerful, and Han XiaoYing, lighter body, didn't seem tired; whereas their enemy became more and more violent. Zhu Cong suddenly saw, in the pallid gleam of the moon, the three heaps of skulls on the left. He shivered, and then had an idea; he hurried towards the hole where Ke Zhen'E was hidden, while shouting. "Run for your lives!" The other understood and moved back while still fighting.

"Bastard children from nowhere," Mei ChaoFeng sneered, "You wanted to trap me here, but now it is too late to run away!" She rushed after them. Nan XiRen, Quan JinFa and Han XiaoYing did their best to engage her, while the three others united their strength to raise the slab of stone. It was just in time, because Mei ChaoFeng had seized Nan XiRen's iron rod and was moving her claws in direction of his eyes.

"Come quickly and help us", Zhu Cong shouted. He pointed his finger upward and made gestures with his other hand, as if calling for the help of someone hidden on the heights. Surprised, Mei ChaoFeng couldn't stop herself from

raising her eyes; but all she saw were the low clouds veiling half the moon... There was no one up there!

“Seven steps right!” Zhu Cong shouted. At these words, Ke Zhen’E threw six poisoned projectiles seven steps to his right, two at head height, two to the middle and two below, while bounding out of the hole. The other Freaks attacked from all sides at the same time. Mei ChaoFeng let out a shriek of pain; two projectiles had reached her eyes! Fortunately for her, her agility allowed her to move her head back immediately, so that the invisible projectiles didn’t penetrate into her brain, but she had definitely been blinded!

Feeling pain and rage, she struck downward with her two palms; but Ke Zhen’E had already escaped to one side. They heard two thuds, because her palms had hit a rock. Made even more furious, she sent out a kick that struck the slab and made it fly off. The ‘Seven Freaks’, afraid of the strength of her attacks, remained carefully to the side.

Since she couldn’t see them any longer, she thrashed out with her senses, striking, scratching, and kicking. She looked like a furious tiger, or a demon, breaking everything in her path, while raising clouds of dust, breaking the branches of the trees, all without hurting any of her enemies, who were sufficiently far away, holding their breath. Later, her vision became completely dark, and she knew that the poison had taken effect. “Who did this?” she said with a terrifying voice. “Say it quickly, so that I die knowing who killed me...”

Zhu Cong made a gesture in direction of Ke Zhen’E to ask him to be quiet and to let Mei ChaoFeng die in ignorance. Then he remembered that his Older Brother was blind, how could he have seen his gesture?

“Mei ChaoFeng.” Ke Zhen’E said with an icy voice, “Do you remember ‘Divine Dragon Soaring Through the Sky,’ Ke Pixie, and ‘Bat Soaring Through the Heavens,’ Ke Zhen’E?”

Mei ChaoFeng responded with a thunderous and terrifying laugh.

“So Old Bastard, you didn’t die! You’re the one that used the poisonous projectiles, aren’t you? Have you come to avenge ‘Divine Dragon Soaring Through the Sky’s’ death?”

Ke Zhen’E replied, “Precisely! Since you haven’t died yet...that suits me well!”

Mei ChaoFeng sighed and stayed silent.

The ‘Seven Freaks’ remained on guard. At that moment, the moon was nearly hidden by the dark clouds, and everyone felt the insidious and penetrating cold. Mei ChaoFeng stood immobile like a stone statue, her hands alongside her body, and the moon light reflecting off her sharp nails. The strong wind that blew from behind her raised her long hair. Han XiaoYing, who was in front of her, saw blood oozing from her eyes.

Suddenly, Zhu Cong and Quan JinFa shouted at the same time, “She attacks, Older Brother!”

As their voices resounded again, Ke Zhen’E sensed a hit was about to arrive on his chest. He bounded into the air by delivering a heavy stroke to the ground with his staff, and landed on top of a tree that was behind him. The blow delivered by ‘Iron Corpse’ missed its target; instead, she planted her ten fingers in the trunk of the tree. The Six Freak’s faces were pale with terror. Had Ke Zhen’E lingered for only one second, the nails would be planted in his body. How would he have been able to escape alive?

Having missed her adversary, Mei ChaoFeng released a sudden long and weird howl, very piercing, but with a power that carried far.

“How unfortunate”, Zhu Cong thought, “She calls her husband ‘Copper Corpse’ for help.” Quickly, he shouted, “It is time to finish her!”

He mobilized all his energy into his arm and heavily hit Mei ChaoFeng’s back, while Zhang A’Sheng raised a big stone which he brought down at her head.

‘Iron Corpse’, who had just lost her vision, didn’t yet know how to protect herself by using her hearing, like Ke Zhen’E. The big stone, while coming down, made a noise that she could hear and she quickly avoided it. But she could not avoid Zhu Cong’s stroke. Even though she had trained her body for extreme resistance to accupoint strikes, the ‘Scholar’ not only had quick hands but also strong ones; she felt a stabbing pain in her back.

Zhu Cong wanted to take advantage of his position and continued to hit her, but Mei ChaoFeng counter-attacked with a slash of her claws, and he moved back.

Just as the other Freaks got ready to step in, they heard a long howl coming from far away. It had the same tonal quality that Mei ChaoFeng had used a while ago, and it gave them the creeps. Shortly, a second howl was heard, but this time a lot nearer.

“That person moves quickly,” the ‘Seven Freaks’ thought and alarmed.

“Be careful, that is ‘Copper Corpse’!” Ke Zhen’E shouted.

Han XiaoYing ran over and looked down the hill; she saw a shadow approaching at a quick pace, howling.

Mei ChaoFeng had adopted a defensive stance, no longer attacking. She concentrated her internal energy to arrest the progress of the poison in her body, while waiting for her husband's arrival to help destroy the enemy.

Zhu Cong made a sign to Quan JinFa and the two men hid themselves in the brush. 'Iron Corpse' was dangerous by herself, but from the speed of 'Copper Corpse', Zhu Cong suspected that he could be even stronger than his wife. It was obviously impossible to defeat them when they were together. On the other hand, a chance existed if they took them by ruse.

Suddenly, Han XiaoYing uttered a shriek of surprise; she saw, in front of the running shadow, another smaller silhouette that was also climbing the hill. This silhouette moved more slowly, and, because it was small, no one had seen it before. She watched more attentively and saw that it was a child, Guo Jing certainly. Surprised and delighted, she hastened to meet him.

She was not very far from him and the downward slope was easy to descend, but 'Copper Corpse', a remarkable expert in lightness kung fu, was gaining on him quickly. Han XiaoYing hesitated: "I am not skilled enough to face 'Copper Corpse' ...But the child is going to fall into his hands, how can I not help?" She accelerated and shouted, "Quickly, child, run faster!"

Seeing her, Guo Jing uttered a yell of joy, unconscious of the imminent danger that threatened him.

For years, Zhang A'Sheng had been secretly in love with Han XiaoYing, but never dared express his feelings towards her. Seeing her running into terrifying danger, he feared for her safety and sprang forward to catch up and protect her.

On top of the hill, the other Freaks had stopped attacking Mei ChaoFeng and observed the slope of the hill, keeping their invisible projectiles concealed, ready to intervene.

In the blink of an eye, Han XiaoYing reached Guo Jing; she took his small hand and turned on her heels to run back with him. They had hardly started, when she felt Guo Jing's hand slip from her grip. The child uttered a loud scream; Chen XuanFeng had grabbed him from behind. Han XiaoYing turned around with an agile move and, using the sword stroke "The Phoenix Nods its Head", fainted towards the enemy's left armpit; then, moving to the side, raised the tip of the sword for a quick and precise thrust, aimed at his eyes. It was the very essence of the sophisticated technique of 'The Sword of the Yue Maiden'.

Chen XuanFeng took the child under his left arm, parried the stroke with his right, deflecting the blade. He followed with the palm stroke ‘To Push the Skiff while Following the Current’. The young woman retracted her weapon and moved away. But the arm of Chen XuanFeng suddenly seemed to lengthen by half a foot. Han XiaoYing who originally had the impression that she was outside of his range, she was reached and struck on the shoulder. She fell to the ground.

This exchange took place in a flash. The merciless ‘Copper Corpse’ followed with a stroke of his claws directly at the top of Han XiaoYing’s head. The ‘Nine Yin White Bone Claws’ was a dangerous and cruel martial art technique in which the practitioner destroyed his or her opponent’s flesh and broke bones. The stroke could not fail to penetrate the skull of the young woman. Zhang A’Sheng was some steps away and understood the danger; without thinking about his own safety, he threw himself on top of her, protecting her with his body. The claw fell, and the five fingers of ‘Copper Corpse’ penetrated the ‘Smiling Buddha’s’ back. Zhang A’Sheng let out a terrifying howl and tried to reach his enemy’s chest with his large knife. Chen XuanFeng defended against it, causing the weapon to drop. ‘Copper Corpse’ returned with another palm against Zhang A’Sheng as he lay on the ground. Frightened, the other Freaks shouted as they hurried to their rescue.

“My ‘Shrew’,” shouted Chen XuanFeng, “What happened here?”

“They destroyed my eyes!” Mei ChaoFeng replied with anger while leaning against a tree. “If you let one of them escape, my ‘Bastard’ husband, you will deal with me!”

“No worries, my ‘Shrew’,” Chen XuanFeng shouted, “Not one will escape alive. You...Are you hurt? Don’t move...”

‘Copper Corpse’ slammed down his hand again at the head of Han XiaoYing. Han XiaoYing used the move “A Lazy Dunce Makes a Somersault”, and she escaped rolling.

“Do you believe you will be able to escape me?” mocked Chen XuanFeng, raising his left hand.

Zhang A’Sheng, severely wounded and confused, saw that his beloved was in danger of being killed. Mobilizing every last bit of strength, he sent a kick toward the enemy’s hand. Chen XuanFeng planted his fingers in Zhang A’Sheng’s leg. Zhang A’Sheng, goaded by the pain, straightened up and wrapped his arms around his aggressor. Chen XuanFeng caught him by the neck, wanting to throw him far away, but the ‘Smiling Buddha’, fearing still that he would hurt Han XiaoYing, stubbornly refused to release him. ‘Copper

Corpse' gave him a violent blow to the head that stunned him. The butcher fainted, and his grip relaxed.

The intervention of Zhang A'Sheng had given the young woman enough time for her to jump to her feet and take the fight to Chen XuanFeng. She didn't dare approach him closely and was content to whirl around the enemy using her lightness technique.

"Fifth Brother," she shouted, "How do you feel?" She had made two whirls round Chen XuanFeng, when the others arrived and joined in. Zhu Cong and Quan JinFa immediately threw their invisible projectiles.

'Copper Corpse' was surprised to see so many enemies of this strength. "We are in the middle of the deserted steppe," he thought, "Where did these expert fighters come from?"

"My 'Shrew'," he shouted, "These skilled people, who are they?"

"They're the members of the 'Bat Soaring Through the Heaven's' group. The leader is the brother of 'Divine Dragon Soaring through the Sky'," replied Mei ChaoFeng.

"Good, a group of bastards we've never met. Never mind, we will kill them anyway!" Fearful of his wife's injury, he shouted, "And you my 'Shrew', are you seriously wounded? Tell me at least that it doesn't threaten your life?"

"Hurry up and slaughter them", Mei ChaoFeng shouted furiously. "I am not dead yet..."

Seeing his wife leaning on the tree and not coming to lend him assistance, Chen XuanFeng understood then that, in spite of her usual stubbornness, she was seriously injured. Worried, he hoped to eliminate the enemy as soon as possible and take care of her. At this moment, 'Five Freaks' were surrounding him; only Ke Zhen'E remained aside ready to intervene at any time.

Chen XuanFeng threw Guo Jing to the ground and sent a punch in the direction of Quan JinFa. Quan JinFa, worried about the child, ducked to avoid the stroke and used this chance to snatch up Guo Jing. A somersault got them out of the enemy's range. This movement, named "The Mischievous Cat Catches the Mouse", is used to avoid and save at the same time. It had been executed with agility and precision. Even Chen XuanFeng was in awe of his move.

'Copper Corpse' was cruel by nature; the stronger his adversaries were, the more he wanted to make them die with atrocious suffering. Because they had injured his beloved wife he wanted it even more. The 'Twin Killers of the Dark

Winds' had, for a long time, trained in two dangerous techniques; the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws' and the 'Heart Destroying Palm'. He had now mastered them to eight or nine tenths of their power. With a terrifying howl, he attacked his enemies without worrying about his own safety, attacking with deadly strokes every time.

The five knew that their lives were at stake at this precise moment and didn't take his attacks lightly. They mobilized all their strength to defend themselves. But they could not approach the enemy too closely since he was so dangerous.

Han BaoJu decided to attack, using the technique 'Whip at the Even Soil', rolling on the ground and delivering whip strokes from all sides at Chen XuanFeng's legs. Chen XuanFeng, troubled by this unexpected attack, received a stroke on the back from Nan XiRen's stick that made him utter a scream of pain. He turned around and stretched his claws towards the 'Wood Chopper'.

Nan XiRen didn't have the time to retract his stick for defense because he sensed the claws coming at him. He fell backwards to escape. Then he heard popping sounds coming from the joints of 'Copper Corpse', whose arm suddenly stretched out an extra several inches. His hand was against the 'Wood Chopper's forehead. In a fight between experts, the murderous strokes were often avoided by one or two inches. Nan XiRen had thought that the extension of his adversary's arm had reached its extreme, yet it had stretched still farther! How would the 'Wood Chopper' escape this stroke? He soon felt the tips of Chen XuanFeng's nails on his forehead...

In panic, he raised his left arm and seized the enemy's wrist with a 'Catch and Control' technique, trying to block it. At that moment, Zhu Cong jumped on the back of 'Copper Corpse' and jammed his forearm onto the adversary's throat in order to strangle him. By doing that, he fully exposed his own chest, but to save the life of his sworn brother, he didn't worry about breaking the elementary precautionary rules of fighting.

At this moment, when the lives of the fighters were held by a thread, thunder sounded and the clouds covered the moon completely. It was total darkness; a person couldn't even see the fingers of his own hands and a heavy rain started to fall.

They heard the sound of two crunches and a plunk. Chen XuanFeng had just broken the left arm of Nan XiRen and, at the same time, had given a stroke from his elbow to Zhu Cong's chest. Zhu Cong felt a terrible pain that forced him to stop the pressure on his enemy's neck and fall backwards. 'Copper Corpse', close to suffocating, stood to one side catching his breath.

“Move back everyone,” Han BaoJu shouted in the blackness. “Seventh Sister, how do you feel?”

“Silence!” replied Han XiaoYing while moving several steps.

Astonished by the sounds of the movements made by his friends, Ke Zhen'E asked, “Second Brother, what's happened?”

“The darkness is total,” Quan JinFa answered, “No one can see anything!”

“So the Heavens come to help us,” Ke Zhen'E thought and felt a little delighted.

The ‘Seven Freaks’, three of whom were severely injured, were thinking that they had just lost the first part; but now dark clouds had covered the sky and it was raining heavily. Each of them kept their breathing silent and no one dared move. The extremely fine hearing of Ke Zhen'E allowed him to recognize that the breathless man that was standing seven or eight steps away from him, on the left, was not one of his brothers. He immediately threw six poisoned projectiles in that direction.

Chen XuanFeng sensed the arrival of the invisible projectiles and jumped into air. He was indeed very strong and because of it, he succeeded in avoiding all six while at the same time, determined their source. Without making a sound, he suddenly leapt, all claws extended, toward Ke Zhen'E. Ke Zhen'E heard him, briskly moved to the side, and attacked with a stroke from his staff. For him, there was no difference between day and night. Since Chen XuanFeng couldn't see anything, his power was greatly impaired. The two men were now on an equal footing. After about ten exchanges, ‘Copper Corpse’ had the impression that his enemy was attacking from all directions, without knowing for sure if his own strokes were directed in the proper direction. It was like living in a nightmare.

Slowly probing around, Han BaoJu, Han XiaoYing and Quan JinFa were trying to help their injured brothers. The fate of Ke Zhen'E also preoccupied them, but they weren't able to help him in this darkness. Amid the sound of the rain, they heard the hisses produced by the hands of Chen XuanFeng and the staff of Ke Zhen'E. The two fighters had hardly exchanged thirty strokes, but, to the other Freaks, it seemed to last for an eternity. Suddenly, they heard two strokes, and ‘Copper Corpse’ started screaming in pain; he had been struck by the staff. The Freaks were delighted just as lightning flashed in the sky, illuminating the summit of the hill.

“Watch out, Older Brother!” Quan JinFa shouted.

Chen XuanFeng had benefited from this instant of vision to orient himself. He advanced, concentrating his energy in his left shoulder and suffered, without flinching, the staff's strokes. He then seized it with his left hand and his right hand grabbed at the blind man's chest. Ke Zhen'E, surprised, released his staff and leaped backwards. 'Copper Corpse' wasn't going to let such a great opportunity pass; the claw that had already torn his adversary's garment, turned suddenly into a fist. Without a single movement of his body, Chen XuanFeng's arm stretched and delivered a stroke loaded with internal energy, to the blind man's chest and he was propelled violently backward. At the same time, he threw the blind man's staff like a javelin. All these gestures were executed with smooth continuity; 'Copper Corpse' was very proud of it and issued a long howl of joy, accompanied by thunderous growls.

During another lightning flash that illuminated the area briefly, Han BaoJu saw the staff flying towards his Older Brother. Conscious of the danger, he lashed his 'Golden Dragon Whip', causing it to wrap around the projectile and make it fall.

"Now," Chen XuanFeng exclaimed, running towards him, "I'm going to take your dog life!" Carried away by his impetus, he stumbled on something that felt like a body; he bent over and grabbed it. It was a small boy, Guo Jing.

"Let me go!" the child shouted.

Then a new lightning flash illuminated the area. Guo Jing saw the face of the man that held him in air, a sallow face with a menacing look. He was so frightened that, instinctively, he drew his dagger and plunged it into the man's body, right in the middle of the navel, until he could push it no further.

Chen XuanFeng let out a terrifying howl and fell backward. In the technique that he used to make his body invincible to the strokes, the vulnerable nodal location he'd chosen was situated precisely in his navel. Even though Guo Jing's dagger had an extremely sharp blade, even a simple knife, if it struck this place, would have been fatal to him. This was the reason that, during a fight, he took every precaution to protect this part of his body. When he seized the child, he didn't feel that he was a danger to him. After having caught him on the flank of the hill a little while ago, he knew that the youngster surely didn't know any martial arts. However, as the proverb says, "It is the good swimmer who drowns, and it is on flat land that the cart reverses itself". Who would have predicted that this dangerous expert was going to lose his life at the hand of a small, weak and ignorant boy!

After fatally injuring 'Copper Corpse', Guo Jing remained petrified, standing still without knowing what to do. He seemed on the verge of crying, but didn't dare let himself go.

Hearing her husband's long scream, Mei ChaoFeng hurried, stumbled, fell and crawled to reach him. "My dear brother," she shouted, "How are you?"

"It is done, my little...sister", he mumbled, "Hurry, flee...before you..."

"I am going to avenge you", she croaked.

"I will miss you, my little sis...little sister. I..I cannot take care of you anymore..." and with those last words Chen XuanFeng died.

"Good brother... I will miss you too! Don't leave me!"

Han BaoJu, Han XiaoYing and Quan JinFa, taking advantage of the first glow of the pre-dawn, rushed to the attack.

Mei ChaoFeng had not only lost her vision, but she felt her head spinning from the poison's effects. While training in the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws' the spouses had, for about ten years, absorbed arsenic acid in small quantities regularly. They neutralized the toxic effects with their internal energy. Using this dangerous method was the only way that Chen XuanFeng had found to increase their internal and external strength. With time, Mei had been partially immunized against poison; otherwise the poisoned projectiles of Ke Zhen'E would have killed her long ago.

She defended herself so ferociously that the Freaks didn't even manage to reach her and were repeatedly put in danger. Han BaoJu was beginning to get angry. He thought to himself, "If we can't manage to overcome her on a three against one basis, and even worse, she's injured and blind, what a blow to the reputation of the 'Seven Freaks of the South'!" He then attacked more furiously with his whip, focusing on trying to hit her back. Han XiaoYing and Quan JinFa, noticing their enemy staggering, also increased the vigor of their attacks. Just as it seemed they would carry the day against her, a storm arose and dark clouds covered the sky again. Suddenly, the mixed violent gusts of wind and rain blinded them again. The 'Three Freaks' dropped to the ground to protect themselves. Much later, the storm abated and the moon again showed from behind the clouds. Han BaoJu jumped to his feet and uttered a scream of frustration; Mei ChaoFeng and the body of Chen XuanFeng had disappeared. What greeted him was the sight of his severely injured friends lying on the ground. The small head of Guo Jing slowly appeared from behind some rocks. Everyone was soaked to the bone.

The three uninjured survivors rose to take care of the injured. Nan XiRen had a broken arm, but fortunately no internal injuries. Ke Zhen'E and Zhu Cong, whose Nei Gong was powerful, were not too affected either, even though they had been hit by several strokes from 'Copper Corpse'. However, Zhang

A'Sheng had been hit two times by the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws' and also received a deadly stroke to the head. He was conscious but his life was on the line.

Seeing him close to death, the 'Six Freaks' collapsed in sadness, especially Han XiaoYing who knew very well that the Fifth Brother had been in love with her for a long time. But she was a bit of a tomboy, enjoying martial arts above all else, and had little to do with matters of the heart. Zhang A'Sheng, for his part, laughed it off the whole time; they had never admitted to any feelings. Thinking of how he had thrown himself under the enemy's claws to protect her, she hugged Zhang A'Sheng sobbing.

Zhang A'Sheng's plump face was normally cheerful and smiling. Even now he smiled slightly and his big hand softly caressed XiaoYing's hair. "Don't cry", he said to her trying to comfort her. "Don't cry. I am alright."

"Fifth Brother", she said while hiccupping back her sobs, "Do you want to marry me?"

Zhang A'Sheng gave a silly laugh, causing the pain from his injuries to make him suffer badly, and he began to lose consciousness.

"Fifth Brother", she continued, "I assure you that I already consider myself your wife...I won't ever marry anyone else. After my death, we will remain together for eternity."

"Seventh Sister", mumbled Zhang A'Sheng, "I have not taken good care of you...Me...I am not worthy of you..."

"You always took very good care of me", she sobbed. "I always knew it..."

With his eyes full of tears, Zhu Cong asked Guo Jing, "When you came here, was it to learn martial arts from us?"

"Yes", the child answered.

"Then you must obey us from now on."

Guo Jing nodded his head.

"We, the Seven Brothers and Sister will all be your Master," continued Zhu Cong while wiping away his tears. "But now, your Fifth Master's spirit is going to leave us, kowtow and pay him homage."

Guo Jing didn't know what precisely what 'spirit is going to leave us' meant, but he immediately obeyed, kowtowing and touching the ground with his forehead.

Zhang A'Sheng, his face white like linen, forced himself to smile. "That is sufficient...Brave boy, I won't be able to teach you my knowledge...Ah, but if I did and even if you had learned what I know, it would not serve you very well. I am not naturally quick witted, and rather lazy about practicing...I relied on the little strength that I had...had I worked more, maybe I would not have met a sad end today..." He almost fainted and became even paler.

"Neither are you", he said while panting, "Naturally gifted; it's absolutely necessary for you to put in a lot of effort. When you're tempted to be lazy, think about your Fifth Master and the state in which you see him..."

He wanted to continue, but didn't have any more strength.

Han XiaoYing lowered her ear to Zhang's mouth, and heard him barely say,

"Teach the child well...don't let us lose to that cow-nose Taoist priest..."

"Be assured", said Han XiaoYing, "The 'Seven Freaks of the South' will not lose!"

Zhang A'Sheng gave a small foolish laugh, closed his eyes, departed this world, and returned his soul.

The 'Six Freaks' broke into sobs. Since they had become sworn brothers, a very strong bond united them. During the past years searching for Li Ping and her son, they had lived day and night together. And now, at this moment, one of them had tragically died in this foreign land. How could they not be overwhelmed with grief? After having cried themselves out, they dug a grave and buried Zhang A'Sheng. When they finished, they erected a big rock to mark the place of his grave. By then the sun had already risen.

Quan JinFa and Han BaoJu left to search for visible clues that could lead them to Mei ChaoFeng. After the storm, the sand showed no traces of her passing and it was impossible to know where she had gone. They extended their search for several li around the mountain, but came up with nothing.

"In the steppe", Zhu Cong said, "I imagine that this blind...this woman can't go very far. The poisoned projectiles should have taken effect by now and she will probably die somewhere. Let's take the child back home first and take care of our injured. After that, Third and Sixth Brother, and Seventh Sister can continue the search."

All agreed and shed some more tears while saying farewell at the grave of their deceased brother.

ⁱ 1 li = .5 kilometer.

ⁱⁱ Koumiss is a very strong Mongolian alcoholic drink made from horse milk

ⁱⁱⁱ The world of martial art.

^{iv} Internal martial arts which concentrate on the cultivation, development and application of internal energy.

^v Derogatory term for Taoist.