

SCOTT BLASINGAME . KYLE FISKE . MICHAEL LAUCK . JF LEE . BLAKE MATTHEWS

FISTS OF FICTION

AN ANTHOLOGY OF MARTIAL ARTS STORIES



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SCOTT BLASINGAME KYLE FISKE
MICHAEL LAUCK JF LEE BLAKE MATTHEWS



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SCOTT BLASINGAME



NOTE FROM SCOTT BLASINGAME

SCOTT BLASINGAME

“The Kempo Kid” is set in Nocturnity, the fictional present day city of the author’s “NightDragon” series, and concerns a private investigator who finds himself in a very dangerous situation.

“The Night Before” is a fantasy story set on a world called Pangea, and is about the parental expectation of a daughter’s participation in a bizarre betrothal custom.

THE KEMPO KID

A TALE IN THE CITY OF NOCTURNITY

SCOTT BLASINGAME

“Alright, take the bag off him.”

Parker Cassidy winced as a black sack was snatched from his head. His reddish brown hair was ruffled. It was long and shaggy, his bangs hanging down to the tip of his nose. He was brown eyed, with a week’s worth of stubble on his face, and dressed in jeans, sneakers, and a faded denim jacket a couple of sizes too big. Beneath the coat he wore a black t-shirt that sported an image of what looked to be a ninja wearing a long coat, with the phrase “Nocturnity’s #1 Vigilante” emblazoned across the top and bottom. Blood trickled from one corner of his mouth through the whiskers on his chin, and one cheek was bruised and beginning to swell. He glanced around to take in his environment.

He found himself in a cluttered office, a couple of strips of duct tape binding his wrists to the arms of an old swivel chair that rolled on casters. He was seated in front of a desk, though a short distance away from it. The desk was littered with papers, a phone, a computer monitor, and keyboard. There were shelves lining one wall that held boxes and bins of knickknack parts. A small garbage can

was filled to overflowing with old fast food bags, soda cups, and used napkins. Light filtered into the room through a grimy window situated behind the desk and shielded on the outside by security bars. Swiveling around to glance behind him, he saw a wall decorated with calendars from years past, and a clock showing the time as being 10:13 a.m. The linoleum floor was filthy with dirt buildup and oil stains. Sweeping and mopping it would have done no good. It ought to be burned as part of a purification ritual to really clean it. The office door was old, the paint peeling, and the window taking up the top half of it was missing some of the lettering that spelled out 'Shop Manager'. A picture window next to it looked out into an open bay area where cars, parked or on hydraulic lifts, and burly men could be seen going to and fro amid the sounds of obnoxious profanity, the loud burst of an occasional air tool, and the arrhythmic clanging of metal parts being tossed about.

Looking at his captors, Parker cocked his head with a quizzical look on his face. "Butch's Body Repair?"

The man who had ordered the removal of the bag motioned with his head at one of his cohorts. "Morty, get the blinds."

"Hey, no names," Morty grumbled. He was short, standing about five foot four inches, with a compact build. Dressed in jeans, a nice shirt, and a sports jacket, he had beady black eyes, and dirty red hair that was slicked back.

"It's okay, Morty. We're all friends here," Parker said congenially.

Morty sneered at him as he went and lowered the blinds above the window, making sure to close the slats also.

"Friends, he says," the leader chuckled.

"Yeah, aren't we? I mean, you know me obviously, and I

know you guys, too,” Parker said with a grin. “That’s Morty, that’s Mitch, and you’re Doofus...I mean, Douglas.”

Douglas’ shoulders shook once with another silent chuckle. He was a tall, well built man, good looking in a smarmy way, with blue eyes and dirt blond hair that he kept clipped and groomed. He was dressed similarly to Morty, except that his jacket was a tad more expensive, and its front pocket held a scarlet handkerchief that matched his silk shirt. He gave a nod to Mitch.

The third man, Mitch, was about six feet tall with wavy black hair worn a little long and kept swept back. He wore black jeans and a purple paisley shirt that was a size too small, so that it fit snugly to his body to accentuate his thick shoulders and bulging biceps. At the cue from Douglas, he stepped up to Parker and backhanded him across the face.

Parker’s head rocked back from the blow. He shook it off, moving his lips over his teeth while probing his mouth with his tongue. Then he turned and spat. A pink glob of saliva hit the floor.

“Hey, where are your manners? We’re in an establishment here,” Douglas said with mock indignity.

“My bad,” Parker muttered. Then he cut his eyes over to Mitch and said, “That’s one.”

“What are you keeping count or something?” the thug asked.

“Uh, yeah.”

Mitch grinned as he looked at the other two goons, and then back at Parker. “So what do we get? Like, three apiece?”

“Yeah, okay,” Parker shrugged.

Morty snickered. “We already hit you way more than that, man.”

“Yeah, but you bunch of pansies blindsided me, put the

bag over my head, and then started whaling on me. I don't know who did what, so I'm starting your count now."

"So if we get three shots each at you, that's like what? Nine total?" Mitch figured.

"Oh, your public education system at work. I'm surprised you remember your multiplication tables, considering you probably dropped out of school in sixth grade."

"Hey!" Mitch said, truly offended. "The three of us could beat you to death in that many punches."

Parker rolled his eyes and smirked. "Please. I've gotten fresh with women who have slapped me harder. Can't you swing with any more 'oomph' than that? I mean, what do you guys do to pass time, play ping pong?"

Mitch started to hit him again, but Morty shoved past him and drove his fist into Parker's stomach. As his victim doubled over, wheezing, the henchman leaned down and said, "Nah, pool. I'm really good at busting the rack, too."

Parker forced himself to sit back, his face wearing a painful grimace. "You probably scratch a lot though." Locking eyes with Morty, he added, "That's one."

"Whoa, this guy! Is he tough or what?" Douglas said, pushing some of the clutter on the desk aside so as to sit on the edge. "But with a nickname like 'the Kempo Kid', I guess you got to be."

"Kempo? What's that? Some sort of fancy Kung Fu?" Mitch asked snidely.

"Karate," Parker corrected. "And actually it's Kenpo with an N. It just gets pronounced the other way, so it gets spelled with an M. That's America for you."

Mitch chuffed. "Whatever. Kenpo, Kempo; Kung Fu, Karate. Same difference."

"Not really."

“What does that even mean? ‘Same difference.’ I never understood that,” Morty said.

“It’s just a saying,” Douglas offered.

“I know, but what’s it mean?”

“It’s an oxymoron,” Parker said.

“A what?” Morty said with a frown.

“An oxymoron is a pithy word or saying that juxtaposes opposite aspects. Like bittersweet, or jumbo shrimp, or only choice, or random order.”

“Oh,” Morty said with nod.

“It’s a weird term,” Douglas mused.

“Well, it’s not meant to be taken literally,” Parker said. “If it was, then that would be like whenever you morons get jacked on Oxycontin.”

The gangsters all looked at one another, and Douglas did his silent chuckle-shoulder shake again. Then he slipped off the edge of the desk to let loose a left hook into the side of Parker’s face.

His head sagging against his left shoulder, Parker turned and spat out another pink glob of saliva and blood. Without looking at Douglas, he muttered, “And that’s one for you.”

Resuming his perch on the edge of the desk, Douglas flexed the fingers of his left fist a couple of times, and then pointed at his captive. “You got a smart mouth, Parker Cassidy. And what’s up with that name? It’s like you got two first names.”

“Well, you work with what you got,” Parker sighed.

“Parker ‘the Kempo Kid’ Cassidy,” Douglas mused. “I remember you doing some semiprofessional fights back in the day. You was a contemporary of Clubfoot, right?”

“Keith ‘the Clubfoot’ Cunningham? For real?” Mitch asked.

Parker shrugged.

“Y’all get it on in the ring?”

“Nah, I was one of his sparring partners, and that got me in the fight game for a little bit. I figured out pretty quick that it wasn’t for me,” Parker said, licking at his bloody lower lip.

“Couldn’t cut the mustard, eh?” Morty smirked.

“Oh, I could cut the mustard,” Parker said. “It was the other condiments I couldn’t hack: fixes, taking dives, extorting fighters and trainers, gambling, and dealing with people like Mr. Magalliano, your boss. Put a bad taste in my mouth.”

“Ain’t Clubfoot still fighting?” Mitch asked.

“Yeah, but not like he used to,” Douglas said. “He joined the Nocturnity Police Department a few years back. Think he’s a detective now.”

“For real?”

“Yeah, Mitch, for real. Sheesh! Is that all you know how to say?” Douglas said, rolling his eyes. Then he looked at Parker. “But this guy apparently couldn’t cut being a cop either. No, he went the private investigator route.”

“What can I say? When I found out the pay and the hours were worse, I knew I’d found my calling,” Parker grinned.

Douglas grinned along with him and asked, “Where’s Bethany?”

Parker looked confused. “Which one? There’s a Bethany, Missouri; a Bethany, Connecticut; a Bethany, Oklahoma; and some others I can’t remember at the moment. You’ll have to be a little more specific.”

Douglas cast a glance and a nod at Mitch, and the goon shot out a quick right jab to Parker’s face.

Wincing with one eye and glaring at him with the other, the private investigator groaned, “Okay, that’s two.”

“You got a great sense of humor, Parker, but it’s going to bleed out all over the floor if you don’t answer my question. Where’s Bethany?” Douglas asked politely.

“I don’t know, but I can definitely tell where she is not.”

“Where’s that?”

“Well, she’s not in the State of California, the City of Nocturnity, the fine establishment of Butch’s Body Repair, and specifically, this room.”

Douglas’ eyes narrowed. “She left the state?”

“I guess so. She would’ve been smart to, and Bethany strikes me as a smart girl.”

“She is. She’s very smart. And very pretty. And I want her back.”

“Is that what this is all about?” Parker asked curiously, knowing it was. “I mean, this is about you, right? Mr. Magaliano doesn’t know anything about this, does he? This is about you wanting to find the girl that dumped you, and skipped town to get away from your greasy clutches and your nasty mob ties.”

“That’s none of your business, Parker.”

“Then why have you three goobers bagged my head, beat the crap out of me, hauled me to what you thought would be an unknown location, strapped me to a chair, and started beating on me again for?”

Douglas nodded, and Morty stepped up to deliver another gut punch to the private investigator.

Grunting from the pain, Parker’s eyes squeezed shut as he fought to breath. After a few moments, he wheezed, “*Dos, mi amigo.*”

“What? What did you call me?” Morty asked, rolling his shoulders to punch Parker again.

“Hey, hey, settle down. He said, ‘Two, my friend,’ in Spanish,” Douglas informed him. Looking at Parker, he

said, "Why I want to find her is none of your business. You just need to tell me where she is."

"This has nothing to do with Magalliano, does it?" Parker asked again.

Douglas frowned. "No, but what difference does that make?"

"Just checking. I mean, I know you're one of his boys, but I just want to be sure that's he's not vested in this in any way. This is your own personal little foray, right?"

"Yeah. So? My business is none of your business. Where's the girl, Parker?"

"Well, actually, when it comes to Bethany, your business is my business, Douglas."

"Oh yeah?"

Parker nodded with a smirking look in his eyes. Douglas slipped off the edge of the desk in a flash and hit him with another left hook. This time his fist clobbered Parker on the right ear, and the private investigator yelped as he wrenched his head around to shake off the blow. His face blanched in pain as he squinted at the hoodlum. "Not cool, man. Not cool. And that also puts you at two."

Douglas grabbed him by the face with one hand, leaning down so that their noses almost touched. "What makes you think Bethany has anything to do with my business being your business, eh?" He shoved Parker's head back as he returned to his perch.

The private investigator worked his jaw around to loosen it up as he studied the men, particularly Douglas. His right ear was ringing, but his hearing was starting to return. "Because you're the whole reason she came to me to begin with."

"So you could help her sneak off."

"Yeah, pretty much. But then what did you expect,

Douglas? Look, Bethany is quite a looker, and a smart girl. She was working her way through college, and took a second job waitressing in your club. She hit it off with the boss, and you liked her, so you bumped her up to playing hostess. Then it wasn't even that. She was just arm candy for you, and as such, she caught the eye of some of your club's more questionable clientele. So you start having her cater specifically to them, plying them food and drink, and some of the other girls you kept around for...entertainment purposes, let's say. Now she's making good money because, hey, she's the boss' girl, so she stops going to college. Unfortunately, she's also being exposed to the seedy underbelly of Nocturnity that is your world. It's dangerous, and romantic, and pretty soon she finds that she's in way over her head, learning things she doesn't want to know, and being expected to do things that she doesn't want to do. That last one is the straw that broke the camel's back, Douglas. When you tried to pimp her out to one of your clienteles who just had to have her, to the point he almost raped her, she was done. She wanted out. Not just out of your club and your life, but out of Nocturnity. She wanted a fresh start some place where nobody knew her, and she learned the ropes from you, as far as what to avoid, so she wouldn't ever make a mistake like that again."

"So you did help her."

"Well, duh."

Morty lunged forward to deliver a punch that hit Parker soundly in the chest. Parker saw it coming, and flexed in time to take it, but the blow still drew a groan from him. "Hey, no fair. You cut in line. It was Mitch's turn," he said with a gasp.

"For real," Mitch said.

"So what?" Morty dared.

“Okay, that’s three,” Parker said, and then muttered, “You like to work the body. Need to remember that.”

“Where’d she go?” Douglas asked him.

“I got no idea.”

There came the muffled ringing of a cell phone, and Douglas reached into his jacket to extract the device. He held it up for Parker to see that it was his phone, and the caller was identified as ‘Mom’. The gangster grinned at him. “Aw, somebody’s mother is looking for them. Want to talk to her?”

“Nah, I’m good,” Parker said, trying to mask his concern.

“What?” Douglas gasped in disbelief as he looked at his cronies. “Boys, what kind of son doesn’t want to talk to his mother?”

“A lousy one,” Mitch said.

“Are you speaking with the voice of experience?” Parker asked, and when Mitch made as if he was about to punch him again, he warned, “You only got one shot left. You might want to wait and make it count for something worthwhile.”

“Nah, I’m good,” Mitch said, mimicking the private investigator, and snapped out another jab.

The punch popped Parker along the edge of his left eyebrow, causing an immediate split of the skin against the bone. Blood began trailing down his left cheek. Parker’s nostrils flared with fury, and he took deep inhalations through his nose to calm himself. He couldn’t even hear the continued ringing of his phone. He finally cut his eyes at Mitch and said, “That’s your three. You’re big on the jabs.”

“I’m going to answer it,” Douglas said.

“What? Really?” Parker snapped, twisting his head around.

“Sure. It would be rude not to.”

“Aw, dude. Please, don’t do that.”

“Where’s Bethany?”

Parker scrunched up his face, acting like he was considering answering, but then shook his head.

Douglas shrugged, and his two cohorts snickered. “Okay then,” he said, and answered the phone. “Hello?...Oh hey, Mrs. Cassidy. I’m a friend of Parker’s...Well, he can’t really talk right now...Yes, ma’am, he’s tied up at the moment.”

“Strapped to a chair actually,” Parker said.

“Yes, with a case. I’d be happy to relay a message to him.”

“No, you’ll never get off the phone with her.”

“You want him to stop by the store on his way over? Sure, I’ll let him know...Yeah, tell me what he needs to get. I’ll write it down for him. Okay, eggs, milk, a pound of ground beef, the pasta noodles you like, oregano...Mrs. Cassidy, you making spaghetti for lunch?”

“Hang up on her.”

“Yes, ma’am, I love Italian food...Okay, parmesan cheese, and some mushrooms.”

“Don’t forget the arsenic.”

“Wow, this sounds like it’s going to be really good...Me? Why, no, I don’t have any lunch plans.”

“She’s a horrible cook. Really. She killed my dad. You can ask, but she’ll deny it.”

“You know, what my mom always used to do was add a little sugar to the sauce to give it just a touch of sweetness... Yes, ma’am, you should experiment with that.”

“Hey, don’t give her any ideas how to cover up the taste of the poison.”

Douglas held up a hand to silence him. “Well, I appre-

ciate the invitation, but I think I'll have to take a rain check...Yes, I'd love to meet you sometime," he said, wriggling his eyebrows at Parker. "Alright...oh, he needs to stop by the pharmacy, too?"

"Make a noise like you're losing the connection," Parker said as he started imitating the fuzzy sound of static.

"Just your blood pressure medication is ready? Okay, I'll be sure to let him know."

"Tell her you're driving into a tunnel," Parker suggested, and then murmured, "Wait, we don't have one of those around here."

"Yes, ma'am, I added it to the list, and I'll make sure he gets it...Well, it was nice chatting with you, too...Alright then, good-bye." Disconnecting the call, Douglas stuck Parker's phone back in his jacket pocket as he frowned at the private investigator. "Man, you are one rude dude. I'm on the phone, talking with your mom, and you will not shut up."

"I won't shut up? That's the shortest amount of time my mother has ever spent on the phone in her whole life, and it's with you instead of me, her own son. What's your secret?"

"Your mother sounds very nice."

"Wait till you get to know her. And eat her cooking," Parker said doubtfully.

Douglas leaned over and slapped him across the face.

"And that's three for you, which makes a full count for everybody," Parker said, his cheek burning from the sting of the blow.

Pointing a finger at him, Douglas said, "That was for your mom. You shouldn't talk about her that way."

Parker let out a big dejected sigh. "Fine. That one doesn't count then."

Pointing at him again, Douglas said, "Where were we? Oh yeah. So Bethany came to you. What did you do?"

Letting his cheeks swell up with air, Parker blew out another sigh. "Look, here's the skinny. She came to my office one morning. I mean, like, really early. She was there when I arrived. I don't think she'd been to sleep. Said she'd asked around, and was told I was a reliable guy who could help her. She explained her dilemma...sort of. The more we talked, the more I started piecing together until I understood just what she was going through. Anyway, she wanted to get out of town without fear of being stopped, followed, or located in the future. I told her I needed to figure some things out, and to come back in a few days. So she did, and I laid out the plan. She would need twenty grand, some of which to use to create diversionary trails, like bogus plane tickets or train tickets to different locations, for you to follow if you went looking for her, which I assume you did. And I set her up with a new identity. I know a guy."

"I'm going to need his name."

"Not happening. Then I got her a used car, something low key with good gas mileage, helped her load her stuff, and sent her on her way. I don't know where she went; told her not to tell me because I didn't want to know. I also told her to sell the car, and buy a different one as soon as she got to wherever she was going. Oh, and to get back in school, and make a life for herself."

Douglas clenched his teeth as he rubbed at his chin. "Oh, Parker, this isn't looking good for you."

"What are you talking about? I helped the girl get away from a life of scumbags and gangster wannabes. If I was a Boy Scout, I'd get the top merit badge they give out. I'm curious. How'd you track her to me anyhow?"

Douglas' eyes took on a hard, smug glint. "Bethany

wasn't my only girl. Sure, I liked her best, and I still want her back, but I got others."

"Yeah, that's what she said, too."

"Well, I got one of the other girls to confess. She had an inkling of what Bethany was up to. Heard her mention your name, and knew who you were, and what you do."

"Ah. So she dropped my name because you coerced her confession. Probably by beating the snot out of her and threatening to kill her."

"No."

"No?"

"No. I have other ways."

"Oh." Parker mulled that over a moment, and then grinned and fired off a wink at the hoodlum. "Oh! Because that's what you're going to do to me! Gotcha. You probably threatened to string her out on heroin, and then turn her out on the street as a hooker. That's pretty dastardly, man. You really should've just beat her up and threatened to kill her, too. That would actually have been the more gentlemanly thing to do, oddly enough."

"Shut up, Parker. Now tell me where Bethany is."

"Which one is it? Shut up or tell you? You're giving me mixed signals here, Dougie."

The gangster came off the desk in a flash, punching the private investigator full in the mouth so hard that both of his lips split, coating his teeth with blood. Parker's head was forced back awkwardly, and he felt a sharp pain in his neck. For a moment, his vision blurred and went grey. His lower face was numb, and his tongue swept over his teeth and lips reflexively. He could taste the coppery flavor of his blood, but had no sensation of actually feeling his mangled lips. He thought his front teeth seemed loose, but he wasn't sure.

"Tha's th'ee fo' 'ou 'ow," he mumbled, as bloody saliva

drooled through the ragged split in his lower lip and down his chin to drop onto his NightDragon t-shirt.

"I told you to shut up!" Douglas snapped, drawing his fist back again.

"He's not going to talk," Morty said.

"For real," Mitch agreed.

"Oh, he's talking; just not about what I want him to," Douglas muttered, his eyes squinting in fury. He lowered his fist as he looked at his cohorts, moving over to stand next to them by the office door and window. "Doesn't matter really, I guess. I don't need Bethany. She was actually getting to be annoying anyway. It's just the principle of the thing, you know? She doesn't call it quits on me. I call it quits with the chicks."

"Hey, that rhymes," Parker mumbled as he twisted his chair around to face them.

Douglas raised an arm as though he was about to backhand the private investigator. Instead he looked at Morty and asked, "Did you say if Butch is here today?"

"Nah, he's off. He left Tito in charge though."

"Cool. I like Tito. Go tell him I got some bodywork for him to do."

"I'm on it," Morty said, and he quickly exited the office, shutting the door as he yelled, "Hey, Tito! Come here."

Douglas reached into his jacket once again, this time extracting a switchblade. He depressed the button on the slim handle, the stiletto instantly snapping into place, as he turned to Parker. "To use your term, here's the skinny. So you won't tell me where Bethany is."

"Because I don't know."

"So you say. Irregardless..."

"Not a word."

"What?"

“Irregardless is not a word. You should just say regardless.”

“What are you, an English teacher?”

“No, and I’ve never played one on TV.”

“What? Shut up!” Douglas took a deep breath, striving to remain calm, cool, and intimidating. He sighed. “Fine then. Regardless, I can’t have somebody out there that one of my girls thinks can help them, if they don’t like doing the things I expect them to do. It’s bad for business, and my image. So I’m going to have to make an example out of you, Parker.”

“A good example or a bad example?”

“Depends on its effect,” Douglas shrugged. “I’m going to slice you up six ways to Sunday and cut your throat right here. Then Mitch and Morty are going to carry you to a special room in the body shop, where you will be ‘disassembled,’ as it were. Butch has at least ten different vehicles out in his lot that are bound for the junkyard, to be compacted into scrap, and I’m going to hide parts of you in each and every one of them. Nobody’ll ever find you; much less even know where to look for you.”

Parker had been nodding along, as though considering the quality of Douglas’ plan, and when the gangster concluded, he frowned as he let out a deep breath. “I mean, that’s sounds good and all, but...”

“But what?” Douglas scowled at him.

“Look, you’re one of Magalliano’s boys, right? Right. Is this a sanctioned hit? I mean, is he going to be okay with you taking me out like this?”

“No, it’s not sanctioned, but I don’t think he’ll care.”

“Really? Come on, Dougie. Think about it. Does Magalliano really like for his guys to take this sort of initiative without his say so? If it pertains to him, I’m sure he

doesn't mind. But this doesn't pertain to him, does it? This is about you; and if you do this, and it comes back on Magalliano, and he didn't know anything about it...dude, I would not want to be in your shoes, even though they do look really comfortable. Well, technically, I couldn't because I'd already be dead. Anyway, he'd probably do the same thing to you that you're going to do to me. Am I right?"

Douglas and Mitch looked at one another doubtfully, the latter shrugging.

At that moment, Morty reentered the office and closed the door. Taking in the scene, he said, "Alright, Tito says it'll be ready. What's the deal? You ain't carved him up yet?"

"Oh, and then there's that," Parker chimed. "Yeah, slicing me up six ways to Sunday and then cutting my throat here in Butch's office? Not a good idea. I'm going to bleed everywhere, and the arterial spray of my blood when you sever my jugular is going to go all over the place. Which means you boys will have to get new matching outfits. Also, you'll have to completely scour the room to get rid of any trace evidence. Can you imagine the time and effort it's going to take to clean this floor? Plus, you'll have to trash Butch's ancient calendar collection of semi-dressed car models. He's not going to be thrilled at that. And carrying my body through shop? My blood will be dripping all over the place. Honestly, you'll never get it all. Once someone files a missing person's report, and the cops start investigating, somehow it'll get out that I was last seen here. They'll come knocking, and they'll find something. You know they will."

The three thugs eyed one another, knowing their captive had a point.

"For real," Mitch whispered.

“So what do you want to do?” Morty asked in a low voice.

Douglas’ jaw was clenched as he thought. “Alright, alright,” he muttered. “Okay, he’s too banged up to put up much of a struggle. You guys get on either side of him, and I’ll cut him loose. Then we’ll escort him through the shop to where Tito can cut him up for disposal. I think there’s a drain in the floor.”

“Well, it is a chop shop, you know,” Parker said with a grin and a wink.

Pointing the stiletto at him, Douglas seethed, “First thing I’m going to do is cut that tongue out of your mouth, and step on it.”

“That would be distasteful,” Parker murmured in mock horror.

Douglas squeezed his eyes shut to keep from losing his temper. Then he nodded for Mitch and Morty to take their positions on either side of the private investigator. Parker sat up straight, pulling his feet in as the goons laid their hands on his shoulders. Douglas stepped in front of him, and leaned over to slice through the duct tape binding his left hand to the chair’s arm.

“One final question,” Douglas said.

“What’s that?” Parker asked.

“What’s your mom’s address?”

Parker’s eyes narrowed with apprehension. “Why?”

Smiling, Douglas replied, “Well, someone’s got to take her blood pressure medication to her. She’s going to need it when you never show up...ever.”

“It’d serve her right,” Parker said through tight lips, trying to keep his voice light. “She can die from her own horrid cooking.”

“What is wrong with you? That’s your mom,” Douglas

griped. He reached in and sliced through the remaining bond that secured Parker's right hand to the chair arm.

That was what the private investigator was waiting for. He snapped both knees up to his chest and fired his feet forward into Douglas' chest. The impact sent the gangster flying backwards so that he smashed through the blind-covered picture window. The back of his legs happened to clip the office wall, and it caused him to flip back so that he landed awkwardly on the concrete floor of the body shop, face and chest first, followed by his knees and feet. The impact of Parker's double kick sent his chair rolling back and away from Mitch and Morty. As the two goons turned to grab hold of him, he leaned back and slid out of the chair beneath their reaching hands, and onto the floor. Lurching to his feet, Parker turned to face them. He lashed out with a left side kick into Mitch's ribs, driving the henchman back into the desk, and let his foot bound across from the impact in a roundhouse kick to Morty's chest. The blow checked the thug for an instant, but he quickly caught Parker's extended leg in the crook of his right elbow, and reached out to shove the P.I. in the chest. Parker pitched back into Mitch, who grabbed him from behind in a bear hug, pinning his arms at his sides. Morty had released the trapped leg to draw his right fist back when Parker kicked him in the groin. The blow lifted Morty slightly off his feet, and his hands dropped to cover his injured testicles as he staggered back. Parker snapped his other foot up to kick him in the face, and Morty went reeling away to crash against the calendar-covered wall and slump to the floor.

Parker's action drove him and Mitch into the desk, causing it to scrape roughly along the floor. The private investigator threw his head back in a reverse head-butt to Mitch's face, while at the same time reaching up with his

right hand to where the goon's hands were gripped together in front of his chest. Gaining a hold of Mitch's fore-and middle fingers of his right hand, Parker savagely twisted them away, breaking the bear hug, as he pulled the arm out to his right. Mitch yelped as Parker sidestepped to his left to arc his right foot up in a short hooking kick. His heel snaked up between Mitch's legs, popping him in the groin. As Mitch started to double over, Parker whipped his right arm back in a reverse elbow to the thug's nose, breaking it as the blow forced him to stay erect, and causing blood to jettison out his nostrils. Parker's right fist swung down like a pendulum, smashing the groin area again. Then he snapped his right elbow upward in a vertical reverse strike to the face once more. Pivoting to his right, he threw a left hook into Mitch's throat. Muscle memory and training took over as Parker unleashed a series of staccato strikes on the goon: a low chop of his right hand to the pocket of Mitch's left hip; a low left uppercut to his belly; a right back fist to his chest; a left vertical palm strike to his chin; a right palm strike to his throat using the hand's upper ridge between the thumb and forefinger. Mitch flopped from each impact like a marionette in the hands of a first time puppeteer. The last blow was particularly vicious as Parker stepped in, torquing his body to the left as he swung his right arm across in a short elbow strike that caught Mitch squarely in the left temple. The henchman's head wrenched around to his right, and his body slowly listed in that direction until he toppled along the edge of the desk, collapsing to the grimy floor.

"You like the jabs. I like the elbows," Parker commented to unconscious thug.

Morty tackled him from behind, folding Parker over the desk. The stocky henchman then hit him with a number of rabbit punches, short jabs to the kidneys. Ignoring the jolts

of pain that flared across his lower back, the private investigator twisted to his left, whipping his left elbow back in a reverse strike to the left side of Morty's face. The knob of his elbow caught the goon perfectly in his left eye socket, and Morty yelped as he lunged away, his eye already swelling shut. Whirling to his right, Parker unleashed a spinning back fist with his right hand, but missed as Morty had shifted away. Still, he continued spinning in that direction. His left fist arced across to clobber the goon in the face, and he spun about to again lash out with another spinning back fist of his right hand, this time smashing the thug's nose and upper lip. Morty's arms flailed like pinwheels in a stiff breeze as he tottered across the office to bounce off the far wall. Parker followed after him, still whirling to his right, and he unloaded a right spinning back kick into the pit of Morty's stomach as the goon stumbled forward. Parker used the impact to reverse the direction of his spin to his left, and as the stocky thug doubled over, he whipped his hands up and then downward. His right hand descended in a hammer fist, his left hand open in a supporting position along the inside of his forearm, to club Morty soundly in the back of the head. The impact caused Morty's feet to slip out behind him, so that he slammed face first down on the grimy floor, his chin jamming his teeth together so forcefully that a few of them cracked and fell out.

Parker stepped back, wincing and shaking his right hand out. "Dadgum, I don't know what's harder: your head or your gut." He could hear commotion going on out in the shop, and he glanced quickly around the office. He wasn't seeing what he wanted. He hurried over to the desk and began looking around it. Then he saw the phone lying on the floor. He snatched it up and dialed 911. Putting the receiver up to his ear, he waited while it rang, his eyes

watching the office door and busted window. Then a tinny voice came on the line.

“911. What’s your emergency?”

He began speaking in a blaring, surly voice. “Yeah, I’m down here at Butch’s Body Repair, and they won’t release my vehicle.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but...”

“We agreed on a set price for the repair. Now Butch ain’t here, and his guys are saying the price ain’t right, and that’s it’s goin’ to cost more than what I was told. That’s dishonest, I’m tellin’ you.”

“Well, I sympathize with you, sir, but that’s not really an emergency.”

“Yeah? Well, it’s ‘bout to be. Me and my buddy Willy are fixin’ to storm in there with a 20 gauge and a 30.06 rifle, and reclaim my truck.”

“Sir, do not do that. That’s...”

“Hey, you know this place is a chop shop, don’t you? I seen some funny going-ons while I was in there. I gots to get my truck before they turn it into spare parts. Look, I was willing to pay the agreed amount, but I ain’t letting no one take advantage of me.”

“Sir, don’t do anything...”

“Yeah, I right behind you, Willy. Listen, I gots to go. Willy’s chompin’ at the bit. We’ll try not to leave too big a mess for you boys, but y’all better hurry.”

Disconnecting the call and tossing the receiver on the floor, Parker hurried out of the office. As he exited, he looked to his right where Douglas was slowly trying to get to his hands and knees. The P.I. took one stride to his right and delivered a kick to the head henchman’s exposed side. Douglas let out a pained grunt as he fell over onto his back, his face a grimace of pain.

Parker leaned over him, rummaged through Douglas' jacket pockets, and retrieved his cell phone. Glancing down at the gangster, his face blanched as he said, "Ew. Now it's all covered in your invisible slime. Well, any excuse to get a new one, right?" He placed a foot on Douglas' chest and applied his weight until the thug looked up at him. "Forget about Bethany. She's history to you. Understood? Nod. Come on, nod." Douglas resentfully complied. "There, that's a good wannabe gangster. You know, I really should take you to meet my mom. If anyone deserves to eat one of her deadly dinners, it's you."

Slipping his phone into one of his back pockets, the private investigator stepped fully onto the gangster's chest as he walked away, causing Douglas to let out a wheeze as his arms and legs flinched. Parker rounded a car to move into the huge bay area of the body shop. There stood Tito and three other mechanics waiting for him.

Parker paused, rolling his eyes as his hands went to his hips. "Guys, look, I don't want to dance anymore."

"Oh, you got to dance, *amigo*," Tito said, pointing a lethally long screwdriver at him and eyeing his t-shirt. "And *El NocheDragón* isn't going to show up to help you," he added, referring to the shirt's image of the vigilante hero of Nocturnity.

"Well, just once it would be nice if he did," Parker muttered as he sized up his opponents.

Tito was a Latino man roughly Parker's height. His chest, shoulders, and arms were thick with muscle, a fact that was obvious even in the drab green coveralls he wore. His black hair was short and shiny, and he had dark eyes, a broad nose, and a thick mustache that framed his plump lips. As Parker had noted, he was holding a long, heavy screwdriver in one hand, and now he reached to one of his

back pockets and pulled forth a big crescent wrench. His coworkers were similarly dressed and armed. A black man wearing a red bandanna over his head held big rubber mallets in each hand. Another Latino man, who was young and lithely built, grasped a length of towing chain with a hook at one end, which he was beginning to twirl out to his side. The fourth was a bald white guy, who held a large crowbar, and was gently smacking the curved end of it in the palm of one hand.

“Guys, we don’t really have to do this,” Parker said, giving them a reckless and friendly smile.

“Come on, *chico*. Time to face the music,” Tito grinned.

“Okay, but I get to pick the tune. It’s called ‘Consequences,’ and it’s got a good beat,” Parker said.

His eyes darted about. Just to his right was a battered, red tool cabinet, and among the tools lying on top of it were a long-handled socket wrench and its extension bar, each measuring about two feet in length. He turned and snatched them up as he spun to his right to face his opponents. The mechanics were fanning out to surround him, and he began swinging his makeshift weapons with easy rolls of his arms and wrists in a continuous, undulating rhythm of horizontal figure eights.

“Does Butch provide you guys with a decent medical plan? Those deductibles can be as costly as some car repairs.”

“Deduct this!” the bald guy snapped as he charged in from Parker’s right, swinging his crowbar to his left.

Parker swayed back, letting the crowbar sail by. As Baldy reversed his swing back to his right, Parker swung the socket wrench in his right hand up to block it, at the same time swinging the extension across to strike the man’s grip at his right wrist. Immediately Baldy barked out a curse and

dropped the crowbar, which made a deafening clatter in the bay. With a flick of his left wrist, Parker whipped the extension out horizontally, clubbing the mechanic in the mouth, shattering his teeth. Almost simultaneously, he swung the socket downward and across to his left, striking the man's right kneecap. As Baldy began to crumble to the floor, Parker whirled to his right, raking the socket around at waist height to deliver a reverse strike to the right side of the mechanic's head. There was a meaty thump as the blow landed, causing Baldy to pitch to his left as he fell.

The other three men circled around Parker as he resumed the hypnotic twirling of his tool weapons while slowly turning to watch them.

"Rico, strip those away from him," Tito ordered.

No sooner had he spoken than Rico brought his chain down in an overhead strike aimed for Parker's left arm. The chain wrapped around Parker's wrist, and Rico gave it a nasty jerk to try to make the private investigator drop the extension. Parker winced as the links pinched his skin, but he deftly slipped towards Rico when he tugged the chain. Swinging his trapped arm up, Parker spun to his left beneath the chain as he dropped to his right knee, closing the distance and facing Rico. Whipping the socket in his right hand back to circle downward and up along the mechanic's centerline, Parker drove the socket's bulky head upward to viciously jab Rico underneath his chin. The mechanic's hands went limp, dropping the chain, as his head snapped back. He reeled away a couple of steps towards a car raised on a lift. The back of his head slammed into the fender with such force that he was thrown forward as his feet kicked back behind him. Rico crashed to the floor on his face, his jaw making a horrible crunch as it hit the concrete.

Parker was up, shaking the chain from his left wrist and whirling his tool weapons, as he slipped quickly in between Tito and the bandanna-wearing mechanic.

“Hey, I don’t know about this,” the man mumbled, as he feigned swinging one mallet or the other while circling the private investigator.

“Shut up, Carl. We can take him,” Tito snarled.

“Where’re you taking me? Because I could kind of go for a shake right about now,” Parker said, glancing at each of them. “I like strawberry. You guys like strawberry?”

“I like vanilla,” Carl said with a shrug.

Parker stopped twirling his tools to stare at him. “Really?”

“What?” Carl challenged.

Parker shrugged. “I don’t know. It just seems...I don’t know.”

Carl’s brow furrowed as he suddenly paused, too. “You saying I can’t like vanilla because it’s white, and I’m black?”

“No, no, absolutely not. I think it’s great you’re not biased regarding your choice of milkshakes. Just caught me off guard. Wasn’t what I was expecting to hear.”

“I like chocolate, too.”

“Don’t we all?”

“I don’t,” Tito spoke up.

“What?” Carl said.

Tito had paused, too, and he used his screwdriver to scratch the side of his head. “I just never cared for it. I like peach.”

“Oh yeah, peach milkshakes are good,” Carl agreed.

Parker tossed his hands up, still holding his tool weapons, with a roll of his eyes. “Who doesn’t? Everybody knows that peach is awesome. Still, Tito, you don’t like

chocolate? Looks like me and Carl are going to have to gang up on you then.”

Carl and Tito looked at one another, confused, and the private investigator lunged at the latter. As Tito snapped to a defensive posture, Parker suddenly leaped away and turned towards Carl. With sweeping outward strikes, he hit the bandanna-wearing man along the inside of each wrist, causing Carl to drop his mallets. Then with a whip of his hands, Parker whirled his tool weapons up and brought them down, clubbing the mechanic on each shoulder at the same time. He snapped the tools together, thumping Carl on both sides of his head. As Carl’s eyes glazed over, Parker hopped into the air, throwing out his right leg in a leaping side kick to the man’s chest. The mechanic sailed backwards into a stack of tires, and they fell atop him as he dropped to the floor.

As the P.I. turned towards Tito, he threw his hips back and sidestepped to his right, narrowly avoiding a horizontal slash across his belly from the tip of the mechanic’s screwdriver. Unfortunately, the attack tore a hole along the side of his NightDragon t-shirt. Parker scowled as he looked at the rip and then at Tito.

“Not cool, man! This shirt is vintage.”

Tito rolled his eyes as he smirked, “Ain’t nobody going to believe that shirt is vintage. I bought one just like it for my cousin’s kid’s birthday last month.”

“Well, it was going to be, but you ripped a hole in it.”

“I was trying to rip a hole in you, homes.”

“I almost wish you had. I love this shirt.”

“Maybe you can be buried in it,” Tito said.

He skipped towards Parker, jabbing with the long screwdriver like a fencer. The private investigator deflected the attack, and Tito swung across with his big crescent

wrench, missed, and reversed the direct to swing it across again. Each time Parker leaned away, and then quickly snapped his socket wrench out to whack Tito along his right forearm. Tito grunted, but didn't release his screwdriver. Parker whipped his extension piece across to his right, intercepting another swipe of Tito's crescent wrench. The clanging impact twisted Tito's left arm away at an awkward angle, but still he didn't drop the wrench, though he grimaced in pain. Parker turned in right profile to him, and extended his socket wrench to keep the mechanic at bay. Whenever Tito swiped at it or at him, he merely moved the tool a fraction to avoid any collision while keeping the Latino man away. Tito knew he was being toyed with, and the frustration showed on his face.

"You're outgunned, *amigo*, or out-tooled, rather," Parker chided as he quickly waved his weapons at Tito, and then resumed his posture. "Mine give me a greater reach."

"Doesn't matter," Tito growled.

"Sure it does," Parker said, his face making a wry expression as though that was the silliest notion he'd ever heard. "Tell you what. Let's be fair. I'll trade you one," he said affably, and he casually pitched the extension in his left hand towards the mechanic.

As Parker tossed the tool, he threw it underhanded, so that it spun backwards and vertically through the air. He did so with seemingly effortless, and caught the mechanic completely off guard. The extension passed between Tito's arms. One end struck him in the chest with such force the tool was sent into a forward flip, and the other end struck him in the face. The blow stunned the mechanic, and he squeezed his eyes shut for an instant. That was the opening Parker wanted. The socket wrench in his right hand was a blur, and he clubbed Tito's wrists so

that he dropped his weapons. Then the private investigator whipped the tool all over the mechanic's body in a flurry of sodden blows. He started at Tito's knees, moved up his hips and ribs, struck his collarbone, and then clubbed him with a backhanded strike to the top of the head. Blood trickled from Tito's scalp as his eyes rolled up, and he sank to the floor.

Parker pitched the socket wrench on top of the unconscious mechanic as he turned to walk away. He happened to glance over where Carl lay beneath the pile of tires, one foot moving lazily. "Man, I'm sorry about that. I kind of like you. How about I buy you a milkshake to make up for it?"

Carl groaned.

Parker gave him a 'thumbs up' gesture even though the bandanna-wearing mechanic couldn't see it. "Vanilla. I got it."

He glanced around, and spotted a door. As he threaded his way between a car to his right and another tool cabinet to his left, Douglas jumped out from behind the vehicle to block his way. His hate-filled eyes glared at the private investigator, and he waved his stiletto menacingly. His jaw was clenched, and one corner of his mouth was pulled up in a snarl.

"Where do you think you're going, Parker?"

"Don't you remember, Dougie? I'm heading to my mom's, and I have to stop and pick up some stuff for her. Say, do you have that list on you?" Parker replied with a reckless grin. His eyes cut to either side of him for a split second.

Douglas' shoulders shook with a silent chuckle. "I don't think so."

"You don't think period, Dougie. Butch is not going to be happy with you. His office is wrecked, which is probably

an improvement really. A bunch of his mechanics are boogered up, and aren't going to be able to chop cars. Magalliano isn't going to be happy with you either. You know better than to undertake something like this without the old man's say so. Oh, and the cops are on the way."

"I don't care about any of that."

"Look, I told you to forget about Bethany. I don't know where she is, and wouldn't tell you if I did."

"Oh, it's not about her anymore. I'm taking you out, Parker."

"I'm flattered, but I don't date guys."

Douglas' face turned red. "Will you just shut up!"

"I will if you will."

With a roar the gangster sprang forward, thrusting his knife at the private investigator's face. Parker' left hand shot out and across, deflecting the blade, and his right fist snapped out over the top of Douglas' arm, to punch him full in the face. The hoodlum swung his knife in a reverse cut, but again Parker's left hand was there to block it in place, and he drove his right fist in Douglas' stomach. Taking the man's right hand with both of his, Parker pivoted to his right while pulling the arm and twisting it savagely. With a yelp, Douglas released his stiletto, and Parker pivoted to his left to drive his right knee into the gangster's belly before shoving him away. Douglas doubled over as he backed away a couple of steps, and Parker could see him reaching inside his jacket. He knew it wasn't going to be another knife that was pulled out. His left hand reached out to the top of the tool cabinet for the first thing he could grab, as he lunged towards Douglas, who just pulling his gun free. Before he could get the weapon pointed at the private investigator, Parker hit him across the back of the hand with what happened to be a long-handled wire brush. The metal bris-

gles dug deep into Douglas' skin, raking it away, and he yowled as he dropped the gun. His mouth gaping in surprise, he stared incredulously at his wounded hand. The wire brush had left an ugly stretch of furrows in the skin that were red and raw, and blood seeped to the entire surface. The pain throbbed and burned, and he glared at Parker, who lashed out in a left spinning backhanded strike to hit him with the wire brush again. This time the blow fell across Douglas' left eye and his nose. Parker raked the brush viciously downward, shredding away the left eyebrow, a large chunk of the nose, and a few layers of skin along Douglas' right cheek. As the gangster clapped his hands over his face with a scream, Parker pitched the wire brush over his shoulder to go skittering along the floor. He kicked his left foot up as he hopped into the air. His feet rotated as though he was riding a bicycle, so that his right foot snapped out in a leaping front kick to Douglas' hand-covered face. The impact lifted the goon off his feet, and he landed heavily on his back, his head rapping against the concrete with a wet-sounding crack. Douglas' body immediately went slack as his arms and legs splayed out.

Parker watched Douglas' inert body for a few moments, and when he could tell that the gangster's chest was rising and falling, he breathed a sigh of relief. He reached down and snatched the scarlet handkerchief from the front pocket of the goon's jacket, flinching when he saw just what the wire brush had done to the man's face. Dabbing the soft material against his own bruised and bloody face, he glanced around the shop again. No one was moving. He took a deep breath and blew it out. He started towards the door again. Then a thought hit him, making him snap his fingers.

“Aw, man. I didn’t ‘Frisbee’ anybody with a hubcap. That would’ve been so cool. Oh, well.”

As he opened the door and stepped outside, he could hear sirens in the distance, growing louder and closer. He moved to the alley behind the shop, walking with a swift pace. His phone rang, and he dug it out of his back pocket.

“Hey, ma...Yeah, I’m on the way...Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’m going to get the stuff and your medicine. Can you give me that list again?...No, my ‘friend’ didn’t write it down...Okay, slow down. I don’t have anything handy to write it down on either...Because I don’t right now. Just tell me again what you want me to get. I’ll remember...What? No, don’t add any sugar. Who in their right mind wants sweet spaghetti sauce?...I’m not...No, I’m not eating it. What are you trying to do, kill me?”

THE NIGHT BEFORE

A TALE OF PANGEA

SCOTT BLASINGAME

“The suite is ready, as are the men,” the captain of the guard said to the king as he, his queen, and his daughter entered the sparse room.

King Terchul, crownless, strode casually from the wide, open stairway towards the center of the room. He was dressed comfortably in baggy, navy blue pants, which the straps of his sandals wrapped around up to his knees. A tunic of thin, vertical, gold and blue stripes reached to his mid-thigh, snugly encasing his paunch by the soft leather belt around his waist, where a short, fat-bladed knife rested in a sheath against his left hip. His slight girth did not take away from his muscular build as his chest, shoulders, and arms were packed with muscle. His face was hard, though not unhandsome, with steely blue eyes and thin lips. His complexion was perpetually tanned a golden hue from his years of armed service. A neatly trimmed mustache and beard framed his lower face, and like his hair, which hung in loose curls to his shoulder tops, was blond while streaked with strands of brown and gray. Leather gauntlets adorned his wrists, and a band of gold encircled his left bicep.

His wife Laghetta walked behind him with a regality that was absent of arrogance. She was a lovely woman, with a warm voice and gracious smile for everyone she encountered. Her long blonde hair had darkened with age so that it contained a more reddish brown hue, and she wore it in a thick braid draped over the front of her right shoulder. A tiara perched on her head at her hairline, and bands of gold cupped her upper arms and wrists. Her eyes were deep brown, like bittersweet chocolate, and she retained her voluptuous figure, dressed in a satin gown the color of the faintest yellow pearl. Her slippers glided soundlessly along the white marble floor, as she followed her husband to stand off to one side while he inspected the men.

Their daughter Mesma dutifully stood beside her mother. A beautiful girl of twenty, her hair, like the color of honey, hung just below her shoulders and swept back behind them. She had her mother's exquisite beauty, with high cheekbones, sensuous lips, and cobalt blue eyes like her father. She was dressed in a sleeping gown of white silk, tailored to her figure, and sewn at her hips so that the flair of its skirt played out to billow about her legs and cover her feet. A cape of white lace was pinned to the shoulder straps of the gown to hang down to the tips of her fingers. She wore no jewelry save for a small tiara, like her mother.

Sighing heavily, she murmured, "Is this really necessary?"

"It's customary; you know that," Laghetta replied in a whisper.

"It's a stupid custom," Mesma muttered.

"Yes, we are all well aware of your opinion on the matter," Laghetta smirked dryly.

"Which apparently has no bearing."

"Mesma, this is momentous time for the kingdom."

“Of course it is. The king is bartering his daughter away via a three hundred year old custom. What could be more momentous than that?”

Laghetta was about to respond when she heard her husband say, “They look in order. Send them to their stations.”

The men stood in a line facing Terchul and the captain. Each guard was a specifically chosen member of the palace guard, a service only the best soldiers of the army could attain. They were clad identically in a thick leather jerkin that covered their torsos, and pteruges, skirts of wide leather strips, covering their thighs. Their feet were shod in sandals, the straps of which reached the bottoms of their knees, and the center strap was adorned a vertical line of metallic studs. Their heads were encased in helmets that covered their skulls, and the visors were face-like, allowing only slots for their eyes, and a pattern of small holes for their mouths. On each hand they wore a special weapon: the bladed gauntlet. The gauntlets encased their fists and reached up their forearms to their elbows. Projecting from each metal fist was a short dual-edged sword almost two feet in length. At a word from the captain, they silently dispersed to their posts.

The setting was the top floor of one of the castle’s largest turrets, ten stories above the ground. The room was completely circular, with the exception of the portion that met the castle proper where the broad stairway was. It was almost fifty feet in diameter, with a floor and walls of white marble, and a ceiling capping the room at fifteen feet. Inset ten feet from the circular walls was a ring of columns that were three feet in diameter. On each column was an iron sconce holding a blazing torch to light the perimeter. In the center of the room was a small, round dais that was twenty

feet in diameter and rose one foot above the floor. On the dais was a four poster bed, with sheets of white cotton, and a canopy with veils of white gauzy lace, and piles of pillows. Four torches blazed in wrought iron stands creating a square around the bed along the edge of the dais.

The side of the room along the exterior of the turret was open with archways between the columns to let out onto a balcony of smooth granite, and lined with a thick parapet having thin gaps spaced evenly every ten feet. The castle resided at the top of a small cliff, and the view from the balcony faced east, presenting a picture of a beautiful bay caressed intermittently with the forest and the cityscape along its shoreline where the jagged terrain allowed. One had to lean themselves out quite far to peer over the parapet, where they would then see large boulders and trees that decorated the base of the turret for a short distance before the cliff's edge plunged thirty feet to the water below.

The guards spaced themselves evenly about the room, taking positions at the fronts of the columns to face the dais. Each man stood, feet slightly spread, with his arms crossed at his chest, his face visor framed within the crux of the blades of his sword gauntlets. Satisfied with their positioning, the captain turned to the king and bowed. Terchul nodded his approval, and the officer took that as his cue to leave. As he departed, the king looked to his wife and daughter, extending his hand towards the dais. Laghetta smiled at him, and with a glance at Mesma, began making her way over to it. The young woman's eyes narrowed with distaste and dread, but she followed her mother. The three of them converged on the dais, and glanced around.

"Well," Terchul began. "It won't be long now."

Mesma was looking through the archways out onto the balcony. The night sky was a deep blue, and darkening with

each passing moment. Already the stars were visible, and a half moon was present. "Oh joy," she sighed sarcastically.

"Mind yourself," he said to his daughter. The sternness of his face was hardly softened by the half grin that tickled the corner of his mouth. "Remember, this is a momentous..."

"...time for the kingdom," she completed for him with another sigh. "Yes, Mother has reminded me." She glanced at the bed, wanting to sit down, but loath to even touch the gauzy veil of lace that surrounded it.

"Mesma, it's all a part of the marriage ritual; you know that," Laghetta said quietly. "Your husband-to-be will come for you, duel with the guards, and then whisk you away. On the morrow, you will be wed."

"Marriage ritual," Mesma chuffed derisively, pacing with agitation alongside the bed. "A prelude to a political pact, you mean."

Terchul shrugged his bushy eyebrows as he nodded his admission. "It is, but you knew this was coming. You've had plenty of time to prepare yourself its eventuality."

Mesma turned to level her gaze on him, her arms folding across her chest haughtily. "If it's an eventuality, then why bother going through the pretense of my supposed husband-to-be coming to steal me away in the night?" Then she tossed up her hands to cut off her parents' response and answered for them, "I know, I know; it's all part of the marriage ritual. Bah! It's more of a charade, if you ask me; a farce."

Terchul opened his mouth to scold her, but then took a deep breath to calm himself. "Get your vehemence out of your system now. Tomorrow I expect you to acquit yourself with all the proper decorum of a king's dutiful daughter."

"And if I don't?" she asked defiantly. Laghetta reached out to touch her shoulder, but Mesma brushed her hand

away as she said to her, "Don't. I would expect you to be on my side."

"Child, I am on your side," her mother said, attempting another reassuring touch. Again Mesma turned Laghetta's hand aside. The queen smiled at her sadly. "Truly I am, but you must understand: this arrangement was brokered a long time ago, when you were fifteen years of age."

"And should have been consummated at some point during your eighteenth year," Terchul added. "Unfortunately, circumstances the last two years have prohibited that."

"I think you mean fortunately," Mesma corrected him snidely.

"Maybe where you're concerned," he muttered. He turned to face her, his hands on his hips. When he had her attention, he said, "You know we are but one kingdom of the Cathari, whose relationship with the Gothosi has always been tenuous. As our borders neighbor theirs, this marriage to one of their princes will help to forge a much needed alliance. They aided us when the Dreks sailed into our waters, seeking to rape and pillage their way through our city and into our lands."

Mesma couldn't help but shudder at the remembrance of the invasion two years prior of those Northerners and their fearsome longboats; large, muscle-bound men clad in chainmail and the skins of bears and wolves, wild of eye, with wiry, braided hair and beards, who wielded their axes and swords with fearless savagery.

"That is why I sent you and your mother with a contingent of guards south to Panja," he added. "I couldn't have either of you falling into their hands."

"I know. I remember," she murmured. Then looking at

her father, she argued, "And last year, did we not assist the Gothosi against the incursions of the Diobolik?"

"We did," he agreed, remembering his own encounters with some of those frightful warriors, whose skin was ghastly gray or white, many sporting bald heads, sharpened teeth, and glaring pink or red eyes. The Diobolik men came in all manner of shapes and sizes: tall, short, lean, fat, wiry, or bulked with muscle. The gruesome fighters were like living skeletons, their appearance creating panic among even seasoned combatants.

"So then, we can aid one another without the benefit of a prescribed marriage," she concluded as a matter of fact. "We've obviously done so in the past."

"But the marriage gains us that assurance," he countered. "What if the Gothosi chose to ally themselves with our attackers?"

"Wouldn't we have the same option?" Mesma replied. "And are we not a larger nation than they? Strategically, they stand to benefit far more than we do."

"Don't talk to me of strategy," Terchul snapped at her. "You weigh in on things of which you have no understanding. The Council of Kings of Cathar consider this an advantageous arrangement. Do you think you can dispute the matter with them?"

Mesma glanced away as her parents looked about at the guards. The king's voice had risen so that their conversation could not help but be overheard. The guardsmen remained still, as immovable as the marble pillars they stood before. Terchul's hand fell to the handle of his knife, and he absent-mindedly pulled the blade partially out and seated it in its sheath a few times, a habit of his whenever he was agitated.

"And what of Panja? Didn't they also help us when the Dreks invaded?" Mesma mentioned. She tried to make her

questions sound offhanded, but the arch of her eyebrows gave them a sharpness of argumentation.

Terchul sighed. "I know where you're going with this. Don't start."

She already had. "They sent ships of warriors to aid us, surrounding the outer limits of the Dreks' warships, boarding and sinking them. As a result, they lost many men."

"Yes, they did, and I have improved our trade relations with them as a result of it. My advisors are contemplating other ventures with them as well. And your mother can attest to the fact that I communicate personally with Fen Kan, the Zaikun."

Laghetta nodded to her daughter. "They correspond quite regularly. In fact, your father sent Kan an invitation requesting his attendance for your marriage."

Mesma caught her breath, but tried to hide her reaction. "So he and his family will be there?" she murmured.

"They will," Terchul said, his eyes knowingly fixed on those of his daughter's. "But I caution you against getting your hopes up."

"Oh?" Mesma said, trying to sound nonchalant.

Clearing her throat softly, Laghetta said, "Fen Jun will not be in attendance."

Watching his daughter try to mask the disappointment on her face, the king said, "Yes, I am also aware of your own correspondence with the young zaidun. Actually it was Kan who informed me of it."

Mesma's eyes had widened in surprise, but now narrowed on learning of the breach of privacy. "You've read my letters to him?"

"A few," her father admitted.

She was seething, her fists at her sides, hidden in the

folds of her gown. The features of her face hardened as she strove to remain stoic, and she glanced away. "It doesn't matter. I haven't had any response from him in months."

"I know."

Mesma cut her eyes back to her father. "You know? How could you know? Have you been keeping his replies from me?"

Terchul took a deep breath. "He can't reply to a message he never received."

Her lips parted, and she blinked in shock. She turned to her mother, but Laghetta's eyes were on the floor, a sad look on her face. "You knew?" Mesma asked her accusingly, and Laghetta gave a single nod. Turning to her father, she glared at him, her brow wrinkled with disbelief at his betrayal of trust. "You had no right..."

Terchul stepped to her quickly, leaning his face close to hers as he interrupted her, his voice low and intense. "I have every right."

"What did you do?" the young woman gasped, dread tainting her voice.

Laghetta reached out to place a hand on her husband's shoulder. "Terchul, please, be careful what you say."

The king looked at his wife, and shrugged off her warning as he turned his attention back to the princess. "What did I do? I put a stop to your foolishness."

"My foolishness?" Mesma echoed with incredulousness.

"Yes, your foolishness. You and the zaidun have carried on a courtship of sorts through your letters; an attraction that no doubt started while you and your mother were in Panja. He went to his father a while back and told him that he wanted you for his wife. Kan knew of the arrangement, that you were set to be wed to a Gothosi prince. I had

informed him of it when I asked him to harbor your mother and you during the Drek invasion. Tell me, did the zaidun know? Did you not inform him of this yourself while you were there? Because you certainly never mentioned it in any of the letters you wrote.”

Her father’s mention of his breach of trust stoked the fires of her anger, and her cobalt eyes blazed at him. “The zaidun has a name. It’s Fen Jun, and no, I never told him of the arrangement.”

Terchul smirked at her. “And why not?”

Mesma sighed and stepped back. “Because at the time, on the occasions I was around him, our exchanges were nothing more than harmless flirtations. It was only towards the end of the four months we were there that our feelings for one another started to deepen. We didn’t realize it then.” Her voice dropped to a murmur. “That all came out when we began writing each other. We missed being together, and realized that we had developed a longing for one another. And then...”

“Then came the passionate letters and confessions of love,” he concluded for her.

“Which you’ve apparently read more of than he has,” she shot back icily.

“Probably.”

“Terchul,” his wife chided him. “Don’t be so cold.”

Regarding her father with cool animosity, Mesma said, “I don’t want to wed the Gothosi prince. Why can’t I be married to the Panjan prince, Zaidun Fen Jun?”

“Get that notion out of your head, daughter,” Terchul chuffed. “Your betrothal to Prince Kulthan was set well before your ill-timed infatuation with the Panjan zaidun.”

“Infatuation?” Mesma seethed with gritted teeth. “How dare you make light of our affection for one another!”

“Ah ha! Affection! You named it yourself. And affections are passing.”

“You cannot diminish my feelings for Jun! You refer to my affection for him as some ethereal thing, some dewy morning mist that will evaporate in the rays of the sun. At least they exist, which is more than will ever be said of such for Kulthan. I harbor no affection for him, and never will,” she said tersely.

“Then you had best set your mind to it,” the king snapped. “Your duty is to the nation of Cathar. If that requires giving yourself to one not of your heart’s choosing, then you do it. I know you don’t approve, but we are both honor-bound by my pledge.”

“Husband...” Laghetta began, but Terchul lifted a finger to silence her.

Sighing, he began to reach for his daughter, but then let his hands fall. He knew she would not let him hold her at this moment. He hated dealing so harshly with her, but she needed to understand the gravity of the situation. What had been done was done. The pact of marriage could not be reneged upon without repercussions, possibly bloody ones. Finally he said, “I’m sorry this is the way it must be, but we must follow this path to its end. Steel yourself. Be stoic. It mightn’t be so bad as you think. But you need to focus your resolve. Now, we had best leave you. The time will be soon that Kulthan comes for you. We’ll see you on the morrow.”

He stepped to his daughter and drew her to him. He held her for a few moments, but she remained stiff and unyielding, refusing to return his embrace. He nodded to himself as he withdrew and looked at his wife.

“You go,” Laghetta said to him. “Let me speak to her, mother to daughter, for a few moments.”

With a single nod, he departed from the room, the two

women watching him leave. Only after he disappeared down the stairs did the queen turn back to her daughter. Before she could even begin to speak, Mesma stepped to her, breathless, with dread-filled eyes.

“Please tell me there’s some way I can...”

The queen shook her head. “No. I’m sorry, child, but there’s not. You know that.”

Mesma stomped her foot in frustration as she turned away. Just as quickly, she spun around to face her mother. “Has no one ever thwarted this ritual before?”

“Thwarted it? In what way?”

“I don’t know,” the girl sighed despondently. “Has the would be groom ever been defeated by the guards?”

“No, Mesma. The combat that occurs, when the groom comes for his bride, is a formality. Yes, they fight, and he must best them, but it is no battle to the death.”

“And if he cannot best them?”

Laghetta smiled at her. “It is a formality, Mesma. They will be bested. Granted, not all princes are seasoned warriors. Some even disdain combat in any form. The guards will tailor their defense accordingly to the capability of the groom. They know their role.”

“So it truly is all a farce then; the whole ritual,” Mesma muttered with annoyance. “Well then, if a prince has never been ‘defeated,’” she said sarcastically, “has another ever arrived to truly challenge him?”

The queen regarded her sympathetically. “I know what you’re hoping. Don’t. You will only leave yourself open to disappointment.” When her daughter opened her mouth to argue, Laghetta said, “Jun is not here, and he’s not coming.”

“You don’t know that,” Mesma snapped.

“But I do, dear. When the Zaikun Fen Kan informed your father of the correspondence between you and Jun, he

in turn reminded the zaikun of your intended marriage. The zaikun understood and related this fact to his son. What Jun's reaction was to the news, I have no idea, but afterwards your father and Kan maintained their own correspondence, and intercepted the letters between the two of you to prevent further...entanglement. As your wedding has drawn near, Kan had kept his son busy with princely duties and sent him afield on various missions. He has assured us that Jun is so employed at the moment. Where he is, I have no idea, but he will not be here. Do you understand?"

Mesma could only stare miserably at her mother. "It's not fair."

"I know."

"You should be on my side."

"I am, child. I promise you I am, but this is a royal tradition. I wish I knew some way to free you of it, but there is none."

Blinking back her tears as her anger rose, Mesma said, "Then I will fight the groom myself."

"What?"

"You heard me. If he be some foppish prince, my own combat training will be more than enough to dissuade him from his prize."

Laghetta frowned at her. "That would be unbecoming."

"I don't care."

"Your father is correct. You do have a responsibility."

"Yes, to myself. I won't be victim to a loveless marriage, no matter what consequence comes from breaking such an idiotic tradition."

"You could be hurt."

"Perfect. It would delay everything."

Laghetta shook her head as she stepped forward to place her hands on her daughter's shoulders. "Listen to me,

Mesma. Do not think to challenge your groom. I assure you, Kulthan is no foppish prince. My understanding is that he is a highly skilled fighter. The Gothosi take pride in their combative prowess. He will not be denied. And he is taken with you. You've seen each other before."

Mesma rolled her eyes. "Yes, I remember. Three or four years ago." She looked at her mother as she murmured with disappointment, "He's blue."

Smiling, Laghetta nodded and said, "But quite good-looking."

"I prefer the golden skin of Jun."

Again, Laghetta nodded, this time sadly. "Yes, he is exotically handsome...but it is not meant to be."

She pulled her daughter into her arms. Mesma yielded begrudgingly at first, but then she clasped her mother tightly and fiercely. They stood embracing for a time.

"I don't want to do this. I don't want it to be this way," Mesma whispered, her voice breaking as she tried not to sob.

"I know you don't," Laghetta said with a sigh. After a few moments, she gently disengaged and caressed her daughter's face. "You need to remember this: the marriage will be what you make of it. If you choose to be unhappy, then you will be. But if you try to make the best of it, then it may be that it ends up being better than you expected."

Mesma tried to smile at her, but her heart wasn't in it.

Laghetta could tell, and she nodded as she turned away. Mesma watched her as she strode silently across the room towards the stairway. Then clearing her voice, she spoke out.

"Mother? When Father came for you, was he the prince you wanted?"

Turning to her, Laghetta paused, knowing the answer

would further break her daughter's heart. But she gave it to her anyway with a single nod.

Tears streamed freely down Mesma's face then as she looked away in despair. "It's not fair," she said bitterly.

"I know, and I truly am sorry," the queen said in a choked voice as she began descending the stairs.

MESMA WILED AWAY a few hours alternately lounging on the bed until bored and frustrated, or strolling sadly along the balcony. She paused often at the parapet to gaze out over the rippling bay and along the shoreline, dappled with lunar highlights of the half moon. Somewhere out there, along the borders of the cityscape was a Gothosi encampment, and the thought made her shudder. A soft night breeze wafted through her hair, and she would sometimes close her eyes and turn her face to it, wishing it would blow away the cloud of dread that hung over her; but alas, it would not.

She estimated that the midnight hour was approaching, and with its coming came the determination that she would not succumb willingly to her suitor when he sought to carry her away. No, she would make use of her own combat training. At an early age she had been enamored with the martial practices of fighting and weaponry upon seeing her father train with his soldiers. He had indulged her desire to learn, thinking it would be merely a passing fancy, but she had grown to enjoy it, displaying a natural knack for it. Her mother didn't mind as long as she kept up her studies and observed the proper etiquette reserved for royalty and social occasions. In fact, one of the things she loved so much about the short time she and the queen spent in Panja was

witnessing their warriors in training. They were instructed in the national martial art of Jitkaido, a devastating style where the soldiers were as versatile with their feet as they were with their hands. When she expressed interest in learning it, Jun had graciously begun to teach her small segments of a beginner's form. On her return home, she continued to practice what little she had learned, and then built onto that some of what she had seen, incorporating it to create her own system of combative exercise. The practice kept her fit, and she often astounded some of the guards who served as her sparring partners on occasion.

Yes, when Kulthan laid his hands on her to take her away this night, he would be in for quite the surprise.

She turned away from the parapet and slowly walked back into the room and up the dais to the veiled bed. Neither she nor any of the sentries heard the muted thud of a tethered grappling hook, its prongs covered with sleeves of black fur, as it snaked between one of the gaps in the parapet wall to seat firmly in place.

NO SOONER HAD Mesma reclined on the bed and sought out a comfortable position then there came the light tread of footsteps ascending the stairway. She sat up with apprehension, her heartbeat racing. As badly as she wanted to part the veil and look, she resisted the temptation, and instead leaned her head forward, straining her eyes for the first glimpse of her would be groom.

Kulthan, the Gothosi prince, stepped into the room and paused to survey it. He was a handsome man, and only a few years older than she. He had a lean, athletic build with well defined musculature. His black hair was long, and

plaited in a single braid. A thin mustache and goatee framed his lips, and his eyes were deep purple in hue. A slight scar that rose from the inside of his left eyebrow to the widow's peak of his hairline did not detract from his attractiveness; if anything, it enhanced it. His complexion was indeed a light, dusky blue in color. Dark brown leather gauntlets reached from his wrists up to his elbows. He wore a black vest, open to reveal his chest, and loose, purple pants that were tucked into his black boots. About his waist was a black sash, the tails of which hung to his knees, and tucked in the sash at the small of his back were two sheathed knives known as churai, the favored blades of Gothosi warriors. Always used in pairs, the churai had small handles with no hilts, and the blades, almost the length of a man's hand and forearm, hooked forward slightly about midway along their spines. The cutting edges widened at the ends, tapering to fat tips. The handles of them jutted out to each side just behind his hips.

His eyes took in the sentries and then settled on the veiled bed atop the dais. Vaguely he could make out the shape of Mesma behind the gauzy obstruction. His mouth formed a daring smile, revealing perfectly white teeth, his hooded eyes glittering with relish at the challenge he was about to face. It was a look that caused many Gothosi girls to gasp with hope that they might be the object of his desire. He began walking with assurance towards her. Every guard lowered their crossed sword gauntlets to their sides as they stepped away from the pillars of their stations. Kulthan gave them all a passing regard, but continued forward undaunted. He knew the game to be played, and he spoke out with a rich voice reminiscent of hot, spicy tea sweetened with black sugar, a staple specific to Gothos, and highly sought after in trade by other nations.

“Mesma, daughter of Terchul, and one of the most coveted princesses of Cathar, I come to claim you for my own. Present yourself that I may see my bride.”

His tone was neither arrogant nor audacious, but cheerful and inviting. Still, it grated her nerves. He followed the script of the ritual, and she was supposed to leave the bed, part the veil, and stand at the edge of dais, that he might behold the one for which he was about to fight as she issued his challenge. She performed none of the actions, but she did issue the challenge, and not with eagerness, but derision.

“Come claim me then.”

Kulthan was a little taken aback by her delivery as his brow furrowed, but he took it good-naturedly. The sentries on either side of him had raised their sword gauntlets up in readiness, and the others were beginning to shift about so as to back them up. The Gothosi prince pulled out his churai, holding them so they extended from the bottoms of his fists, the spine of the blades along the insides of his forearms with their cutting edges forward.

He twirled the knife in his left hand around so as to point it at her, as he grinned and said, “Gladly.” Twirling the blade to return it to an underhanded grip, his eyes cut to the sentry advancing on his left, then to the sentry coming from his right. As his gaze passed across, he halted abruptly, his smile faltering to a frown of confusion. He whirled the churai in his right hand around, using it to point across the room. “What’s this?”

In one of the open archways that let out onto the balcony stood a figure entirely garbed in black. His pants were loose about his thighs, but strapped snugly to his lower legs, his feet being shod in split-toed shoes. The left lapel of his jacket was folded over the right, and kept closed by a

short sash. The sleeves were large and loose, the cuffs open and reaching midway down his forearms, which were covered in gauntlets of soft black leather. He wore gloves on his hands which exposed his fingers. A hooded cowl covered his head to drape over his shoulders and across his upper chest and back, and a band of cloth wrapped around his lower face to be tied off at the back of his head. Only his eyes were revealed, and the skin around them was smeared with black face paint. The mysterious figure stood perfectly still, almost casually, his arms down at his sides.

The sentries on seeing him suddenly changed tactics and began to move quickly to encircle him. They knew their role in this ritual. They were to 'defend' the princess from being taken, engage the suitor in vigorous combat so that he might 'defeat' them, and steal her away. But there should only be one suitor, and this strange man, this unknown entity, was not he. That could only mean he posed a real threat to Mesma, and now all pretenses were abandoned. They meant to either capture him or kill him.

Mesma was confused by Kulthan's remark, but when she saw the reaction of her guards, she looked to see what brought about their sudden change in demeanor. All she could make out through the veil around her bed was the vague image of someone in black, who blended into the background of the night sky that was framed between two pillars. She moved off the bed to part the veil and step forward. Then a surge of panic flooded through her body, as she drew back, gasping in surprise, "A shadow-fighter?"

SHADOW-FIGHTERS. Few in all the kingdoms of Pangea were feared more than this lethal group of men and

women, who were reportedly some of the most skilled warriors that could be encountered. They were a clan that held mastery in disguise, thievery, espionage, and assassination. They specialized in ambushes and infiltration; a clandestine group that preferred conducting their raids and assaults in the dead of night. They were the subject of many a child's nightmares, and the very mention of them in campfire tales even drew shudders from seasoned warriors. Now, in the turret room designated for the marriage ritual, one of them stood like some black specter, come to claim a doomed soul.

Even as Mesma quietly spoke the words announcing him, the figure in black went into action.

As guards came at him from either side, the shadow-fighter skipped to his right, dipped his head to avoid a slashing cut from one of that man's sword gauntlets, and then drove his right leg out in a back kick to the guard's chest. The impact caused the sentry to stumble back so that he tripped over his own feet to fall to the floor. Already the mysterious man was moving to his left in a low stance towards the nearest guard. Again he ducked beneath a couple of horizontal slashes meant to take off his head, and dove to his left in a somersault, coming up on his feet in a crouch along the man's right side. Before the guard could turn, the shadow-fighter kicked his legs out as he dropped back onto his right hand. His right leg snaked across the front of the guard's ankles even as his left leg snapped up in a kick to the backs of the man's knees. With a savage twist of his hips to his right, his legs folded the sentry's knees even as they pulled his feet out from under him. The scissor-leg takedown dropped the man to the floor so that he landed on his chest, his arms splaying out, as the shadow-fighter rolled over using his legs to fold the guard's feet back towards his

buttocks. The guardsman began pulling his arms underneath him to push himself up, which was difficult as the sword gauntlets hampered the range of motion of his wrists. The black garbed man kicked his legs free and rolled back in a reverse somersault onto his feet, where he immediately launched himself into the air in a forward flip. He landed atop the downed guard, his left foot on the man's lower back, and his right foot on the back of the man's head, which drove his face into the marble floor. There was a dull clang as his face visor rang on impact, and his body went lax. The shadow-fighter had already dipped forward to throw himself into another somersault off the man's body.

The first guard had been advancing on the mystery assailant from behind, but was too late to help his fallen comrade. He took a lunging leap over the unconscious man, his left foot leading. The shadow-fighter, still squatting in low crouch with his back to them, suddenly twisted to his left as he dropped onto his left side. His loose clothing made it easy for him to slide on the marble floor, and he spun around on his left hip and elbow to snap his right foot out in a forward sweep, hooking the sentry's leg at the ankle to his right. The redirection of his foot, coupled with his forward momentum sent the guard clumsily crashing to the floor on his left side. He rolled to his right across his back and onto his stomach, and began scrambling to his feet. The shadow-fighter slipped up from behind, kicking the man in the groin with his left foot. The sentry emitted a muffled groan as he began to double over, and the assailant delivered a right kick to his rear end so that he stumbled forward, trying to keep his balance. In only a couple of staggering steps, he rammed face first into a nearby pillar, the force snapping his head back. Groggily, the sentry turned around, lifting one

sword gauntleted hand to his ringing head, as though he could massage it. His vision was blurred, and only beginning to refocus properly when the shadow-fighter executed a flying side kick with his right foot to the man's face visor. Again the guard's head snapped back, to bang against the pillar once more. His feet kicked out from under him as his back slid down the pillar. Landing on his buttocks, his upper body pitched to his left in an unconscious sprawl. The shadow-fighter paid him no regard, his back to the fallen foe, as he looked about at the other sentries approaching him.

KULTHAN WAS DUALY PERTURBED to see the appearance of another suitor, and the guards ignoring him as they hurried to set upon the intruder. This was not part of the ritual. He ran to the closest sentry, a man to his right, grabbed him by the shoulder, and spun him around. The guard swung his left sword gauntlet in a backhanded swipe, meaning to knock the prince aside with the flat of his blade. Kulthan easily leaned away to avoid the blow and used one of his own knives to point at the mysterious man.

"What is the meaning of this? Who is that?" he demanded to know.

The sentry answered him, his voice muffled by his face visor. "None of us know, and it doesn't matter. He is the true threat here. Princess Mesma must be protected."

"The true threat?" Kulthan asked, scowling at the insult. "You think a prince of the Gothosi is not worthy of your attention."

"Neither I nor the other guards have time to dicker with you. The ritual is over. Don't get in our way, or seek to inter-

rupt our duty while we capture him.” With that, the guard turned to run towards his fellows and the intruder.

“Don’t turn your back on me, you louse. The ritual is over when I claim Mesma, and not before,” Kulthan growled. No sooner were the words out of his mouth than he lunged forward, and swung his right churai low, slapping the flat of the blade against the back of man’s left thigh.

Without any warning, the guard whirled to his left, slicing across in the same direction with both sword gauntlets; first the left, and then the right. The prince again leaned away, and then lunged forward, bringing his left arm up in a vertical block, his hand towards the floor, so that his churai lay along his forearm to catch the man’s right gauntlet blade as he slashed back in that direction. Still holding the weapon at bay, he sidestepped to his left as his right hand jabbed forward, using the butt of his churai handle to strike the guard in his right armpit. The blow caused the sentry to grunt, and his right arm dropped down as the prince pivoted to his right on the ball of his left foot. His back to the man, Kulthan dipped forward at the waist to swing his right foot up in a hook kick to the back of the sentry’s head. The guard staggered a step, trying to shake off the blow. As he turned to his right towards the Gothosi prince, Kulthan was already executing the same kick with left foot, clubbing the man in the right side of his face. The sentry crumpled to floor.

Kulthan glanced down at his fallen opponent to make sure he wasn’t stirring. He turned his attention back towards the others in time to catch a roundhouse kick across his stomach. The attack caused him to reel back a couple of steps, and his lips tightened in a grimace as he gritted his teeth. The blow had almost knocked the breath from his lungs, and was made all the more painful by the fact that

the center strap of the guards' sandals employed a series of thick studs. A little higher, and he probably would have ended up with a couple of cracked ribs. He twirled the churai about so that they extended from the tops of his fists in time to deflect an onslaught of cuts and thrusts from the attacking guardsman. Their blades rang against each other, echoing throughout the room.

The prince prided himself on his knife-fighting, and where the sentry took a more aggressive approach, he preferred to block and redirect the assaults, while slipping in quick slices and jabs of the weapons' fat tipped blades. He could have easily rendered the guard helpless, but didn't want to permanently injure him. However, he did inflict numerous gashes to the sentry's exposed upper arms and thighs. The king's man seemed to ignore the wounds, but he did become more guarded in his attacks. At one point, the sentry swung his right sword gauntlet down while stabbing forward with the left. In response, Kulthan raised his left churai while cutting down with his right. There was a clang of steel, and for a moment the two men were poised, straining their blades against those of the other. Suddenly the guardsman stepped towards the prince, throwing his head forward, butting Kulthan on the forehead with his face visor, and creating a loud thud. As the Gothosi prince fell back, he hopped in the air, drawing his knees to his chest, and kicked out. His legs shot forward in a double kick to the guard's face, and they both hit the floor on their backs. Popping off his shoulders onto his feet, Kulthan twirled his churai in his hands as he stepped forward. The guard was just sitting up, and the prince brought his blades down in a double cut, banging the spines of his churai on each side of the man's head near his temples. The force of the dual blows left dented

creases in the metal mask, and the sentry fell back, stunned.

“You bang my head, and I’ll bang yours,” Kulthan muttered, and then spat with annoyance.

MESMA DIDN’T KNOW what to do. Should she try to flee and raise the alarm that an intruder was present? The thought barely registered in her mind. She was frozen in place, watching the mysterious black garbed man and the Gothosi prince battle her guards. And she knew this was no mere formality. A shadow-fighter was present, which could only mean someone was going to die, and her guards meant to defend her with their lives. But had the assassin come for her or for Kulthan?

THREE GUARDSMEN CONVERGED on the shadow-fighter; two coming from his right and one from his left.

The assassin turned suddenly and ran through one of the archways letting out onto the balcony. The farthest sentry to his right quickly raced to the nearest opening, seeking to catch the mysterious man before he could escape. However, the black garbed figure didn’t dash out onto the balcony, but instead diverted towards the nearest pillar to his left. As the other two sentries closed in on him at a run, he leapt into the air, and for two bounding steps he ascended the pillar at a diagonal angle to his left. Pressing off his right foot, the shadow-fighter arced over the heads of the guards in a back flip, coupled with a half twist, to land facing them. The men spun about to lunge at him, each

weaving their sword gauntlets in an intricate pattern of slices as they came at him from each side. The shadow-fighter dipped and ducked as he twisted from side to side, all the while waving and circling his arms and hands before himself. His actions seemed almost slowly hypnotic in execution, the guards' gauntleted blades narrowly missing his body, though a couple of times they slashed through the loose material of his sleeves or pant legs.

The mysterious man spun to his right as he backed away, lightly skipping from foot to foot. Then he reversed his direction to swing his upper body down and to his left as he launched himself off his right foot. His body twirled horizontally through the air, passing between the slicing blades, and he landed on his right foot, now between the guards and the balcony once again. Without stopping he slipped his left foot back as he whirled in that direction and threw himself into a side flip, never touching the floor with his hands. At that moment, the third guardsman came rushing in from the balcony, his sword gauntlets held up and out to his sides. The shadow-fighter landed from his flip, and dropped into a backwards somersault towards the man. Rolling over onto his hands and left knee, the assassin lashed out with his right leg in an upwards back kick, his head and shoulders pressed almost to the floor. His foot buried into the pit of the man's stomach. The momentum of the blow folded the sentry almost in half, his feet flinging forward off the floor, so that he crashed down hard on the small of his back. The black garbed figure rolled to his left and onto his feet. The downed guardsman hastened to sit up, and as he did so he thrust his left sword gauntlet out in an attempt to either stab the assassin in the upper part of his right leg or slice the back of it, severing his hamstring. The masked man shifted his leg enough that the attempt slipped

between his legs, and then he deftly twisted his waist to his left to pivot in place, locking the sentry's arm between his legs. The maneuver hyper-extended the guard's elbow while at the same time creating a savage tug at his shoulder, causing him to yelp aloud. The shadow-fighter then snapped his right foot up, his leg folding at the knee, to deliver a short, vicious hook kick that drove his heel into the man's throat at the juncture where his neck met his jaw. The guard gagged from the impact as his upper body was flung back, and when his head hit the floor, he went limp.

The shadow-fighter swung his right foot forward to assume a posture that presented him in right profile; his weight resting on his rear foot, his left fist chambered high at his side, and his right hand open and extended, its fingers towards the ceiling, and its edge facing the other two approaching sentries. The guardsmen hesitated momentarily, but then rolled their shoulders in preparation as the assassin settled into his posture, beckoning them with a single nod of his hooded head.

MESMA WAS awestruck at the agility and speed of the shadow-fighter. He struck with skilled precision, and the effect of his techniques was devastating for the sentries. She also found it difficult to believe that he could deal with her guards so proficiently without the using any sort of weapon against their sword gauntlets, but she was bearing witness to that very fact.

THE GUARDSMEN HEADED the invitation and came at the black garbed figure diagonally from each side. He lunged towards the man to his left, but then lunged to his right towards the other, who was thrusting his right sword gauntlet as though in an attempt to stab the assassin in the neck. The shadow-fighter ducked his head, letting the attack pass along the top of the back of his shoulders. At the same time, he snapped his right elbow into the man's chest while swinging his left downward to the rear to then looped it back up, hooking his elbow inside that of the guard's. Slipping along the sentry's right side, he reached up with his right hand to hook his fingers together. At the same time, he wrenched the man's right arm over along the top of his left shoulder. The action dislocated the guard's right shoulder with a loud pop. The man's body jerked as he hollered out in surprise and pain.

Releasing the damaged arm, the assassin shoved backwards with his hips, propelling the injured sentry towards the other guard. The two men nearly collided, each managing to come to a skittering halt before doing so. Their pause was only momentary, for the shadow-fighter had turned to launch himself into the air, his body parallel to the floor and twisting to his left, to strike out with both legs together in a double kick to the back of the injured guard. The impact caused them to slam together, and both went down in a sprawl, one atop the other. They thrashed about for a moment, and the bottom guardsman was able to finally wriggle his way out from under the injured one as he strove to get to his knees. The mysterious man was on his feet, and he unleashed a powerful roundhouse kick with his right leg, his foot arcing across horizontally to smash into the right side of the hurt guardsman's head from behind. The man

fell over with such force, the left side of his head bounced off the floor, and his body sagged with unconsciousness.

The remaining sentry circled around to the assassin's right to then rush in with a flurry of slashes. The shadow-fighter danced about, shuffling his feet and weaving his upper body, avoiding the attacks until he saw an opening. As the guard's left sword gauntlet cut across to his right, the black garbed man stepped inside, slapping it by with a wave of his right hand. His left fist shot out, punching the sentry in the pocket of his left hip. The assassin peppered him along his left side with blows then; a right punch to the side, a left punch to the ribs, and then another right punch with the fore-knuckle extruded to the armpit. The result was the guard's left arm suddenly going numb and becoming useless. Undaunted, the man swung his right sword gauntlet across in the same manner. The shadow-fighter responded with the same tactic to the guard's right side, though with alternating hands; a right punch to the hip socket, a left punch to the side, a right punch to the ribs, and a left punch, fore-knuckle extruded, to the armpit. The sentry's right arm immediately dropped to his side as he let out an anguished grunt. Without hesitation, the shadow-fighter shuffled his feet so that his right one was to the front. He pivoted on the ball of his foot as he drew his left foot to the rear, the action complimenting the release of his right fist, which had been chambered at his side. His right arm shot up in a vicious uppercut, and his fist, the fore-knuckle again extruded, struck the man under his face visor at the junction of his jaw and throat. The sentry's head snapped back as he dropped to his knees. For a split second he remained erect, but then he collapsed backwards.

Turning away from his downed opponent, the assassin looked across the room to where the Gothosi prince was

battling the final guardsman. He then cut his eyes over to Mesma. She was as still as a statue, staring at him with wide eyes. He made no move towards her. Instead he returned his attention to the ongoing fight. He stood there watching it; his body relaxed, feet slightly spread, and hands out to his sides. Waiting.

KULTHAN and final sentry were in a duel of flashing blades, their honed edges singing as they sliced through the air. The Gothosi prince's speed was blinding as he countered the man's unrelenting attacks. Over and over, he narrowly blocked cuts and deflected thrusts of the sword gauntlets, and yet managed to slip in his own strikes to the guard's chest, protected by his leather jerkin, but finally Kulthan brought the fight to an end.

The sentry swung both his weapons across to his right in a horizontal slash, and Kulthan mimicked the action to catch both blades in the interior hook of his own, which extended from the tops of his fists. At the same time, he snapped his left foot in a low kick to the outside of the man's right knee. As the guard's leg folded, he dropped to one knee, and the prince quickly lifted his left hand up and then brought it down, clubbing the man in the center of his face visor with the pommel of the churai. Stunned, the sentry momentarily relaxed his assault, and Kulthan lunged away onto his left foot, only to lift it and deliver a front kick to the right side of man's head. The guardsman collapsed onto his left side and rolled to his back, where he remained, unmoving.

Grinning, Kulthan stepped back, twirling his churai deftly. His white teeth beamed as he smiled and looked

around. He noted Mesma staring at him, and he gave her a courtly nod. He looked to the shadow-fighter, still standing a short distance away, poised and relaxed. Then he paused, his smile faltering a little. His brow furrowed with consternation, one eyebrow lowered as the other rose, and he made a mental count. His head gave a little shake of disbelief, and he used one of his knives to point at each fallen guardsman. His smile disappeared as his shoulders fell slightly with disappointment, and he looked to the assassin.

“Hmmm, it seems you’ve bested me by downing five guards to my three,” Kulthan admitted.

The black garbed figure said nothing, merely twisting his open hands out to his sides, with the fingers splayed, towards the Gothosi man.

“Without use of a weapon at that,” Kulthan concluded from the gesture. “You must be quite the exceptional fighter.”

The mysterious man shrugged.

Kulthan nodded, his eyes narrowing. “Your name,” he demanded.

The shadow-fighter offered no response.

“I asked your name. Who are you?” the prince inquired as he strode towards the assassin. His hands were down at his sides, still idly twirling his churai.

The shadow-fighter remained silent, with only his eyes darting back and forth between the Cathari princess and the Gothosi prince.

“Shadow-fighters never speak,” Mesma said, her haunted voice carrying through the room.

“Because they can’t or they won’t?” Kulthan asked.

She shrugged. “I really don’t know. Some rumors say they are sworn to secrecy as a part of their code, never uttering a single word while on a mission, or if captured.

Other rumors say that once their training is complete, their tongues are cut out to prevent them from ever divulging the secrets of their clan.”

“I can make him talk,” Kulthan said with a soft voice of confidence.

“I doubt it,” she mused. Noting how the Gothosi prince dared to draw closer to the assassin, her own curiosity got the better of her, and she descended from the dais to move closer, too, though she cautiously retained some distance. She made a closer study of the shadow-fighter, and he studied her as well. She had no idea who this man could be, not that it mattered. Cutting her eyes over to Kulthan, she asked, “Have you another weapon?”

He shook his head. “Only my churai. What? You think to join in this fray?”

“I can protect myself, but I can’t use the sword gauntlets. Give me one of your blades.”

He chuffed at the idea. “I don’t think so. What do you know of combat?”

“You’ll be surprised to learn if you try to take me from this room,” she answered coolly. Turning her eyes to the assassin, she added, “As will he.”

Kulthan looked at her, his expression quizzical. “I seriously doubt either of us is buying that bluff,” he said, nodding to the mysterious man. “One thing is certain: he’s here for one of us. The question is: who is it?”

The three of them formed a loose triangle, eyeing one another. None of them spoke for a time.

Finally, Kulthan sighed and said, “Well, obviously we’re not going to get an answer. Run for help, girl, while I deal with this assassin.”

Mesma’s ire arose, and she frowned at the prince. “Don’t think to tell me what to do! You’re not my

husband yet, and never will be, for that matter. If you think..."

"Bah!" Kulthan snapped, cutting her off. "You need to leave this one to me. Think about it. Neither of us may be the primary target. It may be he made his way to the top of the turret, in order to descend, then locate and assassinate your father. You know this castle better than I. Go to your father, and raise the alarm. For all we know, other shadow-fighters may be infiltrating your home while we stand here arguing."

Mesma opened her mouth to retort, but then paused. The prince had a point. With a brief nod, she turned to hasten towards the stairway. It was then the shadow-fighter threw up his right hand in a stopping gesture.

"Ah! So one of us is the primary target," Kulthan surmised. He edged closer to the assassin and asked, "Who?"

Very slowly, the shadow-fighter turned his head to stare directly at the Gothosi prince, and then just as slowly he drew his hand across to point at Kulthan.

"So be it," the prince muttered. A tickle of panic raced through his body, but he quickly quelled it. Truth be told, he was excited to face a shadow-fighter. Stories of their fighting prowess had always interested him; and while he hadn't had a fair opportunity to witness this one in action, he was duly impressed by the man's besting five of the eight sentries, unarmed. The assassin would pose a challenge not to be underestimated. He hefted his churai, feeling the comfort of them in his hands as he began to ease towards his foe. "Know this, killer. You will speak before you die. I will know who sent you and why. And then..."

Kulthan paused in speaking as the shadow-fighter's hand slowly swiveled to point at Mesma.

“What?” she gasped. “It’s a ruse. He means to kill me and you together. Our deaths will pit your father against mine, so that the Cathari and Gothosi enter into war against one another.

Kulthan’s eyebrows knit together in consternation. Then his eyes widened. “Or he means to slay me and abscond with you.”

The shadow-fighter’s hand ranged back through the air to give the prince a ‘thumbs up’ gesture.

“No! I’ll die first,” Mesma stated.

“You’ll not die at all, princess,” Kulthan vowed. “I’ll hurl the carcass of this dog over the parapet.”

The eyes of the shadow-fighter narrowed as he gazed at the prince, and he turned his hand over in a ‘thumbs down’ signal.

Mesma glanced around. Should she run? Could Kulthan defeat the assassin? The very idea seemed unlikely. As had been pointed out, the black garbed figure had taken down five of the sentries without benefit of a weapon. Even as the thought entered her mind, her eyes darted over some of the fallen men, and a realization dawned on her. None of them were dead. She could faintly make out the rising and falling of their bodies as they breathed. She looked back up. So, did the assassin mean only to slay the Gothosi prince? “Wait,” she said.

“I wait for nothing,” Kulthan spat. “And I’ll meet this mangy cur on equal footing. When I kill a shadow-fighter, it won’t be said I had an advantage over him.”

As he moved to sheath his blades, the assassin motioned for him to stop. Then the mysterious man slowly pulled his jacket open to reach inside and extract something. It was a segment of thick sailor’s rope, black, and a little over two feet in length. The ends of it were tied in huge knots to give

them weight. He held the rope out, his hands at its center so that both ends dangled. Then he slid his hands along the rope until his fists butted against the knots, so that he held the weapon parallel to the floor at chest height.

A smile curled one corner of Kulthan's lips, and he gave his churai an eager twirl with each hand. "Seems an odd weapon of choice; and a poor one at that. Nevertheless, the selection is yours. Not only will I cut your rope in two, I'll hack off both your hands for even daring to think you could lay them on my betrothed."

Mesma opened her mouth to protest Kulthan's declaration, but then bit her lip as the two warriors began circling one another.

THE TWO MEN tracked to the right, eyeing one another cautiously. A few times Kulthan feigned attacks, darting in to execute a little jab or slice to test the defense of the black garbed figure. The shadow-fighter rarely gave ground, merely shuffling his feet and altering his forward hand, his rope ever stretched before him. On Kulthan's next effort, the assassin snapped his forward wrist, letting the taut rope slip from his other. The knot passed between the blades of the Gothosi prince, popping him soundly on the nose. Kulthan flinched away, but too late, and with one eye squinted shut from the sting as a small trickle of blood crept from one nostril, he regarded the mysterious man, whose rope weapon was once again stretched taut between his fists.

Not daring to show weakness and wipe away the blood that moved into his mustache, Kulthan rolled his shoulders to stay loose, and lowered his stance. Then with catlike

quickness he lunged in. He held the churai so that they extended from the bottoms of his fists along his forearms, protecting them. He jabbed with their pommels, but then at the extent of his reach, he would let the hooked blades flick forward in deadly little arcs. Just as quickly he would draw them back before the assassin could snare them with his rope. He faked a jab with his left churai, and then stepped through to throw his right foot up in a front kick. The shadow-fighter swung his right hand up, cutting an inward arc along his centerline to block the blow. Simultaneously, he swept his left hand down in the same manner to deflect the kick, the rope creating a diagonal line. Kulthan dropped his right foot to step forward as he punched across with his right churai, using the butt of it to strike his foe in the left side of the face.

The shadow-fighter twisted to his right, spinning in a blur, and snapped out a right hook kick, his leg sweeping up bury his foot in the exposed right side of the prince. The tactic brought Kulthan to a jarring halt, and he leaned back on his rear foot, dropping his right elbow to protect his side. The assassin flicked his right hand again as he came out of his spin, and the knotted rope end smacked Kulthan in the face once more. As the prince's head rocked back, the shadow-fighter was already swinging his weapon so that it cut the air in a pattern of horizontal figure eights. The knotted end beat against Kulthan's hands and forearms. Then the mysterious man spun to his left as he sunk to the floor in a cross-legged stance, whipping the rope to his left as he did so. The knot struck Kulthan on the inside of his right knee, causing it to buckle beneath him. The Gothosi twisted to his right as he dropped down, and threw his right leg out to arc behind him in a back sweep. The assassin was twisting himself back up out of his cross-legged posture, and

the prince's tactic took his feet out from under him. He hit the floor on his back and quickly rolled away, as the Gothosi prince sprang forward, stabbing downward with his blades, their tips gouging chips of marble from the floor as they struck. Kulthan crawled hurriedly after him, stabbing again and again, but the shadow-fighter always managed to roll aside just in time.

The assassin gained a little distance, and was pulling his knees up to his chest to pop off his shoulders and onto his feet, when Kulthan launched himself into a forward flip. He brought both of his heels down into the black garbed figure's chest just as he was coming off the floor, driving him back down. Landing on his back, the prince threw himself into a reverse somersault and hopped to his feet. The shadow-fighter had regained his own footing, and he was flailing the air with intricate patterns of his rope weapon in his right hand. Kulthan held back, wary of being struck in the face again. Then the assassin snatched the rope back so that its loose end swung beneath his right armpit, where he pinned it to his side beneath his arm. At the same time, he shifted his right foot back so that he stood in left profile to his opponent, his left hand extended.

The two men studied one another for a moment. Then the shadow-fighter turned his head to look at Mesma. She stood only a few feet away. So transfixed had she been by the fight that she didn't realize the combatants had moved so close to her. Now the intruder was little more than an arm's reach away. Their eyes locked, and she felt a terrifying thrill passed through her. Then he looked lazily away from her, and began to slowly circle to his left, drawing the Gothosi prince with him.

Kulthan tracked his foe, whipping the churai about so that they alternately extended from the tops and bottoms of

his fists. The shadow-fighter worked his rope in a pattern, swinging it over the shoulder of whichever hand held it, to reach across his chest and catch its free end as it looped beneath that arm with his other hand. Thus, his weapon alternated from hand to hand, always in motion. Catching one knotted end with his left hand, he flicked his arm out, snapping the rope towards the prince. The free-swinging knot narrowly missed Kulthan's chin, and it was snatched away before he could hack at it with one of his blades. The Gothosi man darted forward and away, jabbing his churai like striking serpents. Suddenly he threw a right side kick at the stomach of the assassin, who stepped back just out of reach. Kulthan dropped the foot down, using it to make a shuffling skip closer, and then pivoted left to snap the same foot out in a back kick. Again the black garbed figure avoided the attack, and this time as the prince dropped his foot down, he spun back to his right, swinging both blades across to his right, first the right and then the left. The shadow-fighter let the first churai pass, and then threw his left foot up to deliver an inside crescent kick to the inside of Kulthan's left wrist. The impact sent the blade flying a short distance to skitter across the floor.

The assassin let the momentum of his kick spin him to his right, and Kulthan quickly stabbed his right churai forward. However, as the intruder spun around, the rope in his right hand, he swung his weapon over and downward so that it fell across the top of Kulthan's right wrist, and looped around his forearm. Deftly side-stepping to his left as he caught the other end of the rope with his free hand, the shadow-fighter pulled at the knots, tightening the loop, and gave a savage tug to his right. Kulthan was pulled forward, slightly off balance. As the prince stumbled, the black garbed figure released the rope so that he could snap both

hands against his opponent's arm. His right hand hooked down against the top of the wrist as his left palm slapped against the elbow, the technique causing Kulthan's arm to lock, hyper-extending his elbow. The jolt of pain forced him to drop his other blade. In a flash, the assassin pivoted left on the ball of his foot as he swung his right knee across horizontally into the Gothosi prince's belly. Releasing the trapped arm of Kulthan to let him stagger back, the intruder then lashed his lower right leg out in a roundhouse kick to the same place on the man's stomach without setting his foot down.

Kulthan doubled over as he stepped back a few paces. His face was a grimace. Both of the assassin's blows had hit him in his lower ribcage, almost knocking the breath from him. He forced himself to stand upright, his brow furrowing in self-recrimination for being bested and stripped of his weapons. He flung his right arm downward, throwing the knotted rope to the floor, and then kicked it away. Glaring at the intruder, who was slowly creeping towards him, he rolled his head and shoulders a couple of times.

"I've heard tales that you shadow-fighters were a sneaky lot," Kulthan muttered.

The intruder gave no response.

This infuriated the prince, but he strove to keep his temper in check. "No matter; when it comes to unarmed combat, there are few Gothosi warriors who can go toe to toe with me in the sandpits."

The shadow-fighter lifted one hand, tapping his fingers against his thumb as he mimed someone incessantly speaking.

"What? Are you implying I talk too much?" Kulthan said indignantly. Then he muttered, "Well, you certainly aren't contributing to the conversation."

The assassin rolled his hand around, bidding Kulthan to come on, as the prince noticed the material across his face move outward in a sigh of exasperation.

Frowning, Kulthan moved forward to meet him.

THE GOTHOSI PRINCE was not a liar.

The combatants traded a few punches and kicks, each adroitly blocking or deflecting the other. Then Kulthan caught one of the intruder's punches, and pulled the man forward as he fell back. Still hanging onto his foe's arm, he jammed his feet in the assassin's hips, and tossed him over. With his arm trapped, the mysterious man couldn't simply go with the attack and flip over onto his feet. He was pulled so that he hit the floor on his back. Kulthan sat up and leaned forward onto his hands, to look back over his shoulder as he kicked out with both legs. The shadow-fighter had rolled over onto his belly, and was pushing himself up when the prince's booted feet slammed into his face. Again he was thrown back to crash to the floor, his feet flinging up in the air.

Both men scrambled to their feet. Kulthan was eager to press his advantage, and he threw a series of punches. The assassin avoided them, but as the prince spun around to deliver a back fist with his right hand, he raised his own to block it. With Kulthan facing away from him, the intruder hit him in the small of the back with a left palm strike, and executed another to back of the prince's head. The Gothosi man stumbled forward and spun to his left, his right fist hand drawn back, to face his foe. The shadow-fighter was moving in, but he checked up when he saw the raised fist, not wanting to run into a straight forward

punch. It was a ruse, however, and Kulthan's left fist looped out in a sharp hook to club the intruder across the right side of his face. The assassin's head snapped to his left, and at that moment, the prince's right fist shot forward in a straight line punch to the right side of his face again. Reeling away, the black garbed figure almost fell, and Kulthan followed after him to leap into the air, twisting his body to the left and lashing out with a left back kick. The intruder crashed to the floor, his head banging against the marble, to go sliding a short distance. When he stopped, he lay on his back, perfectly still, his limbs splayed out.

Kulthan eyed his fallen opponent warily as he edged closer, always at the ready. When the intruder didn't seem to be moving at all after a minute or so, he glanced over at Mesma. "Would you like to see who it is?" he asked.

She looked at him and frowned. "We won't know him."

Shrugging, he said, "No, probably not. But still, we could unmask him just to see what he looks like."

She considered the idea. It was intriguing, and her curiosity was certainly piqued. Looking at Kulthan, she shrugged and came a little closer.

The prince took that as her consent. He smiled at her and gave her a wink. "I mean, I've never heard of anyone unmasking a shadow-fighter. It will make for a great story to tell our children, eh?"

Mesma gave him a look of consternation. "No," she said flatly. "There will be no children."

"What? Of course there will be children."

"Impossible."

"How so?"

"I am not marrying you."

"Of course you are."

"I'd sooner use one of your blades and cut my own throat," she said in a seething voice. "Or better yet, yours."

Kulthan shrugged his eyebrows and gave a little shake of head. "Well, this will make for an interesting wedding night." When she began to protest again, he waved her remarks aside. "Just stay there. I'll unmask him, and we'll get a look at who this is. Then you can go and summon your father, while I bind him."

Whether she nodded or not, he didn't know. He moved over to the shadow-fighter, and began to bend over as he reached down with his right hand to grab the top of the man's hood. In a blur of motion that brought a startled shriek from Mesma, the assassin grabbed hold of Kulthan's hand while at the same time kicking both feet up. Hooking his left ankle over the prince's shoulder and across his throat, and planting his right foot in the man's armpit, the intruder leveraged the arm to pitch Kulthan over onto his side. The Gothosi prince had the presence of mind to reach down with his other hand and hook his fingers together with the trapped one. In this manner, when he landed, he kept the mysterious man from putting him in an arm bar, possibly breaking it at the elbow, or dislocating his shoulder. Having taken his opponent down, the shadow-fighter didn't fret with struggling to achieve the arm bar, and instead used his feet to shove the Gothosi man away. The two men both hurried to get on their feet.

The assassin launched an immediate attack as he came off the floor. Lunging forward on his left foot, he dropped low as he spun to his right, raking his right foot out in a back sweep. Kulthan nimbly hopped over it, but the intruder pressed himself off the floor and into the air, still whirling to his right. The prince expected a high jump-spinning kick with the same leg from his foe, but the shadow-fighter didn't

leap quite as high as he expected. The black garbed figure folded his right leg at the knee as he twirled, but then lashed out with it in another back sweep as he landed. The tactic knocked both of Kulthan's feet out to his left and into the air so that he hit the floor on his upper back and right shoulder with a resounding thud and a loud grunt. His right arm was pinned beneath him as he landed, jamming his own elbow into his side.

Kulthan gnashed his teeth as he struggled to get up. Lurching to his feet with a groan, his face blanched in pain. His ribs hurt, and his right arm felt a little numb. It had been a brutal fall, and he was having difficulty ignoring its effects, or playing them off. Still, he was a Gothosi warrior, a prince at that, and the pains of battle were no deterrent to him. Bringing his fists up as the shadow-fighter stepped near, he threw a left jab to drive his foe back.

The black garbed figure didn't shy away, but side-stepped to his right and forward, pivoting on the ball of his foot so that he was at a right angle facing the prince. Simultaneously, he caught the man's extended arm at the wrist with his left hand, while snaking his right hand beneath it to hook upward in a jarring palm strike to Kulthan's chin. As the Gothosi's head rocked back, the assassin whipped his right hand to left and then back in a hammer fist into Kulthan's solar plexus, causing the air to expel from the prince's lungs with a loud wheeze. Letting the man's arm go as he staggered back, the shadow-fighter lunged back a step onto his left foot as he spun in the same direction. As he rotated around to face the prince, he dipped forward at the waist, the weight of his upper body lending to his momentum as he launched himself into a butterfly kick. His body momentarily parallel to the floor, his right foot came up as he whipped around, to arc across and clip the

Gosthosi man on the left side of the face. As his right foot came down, his left foot rose off the floor to sweep across a split second later, clubbing Kulthan soundly on the side of the head.

The head of the prince twisted sharply to his right, forcing his upper body to follow, as the force of the kick lifted him off his feet and hurled him into a lazy twirl in the air. When he dropped to the floor, he bounced and rolled a couple of times, coming to rest on his belly. After waiting a few moments, the intruder stole cautiously over to the downed man and nudged him once or twice with his foot. Kulthan did not move. Then the assassin turned to face Mesma.

The mouth of the Cathari princess gaped open in shock. She then chewed at her lower lip before asking, "Did...did you kill him?"

Her eyes widened, and her sense of panic heightened, when the shadow-fighter started walking towards her.

MESMA HAD WATCHED THE BATTLE, mesmerized. When the shadow-fighter suddenly roused from his play at unconsciousness, she had a sinking feeling that Kulthan would ultimately end up losing. Not that she wanted him to win and whisk her away to be wedded. And certainly not that she wanted the intruder to make off with her either.

As she witnessed the final moments of the fight, her eyes fell on one of the Gothosi prince's blades that lay not too far from her. She debated taking it up, but hadn't. Now she wished she had, though she knew it would do her no good. Her bravado had faded as reality bloomed in her mind. In unarmed combat, she knew she was no match for

the shadow-fighter. Neither did she think she would fare very well even if she had a weapon. The two combatants had ended up on the side of the room near the balcony. She was close to the assassin, but also closer to the stairway than he. And the churai was only a few feet away. She could reach it well ahead of him, and if nothing else, use it to prevent him from carrying her off. How? By inflicting a mortal wound upon herself. But what if his intention was to kill her anyway? In taking her own life, she would only be performing his task for him.

None of it mattered. When she saw the black garbed figure start towards her, instinct kicked in. She ran for the stairway. She raced like a doe spooked by its hunter, and didn't bother glancing back, because she knew the assassin pursued her.

Indeed he did. He surmised her intent, and raced to cut her off from her escape route. He ran silently, his footfalls no louder than a whisper. Then he sprang into a cartwheel from which he launched himself into a series of back hand-springs. In this manner he practically flew across the floor, passing Mesma to execute a back flip and land facing her. She dodged to her right and he matched her, but then she dodged to her left. He reached out and grasped her right arm, but she twisted away from him. He spun around in the opposite direction, his right hand slipping into his left sleeve. For a split second, they faced one another, and that was all it took. The assassin's right hand waved through the air with a flourish, and a powdery white cloud blossomed before her face as she hastened by him. In less than half a dozen steps, she clumsily dropped to her knees to then sprawl ungraciously onto the floor.

The intruder went to his victim and rolled her on her back. He pressed two fingers to her throat, and felt the faint

pulse in her carotid artery. Scooping her up in his arms, he carried her out to the balcony, to the spot where his grappling hook was seated in the gap of parapet. He set her down gently, and then leaned out over the edge to snap loudly with his fingers. Stepping back, he waited.

A few moments later, another shadow-fighter climbed over the top of the parapet wall, a large coil of black rope looped over his shoulder. Together they bound the hands and feet of Mesma, and then used a black silk scarf to gag her. The second man pulled forth a large piece of folded material from inside his jacket. It was revealed to be a long sack when he unfolded it. The two men eased the Cathari princess into the sack, and tied off its top. Tying the second rope around the bagged girl, the two of them lowered her down two stories to where another pair of shadow-fighters waited on a narrow ledge along the turret. The pairs of assassins worked in relays until they had the girl on the ground. Then the shadow-fighter who had captured her, threw her sack-covered body over his shoulder, and the team of black garbed figures disappeared into the dark shadows of the surrounding forest.

THERE WAS a panic throughout the palace the following day.

The bodies of the downed guardsmen and the Gothosi prince weren't discovered until early the following morning. Each was questioned extensively in the presence of Terchul and Laghetta, and Kulthan's parents, King Rashell and Queen Sheza. Search parties were sent throughout the city, as well as into the surrounding areas, even the encampments of those who had come for the wedding.

No discovery was made, as none had suspected there would be. What the designs of the shadow-fighters were towards the Cathari princess were open to broad speculation. Was this something of their own doing or were they hired by another to perform the abduction? Was Mesma to be held for ransom or as political leverage in order to coerce Terchul, or even he and Rashell together, to take part in some other intrigue? And if Terchul acquiesced to either ransom or leverage, what guarantee would there be that the shadow-fighters or their patron would abide by the agreement; and Mesma be safely returned?

That Terchul was enraged would be to put things mildly. His face was perpetually reddened with the fiery blood of revenge. Laghetta had initially been almost inconsolable in her distress. It was she who determined that word should go out that the marriage was to be delayed. Now, later in the day, she refused to be excluded from any plans or arrangements for the safe return of her daughter. Whereas her beauty typically radiated, it was now haggard and pale with sorrow, something that incited Terchul's wrath all the more even as he felt compelled to comfort and reassure his wife. King Rashell was sympathetic and vowed every capacity of his aid to help the Cathari king. This was to be a marriage that benefited both peoples, and the Gothosi king was equally angered that his son's bride had been snatched away from him.

A messenger, arriving with a summons later that afternoon, was brought into a massive study where the royal couples had sequestered themselves. Unfurling the scroll in the presence of both the Cathari and Gothosi couples, along with Prince Kulthan, he read the invitation bidding them to join Fen Kan, the Zaikun of Panja, at his encampment that evening. After presenting the scroll to Terchul, who

dismissed him after a few questions, the king read over the contents again. He passed it to his wife for perusal, and she then passed it to the Gothosi king and queen.

“What do you take this to mean?” Rashell asked. It was easy to see that his son favored him in appearance, with the exception that the king’s blue-black hair and beard contained streaks of silver.

“I don’t know,” Terchul answered with a sigh. “The shadow-fighters are thought to be Panjan in origin. It may be that he has some information to impart to us regarding them, or how to deal with them. Maybe he seeks to offer his assistance in doing so on our behalf.”

“Or maybe he seeks a parley?” Rashell offered with a suspicious shrug of his eyebrows.

“A parley?” Terchul frowned. “Are you implying the zaikun may have been party to the abduction?”

“Is it possible?”

Scowling, the Cathari king paced. Fen Kan knew of the proposed marriage, but he would not interfere with it. And Terchul felt sure that there was no way any of the Gothosi royalty could have known about the budding romance between Mesma and Zaidun Fen Jun, the Panjan prince. “No. Fen Kan is a man whose honor means everything to him. He would kill himself before he would betray such a trust.” Then he eyed Rashell warily, as he added, “But it’s possible he knows the reason why the shadow-fighters stole my daughter, or who had her stolen.”

Rashell bristled and turned to face the king. “What’s this? Is it you who now make an implication against me? You think somehow that I am responsible for the disappearance of your daughter?”

“Are you?” Terchul demanded, waving Laghetta back as she sought to calm him.

“You dare accuse me of such?” Rashell fired. “And what would be my purpose?”

“A pretense; so that the Gothosi don’t have to enter into a peaceful truce by marriage.”

“Hah! Maybe it is a pretense so that the Cathari don’t have to enter into a peaceful truce with us. You have always despised the Gothosi.”

“What? You dare accuse me of staging my own daughter’s abduction to forego a wedded alliance? I answer to the Council of Kings of Cathari. I cross them at the risk to my own kingdom!”

Laghetta stepped between them, one hand outstretched towards each king to gently pat the air. “Please, my lords. Let us not set upon one another like rabid dogs. Speculation often only begets suspicion.”

“True words,” Queen Sheza said as she moved behind her husband and slipped an arm around one of his to draw him back.

“We can only wait, and see what the Zaikun of Panja has to say,” Kulthan offered from where he sat brooding in a chair, his fingertips pressed together to form a steeple at his chin.

“More true words,” Laghetta said, nodding in deference to the Gothosi prince. Sheza smiled gratefully to her for honoring her son in such a way.

“Aye,” agreed Rashell, eyeing the Cathari king.

“Aye,” Terchul replied, his gaze still filled with wariness.

THE CATHARI and Gothosi royal couples, along with Prince Kulthan, were ushered into the center of a palatial

tent in the center of the Panjan encampment. Their entourage of guards was forced to remain outside. Neither Terchul nor Rashell were happy about having to do that, especially as their wives were with them, but a Panjan captain assured them that the Zaikun Fen Kan was committed to their safety.

The tent was huge and round, spanning almost fifty feet in diameter, and held aloft by thick beams, with rooms sectioned off by extravagantly embroidered curtains. Rugs of Oriental designs covered the ground, providing a comfortable surface. Ornately carved chairs of teak were set in an array forming a half circle before a large chair. It, too, was made of teak, cushioned, with clawed feet and arms. There sat the Zaikun of Panja, the man known as Fen Kan. He was partially bald, with long, thin hair that was jet black and plaited in a braid that draped over his left shoulder. A lean, wiry man, he was dressed in black pants and boots, and wore a thick coat embroidered with tigers, belted with a red sash. His face was relatively free of wrinkles, making him appear timeless, and he sported a short beard and wispy mustache, the ends of which reached down to his chest. He rose to meet his guests, clasping his left hand over his right fist, and offering them a bow. Behind him were two serving girls, dressed in flowery robes, and they, too, offered short bows. They appeared to be the only occupants in the room.

Terchul and Rashell imitated his greeting, and their wives merely nodded to him as they gave a short curtsy. He bid them to be seated. Once the royal couples and the prince had done so, the serving girls hastened to bring them trays of hot tea. Once everyone was served, a formal exchange of toasts and blessings was made, and they all sipped in a salutation to one another.

The formalities concluded; Terchul wasted no time in asking, "Have you some news for me?"

Emitting a calm sigh, Fen Kan said, "I do."

Glancing eagerly at his wife, who sat up anxiously, Terchul said, "Please, don't keep us in suspense. Any further delay places our daughter Mesma in greater danger."

Fen Kan extended a hand and patted the air, a look of assurance on his face. "The girl is in no danger, and won't be."

Confused, Laghetta spoke up. "How can you know that? She was taken by a shadow-fighter."

"Yes, assassins renowned for their ruthlessness and cruelty," Kulthan interjected.

"Their reputation is fearsome; it is so," the zaikun said.

"Then how can you know she has not been harmed, or won't be?" Terchul demanded. Suddenly his eyes widened with realization, and he jumped to his feet. "You know the one who has her!"

"I do," Fen Kan confessed with a nod.

The calm demeanor of the zaikun infuriated the Cathari king, and he took a lunging step forward, his hands rising up as his fingers stiffened into claws. Whether or not he intended to follow through with his urge to take hold of the Panjan ruler, and forcibly extract the information from him, was quickly held in check. Four black garbed Panjan soldiers appeared from behind different curtained partitions, armed with short bows; their arrows notched, drawn, and trained on Terchul. The two queens gasped as they sat back anxiously. Rashell and his son both leaned forward, their bodies tense, and their eyes darting about.

Again Fen Kan patted the air. "Please, King Terchul. Calm yourself, and be seated."

Terchul was reluctant to do so, regardless of the guards aiming arrows at him. Laghetta stood up to tug at his elbow, and coax him back to his seat. Begrudgingly, Terchul complied, but his face was dark red, his wrath on the verge of spilling forth. Waving a couple of fingers at his guards, who then lowered their weapons and returned behind the curtains, the zaikun then lightly clapped his hands twice.

A curtain flap behind him was pulled aside, and a shadow-fighter stepped forward, his hand clasped around the wrist of Mesma to lead her in. They took a position standing just off to the right side of Fen Kan. The princess still wore the same clothes. Her expression was unreadable, but she did not act in any way timid or afraid; merely demure and stoic.

Both Terchul and Laghetta had risen to their feet, as had Kulthan, whose mother waved to him to sit down. The Gothosi prince ignored her, pointing an accusing finger at the shadow-fighter. "You and I will cross swords, and your head will be my wedding gift to my bride!"

"There will be no crossing of swords," Fen Kan said. "Why should you die a bachelor?"

Kulthan glared at the zaikun, and was about to threaten him also when his father rose up to take hold of his arm and pull him back. The prince blustered and snatched himself free, as Rashell cautioned him, "Calm yourself."

"What is the meaning of this?" Terchul demanded of Fen Kan. "You've had her all along? Why didn't you relate this in your message?"

"Child, come here," Laghetta pleaded, extending her arms to embrace her daughter.

Mesma did not move, and after a moment she merely shook her head.

"No?" her mother gasped.

“Release my daughter to me this instant,” Terchul commanded.

Fen Kan turned to glance at her and shrugged. “She is free to do as she pleases.”

“Come,” Laghetta pleaded, but when her daughter again shook her head in refusal, her face clouded with a look of desperation and sadness. “No? But why?”

Cutting her eyes over to Kulthan, Mesma said in a firm and quiet voice, “I won’t marry him.”

The Cathari king’s gaze narrowed on the zaikun. “This is your doing. What are you scheming?”

“I assure you, King Terchul. I am innocent of all this. In fact, I was just as surprised to find your daughter within my camp as you are.”

“Then how came she to be here if you had nothing to do with it?”

“Because I am the one responsible,” Mesma confessed. Then glancing at the shadow-fighter beside her, she added, “Well, partly so.”

The Cathari couple gave one another a perturbed look, and the queen said, “We don’t understand.”

“No, we don’t. And I want to know who that is,” Terchul said with an edge to his voice, pointing at the assassin.

“Shadow-fighters do not reveal their identities,” Rashell said.

“No, they do not,” Fen Kan said.

Terchul was done. He’d had enough, and he stepped forward, thumping himself on the chest with his fist. “I want answers, and I want them now. I mean no disrespect to you, zaikun. This is your camp, but I remind you that you presently reside in Cathari territory. My daughter was kidnapped from her betrothed, and now refuses to return to

us. The betrothal was determined years ago, and any interference on your part is a serious infraction on that agreement. It is cause for war." Looking to Mesma, he said, "Your duty is to your kingdom and your king, who is your father. It is not your place to break the agreement. I know you're not happy with the arrangement, but you will learn to be. Now, return to my and your mother's side."

Mesma did not move.

"That is a command," Terchul growled through gritted teeth.

Everyone was silent, waiting for Mesma to obey. For a few moments, she stood stoically, but it seemed her resolve began to incrementally erode. Her body swayed towards her parents. Then with a bowed head and a sad sigh, she started to step towards them.

Immediately the shadow-fighter slipped in front of her, one hand thrown low as a barricade.

Terchul glowered at the mysterious man. "You dare?" he seethed with violence.

For a heartbeat, no one moved. Then the shadow-fighter reached up to pull the hood and cowl from his head. "I dare," said the Zaidun, Fen Jun, prince of Panja.

Gasps and mutters of shock erupted from the royal couples and the Gothosi prince.

Fen Jun was a handsome young man of Oriental caste, even with the smearing of black facial paint across his face. A shock of jet black hair hung down to the tip of his nose. His eyes were as dark as a pit, and the hint of determination tinged his lips.

Terchul looked incredulously from Fen Kan to his son and back, his gaze finally settling on Fen Jun. "It was you who interrupted the ritual, and stole away my daughter."

"He did not steal me away," Mesma said, pressing

against the back of the zaidun's shoulder. "I sent for him to come and rescue me."

"Rescue you?" Terchul grunted in disbelief.

"Yes," she said, and shifted around to stand beside the Panjan prince. "I had a sneaking suspicion that my letters were not reaching Fen Jun, just as his were no longer reaching me. I dispatched a messenger to Panja a few weeks ago, to get word to him about what was to take place. I begged him to come and get me. I instructed the messenger to make sure that no one else received the letter. Then I waited for a reply, but none ever came. I was certain my plea had failed to reach him."

"But it didn't," Fen Jun said, looking at her with adoration in his eyes.

"You assured me he was out on a mission that would keep him away from the wedding proceedings," Terchul said to Fen Kan, who merely shrugged and tossed up his hands, implying his lack of knowledge.

Fen Jun responded, "I was away on a mission, and that mission was here. I was preparing to infiltrate the castle to see Mesma. I and my team intercepted her messenger, when we saw he was taking the route to Panja. Learning the date of the ritual allowed me time to properly plan how I might secure her."

When Terchul looked to Fen Kan, the zaikun held up a hand. "I assure you, I knew nothing of this. I only learned of it this morning when my son brought your daughter to me. And I was not happy. I value your trust, Terchul."

"Oh, do you?" the Cathari king spat doubtfully.

Laghetta looked to her daughter with sympathetic eyes. "Mesma, I know you're..."

"I'm not leaving him," the young woman said emphatically.

“Now see here...” Terchul began.

“Swords!” Kulthan snapped, blasting a cold stare at Fen Jun. His body bristled with the need to regain his honor at the defeat of his rival.

The face of the zaidun was passive as he studied the Gothosi prince. Then the vestige of cool smile crept into one corner of his mouth.

“Please, please, there may be a peaceful way to settle this,” Fen Kan said.

“And what might that be?” Terchul chuffed indignantly. “How can there be any peace when you would suggest compounding one breach of trust with another? Mine is not the only kingdom being wronged.” He glanced over at King Rashell, who nodded.

Kulthan chewed his lower lip, clenching and unclenching his fists as he stared balefully at Fen Jun.

Fen Kan smiled calmly and nodded his head. “I understand your reservations, but it may be that what you both perceive as a breach of trust can instead be turned into a blossoming of trust.”

Rashell scowled. “A blossoming?”

Again Fen Kan nodded. “Please, be seated. Let’s enjoy some tea.” He softly clapped his hands once. The two servants immediately moved to his side. “Bring extra chairs for the princess and the zaidun. And then go and fetch Fen Zuyah.”

IT WAS late in the evening when the matter was settled.

The wedding would go forth as planned. Except that it would be Mesma and Fen Jun who were to be married the following day. In this way, the arrangement was mutually

beneficial for the Cathari and Panjan kingdoms, and the young lovers.

Fen Zuyah, one of the zaikun's exotically beautiful daughters, was presented to the Gothosi royal couple and their son. It was easy to see that Kulthan's wrath was immediately quenched, and that he was smitten the moment he saw her. A betrothal agreement was struck between Fen Kan and Rashell. A one year courtship would take place, during which Fen Zuyah would dwell in Rahsell's kingdom for six months, at which time Kulthan would escort her back to Panja, where he would stay the following six months. In this way, each of them would come to have a basic, but thorough, understanding of the culture of the other, and it would give them time together.

The only bond left untied was between kingdoms of Cathar and Gothos.

Terchul sighed. "I have a son, but he is too young to be committed in a betrothal."

Rashell nodded. "I have a daughter, who is too young for such as well. However, I proposed a sort of cultural exchange such as Kulthan and Fen Zuyah will have. Shortened, of course. Maybe a few months each year, one may spend time in the kingdom of the other, until they are of age to be betrothed."

Laghetta and Terchul looked at one another, and she nodded. "That actually sounds like a good idea."

The king nodded his consent. The royal couples prepared to leave. The eyes of Kulthan and Fen Zuyah lingered on one another, as the parties bid their farewells until the wedding. Terchul beckoned for his daughter to come along.

Mesma stepped from Fen Jun, and where their hands had been clasped together, their fingers were reluctant to let

go. She smiled at him, her eyes bright and happy. "Tomorrow, my love," she said with an eager sigh.

"I could come for you again," he said. A smile of confident readiness spread upon his lips.

"Like the night before?" she teased.

"Like the night before," he said, with a solemn nod, his smile never wavering.

The end

ABOUT SCOTT BLASINGAME

As a writer, Scott Blasingame strives to bring forth interesting characters with good development, plots filled with tension and intrigue, and thrilling action scenes containing intricate fight sequences that take the reader into the heart of combat. He also likes to construct heroic characters with a sense of morality and honor, though still subject to moments of flawed human decisions and actions.

An avid reader since childhood, his primary influences are Zane Grey, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Robert E. Howard, but he also enjoys biographies, autobiographies, ancient history, and the works of Dennis Lehane, Lee Child, Andrew Vachss, Stephen King, and Robert McCammon to name a few. He also believes comic books are a form of literature. He is a film buff, especially of the martial arts genre, and a big fan of animation fare. He has served in the U.S. Army, worked as a land surveyor and photographer, and at one point studied Northern Shaolin Kung Fu for almost 10 years. He is blessed with a lovely, patient wife, two wonderfully witty teenage daughters, and a cat named Sammo, who thinks he helps with the writing.

Scott Blasingame is the author of "The Warrior-Son", a trilogy nearing its completion, which is an adventure/fantasy saga, and "The NightDragon", an ongoing superhero series. He also writes horror ("The Act" and the new "Wolf & Witch" series) as well as other fictional and nonfictional works.

His two offerings for the anthology are "The Kempo Kid" and "The Night Before".

Scott Blasingame's books are available as both ebooks and paperbacks on Amazon.

KYLE FISKE



NOTE FROM KYLE FISKE

KYLE FISKE

For the two stories I wrote for *Fists of Fiction*, I set them both in the same universe as my historical fiction/martial arts adventure novel *Dragons and Boxers*. And in fact, characters from that novel make an appearance in both stories.

“A Share of the Gate” is the story of two Buffalo Soldiers (the nickname for soldiers serving in the several all-black infantry and cavalry divisions of the United States Army) who find themselves in Tianjin, China, in 1900, just weeks after the devastating events of the Boxer Rebellion. In a public prize-fight against an aging kung fu master, Sergeant Clayton Brooks is in his element. But when American expatriate Wayland Cooper gives him some inside information on the background of his Chinese opponent, his moral dilemma begins.

“The Beggar and the General” tells the tale of young Gao Jinhai, a teenaged kung fu student in Shanxi, China, in 1865. Many strange characters are roaming about in the aftermath of the catastrophic, nation-rending clashes of the Taiping Rebellion, and Jinhai’s kung fu master has always

stressed the importance of bravery and standing against injustice. Still, when Jinhai puts that advice into practice and challenges a petty thief, he soon learns that he's in for a fight more deadly than he could have ever imagined.

THE BEGGAR AND THE GENERAL

KYLE FISKE

Fenchow, Shensi Province, China. March 1867

Gao Jinhai sat cross-legged on the worn cobblestones of the largest courtyard of Master Han's compound, along with his fourteen classmates. Today was the day he would challenge Bingwen. It would surprise the others, no doubt, all except his older brother, who had been helping him prepare in secret. Jinhai swallowed hard, and his mouth was dry.

This compound was where most of the martial arts training occurred. As a matter of habit, Master Han always had his students sit down at the start of class, and he talked to them. Sometimes he spoke for ten minutes and sometimes for an hour. One never knew exactly what the subject would be; he might talk about the nuances of Taoist philosophy and its relation to martial arts, he might recite some verses of an obscure Tang dynasty poet, and he would occasionally tell a vaguely lewd joke. Often he would remind his pupils of some of the principal differences between the various styles of Chinese martial arts. But today was one of his favorite topics: morality.

"What does it mean to be a man? To be a human being?" Master Han asked. He paced back and forth slowly, with measured strides. He was almost fifty, and he had a martial artist's build--not tall, but stocky and powerful. He was clean-shaven, but more than a few strands of gray hair appeared among the black.

There was an old wooden chair to the left of Master Gao, and sitting in that was Teacher Wu, Master Han's assistant. Nobody had too firm an idea of exactly how old Teacher Wu was, and guesses ranged anywhere from thirty to fifty. Wu leaned back in his chair, slowly rocking against the wall as he smoked his pipe.

Jinhai raised his hand, and Master Han nodded. "A man should live a moral life," Jinhai said.

"And why should a man do that?" Master Han asked.

Jinhai opened his mouth to speak but then became less confident of his response, and he remained silent.

The young woman Huifong raised her hand. She was one of only two female students in the school. "The life of the moral man is an exemplification of the universal moral order. The life of the vicious man is a contradiction thereof."

Master Han smiled. "That is what Confucius has told us, indeed, Huifong. But how does one even know how to be moral?"

"By listening to one's heart," another student offered.

"Perhaps," Master Han said. He paced slowly, gathering his thoughts. "Each man is born with a knowledge of right and wrong, that is a fact. But that knowledge is imperfect, and one may easily deceive oneself. We often tell ourselves what we want to hear, do we not?"

"We learn from the teachings of our parents and of our elders," Bingwen said. His voice was deep and confident.

"But did not the previous generations sometimes fall

from the narrow path of righteousness? Did they not go astray, and on occasion, even do terrible things? Should we take their ideas without question?"

Bingwen lowered his eyes. He had no answer. Jinhai was glad to see him knocked down a notch.

"We have the writings of the sages," Jinguo said. Jinguo was Jinhai's older brother. Naturally strong and athletic, and with a sharp mind, he was the most skilled of all the students, even better than Bingwen; his ability was almost on par with that of Teacher Wu, perhaps even of Master Han himself. "The Lord Buddha, Lao Tzu, and Confucious, and others."

"What do you say to that, Teacher Wu?" Master Han asked his assistant.

Teacher Wu took a long draw from his pipe and slowly exhaled. He kept rocking in his chair but paused for a moment as he gathered his thoughts. "Much wisdom is to be found there, no doubt," he finally said. "But do not even the writings of these wise men sometimes contradict one another?"

Master Han raised his eyebrows and nodded.

Jinhai spoke again. "But Master Han, then how *does* one live a moral life?"

Master Han stopped pacing and turned to Jinhai. He paused for a moment and then raised his index finger. "Here is what I will tell you: this is the most important question of your life. Don't ever stop seeking the answer to this question."

Jinhai's brow furrowed, and the rest of the students were silent.

Master Han chuckled. "But for now, remember these words that a Taoist master once said to the Tang emperor: 'Who governs his body, governs the country.' One must

always strive to defend the good and defeat the evil, and to do so one needs courage, strength, and skill. These things can be trained. Find your partner and let's begin our warm-ups."

JINHAI STOOD and stretched with the others. It was a typical March day in Shensi, cool but pleasant with a bright blue, cloudless sky. The chill of winter was a fading memory, and the tantalizing promise of spring was in the air.

"Do you want to be my partner?" Huifong asked as she walked up to him.

Jinhai nodded and smiled. They were usually partners, and Jinhai thought that at this point, it would be understood, but she always asked him anyway.

She nodded and took her position next to Jinhai. Master Han then led them and the others through their usual warm-ups. They jogged in place for a minute, then twisted their waist and let their arms swing around behind their back. They stretched their arms as far as they could up in the air and then turned from side to side.

As Huifong stretched, Jinhai couldn't help but cast a glance at her. She was twenty, two years older than he. She wasn't strikingly beautiful, but she had a confidence and charm that drew the attention of most of the other young men in the class. She paid them little attention.

For some reason, though, she had taken a liking to him. Some of the others teased him about it, asking his secret, and Jinhai just smiled and shrugged. He knew part of the answer: they shared a sense of humor, and conversation between them came easily. But part of him knew the other

reason: that she saw him as harmless. Even the thought of flirting with her, like the others did, made him blush. So he didn't flirt. He was polite and respectful, and she liked that.

"Get your swords and work on the two-person drills," Master Han called out.

The seven pairs of students each had their wooden swords in hand, and they faced off against their partners.

"Huifong, why don't you ever want to be my partner?" Bingwen said loudly. "There's a lot I could teach you... and I'd be very gentle." He laughed in a mocking tone.

"I don't think I'd learn much from you," Huifong quickly replied.

"Well, you're sure not going to learn anything from him," Bingwen said, casting a glance at Jinhai. Several of the other students laughed.

"Bingwen, that's enough," Master Han said. He didn't shout, but his tone of voice made his point clear. The grin faded from Bingwen's face, and he nodded slightly, accepting the correction of his teacher.

Still, Jinhai felt his face flushing in anger.

"Let's just practice," Huifong said. "He's an idiot. Don't pay any attention."

Jinhai knew that Huifong meant well, but her desire to protect him felt even more humiliating. He clenched his teeth as he took his position opposite Huifong.

"Let's start with the third form," she said, and Jinhai nodded.

They took their positions opposite each other.

"You attack," Huifong said.

Jinhai stepped forward with a medium speed thrust towards Huifong's midsection, and she stepped backward and deflected Jinhai's sword to her left. She then stepped forward with her right leg to stab at Jinhai's stomach, and he

stepped back and deflected just as she had. They continued this drill, alternating back and forth between offense and defense.

Master Han and Teacher Wu walked around among the students, observing their practice.

"Remember," Master Han said as he walked with his hands folded behind his back, "the sword is a different weapon than the saber. The saber has one edge, and its use relies on strength and bravery. The sword is double-edged, and its use requires skill and cunning. Do not use the techniques of one when you're wielding the other."

Jinhai and Huifong continued their drill as Teacher Wu walked up to them. He stood there puffing his pipe as the two went back and forth.

"Ah, no," Teacher Wu said. He shook his head.

"What is it?" Huifong asked.

"Start again," Teacher Wu responded, and the two started the drill again with Jinhai stabbing at Huifong's stomach.

"Stop," Teacher Wu said. He took out his pipe with his left hand and motioned for Jinhai to hand him the wooden sword.

"Ready?" he asked, and Huifong nodded. Teacher Wu then thrust the wooden sword at her midsection. She tried to deflect it as she had been doing, but it made its way through her defenses and struck her; she groaned.

"Now, did I thrust at full speed, or with full power?" Teacher Wu asked, looking at the two of them.

"No," Huifong responded, and Jinhai shook his head.

"No, I did not," Teacher Wu said. "But I stabbed firmly and directly at my target." He turned to Jinhai. "When you were thrusting at her, you were doing it lazily, and not even trying to hit her, isn't that so? This training is to develop

your skill and responses. You're not doing her any favor by making it easier for her. Because when somebody really does try to hit her, like I just did, she won't be able to stop it, right?"

"Yes, teacher," Jinhai said.

"Don't go too fast, and don't try to injure your partner, but when you attack make sure that if they don't deflect your strike properly, they will be hit. This," he said, hitting the wooden blade of the sword against his palm, "can be a very good teacher."

Huifong nodded.

"But don't let him bully you," Teacher Wu said to her, smiling. He handed Jinhai back his wooded sword.

"Jinhai wouldn't bully me," Huifong said as she cast a warm glance towards her partner.

"No," Teacher Wu said. "I don't suppose he would." He clapped Jinhai on the shoulder and moved on to the next pair.

The students practiced their drills for the next hour, alternating patterns and techniques and refining their skills.

Finally, Teacher Wu clapped his hands three times. "All right, enough practice. Form a circle. Time for sparring," he said.

The students bowed to their partners and then sat down cross-legged, their wooden swords at their sides. They formed a ring some twenty feet in diameter.

"Bingwen, please enter the circle," Master Han said, and Bingwen bowed and came forward. "Bingwen was the winner from our last session, so he will begin this one. Anyone who wishes to challenge him can please step forward. The rules are the same: if you win, you stay in the ring, and if you lose, you sit down and watch."

Jinhai's heart began pounding. He knew if he waited a

moment or two, his older brother or one of the other senior students would stand up to challenge Bingwen; it was customary for the older, more skilled students to engage in the sparring matches, even though the challenge was open to all. He glanced over at Huifong; her eyes were fixed on Bingwen.

"I'll try," Jinhai said as he stood up.

Some murmurs and whispers came from the other students. Master Han raised his eyebrows and then nodded. He looked over at Teacher Wu, who flashed him a grin.

"Jinhai, you shouldn't..." Huifong said quietly.

Jinhai spun his wooden sword around with his left hand so that the grip pointed down and the tip was behind his shoulder, and he entered the ring.

"You can do it," came a whisper from among the students, and Jinhai recognized the voice of his older brother.

Bingwen had a bemused expression on his face as Jinhai approached; he appeared to be stifling a laugh. Still, he followed the formalities and bowed to Jinhai.

Jinhai bowed back. He raised his head and looked Bingwen in the eyes, and his expression made the smile fade from Bingwen's face.

Teacher Wu entered the ring to judge the match, and he had his usual half-grin on his face. He looked first to Bingwen and then to Jinhai. "Now you both know the rules. Full speed techniques are permitted, but full power is forbidden. Control your power. Remember that you are classmates and that this match is an opportunity for both of you to learn; we don't want any broken bones. No strikes to the head. Is that clear?"

Jinhai nodded, but Bingwen showed no reaction as he stared at Jinhai.

"Bingwen, is that clear?" Teacher Wu asked again, and his tone was sharp.

Bingwen nodded without taking his eyes off Jinhai.

Teacher Wu stepped back. "Begin."

Jinhai flipped his sword from his left hand to his right, and he pressed the index and middle finger of his left hand to the wrist of his right hand. He held his weapon with a firm but relaxed grip, as he had been taught, with the tip pointing at his opponent's face.

Relax. Stiffness and crude strength are no good. Be natural and smooth, and let the chi flow through the relaxed body. The mind leads the chi.

The words flowed through his consciousness, the principles he had learned, and his intellect recognized them. But then Jinhai looked down and saw that his hand was gripping the handle of the sword so tightly that his whole forearm was shaking.

Your plan. Just execute it.

For the last week, Jinhai had been planning for this bout, and he had a repertoire of attacks at the ready. But it seemed as if his heart was beating so loudly that it was drowning out everything, muffling his thoughts and dulling his action.

Think! Be clear. Remember the first attack. Just do it. Do it now.

Jinhai stepped forward and came in low, delivering a backhand slash at Bingwen's right knee. But he leaned too far forward and exposed his upper body. Bingwen stepped back to avoid the cut and saw the clear target in front of him. He brought his own sword down to strike the top of Jinhai's shoulder, confident that this would both end the bout and cause a good deal of pain to Jinhai.

Jinhai, however, was planning on precisely that

response from his opponent. His attack had been a feint, and as Bingwen struck down with his wooden weapon, Jinhai snapped back up and brought his own sword around with the point facing towards the ground. With a windmill motion, he deflected Bingwen's strike and came around with a strong slash of his own to Bingwen's shoulder. His accuracy was off, however, and even though he had caught Bingwen off guard, his strike fell a couple of inches short of its target and his wooden blade passed harmlessly by Bingwen's shoulder and chest, finding no purchase.

Bingwen snapped his head back, realizing that it was only by fortune that the young upstart had failed to hit him. He wasn't able to completely conceal the expression of dumbfounded surprise on his face.

Jinhai vaguely heard Teacher Wu cackling in glee at the exchange, and while he appreciated that, he still knew that he had missed his golden opportunity.

Bingwen's left eye twitched, and his gaze narrowed as he regained his composure. He slowly extended his wooden sword's tip toward Jinhai's head as he stepped towards his opponent with steady, measured paces. There would be no holding back now.

Jinhai brought his blade back to a defensive position, with his left index and middle finger pressing on his right wrist, supporting his sword arm. As he paced backward, he knew his best chance for a victory had slipped away. He pointed his sword tip at the advancing Bingwen.

Bingwen slashed down at Jinhai's shoulder, and Jinhai flinched. Bingwen smiled, and instantly Jinhai understood that it was just a feint, that he was still too far out of range to make contact.

Jinhai swallowed, but his mouth was dry. "Relax, remember your training," came encouragement from the

students, and Jinhai again heard the voice of his older brother Jinguo. Jinhai gritted his teeth and exhaled deeply as he squared up again to his foe.

Bingwen came in fast and with the same technique that he had feinted with a moment before. Jinhai turned his waist and used the flat of his blade to deflect Bingwen's downward slash to the left, and then he shot back with a palm-down, horizontal cut to the right. Bingwen was ready for it, and he withdrew just out of range of Jinhai's cut. He came back in with a lightning-fast "pi" cut. Jinhai instantly recognized that his sword hand was the intended target, but he couldn't withdraw quickly enough. Bingwen's wooden sword tip smashed down on Jinhai's knuckles.

The pain was searing and seemed to course like electricity from his hand to his whole upper body. He heard several exclamations from the crowd, and he distinctly made out Huifong's shout of "oh!" He could barely feel his hand, but he half-surprised himself when he looked down and saw that he was still holding his sword. Master Han's teaching echoed in his mind: "Above all else, one must never lose hold of one's weapon in a fight." He could still retain some dignity in this match, even if he wasn't going to win.

His meager accomplishment was short-lived, however. Bingwen rushed in again, and with the flat of his blade, he delivered an explosive beat to Jinhai's sword, sending it flying out of Jinhai's hand. The wooden sword clattered on the cobblestone.

Bingwen smiled triumphantly and lowered his weapon, but Jinhai wasn't ready to concede. He darted to his left to retrieve his weapon, but Bingwen wasn't going to be denied his victory. He rushed over, and just as Jinhai bent down to pick up his sword, Bingwen cut hard and struck Jinhai on the lower buttocks with a loud smack. Jinhai reflexively

stood straight up and brought his hands back and down to protect his backside from another such strike. Laughter erupted from the other students, and Bingwen started in to deliver another blow.

"Bingwen, that's enough!" Master Han shouted, stopping the action. He wasn't smiling. "The match is over, both of you sit down."

"Might not be that easy for Jinhai," one of the students muttered, and this elicited a few more laughs.

Bingwen was still grinning as he nodded to Master Han and sat down with some of the other students. Jinhai picked up his sword from the cobblestone of the courtyard. He made his way back to sit next to Huifong, and his face burned as he saw her still laughing with the others.

"Are you okay?" she asked, still smiling but with sincere concern.

"I'm fine," Jinhai said. He didn't appreciate her pity any more than her laughter. He sat down next to her.

"Don't worry about it," she said. Her smile faded. "You almost had him at the beginning. And he's had a lot more training than you, too."

Jinhai didn't respond. His anger was palpable as he observed the next students enter the ring and begin matches. He stared coldly at the combatants, but nothing registered. His mind kept replaying his contest with Bingwen and the humiliation he felt. He was aware of his classmates' occasional laughter and cheers as they observed the following bouts, and at one point, Huifong nudged him with her elbow, but Jinhai's expression was as hard as the cobblestones underneath him. He just wanted the class to be over.

Finally, after the last bout ended, Master Han motioned for all the students to stand. Jinhai rose along with the

others, and after Master Han gave his customary words of encouragement, he dismissed class for the day.

"I'll see you next class," Huifong said. She flashed her usual warm grin as if nothing was amiss.

Jinhai grunted a vague response and turned away from her. He strode towards the main gate, still fuming.

His brother approached him and made eye contact; he had something to say. Jinhai gritted his teeth and shook his head. He didn't want to talk.

HE WALKED out of the gate and onto the street. He crossed over to the main avenue of Fenchow and made his way to the market area. With clenched teeth, he walked briskly through the crowded streets, and he replayed the bout with Bingwen in his mind. He cursed under his breath as he envisioned the missed opportunities during the sparring, and another wave of humiliation surged through him as he remembered Huifong's laughter and then her pity. Jinhai knew that he had been close to defeating Bingwen; Bingwen was better than he was, but not by much.

I've trained so hard, harder than most of the others, so why do I still fall short?

There was a commotion up ahead. A vendor was selling steamed pork buns, and several people were crowded around his stall, making noise.

"Hey, he just stole some of your buns!" an older woman yelled. She pointed to a rather disheveled-looking man that was hurrying away from the stall, clutching his ill-gotten goods to his chest.

"Ah, it's not worth the trouble," the vendor said. He was in his late sixties, and his expression was one of both

bemusement and pity. "If he needs them that bad, let him have them."

"Well I don't think that's right," the woman continued. "If he doesn't have to pay, why should any of us?"

Two other women and an older man next to her voiced their agreement. "That's right. Are you just letting people take what they want?"

"Now, Mrs. Liu," the vendor said, trying to stay the emotions of his customers, "you know I don't make too much money here. How could I survive if I just gave all my buns away? It's bad enough when someone steals them, but now *you* don't want to pay me, either?"

"Oh, you know we'll pay you, Old Chen," Mrs. Liu said. "But why do you let a man like that steal from you? He's just an old drunk. Don't you have any pride?"

"Now, now, Mrs. Liu," Old Chen said. "He's just a beggar, and I let him have his buns. He's been here a few times, and he only takes a couple to eat. Maybe that man has had a troubled life, maybe more trouble than you or I understand. Who knows what cruelties fate has delivered to some in this world? Would you begrudge a man a few morsels of food?"

"If he can run away that fast, then he can do a day's work and pay for his meals, like the rest of us. Life is tough for everyone, why is he any different?" Mrs. Liu said. She shook her head and spat on the ground. "Thieves stealing in broad daylight, and nobody will do anything about it. Is everyone so scared and timid?"

She was right. There are too many thieves and beggars about these days.

Jinhai's heart started beating faster, and his eyes focused. People should work for their food, and they should be honest, his master had always stressed.

I'll teach this beggar a lesson.

The beggar hurried through the crowd and was some twenty yards ahead, but Jinhai followed and kept pace. The man weaved and darted through the throng of mid-day shoppers with surprising ease, and Jinhai had to pick up his tempo to keep up. The man cast a glance back at Jinhai, as if he knew he was being followed, and he quickened his stride even more.

"Hey, you!" Jinhai yelled and raised his hand. The man looked back quickly again, but just as quickly, he turned and continued on.

"Damn," Jinhai said, and as he tried to run forward, he was blocked by an elderly man who was maneuvering his pushcart of his wares. Jinhai bumped into the cart, and the pots and pans that the man was selling clanged loudly.

"Hey, watch it, young man!" The salesman said, with a tone of annoyance.

"Sorry, sorry old sir," Jinhai said, and he patted the man on the shoulder. He turned back to his target, and he barely caught a glimpse of the beggar heading down a small alley leading to a side street.

Got you. The sun was just breaking through the gray clouds, and there was a dry breeze in the air. The noise of the crowd faded to the background as Jinhai came up to the alley. The beggar was only a few yards ahead of him, walking away.

"You! Come here!" Jinhai shouted. The man stopped but didn't turn around. "I said look at me!" Jinhai yelled again.

The man slowly turned around. He took a bite from the bun in his hand and chewed as he looked Jinhai in the eyes. "You want something, boy?" he asked as he put the rest of the bun in his mouth.

"We don't tolerate thieves in Fenchow," Jinhai said, trying to convey authority with his tone. "You stole those buns, I saw you. You're going to go back with me to the vendor, and we'll sort this out."

The man smiled. He seemed to be in his early sixties, with a gray-streaked beard and matted hair. His clothes were faded and torn. He had a small flask of *fenjiu* hanging on a cord over his shoulder, and he took the cap off and brought it to his lips, and gulped down a shot.

"Would you like some, boy? It's pretty good, and I know my wine," the man said as he held the flask out.

"No, I don't want a drink. Especially in the afternoon," Jinhai said. "You probably stole that, too."

"Look, did the vendor send you after me? Did he claim I stole his buns?" The beggar asked.

"He didn't need to," Jinhai said. "I saw the whole thing myself."

"Well, maybe what you saw wasn't all there was to see. Maybe I know the man, maybe I did something for him once. Did you ever think of that?" The beggar smiled, and Jinhai was thrown off by the man's confident tone and wry smile. "If he didn't say I stole anything, then tell me, boy, what crime has been committed? Maybe I just like to have a little fun."

The man's repeated use of the term "boy" was raising Jinhai's temper; he wasn't going to be talked down to by a beggar. "We'll sort that out with the vendor. Let's go."

"Run along, boy," the beggar said. He put the cap back on his flask and put its cord back over his shoulder. "You've got some courage, I'll give you that," he said as he turned and began walking away.

"Don't turn your back on me," Jinhai said. A mix of frustration and determination came over his face, and he darted

up to the beggar. He clamped his hand down hard on the older man's shoulder.

The beggar didn't turn around, but a wave seemed to pass up his spine, and just an instant after Jinhai's hand made contact with the beggar's shoulder, the beggar jerked free with little effort, and he turned to face Jinhai.

"You're coming with me, and we'll get everything straightened out. I don't want to hurt you, so just come along," Jinhai said. He was thrown off a bit by the beggar's quick movement, but it probably didn't mean anything; everyone had different reflexes, and the beggar's were perhaps just naturally sharp.

The beggar had a bemused expression on his face as he took a step towards Jinhai. His eyes were sharp, and if he really was inebriated, it no longer showed. He inhaled and exhaled deeply and slowly as if he was trying to control his temper.

"That's very kind of you not to want to hurt me," he said. He pointed his finger at Jinhai. "I don't want you to hurt me, either, so let's just both go our own ways. What do you say about that, boy?"

The beggar put a little extra emphasis on the word "boy." Jinhai wasn't sure if the man did it intentionally to raise his ire, but it had that effect. Jinhai thought that he'd teach the man a lesson. He'd get the beggar in a *qin na* joint lock and immobilize him.

The beggar still had his right pointing finger out, and Jinhai shot out his own right hand and seized the beggar's wrist. He reached to put his left hand under the beggar's elbow to lock up his arm, but before he knew what was happening, the beggar had reversed the situation and had locked HIS right wrist. The pain shot through his hand and

arm, and he was just able to shoot a quick left palm strike at the beggar's shoulder to get him to release.

"That's not bad," the beggar said. "*Daoist Greets With Hands*, was what you were trying? Or *Heaven King Supports the Pagoda*, maybe? You need to lock up the elbow quicker than that, though. You gave me a chance to respond with *Child Worships the Buddah*."

Jinhai was taken aback. The beggar knew the names of the techniques. Not only that, but he was able to counter them. It began to dawn on Jinhai that he was facing a situation that was vastly different from what he had anticipated. Still, how could he stop now? It would be different if he had just agreed to let the beggar go, but now that he saw that the beggar had some skill, letting him go now would be nothing short of cowardice. He couldn't lose face like that.

"Who is your teacher, boy?" The beggar asked.

"Your mother!" Jinhai shouted. He jumped in with a front kick to the beggar's midsection, but the man used the "brush knee" technique from *Tai Chi Fist* to direct Jinhai's kick to the side, and then he stepped in with a right palm strike directly to Jinhai's chest.

The beggar had an almost imperceptible smile on his face, as he expected his strike to flatten the young man and end the fight, but that smile faded as Jinhai swept his left forearm across and deflected the palm strike. Jinhai delivered an explosive right punch to the beggar's ribs. Jinhai knew that his *fajin* was powerful, and he half-expected to have at least cracked one of the beggar's ribs, but when his fist struck, it felt like he was hitting a plate of iron.

The beggar stepped back and raised his eyebrows. He brought his hand down to where Jinhai had struck him, and he looked at the material of his faded blue coat as if half-

expecting to find some evidence of damage. He slowly looked back up to Jinhai and nodded his respect.

"You're not bad, young man. With some training, you could be a decent fighter. I'll give you one more chance: let's call it a day and go our separate ways. Agreed?"

The patronizing tone from the beggar--who was not much more than a common drunkard and a thief, really--didn't placate Jinhai.

He's learned a few tricks, that's all. I'm not holding back anymore.

Jinhai feinted with a left straight punch and then stepped forward with his right forearm to strike the beggar's chest, using the *peng* energy of *Tai Chi Fist*. The beggar anticipated his opponent's intent. He pushed Jinhai's elbow to the side and then delivered a shoulder stroke that knocked Jinhai backward, and he fell heavily on the street's cobblestones.

"You're starting to make me angry!" the beggar said, and he wasn't smiling anymore. "Stay down, boy, or you're really going to get hurt."

Jinhai got to his feet, but he staggered and had to put a hand on the alley's brick wall to steady himself. He wiped his sleeve across his mouth and glared at the beggar. He had suffered enough humiliation already today, and he wasn't going to walk away with his tail between his legs. Whatever it took.

There was an old broom lying next to the wall, and Jinhai reached for it. He broke off the broom head with a snapping kick, and he turned to face the beggar with his new short staff.

"You don't know when to quit, do you?" the beggar said, shaking his head. "You'll learn, by heaven, if I have to teach you. And the lesson won't be cheap."

"Come on, thief," Jinhai said. He held the staff with two hands, pointing the tip at the beggar's eyes. He had trained the spear techniques of *Tai Chi Fist*, so the principles weren't unfamiliar to him, even if the weapon was a bit shorter than he was used to.

The beggar leaped at Jinhai and grabbed the staff's tip; he was going to close the gap and move in for the final strike that would end their bout. To his surprise, Jinhai withdrew the staff directly backward, and the shaft slipped through the beggar's grip. Jinhai stepped back a stride, and now the beggar found himself at the mercy of Jinhai's next move. That move was a thrust towards the beggar's head. The older man was just able to twist his head out of the way, but the jagged tip of the wooden staff grazed his temple, and a crimson streak began to run down the side of his face.

Jinhai lowered his staff, seeing that he had injured the beggar. *Good, he's not hurt bad, and that will end it.*

"There doesn't need to be any more--"

Before Jinhai could finish his sentence, the beggar came at him with a speed that seemed almost uncanny, particularly for a man well into his middle-age. A powerful front thrust kick hit Jinhai in the chest, knocking him back several paces. Before he could recover, the beggar unleashed a series of strikes that Jinhai could barely see, let alone deflect. A whipping punch to his solar plexus knocked the wind out of Jinhai, and as he gasped for breath, unable to speak, the beggar came in with more attacks. The older man advanced and delivered a flurry of punches, one after the other. Some high, some low. Some with a vertical fist, and some with a horizontal. And nearly all of them landed cleanly.

Jinhai finally understood that he was really in trouble, and he was just able to bring his hands up, partly as a half-hearted attempt at defense and partly as a plea for mercy.

The beggar would have none of it, and a final vertical fist strike to the nose cracked something and filled Jinhai's eyes with tears; he could feel the blood starting to flow down through his nostrils. The beggar's left hand clamped around his throat, and the older man nearly picked Jinhai off the ground before slamming him down onto his back. His head bounced against the cobblestones. A glint of steel in the beggar's hand glinted in the sunlight, and Jinhai felt the cold metal of a small blade pressing against his throat. He tried to say something, but only a gurgling sound came out.

"I asked you to walk away, boy," the beggar said. His voice was low and almost growling, as if he was barely controlling some primal rage. He pushed the blade harder against Jinhai's throat. "You understand the game you're playing now? Tell me why I shouldn't kill you."

Jinhai's muscles were straining, and his heart was racing so fast he was sure the beggar could hear it. For the first time in his life, he knew he was near death. And he was helpless.

The beggar snorted a quick breath in through his nose and then slowly exhaled. The two remained motionless and silent, locked in their respective positions; the noise and chatter from the crowd of the nearby main street came into the alley, reflecting off the walls. A dog was barking, and a mother was calling for her child.

"Tell me, who is your master? Who trained you?" The beggar asked.

With the pressure on his throat lessened, Jinhai was able to offer a feeble response. "Master Han."

"Given name?"

"Tao. Master Han Tao," Jinhai replied.

"Here in Fenchow?" The beggar inquired.

"...Yes," Jinhai replied, with some effort.

"Good. Let's go see your master," the beggar said. He grabbed Jinhai by the collar and yanked him to his feet.

Jinhai was wobbly; his leg was still numb, and he figured his nose was broken, and maybe a rib, too. He sniffed and wiped his face with his sleeve, and he wasn't surprised to see blood on his shirt.

"Let's go," the beggar said, giving Jinhai a push on the small of his back. Jinhai acquiesced; he was beaten. He made his way out of the alley and through the streets of Fenchow, with the beggar half-helping and half-forcing him along.

BINGWEN PRACTICED his Hsing-i splitting fist, alternating strikes between his left and right palms as he stepped forward in the training compound. Jinguo was working a simple but physically demanding pattern of deflecting and thrusting with his spear. Other students were working on various techniques that their training demanded.

"It must go higher," Master Han said, stopping Huifong as she practiced her saber technique. He cut down towards her forehead with his open palm. "That move is a deflection, and if you don't get your blade high enough, you won't properly protect your head from your opponent's blade. Your weapon is also your shield."

Huifong bowed slightly, and with a determined look on her face, continued her drill.

Teacher Wu walked around slowly, humming an obscure old melody and observing the students' practice.

A heavy thump on the main gate and the noise of some

commotion outside caused everyone to stop what they were doing and turn their heads. As they did, the two heavy wooden doors of the gate burst open, and they all saw their fellow student and martial brother Jinhai thrown forward through the doorway and face-first onto the cobblestone of the compound.

Behind him, standing confidently and looking at the assembled students and their teachers with contempt, was the beggar.

Teacher Wu hurried up to Jinhai and kneeled, seeing how badly injured his young student was. He cast an angry glance up at the beggar.

"What is the meaning of this?" Master Han shouted.

The beggar grinned and pointed his finger at Master Han. "Are you the so-called "master" here? I'm returning one of your students to you. You should pay me for the lesson I taught him."

Jinhai, lying prostrate on the ground, was just able to push himself up onto his knees. He looked up at Master Han with an expression of shame, but when he turned and met Huifong's gaze, and he saw in her face both pity and disdain, he knew the true meaning of humiliation.

The double affront of seeing his younger brother treated so roughly and his master so insulted was too much for Jinguo. His face tightened, and he wiped his sleeve under his nose and sniffed. He gripped his spear, lowering it until the tip was pointed at the beggar's eyes.

"Jinguo, wait!" Master Han yelled, knowing the impulsive temper of his most talented student, but it fell on deaf ears. With three loping strides, Jinguo passed by his fallen younger brother and squared off against the beggar.

The beggar calmly raised his hand for Jinguo to stop, and he appeared to be just about to say something, a peace

offering, perhaps. Jinguo, however, had no interest in hearing it.

"Bastard!" Jinguo shouted as he thrust the spear point at the beggar's shoulder.

The beggar snapped his head back, surprised by both the physical skill of Jinguo, as well as his willingness to escalate the encounter to one of lethal extremes. Still, with uncanny skill, he brought his palm up and swept the incoming spearhead to the side. Jinguo wasn't deterred, and he pulled back the spear shaft and then swung the razor-sharp point straight down at the beggar's head. The older man jerked his shoulder back and twisted his waist, just dodging the attack. As Jinguo's spearhead sparked against the cobblestone of the courtyard, the beggar brought his leg over the spear trapped it behind his knee. A quick pulse seemed to go through his body as he sunk his weight and snapped the head off the spear. The beggar then drew his shoulders in for a split second before stepping forward with a series of blinding chain punches. Jinguo deflected the first two, but the flurry came so fast that he was overwhelmed. The beggar seemed to rise and fall as he advanced, and his punches were variously low and high, although in no discernible pattern. He hit Jinguo in the chest with one punch, and then as he dropped down almost to one knee, he threw a right-hand, upward punch that landed solidly under Jinguo's chin, sending the young man backward and down.

The beggar rose, his striking fist still extended. He inhaled and drew his fist back to his waist and then exhaled slowly. He looked around defiantly for the next challenger.

Bingwen began to stride up to face the beggar, but as he passed Teacher Wu, he felt a hand on his shoulder, and Teacher Wu yanked him back.

"Hold on," Teacher Wu said. Despite the situation, his tone was calm. He cast a glance back at Master Han, who nodded subtly. Wu turned back to the beggar.

"Who are you? What's the meaning of your coming here like this and roughing up our students? What wrong has been done you?" Teacher Wu said. Master Han brought his hand up to his chin and slowly stroked his beard, waiting for the beggar's response.

"What wrong has been done to me? *What wrong has been done to me?!*" The beggar threw his head back and laughed, but the laugh was bitter. He gazed around the room, meeting the eyes of Teacher Wu and the students, and then finally Master Han.

"You are Han Tao?" the beggar asked.

"I am. And may I know your name?" Master Han replied.

The beggar smirked. "I don't use it much anymore, but it's Yen. Yen Fuhua."

Master Han turned quickly to Teacher Wu, and he saw the same shocked expression that he knew must also be on his own face.

"General Yen!" Teacher Wu said, and he placed his right fist in his left palm and bowed slightly to the beggar.

The beggar nodded in appreciation as the students looked at each other in bewilderment and confusion.

"General Yen," Master Han said. "I sincerely apologize for any offense my students have caused you. Please, won't you join me for tea?" He motioned with his open palm towards the private courtyard off to the right.

The beggar, General Yen Fuhua, looked around again at those assembled, his body still ready for combat. After a moment, he looked back at Master Han and nodded. The students of Master Han stepped back slowly to give way as

General Yen strode past them. He walked into Master Han's courtyard, and Master Han and teacher Wu followed, and Teacher Wu closed the gate behind them.

The students drew together and whispered amongst themselves at the tumultuous events that had just transpired.

"Who is he?" Huifong asked Jinhai.

Jinhai shook his head in frustration. "I thought he was just a beggar. A thief. He stole from the marketplace, and I tried to stop him."

"He's no beggar," Jinguo said to his younger brother. "His skill level is higher than Master Han's, I'd say."

"They called him "General," Huifong said in a tense whisper.

AFTER A HALF-HOUR, the gate opened, and General Yen emerged from the small courtyard, followed by Master Han and Teacher Wu. Wu whispered something, and both Master Han and General Yen laughed heartily.

Jinhai cringed at seeing Master Han and Teacher Wu behave so respectfully towards General Yen, and although he still wasn't clear on the details, Jinhai understood that he must have been in the wrong. He hurried up to the three men and dropped to one knee, bowing his head.

"Sir, I apologize for my disrespectful behavior towards you," Jinhai said. He knew that he had embarrassed not only himself but his master and classmates as well.

A subtle smile crossed General Yen's face, and he motioned for Jinhai to stand. He clapped his hand down on Jinhai's shoulder. "You have potential, young man. You

sought justice with courage and spirit, and your martial arts aren't too bad. That is to be commended."

Jinhai looked up slowly, and to his surprise, Master Han and Teacher Wu were smiling instead of scowling.

"Still, you had better learn to judge your foes more astutely before you challenge them. The cemetery is filled with noble fools," General Yen said.

MASTER HAN HAD ASKED Jinhai to stay after class, and he invited his young student to join him for tea. The two sat down at a wooden bench in the small courtyard off to the right of the main training area. Master Han poured a cup of tea for Jinhai, and then he filled his own cup.

The two sipped their tea in silence for a moment, but Jinhai felt compelled to speak.

"I'm sorry if I brought shame on our school, and on you, Master," Jinhai said. He sighed heavily. "I really thought I was upholding what I had learned from you. I guess I didn't understand things very well."

"How so?" Master Han asked. He had a quizzical half-smile on his face.

"Well, I started a fight when I could have just not gotten involved, and I almost got killed. And maybe I endangered my classmates, and you, too," Jinhai said.

"Why did you get involved?" Master Han asked.

Jinhai shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I saw somebody stealing something, and I thought I could stop them. I guess I should have minded my own business."

"Is that the lesson you've learned?"

"I guess so," Jinhai said, but he had been with Master

Han long enough to know that was not the answer he was looking for."

"Doing the right thing doesn't always mean that things will work out for the best," Master Han said. "None of us can predict the future, nor can we know exactly what the impact of our decisions will be."

"Who was he, anyways? You called him 'General?'" Jinhai asked.

"Yen Fuhua is his name. He was a general. He fought against the Ching government, and for the longhairs during the Taiping uprising. He was from Tientsin, but as a child he grew up here, in Fenchow. Some of us older folks remember him. His family moved to Tientsin when he was 15 or 17, I think. He was a martial arts prodigy from a young age, and he studied several different styles, as I recall. He was particularly renowned for his skill in *Fanzi Fist* [Rotating Fist style], which specializes in powerful, rapid-cycling punches and palm strikes."

"I believe that," Jinhai said, and brought his hand up to his nose. "How did he become a beggar?"

"After the government defeated the Taiping forces, they launched a campaign of retribution against many of higher-ranking officers. As I heard, General Yen's entire family was beheaded by the government, but he escaped and became a fugitive. I believe there's still a price on his head."

"And the vendor with the pork buns, Old Chen—he knew that the beggar was General Yen?" It was starting to make sense to Jinhai.

"Probably," Master Han said. "Many of the older folks here remember the family and know their story, although they keep it to themselves."

"So you're not angry with me?"

Master Han shook his head. "Life is full of risks, and you

may never know exactly what motivates any man. Bad things may happen even if you have the best of intentions and truly believe you're doing the right thing."

"What would you have done in my place, Master?" Gao Jinhai asked.

Master Han scratched the back of his neck. "Who knows? I am not you, and even now I'm not who I was when I was your age. There is much value in simple lessons and clear parables, and we're right to study them. But life is not always so clear."

Gao Jinhai nodded, and he absentmindedly ran his fingers around the rim of his teacup. "I'll try to remember that, Master."

"Do that," Master Han said. "Remaining humble in your understanding of the ways of heaven, earth, and man is the key to wisdom. And if you can maintain that and continue to learn, then someday you will be known as Master Gao."

A SHARE OF THE GATE

KYLE FISKE

Tientsin, China. Late July 1900.

It was a little after 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and Sergeant Clayton Brooks lay on his back on his army cot, his cap tilted down over his face. He was sound asleep and snoring. It was hot, in the mid 90s, and although the windows were open, there was no breeze coming through. A couple of beads of sweat were slowly dripping down his cheeks, and the dime novel he had been reading, "Twenty Guns From Apache Pass," was resting on his chest, rising and falling with each breath he took.

There were thirty-five cots set up in the room, and there were some fifteen soldiers of the U.S. 9th Cavalry present. They were the first soldiers of Troop C who had shipped in from Camp Lawton, Seattle, as part of the American contingent of the Eight-Nation Alliance tasked with putting down the Boxer Uprising. A few were sleeping like Sergeant Brooks, two were writing letters, one man was cleaning his Krag rifle, and the rest were either involved in or watching the heated poker game in the back corner.

The makeshift U.S. barracks were housed in the British Concession area of Tientsin, as the Americans had formally given up their territory in the city some years ago. And these were the barracks of the colored troops, kept separated from their white comrades. Most of the remainder of the American forces were in the building on the other side of the street. Although the room was a bit dilapidated, it was clean and comfortable.

"Hey Sarge. Sarge, you awake? I got someone you want to meet," Private William Malone said as he came across the room. Malone was short but broad-chested, and he strode with a confident, easy gait. Behind him walked an equally short although not so broad-chested Chinese man. The man was wearing a sharp, dark blue Western suit, and he had a flat cap on his head. Both men were smiling.

"You awake, Sarge?" Malone asked again in a tone just above a whisper as he approached his Sergeant's cot.

"What do you want, Malone?" Sergeant Brooks said from under his cap.

"Oh, I got a man to see you, Sarge, a Chinese fella. Says he's got an offer for you. Says he was in the crowd the other day when you whupped that big ol' Russian. Says he never saw a fight like that in all his days."

"Yeah, it was quite a fight," Brooks said, without looking up. "My jaw's still sore, and I think I broke my left pinky. Ask him what the offer is."

"Well, I'll let him tell you, Sarge. He talks pretty good English. His name is Mr. Chen."

Brooks sighed as he brushed his cap off his face, and with a groggy effort, he sat up on the cot. The paperback book on his chest tumbled to the floor.

"Damn, gonna lose my place again," he said as he bent down and picked up the book. He flipped through the

pages, trying to find where he had left off. He placed a scrap of paper on the page, closed the book, and tossed it back onto the cot.

"Sergeant Brooks, how do you do? As your friend said, I am Mr. Chen," The Chinese man said as he held out his hand.

"Mr. Chen," Brooks said, and he shook the man's hand. "I'm a very busy man, as you can see. Please state your business."

A half-smile flicked across Mr. Chen's face, as he wasn't quite sure what to make of this American soldier.

"Sergeant Brooks, it is a pleasure to meet you. I was indeed among the spectators of your fight against the Russian, Kazmarov. I was very impressed with your skill. You looked like you were in trouble, but in the end, you defeated him quite handily."

"Okay," Brooks said. He stared blankly at Mr. Chen.

"Ah...yes. Well, I wanted to propose another fight for you, one that I think could prove quite beneficial to you, from a financial perspective," Mr. Chen said.

"I could make some quick cash?"

"Almost certainly," Mr. Chen replied.

"And you would too, I'm guessin'?"

Mr. Chen smiled. "I would only be duly compensated for my efforts--a small sum."

"Get that, Malone," Brooks said, grinning at his friend. "Ain't bad enough that the white folks is always trying to make money off me, now even the Chinees are doin' the same thing halfway around the goddamn world."

"I assure you, you would be making the greater share of the profit from this venture, Sergeant Brooks." Mr. Chen smiled again and raised his eyebrows. "Provided, of course, that you win."

"And who am I goin' up against this time? Some German bastard? A Brit? Some Eye-talian? Never seen so many folk from so many different armies all in one city."

"Maybe some Irish fella again, Sarge. Remember that red-headed son-of-a-bitch you fought in St. Louis? Goddamn, if that wasn't a knock-down, drag-out. He gave you quite a hammerin'--I didn't think you were gonna get up that last time," Malone said.

"Ain't no Irish army in Tientsin," Brooks said.

"Still, that was a shit-kicker," Malone said.

"Broke my left thumb hittin' that bastard, I tell ya," Brooks said. "He could punch like a motherfucker, that's for damn sure. He didn't have no wind, though--got tired out pretty quick."

"Yeah, and then you gave him what for," Malone said. He laughed and slapped his thigh. "Goddamndest fight I ever did see!"

"See bein' the key word there, shorty," Brooks said to his friend. "Why the hell don't you ever get in the ring, if you like the fightin' so much?"

"Oh, I know my limitations," Malone said, still grinning.

"What the hell you talkin' about?" Brooks said. "You're strong as an ox, you got that barrel chest and those thick legs. You short, but you built for fightin'. Maybe it's just that heart muscle that's a little weak, huh?"

Malone tapped the side of his head. "Or maybe this here brain muscle is a little strong, ever think of that? Why the hell do I want to get in there and whup some stranger who never done me no wrong--or get whupped by him, if it comes to that?"

"Cause that's what men do," Brooks said. "We got to test ourselves, it makes us who we are."

"Maybe it makes you who you are, but I already know

who I am without gettin my head beat in," Malone responded.

"But you ain't too proud to make some money off me doin' it, huh?"

"A man's gotta eat, don't he? I'm just like Mr. Chen here, tryin' to make my way in this world," Malone said. "I know you like fightin', and you good at it. And the good Lord don't want me to starve now, do He?"

"No, I guess He don't," Brooks said, chuckling. "You're right. We all got to follow our own nature."

Mr. Chen was waiting patiently, and he smiled at the men's exchange.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Chen," Sergeant Brooks said. "Don't mind our yappin'. Let's cut to the chase. Who do you want me to fight?"

"It's not a European, actually," Mr. Chen said. "It's a local man. A master of Chinese martial arts, quite renowned in the city. Sun Huojin is his name."

"Chinese, huh?" Brooks said. "I don't know--I seen some of them street shows, what with the swords, and spears against their throats. They ain't gonna use no spear on me, is they?" Brooks said.

"No, no Sergeant Brooks," Mr. Chen said. "This will be a standard boxing match, very much like your fight against the Russian soldier."

"All right, Mr. Chen. And what's in it for me?"

"If you win, fifty percent of the gate."

"And if I lose?"

"The loser will receive ten percent, for their effort," Mr. Chen said.

"Same deal as before, Sarge," Malone said, shrugging his shoulders. "Not too bad."

"And you still takin' thirty percent of whatever I get, Malone?"

"Sarge, do you know what I had to do to set this up? This city was a full-scale war zone just a week ago, and there's all kinds of danger around every corner. Them Chinee Boxer fellas is still out there, let me tell you. They wasn't all killed in the fightin', or arrested, or whatnot. No sir, they roamin' around. And if anythin', they hate us black folk more than whitey. Why, I was takin' my life in my hands just to get out there and find a decent fella like Mr. Chen here. The risks I take to make you a little money, and all outta the kindness of my dumb ol' heart."

"You sure can shovel it, Malone," Brooks said, smiling despite himself. "You ain't much of a fighter, but you can damn well talk up a good game." He stood up and stretched his arms over his head.

"Then do we have a deal, Sergeant Brooks?" Mr. Chen asked.

"Now when and where is this all goin' to take place?" Brooks asked.

"Two days from today, on Friday, at noon. It will be in the old city."

"The old city?" Brooks asked. "Where it's just Chinese?" His fight against the Russian had been in the Russian concession district, just across the Pei Ho river from Gordon Hall and the British area of Tientsin.

"It's perfectly safe, Sergeant Brooks," Mr. Chen said. "I guarantee it."

Brooks scratched the side of his jaw and looked over at Malone. "Didn't they tell us to stay out of there?"

"Who's gonna know we went there?" Malone said. "Ain't nobody checkin' on us when we off duty."

"If you're frightened, Sergeant Brooks, maybe we could come up with some other arrangements," Mr. Chen said.

"Nah, I ain't scared, Mr. Chen," Brooks said. "If you seen some of the ones I stepped in the ring with over the years, you'd know I wouldn't back down from some little Chinese fella, now. No offense intended, o'course."

"I never thought otherwise, Sergeant Brooks," Mr. Chen said.

"Then I guess we have a deal, my friend," Brooks said. He held out his hand, and Mr. Chen shook it.

"Excellent. I will come back here on Friday morning." Mr. Chen pulled out the gold chain of his pocket watch and opened the face. He looked back up to Brooks. "It is only a twenty minute walk from here, and I will be here at 11:00 to escort you to the location."

"That sounds fine," Malone said, and he also shook Mr. Chen's hand.

Mr. Chen smiled and bowed. He checked his pocket watch again and quickened his pace as he made his way out of the U.S. Army barracks.

"Good deal, Sarge," Malone said. "Gonna be a quick fight."

"How the hell do you know it's gonna be a quick fight?" Brooks said. "You know anything about the guy I'm fightin', this Sun fella?"

"Don't know nuthin' about him and never seen him, but I got a good feelin' about this one, Sarge, that's all."

ON FRIDAY, Sergeant Brooks awoke at dawn. He had some trouble sleeping, as he always did the night before a fight. Still, he knew he needed the rest. Someone had told

him once that even if you can't sleep, if you just lie there, it was almost as good for your body as sleeping. So he did that for another hour or so until Reveille sounded at 7 a.m. As the other men yawned and stretched, Brooks was quickly out of bed, and he pulled on his shirt and trousers and slipped into his boots. He went to the makeshift mess hall and ate some oatmeal, and downed a cup of hot, black coffee. Something about black coffee in the morning: it didn't matter where he was, if it was ten below zero and snowing, or humid and hot as a bastard--like it was today in Tientsin--it always went down easy and sharpened his senses. He felt good. Some things were the same no matter where you were in the world. He poured a second cup and sat down at one of the long picnic bench tables in the mess hall for the colored troops.

"You already up and about, huh Sarge?" Bill Malone said as he walked up. He set his own coffee mug down on the table and took a seat across from his Sergeant. "You feelin' good?"

"I reckon I feel better now than I will after the fight," Brooks said, and he smiled as he took a sip of coffee.

"Yeah, but the other guy'll be in worse shape, won't he, though?"

Brooks shrugged his shoulders. "I ain't no prophet. Only the good Lord knows the future, not me."

"Always with 'the good Lord.' I still say you shoulda been a preacher," Malone said. "You got the low, boomin' voice for it, and you really believe in the whole thing, huh?"

Brooks nodded. "Don't you? You been to church with me in lots of places over the years." Brooks looked to his friend, and although he was smiling, his tone was serious.

Bill Malone scratched the back of his neck and sighed, and he gathered his thoughts. "I don't rightly know, to tell

you the truth, Sarge. I suppose I do. It makes a lotta sense when I'm in the pew and the preacher is goin' strong...but then I get out in the world, and I just don't know. I guess there's gotta be somethin' more than all this, than just eatin' meals and followin' orders and walkin' around hopin' to get laid. But man, white folks been tellin' us about that Christian charity our whole lives, but we ain't seen too much of it from them."

"We all sinners. White folk, all these Chinamen, and us too--you and me included," Brooks said. "Problem ain't so much with the world, the way I see it. It's on the inside. Inside o' every man. We's all fucked up. Been that way since Adam and Eve, I guess. I sure ain't seen nothin' in all my years to make me think that that ain't true. You ever see anythin' different?"

"Nah, I guess I ain't, when you put it like that," Malone said.

"No, you ain't. And you ain't gonna, I reckon." Brooks took a long sip of coffee.

"Say, what do you make of them Boxers, Sarge? 'Peasants,' they call 'em. They be murderin' the missionaries and other Christian folk. What's that mean, Sarge, a peasant?"

"Peasants is just poor farmers, as far as I can tell," Sergeant Brooks said. "Same everywhere, I reckon. Ain't got a pot to piss in, proud of their own folk, and they got the balls to fight. And mix that in with a little magic and religion, and you get trouble. Same as them Ghost Dancers we fought at Wounded Knee. Remember them?"

"I remember. How could a man forget a thing like that? You think we was on the right side there, Sarge?"

"I don't reckon," Brooks said, and he took another sip of his coffee.

A FEW HOURS LATER, Brooks and Malone were sitting across from each other over a small table set up near the wall to the right of the cots, and they were playing chess. Malone was leaning back with his arms folded, balancing and rocking on the back legs of the chair. Brooks was leaning forward over the table, and he rubbed his jaw as he studied the layout of the pieces.

"I shoulda never taught you this game. You took to it too quick," Brooks said.

"Look at that, right on time," Malone said, and he rocked his chair forward and stood up.

Sergeant Brooks looked up and saw a smiling Mr. Chen walking briskly towards them. He looked at his wristwatch, and it was just a minute before 11 a.m.

"Gentlemen, good morning. I presume you're ready for the event?" Mr. Chen said. His western suit looked freshly pressed, and he was wearing small round sunglasses.

Brooks stood up and stretched.

"I guess we're just about ready to go," Malone said, looking over at Sergeant Brooks. Brooks nodded.

"Excellent," Mr. Chen said.

THE THREE MADE their way out of the barracks and onto the streets. Tientsin was a surreal vision for Sergeant Brooks. Although he had grown up in rural Tennessee, he'd been in the Army for 15 years this September. He had signed up in 1885 when he was just twenty, along with his childhood friend Bill Malone, and together they had seen all kinds of sights--and not all pleasant. From the aftermath

of Wounded Knee in North Dakota to charging up San Juan Hill with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders in Cuba, in the 9th Cavalry they'd seen their share of conflict and war. But China was a different beast. The other side of the world, where you couldn't speak the language, and you couldn't even read the words on their signs. It was strange.

And when they were in the foreign concession areas, so removed from the rest of the country, it was hard even to remember that they were in China. He'd never been to England, but he couldn't imagine that the streets would look much different there than they did here, as he strolled past serene Victoria Park and then the stately and massive Gordon Hall, the seat of the British government in the city. It was almost magical with its castle-like facade and the Union Jack fluttering from both of its huge turrets

All kinds were milling about outside Gordon Hall. British soldiers and staff, some Japanese diplomats, a couple of Italian officers, what he thought might be a Russian general, and some Chinese dignitaries as well. And along with the powerful and influential, there were lower-level civil servants, European civilians, and Chinese workers out and about. It was a crazy mix, in a crazy place, Brooks thought.

Signs of the recent fighting were everywhere. There were bullet and shell holes in the facades of several buildings, a few wholly collapsed structures, and now and then a neat pile of arranged rubble where the first efforts at cleanup had begun. And aside from that, people were just going about their daily business with their affable and purposeful demeanors, just as if savage warfare and senseless violence hadn't occurred on these very streets only weeks ago.

"So what do you think of our city?" Mr. Chen asked as he led them through the well-groomed streets of the British area.

"We haven't seen too much of it, I guess," Malone said. "It's a lot to take in for a couple of American country boys."

Brooks looked over at an elderly Chinese man sweeping the sidewalk in front of a British apothecary.

"It's strange to us, Mr. Chen, but I guess some things are the same everywhere," Brooks said.

"The city has seen better days," Mr. Chen said. "Still, we all do what we must to get along, don't we?"

"Ain't that the truth," Brooks said.

They continued along the well-manicured, tree-lined Victoria Road, and a sign informed them that they were passing from the British zone into the French concession area of Tientsin. Nearing noontime, the sun was hot and the air was humid.

"Warm out, huh Sarge?" Malone said, as if reading his friend's mind.

"Sure is," Brooks said, and he was aware of the increasing sweat under his arms and on the back of his neck. Some of it was from the heat, but not all of it.

I'm going to fight a man.

"You have not been in Tientsin long, I take it?" Mr. Chen said.

"Nah, and we're not gonna be here long, either," Brooks said. "By the time we got here a week ago, Army already decided that the fightin's all but over here. They don't need us. We're bein' shipped out to The Philippines in a couple days."

"They move us around like mules, I reckon'," Malone said. "Around the whole damn world."

"I suppose that is the life of a foreign soldier," Mr. Chen

said. "I do not know much of that. The Chinese soldiers have enough to keep them busy in China."

"Seems to me that's the way it should be," Brooks said. "I don't know what we're doin' halfway on the other side of the globe. Somebody in charge thinks it's somethin' we should do, I guess. And us regular folk just do what we're told and go along for the ride."

"Do you like being a soldier, Sergeant Brooks?" Mr. Chen asked.

"All in all, I guess I do. I'm a man, and I like bein' outside, in the Cavalry," Brooks responded. "I like horses and guns, I like fightin'. I like seein' the world. I've served with some of the finest men you'd ever find on God's green earth. They'd a given their lives for me, and I'd a done the same for them. I like havin' a purpose, somethin' bigger than me and my own worries, you know?"

"I was a soldier for a while," Mr. Chen said. "It did not agree with me." His voice trailed off, but he didn't add anything.

"Well, I don't know if it agrees with me or not," Malone said, chiming in. "But a man's got to do somethin' with his life, and this is what I fell into. As good as anythin' else, I guess."

They walked for another fifteen minutes, with Mr. Chen giving them a guided tour of the areas they were passing through. Before long, they came up to the East Gate, the entrance into the old city proper. They went through.

The heat of midday was upon them, and as they walked through the narrow streets of old Tientsin, they drew their fair share of attention. Two black American soldiers walking with a Chinese man was not a common sight in this

part of the city, and the local Chinese pedestrians and shopkeepers often did a double-take as the three passed by.

The city was alive with all the sights, sounds, and smells of humanity. Here a mother with two daughters in tow was haggling with a fishmonger over the price of the day's special, there the enticing aroma of grilled garlic pork skewers for sale from a wizened man behind his food cart. Several young boys in ragged clothes played tag in the street and laughed at their own antics.

Not too different from his own childhood on the other side of the world, Sergeant Brooks thought to himself.

"It is just up ahead and to the right," Mr. Chen said.

As the three made their way to the intersection ahead, the crowd grew thicker and began to buzz with anticipation. Some were laughing and pointing; others were watching the foreigners with a subdued seriousness.

"I think we're gonna have a good crowd, boss," Malone said.

"Feels that way," Brooks replied. His own nervous anticipation fed on and added to the excited energy of the throng.

Mr. Chen led them on, and when they turned to the right at the intersection, the crowd began to part, revealing a small, raised, wooden platform. It was probably fifteen by fifteen feet, and it was about four feet off the ground.

"There's the ring, Sarge," Malone said.

"This is called a 'lei tai,'" Mr. Chen said. "It just means a raised platform for the combatants."

"Whatever you folks like," Sergeant Brooks said. "I can make do with that."

Mr. Chen went over and talked to several other Chinese men who seemed to be involved in organizing the

fight, and there was some pointing, shaking of heads, and then nodding. Mr. Chen waved the two over.

"Are things all set?" Sergeant Brooks asked.

"The rules are agreed upon, as I had discussed with you—no strikes to the eyes or the groin, and no locking of joints. Everything else is permitted. If the judge tells you to stop fighting, you must obey him immediately. There will be three five-minute rounds, provided the contestants are able to continue.

"Bout the same as last time," Malone said, and Brooks nodded.

"I still haven't seen who I'm fighting, though," Brooks said.

There was a murmur through the crowd and then cheering, and a man came through to the edge of the platform. People around him were clapping him on the back and shouting encouragement.

"That's him there, Master Sun," Mr. Chen said.

Brooks looked over that man. He was tall for a Chinese man, almost six feet. He had broad shoulders and a narrow waist, but he looked thin. And not thin and wiry, but just thin.

"What can you tell me about him?" Brooks asked. Upon first glance, he didn't expect he'd have much trouble with this Master Sun, but a little extra information never hurt.

"He is a master of *Tai Chi Fist*, a style of Chinese boxing. Its main principle is to be relaxed and soft—to use the force of one's opponent against him," Mr. Chen said.

"Does he just use his hands, or does he kick, too?" Brooks asked. He had seen some of the street performances by Chinese martial artists since he had been in Tientsin, and he saw that many of them displayed kicking techniques.

"All Chinese martial arts styles teach punching, kicking,

joint locks, and wrestling, and *Tai Chi Fist* is no different," Mr. Chen said.

A short, round man in dark blue breeches and a sharp white jacket came through the crowd. He had a wispy white beard and a gray queue, and he climbed up the makeshift stairs onto the stage. The crowd cheered, and people came closer to the edge of the platform. The man smiled broadly and motioned first to Master Sun and then to Sergeant Brooks.

The crowd parted as Master Sun and the younger man attending him made their way to the platform's steps, and as he ascended, the crowd cheered.

"Please," Mr. Chen said, and he motioned with his open palm for Sergeant Brooks to take to the stage. "I will be nearby during the fight in case you need anything translated."

"Right," Brooks said, and he glanced over to Malone.

"Let's go, boss," Malone said. As he and Brooks made their way through the crowd, there were a few boos, some laughter, and little nervous grumbling from the people in the audience.

Malone walked behind Brooks, and he rubbed his Sergeant's shoulders. "You got this, boss. You'll make quick work of him and then we'll go get some nice lunch somewhere."

Mr. Chen followed the two, and they made their way to the stage. Brooks walked up the three steps and got up on the platform, and another murmur went through the crowd.

Malone went to follow, but Mr. Chen pulled on his shoulder.

"Only the fighters and the judge are allowed on the platform. Those are the rules here," Mr. Chen said.

"Fair enough," Malone said. He cupped his hands to his mouth. "You give him a good whuppin', Sarge!"

Both Master Sun and Sergeant Brooks took off the shirts they were wearing. This left Master Sun bare-chested and Sergeant Brooks in a white T-shirt. Brooks began bouncing up and swinging his arms loosely, and he looked down at the wooden platform as if to pretend that there was no crowd there. Master Sun rolled his shoulders and twisted his waist, and he circled his head and neck around several times.

The judge raised both of his hands for the crowd to be silent, and then he addressed them in Chinese in a loud, booming voice. Brooks had no idea what the man was saying, but he recognized the theatrical flourish in the man's tone, the same as any barker who was trying to get the crowd excited before a fight. Brooks had heard enough of them in his day.

The judge motioned for both men to come over, and he spoke something to them. Master Sun nodded, but Brooks just shook his head. He glanced over at the crowd and pointed to Mr. Chen and Malone.

The judge nodded, and he went over to Mr. Chen. The two spoke briefly, and then the judge nodded and returned to the center of the ring.

"He just wanted to make sure that the rules had been explained to you," Mr. Chen yelled.

The judge looked at Brooks with his eyebrows raised, and Brooks nodded and gave a thumbs up.

The judge nodded. Brooks stood facing Master Sun, and the judge raised his hand and yelled something in Chinese, and then he stepped back. The crowd roared.

BROOKS ALWAYS STARTED A FIGHT CAUTIOUSLY. He bobbed on his feet, but slowly, and the two circled for a few paces, each keeping out of range of the other.

He took this time to examine his opponent closely. This Master Sun was probably close to fifty, and he really didn't look that good. Sometimes a thin fellow will be all sinew and muscle, Brooks thought, but that wasn't the impression he got from Master Sun. If possible, the man looked skinny and soft at the same time.

Brooks feinted a left jab, but Master Sun didn't react. The Chinese man continued his circular pacing, keeping Brooks at a safe distance.

Brooks quickly assessed what he'd seen about his opponent so far. *He's not nervous. He's not intimidated by me or by being up on this platform. Must have some experience. Scar on his left cheek, and it looks like his nose might have been broken before. His best days may be behind him, but he's a fighter.*

Still, Brooks thought, this Master Sun wasn't going to be that much of a threat.

The two continued circling, but then both came closer, into striking range. Master Sun whipped out a right backfist, and although Brooks saw it coming, his defense was too late. Master Sun's fist struck him on the right cheek with a terrible whipping force. The impact wasn't great, but it was a stinging, penetrating strike, and it had seemed to come out of nowhere. The crowd roared.

Brooks nodded to Master Sun to acknowledge the skill of the technique, and Master Sun showed no expression.

That's how it's going to be. Brooks took a half step in and threw out his own left jab, and when Master Sun bobbed, Brooks threw his powerful right cross. Master Sun deflected

it with his left palm and then stamped his right heel down onto Sergeant Brooks' left instep. Brooks hopped back. The pain was searing, and the crowd roared again.

A foot stomp? Is he trying to make fun of me?

Brooks began to reassess his opponent. He brought his left foot up and twisted it back and forth. It hurt now, and it would hurt like hell tomorrow, but it wasn't broken.

Master Sun showed no emotion, but Brooks recognized the look in the man's eyes. This Sun fellow understood fighting, and he understood that small victories were nothing to be celebrated if they didn't lead to a final triumph. Fights were unpredictable, and they rarely went as planned.

The tone of the crowd was changing along with the fight. Some of the nervous angst had dissipated and was replaced by a more confident glee, as they assessed that Master Sun was indeed going to prove himself superior to the dark-skinned foreigner.

"Shake it off, Sarge! Get that son-of-a-bitch!" It wasn't hard for Brooks to make out Malone's English amidst the cacophony of Chinese shouts that he couldn't understand. The support of his friend in a hostile environment boosted Brooks' spirit. Fighting against the odds and being surrounded by a crowd that desperately wanted to see him beaten was nothing new for Brooks, and if anything, it gave him strength.

Brooks remembered one of the few fights he had lost, to a tough old Italian in Chicago some eight years ago. After he had been knocked out cold, he opened his eyes to see the concerned face of the Italian fighter, who had kneeled down and was hovered over him.

"Are you all right, my friend?" the man had said. "I like boxing, but I don't want to kill nobody."

"I'm all right," Brooks said, although the room was still spinning for him.

"Come, my friend," the Italian said to him. "You are a fine boxer. Let Franco buy you a beer, and we will talk about fighting."

During the next two hours and over several beers, the man Franco had explained as much about fighting as Brooks had ever heard from anyone in his life. It was like a university-level course, and after they had parted, Brooks immediately wrote down everything he could remember about their conversation in a notebook.

One thing that Franco had explained to him was something that came from Italian fencing, the "invito," or invitation.

"You give your opponent an opening as big as a barn door--something they can't resist. You invite them to come in," Franco had explained. "And when they come in, you're waiting for them."

Brooks had used that countless times since, and it had never failed. And if it had worked against the other fighters he had faced, Irishmen, Swedes, Poles, a Mohawk, and just a few days ago a Russian, then it should work against a Chinaman.

Brooks bobbed and then ducked in low, leaving his head exposed. Master Sun took the bait and struck at the target with his palm, exactly as Brooks had hoped. Brooks deflected the strike with his left forearm, came in with his right cross, and took Master Sun square on the chin.

Brooks stepped back. He had connected squarely with his punch, and although it hadn't been his most brutal blow, that same strike had left more than one of his opponents unconscious. To Brooks' surprise, Master Sun staggered backward but stayed on his feet. Steady on his feet, too.

He ain't got a glass jaw, that's for sure.

The crowd groaned almost in unison, but as they saw Master Sun withstand the blow, they began cheering again.

The two men circled each other once more, and this time each had a newfound respect for the other. A trickle of blood slowly ran down the left side of Master Sun's mouth.

Brooks stepped in again with his favorite left jab, and Master Sun brushed it away. Brooks pushed and grabbed again with his left hand, trying to get a grip on his opponent's wrist. He shifted his body forward, and that's when Master Sun saw his opportunity. He stepped in with his right forearm, putting all of his body weight behind him in a jerking, exploding motion, and he connected with Brooks just at his lower rib cage. Brooks' felt his own forward momentum pushed back against him, and the big man was bounced up and back a good six feet. He fell on his back onto the wooden platform.

The crowd erupted again in jubilation, and Brooks propped himself up on one elbow and shook his head. He had never seen a technique like that, and he felt like a horse had kicked him.

"Get up, soldier!" Brooks heard shouted from ringside, and he didn't have to wonder who yelled it.

The judge came over and looked intently at Brooks, and he shouted some questions in Chinese.

With some effort, Brooks popped back up to his feet and nodded to the judge. "I'm okay, I'm okay."

The judge understood what Brooks was trying to communicate, and he gave his signal for the two to commence again.

Brooks rolled his shoulders and began to bounce on his feet. The noonday sun was hot, and the air was humid, and the sweat trickled down his forehead. His eyes narrowed

their gaze, and just as it always did in his most serious fights, his survival instinct gave way to a relaxed, razor-focused, single-mindedness. No fear, no anger, no cruelty, no ego; simply the concentrated essence of who he was and everything he had ever done, all coalesced into solving the problem that stood before him.

He jerked forward with a powerful half-step, closing the distance so rapidly that Master Sun was surprised; he wasn't prepared for the American's speed. Master Sun scrambled back haphazardly before regaining his firm stance. Brooks calmly stepped back again, as if his only purpose had been to demonstrate his control over the situation.

The two circled again, but this time Brooks did see some expression on his opponent's face, and it was not one of confidence. Brooks powered forward again, and on the way in, he was hit on the jaw with another of Master Sun's whipping backfist strikes, but he brushed it off. He drove a mighty right fist into Master Sun's midsection, and it lifted the man off the ground. Brooks kept coming, and he threw out a right kick that connected squarely on the side of his foe's left thigh. Master Sun was reeling now, and with a devastating right cross, Brooks came in again and hit Master Sun on the jaw. The sound of the impact reverberated through the air, and the crowd groaned in unison as their champion went down and hit the wooden floorboards hard.

Stay down, old man. Don't make me hit you again, because I will. It's what I do, it's what I have to do. That's how God made me.

The judge darted over and knelt before Master Sun, and to the surprise of Brooks and the delight of the crowd, Master Sun got to one knee and raised his right hand. The judge raised his hand for the fight to continue, and as

Master Sun got to his feet, the crowd erupted again in raucous glee.

"Put him down, Sarge," Malone called from the crowd, and Brooks heard it as clear as a bell.

That's just what I'm gonna do, old friend. Ending this fast is going to be best for everyone.

The two faced each other again, and Brooks looked intently at the man standing across from him. And for the first time, Brooks saw the reality of who Master Sun was. He was a fighter. He was a man of grit and determination who had learned his craft--and he was a man who was a good decade past his best years. He had skill and he had spirit, but his body was starting to betray him. Brooks wasn't sure whether it was hunger, sickness, or just the inevitable ravages of age. In his prime, this Master Sun might have been more than a match for him. But here, today, he wasn't.

Brooks came forward with a slapping left jab that caught Master Sun just under the eye and then feinted a right cross before following up with a left hook to the jaw and a right to Master Sun's midsection.

The crowd groaned as Master Sun dropped to his knees, but the cheers erupted again as the battered man rose to his feet.

Just stay down, old man! The fight's over, and you can't take much more.

Master Sun had a cut on his right cheek, and the blood was flowing profusely. His once measured, balanced steps were now just a jagged shuffling. It was an effort even for him to keep his hands up to defend his face.

Brooks came in again with a solid right to Master Sun's jaw that spun the man around, and he followed with a left hook to Master Sun's kidneys. Master Sun fell to the ground, not even able to get his hands out to break his fall.

A young girl, no more than ten years old, screamed in anguish and scrambled up onto the stage, and rushed to kneel beside the older man.

Brooks immediately understood.

His daughter.

Just a few years younger than my own little girl.

The girl turned from her semi-conscious father and looked up at Brooks with an expression of pain and accusation.

Two young men darted out onto the stage. One escorted the crying little girl back down into the crowd, and the other bent down to Master Sun. Brooks looked over at the judge, expecting him to announce that the fight was over.

Three older men--ones who had been organizing the fight--came over to the judge, and the four had an animated discussion as the crowd murmured. The judge looked down to the dazed Master Sun and shook his head, but the other men had a different take on things, and they argued their position.

To the disbelief of Sergeant Brooks, Master Sun once again rose to his feet.

Finally, the debate was settled, and the three men exited the stage. As Master Sun steadied himself, the judge yelled out something in Chinese, and the crowd cheered again.

Brooks shrugged his shoulders and raised his palms, unsure of what was transpiring.

"Sergeant Brooks," came a voice from the side of the platform, and Brooks recognized the tone of Mr. Chen.

Brooks went over to the edge and knelt on one knee. "What's going on?"

"There will be a ten-minute rest period, and then the second round will begin," Mr. Chen said.

"Second round?" Brooks said. "The man's beaten. He can't go on. I don't want to kill nobody here, not a man like that. And I sure as hell don't think the crowd wants to see that. *It's over.*"

"I am sorry, Sergeant Brooks, but the organizers of the fight are the ones who will determine when it is over. Master Sun has not conceded, and so the fight will continue. Unless you wish to forfeit, of course."

Brooks shook his head and exhaled forcefully. "I ain't going to forfeit nothin', but there's no need for a man to get killed here. You can see as clear as the Goddamn day that he can't take any more, can't you?"

"It is out of my hands," Mr. Chen said. "You have a ten minute rest period."

"Here, Sarge," Malone said from the edge of the platform. He held up his canteen.

Brooks squatted down and slid off the platform down to the ground. He took a long drink from the canteen and then poured some water over the top of his head and down over his face.

"Nice job out there. Kind of a rough start, but you found your legs," Malone said.

"He's a tough bastard," Brooks said, "but he got no business bein' up there. Ten years ago, yeah. He'd be a match for me. But he's just worn down. Hell, I'm gettin' too old for this myself, and I'm a lot younger than him. And I don't think he's livin' too high on the hog, either."

"Well, finish it quick then," Malone said.

"I never killed a man in the ring before, Bill. I seen it done once, though, and I don't want no part of that. Don't want that hangin' over my head the rest of my days."

"That's the game you're in, though--you always know that could happen. To the other guy, or to you."

"I reckon so," Brooks said. "Still, this shoulda been stopped already."

"Excuse me," came a voice from behind him, and Brooks was a little surprised to hear an American accent.

He turned around and found himself facing an elderly Chinese man and his much younger companion, both dressed in the standard blue cotton breeches and jacket favored by the locals. Brooks looked again at the younger man and frowned slightly: his hair was black, but he wasn't Chinese. He was a westerner.

"Could we have a word with you? In private?" the young man said.

"I'm gonna go see what they're sellin' at that food cart over there," Malone said, and he turned and made his way in that direction.

"You American?" Brooks said, turning back to the pair.

"My name is Wayland Cooper," the young man said. "Yep, I'm American. Been in China quite a while, though. With missionaries. It's a long story." Wayland turned to his older companion and said something in Chinese, and the old man nodded.

"Nice to meet you," Wayland said, and he held out his hand.

"I bet it is quite a story," Brooks said, and he shook Wayland's hand. "I'm Clay Brooks, Sergeant with the 9th Cavalry." His brow furrowed as he sized up Wayland. "What can I do for you?"

"It's not what you can do for me, Sergeant Brooks. It's my friend here. His name is Old Wu."

Brooks held his hand out. "Mr. Wu, my pleasure."

Old Wu smiled and shook hands.

Wayland looked at Old Wu, and Old Wu nodded.

Wayland began. "First off, you're a hell of a fighter, Sergeant Brooks."

"God gives us all particular gifts, I reckon. You like the fights, do you? Is that why you're here?"

"It's a little more than that," Wayland said. "It's the man you're up against, Master Sun."

"He's a tough one, I'll give him that. But he's a bit long in the tooth. Say, you speak Chinese? What's that I keep hearin' from the crowd? Sounds like 'hey-gwee'?"

"Ah, heigui," Wayland said, and he grinned. "It means 'black devil,' more or less. But don't take it too hard--I'm a foreign devil myself. You get used to it."

"I don't take it too hard," Brooks said. "People are the same the world over, I guess--for better or worse."

"Are you a Christian man, Sergeant?" Wayland asked.

"Don't reckon I'm a very good one," Brooks said, "But I am a believer, if that's what you mean."

"I guess that describes me pretty well, too," Wayland said. "Maybe that gives us some common ground."

"Go on," Brooks said. "Say what you gotta say."

"Well, it's like this," Wayland began. "Old Wu here knows Master Sun real well. Been friends for a long time. Old Wu taught Master Sun how to fight, and they've been through a lot with each other over the years. It's hard to explain, but it's a Chinese thing. They're almost like family."

Brooks nodded, and he cast a glance back to Bill Malone, who was over haggling with a vendor over some steamed pork buns.

"Old Wu here would like to tell you about Master Sun, if you'd be willing to hear it. I'll translate for you both," Wayland said.

Brooks looked into Old Wu's eyes, which seemed to

convey wisdom, melancholy, and mischief all at the same time. And they told Brooks something else, too: Old Wu had once been quite a fighter himself.

"I'll listen," Brooks said. "But make it quick. We got about five minutes before the next round."

WHEN MALONE MADE his way back to Sergeant Brooks, the other two were gone.

"Have a bun, Sarge? They're damn good," Malone said.

"It's a hundred degrees out here and humid as a mother-fucker, I'm dripping with sweat and half beat-up, I got to go back to the fight, and you ask me if I want a steamin' hot pork bun?"

"Just askin'," Malone said. "Nobody's forcin' you to eat one."

"Gimme that," Brooks said, and he grabbed a bun and took a big bite, and then he reached for Malone's canteen, poured some water over his head and then took a long drink.

"Where'd those two go that you was talkin' to?" Malone asked. "What did they want?"

"Nothin'," Brooks said. "Just some other American who wanted to say hello."

The judge got up onto the stage and raised his hand to draw the crowd's attention, and then he yelled something in Chinese, and the crowd burst into cheering.

"Sergeant Brooks, if you please," Mr. Chen yelled from the other side of the platform, and he motioned for Brooks to get back up onto the stage.

Brooks nodded and popped back up onto the platform. He bounced up and down. He rolled his shoulders and circled his head. He felt good.

Master Sun, on the other hand, didn't look so good. One of the younger men with him had to help him back up onto the platform, and as the judge motioned him to come forward, his steps looked unsteady.

The two stood facing each other, a couple of yards apart, and the judge shouted and brought his hand down. The crowd yelled gleefully and seemed to all at once move a step closer to the stage.

"Let's go, Sarge!" Malone yelled.

Brooks wasn't bobbing or bouncing. He paced slowly, looking the bedraggled Master Sun in the eyes. And what he saw were the eyes of a tired man. Weary not just of this fight, but of the daily struggle.

Forget about what those two said. Just end it quick, get your money and get out of here.

Master Sun was shifting his weight from foot to foot, but to Brooks, it looked more like an effort just to stay upright rather than any fighting strategy. He made a lunge towards Brooks and threw a straight punch at Brooks' head, but Brooks bobbed and ducked out of the way. He came back at Master Sun and hit him with a right uppercut that landed cleanly. The older man's lower teeth smashed into his upper ones, and he was lifted off his feet and fell onto his back. Unable to get his arms out, the back of his head bounced off the wooden platform. The crowd groaned in disappointment, and Brooks heard more jeers directed towards him. He distinctly heard the cry of anguish of the young girl who had run out onto the stage before.

Well, that's it, at least. We can all go home, and nobody's dead.

Brooks turned to make his way off the platform when the roar of the crowd made him turn around. To his absolute surprise, Master Sun was up on one elbow and saying

something to the judge. Blood ran down his face from both the cut under his eye and again from his mouth. The judge shook his head, but Master Sun yelled something and then staggered back up onto his feet. He looked Brooks in the eye, and although he was barely able to keep himself steady, he nodded to his opponent. He wanted to continue.

"Oh, come on," Brooks said out loud. He dropped his shoulders and showed his open palms to the judge. "Why don't you stop the fight, for God's sake? The man can't go on."

The judge shook his head vehemently and pointed to Master Sun.

Master Sun wiped some of the blood from his face, and he exhaled sharply and brought his hands up in front of him and circled them in the slow, flowing movements of *Tai Chi Fist*.

The question posed to him by Wayland Cooper, the young American, echoed in Brooks' mind:

Are you a Christian man?

Brooks gave a short nod to Master Sun, and then the two commenced their duel.

If anything, the midday sun was hotter than ever, and Brooks' white T-shirt was drenched with sweat. He knew he didn't look as bad as Master Sun, but he knew that the wind was going out of his sails as well.

He came in with his usual left jab, but instead of following with the right cross, he stepped in again with a smashing straight left to Sun's jaw. Master Sun brought his right forearm up and turned his waist to the left, directing the blow away, and then he came back and hit Brooks with a sharp left punch to the solar plexus.

"Unghh..." Brooks groaned. The strike wasn't exactly on

target, but Brooks grimaced and staggered backward. The crowd was delighted, and the cheers erupted.

Encouraged, Master Sun lurched forward and threw a palm strike at his opponent. The speed of his attack wasn't overwhelming, but he hit Sergeant Brooks square in the chest, and the big man was knocked back a step. Brooks responded with a right hook, but it missed, and Master Sun threw a backfist at Brooks that landed clean and broke the American's nose.

Brooks went down to one knee, and the blood was flowing down over his mouth.

The judge motioned for Master Sun to stay away, and he waved at Malone to come up onto the platform. Malone jumped up and pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket. He kneeled next to his friend and dabbed the blood from his nose.

"You alright, Sarge? Man, I thought you had him, but I reckon he's still got some fight in him."

Brooks took the handkerchief and blew his bloody nose into it. "He's a tough bastard, like I said."

"You can keep goin' though, can't you?" Malone asked.

Brooks smiled and handed him back the handkerchief. "You better get the hell off of this stage or else they'll be wantin' you to fight."

Malone grinned and gave the judge a thumbs up, and then he jumped down off the platform.

The judge brought his hand down again, and to the crowd's delight, the two men resumed their combat.

With renewed energy and buoyed by the crowd, Master Sun took the offensive. He threw a low kick to Brooks's right thigh and then smashed a right hook into Brooks's kidney. Brooks winced and brought his hands up and his elbows in.

Master Sun continued with a flurry of blows to the body of Brooks, and some of them landed.

Master Sun stepped back, almost too exhausted even to throw another strike, and Brooks lowered his hands. Completely drained himself, Brooks dropped his guard as he stepped towards his opponent. Master Sun saw his opening, and with the last drop of his will, he threw his whole body into a right vertical fist to Sergeant Brooks' jaw. It hit cleanly.

Brooks dropped again to one knee, and the judge motioned for Master Sun to halt.

"Come on, Sarge!" Brooks heard Malone yell.

Cheers from the crowd for Master Sun exploded, and so did their jeers and mocking insults for his foe.

Brooks raised his head, still half in a daze. The judge looked at him with inquisitive intensity, and Master Sun, his face bloody and swollen, was looking away, his eyes not focused on anything in particular.

Brooks became aware of the sweat dripping down his face, and for some reason, as he breathed in, he noticed the smell of fried dough from one of the food carts. He saw the young girl as she scrambled up again onto the stage and threw her arms around Master Sun. He saw that the sky was bright blue.

Sergeant Brooks grinned, and then he fell face-first onto the wood of the raised platform.

BILL MALONE and Sergeant Brooks walked back together to the American barracks in the British concession area of Tientsin. It was still hot out, and Brooks was walking at a

slow pace. The fight had taken its toll on him, and the heat wasn't helping.

"If you need to stop and rest or anythin', just let me know, Sarge," Malone said.

"I'm okay," Brooks said. "As long as you don't see me keel over, I suppose I'll be all right. Just a little tired, after everythin'."

"I got to say, Sarge, I thought you had it just about wrapped up. I been around enough fights to know when a man is licked, and that Master Sun sure looked licked to me."

"Well, you never know what's going to happen when two men stand across from each other. You wouldn't need to have the fight if you knew what was gonna happen aforehand."

"What'd those two say to you, anyhow?"

"Huh?"

"Now don't play dumb with me, Sarge. We been through too much together."

"What are you gettin' at?" Brooks said.

"You know damn well what I'm gettin' at," Malone responded.

Brooks chuckled. He never could get much past Bill Malone.

"So? You gonna let your old friend in on it? That's the least you could do, I'd say, after all the money you lost us. Did he beat you, or not?"

Brooks didn't answer, and Malone knew his friend well enough not to press the issue.

The two walked along in silence for a while. Out of the old city, they came back through the European concession areas of Tientsin, through the French zone, and then back alongside the Pei-ho river. Finally, they

turned onto the familiar Victoria Road in the British concession.

"Let's take a break for a minute," Brooks said, and he walked off the road and sauntered down closer to the river's edge. Malone followed him.

Brooks leaned against a tree, and he undid the cap of his canteen and took a long drink. The water was warm, but it still tasted good on this hot, humid day. He stared out over the steadily flowing waters of the Pei-ho.

"The kid was an American," Brooks said. "I don't know his whole story, but he said he'd been in China for a few years. Some kind of missionary, spoke the language, too. The old man that was with him...he was a friend of that Sun fella I was fightin'. He told me the man's story. Said that Sun used to be a great fighter, but had been down on his luck the last couple years. His wife took sick and died, leavin' him with his little daughter. He got sick himself, and couldn't even barely get outta bed for months, couldn't even catch his breath. Couldn't work, didn't have no money comin' in."

Malone was skeptical, but he chose his words carefully. "You sure that was the truth, Sarge? People be tellin' you all kinds of stories if it puts them ahead. Gets them a few bucks."

"I guess a man never knows for sure if he's hearin' the truth or not, but I looked that old man in the eyes. I don't reckon he was a liar."

"Still, we all got our own sad tales--you as much as anyone. That reason enough to take a dive?"

"I don't know. But I know what it's like havin' a little girl who's expectin' you to make sure she has something to eat, and then you have to tell her that there ain't nothin', cause you got nothin'... cause *you're* nothin'. I don't wish that on any man--black, white, Injun, or Chineese."

"Ah, so you threw the fight and lost all our money? Why, you're a straight-up saint, that's what you are," Malone said. "The Goddamn Pope in Rome'd have to wash your feet. Why, if you don't count the whores, the gamblin' and the drinkin', you might be next in line for his job."

"Don't you ever shut up?" Brooks said.

"How come none of that there Christian charity gets extended to me? I thought we were goin' out on the town tonight, gonna eat at some fancy Chineese restaurant and get stinkin' drunk? Now what are we gonna do?"

"You still got our ten percent of the gate for showin' up, didn't you?" What'd that come to?" Brooks asked.

"Yeah, I got it. But it ain't much. They wasn't exactly chargin' a mint for tickets," Malone said.

"Well, my old friend, you can have a wonderful dinner with me at the mess hall, provided by the U.S. Army," Brooks said. He grinned and clapped Malone on the shoulder. "Finest food you ever tasted in your whole life."

"Unless somethin' changed since yesterday, it's gonna be all I can do to keep it down."

"Well, maybe afterwards, we'll go out and I'll buy you a couple beers. You can drown your sorrows."

Bill Malone looked at his friend as the two walked back down stately Victoria Road in the British concession. He hadn't met too many men like Clay Brooks in his life, and he was pretty sure he never would. "Nah Sarge, maybe I'll buy you a beer."

"And just maybe I'll drink it," Sergeant Clayton Brooks said, and the two Americans walked on in the hot afternoon sun of Tientsin, China, in July of the year 1900.

Author's note:

This story is a work of historical fiction, partially inspired by a photograph on the U.S. National Park Service's

website page on the Buffalo Soldiers. The caption of the photograph read "Troop C, 9th Cavalry at Camp Lawton, Seattle, 1900, preparing to embark to the Boxer Rebellion in China. The conflict in China was resolved before the company arrived, and Troop C was then diverted to the Philippine War."

No U.S. Army "Buffalo Soldier" units served in China during the Boxer Rebellion.

ABOUT KYLE FISKE

Kyle Fiske grew up on a farm near the Canadian border in northern New York State. He studied history and English at St. Lawrence University and the University of Copenhagen and museum studies at Tufts University. Kyle was a competitive fencer for several years and has been a practitioner of Chinese martial arts for more than two decades, with a particular focus on Chinese swordsmanship. He's also a long-time guitar player, songwriter, and occasional composer.

Kyle is the author of the novel *Dragons and Boxers* and the short story collection *Even Closer Than the Sea*, and he writes in the genres of historical fiction, martial arts, speculative fiction, and horror. He now makes his home on scenic and historic Cape Ann, Massachusetts, and you can visit him online at KyleFiskeauthor.com

MICHAEL LAUCK



NOTE FROM MICHAEL LAUCK

MICHAEL LAUCK

“A Fist Against The Sky” is a different kind of martial arts story. Although it is set in the universe of my Pride of Tiger novels (White Tiger is, in fact, the reluctant hero of White Tiger, Black Leopard), it is very much based on a real lesson I have been forced to teach several students (some young, some not so young). I hope it is not only entertaining but also useful for anyone entrusted with guiding future generations.

While “A Fist Against The Sky” is a serious story, I have to admit the idea behind “Search For The Flying Guillotine” was a little more tongue in cheek. Also set in the Pride of Tigers continuum, it sends characters from The Grand Tournament far from home to settle a question at least a couple cable TV shows have tackled: Was the flying guillotine, that unbeatable weapon from iconic 1970s movies, real?

A FIST AGAINST THE SKY

MICHAEL LAUCK

White Tiger was having a hard time walking. The girl over his shoulder was making things difficult as she kicked wildly and beat her fists against his back. At least once she bit him, too. She screamed and cursed at him, of course, but mainly she laughed so hard she could barely breath.

“Hello, Fire Demon!” White Tiger called cheerfully as he stopped at the weaponsmith’s forge. Two little boys, probably not even five, were watching the smith beat red hot metal into a spearhead and eating ripe fruit from the large bowl he always kept in his workshop. They covered their faces and laughed as Tiger walked drunkenly with the flailing girl.

“Where are you taking your sister?” Fire Demon asked without looking up from his work. He made a face and then hammered at the leaf shaped blade again.

“I was going to throw her in the well,” Tiger explained.

“Why is that?” Fire Demon asked, again examining the spear head for symmetry.

“She said I couldn’t do it.”

“Is that all?”

“She put hot oil in my tea. Again.”

Fire Demon grunted and began to hammer at the spearhead again.

“Of course,” White Tiger announced to the two little boys, “I could always take her to the stables and throw her in the manure as long as Lolo has not cleaned it all up.”

“Lolo is not cleaning the stables,” one of the little boys said. “Little Chao is, I just saw him.”

“But it is Lolo’s turn...” White Tiger said, mainly to himself. “Fire Demon,” he called loudly over the hammering, “Do you have an empty barrel I can put her in?” The smith grunted and nodded towards his right. Tiger saw the large, empty barrel and dumped his sister, upside down, inside. She was not very big and fit easily. Tiger tossed a large, flat metal plate Fire Demon had leaning against the barrel on top as a makeshift lid. Then he picked up one of the little boys who had wandered over to get a closer look and set him on top of the plate.

“Don’t you let her out Little Brother,” Tiger instructed, wagging a playful finger. He then started for the stables but the little boy called after him.

“You shouldn’t put Hidden Flower in a barrel!”

“What do you care? Hidden Flower is a naughty girl!” Tiger called back.

“But she is a pretty girl!” the little boy responded.

Tiger stopped, mid step, and turned around. “You do not think girls are disgusting?” He asked. The little boy shook his head slowly.

“You notice pretty girls?” The little boy nodded solemnly. White Tiger lifted an eyebrow. “Just how old are you?”

The little boy held up three fingers on his right hand.

“Almost this many,” he added, and used his left hand to uncurl a fourth finger on his right hand.

“Oh, almost this many?” White Tiger said absently, holding up four fingers of his own. “And you like pretty girls?” He shot an incredulous look at Fire Demon, who just grunted.

It only took a minute for Tiger to find Little Chao at the stable and confirm the boy was doing Lolo’s chores. It took several rounds of questioning before Little Chao admitted Lolo had threatened to beat him if he did not clean the stables. After that, Tiger only had one question for Little Chao before sending him home: Where is Lolo now?

A very angry White Tiger found Lolo sleeping under a tree by the pond just west of the village. It was not far from Lolo’s house or the village, but a convenient hill or two made it impossible to see from town. It was a popular site for fishing. It was a more popular site, though, for errant children and drinking husbands looking for a little privacy.

There was a small pavilion on the far end of the pond, but Tiger found Lolo sleeping under a tree on the near side. The boy was very close to the edge of the pond. Close enough to be splashed when Tiger heaved a bucket sized stone into the water.

“HEY!” the boy shouted as he jumped up. “What is—?” Lolo fell silent when he saw White Tiger standing over him. “Hello, Tiger.”

“Hello Lolo,” Tiger replied amiably. “Did you clean the stables already?”

“It is taken care of,” Lolo shrugged, settling back against the base of the tree trunk.

“Oh, it is taken care of,” Tiger said thoughtfully. “I saw Little Chao doing it,” Tiger added, just as amiably as before. “Why is that?”

"We made an arrangement" Lolo shrugged.

"Did you trade chores?"

"Something like that," Lolo replied, an evasive quality starting to enter his voice.

"Explain it to me," Tiger said firmly.

"I asked him to clean the stables," Lolo started.

"And he just agreed?" Tiger asked. Turning, he continued "I will just go ask Little Chao about that."

"I did not exactly ask him," Lolo admitted.

"Then what exactly did happen?"

Lolo looked at the ground. He did not answer.

"Lolo, why is Little Chao cleaning the stables?"

"I told him to," Lolo said quietly.

"And he just did it? You must be quite a talker," Tiger replied, annoyance coloring his words.

"I told him to but he said it was my job."

"Perhaps because it is your chore. And then?"

"And then I told him I would beat him if he did not clean the stables," Lolo admitted in a whisper.

Tiger cursed softly and picked up another rock, a much smaller rock, and threw it forcefully into the pond. White Tiger had been entrusted to start teaching Lolo and the other boys about his age the basics of the Wang Yue Fist a couple seasons earlier. They were his first students and they were learning well, or so Tiger had thought.

The truth was the boys were doing well learning their foundational stances, the core defensive moves and basic strikes. Tiger realized he was failing them as a teacher, though, if Lolo thought bullying Little Chao was in any way acceptable. The true heart of martial arts is much more than fast strikes, powerful kicks, clever joint locks and precision swordplay.

Tiger looked at Lolo. He remembered being that age;

truth was it was not so very long ago. White Tiger sighed; after all, he was still young enough to put his little sister in barrels.

"I am ready for my punishment," Lolo announced. He stood and braced himself for a blow.

Part of Tiger wanted to knock some sense into Lolo. Tiger was still young, and only beginning to act as an instructor of the Wang Yue Fist. Still he had enough wisdom to realize violence would not be an effective way to teach Lolo not to bully others.

What would his father do? White Tiger really was not sure. It was not that Tiger had been the perfect student or child, but as the second son his birthright had been to be the victim, not the bully, and his older brother had never really been a bully. What would Fire Demon do? The weapon-smith was also a father and he was beloved by all the village children, which was why his forge was such a popular place for them to gather. What would Auntie Yi do?

"Sit down, Lolo," Tiger said quietly. "We need to talk."

Lolo settled back down against the tree trunk, not quite sure what was happening, and Tiger took a place in the shade of the tree beside him. There was silence as Lolo awaited his punishment and White Tiger tried to decide what to say. He thought about how Scholar Lo may handle this situation. Truth was he thought about how everyone he respected would handle such a situation. He even thought about how his friends Student Lo, Two Ox Han and the odd young monk Er Han would attempt to teach Lolo.

Student Lo, the adopted son of Scholar Lo, harbored a near irrational hatred of bullies. He would probably beat Lolo within an inch of his life lecturing him the entire time. White Tiger's older brother would probably take a similar course of action; he hated bullies almost as much as Student

Lo. White Tiger had no love for bullies, either, but he did not lose sound judgement when faced with a bully. Two Ox, for all his brawn, would probably try to talk to the boy but White Tiger had no idea what his friend would say. The monk Er Han would probably have some allegorical story from some obscure religious scroll which did not seem to make any sense at first but would reveal its wisdom upon reflection. Unfortunately, White Tiger had no idea what strange tale the monk would offer.

“Why did you make Little Chao clean the stables?” This question was part of no grand strategy other than giving Tiger more time to think... but it seemed a sound place to start.

Lolo looked at Tiger as if he was crazy but White Tiger’s expression did not change. “I did not want to clean the stables. It is an awful chore,” the boy started.

“Yes. But it needs to be done.”

“Yes. But you do not do it! Grown ups never do it!”

“I cleaned the stables before the last caravan I walked,” Tiger said. “When all of you were sick.” Lolo gave him a “see what I mean” stare.

“Do you know why you little brothers clean the stables, feed the livestock and the other jobs of that type?”

“Because bigger people make us!”

“It might seem like that,” Tiger shrugged. “Everyone has chores, whether walking a caravan or in the village. Tell you what, I’ll talk to Fire Demon. Maybe you can take over the forge and he will clean the stables.”

“I can not run the forge!”

“Oh.” Tiger said, his voice full of disappointment. He thought for a long moment, then snapped his fingers. “Maybe you could tend to the fields in place of Cheng Chen or Iron Cudgel?”

“I do not know how to watch for the weevils or signs of sickness. We would starve. I am not even sure when to plant.”

“Really? Unfortunate. Oh! What if you took over the kitchens for Granny? She is old, she should rest.”

Lolo looked at Tiger as if he were insane. Then a look of understanding spread over his face. “I don’t know how to do anything but clean stables or gather wood and other boring jobs,” he sullenly admitted.

Tiger shrugged. “You do not know how to do anything but clean stables or gather wood *yet*. Prove your responsibility and you will get the chance to learn things that interest you. That is how growing up works.

“Fire Demon, for example, he needs to find someone who does not mind working hard, someone who will keep the forge going with a constant heat, to train in his craft. Granny needs to find someone possessing the patience to prepare dishes, sometimes days or even weeks or months in advance and for the entire village. Do you understand?”

Lolo shifted around, made a face. Finally, he quietly said “Yes.”

“If you think you are getting too old to clean the stables, if you believe you are responsible enough for other chores then you need to prove that to everyone. When Student Lo, Two Ox and I were young, who do you think was the last still cleaning stables?” Lolo shrugged. Tiger laughed at the memory. “It was Lo because, even though he was very smart and knew many things, he spent too much of his time trying to figure out how to get others to do his work. I would rather not see you make the same mistake.”

“I understand,” Lolo said softly.

“Good. This was advice from someone who is old enough to have already made many his own mistakes but is

maybe not quite yet grown up either. Now we have something more serious to speak about, something I need to discuss with you as teacher and student.”

Lolo straightened up a bit. “Yes?”

“Why would you think it is acceptable to force Little Chao to do your work? Because you thought grown ups use force to make you do it?”

Lolo sat for a while. Tiger waited. Lolo fidgeted. Tiger waited. Finally Lolo spoke. “The strong get to decide and the weak have to do what they are told. I am bigger and stronger than Little Chao. My martial arts are better. I should be the boss of him.”

“Oh, I understand,” Tiger nodded. “Rule of the fist.”

Lolo shook his head. “I have never heard that exact phrase before, but yes. Rule of the fist. Some day I will be a leader on the caravans because my martial arts are strong and Little Chao will have to listen to what I say, do what I tell him.”

White Tiger laughed to himself. “Lolo, you are bigger and stronger than Little Chao. Right now you easily overpower him but, to be honest, he trains harder than you because he must use technique instead of strength. His martial arts are probably a little better than yours already and if nothing changes over the next few years his martial arts will become much better than yours. And once you two are done growing you might not be the bigger or stronger one any more.

“Then who will be taking orders on the caravan?”

Lolo started to say something but words did not come out of his mouth. His face screwed into a frustrated expression for a long moment and he finally asked “Is Little Chao really better than me?”

“You rely on your strength and size. He can not do that

so he has to develop his skill and mind. Today, he honestly has more skill than you. Tomorrow, who knows?"

The two sat for several minutes in silence. Finally, White Tiger spoke. "Lolo, I have two questions to ask.

"First, if we fought, who would win?"

"You would," Lolo replied immediately.

Tiger nodded. "And what color is the sky?" The young man pointed into the clear, blue cloudless sky.

"Blue," Lolo replied and then yelped like a puppy when Tiger slapped him on top of the head.

"The sky is yellow," Tiger declared.

"Big Brother Tiger, have you lost your mind?" Lolo exclaimed. "The sky is blue!"

Tiger slapped Lolo again; "Yellow."

"It is a bright, beautiful blue—" SLAP!

"Yellow," Tiger corrected.

Lolo rubbed the top of his head. He looked at Tiger sideways and scooted about a step away. "It is bl—"

White Tiger launched himself on the boy before he could finish his words. They rolled over a time or two and Lolo tried desperately to escape from his teacher. However, when they came to a halt Lolo was chest down in the grass with Tiger, face up, on top of him. Tiger's left arm was locked around Lolo's head, just under the boy's chin. The young man's right arm was around the boy's leg, his elbow just over the knee. Tiger made sure he was not choking the boy but pulling his head back.

"Let me go you crazy man!" Lolo laughed.

In response, Tiger flexed his arms and pulled at Lolo's head and leg. It was not enough to hurt the boy, just to emphasize he was not escaping any time soon. Tiger was sure the move was effective as his older brother had applied it to Tiger many times when they were younger.

“Lemme go!” Lolo demanded. The laughter was replaced by anger.

“I will let you go when you admit the sky is yellow,” Tiger said, mock boredom in his voice.

“Blue!”

“Yellow,” Tiger insisted, beginning to rock back and forth, rolling his weight over Lolo. The boy struggled mightily but could not escape. From experience being the victim of this hold White Tiger knew struggling did one nothing except to cause himself more pain.

When telling the story to Student Lo, Two Ox Han and Hidden Flower later in the evening, White Tiger would admit Lolo held out much longer than he expected. He had to give the boy credit for his tenacity. Luckily, though, Hidden Flower was renowned for her stubborn ways so White Tiger had developed copious amounts of patience. That remark would earn Tiger his own slap on the head, delivered by his sister much to the amusement of Tiger’s friends.

Eventually, though, Lolo relented shouting “Yellow!” at the top of his lungs until it echoed between the hills. Tiger immediately let the youth free. They both scrambled to their feet, panting. Tiger could tell Lolo was more than just a little angry now.

“Lolo,” Tiger asked calmly, “is it not truly remarkable how I used my strength to the sky turn yellow?”

The boy took a step away, in case this was some sort of trick. “No.”

Tiger nodded. “But I did make you believe the sky was yellow with my superior martial arts, didn’t I?”

Lolo made a face. “Of course not!”

Tiger nodded again. “But I made you say the sky was yellow. Are you telling me that even though I am stronger

than you I was not strong enough to change what you knew to be true, much less change the actual sky?"

"Yes, I just said the sky was yellow so you would let me go."

"Oh," Tiger said. "So my fist made me the boss of you and my fist could even make you do what I wanted but it really did not make me right?"

"Yes," Lolo said with an emphatic shake of his head.

"Interesting," White Tiger said. "And do you have any further thoughts on this?"

"I realize," Lolo started and then sighed. "I need to go apologize to Little Chao."

Tiger reached out and playfully tousled Lolo's hair. "And I realize I need to apologize to Hidden Flower." She would be mad, even though she started it and Fire Demon had probably let her out of the barrel long ago. White Tiger knew he would be lucky next time if it was only hot oil in his tea.

"Come on, Lolo, let's go find them."

As they walked Lolo found the courage to ask "Why do you need to apologize to Hidden Flower?"

"I put her in a barrel."

"Why?"

"She put hot oil in my tea."

"Again? Tiger, how many times are you going to fall for that?"

Tiger sighed. "I don't even remember what tea is supposed to taste like anymore."

Lolo laughed. "You have to give her credit, Hidden Flower is as clever as she is pretty."

Tiger growled. "Not you too..."

SEARCH FOR THE FLYING GUILLOTINE

MICHAEL LAUCK

“I am telling you,” Bian Feng Tao said shaking his head, “the flying guillotine is a myth. What would it even be? A weapon that can behead a man from fifty paces?” He shook his head again and added a rude phrase to emphasize his point.

“I agree, this sounds impossible,” Hong Yue nodded. “But a bow can kill a man at fifty paces, and so can a stone.”

“A stone?” Feng Tao demanded.

“When thrown from a sling,” Hong Yue shrugged. “Besides, I have traveled on a few caravans near here and have always heard to beware the flying guillotine when in the World River Pass.”

Bian Feng Tao shrugged. “And? You also hear to watch for the great serpents in the Southern Mountains but those are obviously just stories to frighten children.”

“I have *seen* the great serpents of the Southern Mountains,” Hong Yue snorted.

Bian Feng Tao replied with the same rude phrase, then added “You have seen a snake so big that it could eat a horse?”

“No,” Hong Yue frowned, shaking his head. “I have not seen a serpent that could swallow up Monkey,” he reached up and patted his mount’s head. “I would never let a serpent swallow you up,” he told the animal, speaking to it like it was a small child. The horse whinnied but did not slacken his pace. “But I have seen one that could maybe swallow you.”

Bian Feng Tao repeated his rude phrase.

“I am serious,” Hong Yue laughed. “It is one of the reasons I avoid the Southern Mountains.”

“Just one? What better reason could there be than giant man eating snakes?”

“It is hot and not a pleasant dry desert hot either. They are that miserable wet kind of heat,” Hong Yue laughed. “Although at the moment hot does not seem so bad.”

“Yes,” Bian Feng Tao sighed. The pair had been riding for days through a constant, cold drizzle. “It should not be too much further to World River Gate. We will be in the mountains by the end of the day at this rate!” And the young Imperial officer was correct. When the pair reached the top of the next hill they found themselves staring down at a cluster of buildings. Most were smaller, obviously family homes or small shops, and all had smoke rising from their chimneys.

“They all look so warm,” Bian Feng Tao sighed wistfully. Urging his horse to quicken his pace, he called back “Come on!” and sprinted away. Hong Yue started to tease his companion about his city upbringing failing to prepare him for the hardships of travel but decided against it. Hong Yue had grown up traveling along merchant caravans as a guard but the truth was he was cold, wet and sore too... So instead he just urged Monkey to catch up.

Within an hour the two young men sat in the warm,

pleasant dining hall of the first inn they found in World River Gate. Monkey and Bian Feng Tao's mount Flying Cloud were in the stables where, last the men saw, the horses were happily feeding. Hong Yue and Bian Feng Tao were also happily feeding as they enjoyed the dining hall's fire.

"You are not going to suggest pushing on tonight, are you Hong Yue? I would hate to have to fight you."

Hong Yue snorted. It was not an arrogant snort, just a kind of laughing at his friend's joke even though his mouth was full of steamed bun. Swallowing, Hong Yue said "No, I already paid for a room while you were taking care of the horses. We will have to fight later and for some other reason."

"Okay, I will let you off this time," the young officer shrugged. He picked up another steamed bun and dipped it in his soup. "What do you say we place a wager on this flying guillotine? Whether or not it is real?"

"We have to determine if the flying guillotine is real or not no matter what... that is the point of the Book of Fists and Skills."

"I know," Feng Tao nodded. The Grand and Glorious Emperor himself had appointed Hong Yue and Bian Feng Tao to update the decades out of date accounting of the weapons, schools and masters of all the Empire's various martial arts. "Just trying to make things a little more interesting. How about this? If there is a flying guillotine I will do all of the camp chores for five days. Everything! Sharpen weapons, oil leather, feed horses, build fires, cook and more. But if there is not, then these are all your tasks for five days."

"We have already almost drowned, been in more fights than I can count and you had that allergic reaction to those stinky weeds. How much more interesting do you need?"

Bian Feng Tao scratched at his neck, remembering those “stinky weeds” and the extremely itchy rash. “Yes, well, I was just worried for you. After all, this must be a rough assignment for a newlywed.”

Hong Yue did not answer for a long moment. He played with his half eaten bun instead. “You are a good companion, Feng Tao. I consider you a brother-in-law—” Feng Tao laughed and Hong Yue looked up. “What?”

“Hummingbird has something like fourteen brothers and at least half a dozen sisters at my last count, maybe more by now. You need me as a brother-in-law?”

“I think you grew up closer to Hummingbird than any of them,” Hong Yue shrugged. “Still, you are no replacement for Hummingbird.”

“I am sure,” the other young man laughed, tossing a bit of bun across the table. “How do you think she is?”

Hong Yue continued to pull at his bun. “My mother always wanted a daughter. She is probably being spoiled.”

“She grew up in the Grand Imperial Palace! She is a beloved daughter of the Glorious Emperor himself! How could your mother spoil her?”

Hong Yue laughed. “You met my mother.”

“Yes,” Feng Tao agreed.

“And you met my mother’s closest friend and sworn sister?”

Feng Tao made a face, thinking of the woman known to the world as the Masked Beauty and to Hong Yue simply as Aunt Yi. “Well, there is that...”

“So why do not not believe there is a flying guillotine?”

“First of all, who ever heard of a guillotine?”

“It is a machine to behead prisoners, the old Shun Dynasty used them because they did not believe one man

should kill another, even if one had been condemned to death.”

“I know that,” Feng Tao huffed. “Never really made any sense to me. Whether the executioner wields a sword or a machine, he is still the executioner!

“And I saw a picture in a scroll once. The thing looked taller than a man so what kind of weapon would that be? Really, Hong Yue, do you believe in some device that can be thrown and behead a man at fifty paces?”

Hong Yue shrugged. “Maybe it is not thrown. Maybe it is shot, like an arrow. It may be exaggerated, like those serpents in the Southern Mountains. You expect them to eat horses and say that is ridiculous. Truth is they are probably only big enough to swallow a large child but I say that is still enough to stalk my sleepless nights!

“So why not a flying guillotine?”

The inn keeper stopped at the table, replacing the pair’s tea with a fresh, hot batch. “You two are seeking the flying guillotine?” Hong Yue thought the inn keeper’s voice acquired a wary edge to it and he was sure the man shrank away from the table.

“If there is such a thing,” Bian Feng Tao laughed warmly. “We understand all traveling the World River Pass should beware the flying guillotine.”

“All should,” the inn keeper said quietly.

“Honored storekeeper,” Hong Yue started using language much more formal than everyday politeness required, “have we offended you?”

“No, no,” the man replied nervously.

“Are we discussing a forbidden topic?” Hong Yue considered, continuing to use the most formal language at his disposal.

“No,” the inn keeper replied, dropping his eyes to his feet and shaking his head.

“Uncle,” Bian Feng Tao smiled, “surely you are not afraid of us? We can put our swords in our room if you prefer.” He chose less formal language, but still addressed the inn keeper more politely than normally required. He also reached out and grabbed the man gently by the arm, which was less polite, and showed the inn keeper something with his other hand. The man’s eyes got wide and his gaze shot to Bian Feng Tao, who had lifted his hand over his mouth to indicate the man should stay quiet.

“It is real, honored uncle, but we prefer it remain secret.” The man visibly relaxed but at the same time acquired a kind of nervous, fidgeting energy. “There is no danger here, we simply needed a dry, warm place to sleep and a good meal.”

“Is your mission secret?” the man asked in a wide eyed whisper.

“Something like that,” Bian Feng Tao smiled, “so you can help us by keeping this quiet.” The man nodded his head eagerly.

“Uncle, will you tell me why you were disturbed?” Hong Yue asked.

“Yesterday, there were others here asking about the flying guillotine. Rough sorts, maybe wanted men,” the inn keeper’s eyes widened again as he paused, building a story in his mind. “Are you pursuing these men? Of course you are! Are they dangerous?”

Hong Yue smiled and leaned on the table. “Uncle, can you spare a minute to share a jar of wine with us?” The inn keeper stood up a little straighter and surveyed the dining hall. He nodded and went to the kitchen to get some wine.

“You just love to show off that Imperial Medallion,”

Hong Yue said with an exaggerated frown as he turned to his companion. Bian Feng Tao gave a noncommittal grunt and tilted his head in mock contemplation before picking up his bowl of soup and taking a sip.

“You miss your uniform, don’t you?” Hong Yue smiled.

Bian Feng Tao shrugged. “Sometimes, I suppose I do. This life of travel is still new to me. Every other time I left the Imperial City I was part of a military camp.”

“You are adjusting,” Hong Yue laughed, nodding to the bowl of soup in Bian Feng Tao’s hand. “Not too long ago you would have never imagined drinking your soup without a spoon.”

Bian Feng Tao considered the bowl of soup for a long moment before nodding with a silent laugh. Then the inn keeper returned with a jar of wine and fresh cups.

The next morning the pair woke early. They stirred the embers in the room’s hearth into a fire and prepared for the day in relative silence. The sun was not yet up but they knew they would be able to find a warm meal in the dining hall before they left. Not wanting to broach the subject among others in the hall Bian Feng Tao quietly asked Hong Yue “What did you think about what uncle said last night?”

The inn keeper had told the men the day before five rough looking men had taken two rooms in the inn. They were rude, belligerent and although they were intimidating their leader, a larger, older man who looked as if he had spent all his years under the sun and stars running from justice, kept the rest from getting out of hand. He kept telling them it was not the time to create trouble. The innkeeper also said the men spoke loudly, angrily and proudly most of the time but dropped into whispers when they spoke of the flying guillotine.

The men had obviously shaken the inn keeper, so

neither Hong due nor Bian Feng Tao pressed him about them or the flying guillotine.

In addition to these useful, although meager, pieces of information the inn keeper told them of his boyhood in a farming village a couple days travel to the east, how his two most capable sons had shown no interest in operating his successful business and how his daughter truly would be most suited to run the inn anyway... but was that really proper?

Hong Yue wondered if the man would take their advice. In the Imperial City, like many other urban areas in the empire, the idea of a woman running a business was hardly the scandalous thought it was out in the further provinces. This meant Bian Feng Tao saw nothing wrong with the daughter taking an active role in the business. The innkeeper took this in but did not seem convinced. The southern deserts held similar attitudes so Hong Yue's advice was the same. It also seemed to fall on deaf ears until he mentioned how his aunt was a successful businesswoman. When the man learned Hong Yue was speaking of the famous Masked Beauty he suddenly re-evaluated the advice and the men he drank with.

The innkeeper greeted the two warmly when they entered the dining hall, placing a large bowl of steaming rice porridge and vegetables on a table and gesturing for them to sit. As they settled he returned with bowls and tea.

"It is going to be another cold day," he smiled as they began to eat. "The air is still full of that damned fine, cold rain and the ground has frozen. It will be slick, be careful. Hopefully it will thaw once the sun rises. Still, a misty day such as this will feel much colder than it actually is. Especially for a son of the desert," he said, nodding to Hong Yue, who grunted through a frown.

Hong Yue and Bian Feng Tao made sparse small talk as they ate. When the innkeeper returned to check on them he found a small stack of coins on the table. "What is this?"

"Uncle, you know we are leaving. We must settle our bill. Is it not enough?" Hong Yue asked. He had thought he had made a generous overpayment.

"Too much," the innkeeper said, "even if I was going to charge" he leaned in and whispered "agents of the Glorious Emperor."

"Nonsense," Hong Yue and Bian Feng Tao exclaimed almost at the same time. "His Excellent Self insists his agents pay their debts," Bian Feng Tao went on to explain. The innkeeper still seemed to hesitate so Hong Yue pushed the stack of coins towards him. The man thanked them and disappeared into the kitchen. The pair finished the last scraps of their meal and rose to leave. The innkeeper rejoined them, carrying a sealed jar of wine.

"You can not leave without this!" He insisted. "My payment to you for a pleasant night and some sound advice. I will speak with my daughter about the inn's future and about what she wants."

After pleasant goodbyes and a promise to return when they were in the area, Hong Yue and Bian Feng Tao headed through the chill morning air to the stables. The sun was finally peeking over the horizon as the pair set off. The horses trotted happily towards the mountains, their breath puffing out of their nostrils into the cold air as steamy clouds.

Before long the pair was moving into the mountains proper. The sun climbed higher in the sky but because they moved higher into the mountains the temperature did not rise. The cold, fine rain gave way to fog, which was no

better. Later it finally cleared, which did a good deal to make the journey more comfortable.

It was soon apparent to Bian Feng Tao why Hong Yue had never been through World River Pass. Although it ran along the river, at least most of the time, it was often barely wide enough for a cart to pass. Hong Yue said the pass a few days ride south was wide enough for five carts at its narrowest. Worse, though, was that much of World River Pass was knotted with twisted tree roots. The horses had to slow to keep from stumbling and it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to pull cart through sections of the pass. Any caravan would obviously head to the passes to the south.

By the time the men stopped for their midday meal the weather was tolerable, but they both appreciated the warmth of the small fire they built. Hong Yue, who was not much of a drinker, asked if his friend wanted to open the wine but Bian Feng Tao suggested they keep it in reserve for the chill of the night. As Hong Yue repacked after their meal, Bian Feng Tao suddenly turned. "Listen! Do you hear riders?"

Hong Yue stopped for a moment, head cocked. "Yes, might as well put some more wood in the fire. No reason to expect the worst." He finished re-packing their gear and moved the horses closer to the trees while Bian Feng Tao found some more dry kindling in the underbrush.

In just a few breaths three riders appeared, slowing noticeably when they saw Hong Yue and Bian Feng Tao. A sturdy middle aged man led the group. He was not built like a fighter but had a frame which spoke of a life accustomed to labor. The other two were markedly younger. In fact, neither was old enough yet to be called a man. The family resemblance was obvious, even at a distance.

“Wai!” Hong Yue called out a greeting common throughout the empire, smiling broadly. “My friend and I are departing but perhaps you would enjoy our fire!”

“Thank you,” the lead rider called back. “But we are in a hurry.” It was obvious the refusal was more a lack of trust than a lack of time.

“Good travels,” Hong Yue smiled back. “Perhaps you can answer a question for us, though, good sir. We seek news of the flying guillotine.”

The lead rider slowed a bit and looked hard at Hong Yue. “The flying guillotine is no more.” He urged his mount on but called back “Which is why one cannot chance accepting anything from a stranger in the World River Pass.” The three galloped on and out of view.

Bian Feng Tao tossed another piece of wood on the fire. “I imagine we will be giving them a bit of time before we set off?”

“I think if we were too close it would only frighten them,” Hong Yue shrugged. He glanced around. “Food is packed up. Care for a quick game of animal chess?”

After the fresh wood burned down and the game was completed, Hong Yue and Bian Feng Tao set off. They rode in silence, as Bian Feng Tao had an uncanny ability to almost sleep on his mount. It was a skill he assured Hong Yue all young officers acquired very early in their service and it was a skill he was employing to great effect in the World River Pass. That was, at least, until Hong Yue hissed his name urgently.

Eyes instantly open, the seemingly completely alert young officer grunted, both assuring his companion he was awake and asking what demanded his attention.

“A voice from up ahead, it was faint,” Hong Yue offered,

bringing Monkey in close to Flying Cloud. "It called out 'Halt, you three!'"

Bian Feng Tao looked forward, but the pass took a sharp turn which kept one from seeing more than a few dozen paces ahead. He then glanced at the horses. Both had their ears cocked, straining to hear more. It was all the confirmation he needed to know Hong Yue had not imagined the voice.

"Our riders without time for a fire?" Bian Feng Tao asked quietly.

Hong Yue nodded, whispering "So it would seem. It appears they have met less friendly travelers in the pass."

Both men freed their swords and urged their horses forward. Hong Yue was in the lead, his large, rectangular bladed desert knife held low. Bian Feng Tao followed, swallowing his nerves down. Even though he spent most of his military career guarding the corridors of the Imperial Palace he was trained to fight on horseback. He worried for Hong Yue, though.

If he chose to boast, Hong Yue could honestly claim to be one of the best fighters in the entire Glorious Empire. Truth be told, he had arguably *proven* he was the best. He had protected the caravans from raiders and bandits since he was able to walk. His performance in the Grand Tournament would be spoken of for generations. Bian Feng Tao would have wagered on Hong Yue against any ten men, provided they were on foot. On horseback, however, Hong Yue could be called a novice and his blade was a heavy, awkward weapon.

The pair came into the next clearing side by side. They found the the trio from earlier in the day, as expected, and five more riders spread in a semi-circle around them. The little family was unarmed. The riders threatening them all

had drawn swords, mainly the curved single edged knives used by common soldiers. One rider, though, was armed with the long, double edged, straight sword favored by officers, including Bian Feng Tao.

"We are unarmed and we are not warriors," the father was calling out. His voice was calm, his words loud but not shouted. Still, Hong Yue felt there was a thread of pleading in them. "Take what you want, we will not resist." He glanced back at Hong Yue and Bian Feng Tao. "You have us circled and outnumbered."

Before any of the others could respond Hong Yue called out, "Take your sons and ride as fast as you can." Nodding towards Bian Feng Tao, but without diverting his eyes from the armed riders, he added, "We will hold them back from you." Hong Yue patted Monkey on the neck and the horse trotted forward, around the man and his sons. Flying Cloud followed suit, passing the group from the other side. There was just enough room for the father and his sons to pass between Flying Cloud and the river and they did so at a full gallop. No one followed them.

"What in the nine infernal hells kind of knife is that?" the apparent leader of the brigands called out, exaggerated amusement in his voice.

Hong Yue raised the big, rectangular blade, pointing it towards his interrogator. The man seemed a little older than the rest, but not much. All looked to be older than Hong Yue and Bian Feng Tao, but probably younger than the father they had just threatened. They were all ugly, scarred and dirty; these were obviously the men the inn keeper had mentioned.

"Southern desert style great knife," Hong Yue said coldly. His voice was not raised in the least but it carried

through the pass. Bian Feng Tao listened to it carry as he also listened to the hoof beats of the little family running.

The brigand grunted, half nodded. "Well, in case you can not count in the southern desert, you and your friend are outnumbered five to two."

"Five to three," came a new, louder voice. All of the brigands turned to look except the leader. A young man on a grey speckled horse appeared from the trees. He wore the round, woven hat of a traveler and carried a round, woven shield. Like his hat, the shield was lacquered black. "Perhaps it is Tiger Wan who can not count." On the words "Tiger Wan" Hong Yue saw surprise in the bandit leader's eyes.

Hong Yue had seen many things in his young life. He truly had seen the great serpents of the Southern Mountains. He had seen both the Western and Eastern Sea and even the inner chambers of the Imperial Palace. He had seen men who fought as tigers, snakes and monkeys. He had seen grannies who could fling a blade into your eye before you realized they had moved a withered hand. What he saw next, though, brought surprise to his eyes.

The newcomer let the shield fall from his arm until he grasped its edge in his hand. Then, leaning against his horse and towards the closest brigand, he flung the shield into the man. Blood shot from the bandit's face as he tumbled from his mount, nose crushed. The real surprise, though, came next as the flying, spinning shield leapt back to the young man's outstretched hand. Twisting, he flung it again at the next closest brigand. This man, however, was luckier and managed to catch the impact on this upraised arm, cursing with pain at the blow.

As the shield again flew back to its young owner, Hong Yue thought he saw a fine black cord running from the

man's wrist to the lacquered shield. The flying shield technique! Hong Yue had heard of it but he had assumed it was a poetic name for some defensive school of martial arts. Apparently, though, it was quite literal.

All of this raced through Hong Yue's mind as he and Monkey charged forward. In half a breath they were close enough to one of the brigands to exchange blows. To his credit, the man not only raised his soldier's ox tail knife in time to block Hong Yue's strike, he also managed to maintain his defense under the crushing blow from the massive rectangular knife. Hong Yue withdrew his blade and shot it forward again in a flash, sneaking it under the other man's blade. The rider leaned away from the blade, just avoiding it. He was massively unbalanced, though, and Hong Yue grabbed the man's knee and gave it an upward tug. It was enough for the man to lose what was left of his seating and he tumbled backwards from his mount.

On the far end of the fray, Bian Feng Tao and the rider with a straight sword exchanged attacks. Their blades danced in the sunlight for perhaps five clashes, then Bian Feng Tao suddenly pulled his attack short. The feint caused his opponent to attempt to parry an attack which was not there... and Bian Feng Tao's blade cut into his arm just above the wrist. It was enough to make the man drop his sword. This left the young shield man and the bandit he had called Tiger Wan.

"It is not you I want," Tiger Wan declared. "Where is the flying guillotine?"

"I know my father killed your brother," the young man replied.

"And sent me to a five years in the Emperor's labor camps," Tiger Wam snarled.

"And fever robbed you of your vengeance. Father is

gone and I am High Ranger now," the young man said evenly.

"You?" Tiger Wan scoffed. "I have boots older than you!"

It was now the young man's turn to scoff; with a judging glance he frowned "I do not doubt that." Bian Feng Tao tried to hold back his laughter, but he was not very successful.

"You and me, boy! Fair duel, right here!" Tiger Wan growled. He virtually leapt from his mount to the ground. "If you are any measure of your father you will take my challenge!"

"Just you and I," the High Ranger replied. Tiger Wan gave a short nod and the young man slid down from his grey speckled horse. "Wait here, Evening Mist," he said calmly, patting the horse on his neck.

Bian Feng Tao shot Hong Yue a meaningful look from across the little clearing. Hong Yue shrugged and returned his big knife to the lacquered wooden sheath hanging across his back. Feng Tao made a face at his friend but returned his own blade to its scabbard.

"To the death," Tiger Wan said ominously.

"I do not plan to kill you," the High Ranger replied. He raised his shield, mounted on his right arm, and held his left arm behind him for balance.

In response Tiger Wan held out his sword, which he held in his right hand, so the blade was perpendicular to the ground. The the tip of his blade was at the level of his shoulder and pointed at the High Ranger. His left hand was raised in a fist near his face.

The High Ranger shot forward with almost no warning, although Hong Yue had noticed a change in the way he held his weight in the quarter-breath before he moved. The

shield fell from his arm to his hand and suddenly he pivoted to Tiger Wan's left. The ranger spun, swinging the shield's edge at the bandit's head. Tiger Wan made a backwards step with his left foot and met the shield with the blade of his ox tail knife. A low, reverberating sound of metal on metal confirmed Hong Yue's suspicion the shield concealed a metal rim.

Tiger Wan sprang at the younger man, dropping the point of his sword and thrusting it forward. The ranger, each hand on opposite edges of his shield, slammed his strange weapon down into the bandit's knife causing Tiger Wan to skip backwards, raising his blade again. The ranger pressed his advantage, though, with two rushing steps forward and a lunging left handed swing of his shield. Tiger Wan rolled backwards to avoid the attack. He came to his feet only to face another wide swing of the shield. Tiger Wan took three large steps back, stumbling slightly with the last.

The ranger did not follow, though. He flung out his arm and his shield shot toward Tiger Wan before Hong Yue could yell "NO!" Tiger Wan side stepped the shield; his stumble was a ruse. Once the flying lacquered shield passed the bandit slashed out, severing the fine black cord. The shield wobbled slightly from the impact of the blade on the cord but it continued on its flight.

Turning towards the ranger with a cruel smile Tiger Wan raised his sword overhead and charged. The ranger stood his ground, though. Just as the bandit's sword started to come down the young man raised his hands to his face. Hong Yue almost turned away, unwilling to watch the young ranger die. Hong Yue did not move, though.

Hong Yue also did not see the ranger die. The young man's hands did not try to shield his head from the blow but

instead snatched his wide, lacquered hat from his head and held it out between his head and Tiger Wan's knife. The blade crashed down, cleaving through the top of the hat and then stopping with a low metal on metal sound. The ranger twisted to the right and pushed the sword away. He swung with his left and crashed the edge of his torn hat into Tiger Wan's face.

The impact opened a gash over the bandit's right eye. His knees buckled but he tried to recover his balance. Before Tiger Wan could stand again, though, the High Ranger spun and crashed his hat into Tiger Wan's temple. His head snapped to the side, hard, and Tiger Wan crumpled to the ground. He breathed but otherwise he did not move.

Stepping back, the young ranger turned to determine where Tiger Wan's men stood. None of the four made a move towards him.

"He had his duel," the ranger declared. "Take him and leave World River Pass. But be warned: threaten any traveler here again and you will be lucky to spend five years in labor camps!" Tiger Wan's men hesitated until the ranger again shouted "Take him! Go!"

Two of the men warily moved forward and lifted Tiger Wan to his feet. More dragging him than anything else they returned him to his horse. Mounting their own horses the men left, heading back in the direction of the village Bian Feng Tao and Hong Yue had stayed the previous night.

The ranger watched the men ride away. After they were gone he then turned his attention to Hong Yue and Feng Tao. "First, I should thank you.

"Thank you, I was obviously outnumbered."

Bian Feng Tao nodded and asked "Why are you out here alone? Where are your men?"

The young man laughed. "You two would not be interested in a job, would you? I can offer lodging, meals, fresh air and you get to protect the common people."

"I am afraid we already have an employer," Hong Yue apologized.

"The governor would treat you well. It is hard to find a better patron," the young man pressed. True to form, Bian Feng Tao reached inside his jacket and withdrew his Imperial Medallion. The High Ranger's eyes fell to it and he froze, mouth open, suddenly robbed of his next argument.

The High Ranger dropped to a knee, head bowed. "I apologize."

"No need," Bian Feng Tao laughed, skipping the medallion back into his jacket. "I take it you are in need of men? I am Officer Bian, by the way, and my good friend here is called Hong Yue."

"Officer Bian, yes. The World River Pass needs more rangers. Traditionally there would be at least three High Rangers, each leading a group of four strong men or more. Unfortunately, last year's snows were heavy. The pass was cut off for most of the winter. Two High Rangers and four of their men were lost to an avalanche. My father and his men tried to find them, he stayed too long in the snows himself. He fell ill shortly after and..." The young man took a deep breath and continued "I inherited his position, as is tradition. There are three rangers in my band, and we often patrol the pass alone.

"I am called Mei Kao, it was rude not to introduce myself."

"And the other High Rangers had no heirs?"

The ranger shrugged. "Pao Tan had a daughter, she wants to take her father's position."

“And?” Hong Yue asked, his “why can’t she?” Unspoken but obvious.

“She is skilled, a good fighter and smarter in the ways of the mountains than most. However, she is has only seen fourteen summers.”

The young High Ranger shook his head and then forced a smile. “I sent word to the Governor last winter. Surely more men are on the way.”

“Last winter?” Hong Yue scoffed. Bian Feng Tao jumped in, “I am sure the governor only needs a gentle reminder of your situation. We can take him word, yes?” He turned to Hong Yue, who nodded.

“No, there is no reason to bother the governor,” the High Ranger protested.

“Ranger Mei, there is no way four men, even fine men such as yourself, can watch all of the World River Pass. The loss of your father, taking up his position... you are obviously a true hero.”

“I am no hero. My family has held the position of High Ranger for five generations before me. What else could I do?”

“Spoken like a true hero. But even the most heroic deeds sometimes get lost in the bureaucracy of government. Let us lend our authority to your situation,” Bian Feng Tao said.

The young ranger smiled sadly. “I appreciate the offer but there is no need to delay your Imperial business for my burdens. Besides, I do not wish to offend you but the governor might not even have time for Imperial operatives without offices of their own.” He scratched his head. “It is the way things are, as I am sure you know.”

“We have appointment from the Glorious Emperor

himself," Bian Feng Tao said seriously. "No governor should ignore our office!"

Hong Yue laughed and grasped Mei Kao's shoulder. "Between you and me, Officer Bian loves to let people know of his Imperial ties!"

"But your own mission," Ranger Mei protested, although without quite as much conviction.

"Actually, perhaps you could help us with our task," Hong Yue explained. "We are adding to the Imperial Book of Fists and Skills, a listing of martial art schools, masters and weapons first compiled two centuries ago.

"We came to World River Pass seeking the flying guillotine."

High Ranger Mei Kao seemed surprised, but only for half a breath. He nodded. "Well, then you two need to come visit my home."

FLYING Cloud and Monkey did their best to follow Mei Kao's Evening Mist through the narrow trail up the hills on the north side of the World River Pass. Still, the High Ranger had to urge his mount to slow down at least twice as they rode. It took well over an hour, probably close to two, before the horses reached a large, flat clearing. There was a cabin with smoke rising from its chimney. Its first floor had stone walls with a second level made of wood. There was a stable with a fenced yard behind the cabin and a marked off area, perhaps a garden during warmer months, on the left side.

"Welcome to my home," Mei Kao called out. "Let us put the horses in the stable. They will be warmer there and

if your horses are anything like Evening Mist they will be wanting something to eat.”

In just a few minutes the horses were settled and Mei Kao was leading his new acquaintances into his home. “Auntie Sao, Little Sister Fei! We have guests!”

An older woman appeared with a steaming pot of tea and a smile. She struck Hong Yue as the image you would conjure if asked to think of the average grandmother. “How many? Just these two young heroes? Good, I brought enough cups. Sit by the fire, sit! Are you boys hungry?”

“Are the others here?” Mei Kao asked, but the grandmotherly woman shook her head.

The woman herded the young men towards benches arranged around a small fireplace with a roaring fire. The room also featured a table surrounded by more benches and a shelf loaded with scrolls, books, writing implements. There were several ink paintings on the walls and over the fireplace hung a small shelf with an iron ring a little wider than the length of Hong Yue’s forearm displayed upon it.

“I will return in just a moment with soup and rice,” Auntie Sao assured them.

“Please, do not trouble yourself for us,” Bian Feng Tao plead but the old woman patted him on the head as if he was a small child. Hong Yue barely choked back a laugh. “It is no trouble,” she smiled. Nodding towards Mei Kao she explained “This one gets all out of sorts if he does not get his lunch!”

“Where is Little Sister Fei?” Mei Kao asked, pouring tea and handing lidded cups to Hong Yue and Bian Feng Tao.

“She needs to make herself presentable since there are young men here,” Aunt Sao replied in a stage whisper.

"I am always here," Mei Kao said indignantly. "And I am a young man!"

"Oh, dear," Aunt Sao clucked, "You know you do not count!" She left the room to go tend to the soup.

"You asked about Flying Guillotine," Mei Kao started, staring at the iron hoop over the fireplace.

"Is this the famous flying guillotine?" Hong Yue asked, rising. He took a step towards the fireplace and leaned closer to the hoop. It was about two fingers wide and almost as thick as his little finger on the inside but the outer edge of the hoop was sharpened. A smaller ring encircled the hoop, which Hong Yue did not notice until he had moved closer. There was a coil of silk cord attached to the smaller ring, much like the cord on Mei Kao's flying shield.

"What?" the High Ranger asked with surprise. "Of course not! The Flying Guillotine was my father! Flying Guillotine Mei Pao, High Ranger of the World River Pass!"

Hong Yue and Bian Feng Tao just stared at each other in shocked surprise.

After a long moment Hong Yue realized he and his friend were just standing there open mouthed. He forced himself to blink and shook his head to gather himself.

"Mei Kao, I have long heard that anyone traveling the World River Pass should beware the Flying Guillotine. I always assumed the flying guillotine was some type of weapon!"

The young ranger scratched at his chin thoughtfully. Finally he said "It does sound rather ominous: Beware the flying guillotine!"

"It sounds ridiculous!" A girl's voice suddenly declared. Aunt Sao had returned with a tray of soup bowls and buns. A girl, just beginning to become an adult, was at her elbow with a second tray. "Only bandits and miscreants had to

beware Flying Guillotine. He was a blessing to the common people!" She spoke with the certainty those straddling childhood and adulthood often manage.

"True enough Little Sister Fei," Mei Kao agreed with an indulgent smile. "Still, if you did not know they called my father the Flying Guillotine it does sound like some type of fearsome weapon."

"Oh, yes. Fearsome indeed! Why not call it the flying guillotine of death? Even more fearsome," Little Sister Fei frowned as she helped Aunt Sao settle everything on the table.

"Miss Fei," Bian Feng Tao said gravely, reverting to his most formal language, "are you the young lady Mei Kao spoke of? The girl ready to assume a position as a ranger in this pass?"

"I am," the girl said hesitantly, worried the stranger was setting up some type of verbal trap. She then added, with a bit of hostility, "And what of it?"

"It is admirable! Since I was a small child I always knew I wanted nothing but to serve as an Imperial officer. And my friend here, he is called Hong Yue, moved the stars in the sky to preserve his father's legacy and caravan security service," Bian Feng Tao explained.

"So you do not believe it is impossible for a woman to be a ranger?" the girl asked Bian Feng Tao and Hong Yue while throwing a sideways glance at Mei Kao.

"Of course not," Hong Yue said with a shake of his head. "Women fight in the Grand Tournament. There are women bandits. Why not women rangers? I am sure you will be a fine ranger once you are ready."

"How do you know I am not ready now?" Mei Kao countered.

"I do not know if you are or not. I have only just met

you!" Hong Yue said as he drew his hands together in a warrior's salute, left hand covering right fist, as he bowed.

"Maybe we should have a match!" the young lady declared. "Show Mei Kao I am ready."

Hong Yue muttered to himself "Do they call this one Hummingbird?" and Bian Feng Tao also bowed to the girl called Fei. "That is not the challenge you want to set for yourself, Miss Fei, please believe me."

"Is he really so fearsome?"

"He really is that fearsome Miss Fei," Bian Feng Tao assured her.

The young lady regarded the Imperial Officer for a long moment. "Everyone calls me Little Sister Fei," she offered with a smile and a slight bow of her head.

"You young people talk while you eat!" Aunt Sao broke in. "Otherwise everything will be cold. Sit, sit!"

"Won't you eat with us Aunt Sao?" Hong Yue asked as he found a place at the table.

"I ate all I needed while I was cooking!" the woman said as if dismissing a child's question.

"It is Aunt Sao's way," Little Sister Fei nodded.

"I think I have only seen Aunt Sao sit at a table and eat maybe, of, five times in my entire life," Mei Kao laughed.

"Don't you worry about my eating," Aunt Sao said in that same good natured but dismissive way. "Tell them about the dancing knife!"

"Oh, yes," Little Sister Fei agreed, offering the table a bottle of sesame oil. "I think that is a fine idea!"

Mei Kao gestured vaguely at the fireplace with his spoon. "The sharpened hoop. Perhaps it was inspired by being called Flying Guillotine, but father always called it the dancing knife.

"In many ways it is handled the same as my flying shield

or any other iron ring. Of course, you must keep your hands on the inside," he added with a demonstrative gesture. "This fit in with father's style of fighting quite easily. He never adopted it as his primary weapon, though."

"Why is that?" Bian Feng Tao asked.

"He could never figure out how to throw it!

"If we went over there and picked it up now, it would be easy to throw. You could easily cover distance and do it accurately," Mei Kao explained. "But you would grasp it like this," he held up his right hand, and made an exaggerated show of placing his thumb against the side of his index finger. "Or maybe like this," now he brought his thumb to the tips of his fingers. "But when you are trying to fight with the dancing knife it is difficult to transition from here," the ranger mimed pressing his hands against the inner edges of the dancing knife, "to a grip that allows you to throw it."

"Still, even if it can not be thrown, it is an interesting weapon," Hong Yue offered.

Mei Kao nodded, swallowing a bite of bun. "True, but I do not keep my hands on the inside of my rings like my father did. I prefer my flying shield. I would cut off my own finger with that thing!"

"Besides, the small ring that attaches the silk cord dulls the blade horribly! You spend more time honing the blade than using it!"

Hong Yue, Feng Tao and Mei Kao spent a pleasant afternoon together and Aunt Sao insisted the travelers stay the night. The other rangers returned from patrols and everyone shared the jar of wine given to Hong Yue and Feng Tao by the kindly innkeeper. Even Auntie Sao indulged in a cup.

After a pleasant night in warm beds Hong Yue and Feng Tao awoke ready to resume their journey, albeit with a

new detour to visit the governor. Little Sister Fei was practicing with a short spear behind the house when Mei Kao took Hong Yue and Feng Tao out to their horses. After a warm farewell, and receiving a package of steamed buns from Auntie Sao, the pair finally set off.

“So,” Hong Yue mused as they galloped through the pass, “there actually was a Flying Guillotine.”

“True,” Feng Tao admitted, “but it was no weapon.”

“No one ever said it was a weapon, just to beware the Flying Guillotine of World River Pass!”

“That was not the bet,” Feng Tao protested.

“Wasn’t it?” Hong Yue laughed as Monkey broke into a run.

ABOUT MICHAEL LAUCK

Like so many other kids in the late '70s and early '80s, a movie convinced Michael Lauck he should take up martial arts. Unlike so many other kids, it was not the righteous fury of Bruce Lee or Chuck Norris's laconic drive for justice that hooked him. It wasn't even the mysterious vengeance of Sho Kosugi. In *Billy Jack*, with its half American Indian high kicking hero, 10 year old Michael finally found an onscreen role model who reflected his own background.

Today, Michael has over three decades of Chinese martial arts experience behind him. He has worked with police and prize fighters, Green Berets, Girl Scouts and grandmothers. He incorporates his real world fighting experience into fantasy stories where martial heroes can only fly as far as they can jump and lethal weapons have lethal consequences.

You can learn more about Michael's martial arts fantasies and science fiction novels, sign up for his newsletter and find even more free stories at his website www.SwordsAndRayguns.com

JF LEE



NOTE FROM JF LEE

JF LEE

“Duel at Broken Furniture Inn” and “Broken Chairs Hidden Fist,” are wuxia stories both set in the same world as the Tales of the Swordsman. They’re both part of the Tales of the Jianghu series, a collection of light hearted wuxia short stories that poke fun at some of the tropes of the genre (in a very loving way).

The adventures of Yan Tao and Miao will continue....

DUEL AT BROKEN FURNITURE INN

TALES OF THE JIANGHU

JF LEE

Yan Tao hated the *xiake*.¹

For all their good intentions, the wandering martial artists were more trouble than they were worth. They travelled the countryside, looking for chivalrous things to do, fighting bandits, rescuing innocents.

And starting fights in unsuspecting roadside inns.

He threw the broken table leg into the growing pile of broken furniture in the corner of the Green Brocade Inn. It landed with a clatter, skid off the edge of a table, and tumbled back down the pile before settling in with the stretcher of a stool. He scowled, wiping beads of sweat from his balding head. That tangled pile of broken furniture parts from kung fu brawls was turning into something of a joke among the locals and had begun spreading to his patrons as well.

“Such an eyesore,” he heard one say.

“He really should keep it cleared away,” muttered another.

“I can’t believe it’s real! This is the inn of the broken furniture!”

That last confirmed that it was more of an attraction to his inn than his home-cooked style cuisine. Sure, the self-styled martial heroes were considered a force for good in the world. Sure, they had helped him out of a pinch or two. And, sure, they were sometimes his best customers.

But they always made a mess of his restaurant, and they were the primary reason the inn featured a maddeningly permanent pile of broken furniture. So, in fact, they were some of his worst customers.

Where is that useless boy? He'd get Xiao Dou, the inn's serving boy, to haul the pile out later. The sad truth was that no matter what his efforts were, the pile would inevitably return, and grow in size.

And the reason why? The *xiake*.

It was the late afternoon and he watched a pair of customers file out of the restaurant, anxious to get on the road before nightfall. Those that were staying the night were milling about, indulging in light conversation. His cook had come out of the kitchen and chatted with some of the regulars. The storyteller, old man Chen Yang, had started a dice game at a table in the corner that seemed to be getting more and more lively. Xiao Dou was probably loafing around out back, flirting with the cook's assistant.

Judging by the golden light filtering through the bamboo forest surrounding the way station restaurant, the last caravans of the day most likely already departed. *The end of the day can't come soon enough*, he thought. Today was a disaster.

He pushed the unbroken tables, stools, and benches aside, clearing a space to work as he cleaned, and soon cleared an open space in his restaurant. He kept a running tally of all the broken pieces, calculating how much this would cost him this week.

Running the Green Brocade Inn was difficult at best. Sure, it had a great location on the main highway between An'lin and the northern pass. But sourcing good food, keeping his staff paid, and having the *xiake* come in at least once a week to break his furniture, his expenses were up to unsustainable levels. Unless he could find a way to reduce the broken furniture or offset it in some way, it wouldn't be long until he would be forced to close.

He groaned as he stooped to the ground to pick up the pieces of the broken chair. His back ached. He was getting old, his mid-life passing quickly. The pressures of running the business had not been kind to his body. It was a family business—his great-grandfather first settled in the valley and set up shop, and a small community flourished, serving the travelers along the busy road.

He'd been running the inn since his father passed ten years ago. The inn was all he had ever known, and he had worked there since he was a child. There were days where he wished he could have left the valley. There really was nothing that bound him here either. His children had all left the valley—his daughter grown up now with a family of her own, and a son out there somewhere with the Righteous Will merchant caravan. His wife had passed years ago, and he had never remarried.

Whenever a traveler encouraged him to see the world, he always laughed and told them that the world came to him, here in the valley. But the laughter was to cover up his regret. Perhaps he held on to the hope that one day his children would return to the valley, though the likelihood of that happening was slim. Perhaps he knew that he wasn't brave enough to leave behind the only life he had ever known.

Yan Tao bit back a yelp as a splinter of wood buried itself in his finger. He cursed the *xiake* again.

“The fourth table already. And three more chairs,” he grumbled, rolling a piece of table away. His father never had to deal with these problems. “It’s only the first week of the month.”

The martial artists often came to celebrate something or other—maybe a new bond of sworn brotherhood—or to rest from their long adventures. Sometimes they were good for their money. But for every three *xiake* that paid for their collateral damage, there were two that didn’t. Sometimes they would come in and only after eating a meal would they reveal that they had nothing to pay with and laugh that they could offer him an act of martial service instead.

“I can’t feed my children with just your service!” he yelled at the last one, a balding oaf with a wooden staff. The oaf just laughed and bowed and told him to ‘call on him if he ever needed help,’ but failed to tell Yan Tao where he could be found.

He sighed as he swept the floor. Today was typical of a bad day. It started simple enough. A trio of men came in and sat down at one of the tables. Two perched together on one bench. The other on a stool. Xiao Dou took their order—dumplings, pan-fried. Yan Tao wasn’t sure if they could pay, but he wasn’t one to turn away the hungry.

They were almost done with their meal when a quartet of men came in, scanning the restaurant. Before Yan Tao could greet them, they had adopted fighting stances.

“Three Tigers! We are the Four Brothers of the Western Forest. We will defeat you today!” the leader of the quartet yelled. It was all he could do to duck behind the counter and let the fight play out.

This far away from the city of An'lin there were few guard patrols. Heaven is high, and the emperor is far away—²and the locals liked it that way—no imperial troops to interfere. But that also meant no one to police the area. Bandits were held in check by wandering heroes, and they were the ones to intervene, or join in when a fight inevitably broke out.

At the end of the brawl, Yan Tao and Xiao Dou dragged the fighters' unconscious forms out into the road. He rummaged through their pockets to see if they had enough money to pay for the meal.

No luck.

Why was it always his restaurant? he wondered. Surely other restaurant owners didn't have this many fights break out in their establishments.

"You're hogging the customers! Spread the wealth around!" his peers complained. He'd gladly share it if it meant less broken furniture. But still, the martial artists came. He wondered if he was on some sort of list in the *jianghu* community that he wasn't aware of. *Go to the Green Brocade restaurant for a good meal. The laoban³ is a fool, and the inn is an excellent place to fight.* Maybe it was because he was on this list that he got all the *xiake* customers.

But it was probably because of this that things had a tendency to turn violent in his restaurant. Of course, they would never call it violent, but how else would you describe their little duels and 'testing' each other's skill level?

"A friendly match between rivals!" one explained to him once. Despite his most earnest protestations to take it outside, the furniture was always a casualty. That day the 'friendly match' added two splintered tabletops, a shattered table pedestal, three cracked stools with broken seat planks, legs and crossbars, to the growing pile of ruined tables,

stools, chairs, benches, and ruined octagonal window lattices in the corner of the restaurant.

The only good thing was that he never had to pay extra for firewood.

The floor swept clean of the debris, Yan Tao began moving the tables back into place. The first table screeched across the floor, turning the heads of his guests. He waved apologetically, then reached for a second table. It wobbled. He frowned, ducking under the table to examine the uneven base. He stuffed a few stray fragments of a broken chair underneath the table leg, then shook the table. It seemed to balance a bit better. He sighed. "Maybe I can salvage this one. I'll have to get that carpenter to look at it."

And that carpenter—his idiotic brother-in-law that lived on the other side of their little settlement. If there was anyone that profited directly from Yan Tao's misfortunes, it was him—especially since he was the only carpenter around for a hundred *li*. "You should just keep me on staff and pay me a monthly fee!" the carpenter had chuckled. "I'll take care of any broken furniture you may have in the future."

"With how much I'm already paying you, you're practically one of my employees anyway! Besides, you should stop making furniture that breaks," Yan Tao growled, swatting at him.

"And lose you as my best customer?" the carpenter laughed in response.

"Market prices for quality glue have been low. I know you're using inferior glue!" Yan Tao accused. He held up the wedge of a table leg to the carpenter's face. Yan Tao had unfortunately become well acquainted with the workings and construct of furniture. "Look at how it dried in the joint!"

"That just adds to the character of the pieces."

“Character is for the storytellers. I need less character and more durability!”

“You’re too funny Yan Tao. Anyway, I have a surprise for you today,” the carpenter said with a grin, ignoring Yan Tao’s accusation.

“Another bill?” Yan Tao frowned.

“No, no. Something for *you*, not me. Something much better. Look at that!” the carpenter pointed at a black chair resting next to the workbench.

“Another chair,” Yan Tao said dryly.

“Yes!”

“It doesn’t look any different to me.” Yan Tao said, giving it a glance. It didn’t look like anything special. In fact, the only difference was its color. “Oh, look. It’s black.”

“It’s a chair that won’t break,” he said with a sneaky grin. “My latest design! I’m using the finest hardwood from the Sen forest and it has the best craftsmanship. It’s taken me years to come up with something this good.”

“That was what you said last time,” Yan Tao sighed. “And where on earth did you learn to do something new? This is a con.”

“Ha! Go on, test it.”

The seat plank gleamed with polish, smooth to the touch. He tugged on the crossbars, testing the construction of the stool. Unlike the carpenter’s other stools, this one didn’t budge, didn’t make a sound. He sat on it, wobbled and shook the legs. It seemed sturdy enough. He stood up and picked up the stool to scrutinize it. The dowel joints showed no sign of glue. It was a beautiful piece. The carpenter really had outdone himself. He scowled at the grinning man.

“Light enough to pick up with one hand too,” the carpenter added.

“How much is this going to cost me?”

“I won’t charge this time. But if it holds up with the kind of punishing you put your furniture through, I’ll charge you through your nose,” the carpenter laughed.

Yan Tao didn’t know what he resented more: the thought that the carpenter was already anticipating more business or the fact that he was the only carpenter worth dealing with in the valley.

Xiao Dou carried the chair back to the restaurant, but Yan Tao hadn’t found a good place to put it. It didn’t match the rest of the decor, so it sat, neglected next to the pile of broken furniture.

“Excuse me sir,” a polite voice said from behind him, breaking Yan Tao’s unpleasant reverie. “Are you the *laoban*?”

He tried to stand and cracked his head on the table. He cursed, scurrying out from underneath.

“You’re lucky. I was about to start closing for the night,” he said, standing. The polite voice belonged to a young woman. She was shorter than he was and didn’t look like she was out of her teens yet. Her face was caked with a layer of dirt, and she looked incredibly small—too young to be traveling by herself. She was simply dressed in traveling clothes, and she wore a cloak draped around her shoulders that could easily be pulled over her head as a hood.

Someone trying to keep a low profile, he thought. *Another helpless girl in need of a hero?* He’d seen this before too—a young woman in need of help. The next thing he knew, a handsome *xiake* would appear, rushing to her side to help her in her quest. They’d share an excited conversation. Thugs would burst in, and then his restaurant would be broken. Sometimes they’d leave and then come back. And then his restaurant would be smashed.

"I was wondering if I could get something to eat?" she asked.

"There's no food here," he snapped, gesturing for the girl to leave.

"But this is a restaurant," she replied, confused.

He eyed her, suspiciously, "Do you have money? I don't give out free meals."⁴

"I don't have much. Just a few coins," she replied, frowning. She produced a sad-looking coin pouch, emptying what little money she had into her palm. Two coins spilled out. She looked pathetic with the tiny coins in her palm. She licked her lips as she eyed a plate of bao⁵ Xiao Dou carried to the storyteller's table.

"I don't need much. Maybe a meat bao or two?"

"Fine, fine. Sit over there," he said, snatching up the coins. He pulled the black chair to the wobbly table, gesturing for her to sit. She brightened, brushing her hair out of her face as she sat. She had a warm smile, despite her ragged appearance.

"Sorry. It's been a bad day. I'm still cleaning up from a fight that broke out here," he apologized. His heart ached. Her toothy smile reminded him of his daughter at that age. She didn't do anything to deserve his foul mood.

"Does that happen a lot?"

"More than I'd like."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said pouting.

He gave the girl a thin smile that was more a grimace than a smile, then left to get some food. He returned with a plate of three meat buns, and he set it down in front of her. She grabbed one immediately and started eating.

Tiny groans of delight. He tried to fight back the pity he felt. The girl seemed incredibly young, alone, and on edge.

"What brings you through here?" he asked.

“There’s a tournament—” she started

“You’re a member of the *wulin*?”⁶ he asked darkly. The members of the martial world ranged far and wide and could be found in all shapes and sizes. He remembered a particularly nasty encounter with a short round man that a nobleman’s goon called tiny. That encounter ended up breaking three lattices, a door, two tables, and four chairs.

“No, no. It’s not that...”

“Good, you’re too young for that,” he said, relieved. “So, what are you here for?”

She looked embarrassed. “Well... I don’t know really.”

“How do you not know? Everyone always claims they’re members of the *wulin* if they know how to throw a punch or two,” he frowned, miming a punch and a block. “I’ve met more self-proclaimed masters in my life than a storyteller.”

“Well sir, I don’t really remember who I am.”

“Huh,” he grunted. “Is that so?”

“It’s true, sir.”

“I don’t know if that’s something you should be advertising. Unsavory people might try to take advantage of you.”

She took a large bite out of another bao. “I know. But you seem nice.”

Well, that’s a new one, he thought. “Did you get hit in the head or something? How do you not know who you are?”

She shrugged and looked away. She reached for another bao and started eating—this time a little slower.

“You have a name you’re going by?”

“I don’t remember my name...”

“I didn’t ask if you remembered your name. I asked if you have a name you’re using until you remember.”

“Oh,” the girl said pausing. “Miao.”

He let her chew a few bites, before asking, "So, Miao, are you good at fighting?"

She didn't answer, staring at her plate.

He grunted. "Huh. Fine, suit yourself."

Yan Tao caught a whiff of something foul, like the rank scent of dried urine and alcohol, and turned to see a group of five entering the restaurant, laughing and joking. Four men and one woman. One of the men had his arm in a sling. *Bandits or beggars*. Either way they looked like trouble. After the earlier brawl, he didn't want any more trouble.

"We're closed for the night," he told them.

"But you're still serving customers," their leader said.

"We're closed for the night," he said again, more firmly. "These guests are finishing up."

"No, you're still open," the leader said sitting down at a table. The others settled in around him. "Bring us some wine and food."

"Sorry sir, you're going to have to leave," Yan Tao said gesturing towards the door.

The leader glared. "Don't you know who we are? I'm Lu Bo and we're the Five—"

Yan Tao cut him off. "Look I don't care if you're the five pigs, or the four brothers, or the two bears, or the whatever animal you think you are—we're closed."

"You have a problem with us?" Lu Bo grabbed Yan Tao's shirt and pulled him down towards the table until their faces were inches apart. His companions cackled. "Do you know what we did to the last restaurant man that had a problem with us?"

"You're all the same. You bullies think you can just punch someone and get what you want."

Lu Bo laughed as Yan Tao struggled to break free of his grip.

This would be how my day ends today, Yan Tao thought. *I should just retire already. Find a nice place in the countryside where I don't have to see another traveler again.* He cursed. All these martial heroes promising him aid when he needed. And where were they all when he was in trouble?

"Excuse me, sir," said Miao in a quiet voice. "He said he was closing for the day. Please respect his wishes."

"You stay out of this girl ..." Lu Bo started. But as he turned to face the girl seated at the wobbly table, a flash of recognition passed over his face. He let go of Yan Tao, rising from the table and pointed a finger at the girl. As his expression turned from smug to angry, his finger began to shake. "YOU!"

She was startled by the visceral reaction. "Me?"

"Yes, you! You're the little monster that broke third brother's arm!" he said, pointing to his sling-wearing companion.

"Uh ... I did what?" the girl said, startled.

"He just wanted to say hello to you, and you broke his nose! And when he started to defend himself, you broke his arm, then threw him out of the second-floor window!" Lu Bo explained.

"You did that?" Yan Tao straightened his tunic. He cast a glance at the man with a broken arm and knew immediately the kind of *hello* he was hoping to get in return.

"It wasn't me, *laoban*. I swear! I don't know anything about that," she stammered, raising her hands to calm down the leader and Yan Tao.

"And if that wasn't enough, you jumped down from the second story and landed on me!" third brother cried.

"That wasn't me!" Miao denied again.

"You don't remember?" one of the seated bandits shouted, incredulous.

“Such disrespect,” the woman huffed.

“You’re going to pay for what you did to third brother!” Lu Bo shouted. Yan Tao was aware of the other patrons’ wary glances. Some looked like they were about to bolt out the door.

“Brother teach her a lesson!”

“Take it outside! Please don’t break the restaurant.” Yan Tao begged.

No one moved. No one ever moved.

Please don’t use the furniture, Yan Tao pleaded silently.

A light breeze came in through the open doorway, swaying the lanterns. A wooden window frame creaked. Dappled light filtered through the bamboo leaves, illuminating dust motes spinning in the air.

Oh no, Yan Tao thought, a sudden epiphany. *Dramatic lighting. This is why they come here.*

The bandit hurled a stool at the girl. She sidestepped, and the chair shattered as it hit the ground. As Lu Bo charged, she picked up a broken chair leg to defend herself. He kicked at her, bringing his heel down in a blow that would have left her unconscious if not for the table leg she used to deflect it. The leg broke in her hands, and she dropped it.

She dodged to the right, pushing the wobbly table into the path of Lu Bo. He brought his fist down, breaking the table in half. With his other hand he made a swipe for her. Miao was too fast, just staying out of reach. She scooped up a chunk of the table and held it up like a shield, but Lu Bo punched through it with ease.

“Stop using the furniture!” Yan Tao yelled as he scrambled out of harm’s way. He hurried to his usual hiding place behind the counter. A piece of table slammed into the wall behind him. *Guess I’m not salvaging that one.*

Lu Bo was close on her heels, and his companions—even the one with the arm sling—joined the fray. Yan Tao didn't like how this was turning out. He may not liked martial artists trashing his place, but he liked bandits even less. And he certainly didn't want to see a youngster get beat up by a bunch of thugs.

She shoved empty tables and chairs in the way of her attackers. They tripped and fell, buying her a few precious seconds. She leaped in the air and kicked the closest attacker in the chest. He fell back and landed on a chair and it broke under his weight.

"How did that even happen?! He wasn't even that heavy," groaned Yan Tao. "That dirty carpenter has to be cheating me."

Someone behind Yan Tao cheered, and he turned in surprise. Instead of leaving, the other patrons gathered together for a better view of the fight. Others were coming into the restaurant to watch the fight.

The storyteller stood on a stool to get a better view of the fight, applying his skills to narrate the combat. He described in great detail the techniques the fighters were using. His listeners, listened with great interest while the girl fought. They were hooked by the agility of the girl, in awe as she dodged and struck at attacker after attacker.

"Her dodging technique is reminiscent of Gu Lao's Avalanche of the Youthful Guardian. She uses Eccentric Fox Whirlwind to counter each move, see the way she finishes each strike? Oh, what a punch!" the storyteller said as Lu Bo punched through a table the girl kicked at him. "The bandit uses a more traditional Eight Penetrating Claws technique. You can see it in the way the tables shatter."

"You need better furniture Yan Tao!" someone called

out. The crowd laughed. Yan Tao flushed, scowling. With every shattered table, he felt himself die a little bit more. Maybe it was time to retire from this business.

Miao and Lu Bo fought in the open area, exchanging blows. The girl dodged each of Lu Bo's attacks and threw counter punches of her own. Lu Bo grew more and more frustrated at his inability to land a hit on the girl. It almost looked like a ring fight of one the *xiake* tournaments.

"Some entertainment for you, but don't leave without paying your tab!" He said to the crowd. They cheered. Some had joined him behind the counter. An idea began forming in his mind.

"The incompetent leader of the Five Pigs has no chance against the nimble girl," called out the storyteller.

Lu Bo's companions had now joined in the fight in earnest. They threw punches and kicks at the girl. But she managed to stay one step of each attack. With a quick block and a palm strike, Miao knocked back another of the attackers.

"Things aren't looking good for the Pigs. Even five to one, the nimble Miao is putting them to shame!" He called out. The crowd laughed.

"WE ARE NOT THE PIGS!" One of Lu Bo's companions shouted at him, shooting the storyteller a glare. She shook a fist at him. "We are—"

She never finished her sentence as Miao kicked the woman hard in the ribs, forcing the air out of her. Lu Bo, seeing an opening, redoubled his efforts, driving Miao on her back foot and towards the pile of broken furniture. At an unseen signal, he and his companions flanked to herd her towards the corner.

Yan Tao gripped the counter anxiously. The odds were against the girl, despite her fighting prowess. He didn't want

to get involved. He'd learned fairly early on to avoid joining a fight (three broken ribs, two broken tables, a broken countertop, and a stove). He was not a fighter.

Another strike narrowly missed Miao, this time from a bandit using a broken chair leg. He jabbed at her with the splintered end, hoping to impale her. All of the bandits had now picked up pieces of broken furniture, brandishing them like cudgels. She looked around nervously at their weapons.

"They've got her trapped! Eccentric Fox Whirlwind, while useful against single opponents, finds its weakness against more than three opponents," the storyteller informed the crowd. The crowd grumbled its worry.

She scrambled over to the furniture pile, tossing stool parts, and table legs at her attackers. Some struck true, clattering towards the crowd and Yan Tao. He caught a chair leg before it struck the storyteller. The man nodded his approval. Yan Tao scowled.

And yet, he wondered why no one was helping. Surely, watching a young girl fight on her own was enough to inspire someone to help. *Someone should help*, he thought, looking at the crowd. *Anyone?*

Miao continued her defense, but to Yan Tao's alarm, he saw that she would soon be overwhelmed. Without thinking, he threw the chair leg he held at the attacker closest to her, and it struck him in the back. Yan Tao let out a small cheer. It wasn't enough to hurt the man, but it distracted him long enough for Miao to knock him to the ground.

"Dog Sweeps His Tail! And the girl knocks over another!" the storyteller yelled. The crowd cheered. Miao scanned the direction the chair leg came from and made eye contact with the innkeeper. He grinned at her. Miao smiled, but then had to duck quickly as another chair came hurtling towards her head. Its impact showered her with splinters.

“Why does everything keep breaking?!” she yelled in frustration.

“The chair you were sitting on! Use that one!” Yan Tao said pointing frantically at the new chair the carpenter gave him. “It’s supposed to be sturdy!”

The problem was the chair was on the other side of the group that had now cornered her by the pile of furniture. She dodged another attack, rolling on the floor. As foot after foot came down in heavy stomps meant to crush her, she swept out her own feet as she rolled, twisting into the air. As she landed she dashed the lone black chair. The crowd cheered its approval.

“What a dodge! The Pigs have no chance against the nimble Miao!” Chen Yang, the storyteller, called out. Yan Tao couldn’t help but join the cheering.

But before the girl could pick up the black chair, Lu Bo roared, charging at the girl again, grabbing for her. It was all she could do to keep dodging, turning, and spinning out of reach. He growled in frustration. “Stay still little brat. I’ll show you what it means to mess with the Five—“

On his next lunge, Miao grabbed his arm and with a quick turn, threw him over her shoulder. She slammed him hard on the ground. Yan Tao’s gasp of surprise was lost in the cheering of the others crowded next to him behind the counter. He was no expert in martial arts, but in his years of running the restaurant, he had seen many displays of martial skills—some very high, some non-existent. The moves this girl was using were on a high level, not the common fighting styles of thugs and no named martial artists.

“An incredible throw! I’ve never seen a girl so young execute that move perfectly!” the storyteller said. The crowd cheered.

Despite the brutal throw, Lu Bo wasn't on the ground long and was already starting to rise to his feet. Miao made a break for the chair again, kicking it into the air with one foot. Leaping off her other foot, she twisted to kick the black chair in mid-air at the rising Lu Bo. It struck him square in the head and he fell over, out cold.

"It didn't break?" Yan Tao yelled in surprise as the chair bounced towards the girl.

"He's knocked out!" some exclaimed.

"Uh...yes! With a sudden strike with the black chair, the girl defeats the leader of the Five Pigs!" the storyteller yelled.

"Brother!" one of Lu Bo's companion's shouted. He snarled at the girl, brandishing his splintered chair leg and rushed her.

Miao beckoned him forward with one hand and grinned a smile of impish delight. Her attack was relentless. The chair in her hand became an extension of her fighting spirit as she swung it around.

"It's so light," she marveled.

With their leader knocked out, the others were stunned. She pressed her attack and took advantage of her opponents' surprise. They brought their chair legs up to bear to deflect the weight of the black chair, but she swung it through the air, shattering the furniture legs they used as weapons.

"And strong!" Miao added, caging a bandit's hands through the stool legs before driving his head into the seat.

She hesitated on the last bandit, frowning at the man with his arm in the sling.

"Don't hurt me!" he begged, flinching away from the girl. "I didn't want them to avenge me! Please believe me!"

Yan Tao saw the knife before she did. He vaulted over the counter to tackle the bandit. "Watch out!"

Miao was faster. She struck him in the head with the chair, and the chair finally shattered. In the late afternoon light, the shower of splinters floated around the girl like a golden nova of wood, a vengeful goddess, a warrior unsurpassed.

Dramatic lighting, Yan Tao thought ruefully as he stopped short.

The moment passed, and Miao became a girl again, slumping to the floor exhausted.

The crowd roared its approval, cheering and heaping praise at the girl. She looked up at them in surprise as though noticing them for the first time. She flashed them a wide grin, rising to her feet. She bowed to them before they broke into conversations of amazement.

"What a show! I didn't know ol' Yan Tao started doing entertainment," said one of the crowd.

"It's great! It brings some life to this sleepy little town."

"A creative way of using the broken furniture!"

"Xiao Dou! An order of dumplings!" said another.

"Laoban! I want to see your menu!"

The place seemed more full than it was before the bandits arrived. Yan Tao waved frantically at Xiao Dou, urging the boy to take customer orders. The cook hurried back to the kitchen, and the storyteller gave Yan Tao a knowing smile. *The storyteller was going to cost more now.*

He surveyed the damage. Three more broken tables, two benches, three stools and the carpenter's black chair. Somehow that chair proved more resilient than the others. He didn't want to admit it, but maybe he should pay a visit to the carpenter and place a large order.

No longer the center of attention, the girl looked lost.

Yan Tao pulled the girl aside. "Are you ok? Did they hurt you?"

The girl patted her arms, torso, and legs. "Not hurt," she reported.

Yan Tao sighed, relieved. "Can I get you anything?"

"Maybe another bao?" she asked, hopefully.

Yan Tao laughed.

THE BANDITS WERE in no position to protest as Yan Tao dragged their unconscious forms out of the restaurant and dumped them on the side of the road. It was a beautiful evening—late summer coolness in the air, and only the minimum of mosquitoes. The winking lights of fireflies. One of the bandits groaned as Yan Tao rummaged through his pockets. They were carrying a surprising amount of money on them.

"Don't complain. It's only fair that you pay me for the furniture you broke. I tried warning you. The restaurant was closed. Didn't I say the restaurant was closed?" Yan Tao chuckled.

"Another brawl, huh?" asked a passerby. "Tough life."

"Don't I know it," Yan Tao replied, smiling. The passerby gave Yan Tao's smile a curious look but continued on his way.

The girl followed Yan Tao as he dragged and dumped Lu Bo's body out into the street. He dusted off his tunic, and they made eye contact.

"Uhm ... *laoban*, I'm sorry for breaking your restaurant," she stammered. She bowed hesitantly, trying to hold the bao she munched and cup her hands at the same time. She

finally settled for cupping the bao and bowing. "And I don't have anything to pay you with for the damage."

"Thanks for the save," he said bowing to the girl.

"I didn't really do anything," she said, surprised.

"If you hadn't stepped in, they would have ..." he said, letting the idea hang. He coughed. "Anyway, people break my restaurant more often than you think. I was cleaning up the last fight when you came in."

"This happens a lot?"

He sighed. "Almost once a week. My bills are through the roof."

"I'm sorry to add to your burdens," the girl said, bowing.

"Don't be. You're no burden."

Xiao Dou came out to light the lanterns by the doorway, and the fireflies winked around him. He smiled and waved at the girl. She waved back but then turned to gaze down the road, a look of sadness on her face. "I should be heading out again."

"You're going to the tournament?"

"I was going to go to that tournament for some clues. I was hoping that someone would recognize me. Now I think that might not be a great idea."

Yan Tao chuckled. "Maybe not. But with *lao* Chen Yang's storytelling, you may as well be at one of the tournaments."

She saluted him with a bao. "Thank you for your hospitality, sir."

"Wait. Do you have somewhere to stay?"

"I don't have any money for a room."

"That's not a problem," Yan Tao laughed. The girl gave him a confused look. "If you're looking for answers, why don't you stay here? We get a lot of travelers passing through. Someone may know who you are."

“I don’t know... I don’t want to bring more trouble to you.”

“You clearly know how to take care of yourself,” Yan Tao said dryly, with a nod towards the unconscious forms of Lu Bo and his companions. “It’s safer for you to stay here. Plus, I’m thinking of leaving the area open for people to fight in. Maybe they won’t break the rest of my restaurant this way. I could use some help though. Someone to keep the patrons in line and fighting in the ring. Know anyone that could help me?”

She shook her head. He gave her a flat look.

“Oh. You mean me?”

“I’m trying to give you a job if you want it,” Yan Tao coughed. “It wouldn’t pay much. But you’d have somewhere to stay for a while.”

She brightened. “I’d like that.”

BROKEN CHAIR, HIDDEN FIST

TALES OF THE JIANGHU

JF LEE

“Laoban! Laoban!”¹ Shu Yiyi shouted. “Bring me more food!”

Miao frowned as innkeeper Yan Tao hurried over to the woman’s table. Shu Yiyi was a rude customer, and Miao didn’t like dealing with her. The woman wore bright blue and green robes and was adorned with jewelry from head to toe. In her hair sat a golden hairpiece in the shape of a crane. On her wrists jangled bracelets of charms, and around her neck sat a stately necklace.

Shu Yiyi had a presence that went beyond her finery and her lean and muscular body. She knew how to fill a room. Miao had a vague sort of discomfort around her, and it wasn’t just because of her rude behavior. It was an instinctual dislike, but also a strange sort of attraction. Shu Yiyi repulsed her, and yet Miao found herself wanting her approval.

Objectively speaking, the woman was refined and beautiful. Men from tables all around the restaurant couldn’t help but stare. She had the air of a noble woman that was used to getting what she wanted. Xiao Dou, the inn’s

serving boy, said the woman was an opera star of some sort. Star or not, the last time Miao had waited on her, she had nearly gotten slapped by the woman for spilling five drops of tea on the table.

"Incompetent," Shu Yiyi glowered at the young woman. Miao tried to explain that it wasn't her fault because a drunken customer stumbled into her. The woman would not be placated. Her bracelet charms jangled as she raised her palm to strike. That was until Yan Tao had come to her rescue by throwing on the charm.

He complimented her beautiful² looks, her grace,³ and her warm⁴ temperament. The opera singer smiled at the compliments and allowed the girl to scurry away.

And now Shu Yiyi returned every night.

"You're so slow Yan Tao!" the woman scolded. She brushed crumbs off her face with a silk sleeve.

"Yes, yes, my apologies my lady," Yan Tao chuckled. "The other customers needed my attention."

"Hmph. You should be paying more attention to me," the woman grouched. "You are in the presence of nobility."

"You are as beautiful as the moon goddess herself," he replied. "Another order of the same?"

"Three!" she said slamming a palm on the table. Yan Tao laughed. "And hurry it up!"

"Yes, yes. Right away," Yan Tao bowed, shooting Miao a knowing grin before hurrying into the kitchen. Meanwhile, Miao caught a glimpse of Shu Yiyi casting a baleful glare in her direction. The girl blanched and scurried out of the line of sight.

Everything about Shu Yiyi made Miao shudder. It was strange that her aversion to the woman was so deep. It wasn't that she was scared of her. Miao was strong and skilled enough in the martial arts to deal with any number

of would-be brawlers. There was just something about the woman's glowering presence that she found off-putting. It was like an ominous aura, oozing ill will toward her at all times. Real or imagined miasma aside, Miao did not like the awful flirting between the opera singer and the innkeeper or the way Yan Tao bowed and scraped to the woman.

But beyond that, there was something oddly familiar about her. Perhaps Miao had disliked someone like Shu Yiyi in a previous life—before she lost her memories. Miao had a sense that the woman wore the opera singer as a facade and she was hiding something. Perhaps that was why she was so uncomfortable around her. Or maybe she was thinking too much and Shu Yiyi was just an awful person. Whatever the reason, Miao couldn't help but observe the woman.

It was a busy evening at the inn. Master Flying Bear took challengers in the ring, hoping to show off his martial prowess and recruit new disciples for his school in An'lin. So far tonight he had defeated four opponents. A good-sized crowd had come for the spectacle, and most stayed for the food.

Master Flying Bear was famous for his Storm Bear Dropkick technique. In nearly every fight, he had shown his prized technique. In each fight, Miao had watched as he ran forward jumping high into the air with a two-footed kick at his opponent. The speed of the attack somehow caught each opponent so completely by surprise that it knocked him out. Yet, beyond the move's ludicrous name, she thought the nearly suicidal attack was stupid—he committed so far into the move that he essentially rode his opponent to the ground with no way of controlling his fall.

Still, Miao had seen him do the attack a few times now and was pretty sure she could replicate it. Miao had discovered that she had the knack of being able to replicate moves

after only seeing it a few times—a leftover she assumed from her previous life.

She usually found a way to incorporate their techniques into her own forms and had used a few of these new moves in her own arena fights with unruly customers. As far as secret moves, she had only picked up a move or two from some interesting fighters because no one would use a secret technique in a restaurant brawl—those were for special occasions. Battles of honor on moonlit terraces and stuff like that. The stuff of the storyteller's dreams.

No one, that is, except Flying Bear, now slouched by a table reserved for fighters, waiting for the next fool to climb up on the stage to challenge him. He gave her a leering wave, and she pretended not to notice. Miao idly imagined Flying Bear fighting Shu Yiyi, his two-footed dropkick knocking the woman out of the ring with a heavy thud. Then she imagined Shu Yiyi repeating the move, this time knocking Flying Bear out of the ring. The thought made her laugh out loud, and a bald-headed patron gave her a curious look.

She blushed and wiped the cloth across a wooden table.

Miao had been employed at the Green Brocade inn for the last six months. Yan Tao had made good on his promises to give her a place to stay and he had given Miao a job to keep rowdy patrons in line.

"You help out around here and you get all the *bao*⁵ you can eat," he had said. It was a generous offer—the Green Brocade had the best *bao* in the region.

The Green Brocade was also a very popular hangout in the *jianghu*⁶. Its location on the main road to An'lin and the northern pass meant that all of the commerce in the area passed through the inn and the nearby village. It also meant

that *xiake*,⁷ the martial heroes of the region, and bandits liked to frequent the establishment.

Miao's official job title was 'greeter of guests.' When things got out of control, she stepped in and 'greeted' unruly guests—with her fists. When they got too spirited for their own good, Miao challenged them to prove their worth in the arena, after which she would promptly defeat them. Then she and Yan Tao would drag their unconscious forms out into the street, making sure to rummage through their pockets for any spare change. In between these moments of excitement, she waited tables and cleaned up.

The visitors of the inn whispered about a master of a new style of *wugong*⁸ at the Green Brocade Inn—the Broken Chair style. But when they heard that it was eighteen-year-old Miao, they couldn't believe it. The original spectators of her fight with Lu Bo and his thugs had spread her story of how she had fended off an entire group of bandits with a piece of the inn's furniture⁹. But the story didn't travel that far, many assuming that it was the made up stuff of storytellers.

And she was just fine with that.

After her fight with Lu Bo and his bandit friends, Yan Tao had a renewed vigor for the inn. He had expanded the restaurant, clearing an area of the floor and building an elevated stage for everyone to watch. He figured that if people were going to come and fight and break his furniture in the inn, he may as well give them a dedicated space for that. And somehow, despite eschewing fame, she had a small following of regulars that itched to see her fight again.

The Green Brocade Inn was better known for its nickname—the Broken Furniture Inn. The innkeeper had replaced all the furniture with stronger and better constructed tables and chairs, but that only made the guests

even more determined to break it.¹⁰ Still, despite the innkeeper's complaints, the increased number of guests more than made up for the added cost of furniture. And indeed, truly ludicrous challenges had emerged from some of the traveling martial artists. For instance, one challenge was to see who could take the most blows to the head before a stool shattered. They called it a show of *neigong*—the outward manifestation of the practice of internally cultivating qi. While muscles and speed were what determined a martial artists' physical attack, it was the strength of their qi that allowed them to do the truly amazing acts of wonder—lightness of feet to allow for long, graceful leaps through the air, extraordinary toughness of skin to prevent even the sharpest blade from cutting.

Suddenly the clatter of dishes and the sound of plates shattering on the floor broke the girl's reverie. As the din of the restaurant quieted, Miao tensed for a fight, searching for the source of the noise. *Another restaurant brawl?* she thought, but she hadn't noticed any *jianghu* types today other than Master Flying Bear.

But it was only Xiao Dou. The serving boy was on his hands and knees picking up shards of the dishes he dropped. Yan Tao hurried over to help clean up the mess, scolding the boy. Before long conversations continued, and patrons soon forgot their interruption.

Miao's days at the inn passed quickly and peacefully. The leaves budded on the trees and there was a dampness in the air that accompanied the promise of spring. Travelers came and went, and she was able to meet all manner of fighters from the *jianghu*—traveling swordsmen, martial artists, and practitioners of every kind of kung fu imaginable. Recently a traveling troupe of musicians and performers had taken up residence nearby—hence the

return of Shu Yiyi and her glowering brow every day. Despite the woman's presence, Miao found herself quite content, happy to take in the sights of the world from the comfort of the Green Brocade Inn.

Again there was the clattering sound of a dropped plate and the din of the restaurant quieted as patrons searched for the source. Yan Tao yelled at Xiao Dou, and the innkeeper's assistant hurried into the kitchen.

"You idiot boy! Another dropped plate? I should kick you into the streets!"

Miao fought a smile. For all his gruff behavior towards his employees, Yan Tao was a good man, a good boss, and would likely never throw out Xiao Dou. Yan Tao had only shown her kindness. He never pushed her to reveal the secrets of her past. She tried her best not to think about why she knew martial arts or who trained her. When she tried, it physically hurt—a lance of pain behind the eyes that seemed to emphasize the massive gaps in her memories. So, she stopped worrying about it, instead enjoying the comfortable every day rhythm of life at the inn.

And she'd never been happier.

But today her insides roiled with anxiety, and it wasn't just from seeing an unpleasant customer. The truth was, she felt a gnawing sense of dread that arose from fighting an overwhelming compulsion. Three days ago, while dragging out the unconscious bodies of another pair of aspiring pugilists to the street, she caught the sound of jingling charms and felt a sudden wash of familiarity pass over her.

Then a series of images came to her mind. An old pagoda looming over a decrepit temple. Messenger pigeons. Sets of charms fluttering and jingling in the wind. Her arms and legs hurting from training in different fighting styles

with other children. The need for approval from her masters.

She still didn't remember her name, but she had an idea of who she was.

And the thought frightened her.

She felt the memories coming, slowly at first, snatches of images, voices. She shut her eyes to push back the thoughts. But then they came.

The Hidden Fist.

Shadowy figures and dark deeds. Her cold and ruthless determination as she refined herself into a weapon. Lives and death. She gave a sharp intake of breath as her fist clenched and unclenched. She felt her knees going weak, like she was going to fall from a great height. She leaned on the fence, fighting to control her breathing.

"Hey! Are you okay?" Grandma Sun called from the road.

"I'm fine . . . just a little lightheaded," Miao lied.

"That innkeeper. He's working you too hard young lady," the old woman clucked disapprovingly.

"He's a good boss," Miao shook her head.

"Hmph. I'll give him an earful anyway. That man is ridiculous," the woman said, frowning. But she continued on her way.

As Miao watched the woman go, it was as though the whole world had become tainted with a sense of dread. She knew she was very late in reporting back to the Hidden Fist. For the next few days she had debated whether she should just pretend they didn't exist and continue with her nice life at the inn. But the longer she tried to put it off, the more anxious she felt.

Shu Yiyi yelled for Yan Tao, and she heard his answering call. Miao bent down to wipe the traces of Xiao

Dou's mess, carefully stepping around another drunken patron. Her rag soaked up tiny splashes of brown sauce. She took another look around at the mild chaos of the inn.

With a sigh, she resigned herself to leaving.

WHEN THE LAST patrons had finally left and after she had dragged out the unconscious Master Flying Bear into the dirt street, Miao found Yan Tao waiting for her at the doorway.

"Your memories . . . they've returned haven't they?" he asked, his voice quiet in case others were listening. But there were no others and Xiao Dou was somewhere in the back flirting with the cook's assistant.

She was so startled that the only response she could give was a single nod.

Yan Tao grunted, shaking his head. He wiped beads of sweat from his balding head with his sleeve. He was old enough to be Miao's father, and they had a comfortable relationship. If she had known any better, she would have called him family.

"So, what happened to you? How did you lose your memory?"

"Uh . . ." she started. She wasn't sure exactly. She had snatches of images. She remembered using her *qinggong* — lightness techniques to travel quickly — jumping and skimming through the high branches of trees. But as she recalled these images, she suddenly remembered her foot snagging a limb. Sudden panic as routine movements eluded her. Tumbling and missing branches. Falling. Pain.

I fell out of a tree?! she thought to herself. That's how I lost my memory? She felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment.

“What is it?” Yan Tao’s asked, his eyes narrowing.
 “What’s wrong?”

“Uh . . . I don’t remember,” she lied.

The innkeeper gave her a questioning look, then shrugged. “Sure.”

They stood in the doorway of the inn for a moment watching the stillness of the road. Night creatures barked in the distance. The wind swayed the bamboo, rustling and whispering the secrets of the season to any who would listen.

Yan Tao was the first to break their companionable silence. “Do you know where you need to go?”

Miao nodded. “I think so.”

“You don’t have to leave, you know,” Yan Tao said quietly.

Miao shook her head, her eyes downcast. “The longer I stay, the more dangerous it will be for you. But if things work out. . . .” She trailed off, not wanting to give herself that hope.

Yan Tao stretched, groaning as his back popped. She grimaced at the sound. “I figured this day would come. A kid with high martial skills with no recollection of her past? Definitely material for the storytellers. I guess all the bao you can eat isn’t really good pay.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, but she wasn’t sure he heard her.

“Well,” Yan Tao said sadly, placing a hand on her shoulder, “You’ll always have a home here. Come back to us when you’ve done what you need to do.”

She blinked away tears and bowed to him.

“Who knows?” he said wryly, “I might even give you a raise.”

. . .

MIAO STOOD at the edge of the temple compound, her eyes scanning the grounds for signs of the Hidden Fist clan. On the three-day journey to the abandoned temple, she determined to break her ties with the clan, knowing full well what awaited her if she did. When Miao was a child, she was taught the punishment of breaking an oath to the Hidden Fist. Their instructor had sat them in a stone courtyard and made the young initiates watch as they tortured a man to death. That was one memory she could do without.

She didn't know if it would work, but she had to try. If only to make sure no one hurt Yan Tao, she needed to try. She knew that she didn't have much time. She was already overdue, and sooner or later someone would come looking—if they hadn't already.

If she remembered correctly, the abandoned temple was one of the remaining scars of the war that once ravaged the land. Years ago the area was a hub of activity, the home to the small city of Chen'sen. A city only in name now after the emperor's soldiers razed it to the ground to quell the Chang rebellion.

The temple, on the other hand, was far enough away to escape the blaze, but with the destruction of the city, the temple was also eventually abandoned. Now the encroaching forests reclaimed the land that was once theirs, life continuing even after the devastation of the emperor's war.

Long vines wound their way through broken door panels and windows. Wildflowers poked between cracks in the stone courtyard. Statues of toppled spirit guardians lay under a blanket of moss. The young shoots of ferns grew on the edges of the buildings. Even the bamboo forest had begun encroaching on the temple, the long stalks of trees

pushing through the cobblestone pavement, claiming what were once paths.

And then there was the pagoda looming over the tops of the bamboo forest. Part of the finial had fallen off, but the building cut an impressive figure in the forest. What few locals that remained in the area believed the pagoda haunted. In truth, the abandoned temple wasn't haunted by ghosts but by the couriers and messengers of her clan. It was a rendezvous point for the Hidden Fist—off the beaten path but close enough to civilization.

As Miao approached, she heard the cooing of pigeons and watched as a pair flitted from the tree line towards the pagoda. There were still large pockets of her memory that eluded her, but she remembered the sharp pain of pigeon claws digging into the palms of her hands.

Messenger birds.

With more and more of her memory returning, she was afraid of losing the sense of who she was during her life at the Green Brocade Inn. But that sense of self conflicted with the overwhelming compulsion to return here. Who was she supposed to meet here? She still didn't remember.

She supposed she wasn't much different from these messenger birds following their instinct to return to their roost. In her reverie, she almost missed the hooded figure leaning on a section of crumbling wall, blending in among the dappled shadows of thick leafy trees. Her first thought was to take cover and to make for the bamboo forests, but there was no point in running. If she saw the hooded figure, then they would already have seen her approaching from far away. As she approached, she forced down her apprehension, mustering some measure of confidence.

If all else fails, I can try and fight my way out.

Though she couldn't see the figure's face, she thought it

was a man. He wore simple homespun travel clothes of grey, stained with the dirt of travel, and a hood that obscured his features but left his clean-shaven chin exposed. The rest of him looked ordinary—lean and of average height and build, with no visible scars or identifying features. He didn't look particularly strong nor was he built like a fighter. He was completely forgettable. They weren't all fighters and assassins in the Hidden Fist. Some were spies—eyes and ears on everything and anything for the highest bidder. Some were fleet of foot messengers able to travel great distances quickly. And of course, some were killers.

"Well, look who it is," the hooded figure said. There was an amused tone to his voice, but it carried no warmth. "You're months late."

"I know," Miao replied.

"You have explaining to do," he said.

"I'm back now?"

The man nodded, then smiled a wicked looking smile as he pulled back the hood. She saw that she was wrong about her initial assessment. Scars on the edges of his mouth pulled as he spoke—too easily recognizable. Perhaps this was why he manned a messenger post. "You're in luck. You can make your report yourself. A high master is here."

Her blood froze. She had never met a high master before. She vaguely remembered the other initiates' hushed whispers of a high master coming to visit once but nothing ever came of it. In the field they only ever worked with brothers and sisters, and occasionally a master. Never the ones pulling all the strings. "A master is here?"

"A *high* master," he corrected. The man gestured for her to follow him. He led her deeper into the abandoned temple grounds, making towards the pagoda looming over them. "Up there."

She looked up at the pagoda, unsure, but kept her face as passive as possible. After her fall, the thought of climbing somewhere high gave her tiny pangs of fear. “How far up do I have to go?”

“What do you think?” he spat.

She looked up again hesitantly, then started up the stairs into the pagoda. The interior of the building was not in as much disrepair as the outside would have suggested. The floors and walls were intact—more than could be said about some of the other buildings in the compound. Detritus was strewn everywhere, the traces of looters rummaging. Any sacred relics the pagoda once held were sure to have been stolen long ago.

The second and third floors were more tidy—empty even. As she made her way higher, she tried her best not to look out the torn lattice windows, knowing she’d be able to see the forests below. It was not a comforting sight.

She had hoped the master would be on the first few floors, but after climbing to the third floor and finding no sign, Miao resigned herself to climbing to the top of the pagoda. She was aware of the stench of bird droppings, the light cooing of pigeons, and black grackles in the eaves and on the beams of the building. Grey and white feathers stirred on the stairs as she passed.

At the top of the final flight of stairs leading to the thirteenth floor, another hooded figure waited. The figure stood with their back to her, admiring what was once a beautiful golden statue of the goddess. They stood with the confidence of one who never felt threatened by anyone. The stillness of the figure was a stark contrast to the noise of the room—a cacophony of bird calls.

The message room, she suddenly remembered. The top of the pagoda was home to a host of messenger pigeons on

perches and in more cages than she cared to count. When she was a child, she learned to write coded messages at a table in the corner that were then carried off to brothers and sisters elsewhere. She never liked being here. She always felt the birds were watching her, judging her for her actions. Cooing. Always cooing.

“This place was beautiful once. As they climbed the pagoda, the monks passed through the elements of the world, purging themselves of the wickedness and sins of their lives. This was a place of refuge for those searching for enlightenment and freedom,” the master spoke without turning. “Those people are gone now, but their echoes live on in us. And now our own distant echo has finally returned.”

The Master’s voice froze Miao’s blood. It was an elegant, feminine voice, one of wisdom and seduction, power and warmth.

“Master,” she said kowtowing to the ground. She pushed her forehead to the floor and stayed there. “I apologize for my absence.”

“So, our little bird has finally returned,” the hooded figure said, finally turning around. “Get up.”

“Yes, Master.” As Miao stood, she took in the figure in front of her. The woman wore a full-face opera mask—the red and white stripes along the cheeks, and deep black around the eyes. Strange that she wore it since mostly men wore masks, and women wore makeup. The master glided across the floor to stand in front of the girl. She reached out with a soft hand to raise the girl’s chin and stare into her eyes. Miao tried not to flinch.

“Explain yourself,” the master commanded, releasing the girl’s face.

“I was delayed. I was injured and needed to recover.”

The woman chuckled. It was a warm pleasant sound, but it carried the threat of danger. "So, the first thing you do when you return to us is lie?"

"I mean no disrespect. There is no lie."

"And there's the second lie," the woman shook her head. "For a future *gaoshou*¹¹ of the Hidden Fist to be a serving girl . . . such a waste. Though the Green Brocade Inn was a good choice, I'll give you that."

"They were good people. They helped me," Miao responded. If they had known about the inn all this time, then they could have reached out to her at any time. *All they did was watch. Why didn't they come for me?*

"Good people," the master laughed. "A favorite hangout of the *wulin*."¹²

"They are . . ." she defended.

"And I suppose rummaging through their pockets makes them good people too?"

Miao flushed with embarrassment.

The woman pushed back her hood and removed her mask. She let the mask drop to the floor with a clatter. Miao gaped at it and then at woman's face in disbelief. Shu Yiyi, the rude patron of the Green Brocade Inn grinned back at her.

"You're a master?" Miao gasped, dumbfounded.

"A *high* master," Shu Yiyi corrected. "Learn your place, gutter rat." A high master. Shu Yiyi must have been very fortunate to be promoted to such lofty heights.

"How? Why? How?"

"Which one do you want me to answer? How? Or why?" Shu Yiyi said with a wicked grin. She laughed, and as she laughed, it was though the guise of a refined noblewoman fell away like the discarded mask. Her voice changed, and she became the obnoxious woman from the

inn, full of demands and baleful glares and that ominous presence returned.

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

"We've been watching you, waiting for when you'd return. There was no way that one of our best and brightest would fail to return over such a simple assignment," the Master said.

Miao had flashes of memories enter her head. Harsh punishments. Cold camaraderie. Snatches of faces and traces of emotions. But of the last mission she drew a blank. She imagined a clandestine operation, of hidden murder and dark deeds. She shook her head.

"You were on a delivery mission. Do you remember?" A pigeon landed on Shu Yiyi's outstretched hand, and the woman pet the bird. It cooed under her touch.

Miao shuddered.

The woman smiled a wicked, lopsided smile. "Routine delivery, something that even a novice should have accomplished in a day, let alone six months. All you had to do was retrieve the Beryl Lily Root potion from the Alpine Alchemist and bring it back to us. Master Chen Gao needed it. Do you remember that?"

"No . . ." she said again, bewildered. But she was lying. She remembered waking at the base of bamboo trees, a broken bottle of some sort in her pocket. She remembered tossing aside the fragments, wiping her hands on some leaves. The smell of it was disgusting.

The woman's eyes narrowed, sensing the confusion in the girl. "You *do* remember."

"No, I don't!" she denied, but the lie felt hollow in her mouth.

"A novice could have done it, and yet you failed! Master Chen Gao is dead now because of your failure."

Miao grimaced. Master Chen Gao was a perverted old jerk, with an eye for young girls. Miao didn't like him.

"Yeah, I didn't like him much either," Shu Yiyi laughed, seeing Miao's facial expression. "I suppose I should thank you. His death made my rise to High Master possible!" The pigeon flew off, and the woman began pacing the room, passing behind Miao. And as the woman paced, Miao couldn't help but feel like she was being stalked by a predator, a tiger intent on eating a wolf. "And now you've returned to us, like one of these birds. You've come home to report on your failure."

"Master, respectfully, I have come to ask your forgiveness—"

"That may be earned."

"And to release me from the clan."

"And that will not happen. You are one of us. We made you. We own you. What did you think would happen? You spend a few months working as a serving girl in a roadside restaurant and now you're going get your freedom? You think it's that easy to leave the Hidden Fist?" Shu Yiyi fixed her with a haughty look.

It was that look that triggered another wave of memories in her broken mind. She winced from the sudden rush of them. Snapshots and images again. But she recognized Shu Yiyi from them. The woman's hand in hers as the woman brought her to her instructors. The woman's harsh gaze as she observed Miao's training. An instructor shouted out the tenets of the Hidden Fist, the trainees echoing the appropriate responses as they practiced their forms. Shu Yiyi's nod of approval.

"Whatever talent you may have, even a gutter rat should know better," Shu Yiyi sneered.

Miao met her gaze with a steely look of her own.

“So determined. Fine, you’re free to go.” Shu Yiyi cackled.

“You’d never let me leave so easily,” she said quietly.

“Ah, so you remember the cost of breaking your oath to the Hidden Fist. You failed your mission, and then you failed to return to us. You have a price to pay, one that requires your life.”

“How can you punish me when I have lost my memories? You can’t blame me for that,” Miao protested.

“You failed your mission. Failure requires punishment. It is our code,” Shu Yiyi shrugged.

“I’d rather not die today.”

Shu Yiyi chuckled. “And I just got these robes cleaned. I’d rather not kill you. What kind of creative solution will you find to this problem?”

“I demand a trial by combat. I will win my freedom.” Miao blurted out without thinking. She regretted it almost immediately. Challenging a master was foolhardy. Challenging a *high* master was like a death sentence. She didn’t know what kind of skills Shu Yiyi had, but it was likely that Miao was outclassed. If she was going to die, she may as well make it worth it.

“Fighting,” Shu Yiyi said dryly. “That’s not very creative.”

“It is part of our code, isn’t it?”

The woman clucked her disapproval. “We really must get rid of that part of the code. I’ll suggest it in the next council of masters.”

“If I win, I go free.”

“I’ll destroy you. It won’t even be interesting,” the master replaced the mask on her face, but Miao could hear the woman’s disappointment.

“Fine. I take your mask, and I go free,” Miao said, pointing at the woman.

“Ahhh, now that’s slightly more creative than just fighting.”

“Don’t hold back. I’ll show you,” Miao said, hoping that she sounded more confident than she felt.

“You think you can do it?” Shu Yiyi shrugged off her cloak and settled into a fighting stance, beckoning the girl with her palm. “Then you will get your trial. Enough talk. Defeat me and you will earn your freedom. Let me see the skill of the Hidden Fist’s young *gaoshou*.”

The master was obviously more skilled than she was. She was larger and stronger and likely faster than Miao too. If Miao just rushed forward headlong, she would be defeated in a heartbeat.

There was only one thing she could do.

She settled into a fighting stance, holding up a hand in challenge. “Please,” she gestured. Miao and Shu Yiyi eyed each other. The birds cooed and fluttered in their cages. Sunlight filtered through the broken lattice windows.

Miao turned and ran.

“Running?” the master called out, surprised. “That’s an interesting tactic. It won’t help you get my mask though.”

Miao ran to the pigeons, punching the wicker cages open. As she darted through the birds and feathers, she knocked over as many perches and cages as she could. Within seconds the room erupted into madness. Squawking birds fluttered in every direction. Cages rolled underfoot. She knocked over chairs, flipped tables and altars.

“Ahhh, chaos! You win points for creativity, but don’t think it will stop me!” Shu Yiyi approved, giving chase. But it did slow her down. The master found it more difficult to move through the mess, giving Miao a slight advantage.

But there was only so far that she could run before Shu Yiyi's fist caught up to her.

Miao crossed her arms, blocking the full force of the punch with her forearms. She felt her bones crunch and cried out as pain flared in her arms. She hoped they weren't broken. Miao countered with a flurry of kicks, aimed at the woman's feet as she pawed her way around the rolling cages.

As Shu Yiyi blocked her moves, Miao suddenly switched to throwing palm strikes and punches. The names to the techniques came to her mind faster as the next appropriate move in the sequence. *Eight Penetrating Claws. Gu Lao's Youthful Avalanche.*

While each was blocked, she finally landed a punch to the woman's chest, then drew her hand back for a follow up strike. Pain flared in her knuckles and she realized her opponent was using the Stone Mountain Iron Skin technique—a technique that channeled qi into the skin to instantly harden it. *Of course she would.* It was the only rational move for someone stronger in this situation.

The next time Shu Yiyi struck with her palms, Miao slipped past the blow and grabbed her arm. Turning into the attack, she used her opponent's strength to throw her.

At least that's what should have happened. Shu Yiyi twisted and caught a hold of Miao by the arm and slammed her hard into the wooden floor, splintering the wood and knocking over a chair and table used for writing messages. The impact forced the air out of Miao's chest, and she was sure something broke.

"You're failing!" Shu Yiyi said, towering over Miao. She removed her mask, taunting the young woman. "Come on then. Here's my mask. Come get it."

Groaning, Miao rolled to the side, startling the pigeons

on the floor. In desperation, she grabbed one of the birds and threw it at the woman. While it didn't connect with Shu Yiyi's face, the flapping of the bird's wings bought Miao enough time to stand up on her feet. The master yelped, and she wiped a goopy trail of white and brown trickling down from her hair to her face. The bird had defecated on Shu Yiyi.

Miao snatched up the fallen chair and swung it at Shu Yiyi's head. It broke on her skull in a shower of wooden splinters, but still the woman kept her feet, and Miao darted away, throwing the chair leg at the Master. The woman swept the leg aside, and it clattered to the floor.

So much for Broken Chair style. I really thought that would work, Miao thought in a panic.

She made a dash for the open patio door, kicking an empty bird cage out with her. The chaos she caused was complete. Birds on the railings and beams, bird cages rolling out onto the veranda. Miao squinted in the midday light.

"Running to a place with even more treacherous footing?" asked Shu Yiyi, emerging out onto the veranda. She had fixed the mask on her face again, but Miao could see smeared bird feces on her hair and cheek. "You have nowhere to run. Your qinggong isn't good enough to survive a leap from this height."

The wind howled around them on the veranda. She peeked over the edge. It was a long way down. The thought of just jumping down entered her mind, of ending the fight here and now, but she pushed it away immediately. It would be a stupid, suicidal move. But if Shu Yiyi caught her, then she'd be dead as well.

Unless . . .

The beginnings of an idea formed in her mind. She snatched two more pigeons from where they strutted, obliv-

ious to the fighting around them. The birds squawked in her grasp, but she kept an open hold so as to not hurt them.¹³

“Stop trying to run. We’ll never let you go. You’ll never be rid of me—I’ll hunt you down myself,” Shu Yiyi approached slowly, her fists clenching and unclenching. A stiff breeze whipped her hair around. “Give in and return to us.”

Miao threw the pigeons at her, and they flipped through the air as they tried to right themselves¹⁴. The master sidestepped one, sweeping with her hands to brush the bird away. A fraction of a second behind the flipping birds, Miao leaped into a two-footed kick—Master Flying Bear’s Storm Bear Jumping Drop Kick—closing the distance between them.

“How’s this for creative?” Miao yelled. Both feet landed hard on the woman’s chest, and she felt the woman falling over. But before Miao could whoop in triumph, she felt Shu Yiyi’s hands close around her ankle.

No, no, no, no, no no!

Miao had thought she would be able to land comfortably on the patio and watch as the woman plunged down.

Instead, they both fell.

The wind howled around Miao and her hair and sleeves fluttered in it. Shu Yiyi had a firm grip on her ankle and Miao rode her down, desperate to free herself. No amount of qinggong, could save them from gravity and a fall from thirteen floors while they were mid-air.

“You’ll never be rid of meeeeeee!”¹⁵ the woman yelled as they fell. Miao struck down at the woman, trying to hit enough pressure points to force Shu Yiyi to release her. Then the world turned green. They hit the tops of the trees and Miao suddenly found herself free but still falling much too fast. She grasped at leaves, pulling handfuls of branches

to break her fall, feeling the trees tear at her hands. But her flailing got her sleeve caught and jerked her head first into a thick branch.

And then there was only darkness.

WHEN SHE WOKE, she thought she had lost her memory again. But then she remembered what she was doing, why she was there. She blinked slowly, trying to focus on the bamboo leaves rustling above her. She wobbled to her feet, then patted herself gingerly, checking her injuries. The trees broke her fall and broke her as well. She was in pain and didn't want to know what other injuries she had. Her arms hurt terribly. She was sure something was broken.

It was then she noticed that the hooded man was watching her.

"Hello . . ." she said timidly. She braced herself for another fight. "Are you here to kill me?"

"Hmph," the hooded man replied. He nodded for her to follow. He lead her a short distance to a break in the trees. There the High Master's body lay on the forest floor, broken branches scattered around her. She appeared in bad shape, cuts and bruises, tears in her fine green robes. Miao was sure that the woman's *neigong* had protected her from the fall but to what degree? What kind of internal injuries did she have?

"Master," Miao said, kneeling by the woman's body. She reached down and began pulling the mask off, careful not to touch the pigeon droppings smeared into Shu Yiyi's hair. The woman smirked up at her from under the mask, and Miao winced as another memory returned. A deadly obstacle course completed in record time. Shu Yiyi smirking

at her in approval. Miao's surge of pride as she walked past the other initiates.

"That idiot Flying Bear's attack?" Shu Yiyi gasped. "How did that even work?"

"My apologies, Master," Miao said, touching her head to the ground.

Shu Yiyi snatched the edge of Miao's robe, the faintest traces of a smile forming. Her speech was slow. "Look at you. Still able to walk. I suppose you came up with a creative solution to your problem after all."

"Master?"

"You won. You have your freedom. You're lucky I'm in a good mood," the Master said, coughing. The crude Shu Yiyi's accent had vanished, and the Master's elegant tone returned. "Go, before I change my mind."

"Thank you, Master," Miao said, kowtowing to the woman's prone form. After she had touched her head to the ground three times, she rose and left them behind.

When Miao was out of earshot, the hooded man sat down next to the Shu Yiyi. He sighed, pulling a throwing knife out of a hidden pocket and picking at the dirt under his fingers.

"Keep an eye on her—discreetly. I'm curious to see what becomes of our little bird," Shu Yiyi whispered.

"You can stop pretending now, Master Shu," the hooded man said.

"Who said anything about pretending," Shu Yiyi groaned as she sat up. "Baiting her like this was your idea anyway, Master Huang. Next time, you fall out of the pagoda."

Beneath his hood, Master Huang rolled his eyes, "You're always so dramatic."

IT WAS late in the evening when Miao finally returned to the Green Brocade Inn. She found Yan Tao sitting on the outside of the inn enjoying the warm spring night. A pile of unconscious pugilists lay on the road outside of the inn.

"You're hurt," Yan Tao said, hurrying to her side. He put an arm around her to hold her up. She leaned into his support, and he helped her down onto the step.

Miao coughed. "I'll be fine."

"I'll get you something to eat," he said, giving her a flat look that told her how much he really believed her. "And then the doctor."

She leaned against the pillar of the entryway, feeling the cool wood against her skin. The sun had set beyond the edges of the bamboo trees, the warm colors of the day blending into the deep shades of the night.

Yan Tao returned with leftover bao.

"All the bao you can eat," he said.

She took a bite, letting the savory flavor of the sauce ooze over her tongue and then let out a content sigh.

ABOUT JF LEE

JF Lee is a wuxia and Asian Fantasy author for both adults and teens, including his popular Tales of the Swordsman series. He is a Chinese-Singaporean-Canadian writer that grew up in Vancouver, Canada and is currently based in the Cayman Islands (complicated, I know).

When he's not working on his next novel, he can be found scuba diving for green sea turtles to photograph.

More of his wuxia stories can be seen on Amazon. Sign up for his newsletters at <https://jflee.co/> for more exclusive content and early access to wuxia/xianxia/and other fantasy stories.

BLAKE MATTHEWS



NOTE FROM BLAKE MATTHEWS

BLAKE MATTHEWS

"Disciple of the Wall of Sleep" - We often speak of people battling their "inner demons." What if those were literal? How do you battle them? Washington Silva will find out for himself.

"Miss Stiff Corpse" - Teenager Feng Moua is a Chinese immigrant living in Brazil. After a supernatural encounter, she learns that she has become heir to a powerful legacy. Will her newfound gifts be enough to save the innocent, both living and (un)dead?

MISS STIFF CORPSE

BLAKE MATTHEWS

The thunderous footfalls aroused Feng Moua from her uneasy slumber.

“Who’s there?” she gasped in Iu Mien, her native language.

Feng looked around her room, allowing her eyes to accustom themselves to the darkness. After a few seconds, she saw that she was alone; her parents were sleeping in the adjoining room and her grandmother was sleeping on the sofa downstairs.

Was it a dream?

She heard something outside. It was the sound of shuffling feet. While it was certainly not unheard of for drunken men, wayward youth and a few individuals who worked ungodly hours to walk down the street at this hour—Feng checked her phone to confirm that it was one-thirty in the morning—there was something cold and sinister about this sound.

Feng pulled off the covers and walked over the window that looked out onto the street. As was the case with most houses in the neighborhood, there was both a sliding glass

pane and a sliding metal shutter that allowed cool air to enter during the warming spring and summer months. She slid the glass pane out of the way and peeped through the small holes in the shutter; to *open* the shutter might result in catcalls from a *bandido*, as the locals called them.

Adjusting the angle of her head so that her limited vision reached the streets, Feng observed the otherwise serene scene of a sleepy residential street. She still heard the shuffling, with each footfall giving her a cold feeling in her breast. After a few moments, a lone, shambling figure stepped into her field of vision. Feng was surprised to see a young woman, maybe seventeen or eighteen years old, staggering in the middle of the road. She was dressed in a short, ripped skirt and a white blouse. Feng thought she saw several dark splotches on her clothes, but given her vantage point and limited light outside, she could not be sure.

Is she hurt? Does she need help?

Suddenly, the lone female figure outside stopped right in front of Feng's house. Miss Moua blinked and furrowed her brow, trying to get a better look at her. The young lady outside slowly turned to face the house.

Oh my god! Can she see me?

Looking up at the window, the solitary streetwalker met with Feng's curious gaze. Feng gasped as her dark, almond eyes stared into the dark, lifeless orbs of the visitor. There was no emotion on the young lady's countenance. Several streams of blood ran down the left side of her face. Her long blonde hair was matted with dirt and blood. For a few moments, the two girls looked at each other. Then the girl turned again and continued on her way.

Feng quickly got back under the covers, breathing deeply.

Who was that? How did she know I was there? I wonder if she'll find anyone who can help her.

The young lady pondered the events of the evening for another hour before sleepiness overtook her.

FENG MOUA WAS the only daughter of the Moua family, who had immigrated to São Paulo, Brazil, from China the year before. The Mouas belonged to the Miao ethnicity, which inhabited the tropical forests of the Yunnan province, plus the northernmost regions of both Laos and Vietnam. Her father had served in the Chinese military, often being sent into the notorious “Golden Triangle” to battle against Southeast Asian—and Chinese—drug dealers. His ethnicity allowed him to interact closely with the other Hmong tribes living in that region, usually to the benefit of his mission.

It was during his last mission that his platoon, in conjunction with the Laotian army, raided a village said to belong to a powerful drug lord. The intelligence had been incorrect, unfortunately, and Captain Fong Moua and his team unwittingly slaughtered a peaceful village of Hmong people. To add insult to injury, Captain Moua later learned that the Laotian soldiers had deliberately fudged the intelligence about the mission. Feng’s father never talked about what happened afterward. Only that the experience was enough for him to quit the army and get out of China. A few residents of the city of Jinghong had moved to Brazil a few years earlier in search of better economic opportunities. One family had just opened a small supermarket in São Paulo and invited Moua to come out and assist there.

Fong Moua; his wife, Bao; their daughter, Feng; and the

Fong's aging mother all flew out to São Paulo to restart their lives. They initially stayed at the Li residence, although the supermarket was doing well enough after the first year that Fong Moua got a raise and could rent a house of his own not far from the store. Grandma Moua stayed at home, taking care of the cooking and cleaning while Fong and Bao worked all day at the market.

Feng, sixteen at the time, had enrolled at the local high school. Because of the language barrier, the school officials started her off in the *décimo ano*, or the tenth grade. Her first year was torture: not only did she not speak the language, but also her colleagues were more interested in calling her "geisha" and making slanted-eye gestures at her than actually helping her get accustomed to life in a new country. While Feng often offered to help at the market, her father made her stay at home and focus on her studies.

"Besides," he would add, "the Li family already has a teenage son to help out after school."

By the time Feng had started school the following year, she was able to communicate more or less freely in Portuguese and had even made a close friend. Renata Sayuri Okamoto was a third-generation Japanese-Brazilian and one of the few people of Asian descent to attend that high school. The others were also of Japanese descent—the Li boy transferred to a private school earlier that year—and were even *more* assimilated into the Brazilian culture than Renata was. The kids no longer called her "geisha," now that she could correct people and tell them she was Chinese—she figured that it was pointless to explain the difference between Han Chinese and Miao Chinese at this point. Instead, they called her a "xing-a-ling", a typical (if unwelcome) local nickname for anything Chinese.

Feng hated that label, but ignored it. She was a stranger

in a strange land. She could fight back: she had studied martial arts under both father, *wushu* at school, and continued her training her grandmother's watchful eye. Nonetheless, she feared that if she lashed out, it might result in something bad happening to her family, especially if one of the kids happened to be a *traficante* or *bandido* (or had a sibling who was).

FENG WOKE up the next night at the same hour, startled by the sound of shuffling feet. She stole quietly across the floor to the window. Peeping through the little holes in the shutter, she saw the solitary figure shamble into view once more. Moreover, like the previous night, the young lady stopped in front of Feng's house and looked up at the window.

Taking courage, Feng slid the both the shutter and the window open and poked her head out for a better view. The girl stared blankly up at Feng. She was wearing the same tattered clothes from the previous morning. The same streams of blood ran down her face—in the exact same place. The girl's skin was deathly pale, although Feng surmised that she must would have beautiful swarthy skin under normal circumstances. Dark circles marked her equally dark and cavernous eyes, completely glazed over.

The girl kept her soulless eyes locked on Feng's gaze for a few minutes. A few times, she slowly opened her mouth to speak, but Feng heard nothing. Not even a groan.

Is she trying to communicate with me?

After a few minutes, the girl resumed her course and staggered down the street and out of sight. Feng stuck her body further out the window to try to see where she was

going. The girl turned right at the corner and disappeared from sight.

THAT EVENING, after he parents had returned from the market and were having dinner, Feng took a break from her studies and joined them and her grandmother in the kitchen. They were eating a simple meal of rice and chicken—her grandmother had liked the idea of Brazil being a place where rice was a daily staple, but was a little dismayed to learn that it was western long-grained rice. Her parents were less picky and were simply glad that it wouldn't be hamburgers every night "like they do in America," as her dad said.

"Dad?" said Feng, interrupting her parents' chatter about the Li family.

"Yes?" he said.

"Do you hear news about what happens in the *neighborhood* at the market?" Feng mixed Mandarin Chinese with her Iu Mien whenever she felt an idea could not be expressed in her family's language.

Fong swallowed a mouthful of rice. "A little. The stock boy is Brazilian and he usually tells Li or his son the gossip about the other businesses on the street."

"Why do you ask, daughter?" said Bao.

Feng sighed. "I saw a girl outside my window walking alone in the street last night. She looked hurt. I wonder if there was any news about her."

Feng's parents looked at each other and shrugged. She then noticed that her grandma was giving her one of her patented Piercing Stares™ and thoughtfully rubbing her chin.

Fong spoke up. "I certainly have not heard anything. But Roberto always mentions the *funk* parties that the *traficantes*—" he mixed a few mispronounced words of Portuguese with his Iu Mien. "—throw in one of the neighborhoods nearby. He says that it is not uncommon for girls to drink or use drugs and get raped."

"That's probably what you saw, Feng." Her mother said. "That's why we want you to study. We don't want you involved in that kind of activity. We Chinese are better than that."

"I know, mom," answered Feng impatiently.

"Are you hungry, my dear?" asked Grandmother Moua.

"No, *pou pou*," she answered. "I have some math homework to finish before tomorrow."

Feng excused herself and went back upstairs to finish her lessons.

THE NEXT DAY, Feng came home to find her grandmother sitting on the couch waiting for her.

"Yes, *pou pou*?" she said as she placed her backpack on the ground next to the sofa.

"Did you see her again last night?" her grandma asked.

"Yes, I did. Why?" Feng walked into the washroom beneath the staircase and threw some water on her face.

"Was she dressed the same way she was the night before?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

Grandma Moua said nothing for a few moments. "I think you have *sight*," she finally said.

"What do you mean *sight*?"

"You can see ghosts."

Feng looked at her incredulously. “Are you sure? I never saw any before. Why would I start seeing them now?”

Her grandmother raised an eyebrow. “Well, either the gift never manifested itself until now—” she paused and muttered unintelligibly to herself. “—or maybe your *sight* isn’t for ghosts, but for *magic*.”

“Magic?” Feng could not believe her ears.

Grandma Moua nodded. “Yes. Possibly magic of the blackest kind.”

“Black magic?” Feng stammered.

“One almost never sees it in China. The communists saw to it to destroy all forms of folk magic and superstitious beliefs. Some clans of the Miao in China still practice it. It is a lot more common among the highland peoples of Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. That is probably why you never saw anything back in Yunnan.”

“But how did it come to Brazil.”

Grandma Moua chuckled. “Oh, little one. You have much to learn. Magical energy is everywhere. Good and evil spirits inhabit the entire world. Just because the knowledge to tap into that energy, or invoke those spirits, has largely been ignored and forgotten by the modern world, it doesn’t mean that it no longer exists. And each culture has its ancient (and less ancient) methods of interacting with that energy.”

“Do you know how to use this magical energy, *pou pou*?”

“Yes, my dear.”

“Does that make you an enchantress?”

Grandma Moua laughed heartily. “Oh no. I never trained enough—I would have been jailed and maybe executed by the Communists had I done so. But I spent

some time in the Laotian highlands before I married your grandfather and learned some things there. In fact—“

Grandma Moua got up and walked into the kitchen. Feng followed her. Sitting on the table was a coffee mug filled with a dark, foul-smelling liquid. Feng scrunched her nose at the smell of it.

“What is this, grandma?”

Grandmother Moua ignored her question. “I spent the entire morning looking for the ingredients. Thankfully, there was a huge grassy field out past truck stop near the highway. I was able to find all of the animals—or the closest thing to them—that I needed. It should work.”

“What should work?”

“Have a seat, little one.”

Feng looked at her grandma and sighed. “What are planning?”

“Sit, Feng.”

Feng rolled her eyes and had a seat.

“Now close your eyes.”

“Grandma—“

“Silence.”

Feng closed her eyes and obeyed. “This will be interesting,” she muttered under her breath. “Ghosts and magic and now magic potions?”

Grandma dipped her fingers into the liquid and started chanting in a Hmong dialect that Feng was unfamiliar. She thought she understood a few words, or at least some words that sounded like others she knew. Feng’s grandmother anointed her eyelids with the substance. Being so close to her nose, Feng almost gagged, but she held it in. Feng then felt the wet, slimy fingers of her grandmother enter her ears. She did know whether to laugh at the ticklish feeling, or shudder, knowing that some putrid slime was being placed

on her body. The chanting grew louder as her grandma finally anointed her lips. Feng felt tempted to lick the substance, but she figured that she would probably end up retching and ruin what appeared to be an actual shaman ritual.

After a few minutes, the “ceremony” ended and her grandma cleaned off the mixture with a wet towel.

“What was that?”

“An old recipe. It will help you communicate better.”

“With who?”

“With the ghost, of course.”

“What do you mean, ‘of course’?”

“I mean, it’s obvious that your visitor is a ghost.”

“A ghost?”

“Are this slow in your studies, little one?”

Feng rolled her eyes. “But why would I want to communicate with her?”

“Because she wants to communicate with *you*. How else do you explain her stopping in front of our house each evening? She can sense that you have *sight*. Maybe she wants you to help her.”

“Me? What can I do?”

“Talk to her, for one.”

“But—“

“Don’t worry. Tonight, I’ll keep the door unlocked when your parents go to bed. When you hear her footsteps, just slip outside and try to talk to her. I’ll be awake to help in case anything happens.”

Feng was flabbergasted. “But—me—talking? To a ghost?”

“You have lots to learn, my dear.” Her grandma poured the concoction into the kitchen sink and washed it down the drain.

FENG WAS HARDLY able to sleep that evening. She lay in bed for almost three hours—the family tended to go to sleep around ten o'clock—before the familiar sounds of the ghost's feet shuffled down the street. This time, she could hear them louder and clearer than before.

Grandma's potion worked.

Throwing on a robe and slipping into her flip-flops, Feng snuck quietly down the stairs and into the living room. Her grandmother must have heard her, as she was already sitting up on the couch when she arrived. The older lady got up and tiptoed to the door, which she opened as quietly as she could. Grandma pulled the keys from the lock and handed them to her granddaughter, who glided silently across the *garagem* to the gate, which she unlocked. Before stepping completely onto the sidewalk, she popped her out to see if anyone else was on the street. Nobody, thank goodness.

Feng met the young woman in the middle of the street. The ghostly personage stood before for several seconds, swaying slightly back and forth. Like the other nights, she wore the exact same clothes, with reddish-blown splotches (now visible in the street light) in the same spots Feng had seen them before. It was clear that the young lady was breathtakingly beautiful, even in her otherworldly state. Once again, the young lady's lifeless eyes bore a hole into Feng's soul.

"Hello, I...I...I'm Feng."

The ghost stood in place without responding.

"Who are you?"

Once more, there was no answer.

"Uh...can you hear me?"

The ghost nodded slowly.

“Okay. That’s a start,” she muttered in her own language. “Can I help you?”

For a moment, the ghost stood there. Finally, she opened her mouth. “Joseane Ferreira. April fourth.”

“Your name is Joseane Ferreira?”

Joseane nodded.

“Is April fourth your birthday?”

Joseane glacially shook her head. She then took a step forward. Feng stepped out of the way and let her pass.

A voice called from above. “Is everything okay, *moça*?”

Feng looked up and saw one of the neighbors from across the street standing at the bedroom window. Embarrassed, Feng simply smiled and gave him a thumbs up and ran back into the house, almost forgetting to lock the gate on her way in.

“WHY IN GOD’S name are you looking at that, Feng?”

“That” referred to an edition of *Extra*, a popular newspaper that sold well among the lower classes—and young men in general. Feng had stopped by a newsstand on the way to school and picked up a few papers—thankfully, the newsstand still had editions dating back to the week before. A brief search online had yielded no recognizable results. She then recalled seeing some classmates from the year before reading this paper, usually just to ogle the scantily-clad women who adorned every page and snicker at the sex columns. While the respected newspapers probably would not dedicate much space to some random girl from a small neighborhood near the periphery of town, maybe a lowbrow paper like *Extra* would mention something.

Renata happened upon Feng during their break as a Feng had turned the page to a story about the soccer muse of the day. Renata examined the picture of the girl, dressed in a tube top and a mini-skirt so small that challenged the very definition of the term.

“So is that your fancy, Feng?”

“No,” Feng said. “I’m just...just...” She looked up at Renata, who was anxious for an explanation. “I just think it will be good for me to learn some of the Portuguese expressions here. Like this headline. It reads: ‘*Guria acaba namoro com mano e leva duas na cuca*¹.’ Renata? What’s a *cuca*?”

Renata laughed aloud. She then tapped Feng on the forehead with her index and middle fingers. “It’s your head. In any case, good luck on learning slang that way. Do you want to get something from the snack bar?”

“No thanks. I want to finish reading this.”

Renata rolled her eyes and spun around. “Just don’t fall in love with any of those *Maria Chuteiras*². They’re probably full of diseases by this point.”

Feng stuck her tongue out and resumed scanning the pages for anything about a “Joseane Ferreira.”

Snack break had almost ended when Feng saw an article in an edition from five days before. It talked about a young girl named Joseane Ferreira from the North Zone—that is where Feng Moua lived—who had started dating a young man. Apparently, she did not realize early on that the boy, whom the article identified as *Bicho Mamão*³, was associated with the local chapter of the biggest drug gang in the city. According to the article, she told her family that she was going to break it off with him. She had gone to see him at his home in the *Jardim Julieta* neighborhood on the evening of April 4, but never returned. While the local police considered *Bicho Mamão* as a “person of interest,”

the residents of his street report not seeing Joseane that evening. There was a WhatsApp number at the end of the article with which to contact her parents if anybody had any news of her whereabouts.

The *Jardim Julieta* neighborhood was located on the opposite end of the district where Feng Moua lived. She was not familiar with it, but she had heard her classmates mention it on occasion. Some hailed from there; others described it as a drug-infested cesspool of crime. The stories surrounding that area scared Feng too much—much more than meeting a ghost—for her to want to risk wandering around and discovering what she might see. Moreover, she did not know what she was looking for. After all, even if *Bicho Mamão* was delving in the black arts, she obviously was not going to simply waltz into a dangerous neighborhood and ask him to stop. What could she do?

Then she had an idea.

During math class, she slipped a note to Renata. Renata read it and looked up at Feng. The look on her face suggested that she did not have the slightest idea what the note had meant. Feng gestured for her to go ahead and answer. Renata rolled her eyes and scribbled something on the note. Satisfied that the teacher was not looking, she returned the piece of paper to Feng.

“Is there a bus that passes close to here that goes through Jardim Julieta?”

“117-F. Santana – Jardim Guançã.”

Feng smiled at her bewildered friend and slipped the note between the pages of her textbook.

WHEN SHE GOT HOME that afternoon, she was excited—if that was the correct word—to explain her findings to her grandmother. She had not had the chance to discuss that morning’s interview with the ghost, as her parents were in the kitchen during breakfast. She told her *pou pou* about the ghost’s name and the mysterious date. She then showed her aunt the newspaper and explained the content of the article in a combination of Mandarin and Iu Mien.

From there, Feng explained that after class, she went to the bus stop in front of the school. The 117-F bus to the *Jardim Guançã* neighborhood passed by and she took it. The bus passed through *Jardim Julieta* as part of its itinerary. When the bus passed in front of *Rua das Harpas*⁴, Feng felt a sudden chill run throughout her body. The sensation was so powerful that her anxiety and excitement were immediately replaced with despair and sheer horror. As soon as the bus left that neighborhood, the awful sentiment went away, too.

Grandmother Moua listened intently as Feng related the experience to her. As soon as she finished, Grandmother Moua spoke up.

“Courageous little one,” she said as she ran her fingers through Feng’s hair. “That is indeed the mark of black magic. Only someone who delves into any magic at all would be able to recognize its presence. As you have *sight*, you are even more sensitive to its presence.”

“But what does this all mean?”

“I fear that some of the darkest magic imaginable is being practiced. I fear that someone has enslaved the spirit of Joseane—” Grandmother Moua struggled to pronounce the Brazilian name. “—and continues to take advantage of her, even in death.”

“You mean that someone is taking her spirit and—”

“Yes. I have never heard of anything so vile. It is cruel enough to violate a living woman. But to do so to her immortal spirit is unspeakable.”

Feng Moua felt her blood rise.

“How horrible!” she finally exclaimed, followed by a string of epithets in both Iu Mien and Mandarin. “That’s so awful. I mean, this Joseane cannot rest in peace now, can she?”

Grandmother Moua shook her head. “I am afraid not, little one. She is now a slave to the passions of her enchanter. No power among men can help her.”

Feng Moua’s eyes brimmed with tears. “But we can’t just stay here and do nothing. Someone has to do something!”

Her grandmother’s lips curled into a half smile. “I said ‘No power among men can help her,’ not ‘nothing can help her.’”

Feng wiped away her tears. “Well, *what* can help her?”

“You can.”

Feng’s eyes widened. “I don’t understand. Aren’t I just a regular person?”

Grandmother Moua grasped her shoulder firmly. “You are. But you do not represent the limited scope of man’s associations and institutions. Like your grandmother, you have the authority of the great Phoenix, the great protector of the South.”

“Phoenix? You?”

“Come with me, granddaughter.”

Feng followed her grandmother up to her room. Her grandmother stepped onto a chair in front Feng’s wardrobe and rummaged around the boxes packed tightly in one corner of the upper shelf. She produced an old, dust-covered box from among the other things. Grand-

mother Moua set the box on Feng's bed and removed the lid.

Feng's grandmother produced a two-piece Miao garb. The blouse looked like a Chinese *cheongsam*, made of black-dyed silk with red flowers and green leaves embroidered into the edges, set to a yellow background and bordered by thin red and white stripes. The same flowers also bordered the sleeves, although it followed by a wider red stripe, followed by a third border of blue embroidered flowers set to an orange background.

"That's a beautiful dress, grandmother." Feng reached out and felt the material. It was smooth like silk and as light as a bag of cotton balls.

"It is more than a dress, granddaughter. It was woven from the skin of a Vermillion Bird and dyed with the bark from the oldest mangosteen tree in Laos. It is the gift from the Phoenix to the protectors of the Miao and Hmong peoples. We are few, but proud."

"We', grandmother? You mean you were a 'protector'?"

"Yes, little one. I joined the People's Army at a young age. Because I spoke Iu Mien and several other Hmong languages, I was sent by the Party to assist the *Pathet Lao* in hunting down the Hmong, who had assisted the Americans during the so-called Secret War. I was to go undercover to visit their villages and ferret out their arms deposits, lookout posts, traps, and hiding places. One day, I was doing reconnaissance in the Laotian highlands when I came across an abandoned Buddhist temple. Among the statues of Buddha that protected the courtyard was one of Buddha holding a Phoenix in his hands. I felt a strange power emanating from the statue. When I placed my hand on the Phoenix, it shattered. In Buddha's hands was the dress you see here.

"The moment I touched it, I heard a gentle female voice

echo in my head. She said, ‘Ying Moua, my daughter, seek no more to destroy your brothers and sisters. They are your people. Protect them from the strength of tyrants and the evil of despots.’ I understood what the spirit of the Phoenix meant. At that same moment, I entered the temple and put on the clothes of the Phoenix. Finding some weapons left behind by Shaolin monks from the days of the warlords, I became a double agent. By day, I gave intelligence to the *Pathet Lao*, by night I hunted them in the jungles. I diligently protected my people and their traditions for a few years, until I met your grandfather. I decided to marry him and raise the next generation of protectors. Your father did much for the good of our people before *the incident*, but it is now time for *you* to carry on the legacy of the Phoenix.”

Grandmother Moua reached into the box and produced a facemask. It was made of a tin metal and painted silver. It was sculpted to cover the upper half of the wearer’s face and most of the right cheek. She handed it to Feng.

“This is to protect your identity with.”

“This looks like the Western Phantom.”

Grandmother Moua just grunted. She then removed a pair of daggers from the bottom of the box. They looked like traditional *wushu* daggers, with red-dyed tassels flowing from the pommel. Inscribed on the blades were characters in a language that Feng could not understand.

“They are spells in the language of the ancients. The script is called *Pallava Grantha* and it has its origins in India. The spells imbue the daggers with special power. Wield them worthily and they will never fail you.”

“So, what am I supposed to do?”

“You must find the enchanter responsible for Joseane’s enslavement and put a stop to his nefarious activities.”

“You mean kill him?”

“Perhaps. If it becomes necessary.”

“But I can’t do that?”

“Why?”

“Killing is wrong! It’s against the law.”

“Little one, this enchanter has broken the laws of man and the laws of the gods. He has broken the laws of nature by violating the spirit of an innocent girl. These laws transcend the laws of man. The institutions of man are unable to comprehend these laws, let alone enforce them. Only you can unmask this diabolical rascality and put an end to it.”

THAT NIGHT, Grandmother Moua mixed some special herbs into Feng’s parents’ tea, guaranteeing them a long, peaceful night’s sleep. Once they were asleep, Feng got ready for action. She donned the Phoenix dress. It fit her small frame quite snugly. She placed the mask on her face.

Yeesh. I look like the Phantom.

Her grandmother twisted her long black hair into twin braids, which she then tied into a double Dutch bun. She then stuck a golden hairpin into the bun, which head was elaborately sculpted into the likeness of a phoenix.

“Great! You like even more beautiful than I was at your age,” her grandmother jested.

An overwhelming feeling of calm fell over Feng. She went downstairs into the living room, where she knelt in the middle of the room. Placing her daggers beside her, she placed her hands on her knees and bowed her head forward. Feng closed her eyes and meditated, clearing her mind of all of her anxiety. She hoped that she would hear the voice of the Phoenix.

For two hours, Feng remained motionless in the state of

meditation. Then the sound came. Her ear twitched. Feng opened her eyes.

“It is time, *pou pou*. Pray for me. It ends tonight.”

FENG MOVED SWIFTLY through the night, clinging to the shadows as much as she could. She followed the spirit of Joseane, which gradually grew tangible through dark magic, through the streets. Sometimes, Joseane would pause and look behind her, but Feng remained hidden from sight. They walked through the square that marked the end of the neighborhood’s major commercial street. The square served as the repose for homeless people and drug addicts. None of them could see Joseane, nor could they hear Feng, who crept stealthily through the shadows.

They continued through one of the roads that intersected with the business street, which made Feng nervous. This was a busier road—even at night—than the one she lived on. There were two schools and a government building—a small health post—on the right side of the road. Small businesses and houses populated the left side. Feng kept to the right; she scaled the walls of the school and sometimes moved along the inside as she followed her target, who shambled down the sidewalk. Feng stole across the school parking lot—it could fit ten cars side by side—and leapt onto the wall of the health post. She let herself down inside the property of the health post and ran to the other side. Pushing off the wall, she jumped atop the wall. Joseane was still making her way down the street.

Trouble.

The street light was on and there were still some patrons at the bar on the next corner.

For the love of God! It's 1:40 a.m. on a week night!

She descended back into the courtyard and searched the ground for stones or pieces of brick. Finding a few, she ascended the wall once more. Joseane was already crossing the street toward the bar.

I have to be fast.

She took one stone between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand and aimed it at the nearest street light. Satisfied with her aim, she flicked it as hard as she could. To her surprise, the stone shot out like a projectile—a bullet, even—and shattered the glass of the lamp, putting the light out. She fired a second stone at the light post across the street, hitting it once more with eerie accuracy. Finally, she aimed for one of the lights at the bar, successfully putting it out. As the drunkards muttered in loud voices at who had broken the light bulb, Feng flipped over to the other side of the wall and continued following Joseane into the blackness of the night.

The streets continued deserted as they made it to the third block, whose right side housed a large church. Thankfully, the parking lot lights were off and several trees on the sidewalk gave Feng extra cover.

Joseane now lurched over to the left side of the street. A little further was a huge dirt lot. At the far side of it was a little passageway that led into *Jardim Julieta*. Feng knocked out two more streetlights as she crossed to the other side and made her way to the lot. Before Joseane entered little passageway, she turned and looked in Feng's direction. Feng hugged the wall of the house that bordered the lot to the left. She did not know if Joseane saw her, and patiently waited until the ghost resumed its descent into the hell of dark magic. As Feng herself drew closer, she felt the air grow cold and dead around her. She was almost there.

Jardim Julieta consisted of a single street running north and south flanked to the right by several smaller roads, all named after musical instruments. Tonight the streets were bare. Only two out of four streetlights on that road were on. Feng crept along the sidewalk to her left until she reached *Rua das Harpas*, where Joseane turned and entered.

By this point, the negative energy that Feng felt almost overwhelmed her. She unsheathed her daggers and held them close to her chest. For a split second, Feng thought she saw them glow blue. Then again, it might have been the moonlight reflecting off the steel of the blades. Feng crossed to the other side and crept along the sidewalk to the house in front of which Joseane now stood.

It's time.

At the corner of *Rua das Harpas* was a medium-sized mango tree. Feng hid herself behind it. With the tip of her right dagger, she nicked the sleeve of her costume, allowing a red thread to come loose. She pulled the thread quickly until she had several feet of it. She then removed the phoenix hairpin from her hair and tied one end of the thread to it. Spinning the hairpin above her head like a lasso, Feng launched it in Joseane's direction. Now completely tangible, Joseane could be reined in by her benefactor. The hairpin spun around Joseane's arm several times. Feng then cut the thread and wrapped it around the tree. Joseane was now unable to proceed into the house.

Feng climbed the mango tree and set herself between two large branches. She could hear voices from above. The bottom floor the narrow house was actually a single-car garage. Next to the garage was a long corridor at the end of which was a staircase leading into the house above. Soon, a pair of male voices echoed in the passageway. Feng could see their figures moving in the darkness as they approached

the door: a steel grating whose vertical bars were sculpted into points resembling spearheads.

The door opened and the two men merged. Both of them were shirtless; one of them wore beige cargo pants, the other wore a pair of ripped jeans. Both of them were covered with tattoos and gold jewelry.

The man in shorts yanked Joseane's arm.

"Get inside!" he snapped. "You're keeping *Bicho Mamão* waiting!"

Feng slithered silently along the branch.

"I said *move!* What's wrong with you? You're as dumb dead as you were alive! Zé! Help me move this zombie whore!"

The man in jeans, called Zé, flanked Joseane and grabbed her arm. He apparently did not notice the string holding Joseane in place—yet. At that moment, Feng dropped down, seizing the branch as she fell and swinging forward. She kicked out with both legs. Her feet struck the man in shorts under the chin and force of impact lifted him off the ground and sent him flying into the garage door. He dropped to the ground, senseless.

"What the—Mangaba!" Zé yelled in surprise.

Feng was already swinging back. As she oscillated forward, she let go of the branch at the zenith of her swing. She twisted in the air toward Zé and flung her leg vertically in a 270-degree arc, bringing it crashing down on Zé's head. He immediately collapsed, unconscious. At that moment, Mangaba was getting to his feet. Feng instinctively took two steps toward him before planting both feet in the ground and pushing off the ground into a forward somersault. As she completed her flip, she extended her left leg so that her heel smashed Mangaba on the top of the head on the descent. He also fell over, unconscious.

Feng knew that the others would soon appear. She quickly dragged Mangaba and Zé beneath the nearest car, a grey 2006 Renault Clio, while the corridor filled with more voices. There was not enough time for her to pull that trick again; instead, Feng slid under the car with the two unconscious goons.

Three men emerged from the corridor. Two of them grabbed Joseane and tried to force her to move, yelling out curses and epithets as they did so. The third man stepped into the cutter and whispered loudly for his friends.

“Mangaba! Zé! Where are you? Is this supposed to be funny?”

The man stepped into the street and in front of the car. Feng slowly moved closer to him. When she reached the right distance, she swung her right leg in a wide, horizontal arc, clipping the man’s legs from the front. The man fell forward, smashing his face on the asphalt. Feng rolled out from under the car, struck the dazed man in the temple with the pommel of her right dagger, and then grabbed him and rolled back under.

The man’s fall had alerted his buddies.

“Alves! What happened? Are you alright?”

“Joãozinho! Keep it down!”

“Shut up, Pimentão! Get on the other side of the car!”

Feng saw both men’s legs on each side of the car. She scrambled forward and emerged from beneath the hood. She quickly performed a backward handspring onto the hood of the car and cartwheeled onto the roof. The men, who had been crouching down to see who was under the car, sprang to their feet. Feng dropped in a crouch and swung her left leg in a wide sweep, striking Joãozinho across the jaw with her heel. Pimentão let out a chain of profanity as he shuffled to the side toward the hood. Feng, still in a

crouching position, pushed off the roof of the car with both legs and lunged toward Pimentão. Her attack caught him off guard, but she was too light to tackle him outright.

Instead, she wrapped her arms around his torso, threw her body forward, and swung her left leg behind her. It curled over her back and struck Pimentão in the mouth: a perfectly executed scorpion kick. She then quickly spun to her right, leapt into the air, and clubbed Pimentão in his right temple with a jumping crescent kick.

She spun around to see Joãozinho staggering toward her, his mouth full of blood. He reached into his pants and produced a Smith-and-Wesson .38 revolver. As he pointed it at Feng, she responded by hurling the dagger in her left hand at him. The blade spun through the air before it buried itself in the flesh above Joãozinho's right collarbone. He immediately dropped the gun and shrieked in pain. Feng dashed toward him, leaping onto the hood of the Renault Clio, followed by a second launch. She lifted her right arm up and brought it down in a powerful elbow smash to the top of Joãozinho's skull. The force of the blow knocked him out.

Feng could hear more voices coming from the corridor. She quickly extracted her dagger from Joãozinho's right trapezius muscle and cartwheeled over the hood of the car. Dashing toward the corridor, she veered off to the right. A couple of feet from the door, she came down on her left foot and threw all her weight into it. Pushing off the ground, she spun her body around and performed a spinning heel kick with her right foot.

At that very moment, another *bandido* emerged from the corridor, just in time to be struck square in the middle of the face with her heel. The impact not only broke his nose, but his forward momentum combined with the force of

Feng's kick clotheslined him and left him out cold on the sidewalk. Feng quickly dived between the next man's legs and tumbled forward. She kicked up to her feet in front of the third man. Feng sliced his hand with her dagger as he reached for his pistol before spinning around and parrying a punch from the second attacker and slicing his other wrist as it reached for his revolver. She noticed the third man grabbing for his piece with his other hand, and slashed his forearm with both daggers. The second man tried to wrap his good arm around Feng's throat, but she thrust her arms back and stabbed him in his lean love handles. The man yelled in pain, even more so when she yanked the blades free. The third man was already trying to land a kick in her stomach. She stepped back and caught his foot with her daggers, crossed to form an 'X'. She then yanked her hands outward, slicing through the man's Achilles' tendon with both knives. He howled in pain and dropped to his knees. Feng quickly placed her right foot on his shoulder, and then pushed off into the air and spun to face the second man, smashing him in the face with her left knee. Finally, she threw her foot in a vertical arc and brought down on in an axe kick, striking the third man in his forehead.

Feng Moua dashed toward the staircase and climbed it as fast as she could. She found herself in a washroom—located at the back of the house—connected to the kitchen. She could hear another pair of voices—one male and one female—and she slipped through the kitchen and into the living room.

A pair of figures was waiting for her in the center of the room. The first was a tall, muscular young man dressed in a pair of *capoeira* pants and nothing else, save a gold chain around his neck. He held a rusty machete in his right hand. The young woman was dressed in a white

dress: long around the legs, low around the bosom, and with the sides cut out to reveal the smooth brown skin of her waist and accentuate her wide hips. The woman had long black hair, complemented with dark eye shadow and eye pencil exaggerated to give her a faux-Asian look. The lipstick that punctuated her sumptuous lips was black as well.

“Where is Joseane?” the man said. His voice was deep and harsh.

“She will not be visiting you this evening.” Feng inched toward him. “Nor any other night. This is the end of the line for you, *Bicho Mamão*.”

“What a funny accent,” observed the girl in the white dress. “Since when does a *Japa* come in here telling us what to do?”

“I’m not a—” Feng stopped herself. “I mean, my ethnicity has nothing to do with our conversation.”

The lady nodded. “Ah, a xing-a-ling then. So how did you find us? Did you use that Taoist magic nonsense? Perhaps Buddha himself came down and showed you the way?”

“So you admit that you have been using the black arts.”

“Of course,” said *Bicho Mamão*. He slowly tapped his left hand with the flat end of his blade. “Joseane was the best lay I’d ever had. I wasn’t about to let her go. She knew it. I knew it. And death? It is simply a bump in the road. Especially with my sister, the greatest *Quimbanda* sorceress of them all by my side.”

“How could you?” said Feng. “Deny someone the right to their eternal rest?”

Bicho Mamão shrugged. “It’s pretty easy. I get the best screws in Brazil on a nightly basis. Nobody’s around to complain. It’s a win-win situation.” His tone was both

condescending and nonchalant. “Hey, Catarina. I think I’m going to add some *temaki*⁵ to my nightly meal.”

“That should be as easy as pie,” said Catarina with a sinister smile. “I’m sure with the moves this girl has, you’ll be able to do some real acrobatic stuff as well.”

“I love it!”

Feng scowled. “And what’s in it for you, witch?”

Catarina cackled. “It’s great practice, obviously. Not too many enchantresses deal in necromancy these days. I have plans, but they’re none of your business.”

“Yes, let’s get this over before the police arrive.”

Bicho Mamão took a step toward Feng, still tapping his left hand with the machete. Feng held her daggers in a defensive posture and stepped back. Catarina stepped back so that she was under the arch that led into the house’s sole bedroom. Feng sidestepped toward Catarina while *Bicho Mamão* moved diagonally toward his prey.

Suddenly, *Bicho Mamão* started to *ginga*, lurching back and forth, frequently dipping his upper body. Feng watched his constant movements, confused at constant false steps.

Does Brazilian have its own Drunken Boxing?

Her opponent lifted his leg twice as if to kick, causing her raise her defenses or step back. They were false alarms. The second time Feng relaxed her muscles, *Bicho Mamão* spun around, bringing his leg up for a kick. Before he could follow through, he dropped his knee and swung his machete in a wide arc instead. Feng crossed her daggers to catch the blow, but it came with enough force to knock her off balance. Using the momentum from the spin, *Bicho Mamão* dropped into a crouch and swept her legs out from under her feet with a *rasteira*.

Seizing the advantage, Feng’s adversary performed a cartwheel, bringing his legs up in a wide arc before sending

them crashing down on Feng. She quickly rolled out of the way, barely missing a stop that would have snapped her sternum in two. She kicked up to her feet, just in time for a front push kick to strike her in her stomach, lifting her off the ground and crashing into the wall near the television. *Bicho Mamão* continued to *ginga* as he waited for her to regain her senses.

“Is that all you got, you xing-a-ling midget? The fun is only beginning!”

Although Feng had been able to use the element of surprise to her advantage before, her new opponent was a lot more prepared than she was. She staggered to her feet and shook her head, trying to clear up her vision. She got back into a defensive posture and moved away from the entertainment center to the other side of the living room. *Bicho Mamão* remained in a constant state of movement. She watched him carefully as she drew in closer. Judging it the right moment, Feng dropped into a crouch and tumbled forward, slashing her daggers at her enemy’s legs. He simply lunged forward, placing his right hand on Feng’s shoulder, and popped into another somersault over Feng’s head. She sprung to her feet, only to take a devastating back kick to chest, knocking her against the wall that separated the living room from the kitchen.

Bicho Mamão closed in on Feng, who threw her arms back and embedded her daggers into the wall. She quickly lifted herself off the ground and swung her feet up in a wide arc, striking her opponent in the chin and knocking him back. Feng then swung her feet downward and planted them in the wall, her knees close to her chest. She pushed off the wall with such force that she shot out torpedo-like and struck *Bicho Mamão* in the stomach with a flying headbutt. Feng then jumped straight into the air and thrust both

her legs out, hitting him in the chest with a drop kick. The force of the blow brought *Bicho Mamão* to the ground.

“Ah yes, that’s the spirit!” he said, getting up. “A worthy adversary. Maybe all that kung fu BS is worth something after all.”

And that’s just the beginning.

Feng was so focused on her fight that she did not notice Catarina moving slowly along the wall from the bedroom archway into the kitchen. Instead, she was busy fending off a series of powerful swings from her opponent’s machete. He tried to drive her back against the wall, but Feng spun to her left in a butterfly twist, landing on the dilapidated couch. She stepped onto the arm of the sofa and somersaulted over *Bicho Mamão*, kicking him in the back of the head on the way down. He stumbled forward and nearly fell onto the couch.

Closing the distance between them, Feng kept a low stance as she went in for another attack. *Bicho Mamão* spun around with a wild swing of his machete, which would have immediately killed her—if the blade had been sharpened, it might have even decapitated her. She ducked the blow and retaliated with a tight-angled slash of her right dagger, opening a large, if shallow, wound on his chest. Before she could attack with her left arm, her opponent smashed his left knee into her ribcage, causing her stumble to her left. He then swung his machete in a downward arc, which she caught with her crossed daggers. His left hand, completely free, shot out and struck her full-force in the stomach, causing Feng to double over. He then hammered the handle of the machete into the back of Feng’s head, causing her collapse.

“Not bad, but not great either,” *Bicho Mamão* said. “What do you think, sis?”

Catarina stood at the doorway of the kitchen, holding a butcher knife.

“She was okay, I guess. Let’s get this show on road. We need a sample of her blood.”

Bicho Mamão kicked the daggers out of her hand. He then set his weapon down near the television. He then grabbed Feng under both her armpits and hoisted her into the air. He playfully tossed her onto the sofa where she landed, too stunned to move. Catarina approached her.

“I’ll try to keep the cut inconspicuous. We can let a huge gaping wound ruin the mood.”

Bicho Mamão grunted in agreement.

Catarina held the knife to Feng’s neck.

“Just little incision above the collarbone—“

Suddenly, *Bicho Mamão*, who had been standing in front of the country, lurched forward after being struck from behind. The force knocked him off his feet and he landed on his stomach. Catarina turned to see two figures—Joseane and a mysterious figure in black garb—standing in the doorway. At that moment, Feng gathered her wits and seized Catarina’s hand. She twisted her wrist until she dropped the knife, yelping in pain. Feng rose to her feet, still manipulating Catarina’s hand, which she twisted into a throw, tossing her toward the two newcomers.

“Leave her alone!” shrieked *Bicho Mamão*, scrambled to his feet.

Feng quickly grabbed the butcher knife and hurled it him. It found its target in his right shoulder. He howled as he pulled the blade out, causing blood to splatter all over the white tile floor. He lunged toward the machete, but Feng flanked him with a jumping crescent kick, clubbing him across the face with her right foot.

The figure in black fell upon a Catarina, pinning her

shoulders to the ground with their knees. It then removed the black hood to reveal Grandmother Moua. She started chanting something in the same Hmong dialect she had used before.

Pou pou! It's you! What are you doing?

"No! Don't do that! Don't you dare!" said Catarina, her face quickly becoming deathly pale.

"Sister!"

Bicho Mamão tried to advance forward, but Feng quickly swept his feet out from under him bring him crashing to the ground. He started crawl toward his sister and Feng's grandmother, who was muttering dozens of words per second in the ritual she was performing. The lights in the house begin to flicker. The howl of the wind—nonexistent until now—assaulted Feng's ears. Feng quickly performed a front flip that ended in a double knee smash, striking *Bicho Mamão* in his back. He threw her off him and continued to lurch toward her grandmother. Spying one of her daggers near the couch, Feng tumbled toward it. She snatched it off the ground and threw it into *Bicho Mamão's* back, embedding itself in his kidney. He reached behind him and wrenched it free, groaning and growling as he did so.

"I'm going to skin both you xing-a-ling whores," he said.

Grandmother Moua's chanting grew faster and louder, while Catarina's screams of protest simply grew louder and more desperate.

The other dagger had fallen near the entertainment system. Thinking quickly, Feng planted one hand on the ground and cartwheeled across the living room. She picked up the dagger and hurled it. It found its destination in the base of *Bicho Mamão's* skull. His eyes widened as the blow

struck. He muttered unintelligibly and then collapsed. Dead.

Grandmother's ritual continued. While no less desperate, the volume of Catarina's screams diminished as she grew visibly weaker. Feng knew better than to interrupt, but the big question remained: What ceremony was this?

Then Feng looked up and locked eyes with Joseane, who stood motionless in the doorway. It almost looked like her body was fading away. Her rigid face was drawn down into a satisfied smile.

"No! Please stop! Please!" cried Catarina.

Then, her eyes rolled back into her head. She was silent.

"*Pou Pou*, you killed her?"

"Yes and no."

"What do you mean: 'Yes and no'? You can't just partially kill someone."

"Yes and no."

A sudden cough from Catarina startled Feng.

"Granddaughter, I give you Joseane." Once again, Grandmother Moua's attempt to pronounce that name was not quite successful.

"You mean you—"

Grandmother Moua cut her off. "Yes, I transferred Joseane's spirit into Catarina's body."

"But why?" Feng was completely dumbfounded at this turn of events.

"This black magic goes beyond the witch here. There are other, more powerful forces at work. We may need Joseane to help us."

Joseane—now in Catarina's body—sat up, looking confused at both of them. "What's going on? How did--? Who are--? Where am—oh, I'm here again. What is all this?"

Speaking in Portuguese, Feng replied, “It’s a long story. And I think this is just the beginning. Lay down on the ground and if the police come, just say that you were a victim. Someone from another gang came here and started attacking everyone. I don’t think the police will do anything. Catarina’s brother’s men won’t, either. Do you remember me?”

Feng removed her mask. Joseane stared at her for a few moments.

“It’s you! The girl from the window!”

“Yes, it’s me. I know I owe you some explanations, but now is not the time. Look for me—no, I’ll look for you and I’ll clear everything up. I promise. But for now, we have to go.”

Switching back to Iu Mien, Feng said to her grandmother, “We need to go. I hope we can get home before the police arrive.”

Grandmother Moua laughed.

“I thought we might need the extra cover. So, I performed a ceremony to invoke the fog spirits before I left. We should be okay until we get home.”

“Uh...okay, *pou pou*.”

Feng then put her mask back on and, wrapping her arm around her grandmother, leapt from the living room window to the street below, disappearing into the fog.

DISCIPLE OF THE WALL OF SLEEP

BLAKE MATTHEWS

Washington Silva's freshly bruised body lay motionless for several seconds, nestled snugly between his bed and the dresser.

He was awake—no one could have suffered an impact like that and not have woken up—but opted to keep his eyes closed as he collected his wits, which had been scattered all over the bedroom just a few seconds ago. Something cold and wet nudged his bare feet: it was his poodle, Pearl, who had also been startled by the sound of flesh crashing against tile, making sure his owner was okay. Washington, his eyes still closed, whispered a reassurance to his companion. Pearl, now satisfied, lay down next to his feet.

After a few moments, Silva opened his eyes. Staring at the white ceiling above him, he waited for the inevitable sign of movement. It did not take five seconds. The white paint began to squirm and undulate. A single long hairy appendage, like a brown wire brush, emerged from the paint. Several more followed. Soon, a large brown spider skittered quietly across the ceiling until it was directly above Washington's feet. He watched helplessly as the spider

descended slowly on an invisible line of silk until he was halfway between the ceiling and the floor.

Washington felt the blood in feet run cold as the arachnid drew nearer. Thankfully, when it was just a foot away, the spider started swinging right and left before leaping onto the door of his dresser. It crawled to the top and quickly disappeared through a space between the sliding doors. Washington let out a sigh of relief and went to work hoisting his battered body—he noticed that his right buttock was now a deep purple—off the floor.

Now standing, he yawned and staggered to the bathroom to begin his morning ritual before starting work.

“At least I’ll have a nice fresh example to tell the doctors this evening,” he said to himself. Tonight was his polysomnography, which he had been waiting for with baited breath for the past three weeks.

THE SLEEP PROBLEMS had started six months ago, although they had gotten worse in the past two months after Joseane, his wife, had left and taken their five-year-old daughter with her. There had not been a divorce—yet—but Washington held little hope of reconciliation, especially while his sleep problems were as violent as they were. Joseane was concerned about the insomnia, the irregular sleeping patterns, the four-hour naps that consumed the greater part of Washington’s evening after work: try as he might, he simply could not keep his body from completely shutting down after 7 p.m.

The nightmares, however, were another thing. When Washington was “attacked” by the undead hordes, his strugglings resulted in Joseane being violently woken up

with an elbow to the head. They both knew that Washington's flailing about was a physical manifestation of his mental self trying to pry himself loose from the dozens of rotting corpses that threatened to pin him to the ground and gnaw his flesh off, but that didn't make his wife feel any better.

A few days after that, a home invasion commandeered by a band of vicious lawyers and tax collectors caused Dream Washington to spring into action. With the sort of righteous anger reserved for the heroes of the *kung fu* movies that Washington watched his free time, Silva became a one-man army. With the vicious intensity of David Chiang in the 1970 masterpiece of ultraviolence, *Vengeance!*, he stabbed his adversaries in the throat with two-pronged barbecue forks, shoved their eyes into the corner of the thin granite slab that was the kitchen table, and slammed the refrigerator door on their heads and twisting their bodies in order to sever their spinal cord. When the Big Kahuna—the *fisco* in charge of *tributary substitution*—showed up and started whopping Washington with his brief case, the latter responded by leaping into the air, swinging his left leg into a vertical arc, and then bringing it straight down onto his assailant's head.

Washington nearly broke Joseane's shin with that manoeuver. She was understandably spooked and now feared for her safety as much, if not moreso, as her husband's health. He missed work and went to the doctor the day after that particular dream, coming home with a prescription for sleeping pills. As part of his penitence, he slept on the couch the following night. The medicine helped with his insomnia, but not with his nightmares. After several hours of restless sleep during which six-foot spiders stalked him through the halls of an ancient castle,

Washington woke up screaming when he rolled off the couch.

When two weeks of taking the medicine resulted in no noticeable improvement in the character of his dreams—or his violent reactions to them—Washington agreed to go back to the doctor and request something stronger for his sleeping issues. The doctor agreed, but recommended a series of exams to determine the root cause of his problems. Unfortunately, a series of problems at work resulted in his delaying the exams until things were more stable with his employment. Meanwhile, the new meds failed to produce any noticeable affect on his nightmares, which were getting so bad that Joseane complained the neighbors were now looking at her funny whenever she went out: they could hear his screaming, but without knowing the context, invented their own stories to explain Washington's early morning howls.

All of this went on for four months before Joseane had had enough and took Suelen, their daughter, to her parents' house for an undetermined length of time. In the months that followed, Joseane had reached out but twice and had limited her conversation to, "Have you done the exams yet?" Work had been hell, what with the federal and state governments constantly changing up their tax laws one in a vain effort to out-collect the other, so Washington guiltily replied that he had not. "Let me know when you do," was her only response before hanging up.

IT WAS NOW 6 o'clock PM. Washington sat down on the subway as it raced southward through one of the largest metropolitan areas in the world. The train was sparsely

populated; more people were heading northward toward their homes than toward the downtown area. More people would board downtown as they headed to their homes in the South Zone of the city.

Washington looked at himself through his cell phone camera app. His skin had paled and all the color had been leeches from his lips. Skin hung slackly from the dark circles that had formed around his eyes. He felt the urge to sleep—he had mechanically, almost zombie-like, performed his duties at work throughout the day—although a subway train filled with strangers was not very conducive to sleep. Besides, even a five-minute rest could throw his sleep back by several hours, and he did not want to compromise his ability to sleep on this particular evening.

Closing the app, Washington opened the internet browser and scrolled through news stories that appeared automatically in his feed. Most of the headlines blurred into a single mess of text, but one caught his eye:

“SILVER LAM TO DIRECT FOLLOW-UP TO ‘LEGEND OF THE BOXER – HERO OF SHANGHAI’”

Washington lifted an eyebrow. *Legend of the Boxer* had been one of his favorite action films of the past couple of years. His life may have been in shambles, but the thought of a follow-up to a movie he had liked so much gave him a bit of extra energy. He continued reading the article:

“Silver Lam, action director of such classics as *Portrait of a Serial Kickboxer* and *Story of the Chamber of the Drunken Master*, has signed on with Goldig Pictures to direct and choreograph a sequel to last year’s smash hit *Legend of the Boxer – Hero of Shanghai*. The film starred up-and-coming actor Torpedo Chan as famed martial artist Ma Yongzhen. The movie broke records in the People’s

Republic of China and Southeast Asia, which is quite the feat, considering that most audiences have shied away from traditional kung fu movies as of late. Emboldened by the movie's success, executives at Goldig have greenlit a second movie to follow the adventures of Ma Yongzhen's sister, Ma Suzhen.

"Ma Suzhen has been the subject of numerous films of her own, including *The Queen Boxer's Palace* from 1972 and *A Female Black Belt in Shanghai* from 1973. The former starred Judith Lui in the lead role, while the latter was a breakout film for Taiwanese starlet Lung Koon Yee. While the role has yet to be cast, anonymous sources suggest that Mainland Chinese model Lü Ting Ting has been in talks for the role..."

Without reading the rest of the article, Washington switched off his phone. He sighed and shook his head. Yet again, a martial arts movie without an actual martial artist in the lead role. *Legend of the Hero* had been a breath of fresh air for that type of movie, in that Torpedo Chan really *was* as good as the buzz surrounding him said he was. But to give the role of one of the greatest female boxers of all time to a model? Please! Washington quickly banished the misgivings from his mind and directed his thoughts to the evening's consultation.

His stop was two stations away from the southernmost stop on this particular subway line. The crowd had been gradually thinning out for the past five stations, so luckily Washington did not have to exert extra energy to bob and weave through four dozen people crammed into a four-square-yard space in order to get off the train. Too exhausted to tap into his energy reserves, Washington shambled slowly through the station, up the escalator and onto the street.

The sun had already set by the time walked onto the *avenida* that ran north and south through this neighborhood and several bordering districts. He turned right so that he faced north and then made a second right into a side street, which began snaking up a hill after the second intersection. The locals crowded into the numerous bars, small shops and mini-markets on this street, since they were arriving home from work at this time. In less than 90 minutes, however, the population of the street would be limited to a handful of bar patrons. Thankfully, Washington did not have to worry about braving the empty streets surrounding the subway station, as his exam would keep him at the clinic until the following morning.

Said clinic was the Blue Star Clinic, an establishment focusing on psychology, psychiatry and sleep studies, although endocrinologists and otolaryngologists occupied the few remaining consultation rooms. It was the only clinic specializing in sleep studies covered by Washington's insurance, thus the two-hour bus and subway trip plus interminable trek uphill to reach it.

Washington stepped inside, took his number from a ticket dispenser set up just beyond the door, and took a seat. Two seats over sat another fellow, a heavy-set man in his late 40s whose hair count looked to be inversely related to the size of the man's growing belly. His striped dress shirt that last three buttons on which were unbuttoned, suggested that maybe the hairs on his head had simply fled down to his chest. Washington and the man shared a glance. The latter shared Washington's sunken orbitals, flabby bags of skin beneath the ocular region, and skin drained of color. The man managed a half a smile and nodded his head: both men were there for the same exact reason. Both men, however, were really too tired to actually talk, so they

acknowledged each other's plight through a harmony of head nods while they waited to be called by the receptionist.

There were three receptionists working, although from what Washington could gather, only one would stay for the graveyard shift. That was Bernadete, a twenty-ish woman clad in a clinic-specific navy blue dress that clung tightly to her generously curvaceous body, especially down in her posterior. Her olive skin was especially radiant and made for a nice contrast with the bright red lipstick that adorned her full lips. Her long chestnut hair was pulled back and tied into bun—standard receptionist procedure at most clinics.

It had been Bernadete who called Washington's number. Other than bidding her a good evening, he said nothing as he waited for her confirm both his ID and his insurance card to make sure the clinic would bill the right health care provider. He watched her as she scanned and printed copies of his documents, occasionally looking away to not come across as staring at her, especially when she bent over to remove the copies from the printer set up on a table near the wall behind them. She occasionally looked up at him and smiled as she typed in his information for the clinic's own records.

When she finished, she handed him back his documents and said, "Have a good night's rest. Hopefully tonight will be the first of many!" She glowed as she said that.

Washington nodded and mumbled an expression of gratitude. "Have a good night's work," he stammered.

"Why thank you," she said, still chipper. "Now, just take the elevator to the third floor and wait in the reception area there. They'll call you by name."

"Okay!"

“Sweet dreams!” she sang.

Washington smiled and made his way to the elevator, located on the left side of the reception area on the first floor. He glanced back to the seats and noticed that his “partner-in-crime”, the balding guy, was no longer there. *He must have already been called in to start the exam*, thought Washington. As he rode the elevator to the third floor, he started fantasizing about Bernadete showing up in his dreams that evening, should he have any. But then he remembered that he was still married to Joseane and that he wasn’t much better of a physical specimen than the balding guy, not to mention how much his confidence had eroded since both his sleep problems and estrangement from Joseane had happened, so perhaps he *shouldn’t* idle away his thoughts on someone like the receptionist downstairs.

On the third floor, there were only a few adults accompanied by unruly children—most likely to see a child psychologist—plus his overweight colleague sitting in the reception area. Washington took his seat a few chairs away from his new acquaintance and the two exchanged hopeful glances. Sleep was an issue in for the two of them and both hoped that tonight’s exam would be the beginning of the end of their problems.

Fifteen minutes passed before a nurse called out Washington’s name. To her surprise, she called out a second name, João Amado Fagundes, and directed him to the same room. Washington got up, as did his new friend, João, and both men looked at each other curiously. They walked over to the room, which was a small consultation office. The nurse, an attractive brown-skinned woman in her late forties, let them in, where they were greeted by both a doctor sitting behind a desk and a woman wearing a white lab coat over her expensive-looking beige pantsuit. Her hair

was naturally brown, frequently interrupted by blonde streaks, and her light skin bore the new hair color well. Her hair was pulled back into tied into a ponytail, which hung down a few inches above the small of her back.

The doctor spoke up first. "Good evening, Mr. Silva and Mr. Fagundes. I'm Dr. Souza and I'll be administering your exams tonight. I know this is a little unorthodox. In most cases, we talk to you one at a time before getting you ready for the polysomnography. But tonight will be a little bit different. Here with me is Mrs. Viviane da Cruz, a representative of Gold Star Pharmaceuticals, one of clinic's main vendors."

Viviane smiled and nodded her head. She stepped over to both men, who were sitting at the desk and extended her hand to shake both of theirs. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Silva. And you, Mr. Fagundes." Her grip was firm, but with a hint of daintiness.

"According to your referrals, gentlemen," said Dr. Souza, "both of you suffer from recurring nightmares in addition to insomnia, correct?"

Washington yawned—he was so tired at this point he didn't mind if he died in his sleep—and nodded. João Amado forced out an audible "Yes."

"And both of you suffer from a rather vigorous form of Periodic Limb Movement, is that correct?" The doctor remained passive in his questioning.

Washington looked at João and then back at the doctor. He nodded sheepishly.

When João responded in much the same way, the doctor looked up at Viviane and nodded.

She spoke. "The reason I'm here, gentlemen, is that my company has produced a new drug to combat Periodic Limb Movement, or 'tossing and turning' in layman's terms,

during a person's, say, dream cycle. We have had a growing number of cases in the past couple of years and our scientists have produced a drug that might be able to treat that."

Washington cocked an eyebrow. "How exactly does it work?"

"I won't go into the nitty-gritty detail," said Viviane with her assertive saleswoman voice. "Simply put, let's say that Real Washington and Dream Washington are bonded together. So when Dream Washington is engaged in vigorous activity—" she locked eyes with Washington as she pronounced the last two words "--it manifests itself in Real Washington. It could be thrashing in bed. It could be rolling around on the mattress. It could be groans and screams. It could be other things." This time, she allowed her eyes to fix on João's when she said the last two words. Her eyes darted back to Washington. "The medicine, Vexorg, severs the connection between Real Washington and Dream Washington through a dulling of your motor neurons. Your brain no longer confuses the imagery of your dreams with the imagery of reality, and your motor neurons no longer send messages to your muscles. Your dreams play out in a more natural manner. They end. You wake up feeling better. And that's that."

"Has it been tested yet?" asked João in a deep, sleepy voice.

Viviane nodded affirmatively. "It's been tested extensively and approved by ANVISA¹. However, Dr. Souza would like to witness a test before he starts prescribing it to his patients—and recommending it to his colleagues."

"I have discussed it with your respective general practice, doctors," said Dr. Souza. "They agreed that your particular cases would warrant this sort of treatment, especially yours, Mr. Silva."

Washington immediately thought back to the time he accidentally kicked his wife in the shin while he was dreaming. The promise that that might end tonight reignited his hope that he might win Joseane back.

“How would the test work?” asked Washington.

“Simple,” replied Dr. Souza. “I would administer the drug to both of you prior to the sleep study. Obviously, Nurse Neide and I would monitor the both of you throughout the exam to make sure there are no ill effects of the drug on your sleep or general health. You will receive two reports to take back to your respective doctors: one about the polysomnography and one about any effects the drug might have on your EMG and EEG results. Your doctor will then let you know if you can continue using Vexorg.”

“And of course,” added Viviane. “If you agree and everything goes as well, your first four months of Vexorg will be on the house.”

“And how do we sign up for this,” asked a visibly-interested João.

Viviane walked over to a chair near the examination table upon which lay a black briefcase. She fished out a small stack of papers from within. “There would be some consent forms for the two of you to fill out on behalf of both Gold Star Pharmaceuticals and the Blue Star Clinic. Plus, liability waivers. And finally, a questionnaire to be filled out about your respective issues.”

NURSE NEIDE ESCORTED João Amado out of the office, as Viviane and Dr. Souza would fill out the questionnaire with Washington first. Viviane pulled the hard plastic

chair that João had sat on up to the side of Dr. Souza's desk. She handed a thin stack of papers to Washington.

"Please sign and date these," she said pleasantly.

Washington did so and handed them back to her.

"Now, I'm going to ask some questions. I want you to answer them as honestly as possible. Both Dr. Souza and I will record your answers both for our respective companies' records and for future analyses, depending on the results of tonight's tests."

Washington nodded. "No problem. Carry on."

"Age?"

"Thirty-six."

"Weight?"

"One hundred and twelve kilograms."

"Height?"

"One hundred and seventy-four centimeters."

"Do you smoke?"

"No."

"Drink?"

"No."

"Any drugs—prescription or otherwise—used recreationally in the last two years?"

Washington snorted. "No."

"Married?"

Washington hesitated. "Separated."

"Is it related to your sleep problems?"

Washington fixed his sleepy eyes on Viviane. He nodded to the affirmative.

"How often do—did—you have marital relations before your separation?"

Washington cocked his eyebrow and looked up at the ceiling. "Pass."

Viviane opened her mouth to speak, but was silenced by

a slight gesture from Dr. Souza. She took a breath and continued. "Do you experience insomnia?"

"Yes."

"Vivid dreams or nightmares?"

"Yes."

"How often?"

"Practically every night."

"Do you move around during your dreams?"

Washington nodded.

"When was the last time you had any noticeable movement during your dreams?"

"Last night."

"What kind of movement?"

Washington stood up. He unfastened his belt, unzipped his jeans, and let both them and his undershorts fall a few inches, exposing a huge sea of black and blue on his buttocks. Viviane stifled a gasp and then jotted down a few notes on the questionnaire. Dr. Souza reacted mainly by nodding, asking Washington to turn a little bit for him to get a better look, and then typing his observations into the Clinic's system.

"May I ask what the dream was about?" Viviane asked.

Washington noticed that both Dr. Souza and Viviane were looking at him, waiting for a response. He let out a loud sigh. "Well, I was an American spy stationed in North Korea. I had knocked out a military officer and stole his documents. I fled to the DMZ—the demilitarized zone—with North Korean agents in hot pursuit. I was dodging the land mines as the agents fired on me, although none of the bullets hit me. After a few minutes, I was only about a hundred yards away from the South Korean border. As I came close and closer, I launched into a *wushu* butterfly spin to cover the last few mines and make

it to safety. As I was landing, I rolled off my bed and hit the floor.”

Dr. Souza nodded in understanding. Viviane stared wide eyed in surprise with the vividness and creativity of Washington’s dream.

“And you have dreams like this every night?”

Washington nodded. “Um hum.”

Viviane jotted down some more notes and continued. “What medicine have you taken since the sleep issues have started?”

Washington recited the names of the medicine he had taken. He heard Dr. Souza muttering “sounds reasonable” to himself as he punched his answers into the system.

“Any others symptoms we should know about?”

“Sometimes I think there’s a correlation between how much I sleep after work and when I go to sleep for good on said evening. If I don’t nap at all, I fall asleep between 11 p.m. and 12 a.m. If I lay down for fifteen to thirty minutes, then move that back to 2 a.m. If I lay down for one to two hours, closer to 3 a.m. If I sleep for three or four hours, I usually don’t fall asleep until after 5 a.m.”

Viviane and the doctor remained silent. They just looked at each other and then wrote down or typed what Washington had told them.

“One more question,” said Viviane. “How often do you wet dream?”

Washington saw the doctor look at her with a curious glance, and then back at Washington. “I don’t,” he said gravely. “There is no room in my nightmares for pleasure of any kind.”

IT WAS ABOUT 10 p.m. when Dr. Souza called in both Washington and João to begin the exam. He invited both of them to use the restroom before starting. Both men would lay on a bed with a series of electrodes and sensors attached to their bodies to monitor brain activity, heart rate, muscle activity and eye movements. Dr. Souza placed the electrodes on Washington while Nurse Neide worked on João. Viviane sat in a black office chair next to the computer monitors watching as the health professionals hooked up both men to the systems.

“Are you both ready?” asked the doctor.

Both men nodded.

“Nice and sleepy now?” the nurse added with a comforting smile.

Once again, they nodded.

Dr. Souza looked over to Viviane and nodded. She walked over to a sink in the corner of the lab and came back with a silver platter. There were four plastic cups: two of them contained a single pill of Vexorg each, the other two with a little bit of water. Both men took the medicine.

“Okay now, boys.” Viviane said. “Just think sleepy thoughts.”

Washington closed his eyes and started breathing slowly. His body, exhausted from so little sleep the night before and from having had to execute its daily activities in its bruised state, finally gave out and Washington sank into a deep slumber.

WASHINGTON SILVA immediately recognized the house that stood before him. The blue-grey two-story house with the double driveway, of which led to a garage separated

from the rest of the house. The front yard was “divided” into four squares by the sprinkler system that shot up at nine points on the lawn. Giving further character to the front of the house were the large Sierra junipers that guarded both sides of the front room window on the left side the house. The front porch had two doors, one that opened into the front room and a second that opened into the downstairs bedroom.

That bedroom was where Washington’s parents had slept; indeed, this was the house where Washington had grown up in Weberstown, California. Fifteen years had passed since he had last set foot in it, but he still knew the place like the back of his hand. The porch door that led into his parents’ room was perennially blocked by his father’s dresser; one had to go in through front room, kitchen and then laundry room to enter the downstairs bedroom. The second story stood above the left side, with the two windows from his own bedroom staring at him from above.

Washington looked up at the sky, which was forbodingly overcast. The entire block was silent. In fact, there was nary a sound to be heard anywhere: no cries and laughter of children, no chirping of birds, or no barking of dogs. Nor did he see any car driving up and down The Road to his left, or crossing his street at The Way two blocks to his right. He felt the loneliness of his surroundings; he knew that if he walked inside, there would be no one to greet him. Nor would there be any prospect of his parents pulling up to the driveway after a long day’s work. He was in a familiar place that felt like it was trapped in time. Washington pondered going inside the house, but ultimately decided against it. He decided to explore his old neighborhood.

Heading west, he walked slowly down the street and

past his old neighbors' houses, plus a few houses across the street—closer to the corner—whose inhabitants he never knew well, never talking to them except to yell “Trick or Treat!” as a child. Reaching the corner house, with its vast front yard and equally-vast backyard separated by a wooden fence with a small opening in it to allow free passage between yards, he turned to his right onto The Road and walked to the next corner. On the opposite corner was the auditorium to William Henry Harrison Elementary: Washington had attended this school from grades four to six. The auditorium was a grandiose structure of thick rock, so thick, in fact, that it doubled as a fallout shelter during the days of the Cold War.

Washington made the diagonal cross onto the school-grounds; the bus stop was empty and a brief sashay to his left over to the teacher's parking lot showed that the establishment, like the rest of the neighborhood, was completely devoid of life. Had Washington continued to his left, he would have reached Harrison Park, a three-diamond little league field that occupied the second half of that enormous six-blocks-in-one lot. Instead, he simply hiked up the steps of the auditorium and gave the doors a slight tug. To his surprise, they opened. He walked into the familiar structure and walked down the aisle until he reached the door that led into the school hallway.

Washington Silva stood hesitantly at the doorway, considering whether to investigate and see if the place represented the school he had studied at years before, or if it was a version of the school he had visited during high school as part of community service projects. The main hallway of the school ran the entire length of the building, equal to the sum of the short sides of two city blocks and a two-lane street in distance. The lights were off, although there was

enough sunlight coming in through the cloudy sky that Washington could see fairly well.

He took a few steps when he heard something. A foot fall. The echo of footsteps across the linoleum floor of the school. They came from the other end of the hallway, where it turned sharply and jutted into the recess area. The footsteps were loud and heavy. Washington stood paralyzed with fear. Rather than elation at not being alone, Washington felt something evil about the sound. Those footsteps that echoed through the empty building were not natural, he felt. Washington inched back to the door. The sound of footsteps continued, albeit slowly. He overcame his shock and quickly ducked back into the auditorium, trying to close the door as quietly as possible. He clamored up the aisle, burst through the door, and raced down the steps.

Washington turned to his right and headed south down The Road. He passed his own street, followed by a second intersection, a third intersection, and finally entered The Boulevard. To his left was small market where his parents went when they needed to pick up "a few things," usually if it were for one specific meal. To his left was a small strip mall consisting of a dry cleaner, a martial arts school, a hardware store, a photography place and a parent-teacher supply store. Washington, now catching his breath, stood in the middle of the intersection of The Road and The Boulevard.

The sudden sound of a door opening caused him to whirl around with a shriek of surprise. Standing at the door of the martial arts school was a woman. She was dressed in a traditional Tang dynasty *hanfu*, a silk blouse that stopped right below the breast followed by a large underskirt covered the rest of her torso, plus her legs. The blouse, or

banbi, was white, while the underskirt, or *qun*, was sky blue. The coat strings were black.

Washington walked toward the woman, admiring her beauty. As he drew closer to her, he felt something familiar about her large doe eyes, oval head, pouty lips, and long black hair, braided into pigtailed. Her lips pursed into a girlish smile and Washington found himself thinking, “*Man, she looks a lot like Lung Koon Yee.*”

“Hello, there!” she said as he reached the single-row parking lot, about three yards away from her. “How are you, Mr.—“

“—Silva,” he said. “Washington Silva.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Silva,” said the woman with a small curtsy. “Are you here for a class?”

“Are you the teacher?”

The smile never left her face. She nodded. “Yes, I’m Master Ma, although if you want to practice here, you can call me ‘Ma Sifu’.”

Washington looked questioningly at her. “Isn’t that a Chinese word? But isn’t this--?” Washington recalled that when he was younger, the establishment had been a *tae kwon do* school.

Ma waved away his question. “This school teaches whatever you need to know. Nothing more. Nothing less. The origin of the teachings, as you will learn, are of your least concern.”

“And what will you teach me?”

“Conflict resolution,” she said amicably. “All martial arts *should* teach us to strengthen ourselves on the inside so we are ready for problems on the outside.”

Washington sighed. “I think my problems,” he looked around and pointed to the empty stores around him, “are a lot more external than internal.”

Ma followed his finger as he reminded her of their lonely settings. "So you say. Tell me, Mr. Silva," she walked toward him with her arms folded. "Can you stretch out your arm and make people appear?"

"Uhh...I don't think so."

"Why don't you try it?"

Washington did as Ma had suggested. Nothing happened. "It appears we're still alone," he observed cynically.

"An astute observation," she said. "Nothing you can do will change these surroundings."

"So what's the point?"

"You can change yourself. You can be at peace with your situation." She moved in close and placed her pale, white hand on his chest. "Are you afraid, Mr. Silva?"

He looked into her large eyes, with their thick layer of eyeliner emphasizing their roundness. He took a breath. "Yes, I am."

"And why is that?" she whispered close to his ear.

"I'm alone."

"You've been alone for a long time, Mr. Silva." She stepped to the side and snaked around to his left. Now behind him, she whispered into his ear, "Why are you afraid now?"

Washington wiped the sweat from his brow. "I dunno. It's like I know this place, but I don't. I know what I can expect to see, but not what I can expect to confront. I don't know if that makes any sense."

Ma *Sifu* took a step from behind him and strode over to the door that led into the *tae kwon do* school. "Then this is the place for you, Mr. Silva." She beckoned him to enter.

He stepped inside. A dozen or so chairs stood lined up against the window. A four-foot wall separated a narrow

space for parents and observers from the wooden floor of the training area itself. There was a cubby for placing shoes against the left wall, while the right wall had a small counter with a cash register for clients to pay their monthly dues. Mirrors lined the walls of the training area, and, at the back of the school, several racks containing traditional Chinese weapons stood.

“This is a rather *un*-Korean studio,” he said to himself.

Ma pointed to the center of the training area. “Remove your shoes and stand there.” She gracefully floated across the floor—Washington could not hear the slightest sign of her feet touching the wooden boards—and disappeared into a small room at the back of the studio.

Washington followed her directions and stood at the center of the studio. She emerged from the room a couple of minutes later, now dressed a blue *cheongsam* with a bell-flower design that went down to her knees, accompanied by matching blue trousers and slippers. The trousers were loose fitting and gave her considerable freedom of movement.

“Before we start, Ma *Sifu*,” said Washington, raising his hand. “Can you tell me what your given name is?”

She smiled and nodded. “Sure. I am Ma Suzhen.”

“You wouldn’t be from Shandong, by any chance, would you?”

“Very clever, aren’t we, Mr. Silva?” She clapped her hands playfully. “Yes, I am *that* Ma Suzhen.”

“Wow, the real *Heroine Susan*, the *Sister of the Shantung Boxer*, is standing in front of me,” marveled Washington. “Is there a reason why you—”

“--why I look like Lung Koon Yee?” she said. “Tell me, have you ever seen Ma Suzhen in real life?”

“Uh, no.”

“But you have seen me as played by Lung Koon Yee, right?”

“But it is *you*, right? I mean, you’re Ma Suzhen as in the real fighter? Not Ma Suzhen as played by Lung Koon Yee?”

Suzhen smiled. “For now, I will say the former is the correct response, albeit irrelevant. What you need to know, Mr. Silva, is that there are frightful things lurking outside that door—” she pointed to the door that led into the school. “You will not even be able to wake up, let alone expect to improve your waking life in any way, without facing what’s outside. And to face what’s outside, you must be at peace with what’s inside.”

“And how do I accomplish that?”

Suddenly, Suzhen, who had been standing in front of Washington, subtly turned to her side so that her left shoulder was in front of him. Her right foot quickly moved behind her left foot until it was in front, and slightly bent at the knee. She then lifted her left knee and shot her leg out, burying it in Washington’s stomach. The force of the kick lifted him on the ground and propelled him several feet back before he landed on his rear.

“*Se vis pacem, para bellum*,” she said with an impeccable Latin accent. “If you want peace, prepare for war.” She walked up to him and helped him up.

Washington fought to gather his wits for a few moments. He rubbed his now-aching stomach. “So if I don’t learn kung fu, I’ll be trapped here?”

“You don’t have to *learn* anything. You have spent the vast bulk of your life watching people fight—” She slowly transferred her weight to her right leg, keeping it slightly bent. Her left leg was also bent slightly, the ball of her foot lightly touching the ground. She held her arms out in front

of her with her elbows tucked in and her hands open, forming ridges.

“So what? That doesn’t mean I know how to—“

He was interrupted by Suzhen springing off her right leg and lunging toward him. She lifted her left leg and quickly thrust it toward his stomach in a simple jumping front kick. Washington instinctively jumped back, avoiding her outstretched leg by mere inches. As Suzhen’s left leg dropped, she quickly threw all of her weight into it and. Then, she kicked her right leg out behind her, threw her body forward and struck Washington in the chest with her right palm. The force of the blow knocked him to the ground.

“You have a photographic memory, Mr. Silva,” said Suzhen, who now stood with her hands behind her back. “We’ve watched you recount one dream after another to friends and family, with a level of detail unmatched by most. You remember everything you watch to the smallest detail.”

She lurched forward and swung her right arm in a wide clockwise circle. As it came past the six o’clock position, her fist closed at it came for the uppercut. Washington crossed his arms at the wrists and blocked the blow, and then quickly threw his left forearm up in a high block to defend against the counterclockwise fist hammer that Suzhen threw with the same hand. Washington quickly pivoted his hips and launched his right arm out in an open palm strike, stopping inches from Suzhen’s chin.

She nodded and smiled. “You know the moves, Mr. Silva. The dreaming version of you is completely independent from the Physical You. There is no muscle memory, no cerebellum, here. It’s all in the mind.”

Washington looked at Suzhen with a cocked eyebrow

for a few moments. He then stroked his chin and nodded. “So you mean that here, I can do *this*?”

He sprung off his left leg and shot out his right foot in a quick, short front kick. Suzhen quickly blocked it as she stepped back. Still the air, Washington brought his left leg forward and kicked out with it, too. Suzhen quickly side-stepped to her left and, avoiding her kick, aligned her right shoulder with Washington’s crotch. She pivoted her hips and struck him in the stomach with both palms, knocking him to the ground.

“Not bad. You’re beginning to understand.”

“Son of a—“ muttered Washington as he got up, holding his battered balls with both hands. “Do you really have to hit that hard?”

“*They* will hit harder,” replied Suzhen cryptically.

“Who are *they*?” asked Washington, mimicking his instructor’s tone.

“The Physical You and the Dream You are now separated. If they are not in harmony when you awake—“

Suzhen cut herself off and she lashed out at with her hands in the Eagle Claw posture: fingers curled uniformly at both the first and second knuckles and thumb curled opposite the other digits. Washington jumped back as a strike from his instructor threatened to puncture his windpipe. He started shuffling his feet, jumping back and forth between the balls of his feet. He started dancing circles around Suzhen lifted up both arms perpendicular to her body, the palms of her eagle claws facing the ground. As he shuffled behind her, he launched himself forward and thrust both of his fists—the left beneath the right and turned so the dorsal side faced the ground—at Suzhen’s back. She quickly performed a backflip and landed atop Washington’s shoulders, facing the same direction as he. She bent forward

and, as her head touched her knees, struck out at Washington's eyes with her claws. Washington quickly threw up both his arms in a weak defense, so that her fingernails dug into his forearms. Ignoring the pain that shot through his arms, Washington immediately twisted his wrists inward so that the palms of his hands were now facing Suzhen's arms. He latched onto them and pulled downward, yanking Suzhen from her perch. As she came down, she pulled in both legs and then kicked out when they were level with Washington's chest. The double kick caused Washington to stagger back several steps, but he recovered quickly.

Suzhen spun around and tumbled forward, coming out of the somersault with a pair of eagle claw strikes aimed at Washington's groin. Washington stepped back to avoid the blow from her left hand. As her right hand struck out at him, Washington dropped into a low stance, with his weight in his right leg and his left leg extended behind him. He "caught" her right forearm with both of his index fingers and clinched it. He yanked her to his left so that she lost balance and couldn't strike back with her free hand. With control of Suzhen's right forearm, Washington pushed forward and pinned it to her chest. Suzhen responded by seizing his right wrist with her left hand and prying it off her forearm. Washington snapped both hands back and then shot out again at almost light speed, grabbing each of her wrists with his index fingers.

"Your Mantis is not bad for a beginner," she said kindly, trying to shake her wrists from his grasp.

Suddenly, she lifted her right knee up and extended her foot up almost vertically. Washington pivoted his hips in a small circle to keep his chin out of striking distance from the ball of her foot. Before she could pull her foot back, Washington dipped forward slightly so that her ankle came to rest

his shoulder. He quickly slid his right foot behind her left foot, bowed forward, and struck her in the stomach with dorsal side of his hands. The blow knocked Suzhen off her feet, causing her to land on her fanny.

Washington, surprised at this sudden display of prowess, ran up to Suzhen and offered her his hand.

"I'm very sorry, Ma *Sifu*," he pleaded. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to do that!"

Ma Suzhen graciously took his hand and got up. "Good work. I think we can agree that you're starting to understand just what you can do here. You are no longer bound by your physical body." She winked at him. "In other words, you won't have to worry about falling off the bed here."

Washington grinned sheepishly. "So you know about that?"

"We do. We've been following you for sometime now."

Washington scratched his head. "Who exactly are *we*?"

Suzhen reached out and tapped him lightly on the lips with her index finger. "That's not for you to know—at least not now. Just know that *we* are concerned about your well being." She turned and started walking toward the door. "Please, Mr. Silva. Will you take a walk with me?"

Washington moved lazily in the direction of the door. "What about our training?"

Suzhen did not respond, but stepped out of the school. When Washington joined her outside, he was surprised to see her dressed in the same *hanfu* she had been wearing when they met. Washington pointed at her with his mouth agape, but then closed it, and waved away his doubts.

They headed left down the Boulevard, passing the gas stations and donut stores that occupied the right side of the road. The small businesses finally gave way to a string of houses and low-rent apartments. Three blocks down, the

Boulevard intersected with the Avenue, which corner consisted of a gas station on the left, a pet store on the right and a liquor store on the corner adjacent to the pet store. For the first leg of their walk, Washington described the events of his separation from Joseane and his visit to the clinic—still in progress.

Ma Suzhen's brow furrowed as he described his conversation with Viviane. "It's a dangerous thing, this Vexorg drug," she mused. "Our two selves shouldn't be separated."

"But didn't you say that for me it's a blessing? That I can do anything I want?"

Suzhen sighed. "Not everyone will be strong enough in mind or moral."

"I don't get you."

"As I said before, Mr. Silva, there are scary things out there. Hundreds, thousands, or maybe millions may become vulnerable if this drug is allowed to be used. We can train and warn everybody, but not everybody will be strong enough to face those things. If people give in to those dark things that exist in the recesses of our minds, the waking world will truly become a horrible place."

For several minutes, Washington remained silent. He wondered just what exactly Suzhen was referring to. She had talked about "scary things" and "dark things" and "entities" in this world—the Dream World. But who—or what—were they? He knew she was deliberately being vague, so he did not push the matter further.

They turned right at the Avenue and headed south. They walked down three blocks before reaching a bridge that crossed a small canal. Midway across the bridge, Suzhen stopped and gazed at the crystalline water. Washington scanned the length of the canal, which extended for a few miles before passing beneath a freeway, after which it

disappeared into the horizon, where it met with the river delta. There were dozens of small docks lining both sides of the canal—the large houses built on either sides all came with a small dock, and most of them had a boat or small yacht tethered to it.

“Ma *Sifu*?” asked Washington.

Suzhen broke her gaze and looked up at Washington. “Yes?”

“You are indeed the real Ma Suzhen, aren’t you?”

She smiled and nodded.

“So did you do all those things you did in the movies?”

“You mean kill several dozen axe-wielding gangsters with my bare hands?”

With wide eyes, Washington nodded in the affirmative.

“It doesn’t matter if you kill one person or many, or none at all. If you have the power to do good and help others, and you do just that, that’s all that matters. I did what I could during my own life. That’s why I’m here with you now.”

“So you’re an angel?”

Suzhen looked him square in the eye, but then turned away and said nothing.

“What about João? Does he have anyone helping him?”

Ma Suzhen looked at her pupil thoughtfully. She nodded. “Now that this drug is a thing, all of us will be busy. We can’t you leave you all to face those who dwell in dark corners without some preparation.”

“You mean that Dream João will learn kung fu, too?”

Suzhen chuckled. “Not necessarily. Not all battles will be fought with our fists and feet. Sometimes, the confrontations will be purely on philosophical terms. Some may be fought with weapons. The enemy will differ from person to person.”

“Will you be with me the whole time?” asked Washington, concerned.

Suzhen placed her arm lightly on his shoulder. “I will be with you when you need me the most. But only when you need me the most.”

“When will that be?”

She shrugged and looked out at the horizon. “I don’t know. Just do your best to do what’s right.”

Washington looked out toward the horizon as well. “How will I know what that is?”

“You already know.” Ma Suzhen’s voice seemed to trail off.

Washington turned and was startled to see that she was no longer by his side. In fact, she was nowhere to be seen. He descended to the other side of the bridge and looked down the lengthy Avenue, which ended a mile and a half away at the Port of Weberstown. No one. He ran back across the bridge to the Boulevard side. No sign of Ma Suzhen. Finally, just to be sure, he crossed the bridge once more to the port side.

The cloudy sky had been calm and silent. There was no wind to rustle the leaves of the dozens of birch trees that populated the yards of the houses that ran down the Avenue. The humming and roaring of motors was nowhere to be heard. For some time, the only sounds that Washington had heard had been his and Suzhen’s voices, and the light rustling of the skirt of her *hanbok*.

But now a new sound startled him. It was that of a footfall. It was not the dainty pitter-patter that Ma Suzhen might have made in her white silk slippers. No, this was a slow, rhythmic and heavy footstep. Its echo thundered up the Avenue. Washington recognized it as the same sound he had heard in the hallway of the school. Something about the

sound scared him. Washington knew he was alone, but now he had to share his loneliness with someone...or something. And Ma Suzhen was no longer around to boost his morale.

A mile down the Avenue was a park. It took up two city blocks and was a favorite picnic area for the town's inhabitants. The centerpiece of the park was a small museum, the biggest in the county. Washington could not see it from his current vantage point at the south end of the bridge. Nevertheless, when he saw the lone figure step into the street and stride toward him, it was obvious that it had come from the park.

The stranger was a bit too far away for Washington to make out who it was. Washington could tell he was wearing something like a black robe, but the face was indistinguishable. What Washington *did* know was that the very sight of the Stranger filled him with dread. For thirty seconds did he stand still, watching the robed figure approach him with long steps and deep, powerful footsteps that shattered the silence of the Dream World. Suddenly, Washington's desire for survival and protection overcame his temporary paralysis and he booked it over the bridge, heading toward the Boulevard.

He stopped at the gas station at the corner of the Avenue and the Boulevard to catch his breath. The loud, dull thuds of the Stranger's footsteps continued to grow louder. Washington mouthed an obscenity and turned left onto the first residential street after the Boulevard. At the first intersection, there was a large church that took up the entire short side of the block between the street Washington was currently sprinting through and the next one over. He stopped on corner to see if he could hear the footsteps. Nothing.

I must've shaken him, thought Washington.

A sudden rapping at the window of an upstairs room of the church made him jump. He looked up and he saw the faceless figure of the Stranger looking down at him. This time, Washington audibly mumbled an oath and ran down the cross street until he reached the second intersection and turned left. He was now only two blocks from his house. Washington covered the distance in about a minute. He stopped in the middle of the road in front of his house and turned to look. Zeroing in on him from the cross street was the figure in black.

Washington ran across the driveway and onto to the porch. He grabbed the brass doorknob and turned it. Locked. Washington shouted another obscenity. He pounded on the door for a few seconds before realizing that nobody would answer it anyway. He then lifted up the “Home Sweet Home” doormat that his mother had placed there decades before. Nothing. Then he had an idea.

The second driveway ran along the side of the house and led into the garage, but at the same time, there was no fence to block off the backyard. The back porch door had a plastic plate for a window in which the glue had long worn away. It stayed in place, but someone armed with the right knowledge could open it from the inside. The Stranger’s footfalls grew louder as Washington ran over to the back porch. He fiddled with the lock on the doorknob and the chain lock for a few seconds before gaining access to the house.

He entered the house through the laundry room, which consisted of a dryer, a sink nobody used anymore, and a cupboard filled with laundry soap and cleaning products. He cut to his right into the kitchen, with its tacky 1970s green-and-orange wallpaper depicting various kitchen utensils, before acrossing the threshold into the

dining-and-living room, a large room covered with old, grey wool cable-style carpet with the dinner table occupying one end and the couch and entertainment system occupying the end closest to the front window. He dashed through the room and to the front door, which to his left was where the staircase was. Washington stumbled up the fourteen stairs as fast as he could and turned left at the landing into his bedroom. He huddled under the computer desk like a little child afraid of the thunder on a California winter evening.

Washington continued to hear the footfalls until they sounded like they were right outside the house. Suddenly, the steps stopped. For a few minutes, Washington remained cowered in fear beneath the old wooden desk, whose finishing had long worn away and made it a hotbed for slivers. Washington mustered up the courage and crawled out of his hiding place and a little to the left, below one of the bedroom windows. He popped his head up for a moment to spy out the window through the dust-covered blue blinds.

The Stranger stood in the middle of the street, facing the house. He looked up and his featureless face—a silken mask of yellow that covered everything save his skeletal lower jaw—met with Washington's gaze. For a few moments, both looked at each other without making the slightest movement. Washington suddenly broke away from the Stranger's stare and ducked down. He considered pushing his brother's old dresser—a long piece of furniture with two columns of three drawers, the upper left of which had disappeared years and years ago—in front of the door. As he drew up the plan to fortify his bedroom in his head, Washington looked out once more to see if the Stranger was still there.

He was not.

All of a sudden, the wooden boards that made up the floor of the bedroom creaked as a heavy foot trod on it.

Washington shrieked and spun around to see the Stranger standing in the doorway. His stalker towered over him at about six feet and six inches in height. Its long, bony fingers poked out of the wide, tattered sleeves its robe. A thin layer of parchment-like, mummified skin clung to its lower jaw, which the featureless yellow mask failed to conceal. Its chest heaved up and down, but the Stranger made no sounds of breathing.

Washington braced his back against the narrow stretch of wall between the desk and the window and inched slowly to his feet. The Stranger stood motionless, its head slowly lifting up as it followed Washington to a standing position. When Washington took a cautious step forward, he noticed the Stranger clench his skeletal fingers into an equally skeletal fist.

There's no running now, thought Washington. *I'm going to have fight my way out.*

He took a second step toward the motionless spectre of black.

Nothing.

He took a third, even more cautious, step.

The Stranger raised its right fist to chest level.

Washington took a deep breath and then charged. He threw a quick jab with his left hand, which the Stranger blocked with a quick slap of his outstretched hand. That same hand then parried the right hook that Washington followed with, which It then swung in a downward arc to block a front kick that Washington threw in rapid succession. With his first attacks unsuccessful, Washington quickly rubbed the feeling back into his limbs and got back into a defensive posture.

With a powerful leap, Washington propelled himself forward and shot a straight punch at the Stranger's chest. The Stranger twisted 90 degrees to his left and the blow sailed right past him. It quickly jabbed its right elbow into Washington's ribs and then extended its forearm and struck Washington in the face with the back of its bony fist. Ignoring both the pain in his mouth and the rusty taste of blood on his tongue, Washington quickly dropped into a low stance with his weight in his right leg and his left leg extended behind him. He held both of his hands in front of him, his elbows tucked once more against his ribs, with his index fingers extended.

The Stranger took step out of the doorway and into the room. With the dresser hugging the wall to his right, Washington grabbed a drawer—empty—and shoved it at his opponent. The Stranger struck out with his right fist, reducing the wooden drawer to splinters. Washington quickly dipped to the left and latched onto the Stranger's forearm with both index fingers. He swung his right foot in a horizontal arc and battered the Stranger's knee with his instep. Washington did not wait to see if the Stranger would feel any pain: he quickly lashed out with a second roundhouse kick, this time to the ribs. The Stranger doubled over for a moment, but quickly regained composure and seized his leg on the next kick with his left hand. His right hand shot back inside his sleeve, leaving Washington holding just the tattered black cloth, and then shot out again and grabbed Washington by the throat. The Stranger lifted Washington off the ground, slammed him against wall above the dresser and then threw him into the far right corner the room, where he collided with the bookcase. The ancient structure held firm, but Washington was worried that his back would not.

The Stranger walked between the bed on its right and

the dresser on its left, until it reached the desk, where it turned to face Washington, who was hoisting himself to his feet. The robed creature took a step in his opponent's direction. Washington quickly scrambled for the bed, rolled over the mattress, and then placed his hands on the right edge of the dresser, pushed himself up, and thrust both his legs savagely into the Stranger's back. The force of the blow caused It to stumble forward, and Washington stepped back onto the bed with the right foot, then onto the wooden bedpost with his left, and pushed off into a flying knee smash that struck the Stranger full force as it spun around to face again. This time, the robed stalker staggered back up against the bookcase in the corner.

Washington lurched forward and started pummeling the Stranger in its stomach with his fists. He snapped its head to both sides with a right and then a left hook. Washington then took a step back, stepped behind his right foot with this left, and lurched forward with the right kick to its throat. To Washington's surprise, the Stranger dipped forward, lodged its shoulder under his groin, and then pushed up. The force of the shoulder check lifted Washington off the ground, across the room, and into the closet at the left corner of the room. Old polo shirts and basketball jerseys on wire hangers helped soften the impact, but not by much.

The Stranger marched across the room as Washington was still shaking the sense back into himself and seized him by his shirt. He was yanked off his feet and hurled again. This time, he flew through the doorway. Washington gasped for air as he crawled to the door and pulled it shut. The expected attempt to open the door by the Stranger never came. Instead, its fist busted through the old wooden door, barely missing Washington's head. Washington

quickly seized his forearm once more with this Mantis Claw technique, pulling it against the door so that it might not get any leverage. Then, he switched his left hand from a Mantis Claw to the three-fingered Eagle Claw posture—with his thumb, middle and index fingers slightly curved—and dug into the elbow. Washington leapt back and jerked both arms as hard as he could, pulling the Stranger completely through the door.

The ordeal of being yanked forward with that much power brought the Stranger to its knees. Before it could rise to its feet, Washington unleashed another roundhouse kick with his right leg. His foot smashed into Its head, lifting it off the ground and through the railing—a simple structure consisting one vertical 2X4 two-and-half feet in height and two horizontal beams about a foot apart—and onto the staircase. The robed figure crumpled as it rolled down the stairs to the bottom.

Washington shuffled down the steps until he was about halfway down before he launched himself with both feet into the air. As he reached the bottom, he shot out with both legs into a drop kick that rammed the Stranger against the wall so hard that the dryway began to crumble. The Stranger's legs gave out under it, while Washington's drop kick ended with him on his back. For a few moments, both figures remain motionless.

As Washington struggled to get back to his feet, pushing up against the carpeted staircase to try to get some leverage, the Stranger stood up without the slightest effort. Its right hand grabbed his neck from behind and its left hand secured Washington's left wrist. Washington tried to kick backward with the ridge of his feet, but was unable to put his hips into the attacks; the weak attacks did not even make his opponent flinch. The Stranger lifted Washington up so

that his forehead was level with a small picture nailed to the wall to the left of the staircase—more importantly, level with the nail. It then pushed his head forward.

Washington quickly pressed his feet against the wall and kicked back, the force pushed his body back just in time to avoid impalement. The Stranger reacted by throwing Washington across the living room, where he crashed into the entertainment center in the right corner. Old VHS tapes and picture frames pelted him like hailstones. The Stranger walked slowly around the couch, positioned a few feet away from the entertainment center—perpendicular to the front window—and over to Washington.

Lifting its black-shoed foot, the Stranger stepped slowly onto Washington's throat. Washington tried to wrench it off him, but to no avail. He began to gag and gasp for air, and he felt the strength leave him even quicker as he desperately moved around trying to find something to do. In his desperation, Washington picked up a picture frame and slammed it against the Stranger's knee. His opponent was not fazed, but the glass did break. Thinking fast, Washington grabbed a shard of glass and rammed it upward into the Stranger's groin. A foul-smelling yellow-green ichor poured out of the wound as his now-wounded opponent staggered back. Washington took in a few gulps of air and forced himself to his feet. He grabbed another shard of glass and positioned it between his index and middle fingers of his right fist. He then stepped over to the Stranger and shoved the broken glass into the space on the yellow mask where one might expect to find an eye. More ichor squirted out of the wound as the Stranger swayed back and forth, bleeding foul liquid all over the old carpet until it collapsed near the doorway into the kitchen.

No sooner had his enemy been vanquished did Wash-

ington feel his dread dissipate. He collapsed onto the sofa and sat there for several minutes as all of his bumps and bruises sent thousands of messages to his brain letting it know that they hurt. He rubbed his throat where his enemy's foot had been, trying to expel the memories of having been dangerously close to asphyxiation.

Despite the frightening encounter with the Stranger, Washington no longer felt uncomfortable with his loneliness, nor did he dread the thought of seeing Ma Suzhen anymore. Perhaps her role had been fulfilled: she had helped him realize his potential, and his showdown with the Stranger was the ultimate test of just that. Maybe now that he was free of his mysterious stalker, he would no longer need to remain in this facsimile of his earlier life.

For countless minutes, Washington breathed the aromatic air of the Dream World—in this version of the house, his mother's pot-pourri jars still adorned the bookcase shelves. His lungs filled with air and restored strength to his body. The smaller aches and sores on his body began to mend, even if his back was still smarting from having been thrown across the room. Washington eventually found the strength to pull himself off the couch and move about. He had thought about unmasking the Stranger as it lay dead near the dinner table, but he worried that whatever lay beneath would be too disturbing for him. He resolved to leave the house and walk around until it was time for him to wake up.

Said resolve was broken by a blast of freezing cold air that made his hairs stand on end. He looked around and saw that the front and dining room windows were closed, as was the kitchen window. It was while examining the kitchen window that he felt another chill of frosty wind, this time accompanied by a shrill whistle. The sound came from

behind the refrigerator, which had been placed at the opening of the alcove beneath the staircase, near the laundry room.

The alcove had generally been used by Washington's mother during his youth to store decorations, be they Halloween, Thanksgiving, Easter or Christmas. Each year, his mother would pull the refrigerator out and remove the appropriate boxes and proceed with decorating the house. Said boxes were what Washington expected to see as he pulled the refrigerator from its place. Thus was his surprise when he pushed the refrigerator away to reveal an ancient stone stairway leading into a cavernous abyss. The freezing air poured out from the darkened stairwell.

At this moment, Washington felt that the key to his nightmares and sleeping issues lay not on grey carpet in the next room, but at the bottom of the staircase. He braced himself and started down the steps, quickly abandoning himself to the veil of darkness. About forty steps down, the staircase gave way to flat ground. Washington felt himself feeling around the blackness and came to the conclusion that he was in a circular chamber, probably twenty feet in diameter. He did not detect any door along the walls, so he dropped to his knees and felt around. At length, he discovered a trap door near the center of the room.

Unlatching the door, he cautiously stuck his legs into the aperture, once more feeling around for something solid. He discovered a second staircase—a much narrower one—that clung to ancient walls in a descending spiral. Washington slowly descended the stairs, hugging the crumbling wall with his back, careful to follow the curve as good as possible. After almost an hour—the concept of time was quickly becoming a vague suggestion—he noticed a faint, flickering light at what he guessed was the bottom of the

“tower”. Washington sighed in relief—and then felt a chill of anxiety—as he reached the bottom.

The bottom of the staircase was lit by four torches placed on sconces sculpted to look like hideous gargoyles. Between two of the sconces was a large wooden door with a thick iron knocker on its right side. Washington pulled door open slowly, the grinding of the ancient hinges echoing throughout the tower. He stepped out of the tower and into a colossal grotto. Torches floating eerily in the air lit an unending forest of stalagmites. The sconce-less firebrands lined up at regular intervals along a narrow path that wound its way through the sea of dripstone.

Washington knew at this point that it was “now or never.” Once he embarked upon the path, there was no going back. He would either solve the mystery and solve his dream problems, or be lost forever. He trudged forward, following the curvy path into the deepest recesses of the cavern. It went on forever, way the past the point in which the tower from which he had arrived had become a distant memory. The further he walked, the less he remembered why he was there in the first place. Washington simply knew that he must reach the end and see what wait for him there. There was no plan A, let alone plan B. He had no idea what he would do once he reached the end; he just let his body carry him through the ocean of broomsticks and totem poles until he reached his destination.

After many hours—at least to Washington’s vague estimation—the path gave way to a single large circular chamber about a hundred feet in diameter. Torches floated in the air all around the edges of it, and flickering shadows of the stalagmites danced like on the floor like frightful beings. Speaking of beings, at the opposite side of the chamber stood two humanoid figures. Washington felt

himself drawn to them, almost as if unseen beings carried him over the stony floor until he stood only a few feet away.

The two personages stood with their backs to him, but turned around as soon as he withing a few feet of them. They were a man and a woman. The man stood six feet high, his long black hair tied into a ponytail that fell down to his back. He wore loose-fitting, pleated tunic made of thick, black leather covered with steel studs. The tunic ended in a series of frills, also covered with studs, and a black belt wrapped around his waist kept the tunic clinging to his person. He wore black leather trousers and black boots, which ended in steel reinforcements.

The woman was also clad in loose-fitting, sheer black *beizi*, or jacket, with wide sleeves. Beneath the jacket was a white silk *moxiong* that clung to her abundant bosom. Embroidered on the *moxiong* was a golden phoenix. An outer skirt made of black silk dropped down a little past her knees, and instead of a second, longer inner skirt, she wore a pair of *ku*, or loose-fitting trousers, as white as the snow. Her hair was adorned with gold jewelry, including hairpins whose ends were sculpted into fearsome demon faces.

“So, Mr. Washington Silva, we meet at a long last,” said the man with a hearty laugh.

The woman bowed daintily at him, and smiled in such a way that counteracted the affect of the cold air of the grotto. “Welcome, Mr. Silva.”

“You...you’ve both been expecting me?”

“For longer than you could ever imagine,” replied the man.

Washington cocked an eyebrow.

“You see,” the man began. “The cave you now stand in is a prison. My sister and I—” he pointed to the beautiful

woman who accompanied him, “—have been stuck here for...let’s say...thirty-six years.”

Washington immediately recognized the number’s meaning.

The man noticed and continued. “Yes, indeed. Your mind, that is, the deepest recesses of it, are a prison. A prison for entities like us.”

“What exactle *are* you?”

“Well, Mr. Washington Silva,” the man said with a cruel smile. “I’ll be frank with you. I am what you mortals call an *incubus*. You may call me Li Lu. My sister is what you would call a *succubus*. You may call her Li Tu.”

At that, Li Tu courtied politely to Washington.

Li Lu went on, “We’ve been expelled from The Presence—don’t ask me what that is, because I think you already know. We are immortal, and we exist to seduce mankind. The Presence obviously doesn’t want this, so he imprisoned us in the minds of different people all over the world.”

“So you’re the cause of all my nightmares?” interjected Washington.

Li Lu nodded. “Yes, we exert a limited power over the minds of those we’re imprisoned in, although only in their dreams.”

“And the so-called ‘Presence’ is aware of all this?” inquired Washington, his voice tinged with disappointment.

“Indeed. As you can see, you are only a pawn in the battle between angels and demons. You are expendable, so long as you keep us at bay. And all this is on unconscious level, so most of those called to serve as ‘prisons’ never realize why they’re so vulnerable in their sleep. Your needs have always been and will always been secondary to the so-called ‘greater good’.”

“So what you’re trying to say is that I’m on the cusp of losing my family because of the decision that others made for me.”

Both Li Lu and Li Tu nodded gravely. Li Tu then spoke up. “But it doesn’t have to be that way, Mr. Silva. We have the power to deliver you from your suffering. And much more than that, we can make you happier than you could ever be serving as a prison.” She walked up to him and placed her pale white hand on his arm. “Very few people ever find us during their normal dreams. Nonetheless, you’re here now. And my brother and I would like to make a proposition.” She reached up and squeezed his cheek lightly.

Li Lu chuckled. He joined his sister and wrapped his arm around Washington. “My sister is quite right. All we’d like you to do is to lead both of us by the hand—and I mean that literally—into the tower and into the Dream World above. We cannot do it ourselves, but our host can do it for us. If you do that, you have my word that you’ll be free from your nightmares.”

“Not only that,” Li Tu added. “I promise you that I’ll make your dreams as sweet as can be.” She wiped a hair out of her eye and lowered her hand to the hem of her blouse. “Every. Single. Night. We will make the Dream World our own little pleasure palace.”

Washington felt his hands tremble as Li Tu described her part of the bargain. She was definitely the most beautiful creature he had ever laid eyes on.

Li Tu went on. “And it doesn’t always have to be—as you call it—the same ol’ same ol’.” She flicked the outer skirt of her dress up so that it covered her face for a split second. When it dropped, Washington saw himself gazing into the eyes of Bernadete, the receptionist from the clinic.

Washington responded in a monotone, as if in a trance, “And all I have to do is lead both of you up to the surface.”

Li Tu floated over to him and placed her bright red lips close to his ear. “Yes. That’s all you have to do,” she whispered hypnotically.

“So what’s it going to be?” asked Li Lu genially.

Washington lost himself in Li Tu’s gaze. He had lost so much of his life in the past few months that he felt like he was literally falling to pieces, both mentally and physically. His heart was shattered by Joseane’s desertion. His nerves were constantly on edge by his inability to enjoy a single good night’s rest. He knew that sooner or later, his professional life would be completely unsalvageable as well. And he didn’t ask for this. Nobody had asked him he wanted to volunteer for Heaven’s dirty work. In fact, he himself had been volunteered against his will. Why couldn’t he have his moment? Why couldn’t Washington Silva find happiness?

He felt like taking a step toward her. His leg budged just a little. Li Tu must have noticed because she started tugging at her *beizi*, as if to remove it. Then he came to himself. He asked himself what it meant if an *incubus* was left to roam the Dreamscape unopposed. He envisioned a world where thousands of women—including his mother, his daughter, his estranged wife, co-workers, childhood friends—being viciously raped in their dreams, night after night. He thought of the multitudes of traumatized women, scared to sleep for fear of what dreams may come. For a moment, Washington understood what this choice meant.

“No.”

Li Lu, who had turned his back to Washington as he pondered the offer, now spun around. “What did you say? You would turn down an offer of immeasurable pleasure? Of peace? Of slumbering bliss?”

Washington nodded. "My response is final."

Li Lu looked at his sister and then back at Washington. With a flick of his hand, he was now holding a long, curved broadsword, or *dao*. "I was hoping it wouldn't come to this. Violence of this type is so unappetizing to me. But we can always destroy you and hijack your body. It usually doesn't last as long, but it's fun while it lasts."

Li Tu's hands disappeared beneath her sleeves and popped out again, this time holding a pair of daggers. "Please, my dear Washington." Her voice was sultry, but cold. "Don't make us do this. I'll give you more pleasure than all the mortals of the world combined."

Washington's lip quivered at the offer. He knew inside nothing would be better than being visited by Li Tu on a nightly basis, but he could not let that happen at the expense of the well-being of others. He looked down and shook his head.

"I'm sorry," she said coldly. She lunged forward and thrust one of the daggers toward his heart.

Suddenly, a metal rod flashed out of the nowhere and struck the dagger, parrying it away from the target. All three—demon and man—turned to see Ma Suzhen standing there. She was dressed in a white, Qing Dynasty-era *qipao*, adorned with gold and silver stripes, and matching baggy trousers. Beneath the wide sleeves that ended mid-forearm were the narrow, golden sleeves of an underblouse. Suzhen's black hair was pulled down into a bun behind her neck, held in place with gold combs that resembled flowers. The rod she wielded was rounded and sculpted like a spiral pagoda. It was a *bian*, or hard whip.

"Tsk. Tsk." said Suzhen. "Two against one? That's hardly fair. Let's make it even. I'll take on Miss Li Tu, and Mr. Washington can duel with Li Lu."

Li Tu shrieked and charged Suzhen. She flipped both daggers into the air and caught them so that they were both underhanded. She swung her right hand in a vertical arc and brought it down toward Suzhen's left breast. Suzhen lifted her left hand, which held the *bian* horizontally, and blocked the attack with a strike of her own to Li Tu's hand. Then she quickly flicked the whip once more and struck Li Tu in the wrist. Li Tu pulled her hand back and shook the pain from it.

Li Tu lashed out again with a horizontal slash with her left hand. Suzhen bent over backwards to avoid getting disembowled, and swung her left hand in a counterclockwise arc to catch Li Tu's hand at the end of its trajectory. She let the whip fall a few inches before catching it again in the middle, and trapped Li Tu's wrist between her own and the handle of the *bian*. Suzhen then snapped out a side kick to Li Tu's exposed ribs and a second one to the side of her face. Suzhen then wrenched the weapon out of her opponent's hand and kicked it away.

Li Tu's hair was becoming mussed, with numerous strands falling into her face now. She hissed and lunged at Suzhen, slashing at the angel with shorter arcs. Suzhen slid her hand down the *bian* back to the handle and staggered back, blocking the attacks but was unable to retaliate. Li Tu continued the onslaught of wild slashes until she tossed the dagger into the air, caught it so the blade was at the top of her fist, and came in for the kill. She went for a straight stab to the heart. Suzhen quickly extended her left arm out and the *bian*, twice as long as Li Tu's knife, struck her in stomach. Suzhen then pushed forward and swung her weapon laterally, battering Li Tu's upper arm.

The force of Suzhen's last blow knocked Li Tu back several steps and Suzhen used the opportunity to shuffle in

a half circle around Li Tu and move away from the natural wall of stalagmites. Li Tu took a step forward and took a test swing in a descending arc. Suzhen easily parried the attack, as she did a few follow-up jabs. Li Tu moved in closer, taking half steps back to avoid swings from Suzhen's hard whip. Finally, when the *succubus* drew close enough, she waited for Suzhen to swing her weapon. Li Tu stopped the blow with her right forearm and quickly grabbed Suzhen's fist with her left hand. She twisted Suzhen's fist and slammed her right forearm into Suzhen's left shoulder to throw her off balance and take control of arm. By this time, Li Tu was now side by side with Suzhen, so a right cross was out of the question.

"I've never killed an angel before, especially one that's already dead," sang Li Tu coolly. "I'll relish this moment forever."

The demoness flipped the knife out her right hand so that she might catch it underhanded and, by simply extending her arm at the elbow, drive the blade into Ma Suzhen's throat. As the knife twisted in the air, Suzhen quickly pushed off the ground with both legs and performed a forward somersault, so that her body twisted in the same direction that Li Tu had twisted her arm. The movement freed her arm and, as she landed, Suzhen kicked back with her right foot, striking Li Tu in the sternum, knocking her to the ground.

"Maybe you *will* kill an angel at some point, but I guarantee you that it won't be Heroine Ma Suzhen of Shandong."

Li Tu scrambled for the weapon and stumbled to her feet, lurching forward to a final chance to stab Suzhen in the back. Once more, Suzhen pushed off the floor with all her strength and took to the air in a backflip. As she twirled

over Li Tu's head, she swung her hard whip down and smashed it against the top of her opponent's skull, cracking it open. Landing on her feet, Suzhen watched Li Tu stagger around, dazed. Finally, a thin shadowy figure emerged from the gaping wound and ran off, disappearing into the forest of stalagmites.

WHEN THE SCUFFLE between Li Tu and Ma Suzhen had begun, Li Lu had pointed out the other end of the aperture for him and Washington to hold their duel.

As they walked past the dueling divas, Li Tu said, "Do you know what happens if you lose?"

Washington looked at him thoughtfully and then shook his head.

"Well, just to satisfy your curiosity, I'll tell you: if you die here, your physical self never wakes up. Your dear Joseane will probably pull the plug on you once it becomes clear that you have no more consciousness to speak of. That is, unless Li Tu and I pick up the slack on that front. I'll be sure to lay off the sweets, though. If you don't die, then I may well force you to take me up the tower and I win. You lose. The nightmares will continue. Your life will be ruined."

"And if I win?"

Li Lu stroked his chin. "You'll wake up, but you'll never be rid of us. Once again, you lose. You should've taken my sister. You're—what's the word—aw yes, 'screwed' any other way."

"Maybe my 'conscious' is, but my 'conscience' is at peace."

"I'm sure it is. But I guarantee that you'll spend the rest

of your life—however long it is—wondering if you made the right decision. I'll personally make sure of it."

Li Lu came at Washington swinging. Washington backed up, missing the blows by mere inches. He then performed a butterfly spin and spun longitudinally to the right, missing forward thrust of Li Lu's *dao* by a half second. As Washington's feet hit the ground, Li Lu's left foot struck him in the stomach, lifting him on the ground for several feet. Li Lu did not wait for Washington to get up, but quickly spun his body similar to way Washington had done, but this this time swung his left leg up in a 270° arc. Washington rolled out of way as Li Lu's foot came down where his neck had been a split second earlier.

Both men kicked up and were on their feet, facing each other. Li Lu twirled his broadsword around his body, behind it, around his waist, over his neck and back into a defensive stance. Washington got into a low stance. His knees were bent so low that his rear nearly touched the ground. His held his hands out with this fingers slightly curled, rigid, but still flexible. He slowly extended his left leg behind him.

"And what stance is this, my friend?"

"To be honest, I don't know. Monkey, I think. I think it's the one where the gibbon sneaks into the lemurs' territory to steal the durian from the marmoset. I forget which is best for fighting a guy armed with a broadsword."

Li Lu sneered. "I think you'll discover that you have picked the wrong time to experiment."

Like the previous onslaught, Li Lu advanced on Washington with everything he had. Washington tumbled to his right and rolled in a half circle around Li Lu. The demon suddenly leapt into the air, spun around, and shot both legs out in opposite directions. As Li Lu landed in the splits, he

swung his weapon downward at Washington's head. Washington tumbled backward, missing the blow, but Li Lu followed in suit, closing the distance before he swung the *dao* in a double slash. The blade of his broadsword sliced through Washington's left shin and his right bicep. Li Lu then planted both hands on the ground and kicked out with both feet, both of which struck him square in the chest and knocked him back several feet.

Washington knew that he could not "bleed" to death, but the pain from his wounds was preventing him from concentrating. He tried to convince himself that the wounds were not "real," but the pain was too great. Washington tried to run away from the *incubus* on all fours, but the demon quickly covered the distance and jumped into the air, performing another spinning hurricane kick. This time his foot came down on his right ankle, breaking it.

The stalagmites trembled from Washington's howls of pain.

"I don't need this anymore," said Li Lu calmly. With a flick of the wrist, his broadsword vanished.

Li Lu seized Washington as the latter tried to drag himself away from danger. Lifting the broken man up by the scruff of the neck, he buried his other fist in Washington's stomach, knocking out of the air out of his system. A second punch threatened to yank his lower jaw out of its place. Li Lu tossed Washington to the ground like a rag doll. Washington gasped for air, but for a few moments, his diaphragm refused to work. As his body began to regulate itself, he screamed in surprise as Li Lu yanked him up by his hair, and then thrust one of his own into his face. He felt his teeth fly out and his mouth fill with warm blood.

"So, how shall I finish you off? I mean, beating you to death—as it were—with my bare hands is coming along fine.

I could always just chop you to pieces. But that would be too easy, Mr. Washington Silva. I think that if you're going to spend the last days of your life trapped in this hellish place, you might as well be part of scenery."

Washington immediately knew what Li Lu had meant. His belabored mind raced to figure out what he could do with this even-more battered body. Washington played back as many scenes from movies he had seen in his head, looking for inspiration. His concentration was broken by the sensation of being lifted off the ground. At breakneck speed, Washington threw his arm around Li Lu's neck just as the latter was heaving him forward. The momentum pulled Li Lu off his feet and lessened the force of the throw so that Washington was *not* impaled on the stalagmites.

Dragging his right foot behind him, Washington staggered forward as Li Lu scrambled to his feet. Washington tumbled forward and kicked out with his left foot, striking him on the inside of both knees before thrusting it up into Li Lu's groin.

"Try to seduce someone with *that*," taunted Washington.

Li Lu was holding his groin, stamping the ground with force to get the pain out. Meanwhile, Washington kicked up and threw all of his weight into his left leg. He pushed off the ground with this good foot, launched himself at Li Lu, headfirst. The force of his headbutt knocked Li Lu backward and he toppled over. Washington ignored the pain from the bleeding wound in his leg and flipped forward, landing on a stunned Li Lu with both knees. The demon groaned, but quickly regained his composure and flung his leg upward, kicking Washington in the back of his head and knocking him off his chest.

Flipping himself onto his stomach, Li Lu crawled the

distance between him and Washington, whose back was to him. Planting both hands on the ground, Washington folded his legs into the lotus position and lifted his body off the ground. He swung his body back just as Li Lu lunged at him, his hands outstretched. Pulling his hands off the ground, he used the momentum of his swinging body to fly backward, landing on Li Lu's back. Washington quickly struck the demon in both the ears and temple with his palms before tumbling off.

Washington once more channeled his weight into his left leg and he got to his feet, or foot, as he kept his right leg lifted. Li Lu was quickly to his feet to, although he was rubbing the side of his head where Washington had hit him.

"That's called Crippled Silva, He with the Strong Left Leg," said Washington snidely.

"Impressive, Mr. Washington Silva. I never would have expected a cripple to fight so well. But this is where it ends. I'll give you a final chance: yield and I'll reward you. Otherwise, Joseane will really like what I have in store for her."

"Don't you dare speak of my wife that way," Washington roared.

The demon bellowed with laughter for a moment.

All of a sudden, Li Lu cocked his fist back and dashed at Washington. Washington swung his right leg in a wide arc and, instead of striking him with his foot, locked his leg around Li Lu's neck at the knee. Washington hopped toward the stalagmites, clenching his opponent's neck as hard as he could to keep him from escaping. Then, Washington pushed off the ground with his left leg, swinging it up and striking Li Lu in the face with his heel. He did this two more times before swinging the demon with this right leg against the outer row of stalagmites. Washington then tumbled forward into a handstand and kicked Li Lu in the

chest with his left leg. The force of the blow caused Li Lu to fall backward and impale himself on a stalagmite.

Washington, still in a handstand, watched as a black shadow emerged from the bloody wound and disappeared into the depths of the grotto.

MA SUZHEN HELD Washinton firmly as he limped his way back to the tower. She assured him that once he entered the tower, it would be time for him to wake up.

“What about the nightmares?” he asked her.

“It will be a long time—maybe years—before Li Lu and Li Tu are strong enough to torment you again.”

“But they *will* return,” he emphasized.

“Yes, but *you* will be prepared, Mr. Silva,” she replied. “You are now an experienced dreamer. Your potential as a warrior in the Dream World has only begun to be fulfilled. By the time they’re ready to fight again, you will be more than a match for either of them.”

Washington remained silent for a few moments. “There will be others. I don’t think everybody who takes Vexorg—I mean those who are prisons—will make the right decision.”

“This is true,” Suzhen replied darkly.

“Can I help?”

She smiled. “I believe you can. If you wish to become a Dream Warrior, then I will pass your request to The Presence. We’ll need all the help we can get. But I can’t guarantee a fair maiden at the end of every mission.”

Washington chuckled. “At least a few?”

Suzhen shrugged.

“And you? Will I see you again?”

"I believe so. Some of the *incubi* are far more powerful than Li Lu. You may need an angel to help you."

"And why didn't you help me when that *thing* attacked me in my house."

"Because I can't fight your *fears* for you. Nor could I make the decision to help Li Lu and his sister *for* you. You had to make it for yourself."

"Good thing I made the right decision."

"I knew you would, Mr. Silva."

At length they reached the tower. Ma Suzhen pushed the door open.

"In you go," she said with a grin. "And don't worry; you'll have sweet dreams and a good night's sleep for a while. If we need you, I'll let you know myself." She reached over and kissed Washington on the forehead.

Washington took a deep breath and hopped into the tower.

LATER THAT MORNING

Dr. Souza and Viviane da Cruz sat at the former's desk, comparing the read-outs of both of their patients from the previous evening. They peered over two printouts of the men's EEG readings.

"At about 6:30," said Dr. Souza, "You'll notice that an extra line appears on both men's charts. That is almost unheard of."

"You mean it was picking up *two* different brain readings inside each person?"

"That would be *one* way of interpreting it, although most doctors would dismiss it as an anomaly. The fact that it happened with both men is fascinating, if inconclusive. But

I want to draw your attention to the following detail—“ He pointed to another print-out. “In the case of Mr. Silva, the parallel reading sort of disappears at about 7 am.”

“Okay, I can see that.”

“However, in the case of Mr. Fagundes, both lines begin to merge right before he woke up.”

“Huh. That is interesting. What does that mean?”

Dr. Souza shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe a technical error or some systemic anomaly. Most likely nothing. I don’t think we can prove anything. They both seem alright, so there’s probably nothing to worry about.”

ABOUT BLAKE MATTHEWS

Blake Matthews is a writer and critic of Asian genre cinema. He has already published one book—It's All About the Style: A Survey of Martial Arts Styles Depicted in Chinese Cinema. He has also contributed numerous articles about Chinese kung fu movies and Japanese kaiju eiga to fanzines like *Xenorama: The Journal of Heroes and Monsters* and *The Lost Films Fanzine*. He also regularly contributes full-length reviews and film essays to the “Kung Fu Fandom” forum (<https://www.36styles.com/kungfufandom/>). His contributions to Fists of Fiction represent his first published works of fiction.

A long-time fan of cinema, Blake watched his first Godzilla movie, *Godzilla vs. the Sea Monster*, in 1989 at age seven; his first “real” martial arts film in 1991, that being Jean-Claude Van Damme’s *Kickboxer*, which his older brother taped off of HBO; and then started collecting Hong Kong films, starting with Jackie Chan, in 1997. While always an imaginative person, writing short stories for his own amusement as a child and adolescent, early movie review sites like *Stomp Tokyo* and *Teleport-City* inspired

him to review movies as well. Blake currently resides in Brazil with his wife and daughter. When not watching movies or writing, he holds down a day job as a systems analyst and has also worked as an English teacher, translator of documents, interpreter, and Geography tutor. Blake can be contacted via e-mail (DrNgor@yahoo.com) or Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/blake.matthews.9400/>).

NOTES

Duel at Broken Furniture Inn

1. Itinerant martial artists, sometimes called *youke*. They were like knight errants—they travel around looking for chivalrous things to do.
2. It's basically an excuse to do things because there won't be oversight or legal consequences. Kind of like having a party when your parents aren't around. 天高皇帝遠.
3. A *laoban* is a boss or a proprietor of an establishment.
4. Actually....
5. A steamed rice flour bun stuffed with meat or veggies.
6. The martial arts world. It literally means the martial forest.

Broken Chair, Hidden Fist

1. Boss or proprietor.
2. Hideous.
3. Non-existent.
4. Awful.
5. A fluffy white steamed bun. It can be filled with savory fillings like BBQ pork, and curry beef, or sweet things like custard, or red bean paste.
6. *Jianghu* literally means rivers and lakes, but it's also the catchall term for the martial arts world and its surrounding community. Also known as “the scene,” or the underworld. A loose culture of itinerant martial artists, merchants, doctors, priests—a social space where people are away from family and home and there are very little rules. You can think of it like the frontier or the wild west.
7. Itinerant martial artists, sometimes called *youke*. They were like knight errants—they travel around looking for chivalrous things to do.
8. Martial arts.
9. See *Duel at Broken Furniture Inn*.
10. Yan Tao suspected that his brother-in-law, the carpenter, was scamming him. But he had no proof other than the fact that the man was suddenly flush with cash—money that had come from Green Brocade.
11. A *gaoshou* is an expert. It literally means high hand, or the top rank. You can be a *gaoshou* in just about everything—cooking, race car driving, tennis, whatever.

12. The *wulin* means the martial forest. It's a way of saying the world of martial artists.
13. No pigeons were actually harmed in this story. Only qualified stunt pigeons were used in this scene.
14. Yes, she really did flip the bird at her. I'll see myself out now.
Also, this is a real thing. There are pigeons that have some brain damage and all they can do is flip. And now that's something you know.
15. Dun dun DUUUUN!

Miss Stiff Corpse

1. - Translation: "Homegirl breaks up with a brotha and takes two to the dome."
2. - Translation: "Mary Cleets" – colloquial term for a woman who amorously pursues soccer players.
3. - Translation: The Papaya Beast.
4. - Translation: Hard Road.
5. - Brazilian *sashimi* variant in which the seaweed is wrapped to form a cone and the rice and salmon are placed inside, often with cream cheese.

Disciple of the Wall of Sleep

1. - Agência Nacional de Vigilância Sanitária – transl. National Agency for Sanitary Vigilance. i.e. the Brazilian equivalent of the FDA.