

THE FIVE ANCESTORS
BOOK 7

Dragon

Jeff Stone



The Five Ancestors

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THE
FIVE
ANCESTORS



龍 Dragon
Jeff Stone

Random House  New York

**For Jim Thomas,
for getting me started;
and for R. Schuyler Hooke,
for showing me the way home**

Henan Province, China

4348—Year of the Tiger
(1650 AD)





Thirteen-year-old Long limped along the Shanghai Fight Club tunnel, a river of blood flowing down his right thigh, the weight of a nation on his shoulders. He glanced at the crimson liquid oozing from his bandaged leg, and the steady stream leaking from his upper left arm.

So much for winning the Fight Club Grand Championship. Previous champions had earned themselves prime positions within the Emperor's military ranks. Long had earned himself a target on his head.

Balanced across Long's powerful shoulders was the unconscious giant of a man known as Xie—the Scorpion. Xie had been the Emperor's personal bodyguard, but as of a quarter of an hour ago, he was, like Long, a fugitive.

Long had to keep moving. Soldiers would surely be racing after them, following the directions of the new Southern Warlord—Tonglong, the Mantis. However, Long had no time to consider them or their whereabouts. He had a more pressing matter to deal with. He needed to lower his pulse. If he kept going at this pace, his racing heart would soon pump his body dry.

Long—the Dragon—began a breathing sequence that would decrease his heart rate in order to slow his blood flow. Two short breaths in, one long one out. He felt a difference immediately.

He continued along the tunnel's dirt floor, but a stirring sensation in his *dan tien*—his center—brought a sudden sense of dread. His lower abdomen began to warm and his intestines started writhing like a ball of snakes. Someone was coming.

"Golden Dragon?" a tiny voice whispered from down the dark corridor behind him. "Long. Are you there?"

Long stopped and frowned. It was ShaoShu—Little Mouse. ShaoShu had used Long's fight club name: Golden Dragon. Long turned and watched the small boy with the unusually limbed body scamper toward him from the direction he had come from.

"Turn back, ShaoShu," Long whispered. "Return to Tonglong. You will not be safe with me."

"I don't care," ShaoShu replied. "I want to help. You're injured and—Hey!" he squeaked, pointing at Xie. "Xie is alive! His arm just moved. How can that be? I watched Tonglong shoot him in the chest."

“Xie is wearing battle armor beneath his robe,” Long said. “The shock from Tonglong’s bullet just knocked him out. He probably has a cracked rib or two, but that’s it. He should be fine once he wakes up.”

ShaoShu stared at Long’s bulging arms and thick chest. “You’re carrying him *and* battle armor? You’re barely a man. How did you get so strong?”

“Exercise,” Long replied. “Now shoo.”

“But I can help,” ShaoShu said. “Did you see what happened back there with the Emperor and Tonglong? You can’t do this alone.”

“I saw,” Long said. “Tonglong killed Xie’s father—the Western Warlord. He also killed his own mother, AnGangseh. He’s crazy, but he has managed to put himself in a position to kidnap the Emperor, and that makes him dangerous and powerful.”

“Crazy is right,” ShaoShu said. “He will kill you, too, if you’re caught. Why are you carrying Xie around? Just leave him. He’s always been mean to you.”

“If my temple brothers and sisters are to have any chance of stopping Tonglong from taking over the country, we are going to need Xie’s help. He is still a very powerful man. In fact, he is the Western Warlord now. He—”

Long stopped in midsentence as he saw ShaoShu’s body go rigid and his nose twitch.

“Uh-oh,” ShaoShu said.

Long focused his attention down the dark fight club tunnel beyond ShaoShu, and his *da-tien* began to twist and turn. More people were coming.

“Listen,” Long whispered to ShaoShu. “You must either return to Tonglong right now or escape on your own. You can’t stay with me.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I will get Xie to safety, then I will rendezvous with my brothers and sister far to the north. Now go.”

Long whirled around to leave, but his foot slipped in a pool of his own blood. He lost his balance, and Xie’s gigantic body shifted across his shoulders, dragging him to one side. His injured leg collapsed, and he went down. Xie’s head bounced off the tunnel wall, the impact waking him instantly.

Xie sat up, fully alert, like a seasoned fighter who had been knocked out only to wake up swinging.

“What is going on?” Xie demanded, staggering to his feet. He tottered, then centered himself and stood solid as a mountain. He rubbed his head with one hand and felt the dent in his chest plate with the other.

“We’re being hunted,” Long said. He watched as first recognition and then memory flowed behind Xie’s eyes.

Xie growled and glared back up the tunnel.

Long spun around to see two soldiers approaching, one tall and one short. Each held a cocked pistol. The soldiers stopped just out of Long’s and Xie’s reach. The taller of the two cleared his throat.

“Our apologies, sir,” the taller soldier said to Xie, “but you are under arrest. Southern Warlord Tonglong has ordered us to capture you, as well as Golden Dragon. Both of you please come with us and maintain a reasonable distance. Our orders are to take you dead or alive. We will not hesitate to shoot either of you if you come too close or attempt to flee.”

Long’s heart sank. In a traditional scuffle they might stand a chance, but against firearms combined with a short distance, all the kung fu skills on the planet would not help. He looked over to see ShaoShu’s reaction, but ShaoShu was gone.

Long was about to look back at Xie when he noticed a blur of movement behind the taller soldier. It seemed ShaoShu hadn’t gone very far.

ShaoShu scurried out of the shadows and sank his teeth into the taller soldier’s right calf. The soldier howled and spun around, swinging the butt of his heavy pistol at ShaoShu’s head. ShaoShu flattened himself enough to avoid the blow.

The shorter soldier glanced sideways at his partner to see what was the matter, and in that instant Xie struck. Long had never seen a man as large as him move so fast. Xie covered the distance between himself and the second soldier with a lightning-quick shuffle-step and brought a hammer fist down onto the bridge of the soldier’s nose so hard that Long heard the man’s face crack.

The shorter soldier dropped. He would not be getting up again.

The taller soldier straightened and leveled his pistol at Xie, and Long sprang into action. He leaped with his good left leg and landed in a crouch on his left foot, just out of the taller soldier’s reach. Long whipped his body around, raising his damaged right leg and slamming it into the outside of the soldier’s right knee with the force of a dragon whipping its tail.

The soldier screamed as his knee *popped!*, and Long grimaced as the gash in his own leg grew wider. Long’s eyes began to water, and through the tears he saw Xie drive an elbow into the side of the taller soldier’s head. This man would not be getting up again, either.

Xie kicked the soldiers aside and knelt next to Long. “Thank you. I may owe you my life.”

“It was nothing,” Long replied in a weary tone.

“Are you okay?” Xie asked. “Your face is deathly pale. I believe you may have lost a lot of blood. Let me carry you, Golden Dragon.”

Long’s pride wanted to refuse the offer, but his common sense accepted it. He was feeling lightheaded. “Thank *you*,” he said. “But please call me Long. That is my real name. Golden Dragon is dead.”

“As you wish.”

Xie scooped Long into his arms, and Long looked down to see ShaoShu picking bits of his pant leg from his teeth.

ShaoShu grinned. “How did I do?”

Xie chuckled. “I had never heard of mouse-style kung fu before tonight. Well done, little one.”

“Yes, very well done,” Long said.

ShaoShu beamed.

“Could you do me a favor, ShaoShu?” Xie asked. “Place the soldiers’ pistols in my sash.”

“Sure,” ShaoShu said. He hurriedly picked up the pistols, uncocked them, and tucked them behind Xie’s wide sash. Then he looked at Long. “I’d better get back to Tonglong before he becomes suspicious. I will continue spying on him, though, and I’ll try to figure out a way to get information to you.”

“I still think you should run away,” Long said weakly, “but I am too tired to argue. Be careful, and do not stay with Tonglong any longer than you have to. You do remember how to find Hok and the others, right?”

“Of course,” ShaoShu replied. “Go to the Jade Phoenix restaurant in the city of Kaifeng. Ask for Yuen.”

“That’s right,” Long said. “Thanks, ShaoShu.”

“Yes, many thanks, Little Mouse,” Xie added.

ShaoShu smiled and disappeared down the tunnel.

Long sighed and looked at Xie. He had never felt so exhausted. “There is an exit ahead. Are you familiar with it?”

“I am. Let’s go.”

Xie pushed forward through the tunnel with Long bleeding in his arms. He kept to the shadows and moved like his scorpion namesake, sure of himself yet cautious around every bend, every doorway. Long reached out as often as he could, extinguishing torches that were hanging along the tunnel’s stone walls, in order to put a buffer between them and any trouble on their flank. It slowed their forward progress but appeared to be worth the effort. No one caught up with them, and they reached the exit safely.

Long groaned softly as Xie rested him on the tunnel’s dirt floor. Xie remained silent as he knelt down to make his gigantic self as inconspicuous as possible, then opened the exit door and poked his head outside.

“I don’t see anyone,” Xie whispered. “Tonglong must still be in the process of shutting down the perimeter. We should make a run for it.”

“Let me see,” Long whispered.

Xie leaned back inside, and Long repositioned himself to face the door. Even that little effort made Long swoon. He carefully stuck his head into the cool night air and found that the moon was bright. Xie appeared to be right. The area looked vacant.

Long pulled his head inside. “What if they have snipers on the rooftops?”

“We will have to take our chances. They may not have had time to do that yet. It is my guess that Tonglong is busy with other things. Locating us is secondary to his larger objectives. He will deal with the Emperor first.”

Long heard tension in Xie’s voice, and he thought again about what he had seen earlier. Tonglong had killed two people in cold blood.

Long shivered. “I am sorry about your father.”

Xie gnashed his teeth. “Tonglong is the one who will be sorry.”

Long did not doubt Xie. He leaned through the doorway again and felt his *dan tien* begin

quiver. There was someone out there. He attempted to scan the rooftops and found that his vision was blurring from fatigue and blood loss. He strained to focus in the moonlight, but it was no use.

“Do you see anything?” Long asked. “My eyesight is fading.”

Xie carefully stood and leaned over Long, looking outside. “Yes!” Xie replied. “I see something on one of the nearby roofs. It appears to be a ...” His voice trailed off.

“Appears to be what?” Long asked.

“Call me crazy, but it looks like a monkey jumping up and down, waving its arms.”

Long felt a glimmer of hope. “Is the monkey alone?”

“I believe so. It is partially in shadow, and ... wait! There is someone else. A woman, or maybe a tall girl. She is wearing a white dress and a white turban. She glided out of the moon shadows beside the monkey for the briefest of moments, then nodded in our direction and retreated. If I were superstitious, I would have guessed that she was a ghost. I have never seen a human move that gracefully.”

Long smiled, his own world now draped in shadows. “Pick me up and run to them as quickly as you can. It seems there is hope for us yet.”

And then Long blacked out.



“ShaoShu!” Tonglong snapped. “Where have you been? I was about to send a search party after you.”

ShaoShu hurried out of the Shanghai Fight Club tunnel and stopped before twenty-nine-year-old Tonglong, who was standing inside the fight club’s main rear exit. ShaoShu struggled to catch his breath. “I got lost, sir,” he lied. “I am very sorry. Are we going somewhere?”

“We are indeed,” Tonglong said. “All the way to the Forbidden City. Come with me.”

Tonglong flipped his extraordinarily long, thick ponytail braid forward over his shoulder, securing its tip to his sash. He headed toward a group of four soldiers waiting outside the exit door. The men wore the red silk robes and pants of Tonglong’s elite Southern army uniform, and they carried a large object wrapped in a blanket. ShaoShu realized that there was a person inside it, wrapped up like an egg roll.

“Is this how you plan to transport the cargo?” Tonglong asked as he stepped through the doorway, into the night.

“Yes, sir,” one of the soldiers replied.

“Well done.”

ShaoShu reached the exit door and saw a donkey attached to a cart. Next to the cart was a filthy rectangular wooden crate. Ventilation holes had been drilled at regular intervals along the upper section of each side, and large hinges were affixed to one of the sides and a heavy hasp to the opposite. Judging from the smell, ShaoShu guessed that the crate had once held pigs.

“I believe it is large enough,” the soldier said to Tonglong, “but not everyone agrees with me.”

“Find out,” Tonglong said. “Open it.”

The men did as ordered, and Tonglong stepped around to the far side of the crate to get a closer look inside. The soldiers stepped around, too, and began to manhandle their squirming parcel to see how it might fit inside the crate. A section of the wrapping came loose, and ShaoShu saw a flash of brilliant yellow silk. This confirmed what he had suspected. Only one person in all of China was allowed to wear the color yellow, and it was the Emperor. Yellow symbolized the Emperor’s divine connection with the sun.

ShaoShu felt no great devotion to the Emperor, but he did feel sorry for anyone who was being mistreated. He turned away from the spectacle and noticed something moving very fast

and low to the ground in the distance. On first glance, it appeared to be a large shadow. However, after staring hard, ShaoShu realized that it had to be Xie and Long!

He watched out of the corner of his eye as they crossed the open ground and slipped undetected behind a building. ShaoShu glanced back at Tonglong and the soldiers, but they were still occupied with the Emperor.

ShaoShu risked looking over toward Xie and Long once more. He saw a figure appear and float over to the edge of the building's rooftop. It was Hok! She turned toward him, and he pointed to the wrapped captive. Hok seemed to nod, then she simply disappeared.

ShaoShu grinned and looked back at the group of soldiers. One of them glared at him. "What is so funny?"

"Uh, nothing, sir," ShaoShu replied nervously. He realized that his arm was still outstretched, and he lowered it.

Tonglong looked at him from the far side of the pig crate. "What were you pointing at?"

ShaoShu's eyes fixed upon the patch of yellow showing from within the captive's wrappings, and one of the soldiers laughed out loud.

"That is pretty funny, isn't it?" the man said. "We confiscated the Emperor's robes, which means even his underpants are yellow!" The soldier chuckled, and he quickly rearranged the blankets to cover the yellow cloth. Even Tonglong grinned.

ShaoShu turned away. He really did not feel much like laughing. Behind him, he heard the Emperor being loaded into the pig crate, and something that sounded like a huge padlock being put through a hasp.

A commotion within the fight club caught ShaoShu's attention, and he looked over to see two soldiers running toward Tonglong and the soldiers. Unlike the four soldiers standing near the cart, these men wore black silk robes with blue pants. They were the Eastern Warlord's soldiers.

The two newcomers stepped into the moonlight and bowed before Tonglong. One of them said, "We have news, sir."

"Yes?" Tonglong said.

"Let me start by saying that it is an honor to serve you, sir. We have been informed that our Eastern Warlord has relinquished his command to you."

Tonglong nodded, and the man continued.

"I regret that I must report that we have been unable to locate Golden Dragon or Xie's body. In fact, evidence has been found that leads us to believe Xie may still be alive."

Tonglong's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Still alive? What evidence?"

"There was an attack in the tunnels, sir. Two of our men were found dead. The site was littered with footprints the size of Xie's."

"But I shot him in the chest."

"Yes, sir. Xie was known to wear body armor beneath his robes."

Tonglong ground his teeth. "I see. I presume you have men looking for him, as well as Golden Dragon?"

“We do, sir. More than a hundred of our soldiers are combing the fight club at this very moment.”

“Keep me apprised.”

“Of course, sir.”

Tonglong spat, and some of his spittle hit the second Eastern soldier’s boot. The man jumped back, a look of disgust on his face.

Tonglong glared at the man, and the man’s expression changed to one of fear. He began to shuffle his feet nervously.

“Is there a problem?” Tonglong asked.

The second soldier straightened. “No, sir!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I believe there is,” Tonglong said. “If you flinch like that over a little spit, how will you react when blood begins to spill?”

“Excuse me, sir?”

Tonglong’s eyes narrowed. “How many battles have you been a part of?”

The man looked confused. “None, sir. We have had only peace in this region for more than a hundred years.”

Tonglong gripped the hilt of his straight sword. “Then perhaps I need to help you Eastern soldiers grow accustomed to bloodshed.”

“I apologize, sir,” the soldier said. “I—”

The man’s words were cut short by the sound of Tonglong’s straight sword slicing through the air. His blade moved faster and more powerfully than ShaoShu could have imagined. It breezed clean through the soldier’s head as though it were nothing more than an overripe peach, splattering blood across the torso of the first soldier.

The second soldier dropped in a lifeless heap, and ShaoShu fought back a shriek. Tonglong’s sword had gone from sheath to killing blow in the blink of an eye.

Tonglong turned to the first soldier, and the man dropped to his knees.

“Please spare me, sir,” the soldier said in a quivering voice.

“Shut up,” Tonglong said. “On your feet.”

The soldier stood.

“Tell your Eastern comrades what you have seen here. Show them the stains on your uniform. Let none of them say that they have never seen another man’s blood.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Now get out of here and find those fugitives!”

The soldier hurried away, and Tonglong knelt beside the fallen Eastern soldier. He calmly began to wipe his blade on the dead man’s robe. He worked with the emotionless precision of an insect, reminding ShaoShu of a mantis cleaning its forelegs after a kill.

ShaoShu shivered. Who could possibly stop Tonglong?



Four hundred *li* southwest of Shanghai, Ying sat alone beneath a mountain pine tree, his eyes closed tight, his mind open wide. Legend said that it took more than three thousand years for a dragon to grow to realize its deadliest potential. Ying guessed that he had about a month.

Tonglong would be on the move soon, and he needed to be ready for him.

With his legs folded beneath him and his hands upon his knees, Ying meditated. He focused his attention on his *dan tien*, the mysterious *chi* center in his lower abdomen, and began to breathe in a specific rhythm that his mother had taught him. In no time, he felt *chi* circulating through his body, rippling in waves, warming everything from the tips of his long fingernails and toenails to the pigmented scar tissue carved into his face. He had to admit, it felt good.

Ying exhaled slowly, enjoying the sensation, and found himself thinking about his mother. She was resting nearby at a friend's house. He had come out here at her urging so that he could prepare himself for his inevitable confrontation with Tonglong. As so often was the case, her idea had been a good one. Thanks to the breathing exercises she had taught him and the powdered dragon bone he had been consuming, he now truly felt like a dragon instead of the eagle his name—Ying—implied.

Ying opened his eyes and felt his inner *chi* flow begin to dissipate as he eased himself out of his meditative state. Mountains filled his vision in every direction, and he grinned. He was home. There were several different types of Chinese dragons, and they ruled everything from the seas to the rivers to the skies. Some dragons even protected treasure hordes like the one Tonglong had stolen from Ying's family. Ying, however, was a mountain dragon through and through.

Mountain dragons, like all Chinese dragons, were impressive creatures. They were made up of the strongest elements of many different animals, which is what made them—and dragon-style kung fu—so powerful. Dragons were primarily serpentine in shape, but they possessed four legs, each ending with a set of talons. These talons came from an eagle, but the pads of the feet were those of a tiger.

Chinese dragons also had spindly whiskers like a carp, plus a long beard that was more like a mustache. The longer the mustache, the older the dragon. Some people even believed that a very thick mustache meant the dragon was extraordinarily wise. Finally, Chinese dragons possessed the antlers of a deer and, most striking of all, the eyes of a demon.

Ying fixed his eyes on the forest floor and stood. He rubbed his chilly bare hands together.

to get his blood flowing and set his mind to thinking about Tonglong. It was time for some physical training.

Tonglong was a master of the straight sword, and if Ying had any hopes of defeating him, he would have to fight fire with fire. Tonglong's guards would never let anyone get within pistol or even musket range of Tonglong, but Tonglong would welcome a straight sword challenge from anyone, including Ying. He was that good.

While Ying was proficient with edged weapons, he was no match for Tonglong. Even Ying's weapon of choice, an extra-long chain whip, likely would not get the job done. However, Ying had heard rumors back when he lived at Cangzhen Temple about a combined straight sword and chain whip sequence that was supposedly unbeatable. The practitioner used both weapons simultaneously, one in each hand. This allowed him to take advantage of the chain whip's long-range capabilities, as well as the sword's short-range precision. It also coupled the rigidity of the sword with the flexibility of the chain. It was the best of the hard and the soft, the yin and the yang.

This special two-weapon sequence was rumored to be recorded in one of the Cangzhen Temple dragon scrolls, but Ying had never seen it. He had managed to get his hands on most of the scrolls, but he had lost possession of them. He would have to try to develop a sequence himself.

Ying scanned the ground, and his eyes soon fell upon what he was seeking—a perfect straight branch about as long as his arm and half as thick as his wrist at one end. The opposite end tapered to the width of his thumb. Perfect.

Ying lifted the branch by the fat end and measured its weight in his left hand. It would come nicely. He slipped his chain whip out of the hidden pocket in the inside of the sleeve of his robe, gripping its rigid handle with his right hand. He began to swing the multi-section steel weapon powerfully over his head, like a man attempting to catch an animal with a rope.

The sharp, weighted tip of the chain whip sliced through the air, severing pine boughs and tree limbs in every direction. He continued until he had cleared a wide circle that would allow him to swing his chain whip any way he chose without interference. Then he began to create a deadly new dance.

Between long, slashing swings of the chain whip, Ying thrust his practice branch forward again and again. The chain connected with the end of the branch more often than not, and in no time he was left with a short practice dagger as opposed to a long practice sword.

Ying tossed the stubby stick aside and looked around the forest floor once more, this time gathering an armload of branches that would serve his purpose. This was going to take time. He would give himself two weeks to practice, and another two weeks to find himself a real sword. Then he would have to locate Tonglong and face his destiny.



Long heard the voice as if in a dream. The accent was odd, but the words were definitely Chinese.

“Put on all she can wear, mateys! We can do this! The wind is in our favor!”

Long forced his eyes open and found himself lying flat on his back, the ground rolling and pitching violently beneath him. The sun was high overhead, and the crisp scent of salt water invaded his nostrils. He was in a boat.

But whose boat was it? And what day was it?

Long rolled onto his side and tried to raise himself up onto one elbow to take a look around. He'd made it halfway there when his arm slipped on the boat's slick deck, and he flopped back down with a groan, dizzy.

“He's awake!” a familiar voice shrieked from somewhere nearby.

Long raised his head, tilting it left and then right. Strangely, he did not see anyone. Then he gazed up. At the very top of the boat's single tall mast, he saw Malao's dark-skinned face beaming down at him.

Long grinned.

Malao raised a hand and waved, seemingly oblivious to the fact that his perch was swinging wildly back and forth through a full ninety degrees of motion as the boat rolled in the wind-driven seas. “Hello, Big Brother!” Malao shouted down to him.

Long nodded a greeting and mustered as much strength as he could, struggling again to lift himself onto his elbow. This time, he succeeded. He glanced over the side of the boat and saw that they were tearing along at an impressive rate. He'd had no idea a boat could move so fast.

“Lie down, Brother,” urged a gentle voice behind him. A moment later, his younger temporary sister, Hok, appeared at his side. She took his wrist in her hand, searching for his pulse.

Long glanced at Hok's smooth pale skin and spiky brown hair. He had learned from Grandmaster that Hok had a Chinese mother and a Dutch father. That accounted for her light skin, but he had never seen her with hair. It looked nice, but made her look as out of place as she had probably felt growing up pretending to be a boy.

“Conserve your energy,” Hok said to him. “Charles has everything under control.”

“Charles?” Long asked.

Someone began to grumble from the front of the boat. "*Charles* has everything under control? Hmpf."

Long smiled as he recognized that deep, complaining voice. He glanced at the boat's bow and saw Fu expertly rearranging a complicated series of ropes. Fu was shirtless despite the cold weather, and Long was surprised to see how much Fu had thinned out, and how much muscle mass he had gained. Fu's chest might have been even larger than his own, which was really was impressive considering Long had the build of an eighteen-year-old and Fu was only twelve.

"Hello, Fu," Long called out in as loud a voice as he could manage.

"Ahoy," Fu replied. "I would come over to say hello, but I'm kind of busy right now. I'm helping *Charles*."

Long wondered if Fu might stalk over to wherever this Charles was standing in order to give Charles a piece of his mind, or possibly a piece of his fist. Instead, Fu did the strangest thing. He laughed. Then he shouted, "Sorry, Charles. I'm only teasing."

Long blinked. What had happened to Fu? The Fu he knew never apologized for anything.

Things grew even stranger when Long twisted his head around toward the back of the boat. Behind the ship's wheel stood a white teenage boy with straw-colored hair and eyes the color of the sea. Towering next to him was Xie.

Xie clapped the foreign teenager on the shoulder and said, "We are in fine hands, Long. This is Charles. Or should I say, Captain Charles?"

Charles smiled warmly and nodded to Long. "Nice to finally meet you. Welcome aboard."

"Thank you," Long replied. He felt Hok release his wrist, and he turned his attention back to her.

"Please lie down," Hok said. "You need to conserve your energy. Your pulse is very faint and you have lost a lot of blood. You are lucky to be alive. It took more than one hundred stitches to close your wounds, and I had to sew them while the boat was moving. It is not my best work. Some of them are bound to split open if you do not lie still."

Long knew firsthand his sister's gifts as a healer, and he obeyed without question, lying back down on the boat's rolling deck. Her handiwork had impressed everyone at Cangzhen Temple, and she had patched him up more than once after training sessions that had gone awry. He noticed now that his right thigh and the upper section of his left arm had been expertly rebandaged. That was no doubt her doing, too. He asked, "What is going on? I cannot seem to remember much."

"There is quite a bit going on," Hok replied. "Why don't you tell me what you know, first?"

"From the beginning?"

"Sure."

"Well," Long said, "six months ago, Ying attacked our Cangzhen Temple with the aid of the Emperor's soldiers. They had firearms and cannons, while we had swords and spears. Only Fu, Malao, Seh, you, and I managed to survive. I thought that Grandmaster might have made it out, too, but I later learned that Ying had killed him as well."

“Go on.”

“I fled the attack as Grandmaster had commanded, and I came up with the idea of joining the fight clubs like Ying had done, in order to get close to the Emperor. I thought I might be able to change the Emperor’s heart like Grandmaster had directed us. I did manage to get close to the Emperor and even succeeded in becoming this year’s Fight Club Grand Champion, but it was all for naught. As Xie has probably told you, Tonglong is now the Southern Warlord, and he made a move against the Emperor right after I won the championship. I believe he may have succeeded. This is all I know.”

Hok nodded. “Unfortunately, I think you are correct about Tonglong succeeding. I saw ShaoShu briefly as we were leaving the rooftop across from the fight club last night, and he pointed to a figure wrapped in some sort of blanket, held by soldiers. A section of the blanket had separated, and in the moonlight I saw a flash of gold silk.”

“So I have only been asleep one night?”

“Yes.”

“And ShaoShu is definitely back with Tonglong?”

“Yes.”

“I wish he would have come with us.”

“ShaoShu can take care of himself,” Hok said. “What more can I tell you about our situation?”

Long glanced at Charles, then back at Hok. “Tell me about this fine boat.”

“The boat belongs to Charles, of course,” Hok replied. “He is a friend of my father and mother, and I am proud to call him my friend, too. I believe we all are.”

Fu grunted in agreement from the bow, and Malao shouted down from the mast top, “Hear! Hear!”

Hok continued. “Charles has been helping us for a while now, and we have been keeping an eye on Tonglong. We were recently staying with a group of Charles’ friends on a small island to the south, but Tonglong found us and destroyed everything and nearly everyone. We were fortunate to escape. Charles was going to take us farther north so that we could meet up with Seh and a group of bandits he is staying with.”

“Bandits?” Long asked. “Are you talking about Mong?”

Hok’s eyebrows rose. “Yes. How do you know about Mong?”

“Grandmaster shared some secrets with me,” Long said, slightly embarrassed. “Do you know that there is history between Mong and Seh?”

Hok nodded. “Yes, Mong is Seh’s father.”

“That’s right.”

“Do you know anything about Seh’s mother?”

“No.”

“His mother is, or I should say *was*, AnGangseh.”

Long shook his head. “AnGangseh was Tonglong’s mother.”

“She is mother to both of them, though from different husbands. Seh and Tonglong are half brothers.”

“Unbelievable,” Long said.

“There is more,” Hok said. “AnGangseh blinded Seh. That is why he is not traveling with us.” She tapped the side of her ever-present herb bag. “Fortunately, I may have found a cure in the form of dragon bone. Now that you are with us, we are hurrying to Seh and the bandits. Fu’s father is with them, too, as is my mother and hopefully my little sister.”

“I feel bad for Seh,” Long said. “Did you say that you have a sister?”

“Yes. I only learned of her when I reunited with my mother. Besides my family, we have also tried to find information about Malao’s father, a man known as the Monkey King, but no one seems to have seen him in years. Fu has reunited with his father, though. His name is Sanfu—Mountain Tiger.”

“It sounds like you have been busy,” Long said, feeling light-headed. “What about Ying? I have heard rumors about him, but I do not know what is fact and what is fiction.”

Hok smiled. “You are never going to believe all that has happened with him. He is no longer the same person. We consider him an ally. He had a life-changing reunion with his mother and learned some startling things about his father, and especially his grandfather.”

Long’s eyes widened. “Ying knows about his grandfather?”

“Yes,” Hok said. “Grandmaster was Ying’s grandfather. Isn’t that tragic? Although he did not know it at the time, when Ying killed Grandmaster, he killed his only living relative besides his mother.”

Long closed his eyes, his dizziness worsening. “That is not exactly true.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ying has at least one more living relative, though his health is questionable at the moment.”

“Who?”

“Me.”

“What?” Fu roared from the bow of Charles’ boat. “You and Ying are related?”

Long sighed. “You have good ears, Fu. Yes, Grandmaster was also my grandfather. Ying and I are cousins.”

“Does Ying know this?” Hok asked.

“I do not believe so,” Long replied. “Grandmaster kept many secrets, especially from Ying. It seems Ying’s father and my father were brothers. I always wanted to tell Ying, but Grandmaster forbade me. One thing Ying did know, though, was that Grandmaster killed his father. Ying was very young, but he saw it happen and he never forgot. I believe this is the main reason he killed Grandmaster—revenge. Additionally, Ying was upset that Grandmaster had changed his name. Ying’s name used to be Saulong—Vengeful Dragon. Grandmaster changed his name and started teaching him eagle-style kung fu instead of dragon-style.”

“That would upset me, too,” Charles said.

Long nodded.

“Wait—” Hok said. “If Grandmaster killed Ying’s father, that would mean that Grandmaster killed his own son.”

“That’s right,” Long said, his voice faltering. “Grandmaster told me that he did it after Ying’s father killed *my* parents. Grandmaster said that he had two sons, a good son—my father—and a bad son, Ying’s father. Grandmaster told me that Ying’s father was an abomination and needed to be dealt with so that no more people would be hurt by him. He said that the negative traits of a dragon were somehow amplified in Ying’s father, and he feared that Ying might be the same way. That is why he raised Ying as an eagle.”

“This is awful,” Hok said.

“It is,” Long said. “Poor Ying. I do not know anything about his mother, who would be my aunt.”

“We have met her,” Hok said. “Her name is WanSow—Cloud Hand—and she is a wonderful person. She was injured by Tonglong, but Ying is taking care of her now.”

“It sounds like Ying really has changed,” Long said.

Hok nodded.

“I hope to see him again,” Long said. “My aunt WanSow, too. If you happen to see him without me, please tell him all that I have shared with you. He needs to know. Grandmaster kept too many secrets. Look where it has gotten us.”

Hok nodded again, and a weary grin crept across Long’s face. After all that he and his temple siblings had been through, it seemed everyone was doing all right. The only exception might be Seh.

As the heavy hands of unconsciousness began to press against Long’s mind once more, he closed his eyes and thought about his blind brother. Losing one’s sight was a fate worse than death for some people, and it would spell the end for most creatures in the wild.

Long wondered how a snake would handle it.



Twelve-year-old Seh stood before the line of bandit recruits, a razor-sharp spear in one hand, a teacup in the other. He raised the cup to his lips, swallowing the wretched contents in one gulp. He gagged briefly, but managed to keep the medicine down.

One of the recruits scoffed. “What are you going to teach us, young *sifu*? How to distract an opponent by puking on him?”

A few of the recruits chuckled, and Seh frowned. It was like this with every new group. This particular bunch consisted of fifteen men between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. He was going to have to earn their respect, and that usually meant confrontation. His vision was far from functional, but he could now see shadows and had learned to identify individuals by the unique amounts of positive or negative energy they generated. The joker stood in the center of the line, radiating negative energy like a furnace.

One of the recruits spoke up in Seh’s defense. “Give our young instructor some respect, gentlemen. He is blind, and he drinks powdered dragon bone in an attempt to regain his sight. Have you ever tried it? It is horrible.”

“Dragon bone, eh?” the joker said. “He must be a spoiled rich kid to be able to afford such expensive medicine. I guess that is how it works when you are Mong’s son.”

Seh felt anger begin to rise within him, but he fought off the urge to be rude. He decided to give the men a short explanation to try to ease the growing tension. Then he would move on with teaching the class.

“The dragon bone was a gift from a black market dealer called HukJee—Black Pig,” Seh told the group. “HukJee learned that some friends of mine were looking for dragon bone, and a healer friend of our camp named PawPaw realized that dragon bone might be able to help me with my condition. It is true that I have lost my sight, but it has been returning more each week. Today’s lesson will be that vision isn’t everything. I can use other senses to defeat my opponents.”

“Like your sense of taste?” the joker asked. “To help with your projectile vomiting?”

The same recruits laughed, and Seh wondered how men more than twice his age found these childish comments funny.

Seh turned away from the group and walked under a large tent frame that had not been covered with fabric. He could vaguely discern the outlines of several round clay pots hanging at different heights from the crossbeams. The pots were filled with sand, and dangling from

the bottom of each was a square sheet of metal roughly the size of his hand.

Seh subconsciously pushed a lock of his fast-growing hair out of his mostly sightless eyes and pointed more or less in the direction of the man who had spoken up for him. It was time for a little demonstration.

“Please, come here,” Seh said.

The man came forward, and Seh nodded toward the pots. “I want you to hit each of those dangling sheets of metal, then get out of the way as quickly as you can.”

“Okay,” the man replied.

Seh heard five distinct *clangs*, and the moment he saw the man’s shadowy form hurry off to one side, he sprang into action. He rushed forward, swinging his iron-tipped spear in a wide swath, smashing three of the pots in dramatic fashion on the first pass. He felt the satisfying *thunk* as the clay vessels exploded, and registered the distinctive *hiss* of sand flying through the air.

He keyed in on the faint tones emitted by the two remaining metal sheets, and he went after them with all the focus of a kung fu master. He thrust the spear tip at one of the pots, shattering it. Then he pulled his spear back as though to smash the remaining pot, but instead snapped his right foot forward, shouting, “Ki-ya!”

It was a direct hit. The ball of his foot connected with the final pot, and the pot erupted, sending a shower of hardened clay fragments and sand in every direction as the metal sheet dropped to the ground.

Seh landed on his knees for show, his spear held high over his head. He jumped to his feet, bowed quickly to the line of men, and began to dust himself off.

Several of the recruits murmured their approval. The joker scoffed. “I’ll be sure to remember this lesson if I’m ever blindfolded and attacked by a troop of killer flowerpots.”

“Is there something you would like to discuss?” Seh asked the joker.

“Yeah,” the joker replied. “I want to know why you are wasting our time. Breaking pots serves no purpose.”

“That is not true,” Seh said. “Those pots are the same diameter as a human head, and they are hung at different levels to represent opponents of different heights. The force required to shatter one when it is filled with sand is the same amount of force necessary to crack a human skull. It is important practice.”

The joker laughed. “Pots don’t fight back, young man. People do. People also move around. A person would simply get out of your way.”

Seh clenched his teeth. “Would *you* like to try it?”

“Attack some harmless flowerpots?”

“No. Attempt to get out of my way.”

The joker’s tone grew serious. “Are you saying that you want to fight me, boy?”

“I prefer the term *sparring*,” Seh said. “Unless you are afraid, old man.”

“Old man!” the joker roared. “I’ll show you!”

Seh heard the man's heavy boots begin to pound across the ground in his direction. It did not surprise him that the joker acted so spontaneously. In fact, he had been counting on it. Embarrassing this man here and now would earn Seh the respect of the entire group.

Seh sank into a deep Horse Stance and gripped his spear with two hands, holding the wooden shaft parallel to the ground with the metal tip facing forward. He held the shaft's center balance point tight in his left hand at waist level and positioned his right hand near the blunt back end.

He had no idea whether the joker had a weapon, but was certain that he would prevail as long as his opponent did not carry pistols. Seh heard metal unsheathed, and from the sound determined that the man possessed a broadsword of moderate length. No problem.

The joker continued his charge, and when Seh could hear the man's intense breathing, he knew that his opponent was close enough.

Seh struck. He kept his left hand locked and thrust his right hand downward in a large half-circle. This caused the tip of the spear to rise up in an opposing half-circle, heading directly for the joker's face. The joker chopped down at the spear tip with his broadsword, just as Seh expected he would, and the broadsword made contact with the spear tip, redirecting the spear tip down toward the ground.

As the spear tip continued its downward motion, Seh thrust it forward, accurately visualizing the spear passing between the man's legs. Seh clamped the spear shaft in his armpit and rolled to one side, yanking the spear sideways. The spear shaft tangled the man's legs, and he tripped hard and fell to the ground, face-first.

Seh dropped the spear and was about to slither onto the joker's back for a choke hold when someone shouted, "Enough!"

Seh froze. He felt the air behind him begin to pulse with restrained aggression. He did not have to turn around to know that his father was approaching.

"Did you hurt him?" Mong asked as he stopped next to Seh.

Seh fixed his gaze in the general direction of his downed opponent. "How should I know?"

"Good point," Mong said, slapping Seh on the shoulder. "Nice move, by the way." Seh felt the aggression within his father begin to dissipate.

Seh nodded, and he heard the joker groan.

"He looks like he is going to be fine," Mong said. "Listen, I realize that sometimes you need to make an example of someone, but next time please try to pick a younger man. He looks to be in his mid-thirties, and older individuals, like myself, take longer to heal. I fear we are going to need all the extra hands we can get very soon."

"I will remember," Seh said. "Have you received some news?"

"Yes. It is all speculation at this point, but we believe that Tonglong may attempt to amass an army."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that you are going to have to train more men," Mong said. "A lot more."

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