

# Two Dragons

A Martial Arts Novel

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*"He is honest in words, effective in action,  
faithful in keeping promises, fearless in offering  
his own life to free the righteous from bondage."*

- Sima Qian (145-90 B.C.)

## Chapter I: The Young Scholar

Laughter filled the room as the men sat and drank. They had been sitting there for several hours now, amusing each other with stories of all types. Most of them were merchants, traveling the different roads, earning a living selling their goods. Some had been on the road for years and had families waiting for them back at home. Others were young and just starting out on their path.

None of them had met before tonight. Six of them were sharing a table in a small little inn on a road in the countryside of the Chinese province, Jiangxi. It was 1545, the twenty-fourth year during the reign of Zhu Houcong, the eleventh Chinese emperor during the Jiajing period of the Ming Dynasty

The merchants and those seated in tables around them were being entertained by a young man named Teng. His clean robes, delicate demeanor, and articulate manner of speaking stood out among the others. He was not a merchant, but a scholar, someone who had spent hours reading and writing and came from different stock than the rest of them.

A young girl about sixteen years old came over to Teng's table and filled their mugs with more wine. One of the merchants looked up at her and grinned, his smile missing a few teeth.

"You're looking very pretty tonight, Xiao Hong!" The girl blushed while her lips curled into a smirk. She spoke in a playful scold.

"You shouldn't say such things, Cao! What would my father say if he'd heard?" The merchant laughed.

"Out of all the inns I stay at, this one is my favorite. Not because it has good food and drink, but because you're here to serve it!" He raised his glass in the air. "To Xiao Hong, may she always be here to tend to our needs as we rest from our journeys." All of them raised their glasses.

"To Xiao Hong!" The girl continued to smirk as she turned to walk away, but another merchant grabbed her dress and pulled her on to his lap. The girl rolled her eyes. The merchant had foul breath and a pot-marked face.

"Xiao Hong, when are we going to get married?" He smiled. She laughed out loud.

"Now why would I want to marry you?" The merchant pondered this for a moment.

"Every good man deserves a good wife."

"If I see a good man around here, I'll be sure to marry him," she said. The men burst out laughing while the merchant placed his hands on his chest and spoke in a whiny voice.

"My heart is breaking Xiao Hong! You mean to say you don't love me?"

"Of course my dear, that is exactly what I mean to say!" The men burst out laughing again as the girl got up and walked away from their table.

"You're not leaving us are you?" all the merchants said together. She looked back at them and smiled.

"Just for a little while. Why don't you have your friend entertain you some more?" All eyes turned back towards Teng, who had remained silent the whole time, a meek smile on his face. One of the merchants spoke, prodding Teng's arm.

"She's right. Tell us another story." Everyone murmured in agreement. Teng took a swig of wine, placed his mug on the table, and began.

"This one's about Shuang Long Ji, the Legend of the Two Dragons, men who fight not for fame or fortune, but honor. They travel throughout the country doing good deeds where they can and fighting evil where they find it. They're supposed to be fast. Fast like lightning." Teng made several quick swinging motions as if he were holding a sword, pretending to jab at several of the merchants, who jumped a little as he swung at them.

"You have to be careful. If you see one of them, the other's usually not far away. That's how they trick their enemies. For instance, there was a road that was known to be dangerous. Thieves would hide in the nearby forest and ambush anyone who passed by to steal whatever they had." Teng got out of his seat and began to walk around the table, lowering his voice, as if he were whispering into the ear of each merchant as he passed them.

"One of these Dragons walked down the road by himself, humming a tune and acting as if he didn't have a care in the world. Naturally, the thieves in the woods saw this and began to follow him.

Eventually, they revealed themselves and went to rob him, not realizing that they were the ones that were being ambushed." Teng clapped his hands together, startling some of the merchants.

"The other Dragon appeared from thin air and the two of them made short work of the thieves before they even knew what had happened. But the best part is that they

didn't kill the thieves. They simply knocked them out and when they woke up, they found that their clothes had been stolen right off their backs, leaving them naked and looking like idiots! "

"Things got worse though when the thieves, in their confusion, finally managed to stumble back to the cave where they had stored their loot. They found that it had vanished! Every last bit gone!" Teng paused and silence filled the room until one of the merchants ventured a question.

"So what happened to their loot?" Teng turned and looked at him.

"No one knows. Some say the Two Dragons hoard the loot they take from thieves, others say they give it back to the people it was stolen from. It's hard to say for sure." The merchant smiled and raised his mug in the air.

"Well here's to the loot. If it's out there, may one of us poor fools be fated and lucky enough to run across it!" All the merchants raised their glasses and shouted in unison, "to the loot!"

For some time the men continued to drink and tell stories. The stories were many, being short and long, about heroes, adventures, life on the road, and so forth until one by one, the merchants began to retire to their rooms for the night, leaving Teng by himself at the table. His soberness had faded away long ago, but drunkenness had not overcome him. He just continued to sip from his mug and stare around the empty inn.

He pushed back his stool, about to go to bed, when he noticed a thin scroll of parchment placed on the ground under the spot where his stool had been sitting for most of the night. Curious, he picked it up and unrolled it. The parchment contained a hand-scrawled message. Teng rubbed the sleep from his eyes and began to read.

You are a gifted storyteller, Teng, and we enjoyed listening to your stories tonight. You have the potential to become a great scholar one day. Perhaps we'll meet again.

The parchment had a signature at the bottom written in two characters: *Two Dragons*. Teng's eyes widened with shock. He jumped up to his feet, knocking his stool over. He read the letter over and over until the truth sunk in. The Two Dragons were real! They were real and they had been sitting at one of the tables at the inn tonight, listening to the stories he had told! They'd been so near, but yet he had no idea what they might have looked

like. In all the stories he'd heard about them in his travels, he'd never once heard anything about what they might have looked like. Scratching his head, Teng read the letter over several more times and smiled. Then he went to his room to sleep.

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The next evening, Teng strolled down one of the roads near the inn, his hands clasped behind his back, still thinking about the night before. For most of his academic life he'd been studying the Two Dragons, hoping that he would someday be able to find out more about them, who they were, and why they did what they did.

Teng's father had been a scholar like him, but had only passed the first round of imperial examinations and gone no further. He had tried several times to reach the next level, but had no success. Having resigned himself to his fate, Teng's father became a tutor to a wealthy, high-ranking family's children. It was his father's earnest hope that Teng might be able to succeed where he had failed. All his life, Teng had been encouraged to become a scholar and to prepare for the imperial examinations in the hope that one day he might have the chance to become a government official.

This was all fine and good, but he wasn't sure if it was what he really wanted. Teng had already passed the first examination and the next one was still several years away. Despite his modest income, Teng's father had provided for Teng's living, insisting that he should spend his time in study without the distractions of tutoring for a living. Teng had been enormously grateful for this, but something still nagged at him in the back of his mind.

He loved books and reading, but somehow, he wanted more. As a child he'd always been fascinated by stories of heroes and villains, ghosts and demons, and others. Now he wanted to tell stories, wanted to take what he heard and record it for the generations to follow him.

The Two Dragons had been the focus of this passion in recent years. Ever since he'd first heard of their existence, he'd been collecting stories about them, trying to record everything he heard. Information and details were sketchy at best. No one knew who they were or where they had come from. They were like phantoms that would disappear into thin air the more he searched for them.

Teng pulled out the parchment he had found the previous night and looked over it again. For the first time, he felt a hint of validation in his goal to find out

something of these Two Dragons. Against his father's advice and wishes, Teng had decided to take a year off from studies and travel the various roads and provinces, searching for any truth in the stories of the Two Dragons and now the parchment that he held in his hand appeared to be the first sign that he might be making progress.

Teng looked around to discover that he'd wandered off the road, now walking through a field filled with tall grass, gently blowing in the night breeze. He came to an old tree and sat down against the trunk, gazing up at the stars in the sky. The Two Dragons often filled his thoughts. He admired them for their actions, for their bravery to fight injustice, knowing so few people could or would these days. He wanted to know more about them. Who were they, and where did they come from?

## Chapter II: A New Path

### 5 Years Earlier

Quan Jun woke to find himself seated upright in bed, his skin drenched with sweat and his body shaking. He opened his eyes and glanced around his cell. There was no one else except him. His room contained only a bed, a chair, and a window. Outside, rain poured in torrents from the sky, making a drumming sound on the ceiling. Jun sat still for a moment, thinking about his dream. A tear slipped from his eye and ran down his face. After rubbing his eyes, Jun got out of bed, put on a simple brown robe, tied a cord around the waist, and walked towards the window, staring out at the rain.

"It was so real," he thought to himself, "as usual." He moved towards a pair of sandals sitting on a crude stone floor and slid his feet into them.

As the rain continued to pour outside, Jun walked down a long hallway. In the darkness there was the faint outline of doorways leading to other rooms beyond. Jun passed them without a second glance. Although he couldn't see it, he could hear a mouse scurry in front of his path.

"I remember every detail still, as if it had happened yesterday," Jun thought as his mind slipped back to his childhood.

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He was five years old. It was a night exactly like this one. Rain poured from the sky. Tears streamed down his cheeks. His father knelt down in front of him to wipe his face.

"...but why Papa? Why do you have to go?"

"It's just the way things have to be, Jun. I wish I could explain more, but I can't." Jun lowered his head and stared at the ground.

"Please don't go, Papa. Please don't go." Tears began to fill his father's eyes as he wrapped his arms around his little son and held him close.

"I'm so sorry, but I have to. Someday you'll understand." Jun's father looked him square in the face, lifting his head up so that their eyes met. "I'll always love you, son. Remember that. I'll always love you." Jun's father let go of him and stood up, slowly backing away into the darkness until he disappeared. Jun, sobbing beyond control, sat down on the muddy ground, and put his face in his hands.

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Jun reached the end of the long hallway, walked out the doorway, and down a flight of steps until his feet touched the ground. There he stopped and stared off into the darkness, the rain drenching his robe.

"Even after all these years, sometimes I still hope with all my heart that one night I'll walk through that dark hallway, down these steps, and he'll be waiting for me." Jun stared out into the darkness, standing in front of the monastery where his father had left him fifteen years ago. "But of course, he never is."

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Several days later, Jun stood in a small garden, picking tomatoes. He carefully looked at each one as he took them from the vine. Every now and then he scratched his shaved head. He had a trim build with a well-proportioned face and his eyes always seemed to carry a look of thoughtful serenity. He picked the tomatoes at a quick pace, but gradually slowed as his thoughts drifted elsewhere.

"Quan Jun!" Jun snapped out of his thoughts and looked around behind him. An old, short monk halfway across the garden stared at him. "Have you finished picking those tomatoes yet?" Jun glanced at the tomato vine and then down into his half-empty basket.

"Uh, yeah. Almost there, Shifu!" Jun began to pick tomatoes at a frantic pace. The glimmer of a smile crossed his master's face.

"It looks like it."

After several minutes, the other monks began to leave the garden, baskets in hand. Jun looked around and began to make his way towards the monastery.

"Jun. Could I speak with you?" Jun stopped and turned around. His master walked over to a makeshift bench at one end of the garden and sat down. Jun walked over to the bench and took a seat next to him, placing his basket of tomatoes on the ground. There was silence between the two of them.

"Jun," his master paused, as if collecting his thoughts, "Something has come up that I think we need to discuss."

"What is it, Shifu?" Jun looked at his master, his face full of curiosity.

"I believe you've reached a turning point in your life here, Jun. Each person has a path they follow throughout their life and sometimes they realize at some point that the path they're now walking is not the same one they started out on." Jun turned his face away from his master, stared out towards the garden, and spoke with a bit of disappointment in his voice.

"You mean to say that I don't belong here."

"For fifteen years we have taught you all we know about life, our ideas, our philosophy, our knowledge, our kungfu, but somehow I sense that this isn't enough for you. Your mind and soul are restless. You seek something different from what we have to offer. This is a place for those who have found peace, but that is something you have not found and will not obtain by simply staying here." Jun turned this over in his mind.

"My mind would disagree with you Shifu, but my heart wouldn't. You have been good to me all these years and for that I am grateful, but I feel it would be a great disservice to you if I left."

"It would be a greater disservice if you stayed. All of us here walk one path, but you walk another. It is a path of mystery that has yet to be revealed. I have been here for over sixty years. I can now see the end of my journey, but yours is just beginning. Embrace it to its fullest. You must find what you're searching for."

"I don't know what that is."

"Yes you do. You dream about it every night. It has consumed your every spare thought since you came here."

"My father."

"Yes, your father. You seek to know who he is and why he left you here. Excellent questions, but you will not find the answers here." His master got up from the bench and began to walk back towards the monastery. Jun called after him.

"Shifu, where should I begin?" His master turned back towards him and smiled.

"That is something you'll have to figure out."

### Chapter III: Chance Meeting

For the first time since childhood, Jun left the monastery. He stopped and turned to look at the old buildings one last time. In his heart, he felt a sudden stab of loneliness. This was his home, the only family he had truly known after all these years. Some part of him wanted to turn around and run back, but he knew he couldn't. Shifu was right. His path lay outside the monastery.

Jun looked down at his clothes. They were simple and plain. Perhaps something a farmer might wear. The sounds and smells of nature filled his ears and nose. Off in the distance, the sun shone on the edge of the horizon, illuminating the vast countryside that lay before him. After taking a deep breath and gathering up his small pack of food he'd been given, Jun began to walk again, taking his first steps into the unknown.

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For several days, Jun journeyed across fields and through forests, not really sure where he would go or what he would find. He hadn't come across any other people so far and he began to realize how far away the monastery had been from the rest of the world. He looked around and studied the woods. Sunlight streamed through the treetops, revealing the brilliant shades of green that the leaves had to offer. All around him he could hear the sounds of nature; birds chirping, animals calling to each other in the distance.

Jun continued to walk until sundown. After awhile, he grew hungry and stopped to eat. As the night grew on, he made a fire to keep warm. A cold breeze had settled in with the darkness. Jun shivered and rubbed his hands together. He checked his pack. The food was nearly gone. He would probably need to hunt once the pack was empty. He wrapped up the pack and sat cross-legged in front of the crackling fire.

The wind grew a bit stronger, but Jun paid it no mind for he was in deep meditation. Shifu had trained him well. He let his mind release from his body and drift away to a place where all material desires and feelings evaporated. He had always found it useful for thought and reflection, but he had always done it in the comfortable

confines of the monastery. Now, being out among nature, he worked on connecting with his surroundings. He felt different than before. There was a great sense of empowerment, as if his destiny were now truly in his own hands. There was no one to lead or guide him. He must find his own way or he would be lost forever.

He pondered this until a vision of his father appeared in his mind. The image, clearer than any of his dreams, didn't look like one he could remember. Jun wanted to speak to the image, to see if it was real, but somehow he couldn't. His mind refused to let him do so.

Jun opened his eyes to see that the fire was dying. He was confused by what he had just seen. Of course he wanted to find his father, but what did this image in his mind mean? Still puzzling over this, Jun leaned his back up against the tree behind him and eventually fell asleep.

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Jun woke early the next morning and continued upon his way. After some time, he noticed that the trees were growing farther apart. The forest must be coming to an end soon, he thought to himself. He walked for awhile, listening to the sounds around him. Something didn't seem right. He could hear a sound in the distance that did not belong to any animal. The sound was quick, repetitive, and growing louder by the second.

With a quick glance around, Jun disappeared among the trees. A few moments later, a young boy about fourteen years old came darting through the trees. Riding almost on his heels were several armed men on horseback. They laughed as they chased their prey.

"Come back here, boy! We won't hurt you! You can't escape us! We'll find you just like the rest! We always do!" The men continued chasing the boy until they had him cornered against a tree trunk with the boy's back pressed against the bark. The horses moved towards the trapped boy. He moved away from the trunk and was about to try and run, but was startled by Jun who seemed to appear behind him from thin air. The boy stared up at him in surprise. Jun glanced down at the boy and then fixed his gaze upon the armed men. There was a strong air of confidence in his voice as he spoke.

"Good day, gentleman. To what do I owe this pleasure?" The man who had spoken to the boy flashed a look of annoyance.

"This is none of your business, stranger. Move along!" Jun stared at him, his eyes unblinking.

"Given the situation, that seems to be the last thing I should do." The man tilted his head a bit, his expression growing more twisted.

"Really? Why would you say that?"

"Four men against one unarmed boy appears a bit unfair, doesn't it? Perhaps I could help even the odds." The boy looked up again at Jun, unsure of his intentions. Malice filled the man's smile.

"If you wish." The man got off his horse and drew his sword. His three companions followed suit. The four of them surrounded the boy and Jun, their swords raised in the air, forming a tight circle around the two. The boy looked up at Jun again, fear leaping from his eyes. Then he looked back at there assailants who were almost upon them.

The boy blinked his eyes once and after he did, they were wide open. He wasn't sure if what he'd just witnessed had actually happened. He looked up again to see Jun still standing in the same position as before, unmoved, but this time his clothes were a bit wrinkled. The boy could not believe it. In the blink of an eye, this stranger had defeated the four armed men as if they were mere rag dolls.

The boy edged his way towards one of the men on the ground and leaned over him. The man was still alive, but unconscious. This newfound stranger appeared not to be a killer. He had simply sought to incapacitate the men. The boy stood up straight again and looked back at Jun.

"What's your name?" he asked. Jun stared at him with a glint of curiosity in his eyes.

"What's yours?" At first, the boy thought it unwise to give his name, but as he stared at this stranger, his distrust began to melt away. There was something about him, perhaps his expression or demeanor that projected an air of gentleness and honesty.

"Li Da Long." Jun smiled as he turned the name over in his mind.

"You must possess the spirit of a great dragon to have such a name." Da Long, unsure of whether this stranger sought to compliment or insult him, took a defensive tone.

"I'm brave alright. I've been chased by armed guards lots of times and gotten away!"

"But how many times have you been trapped by them?" Da Long was silent. He'd truly been in danger this time and the stranger knew it. His mind clamored for something to say. Jun struck a conciliatory tone.

"I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself. I am Quan Jun." Da Long's face lightened.

"It's good to meet you, Jun. Who are you exactly?" Jun thought about his response for a moment.

"I'm a traveler. I go here and there."

"Looking for any place in particular?"

"Not yet."

"Would you like a place to go to?"

"Why not?"

"How about coming with me to my family's home? We seldom meet new people in these parts and my father would love to here about how you handled those guards."

"Lead the way." Da Long smiled and began to walk, leading Jun through the woods. As they walked, Jun grew curious.

"Da Long, you said that those men were guards. For whom?"

"They work for the provincial governor. We don't live very far from Kunming, his seat of power. He keeps a tight control over everyone here in the Yunnan province. He commands and everyone obeys. Those who don't are punished."

"Why were they chasing you?"

"I disobeyed."

"In what manner?"

"I saw those four guards harassing a farmer who was trying to take his harvest to market. They stopped him and demanded a "protection" tax, a bribe, basically. I saw them and got angry. I cursed at them and kicked one of them between the legs."

"That probably didn't go over well."

"No it didn't. They chased me, so I led them into the woods, hoping I could lose them, but I couldn't. That's when you appeared." Jun chuckled at the story, but also grew a bit worried.

"Da Long, do those men back there know your name or who you are?"

"No. I just happened to be passing by when I saw what they were doing. Don't worry. It's not the first time."

"Just be careful in the future," Jun said. Da Long said nothing as he continued to lead Jun towards his home.

## Chapter IV: A Guest for Dinner

Da Long's home sat on a farm near the outskirts of Kunming, the provincial capital for the Yunnan province. The house had only one floor and was made from white bricks, the roof was tiled with blue trimming along the borders and all four sides of the roof curved upward, meeting at a single point. A dirt road ran by the front of the house and farm fields stretched off in all directions.

As they approached the house, Jun noticed an older man in his fifties, his hair long gone, with a thin white beard on his chin, standing in the entrance. He hands were balled on his hips, his eyes staring at Da Long. His face did not look inviting.

"Da Long, where have you been? I've been waiting for you awhile." Da Long spoke, unafraid.

"Father, I was out walking with my friend here and I found our conversation to be so interesting that I lost track of time." His father's eyes narrowed on the two of them.

"You were causing trouble again, weren't you?"

"Of course not!" Da Long's father stared at him.

"Alright! Maybe I did!"

"Did you cause lots of it?" Da Long grinned.

"Yes!"

"That's what I thought!" His father's face changed from a frown to a wide smile. He moved forward and wrapped his arms around his son, squeezing him in a bear hug. The two laughed together. As he watched them, Jun felt a twinge of pain in his heart at the sight of seeing father and son, together and happy. Da Long's father let him go and looked at Jun, still smiling.

"And who is this?"

"Father, this is Quan Jun." Jun made a bow with his hands folded in front.

"It's an honor to meet you, sir."

"Please, call me Li Yuan. A friend of Da Long's is a friend of mine. Dinner is nearly ready and you two look famished. Please join us, Jun." Li Yuan gestured towards the entrance of the house.

Upon entering, Jun's nose filled with the sweet aromas of a meal being prepared and his mouth began to water. Li Yuan saw Jun's face.

"Don't worry, Jun. We'll be eating soon."

"But I didn't..."

"Trust me. I know a hungry face when I see one."  
Li Yuan laughed and offered Jun a seat at the dinner table.  
Da Long sat down next to him.

Moments later, a young girl, about seventeen years old came into the room, carrying several plates in her hands. The food looked delicious. Jun glanced up at the girl and smiled, but she didn't smile back. She didn't even make eye contact with him as she put the food on the table before him. Li Yuan took a deep breath and spoke to the girl.

"Excellent, Xiao Jing, excellent. You've outdone yourself again. Without looking at her father, Xiao Jing smiled and left the room. A minute later, she returned with more dishes, never looking at anyone as she placed them on the table. After observing her behavior and her eyes, Jun began to wonder why she seemed a bit different.

The answer came after she had finished placing the dishes. As she put chopsticks on the table for everyone, she dropped one. Jun caught it in his hand before it hit the ground. Not realizing Jun had caught it, Xiao Jing leaned over and without looking down, her hand began to feel the ground.

"I've got it," Jun said. Blushing, Xiao Jing took the chopstick from Jun's hand. After observing this, realization struck Jun. She was blind. At that moment, Li Yuan clapped his hands together and spoke.

"It looks like we're ready, but where's Chen Wei?"

"Just coming!" A tall, thin, and gaunt man, about twenty years old, came in through the doorway, wiping sweat from his brow. His clothes wreaked of sweat.

"Just in time," said Li Yuan. "Everyone have a seat." Chen Wei walked around the table and sat down next to Xiao Jing. Jun couldn't be sure, but he detected a hint of affection between the two based on their body language towards each other. As Chen Wei settled in, he saw Jun.

"Hi, I'm Chen Wei, and you are?"

"Quan Jun"

"Jun is a friend of Da Long's" said Li Yuan.

"Good to meet you," said Chen Wei. After taking food from several of the dishes, he began to eat. Jun took some food and followed suit. His stomach began to feel better as the hunger pangs subsided. The food was incredible.

"This is delicious," Jun said, wiping a bit of sauce from his lips. Although he had a considerable amount of food in his mouth, Da Long spoke in agreement.

"Xiao Jing makes great food."

"She cooks as well as her mother did," said Li Yuan, a trace of sadness in his voice. Xiao Jing looked rather embarrassed by the praise.

"I don't even come close to mother." There was silence for a little while as they continued to eat. Eventually, Li Yuan spoke up.

"So Jun, how did you and Da Long meet?" Da Long replied before Jun could.

"We actually just met today. I was being chased and..."

"By whom, may I ask?" Li Yuan stared at his son, his face half serious, half curious.

"Imperial guards."

"For whom?"

"Xiong Ba." A slight frown crossed Li Yuan's face. Da Long didn't notice as he continued.

"I was running through the woods and they almost had me when suddenly from nowhere, Jun appeared. The men got off their horses to get us, but before they even knew what happened, Jun had defeated them all at once." Da Long made several quick swinging motions with his hands, striking invisible opponents. "Great kungfu! He was fast! Very fast!" Everyone turned to look at Jun, who remained silent.

"Impressive," said Li Yuan. "It sounds like you've saved my son's life today." Jun spoke with sincere modesty.

"I only did what any decent person would do."

"Ah yes, but I'm afraid to say there aren't many decent people in these parts these days. Thank you for what you did." Jun nodded his head and continued to eat.

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Long after they'd finished the food, the five of them continued to sit at the table, although Da Long, Li Yuan and Xiao Jing did most of the talking. Jun and Chen Wei remained silent most of the time. It was an experience unlike any Jun could remember. Of course, he'd witnessed lively discussions at the monastery, but they were of a more scholarly and brotherly nature. What he observed now was the conversation of a close-knit family, one that had survived hardships including famine and the death of Da Long's mother several years ago. He could hear the deep-rooted sorrow at the mention of her name, but it impressed him that they didn't try to hide it.

Quite the opposite, they shared their grief openly and Jun did what he could to be a good listener. He

saw strength in their bonds as a family and knew that it would see them through good times and bad. Inwardly, Jun smiled. He was witnessing that family bond which always remains unbreakable, the same bond that he still shared with his missing father. He could feel their longing for Da Long's mother to return and it struck a chord in his own heart, for he deeply wished for his father to return as well.

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Long after the others had gone to sleep, Jun and Li Yuan sat up alone together. A few candles lit around the room provided them with a soft, pale glow. Li Yuan eyed Jun for a while, breaking the silence after a few minutes.

"Jun, let me be honest with you. I'm glad that you shared dinner with us tonight. We normally don't have many visitors and it's nice to have someone new to talk with."

"If you don't mind my asking," said Jun, "who exactly is Chen Wei? I gather that he's not your son or nephew." Li Yuan smiled as he answered.

"Chen Wei was the son of one of my dearest friends. At a young age, his mother and father died in a terrible fire and afterwards, we took him in as one of our own, but I believe he's never gotten over the loss of his parents. In his heart, he is still their son and feels that it would dishonor their memory if he were to take me as his father. I understand why he chose to do so. To lose one's parents at such a young age is a horrible tragedy." Jun nodded in agreement, knowing all too well what Li Yuan meant. Li Yuan continued, "I've tried as hard as I could to be a father to him, but there's always been that coolness and separation that he places between he and I. I feel that I'm partly to blame. Perhaps I could have done more, tried something different." Li Yuan looked down towards the ground. Jun smiled.

"I don't think that anyone could ask for a better father." Li Yuan looked up towards Jun with an expression of warmth on his aged face. There was silence between them and for a moment, Jun felt a flicker of emotion in his heart, but wasn't quite sure where it came from or what it meant.

"You are an honorable young man, Jun, and a unique one I might add. Even though you don't speak much, I can tell from your expressions and behavior. I am old and with the experience of my age, I have learned how to judge people. Most of us are farmers, toiling the land,

but you come from somewhere different. Where, I don't know and I wouldn't presume to stick my nose in your business, for that belongs to you alone." Jun listened, deeply impressed with Li Yuan's powers of observation. He took in this man's words and felt what he was really telling him: Don't be afraid to trust us. Jun thought about this before he spoke.

"The truth is that I'm a stranger to this world. I've spent most of my life in a monastery and have seen little else."

"Are you a monk?"

"No. I could have become one, but somehow I never did."

"Perhaps your heart lies somewhere else. Maybe you're searching for something different than what they had to offer."

"That's true, but I don't know how to get there. I know very little about the world, or how to make my way through it." Li Yuan leaned back in his chair, thinking to himself for a moment.

"Well, until you get to where you're going, you're more than welcome to stay with us."

"I wouldn't want to trespass on your hospitality."

"A friend does not trespass."

"But still, I would like to do something. Contribute in some way. Perhaps work in some capacity." Li Yuan smiled.

"An admirable philosophy, I must say. Our home is open to you for as long as you need, but if you insist upon working then perhaps something can be arranged." Li Yuan took a scrap of paper and wrote a name upon it. "Tomorrow, Da Long can take you there. I know the owner and he may be looking for help." Li Yuan handed the paper to Jun. He looked at it for a minute and read the name out loud, "Dragon's Inn."

## Chapter V: Dragon's Inn

Jun left early the next morning with Da Long, who was still rubbing sleep from his eyes, as they walked towards Kunming.

"Father says you're going to work at Dragon's Inn?"

"He gave me the name of the innkeeper and said I should talk with him. We'll see what happens."

"Good luck with him."

"The innkeeper?"

"Uh huh."

"Why?"

"You'll see." Da Long yawned, leaving Jun to wonder.

\* \* \*

Kunming's streets were crowded with people going about their business. At first, Jun felt a bit claustrophobic being around so many people. He looked around. Many of the buildings had black-tiled roofs that curved upwards. Their walls were painted white with black and red trimmings around the windows and balconies. The streets were made of cobbled stone and Jun could feel massive amount of vibrations from everyone walking on the street.

They passed various restaurants and vendors. People filled the streets, some talking with each other, and others walking by. Somewhere down the street, Jun heard a flute being played, accompanied by singing from a high-pitched female voice.

"It seems busy, but it gets even more crowded during the afternoon. It's almost empty at night, though."

"Why?"

"Thieves. You get robbed on site if they catch you. They steal everything you've got and if you're lucky, that's all they do to you. Most places around here tend to close early so they don't get robbed." This remark surprised Jun. The overall atmosphere here seemed to be a good one. Jun had trouble imagining these streets being empty at night.

Every now and then they passed a patrol of imperial guards who made no secret of their intended intimidation towards the citizenry. Several times he overheard guards demanding "protection" money from various street vendors as they walked by.

After some time, the two of them came to an inn situated in the middle of the city. People were going in and out of the entrance. Jun and Da Long walked through the doorway and entered a large room with tables full of people eating, drinking, and engaged in various conversations. The floor was made of wood, as were the tables and chairs. A pair of stairs led to a second level, supported by red-painted columns. Jun could see a row of doors on the second floor and guessed that they were rooms for guests. The inn was crowded and noisy, even at this hour of day. Jun's eyes darted around the room.

"Now I just need to find the innkeeper."

"That won't be hard."

"How do you know?" Before Da Long could respond, a short, bald-headed, round-bellied man came charging out of the kitchen, his hands loaded with several dishes of food. One of the men sitting at a nearby table called out to him.

"Hey Yao! Is that our meal? We've been waiting forever!" The innkeeper's face twisted in annoyance as he replied.

"Shut up, Peng! Your food's coming soon enough! Bother me again and I'll dump these dishes on your ugly head!" Peng and the others at his table laughed while the innkeeper hurried past them and placed the dishes of food one by one on another customer's table. Then he hurried back towards the kitchen. On his way, he passed Jun and Da Long.

"Excuse me?" Jun said. The innkeeper either ignored or didn't hear him as he rushed by without so much as a glance. Jun looked down at Da Long, who shrugged his shoulders. The two of them watched as the innkeeper hurried back into the kitchen. Jun sighed and they both followed him.

They entered the kitchen and Jun immediately knew why the innkeeper was so busy. The kitchen lay in a state of complete disarray as the innkeeper dashed about trying to prepare all the meals by himself. Apparently, his cook had deserted him. As he watched, Jun couldn't help but laugh a little.

"Need some help?" The innkeeper whirled around, dropping several dishes on the floor. His face contorted with anger.

"Who the hell are you? Can't you see I'm busy here!"

"I was recommended by Li Yuan. He told me you might need some help." The innkeeper's expression didn't change.

"Li Yuan thinks that I'm incapable of running my business?" Jun smiled. The monks at the monastery had taught him about different types of people. Some were content with their lives and some were not. This man was not.

"Of course not! He merely thought you might need some assistance, but if I'm not needed then I shall be happy to go." Jun turned around and began to walk away from the kitchen. Da Long followed.

"Wait!" Jun stopped and turned. The innkeeper rushed over to him with several dishes of food and shoved

them into Jun's hands. "Here, you can start right now! There are four men in dark blue robes seated in the rear corner of the room. Take these dishes out to them. Hurry! They've been waiting over half an hour!" The innkeeper hurried back to tend to several dishes that were cooking. Jun stared down at the dishes in his arms and looked at Da Long.

"Need some help?" Da Long smiled.

"I should be fine. We'll see how this works out." Jun left the kitchen and took the food over to the table that the innkeeper had described. The table's occupants didn't look too pleased.

"So there it is! Finally!" said one of the seated men. "What took so long?"

"Busy morning," Jun began to place the dishes on the table.

"This looks terrible! Where's the usual cook?" The seated man's face twisted with annoyance. Jun remained calm.

"Apparently he's out today. Yao has been cooking himself."

"That old fart! I've been coming here for years and this is what I get? I want cooking, not crap!" While the other three laughed, the seated man cracked his knuckles and began to rise from his chair. "Maybe I should go into that kitchen and..." With a quick snap of his leg, Jun kicked the man in one of his ankles, causing him to fall back into his chair with a loud thud, knocking the wind out of him. The other three stared at Jun and then at their companion. Jun set the last dish on the table and played it off naturally.

"Sir, are you okay? That was quite a fall. You'd better make sure you don't hurt yourself." His gaze struck the seated man's dazed face. There was a brief moment of understanding. The man stared down at the food.

"Yes, perhaps I should be careful next time. You know, the food doesn't look that bad after all."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Jun. He smiled, bowed slightly to the four men and went back towards the kitchen.

"That was great!" Da Long's wore a grin on his face.

"What do you mean?" Jun said nonchalantly.

"Never mind." Da Long continued to grin. "It looks like you'll be alright then. I'll meet you back at home tonight."

"Sounds good." Da Long left the inn while Jun went back into the kitchen. Things in the kitchen seemed to have gone from bad to worse. The innkeeper was furiously trying to cook several dishes at once while also trying to put finished food on to different dishes without confusing what went where.

"What the hell took you so long!? We've got more customers waiting! Get over here!" Jun hurried over to the innkeeper who loaded his arms again with more dishes. Jun smiled. This was going to be a busy day.

\* \* \*

Overall, Jun didn't do too badly for his first day. Once or twice he mixed up the tables that the dishes were going to and he almost spilled one on a customer's lap, but other than those few sporadic episodes, everything went well. As the day went on and the hours flew by, the customers kept coming and Jun kept bringing their dishes out to them. The innkeeper stayed in the kitchen preparing the food while Jun delivered it. By the end of the day, Jun had become so quick at delivering food that the innkeeper quit growling at him every time he came into the kitchen.

"It looks like the crowd's finally dying down," the innkeeper said. Jun remained silent. "What's your name by the way?"

"Quan Jun." The innkeeper looked up at him, narrowing his eyes for a moment.

"You're not too bad, Jun. Keep up this level of service and I might just keep you around." Jun smiled. The innkeeper laughed. "My name's Yao. I'll need you to get here early every morning and work till late in the evening. Got that?"

"Absolutely."

"Good. Now that the customers are mostly gone I have another job for you." The innkeeper pointed towards an enormous pile of dirty dishes sitting off to the side of the kitchen. "Those need to be washed and cleaned tonight so we can use them again tomorrow. You can leave when they're done. It'll probably take you awhile, so don't worry about rushing through it. I've got to clean the tables outside, I'll check on you in a little bit." The innkeeper left the kitchen, leaving Jun to stare at the enormous mess before him. Jun smiled and rolled up his sleeves.

About ten minutes later, the innkeeper came back into the kitchen and dropped the dishes he was carrying on to the floor. His jaw hung open in shock. Not only were

the large piles of dishes sparkling clean, but they had been put back in their proper places. He looked over at Jun, who had just finished putting the last stack in its place.

"I'm just finishing up."

"But, but how..." the innkeeper couldn't find the right words.

"I have some experience in this area."

"But..."

"Is there anything else that you need?" The innkeeper thought to himself for a moment.

"Nothing I can think of, I guess."

"Okay. I'll see you tomorrow morning." Jun smiled and left the kitchen. The innkeeper stared around at the immaculately clean surroundings and began to chuckle to himself.

"I think I might just keep this kid around for awhile."

## Chapter VI: Quiet Conversation

The sun was already fading over the horizon as Jun left Dragon's Inn. He began to make his way through Kunming, mentally retracing the path that he had taken with Da Long that morning. Da Long had been right. Once the sun began to go down, the city emptied, leaving a ghost-like feeling as he walked through the vacant streets by himself.

It was a shame that these people had to hide at night for fear of thieves and who knows what else. As he walked, he noticed there were no imperial guards patrolling the streets, no one to keep order. He found this curious, but disturbing as a thought crossed his mind. No one went out at night because there was no one to protect them. This saddened him as he pictured families hidden behind their locked doors, not daring to step out into the street.

He made his way through the streets until he finally reached the dirt road he and Da Long had traveled that morning. By now, the sun had disappeared and the darkness of night engulfed the countryside. Farm lands stretched off into the distance until they met the beginning of the woods. Jun looked around and breathed deeply, taking in the serenity of the land. After some time, he reached home. He could see light coming from the house. He smiled and entered. Li Yuan greeted him.

"Jun, how was your day?"

"Very interesting."

"Did you meet the innkeeper?"

"You mean Yao?"

"That's him."

"Yes I did. He's a very interesting fellow. A bit strange I would say, though." Li Yuan laughed at this.

"He is indeed. For as long as I've known him, he's always been consumed with running Dragon's Inn. He has no children and never married. I think he spent so much time running that inn that he forgot that there's more to life than making money." The two of them sat down and continued.

"How do you know him?" Jun asked.

"We go back a long way, Yao and I. When my wife and I first came here to Kunming, Yao had just inherited Dragon's Inn from his father. All of us were still young then and life seemed quite different from younger eyes. Yao was enthusiastic about running the inn. It was his father's passion and I believe it became his as well. My

wife and I would frequent the inn for his company and food. Many nights the three of us shared, sitting, and talking together at the inn after the other customers had left for the night. Things were quite different back then. The streets of the city were safe to walk at night and thieves were actually punished for their crimes.

As the years passed, and we grew older, Yao poured more and more of his energy into the inn and shut out everything else. I think the lonelier he became, the harder he worked. Now, he spends all his time there and does little of much else these days. I've tried to visit him, but he's always too busy. Doesn't have time for anyone, I guess. We haven't spoken for some years now." Jun thought about this until his thoughts shifted to another topic.

"You said the streets used to be safe to walk at night. This morning, I saw patrol after patrol of imperial guards wandering the streets, but at night there were none. Why is that?" Li Yuan's face frowned a bit.

"In my younger days, things were quite different because Xiong Ba had not come to power yet."

"Xiong Ba?"

"He is now the provincial governor for Yunnan and has been so for over fifteen years. He is corrupt as they come. He cultivates many allies, particularly among criminals for his own personal gain. They have an arrangement. During the day, he lets the imperial guards have control over Kunming, pushing people around, demanding "protection" money, and many other things. At night, the thieves and murderers have free reign. In return, they give a sizable portion of their loot to him."

"Why has no one done anything about this?"

"Things are not that easy. The emperor, Zhu Houcong, is far away from here and his eyes and ears are not without limits. Xiong Ba keeps a tight control over all official lines of correspondence in Yunnan and he also carries favor with corrupt officials at the Imperial Court in Beijing. Even if someone tried to reach the emperor, their case would never be heard." Jun felt his heart sink.

"Is there really nothing that can be done?"

"Well I wouldn't say that. In any situation something can always be done. It's just a question of what should be done. No one here has found that answer yet. Xiong Ba is the law here and as long as he is, people will suffer." Jun spoke with great deference towards Li Yuan.

"You know much about the world around you. I hope I can come to see the world as you do some day." Li Yuan smiled.

"I believe you see much around you, Jun. Age and wisdom do not necessarily go hand in hand. Don't judge yourself too harshly. Besides, I know what I know because I was an assistant to the previous governor before his death." Jun looked up in surprise.

"You worked in the government?"

"I did for quite some time. After Xiong Ba took over, I quietly moved my family towards the outskirts of Kunming. Those with outward loyalty to the previous governor were punished without mercy. I thought it better for all of us if I were to keep a low profile and keep quiet for some time."

"But how can you keep quiet with what is going on?" Jun stopped, embarrassed. His voice was raised almost to the point of shouting. He lowered his head in respect and apology to Li Yuan whose face showed no trace of anger or displeasure. Instead, his voice filled with increased warmth and understanding as he spoke.

"All things have their time, Jun. All things have their time."

\* \* \*

Later that night, Jun lay in bed, pondering the events of the day. He understood what Li Yuan had told him, but he still felt that more needed to be done about Xiong Ba. He felt anger rising up in his mind, but knew this was not the right way to think about things. Restless, he got up and left the house.

He went out to the farm fields near the house and walked until he came to a clearing in the fields. The moon shone in the sky above, casting a silver veil over the land. A faint breeze in the air ruffled his hair as he stood still in the center of the clearing. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, exhaling after a minute or two.

With quick and graceful motion, he shifted into a defensive stance and began to practice several combat motions, moving in harmony with his surroundings. As he moved faster, the breeze in the air seemed to pick up speed, as he slowed down, so did the breeze too. He did this all with his eyes shut, feeling the rhythm of his environment. His mind was clear and in focus, his moves swift and precise.

The monastery did not have a formal kungfu of its own like the Shaolin or Wudang schools. Instead, the monks

had taken what they believed to be the best from several styles and adapted them into a mixed form not clearly identifiable with any one school. Jun had learned hand-to-hand combat, weapons training, and a variety of other skills as well.

In addition to practicing kungfu, he'd spent countless hours in the archives pouring over old scrolls and other texts, trying to learn and absorb as much as he could. Shifu had stressed developing both the body and mind as equally important tasks.

Jun continued to practice for some time until he felt a pair of eyes watching him. Smiling, he continued without opening his own.

"Aren't you up late, Da Long?" Da Long emerged from the field and walked towards Jun.

"So are you."

"I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd find another use for my time." His motions grew in intensity and speed.

"I couldn't sleep either." Da Long watched Jun with awe and fascination. "Can you teach me what you're doing?"

"I could teach you, but would you be willing to learn?"

"Of course I would be willing! How long does it take to learn?"

"It takes quite some time. I've been practicing this particular one for a number of years now and I've just now started to master it." Still moving in all different directions, Jun began to make his way towards Da Long until he stood right in front of him, his eyes still closed. "It takes a lot of concentration and discipline. Otherwise you might make a mistake." With lightning speed, Jun swung his arm around and stopped his hand right on the skin of Da Long's neck. "And in this art, mistakes can be deadly." Amazed, Da Long stared at Jun, who removed his hand from the boy's neck and opened his eyes. "If you're really willing to learn, I suppose we can work something out." He ruffled Da Long's hair and they began to walk back towards the house together.

\* \* \*

Once again, Jun lay in his bed, trying to fall asleep, with no luck. He looked up just in time to see a shadow enter his dark room. Before he knew what was going on, he found Da Long's sister, Xiao Jing beside him in bed. She put her hand on to his and began to kiss his face.

"Chen Wei, it's been so long, I thought we'd never be together again." Jun froze as his eyes opened wide.

"But I'm n..." Xiao Jing put her index finger to his lips, quieting him. She continued to kiss him, but stopped after a moment.

"Chen Wei, something doesn't quite seem..." Her eyes widened in shock followed by sudden realization. She stood up so fast that she almost fell over.

"I'm so sorry. I thought Chen Wei was..." she trailed off as she backed out of the room, her head lowered in apology and embarrassment.

"Please forgive me, I didn't mean to..."

"Don't worry. I..."

"Please don't tell father."

"Not a word." Sobbing, Xiao Jing hurried out of the room while Jun sat up in bed. He started laughing, although he took great effort to conceal the sound, for fear of Xiao Jing hearing him. He knew it was rude of him to laugh, but he just couldn't help it. Life had so many surprises.

## Chapter VII: Reunion

As he walked towards Kunming the next morning, Jun turned last night over in his mind. Although he had sensed affection between Chen Wei and Xiao Jing, he hadn't expected it to be this serious. He chuckled a bit about the fact that she had mixed up his room and Chen Wei's, but at the same time he felt bad for her. Her embarrassment had been genuine and she probably worried that he would tell her father. Of course he wouldn't. This was her and Chen Wei's business and he didn't feel right disclosing that. He would have to speak with her later.

\* \* \*

Jun's second day at Dragon's Inn was much the same as his first. The tables were filled with customers and it looked like Yao hadn't found a new cook yet, so he stayed in the kitchen to make the food while Jun took the customer orders and rushed them out to the different tables.

Jun labored all throughout the day, running in and out of the kitchen, his arms full of dishes, until he noticed something out of place. In one corner of the dining room, there sat a table a bit removed from the others and at it sat a figure robed in black with a hood drawn over its head. The figure's back faced the rest of

the room. Jun looked around the dining room. It appeared that the rest of the customers were keeping their distance from this table. Jun scratched his head and walked towards the table. As he approached, he realized why everyone stayed away. Lying on the table in front of the figure was a sheathed samurai kitana sword. The sword extended several feet across the table and the sheath had several characters written on it that Jun recognized to be Japanese. Next to the sword sat a teapot and one teacup, which the hooded figure periodically sipped from. Jun cleared his throat.

"What can I get you?" The hooded figure did not respond. "If you're not going to order anything then I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave. We're full today and we cannot spare any tables." The hooded figure cocked its head to one side a bit and continued to sip tea from the cup. Jun began to repeat himself. "If you're not going to..."

"I heard you the first time, thanks." The hooded figure spoke with a strong and defiant tone. Jun's eyes squinted a bit. There was something about that voice.

"Well who are you..."

"Let me tell you, Jun." Jun's eyes widened at the mention of his name. In the blink of an eye, the hooded figure threw the half empty tea cup over his shoulder at Jun's face, spun around in his chair, and thrust his leg out in a kick at Jun's torso. Jun caught the cup and blocked the kick with his leg.

Before Jun knew what had happened, the hooded figure leaped out of his chair and assaulted Jun with a barrage of arm and leg attacks. The two of them sparred back and forth for a few seconds hitting and countering each other's moves until the hooded figure kicked Jun's hand, which still held the teacup, causing it to fly through the air. The hooded figure kicked Jun in the stomach and he fell to the floor with a loud thud. As he did, he saw the hooded figure catch the teacup in one hand and finish drinking its contents. He turned, placed it back on the table, laughing as he did.

Something registered in Jun's mind. The sword, the voice, the kungfu, and the laugh. No, it couldn't be who he thought it was! He looked up to see the figure pull the hood away from his head. A long bundle of flowing white hair, spilled out from inside the hood and came to rest below the figure's shoulders. The revealed face had unusually pale skin and wore an expression of grinning mischief.

"Shozoamon Ryoto!"

"You remember me now, kid?"

"How could I forget? I don't think anyone back at the monastery ever will as long as they live!" Shozoamon smiled and laughed again.

"No they won't, will they?" He leaned forward and offered his hand. Jun took it and Shozoamon pulled him to his feet. The two of them laughed and embraced each other in a hug for a few moments until they noticed that everyone in the dining room was staring at them. Some people's mouths were open with food hanging from their lips. Shozoamon smiled and addressed the crowd.

"Everything is fine. Go back to your meals." The customers went back to their own conversations. Shozoamon turned back towards Jun. "So how long has it been? About ten years I think?"

"Something like that. I have to say that the monastery became much quieter after you left."

"I would guess so. Shifu never was one for loud noise." As he talked with Shozoamon, Jun felt a whole flood of memories overwhelm him.

\* \* \*

When he had first joined the monastery as a child, Jun had felt out of place since most of the monks were older men. At eighteen, Shozoamon had been one of the few there relatively close to his age. The two of them developed a close bond and Shozoamon had provided a sense of relief in contrast to the serious setting of the monastery. When they weren't taking lessons from Shifu, they spent their time roaming around the monastery, stretching their imaginations. Since Jun was still a child, Shozoamon indulged him in playing games like hide and seek. Some times they would talk about all sorts of things.

It was quite obvious from his name that Shozoamon hailed from Japan, but every time Jun tried to ask him how he had ended up there in the monastery, Shozoamon would just smile and change the subject. In addition, Shozoamon always carried his kitana sword with him, but would never answer questions about where he'd obtained it. Every now and then, Jun noticed that Shozoamon would sit with the sword in his hands, turning it over and over as if he were remembering something from long ago.

From the beginning though, it became obvious that Shozoamon was not cut out to become a monk. His behavior was not as pious as it should have been. He would frequently speak very loudly with other monks and take

pleasure in provoking them into arguments of almost any nature. If he found that someone had displeased him in some way, he liked to play subtle practical jokes on them. Of course, no one could ever prove him as the culprit, but Shifu had his suspicions.

One day, after having been at the monastery for about five years, Jun came back from working in the gardens and found Shozoamon walking down the steps of the main entrance to the monastery. He wore plain clothes like a farmer. Jun ran over to him.

"Shozoamon! What's with those rags?" Shozoamon looked at him and the smile vanished from Jun's face. "No! You're not leaving?"

"I'm afraid I am."

"What? Why? You can't leave!"

"Yes I must, Jun. The life here doesn't fit me so I must go find one that does."

"Is this because of Shifu?" Anger filled Jun's voice. Shozoamon knelt down on one knee in front of Jun, his voice serious, but comforting.

"No, it's not because of him. It's because of me. I've been here since I was ten and I'm now twenty-three. That's been a long enough time to know that this is not what I want. There's something out there, but I don't know what it is. Something I have to find that I won't find here. I've spoken with Shifu and he agrees. This is what's best for me." As Jun listened, tears began to roll down his face.

"And what about me?" Shozoamon smiled.

"You have a path to walk Jun, just as I do. Eventually you'll take those first steps, but now is not the time. You have a lot to learn here. Shifu is not finished with you yet."

"Take me with you. I'll go wherever you go."

"I can't take you, Jun. For now, you belong here, but I'll promise you that we will meet again some day. I don't know when or where it will be, but we'll meet."

"I'll hold you to that." Shozoamon ruffled Jun's hair and stood up.

"It's time for me to go. Farewell, Jun. May we meet again."

"Sooner than later." Shozoamon smiled again and began to walk off into the distance away from the monastery and from Jun's life. As he watched his friend walk away, Jun somehow couldn't help but feel that he'd been abandoned again.

\* \* \*

Now as he stood here ten years later, staring at his friend in Dragon's Inn, Jun felt a particular warmth and affection that had been missing from his life during all that time. He slapped Shozoamon on the back and smiled.

"Have a seat. We have to talk, but how about a bit later? We've been busy all day and my boss will kill me if I don't keep working."

"No problem. I'll be around."

"Can I bring you anything while I'm at it?"

"Just some Jiu, if you wouldn't mind."

"Be back in a second." Jun rushed towards the kitchen to fetch the Jiu, his mind racing with excitement over having found his old friend again.

For the next several hours, Jun worked, eagerly waiting for the customers to start clearing out so he could spend a few minutes with Shozoamon. As he brought food to the customers though, he couldn't help, but notice the amount of Jiu that Shozoamon drank. Whenever he'd finish one bottle, he'd call Jun over and ask for another. Jun was so busy that by the end of the day, he'd forgotten how many bottles he'd brought Shozoamon.

That night, when the last group of customers had left, Jun went over to Shozoamon and found his friend passed out, headfirst on the table, snoring. Jun sat down next to him and relaxed a bit. His muscles ached from being on his feet all day. He couldn't help feeling disappointed. He'd been eager to catch up on old times, but now it looked like that would have to wait. Jun nudged his friend's shoulder.

"Shozoamon! Shozoamon! Wake up!" Shozoamon muttered a bit and continued to snore. Jun sighed, stood up, and went into the kitchen to find Yao cleaning the dishes.

"Do we have any extra rooms upstairs for tonight?" Yao continued to work as he spoke.

"Why?"

"Someone needs one."

"Who?"

"A friend of mine." Yao rolled his eyes.

"You mean that drunk, white-haired guy seated in the corner?" Jun's voice soured a little.

"He's not a drunk. He's just had a little too much to drink."

"Precisely."

"Well, do we have any rooms or not? I'm confident he'll pay for it in the morning." Yao looked at Jun for a moment, thinking.

"Fine, but if he doesn't pay then I'm taking it from your wages. Also, tell him to put that sword away, he's scaring some of the customers!"

"Fair enough." Jun went back to Shozoamon's table and stared at his friend for a moment. There was no way Shozoamon could walk upstairs on his own, so Jun wrapped his arms around him, lifted him out of the chair, and after some difficulty, managed to drag him up the stairs and into one of the rooms. He put Shozoamon on the bed and took his shoes off for him. Shozoamon began to mutter to himself again. Jun went to the bedroom door and looked back.

"Goodnight, my friend." He smiled and closed the bedroom door.

#### Chapter VIII: A New Student

As he walked home, Jun reflected on his observations during the day. He was glad to see his old friend who seemed to be very much unchanged from their days together at the monastery, but at the same time he seemed lost and without purpose. The excessive amounts of Jiu that Shozoamon drank did concern Jun as well. All these things worried him and he didn't quite know what to do about them. He decided to check on Shozoamon in the morning and decide where to go from there.

\* \* \*

When Jun reached home, he stopped and stood outside, staring at the house in front of him. He felt immensely grateful for the kindness that Li Yuan and his family were showing him, but he also felt a twinge of guilt, as if he were taking advantage of their hospitality.

As he entered the house, Jun saw Li Yuan and Da Long sitting in two seats together. Li Yuan explained to Da Long about how Ghengis Khan and the Mongols had invaded China and established the Yuan Dynasty that would rule China until the establishment of the Ming Dynasty several decades later under Zhu Yuanzhang. Da Long listened, asking questions every now and then.

Jun smiled as he watched this. He had done the same sort of thing with Shifu years ago. He would sit, listen, and learn while Shifu explained. He saw the same eagerness in Da Long that he had felt at that age: The

desire to learn about the world around him and how it worked.

As he watched the two of them, Jun's mind began to wander to thoughts about his father and things that might have been. He smiled and spoke.

"Aren't you two up a little late?" Li Yuan turned towards him.

"Neither of us could sleep so we decided to be useful with our time. Normally we have our lessons during the day, but we make an exception when necessary." He looked at his son and smiled.

"Father knows so many things that I don't. I fear I'll never catch up to him."

"Oh you will son, and faster than you realize. Some day I will be asking you the questions." Da Long looked skeptical.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." Da Long sat silent for a moment until he turned towards Jun.

"You need to teach me something as well."

"What would you like?" Da Long thought about it for a moment.

"Teach me how to fight like you did in the woods when we first met!" Both Li Yuan and Jun laughed out loud. Da Long looked rather sheepish as Jun spoke.

"I'm afraid that would take quite a long time." Da Long's disappointment increased. "But if it's alright with your father, we might be able to begin somewhere." The smile immediately returned to Da Long's face as he turned back to face his father.

"Could he, father? Could Jun teach me kungfu?" Li Yuan rubbed his hand against his cheek, thinking.

"Given your penchant for getting yourself in trouble, I'd say this might be something you could use, provided that you find yourself in need for it. Yes, it's alright with me. I leave everything at Jun's discretion, though." Da Long could barely contain his excitement. He leapt from his seat and embraced his father. When he had finished, he went over to Jun.

"When can we start?" Jun considered this.

"Well since neither of us will probably sleep for awhile, how about now if that's fine with your father?" Da Long glanced at his father, his face pleading. Li Yuan laughed.

"Well I suppose that would be alright, but not too late Da Long. You have chores to do in the morning."

"Great! How do we start, Jun?"

"We'll go outside to the fields. That should let us practice without distraction." And with that, the two of them left the house.

For a little while they walked through the field until they found the same clearing that Jun had practiced in the other night. The air had a slight breeze and Da Long shivered a bit. He rubbed his hands together and looked to see if Jun was cold too. He did not appear to be.

Jun stood near the center of the clearing, looked around, then motioned for Da Long to stand next to him.

"This looks like a good place to start."

"What do I do now?"

"First, you listen."

"Listen? What about fighting?"

"That comes later. To fight, you have to learn. To learn, you have to listen. What I will teach you will take some time. Tonight will be only the beginning. There will be many more nights that follow.

First of all, you must always be aware of your surroundings. Always pay attention." Jun raised his eyes and tilted his head to look up at the moon. Da Long did the same. He stared up at the sky waiting for Jun to continue. Silence met his ears. He looked down to discover that Jun had disappeared. He glanced around, searching.

"You did not pay attention, Da Long." He could hear Jun's voice nearby, but Da Long's eyes could not locate the source. "Always be aware of who and what is around you." Da Long jumped as he felt a hand on his shoulder. He whirled around to see Jun standing behind him. Wide-eyed, Da Long stood silent. Jun smiled. "This is your first lesson. Now I will teach you how to apply it." Da Long nodded.

For the next hour, they practiced together, Jun teaching Da Long how to raise his level of awareness and how to balance his attention between his focus and peripheral vision. Da Long initially had a bit of trouble, but after a little while began to catch on pretty fast. This impressed Jun. Few had the ability to master these skills, but Da Long was proving to have strong potential. Time would tell.

## Chapter IX: Bottle of Jiu

Jun felt refreshed after a good night's sleep as he walked through the streets of Kunming towards Dragon's Inn. He had enjoyed teaching Da Long last night and felt certain that Da Long would make an exceptional student if given time and proper training.

The sun, rising in the sky, cast beams of light throughout the city streets. People were already going about their business, trading with each other in the local market stalls. Jun observed these stalls as he passed them. After awhile he noticed a trio of imperial guards that were making their way from stall to stall. As they approached, each stall owner's face darkened in fear. The guards would walk up to the stall owner, speak quietly with him, and after a few seconds the owner would hand over several silver taels to them. Not only did this disgust Jun, but the fact that the guards did this without any fear of retribution, made him feel worse.

When Jun entered Dragon's Inn, he spotted Shozoamon seated at the same table he'd been sitting at the day before. Jun went walked over and sat down next to him.

"Good morning. Sleep well?"

"Not too bad." Jun looked at Shozoamon. He looked groggy and hung over. His eyes stared down at the table for a while until he turned them up towards Jun.

"How about some Jiu this morning?" Jun laughed, but felt something in him begin to worry.

"I think you had enough last night."

"Nonsense! You can never have enough! Why don't you fetch me some so I can start my day!"

"So you begin and end your days drinking like that?"

"Every damn day!" Jun frowned.

"Not today."

"What do you mean?"

"You heard me. You need to sober up and lay off the drinking." Shozoamon stared at Jun for a long moment and let out a tremendous belch that wreaked of alcohol.

"I am sober!"

"Says you." Jun rolled his eyes.

"Jun, everyone will start arriving soon. I need your help in the kitchen." Yao, the innkeeper, stood at the entrance to the kitchen, his hands on his hips, waiting.

"Bring me something to drink!" Shozoamon shouted.

"I'll bring you some tea," Jun said. He glared at Shozoamon, got up, and walked towards Yao, who spoke as they entered the kitchen.

"I'm not so sure about your friend, Jun. He seems to have a penchant for rude manners."

"I'm afraid I'd have to agree."

"Who is he?"

"An old friend from long ago. I haven't seen him in many years."

"That long, eh?"

"That long."

"Just keep an eye on him."

"I will."

\* \* \*

Within the hour, people started to arrive and order meals. By midday, Jun had his arms piled high with plates, carrying them back and forth from the kitchen to the customers and then taking their dirty plates back to the kitchen for washing. Every now and then, Jun stole a glance at Shozoamon, who seemed to be sitting by himself at his table in the corner, minding his own business. He had his back to the room so Jun couldn't tell if he was awake or sleeping.

For awhile, Jun became so preoccupied between helping Yao in the kitchen and bringing back and forth dishes from the diners, that he lost track of Shozoamon. After about an hour, when he finally had a moment to walk over to his friend, he noticed that a bottle of Jiu rested on the table and Shozoamon had his hand comfortably wrapped around it. He took a giant swig from the bottle as Jun approached. Jun's face dropped and his eyes narrowed.

"Where did you get that bottle?"

"I ordered it."

"From who? I've been the only one taking orders today."

"Beats me." Shozoamon snorted a bit as he laughed to himself and took another drink. Jun was furious. While he'd been busy serving the customers, Shozoamon must have snuck into the back storage area and stolen one of the many bottles of Jiu that were stocked there.

"I'm afraid I'll have to take that back." Jun reached for the bottle, but Shozoamon pushed it from one hand to the other, shifting it away from Jun.

"I don't think so. This is mine and I'm going to keep it." Jun snorted.

"I really don't want to fight with you over this."

"Then don't." Jun reached for the Jiu, but Shozoamon moved the bottle again, away from Jun, who reached even further to grab it. Shozoamon kicked his foot and Jun fell chest-first on to the table, still reaching for the Jiu. Shozoamon now pulled it off the table and held it in the air, away from Jun. Frustrated, Jun got off the table and stood up. Shozoamon smiled and took another drink. Jun looked at his friend with a scowl.

"I'll get back to you later." And with that, Jun stormed off towards the kitchen, leaving Shozoamon to snicker and continue drinking.

### Chapter X: A Night of Changes

At closing time, after the customers had left and Jun had cleared and cleaned the tables, he approached Fei Yang again, still seated at the same table just as before, drink in hand, staring off into space. Jun grabbed a chair and sat down next to him, his hands resting on the table in front of him. Jun looked at Shozoamon and spoke.

"What's going?"

"What do you mean?"

"You and this." Jun pointed to the bottle.

"Nothing really. Just an occasional drink." Jun snorted.

"Occasional my foot. You've been drinking that all day." Jun breathed in deeply. "You wreak of it." Jun examined his friend. He was drunk, but not so much as to be incoherent. Hopefully his memory was still working.

"You've got to stop this."

"Stop what?" Shozoamon gave a lop-sided grin and took another sip. Jun saw his chance and grabbed the bottle from him.

"This! This garbage you've been drinking all day and night! You drank so much yesterday that you passed out and I had to carry you up to a room! Are you going to do this again tonight and the next night? Keep passing out and make me carry you to your room?" Shozoamon grinned and attempted to reach for the bottle.

"We'll find out." Jun pulled the bottle further away.

"No we won't." Shozoamon, annoyed, sat back in his chair.

"What do you want from me anyway, Jun?"

"I want my friend! The one I knew a long time ago! Where'd he go?"

"I'm still here."

"Are you sure? The Shozoamon I knew wouldn't have reduced himself to this drunken state. He had more pride and self-respect."

"'Had' being the key word here." Shozoamon closed his eyes for a moment and opened them again.

"What happened to you, Shozoamon? Don't you care about anything anymore? Don't you care about yourself, about our friendship? Or is this," Jun held up the bottle, "all you care about now?" Shozoamon stared intently at the bottle and licked his lips. At last, Jun put it on the table again and stood up.

"I have nothing else to say." Jun turned towards the kitchen just in time to see Yao walk into the dining room. He was about to say something when a gang of five men, all wearing dark, rough-looking robes, walked into the inn.

"We're closed," Jun said.

"Not any more," said one of the strangers. His voice was raspy and his tone threatening. His face looked rougher than leather and his right eye was missing. Jun's eyes narrowed and he turned towards Yao, whose face flushed with both annoyance and fear. The stranger who had spoken to Jun walked towards Yao. As he did, two of the other men grabbed Yao by each arm and held him there. Yao showed no sign of resistance, looking almost expectant about what was coming. While the first two men held him, the other two stood by the doorway. The fifth man who had spoken, stepped in front of Yao and looked him over. He sniffed the air.

"You smell terrible, Yao. You stink like a dirty kitchen." Yao rolled his eyes.

"Good to see you too, Tie Gong Ji. Can we get this over with?" Tie Gong Ji's eye narrowed, he frowned, and barreled his clenched fist into Yao's stomach. Yao doubled over and would have fallen to the ground if the two men hadn't been holding his arms.

"Your mouth runs like water, Yao. Care-free and foolish." Tie Gong Ji sneered. "Do you have our payment?" Yao pulled himself back up to look at Tie Gong Ji, his face tightened in frustration and defeat.

"Of course." He motioned with his eyes down to his left pocket. Tie Gong Ji reached into Yao's pocket and pulled out a small bag of silver taels. He poured them from the bag into his hand and counted through them. His

lips formed a smile. He put the taels back in the bag and looked up at Yao.

As Jun watched, he felt his face grow hot with anger at this extortion that Yao was being forced to pay, anger that this Tie Gong Ji felt no fear or guilt in his actions. He looked at Shozoamon who sat and watched. Shozoamon looked up at him and slowly shook his head. This made Jun even angrier. Shifu had warned them about these kinds of people, those without compunction or remorse that prayed on the weak and innocent. He'd seen this several times during the last week all throughout the city, but he couldn't take it anymore.

Jun began to move towards Tie Gong Ji, but stopped dead in his tracks. Jun tried to move his muscles in vain, already knowing why he couldn't. Using one of his hands, Shozoamon had just hit several of his body's vital points, causing instant, but temporary paralysis. His anger boiled over, but he was helpless to do anything. He just stood there, frozen, watching what was going on.

"Good for you, Yao. Prompt payment. You haven't tried to cheat us yet. Make sure you don't start trying to." He laughed and turned towards the door. At this moment, Jun felt his frozen body lose its balance and he came tumbling to the floor with a loud bang. This startled Tie Gong Ji and he turned around to face Jun and Shozoamon.

"Too much to drink," said Shozoamon. He made a drinking motion with his hands and face. Tie Gong Ji laughed and moved towards the doorway again. The two men holding Yao eased their grip on his arms and followed Tie Gong Ji out the door. Finally, the two men that were guarding the entrance left as well.

After a minute or two, Shozoamon leaned down next to Jun and tapped his vital points, releasing Jun from his paralysis. Jun sprung up from the floor, hitting Shozoamon square in the face. Shozoamon fell backwards into a sitting position, holding his face in surprised pain. Jun exploded.

"What the hell's the matter with you! You saw what happened! How could you let them do that?! How could you?!" Shozoamon took his hands away from his face and looked at Jun, his voice calm.

"I did it because it's not our business."

"Not our business?!"

"That was a matter between Yao and Tie Gong Ji."

"Are you blind or just stupid?! Shifu warned us about those types of people. How could you just stand by and..."

"Things are different out here in the world. Lessons must be adapted and rethought." Jun stared at his friend in disbelief. He got up from the floor, turned, and moved towards the doorway. Shozoamon watched him.

"Jun, where are you going?" Jun turned and stared at his friend, sadness in his eyes.

"Anywhere but here." He continued to move towards the door, but stopped and turned around one more time to look at Shozoamon.

"Shifu would be disappointed. I already am." And with that, he went through the door and out into the night.

The second he left Dragon's Inn, Jun broke into a sprint, moving quickly through the various streets, looking for Tie Gong Ji and his gang. After a few minutes of searching he found them. They were inside another inn, extorting money from the owner in the same manner that they had from Yao. Jun watched through a window, his anger flowing, but controlled now.

As Tie Gong Ji and his thugs exited the inn, Jun merged into the background, becoming one with the shadows. For the next several hours, he followed Tie Gong Ji and his gang, watching them as they went around Kunming, collecting money from various inns and other establishments. He watched them, observed them, seeing what methods they employed. He kept his anger in check, knowing that if he let it grow, he might lose control of himself. Shifu had taught him to master his emotions, but this was the first time he'd faced a challenge such as this, watching Tie Gong Ji and his gang prey on the innocent. He had to muster all his strength and self-control to not let his emotions get the best of him.

As the night grew older, Tie Gong Ji and his gang came to the edge of the city where they had horses tied to trees. They mounted the horses and road off into the countryside. As they rode of into the distance, Jun looked around. There were no other horses. He shook is head in frustration. This was going to be a long walk. With help from the moon overhead, he fixed his eyes on the tracks left by the horses and broke into a sprint, following them out into the surrounding countryside.

\* \* \*

As Jun ran, he moved his eyes around, observing his surroundings. He was running through a field with grass growing several feet in height. Every so often, he passed a patch of trees that seemed to dot the otherwise open landscape. The wind blew, moving the grass back and

forth in a ghost-like manner. He could hear the sound of crickets and the occasional hoot of an owl.

Jun looked back towards the ground. The horse tracks were fresh and easy to see. The tall grass around him made it difficult to see where the tracks led off to in the distance, so he had to content himself with watching the ground immediately in front of him in order to follow the gang's path.

After about three miles of running, he came towards a set of hills that ran off for about a mile in both directions. The grass became shorter and he could now see the gang's tracks leading up one of the hills and then disappearing behind the horizon. Stopping to catch his breath for a moment, he looked around. There was no one else around for at least several miles in each direction. Off in the distance, he could see faint lights coming from Kunming. Jun breathed in one more time and again broke into a sprint, following the tracks up the hill.

When he reached the top, he stopped and looked around. The gang had completely disappeared. Frustrated, Jun narrowed his eyes and began to scout the area. After a moment, his ears perked up. He could hear the sound of voices nearby, but couldn't quite pinpoint the source. He began to move around, following the voices as they slowly grew in volume until he reached a narrow crack in the rocks that appeared to be the entrance to a cave embedded in the hillside. Jun entered and the sound of the voices grew. He could also see lights ahead. As he approached the lighted area, he ducked down beside a pile of rocks jutting out from the wall and observed his surroundings.

The gang of thieves stood in a large open cavern. Light was provided by torches that had been placed on holders crudely fastened to the rock walls. Jun looked around and couldn't believe his eyes. Piled on the floor of the cavern was the loot that they had stolen, most likely over a period of several years. There were bags of silver and gold taels, furniture, jewelry, all different kinds of items imaginable.

Jun watched as the thieves eagerly threw down the bags containing what they had stolen and extorted that evening. The bags looked heavy and the thieves were glad to take the weight off their bodies.

One of them, after putting down his bag, opened it and began to ruffle through its contents, his eyes shining with greed. Tie Gong Ji's hand struck him across the back of his head, knocking him to the ground. Stunned for a moment, he sat up and looked at Tie Gong Ji while

rubbing his sore head. Tie Gong Ji stared at him with annoyance and spoke, his tone stern.

"No one takes their share until we deliver the tribute to Xiong Ba. Then we take our share! You know that!" The thief sitting on the ground spoke back, his voice defiant.

"Why do we always have to pay him first? We did all the work! We should be paying ourselves first!" He looked around the room at the other men, hoping for agreement. They were all stone silent. He frowned. Tie Gong Ji stuck him across the face this time.

"We pay him first because if we don't, he won't allow us to steal. He'll lock us up with the rest of the scum. You wouldn't want that now would you?" He leaned closer, sneering at the man on the ground. The man's face hung in defeat and he was silent. Tie Gong Ji turned to look at the others. "Let's pack up Xiong Ba's tribute and make sure we send it out as soon as possible. He doesn't like to be kept waiting." The men nodded and began to separate their loot from the bags into piles on the ground, laughing and joking with each other as they did so.

As he watched them, Jun felt his anger beginning to surface again, but he was able to control it this time. He wanted nothing more than to reveal himself and make them all pay for what they had done, but something else in him said that now was not the time.

These men needed to face justice, but their time would come. Still feeling like he wanted to deal with the thieves now, Jun's legs began to move his body back towards the cave's entrance, causing his temptation for rash action to dissipate. The lights from inside the cave grew dimmer until he finally reached the edge of the cave, turned around, and walked back out into the open night.

\* \* \*

About an hour later, Jun found himself walking through the streets of Kunming again. It was late and everyone was indoors for the evening. The streets were almost completely dark except for a bit of moonlight which faintly illuminated the buildings. Jun collected his thoughts. He was utterly disgusted not only with the openness and ease with which Tie Gong Ji and his gang operated, but also the fact that they faced no opposition in doing so.

From what he'd heard, the governor, Xiong Ba, allowed and even profited from what these people did. He sighed. It wasn't just that either. He was tired of all the bad things he saw in the city. How the imperial guards

abused their power, intimidated people, harassed them, and extorted money from them. What saddened him most was that no one fought back. No one opposed the evil that was going on.

Jun continued to walk, thinking to himself, until an unexpected noise stirred him from his thoughts. Off in the distance, he heard a girl's muffled voice trying to scream out loud, but not able to. Jun narrowed his eyes and ran through the streets at break-neck speed, following the girl's voice.

When Jun reached the source of the voice, he was horrified to see an imperial guard with a young girl about sixteen years old in an alley, trying to force himself on to her. On the ground next to them lay the body of an older man. He lay limp and motionless. The guard pushed his body against the girl's began kissing her face. She sunk her teeth into one of his ears. He screamed in pain and slapped her across the face, causing blood to pour from her nose. He grabbed her arms and pulled her body against his again, his voice cruel and savage.

"You're mine now!"

"No she's not!" Startled by the voice behind him, the guard tried to turn, but never made it. With lightning speed, Jun struck him in the back and kicked the backs of his legs, breaking both his knees. The guard tumbled to the ground and Jun struck him in the head before he hit the ground, face first. He was out cold.

Jun stood there for a moment and then knelt down to look at the older man. He was fine. Perhaps one or two minor injuries, but he would be fine. It appeared that the guard had struck him across the back of the head before proceeding to the girl.

Jun stood up and stared at the girl, who was in too much terror and shock to speak. She slid down to her knees, her arms wrapped around herself, crying out loud. Jun knelt down next to her and put his arms around her. She looked at him, her eyes soaked with tears, and wholeheartedly wrapped her arms around him. Jun held her for several minutes until she eventually spoke.

" I-is m-my father okay?"

"He'll be fine. A few bandages and he'll be good as new." The girl's eyes nervously darted towards the guard lying on the ground.

"W-what about h-him?" Jun turned towards the guard and stared at the limp body, thinking about what to do with him until finally, a smile crossed his face.

## Chapter XI: The Dragon

The next day started out the same as any other for the people in Kunming and they went about their business as usual. Around midday, something began to happen. It started as a mere whisper from ear to ear, moving slowly at first until it grew like wildfire and people were telling each other openly. This caused people to drop what they were doing and head towards the center of the city where there was a large open square for gathering. Eventually as word spread, the streets became flooded with people, all moving towards the square until it was packed full with onlookers, all staring at one thing.

In the center of the square was a wooden pole about five feet tall, anchored securely to the ground. Attached to the pole was a lone imperial guard, rope tied tightly around his upper torso, holding him to the pole. His eyes were closed as he lay there either unconscious or asleep. No one knew for sure.

After awhile, the guard's lips twitched and his eyelids began to flicker until he finally opened them and began to slowly move his head, looking at his surroundings. Thousands of eyes stared back at him. Sweat poured down the guard's face as he jerked his head back and forth and struggled without success to free himself from his bonds. He looked up to the sea of faces for help, but after awhile realized that none would be coming.

He struggled for a while until his muscles grew tired and he stopped moving. Breathing heavily, he stared at everyone around him and looked down towards the ground where he noticed for the first time a piece of scroll parchment resting on his chest that was hanging by a string around his neck. There were three large characters scrawled in ink across the parchment: qiang jian fan, "rapist." In the bottom right corner there was a much smaller character written at the bottom: The Dragon."

The guard stared down at the parchment for a minute and looked up at the crowd. More sweat poured down his face. Among the crowd, a subtle tension began to rise, starting almost as a mere thought and growing in intensity until it was bursting at the seams. The moment was ripe, but no one had the courage to do anything.

As if on cue, a rotten apple flew through the air and struck the guard square in the jaw. He yelped in pain and his head hung towards one shoulder. Everyone looked around, but no one knew where the apple had come from. It

didn't matter, though. Someone had taken the first throw and now it was everyone else's turn.

The guard looked up just in time to see a barrage of rotten vegetables fly towards him from the crowd. As he was being pummeled, the crowd cheered. A tremendous explosion of frustration had been released. Mixed in with the crowd stood Jun, his head and body covered by an old, torn robe. As he watched everyone around him continue to throw food, he smiled, took another rotten apple from his robe, and hurled it through the air along with everything else.

\* \* \*

When he came home that night, Jun found Da Long eagerly awaiting him. Jun smiled.

"Now what are you waiting for, I wonder?"

"You know."

"Then I guess we can start." The two of them left the house and went out to the clearing in the field where they had been practicing every night for the last week or so. Jun was impressed with Da Long's progress. He had thought their first night of training might be a fluke, but Da Long had consistently proven every night that he was a capable student, learning everything that Jun had taught him with little need for correction. Jun wondered what this young man's fate would be. He had the potential to become a great martial artist, but Jun could tell that Da Long himself did not yet know in his heart what he wanted to do with his life. That was fine though, he would have plenty of time to figure that out later.

Tonight as they practiced together and Jun instructed him, Da Long noticed that his teacher's thoughts seemed to be somewhere else.

"Jun. Are you okay? You seem distracted." Jun turned to look at Da Long and smiled.

"I'm fine. I just had a good day. That's all."

\* \* \*

Jun's good day turned into a good week. Everyone in Kunming was talking about what had happened with the guard tied to the pole and there were many words of praise for whoever had done it. And that wasn't the end of it either. Rumors began to spread about The Dragon, a dark shadow who moved like a ghost across the rooftops, watching over the people and stopping those who harmed them. Gangs and thieves now moved with more caution through the city and even the imperial guards were now acting with unusual self-restraint.

As Jun walked to Dragon's Inn each day, his ears took in the conversations of people on the street talking about the Dragon. He passed a pair of old men who were arguing with each other one day.

"Well I think he's going to bring a pile of misery down upon us all! The Dragon's attacked imperial guards and that's a punishable offense."

"Well I would think an imperial guard who attacks one of us should be punished! No one else cares. Not even the governor, Xiong Ba!"

"Sshh! Don't speak of him so loud. You'll be locked up!"

"We are already locked up in this city. Xiong Ba's guards rob the men and rape the woman and what's worse, he lets gangs and thieves take advantage of us! If there ever was a time to speak of him, it is now! No one's doing anything except the Dragon and we need to support him." Jun smiled as he kept walking. It felt good to be appreciated.

Later on that day at Dragon's Inn as Jun was serving customers their food, Shozoamon, sitting at his usual corner table, noticed that something was different about Jun. He seemed happier and more content than when they'd first met. When Jun passed by his table, Shozoamon caught his attention.

"How's your day going?"

"Pretty good. And you?"

"Not bad. Been an interesting week though, hasn't it?"

"Why do you say that?"

"People have been talking about this Dragon fellow. How he's been helping people out all over the city. What do you think about it?" Jun thought for a moment and replied, staring Shozoamon straight in the eye as he spoke.

"It's nice to finally see someone doing the right thing instead of sitting around and doing nothing." And with that, Jun walked back towards the kitchen, leaving Shozoamon with a sour expression on his face.

Jun and Shozoamon didn't speak to each other for the rest of the day. As the hours passed and the sun began to sink in the sky, the customers began to leave and Jun started his usual tasks of cleaning the dining room and helping Yao clean up in the kitchen. When he was done, he left the kitchen, expecting to see Shozoamon still seated at his table, but he wasn't there. Jun heard footsteps on

the floor above him and then the sound of a door slamming shut.

As soon as the sun disappeared and the sky was bathed in moonlight, Jun left Dragon's Inn and quickly made his way through the streets of Kunming to an older section where there were many abandoned buildings that were falling apart. Looking around to make sure no one had followed him he disappeared into one of the buildings.

Once inside, Jun made his way through the darkness, up a pair of tired, creaking wooden stairs, and went towards an old empty room, hidden in the back of the building. There, he picked up a small bundle and unwrapped it, revealing a long black robe and a cloak with a hood. He unrolled the robe, put it on over himself, then put the cloak over his shoulders. It covered his entire body and he pulled the hood over the top of his head, casting a dark shadow over his face.

He left the room and went to the roof of the building where he stood on one of the ledges, his cloak blowing in the wind while he surveyed the city around him. It was time to begin his rounds.

He leapt from the ledge of the old building, across an empty alley four stories below and landed on the roof of an adjacent building. As he landed, he broke into a sprint allowing him to leap from building to building in a matter of seconds. Jun did this for several hours a night looking for help where it was needed.

## Chapter XII: Placing Bets

Later on, as Jun came back home, he entered the house and was heading towards his room when he heard the sound of faint sobbing coming from another room. Curious, he made his way towards the sound.

He entered the kitchen and was surprised to find Xiao Jing seated at the kitchen table, sobbing. Jun turned around to give her privacy and started to quietly leave the kitchen.

"You don't have to tip-toe away. I know you're there." Jun stopped dead in his tracks. He hadn't been that noisy had he? Xiao Jing continued.

"You can sit down if you want. I wouldn't mind some company." Jun turned and went to the table, sitting next to her. There was silence for awhile before anyone spoke.

"What's on your mind?"

"I'm a little embarrassed to say."

"I can leave if you want."

"Please don't. I've bottled this up for too long and I need to tell someone."

"What about your father?"

"I'm not afraid to tell him, but still, I just feel awkward trying to do so."

"It's about you and Chen Wei, isn't it?" Xiao Jing sat silent for a moment before she spoke.

"Yes it is. I also want to apologize to you about the other night. I shouldn't have..."

"No apology is needed. I understand. It was an honest mistake. That's all." Xiao Jing smiled upon hearing this.

"Thank you."

"You love Chen Wei, don't you?"

"Of course. I'd marry him if he'd only ask."

"He hasn't?"

"No. That's what's been bothering me. I know father would approve immediately, but Chen Wei has to ask me first and I don't know why he hasn't." Jun thought about this for a moment, but couldn't think of anything to say. It was indeed strange. Why was Chen Wei waiting?

\* \* \*

Later that night, as Jun lay in bed, trying to fall asleep, he heard noise coming from outside his room. He got up and peered out into the hallway just in time to see Chen Wei heading outside, fully dressed. Curious, Jun pulled on some clothes and followed.

Chen Wei moved through the farm fields, probably not wanting to risk being caught on the main road alone at this time of night. Jun stealthily followed, keeping a fair amount of distance between the two of them. After awhile, he realized that they were heading towards Kunming, but for what reason, Jun couldn't guess. He pondered this as he followed Chen Wei.

From what he had observed in the past few weeks, Chen Wei spent most of his days tending to the farm surrounding Li Yuan's home. He got up early in the morning and came home late at night. He would take a few minutes to eat food left over from supper and then head straight to bed. The only person he talked to in any great measure was Xiao Jing. Jun had observed them several times and could see the intimate bond the two of them shared, despite never actually showing any outward sign of affection in public.

When they entered Kunming, Chen Wei made his way through a series of streets, leading to a seedier section of the city. On both sides of the streets, the buildings

were dilapidated and had fallen into disrepair long ago, but despite their appearance, there were men going in and out of the doorways and from inside there came the sound of voices and drunken laughter.

Outside some of the doorways stood women with certain parts of their bodies seductively on display. Several of them tried to catch Jun's eye as he passed. He smiled and they smiled back. Some of them examined him with their eyes and whispered to each other. Jun watched them for a moment as he walked and then turned his head to see Chen Wei disappear down a side street.

Jun turned the corner of the side street just in time to see Chen Wei go through a doorway in the side of a building. The shutters on the windows were closed, but light streamed through several cracks in the wood. There were voices. Jun walked up to the window shutters and peered through one of the cracks. The room beyond lay bare with no furniture. There were about twenty men standing around in a group. Jun saw Chen Wei walk towards the group and there were a series of greetings that Jun couldn't quite hear.

After a few minutes of talking, the men moved to form a clearing in the center of the room. They all took out bags filled with silver taels and Jun saw that one man had a pair of dice, with painted spots on each side, in his hands. The men all pulled out certain amounts of their taels and began to place bets. Each of them would take turns throwing the dice and Jun watched with amusement at the looks on their faces depending on how the dice had rolled. Some were smiling with pleasure while others were twisted in frustration or anger. This continued for some time. Some winning, and some losing. Chen Wei took a few turns at rolling the dice and did fairly well. After awhile, it looked like he'd made a decent profit from this endeavor.

Some time later, Chen Wei collected his earnings, bid the others farewell, and left. He didn't see Jun hiding in the shadows as he left the side street, heading towards another building. Jun followed him down several more streets until Chen Wei entered another building.

Once again Jun watched from outside. This time he saw a very small makeshift arena made from bails of hay. In the center there were two roosters tearing each other apart. Cheering and booing men filled the small arena, watching the two animals fight. Chen Wei went to a certain individual in the crowd and placed a bet on one of the roosters. Jun closed his eyes, hating to see two innocent

animals being forced to kill each other. He'd been taught that all life was sacred, but at this particular place, it seemed to be quite cheap and expendable.

After awhile, Chen Wei left this place as well and Jun followed for the next hour or so as he made his way across the city, stopping at various places along the way until finally, he started to make his way towards the countryside again, heading back towards home.

Jun was fascinated by the journey that he'd taken tonight. He had seen and been to places that he'd only heard about, but never seen before. Shifu had told him about all types of things one could expect to encounter and Jun had eagerly listened, but it wasn't till now that he fully understood the things that he'd been told. He saw the way that certain people lived and the excesses to which they pleased themselves, but instead of feeling disgusted and disdainful, he found himself pitying and wanting to help them. They were people after all and not animals, although sometimes it seemed debatable.

\* \* \*

Once he was out of the city, Chen Wei made his way back home through the farm fields again, walking more slowly this time with his head hanging towards the ground. Jun followed from a safe distance behind him. After observing Chen Wei's activities throughout the night, Jun could tell that Chen Wei had lost more money than he'd earned.

After some time, Chen Wei's feet came to a stop and he dropped down to the ground, sobbing. Jun watched him for some time, wishing he could comfort Chen Wei, but knowing that he couldn't reveal his presence. As he sobbed, Chen Wei's voice was faint, but Jun managed to catch what he was whispering.

"Why? Why does it never work out? When will I finally catch a break?" He was silent for a moment before he spoke again. "We will be free, Xiao Jing. You and I, we will be free someday." Chen Wei took out the bag in which he carried several silver taels and examined the meager contents. He closed his eyes for a moment, squeezed the bag in his hand, stood up, and continued to walk through the fields towards home.

This was the final piece of the puzzle that Jun needed. He'd been watching Chen Wei gamble all night and had been wondering why, when it should have been so obvious all along. Chen Wei hadn't asked Xiao Jing to marry him yet because he felt he wasn't able to. Although Li Yuan considered him a son, the truth was that Chen Wei wasn't

his natural son and everyone in the surrounding area knew it. Chen Wei lived with Li Yuan and his family and took care of their farm, but he himself had no wealth. Nothing to offer Xiao Jing financially. No independent way of supporting a family without living in Li Yuan's house.

Although it was a ridiculous way to try and make money, Chen Wei seemed to think gambling was the only way in which to make more for himself so that he would finally feel comfortable about supporting Xiao Jing and a family on his own.

Judging by tonight's events though, Chen Wei had finished with less than he'd started with. Clearly, things weren't going his way. Jun looked up at the moon and stars in the sky for a moment and then headed back towards the house, thinking to himself.

### Chapter XIII: Reconciliation

Several nights later, Jun wore his dark robe and cloak, leaping from roof to roof, enjoying the night breeze that hit him as he soared through the air between buildings.

So far, tonight hadn't been very active. As word of his Dragon persona spread, crime had started to take a dramatic dive. There were still many things that went on, but not at the same frequency as when he first started. There were still thieves, murderers, and gangs out there, but they moved more discretely, making it harder for Jun to find them. The imperial guards were also better-behaved than before, but some of them still couldn't resist causing trouble.

What worried Jun though weren't the whispers about the Dragon, but those surrounding Xiong Ba. Reward posters had been put up around the city, offering vast sums of money in return for the capture of the Dragon, and Jun knew that Xiong Ba was behind them. It was whispered that he was growing increasingly frustrated and angry about the Dragon's interference in the way he ran Kunming, but no one knew for sure since Xiong Ba almost never left the governor's residence. Few people could even remember what he looked like. Jun brushed these thoughts aside as he made his way across the city, looking for signs of trouble.

After awhile, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. Someone was following him. Jun quickly jumped across another set of roofs and rolled over the edge of the building, falling down three stories, and dropping silently into the shadows of a deserted side street.

A few seconds later, whoever was following him did the same thing and Jun waited in the shadows, watching. To his surprise though, as the robed figure dived from the roof, he fell straight towards Jun, his body posed in an attack position. Not expecting this, Jun shifted to defense mode right as the robed figure landed next to him and began assaulting him with a mixture of hand and leg attacks. For a few seconds they fought until Jun jumped through the air away from the robed figure, landing about ten feet away. Jun turned around, took off his hood and smiled.

"What are you doing here, Shozoamon?" The robed figure stepped towards Jun, until they were standing about two feet apart. Jun saw the kitana sword hanging at the figure's side. The figure removed its hood.

"You knew it was me all along, Jun?"

"I should have, but I didn't realize it until you attacked. Plus that sword of yours is a dead giveaway." Shozoamon smiled and thought to himself for a moment.

"Hmm, you're right. Well there's always next time." Shozoamon sized up Jun, looking at his robe and cloak. "I see you've copied my style." He stared down at his own robes, which were the same color and design. Jun laughed.

"Do you know how easy it is to find a black robe like yours and mine!? They're sold all over the city!" The two of them began to walk down the empty side street. There was silence for awhile. Jun couldn't think of anything to say. He was still mad at Shozoamon over what had happened at Dragon's Inn.

"How's life as the Dragon?" Shozoamon spoke quite casually, although there was an edge of tension in his voice. Neither of them looked at the other.

"You know about that?"

"Of course. It wasn't that hard to figure out. After seeing your reaction in Dragon's Inn the other night and then hearing all these stories about the Dragon and how he protects the innocent. Not hard to figure out at all." They continued to walk.

"Why do you do it, Jun?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. You, the dark robe and cloak, leaping across rooftops, and fighting crime. Why?"

"I'm surprised you don't remember. Shifu taught us about these things years ago. About fighting injustice, standing up for those who cannot. Have you forgotten all that or is it just buried somewhere deep inside that head

of yours?" Jun could feel his anger bubbling again as he spoke, but he restrained himself from saying more.

"I haven't forgotten, but you have to understand that things are different out here in the real world. Life is not a monastery. There are many things that go on that we have to accept."

"True, there are many things that go on, whether we like them or not, but that's no reason to be complacent and allow bad things to happen to good people, especially if you have the power to stop that from happening. You of all people should understand that."

"I understand it, but things are different now." Jun looked at Shozoamon and frowned.

"You know, Shozoamon, I think when you left the monastery all those years ago, you had a path to follow. You didn't know exactly what it was at the time, but you were eager and had faith that you would find it, but I think somewhere along the way during all this time you've completely lost track of who you are and where you were going. Do you yourself even know anymore?" Shozoamon was silent as Jun continued.

"It's not enough just to wander. Purpose is what gives our lives any meaning. You asked me why I leap from rooftops at night? It's because it gives me purpose. I feel like I can help others and make a difference out there. You and I were given great gifts from Shifu and the others at the monastery. How we use those gifts is how we honor the sacrifices they made in time, patience, and dedication to train both of us. Do you really want to dishonor all they've done?" Jun rolled his eyes and heaved a sigh of disappointment. "I don't know, my friend. Perhaps you already have." Jun turned his back on Shozoamon and began to walk in the opposite direction.

"What do you want?!" Shozoamon's voice was loud and firm. Jun could hear the anger and guilt resonating from it. "What the hell do you want from me, Jun?!" Jun stopped and turned around to find Shozoamon standing in front of him again. "What do you want, Jun! What the hell do you think the two of us can possibly do?! Tell me, dammit! Tell me!" His eyes narrowed in anger and he was breathing heavily with his fists clenched. Jun's response was calm and cool.

"I just want my friend back, Shozoamon. The one I knew all those years ago. That's all I want." Jun studied Shozoamon's facial expressions and body language. Something was going on deep inside his mind. Perhaps memories and ideas long suppressed were resurfacing. Jun

couldn't tell for sure, but at that moment, something seemed to snap in Shozoamon. There was a fire in his eyes that Jun hadn't seen since Shozoamon had left the monastery years ago, eager to start his new life, a life with purpose. Jun saw that fire in his eyes and felt his heart warm. He had gotten through and it looked as if he'd managed to finally find his old friend.

Jun could see the colliding emotions and thoughts going through Shozoamon's mind, unsure of what was to come next. Taking the initiative, he wrapped his arms around Shozoamon and held him in an embrace for several long minutes.

"It's good to see you again, old friend," he whispered.

#### Chapter XIV: A Change in Fortune

"Why are we here again? We should be making our rounds in the city." Tie Gong Ji struck the man across the back of his head.

"Because Kunming's become too dangerous, idiot! Things keep getting worse and worse. First there was one and now there are two of these so-called Dragons. It's too dangerous for us to go on our usual rounds."

"So we've taken to ambushing instead, huh?" One of the other men rolled his eyes. Tie Gong Ji turned to look at him.

"Exactly. Since we can't follow our usual scheme, we have to adjust. Xiong Ba has made it clear that he still expects the same level of tribute despite our difficulties and I'm inclined to oblige him. You don't want him coming after you."

"Well what about the loot we've got stored back in the cave, we could give him some of..."

"Nonsense! That's our portion we've sweated for and we're not going to share it with him or anyone else for that matter!"

"So why doesn't Xiong Ba just deal with these two Dragons then, so we can go back to business as usual?"

"I don't know. I don't know." One of the men looked up at the sky. The sun was sinking on the horizon, but hadn't disappeared altogether yet.

"It's kind of risky to wait here in the trees and ambush travelers on this road isn't it? It's not even dark yet."

"Better to try now. Most people aren't stupid enough to travel this way at night." And so, Tie Gong Ji

and his gang waited for awhile, looking for an unsuspecting traveler they could rob.

As the sun finally disappeared and the moon began to make its way to the top of the sky, the gang noticed a lone, hunched-over figure wearing a dark robe and cloak, carrying a walking stick while hobbling along the dirt road. Tie Gong Ji smiled and turned to his men. "Let's see what we can do." The men took their positions and prepared to strike.

Tie Gong Ji made his way through the trees and stepped out on to the road, about fifty feet behind the hobbling figure. As he approached his prey from behind, he could hear the figure humming a song he didn't recognize. He thought it was somewhat comical that this person seemed so happy and didn't even see what was about to happen. Tie Gong Ji broke into a sprint and leapt into the air to attack the figure, but to his surprise, the figure stepped sideways, causing Tie Gong Ji to come crashing to the ground, injuring one of his legs. He tried to get up, but the robed figure already had one foot pinned against his throat. Gasping for air, Tie Gong Ji looked up at the figure. His voice was hoarse.

"You're one of them aren't you? One of the Dragons, aren't you?" The figure said nothing, but continued to hum the same tune again. Tie Gong Ji rotated his eyes and could see his men sneaking up on the figure from behind. His lips curled upwards into a smile and then drooped downwards into a frown.

Another robed and cloaked figure had appeared from nowhere and was engaging his men in hand to hand combat and in almost no time had dropped them all to the ground, unconscious. Meanwhile the original figure kept its foot on his throat without moving at all. The second figure came to stand next to the first one and they both stared down at Tie Gong Ji. The first figure had stopped humming. Tie Gong Ji felt sweat rolling down his face.

"What are you going to do to me?" His voice was shrill and weak. The two figures looked at each other and then down at him again. He felt the figure's foot increase pressure on his throat until he couldn't breath anymore. He choked and his vision went dark.

\* \* \*

As Tie Gong Ji opened his eyes, he felt a bit strange. He sat up and looked down to discover he was stark naked and lying in the same spot where he'd been ambushed by the Two Dragons. Shocked, he glanced around him to find the other members of his gang all lying in the

road, completely naked as well. The sun shone in the sky overhead and they must have been lying there for quite some time.

He heard the sound of horses and quickly turned his head to see a caravan of merchants passing by on the road. They saw him and began laughing out loud, pointing to him, and the rest of his men. Tie Gong Ji quickly covered himself with his hands and leaned his head forward in shame.

"Hey boss, you okay?" Tie Gong Ji turned his head to see that one of his men had woken up as well.

"I'm fine. What the hell happened?"

"It was those Two Dragons, remember boss? They ambushed us, I think. First there was one, and then there were two. Damn fast, though! Lightning fast!" Tie Gong Ji scratched his head.

"Well as long as they didn't..." Tie Gong Ji's eyes widened. Forgetting his nakedness, he jumped to his feet and began to run with all his speed and strength.

"Hey boss, where are you going?" But Tie Gong Ji didn't hear him. He took off across the countryside, making his way up into the nearby hillside until he finally reached the entrance to the cave where they stored their loot. He gasped. The cavern was completely empty. Everything had been taken. Tie Gong Ji surveyed the cavern and saw a piece scroll parchment lying on the floor. He picked it up and looked at it. There were two characters scrawled across it: Xie Xie, "Thank you." In the bottom right corner there were two smaller characters: Two Dragons.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Chen Wei woke up and went about his usual routine before heading out to work in the fields. He sat in the kitchen and ate a small breakfast made by Xiao Jing. She sat with him at the table and he stared at her intently while he ate. Soon, Xiao Jing, he thought. Soon we'll be together. He reached his hand across the table and took hold of hers. She smiled and squeezed his hand.

A few minutes later, he left the house and walked around to the backside of the house where he kept his farming implements. It was a beautiful day and the sun was just rising up over the horizon. Although the weather would be extremely hot during midday, he always loved to work in the mornings like this when it wasn't too hot yet.

He stopped in front of the area where the implements were stored and was about to grab one when he

spotted a leather bag about six inches in diameter hanging on the wall. On the bag, there was a small piece of scroll parchment attached to the strings with the characters "Chen Wei" written across it. Surprised, yet curious, Chen Wei took the bag down from where it was hanging and opened it. He almost fell over. Inside was what looked to be about two hundred silver taels. He was dumbstruck. Where had this come from? He reached his hand inside the bag and found another piece of scroll parchment, rolled up. He took it out, unrolled it, and read it.

"Chen Wei. Thought you might need this. Don't be afraid to take it. Consider it an all-purpose loan." In the bottom right corner it was signed, "Two Dragons." At first, Chen Wei didn't know what to think or do. He couldn't believe this. He'd heard of the Two Dragons and what they'd been doing in Kunming, but he couldn't believe that he would ever have an encounter with them. It just didn't seem possible. What puzzled him even more though was how they knew about his need. It didn't matter now, though. If these Two Dragons were as good as everyone spoke about them then they had given him the greatest gift possible. Chen Wei set the bag down and rushed back towards the front of the house.

He entered the kitchen to find Xiao Jing cleaning up from his breakfast. He went over and wrapped his arms around her, smiling. She was surprised at first, but smiled as well and turned around to face him.

"Chen Wei, what are you doing here? I thought you'd gone out to work in the fields?"

"That can wait till later. Xiao Jing, I have something to ask you."

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Chen Wei and Xiao Jing announced their engagement. Li Yuan and Da Long were both ecstatic and everyone was in a good mood that night. They decided to set their wedding for the following month for there was much to prepare before they were married. Chen Wei spoke with Li Yuan and they decided to rent the farm lands out to some people from the surrounding countryside. Chen Wei spoke of starting his own business. He wasn't quite sure what he could do, but Li Yuan marveled at the young man's newfound burst of strength and confidence. Things seemed to be taking a turn for the better.

## Chapter XV: Revelation

Apparently, it wasn't only Chen Wei's fortunes that had improved because the same morning that he had found the bag of silver taels, people all over Kunming had awoken to find small bags of taels, furniture, and other items placed at their doorstep. These items had not been signed like Chen Wei's, but everyone suspected who was behind it and as a result, the reputation of the Two Dragons grew and grew along with the population's confidence and courage.

Jun found it common to be walking to work in the mornings and hear various conversations about the Two Dragons and the good deeds they were doing all over the city for the people. Along with this increased praise there also came more direct and open criticism of Xiong Ba and the corruption and crime he had fostered over the years. There was even talk of action. The Two Dragons stood against the bad things that Xiong Ba had allowed to go on and now the people were openly becoming fed up with him and his policies. Of course, people didn't openly criticize in the presence of government officials or imperial guards, but once they were gone, the conversations would start up again, growing in intensity day by day. One afternoon, while working at Dragon's Inn, Jun was clearing the dishes from a table when he happened to overhear a group of men talking at a nearby table.

"Yeah, well something has got to be done about Xiong Ba. Although these Two Dragons are doing a lot for this city, he's still bleeding us with his taxes and besides, these Two Dragons can't be everywhere at once. Things still go on. What we need is a new governor." Another one of the men interrupted his companion.

"But to do that, you need to get an Imperial decree from the emperor. Good luck getting one of those! I heard that Quan Tian tried to obtain one years ago to get rid of Xiong Ba, but no one ever heard from him again! Xiong Ba's got too many friends in the Imperial Court!"

Jun froze. Quan Tian was his father's name! Could it be the same? Acting casual, he walked over to the table of men.

"Excuse me, but I couldn't help overhearing you mention someone called Quan Tian?"

"Yes we did. Do you know him?"

"The name sounds familiar, but I can't remember where I've heard it before."

"He used to be a high ranking official here with the old governor before Xiong Ba took over, about fifteen, sixteen years ago, I'd say. He saw Xiong Ba for what he was and went to try and convince the emperor to replace him, but after he left, no one ever heard from him again. He had a child though, a son I think, but no one knows what happened to him either. You should ask your boss, Yao, the innkeeper though, he and Quan Tian were good friends."

"They were?"

"Yeah, from what I hear." Jun couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Quan Tian and his other friend, umm, what was his name? It was, uh...Li Yuan." At hearing this, Jun almost had a heart attack. Both Yao and Li Yuan had known his father? Why had they never told him? How did these men sitting here know all this, though?

"If you don't mind my asking, how do you know all these things?"

"All of us used to work for the governor. Now most of us are retired and have moved on to other things. I have to say though, things were much better before Xiong Ba. Much better."

"Thanks," Jun said to the table of men. He turned and walked straight into the kitchen where he found Yao cleaning a pile of dishes. Jun's tone was laced with anger.

"You knew my father, didn't you?!"

"What?" Yao turned to look at Jun, his eyes widening in surprise.

"You and Li Yuan knew my father, Quan Tian!" Jun stared at Yao, who swallowed hard and turned back towards his dishes, not looking at Jun.

"Yes we did. Why do you think I let you work here? Do you really think I hire anyone that easily? Once you told me your name I figured that it was you and I knew your father would've wanted me to help in any way that I could. You needed a job, so I gave you one."

"You could've told me about my father!"

"No I couldn't have."

"Why not?!"

"That's a question that Li Yuan can answer better than I can."

\* \* \*

Jun immediately left Dragon's Inn and ran all the way back home. Once he entered the house, he found Li Yuan reading by himself. Everyone else seemed to have gone.

"You knew my father, didn't you?" Jun was still a bit angry, but his emotions had begun to calm down since

he left Dragon's Inn. Now he was more curious than mad. Li Yuan closed what he was reading and looked up at Jun. There was a warm smile on his face.

"Yes I did, Jun. Yes I did. How did you find out?"

"I overheard some men who used to work for the governor talking about it at Dragon's Inn and they mentioned that both you and Yao knew my father. Yao told me to ask you about it. Why didn't you tell me you knew him when we first met?"

"Because I couldn't."

"You couldn't?"

"Yes. Please Jun, sit down with me." Although feeling too worked up to sit down, Jun did so anyways. Li Yuan closed his eyes for a moment, composing his thoughts.

"Both your father and I worked for the previous governor. We were his most trusted aids and were privileged to learn from him the economics and politics that go into running a province like this one. When the governor died though, Xiong Ba came to replace him and after some time, your father and I came to realize the true extent of his nature and the corruption that he was fostering across Kunming and Yunnan. Your father and I, along with my wife, would regularly meet at Dragon's Inn, discussing these matters along with our other good friend, Yao. You were very young at the time as I recall.

We basically decided that your father would travel to Beijing to try and convince the emperor to remove Xiong Ba from his position while I would stay here to keep an eye on things. Your father told me that he was going to place you in a monastery some distance away to keep you safe. He didn't want you to be put in danger by all of this. He said he intended to come back and get you if he could, but we all knew that there was no guarantee that we would succeed.

Before he left though, he made both Yao and I promise that if we ever met you some day, we would never reveal to you that we knew your father. He did this because he wanted a clean start for you. He knew that what we were doing was dangerous and he didn't want to place a similar burden on you in the future. He wanted you to be free of all this to make a life of your choosing.

You can't imagine the surprise and joy I felt when you met Da Long and he brought you here to our home. Perhaps fate had a hand in it. I don't know, but I was firm in my resolve to honor your father's wishes and not get you involved. You were free to make your own choices,

but I doubt any of us ever expected that you would become involved. But it appears that you have. More than any of us ever imagined. The Two Dragons have done so many great things for the people. Your father would be proud of you.

"You know about the Two Dragons?"

"I know that you are one of them. Your father told me about the monastery he was going to take you to. I am aware of what they teach their disciples. I do not know who the other Dragon is though, a friend of yours I would assume?" Jun smiled.

"Yes he is. An old friend I knew from our days at the monastery together. I happened to find him one day at Dragon's Inn when I was working there." There was silence for minute. "It's strange isn't it? How fate works?"

"Yes it is," said Li Yuan. "Yes it is."

#### Chapter XVI: "It Ends Now"

Chen Wei and Xiao Jing's wedding was unlike anything Jun had ever attended before. Thirty to forty guests from the surroundings farms and Kunming were invited. Xiao Jing wore the traditional red wedding dress, complete with a red veil over her face while Chen Wei wore a red robe along with a small red hat. Jun stood there with the other guests as they watched the marriage ceremony being performed. Shifu had taught them about these things, but it was the first time he'd ever witnessed a wedding. Jun smiled. It seemed there were many things he still had to experience and learn about this world. He watched Chen Wei and Xiao Jing, wondering if he would be doing the very same thing some day.

The banquet after the wedding was great. Food was served and everyone was having a great time. Jun looked around and felt blessed to be a part of it. Shozoamon sat next to him. Jun had introduced him to Li Yuan several days earlier, telling him about their days at the monastery. Surprisingly, Li Yuan hadn't brought up the Two Dragons since then, perhaps knowing that somehow, he didn't need to.

\* \* \*

Later on that night, after the guests had gone, Da Long approached Jun and Shozoamon.

"Hey Jun, are we still going to practice tonight?" Jun smiled. Da Long's energy was unending.

"If you're up to it. It's been a very busy day."

"I'm ready! Who's your friend?"

"Da Long, this is my good friend Shozoamon."

"Pleased to meet you, Shozoamon! Are you going to practice with us tonight?" Shozoamon looked at Jun, grinning.

"Practice?"

"Da Long and I have been practicing kungfu together for some time now. He's quite good. Want to join us?"

"Sure." And with that, the three of them left the house and headed out into the farm fields towards the clearing where they usually practiced. For an hour or so, they practiced together with Jun or Shozoamon making the occasional correction to Da Long's performance.

During one of these corrections, Jun caught sight of something from the corner of his eye. He turned his head. There was a bright light coming from the direction of the house. A feeling of dread ran through him.

"Da Long, Shozoamon, something is wrong! Back to the house!" Jun broke into a quick sprint and the other two followed. The three of them ran through the fields as fast as they could until they reached the house. None of them could believe what they were seeing. The house was ablaze with flames. About thirty imperial guards surrounded the burning house, each throwing more torches into the inferno.

"What are they doing?!" Da Long screamed. Despite the noise coming from the fire, several of the guards heard him and spotted the three of them. The guards all looked at each other, nodded, and ran towards Da Long, Jun and Shozoamon, torches aimed in the assault position. What followed was a fury of fighting as the guards waved their torches, trying to beat and burn the three of them. Da Long, Jun, and Shozoamon scattered into different directions, each dodging the incoming torches as best they could. By now, the rest of the guards had caught sight of them and ran in for the attack. Da Long, Jun, and Shozoamon found themselves fighting all thirty guards, some carrying torches, others armed with clubs or swords.

The next several minutes were a blur as the three of them fought the guards, taking each of them down, sometimes individually, sometimes as a group. Jun and Da Long fought each guard hand to hand while Shozoamon had pulled out his kitana sword and was slicing through the guards one by one. Finally, when they'd finished with the last guard, they ran towards the fire and circled it, looking for Li Yuan, Chen Wei, and Xiao Jing. On the other side of the fire they found Chen Wei and Xiao Jing lying on

the ground. They both had bruises on their face and body from being beaten, but their condition wasn't bad. They would recover soon enough. Da Long shook Chen Wei's shoulders.

"Chen Wei! Chen Wei! Are you alright? Can you hear me?" Chen Wei opened his eyes.

"Da Long! Are you alright?"

"Yeah we're fine! What about you and Xiao Jing?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Where's father?"

"I don't know. He was in the house right before the guards arrived." Upon hearing this, they all looked towards the flames in horror.

"Father!" Da Long ran towards the flames. Jun grabbed him.

"No Da Long! It's too hot! You'll be killed!" Da Long struggled with all his might, but couldn't break free of Jun's hold.

"No! Let me go! Let me go! I can still save him! Father!"

\* \* \*

The fire didn't finally die out until the next morning. By that time, the house had been reduced to ashes and all of them had faced the awful truth. Li Yuan was gone. From what Chen Wei and Xiao Jing said, they'd been outside, about to go into the house when the guards had arrived. They were immediately grabbed by some of the guards who proceeded to beat them while the rest started to throw torches on to the house. Li Yuan had been inside and somehow hadn't been able to escape.

"It's my fault" Jun said. He and Shozoamon were standing near the farm fields by themselves. "It's because of me that this has happened."

"We don't know that for sure."

"What other explanation is there?"

"I don't know."

"I do. It's Xiong Ba. Somehow he's figured out who we are. He did this."

"Then he's responsible for all of this, Jun. Not you." Jun was silent as he stared at the ground. When he looked up again, Shozoamon could see the fury burning deep in his eyes.

"I've heard a lot about Xiong Ba. I knew that he extorted from people and was capable of many things, but I wasn't quite prepared to believe he was capable of this." Jun looked at Shozoamon and then turned his head towards the direction of Kunming.

"It ends now."

"What does?"

"This, Xiong Ba, everything he stands for." Jun turned and started to head towards the city.

"Where are you going?"

"To see Xiong Ba. I think it's time we visited him personally."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Absolutely." The two of them headed into the fields and broke into a sprint towards Kunming. What they didn't notice though was that someone else was following behind them as well.

\* \* \*

Jun and Shozoamon didn't bother trying to go through the front entrance of the governor's mansion which was heavily guarded. Instead, they were able to sneak in another way by scaling the walls on the back side of the mansion's compound.

Once they were over the wall, they stealthily made their way through several gardens and into the mansion itself. Jun was completely disgusted as they walked through the hallways. It was the epitome of luxury. No expense had been spared in decoration.

The two of them searched the mansion for some time, trying to find its chief resident. After awhile, they heard voices coming from one of the rooms. They made their way towards the door and peered in. Inside the room were several men, discussing something that they could not hear. The room looked like a private study and was filled with books and all types of expensive ornaments. Toward the back of the room sat a large wooden desk with an older man seated behind it. After a few minutes, the other two men standing in front of the desk bowed and left the room.

Jun watched the man behind the desk for a moment before leaving his hiding spot and entering the study. Shozoamon stood shoulder to shoulder with him as they entered.

"Xiong Ba. A pleasure to meet you at last." Jun's voice was full of sarcasm. Startled, the man at the desk looked up, but quickly regained his composure.

"Who are you?"

"Can't you guess? We've been causing you a lot of grief lately." A broad smile crossed the man's face.

"Ah yes! The Two Dragons. It is a pleasure to see you two here. I figured you would come. My guards suggested more security, but I knew it would be useless.

You two would still find a way in here some how, and so you have."

"How did you find out who we were?"

"Do you really think it was that hard? I had you followed when you were out leaping from the rooftops every night. I figured that you eventually would return home every night after you were done, and what did I find to my surprise? You were being sheltered by that traitorous Li Yuan and his pathetic family!" Jun's fists clenched at hearing this.

"You've harmed and killed people very dear to me last night!" Xiong Ba laughed.

"I hope so. I figured if I caused you enough pain, you'd come find me. Easier that way. You're incredibly predictable Jun, just like your father."

"My father?"

"Yes. He tried to have the emperor replace me, but here I still am all these years later. Li Yuan was smart enough to retire and keep quiet. Your father should have done the same.

"Where is my father? What did you do with him?" Xiong Ba smiled at him.

"You'd like to know that, wouldn't you?" Before anyone could blink, Xiong Ba leapt across his desk, sword in hand and attacked Jun and Shozoamon. Jun was surprised at the ferocity of Xiong Ba's attack. Although this man was easily his father's age, he was still quick and agile. He'd had some sort of kungfu training, but Jun couldn't quite place the style. The three of them moved around the study knocking books and furniture over. Xiong Ba was relentless, slashing his sword in every direction, trying to cut Jun and Shozoamon to pieces.

At the right moment, Shozoamon saw an opening and was able to draw out his kitana sword. The two of them locked blades and fought back and forth, giving Jun a few seconds to regain himself. To his dismay, Xiong Ba spun around past Shozoamon and kicked the sword from his hands. It clattered to the ground and he continued to attack both of them with his own sword.

The three of them continued to fight like this until Shozoamon was able to get behind Xiong Ba and distract him. Jun used this opportunity to kick the sword from Xiong Ba's hand. It flew across the room and plunged deep into one of the walls, but this didn't stop their adversary who still flew at them with a wave of punches and kicks, the intensity of which surprised both Jun and Shozoamon. The three of them continued to fight for a few

moments in the study and then moved out into the hallway. Jun couldn't believe how good Xiong Ba was. He was actually having trouble keeping up with him. What puzzled him though was Xiong Ba's kungfu. At first it had reminded him of his own style, but it was too different to be called the same.

The three of them reached a grand staircase in a large open room that went from the second to the first floor. Xiong Ba kicked Jun square in the chest and he crashed through the wooden railing, falling down to the ground on the first floor. Xiong Ba and Shozoamon continued to fight until Xiong Ba grabbed him by the throat and leapt over the staircase, taking both of them down to the first floor, landing next to Jun.

Shozoamon broke away from Xiong Ba's grip on his throat, but was caught off guard as Xiong Ba kicked his legs out from underneath him. He hit the floor hard, lying almost next to Jun, who was still dazed from his fall. Xiong Ba came to stand over the two of them, laughing.

"The Two Dragons? Ha! Nothing!" He burst into a fit of laughter which was suddenly cut short. Jun and Shozoamon looked up. Xiong Ba was deathly silent. Sticking out of his stomach was the tip of the blade from the sword he'd attacked them with in his study. He turned to look behind him, revealing Da Long standing there, holding the handle of the sword.

"That's for my father!" Xiong Ba's eyes widened and then rolled over to white as he collapsed to the floor, dead. Da Long ran over to Jun and Shozoamon.

"Are you two alright?!" Jun couldn't speak. He was stunned by Da Long's bravery.

"Jun, Shozoamon, are you two alright?" Shozoamon looked at Jun's surprised face and laughed.

"We're fine kid. We're fine."

## Chapter XVII: On the Road

A week later, thoughts were still swirling through Jun's mind about all the things that had happened in the past few months. All the changes he'd been through and all the things he'd seen and done.

Still though, one thing penetrated his thoughts more than the rest: his father. Xiong Ba had given the impression that he knew his father's fate. That was the one regret he'd had about Xiong Ba's death. He hadn't been able to interrogate him on what had happened to his father. Jun still had hope, though.

So far, there'd been no direct evidence to indicate that his father was actually dead. There was still hope and he'd decided that the best thing for him to do now was to follow that hope. He was going to leave Kunming in search of his father. He didn't care how long it took. He was certain that he would find him or least what had happened to him one day. Only then would he feel completely at peace.

Despite Jun's objections, Shozoamon insisted on going on this journey with him.

"It's a long road, Jun. Better to have someone with you in case you lose your way." Jun couldn't argue with that.

Chen Wei, Xiao Jing, and Da Long had moved into a neighbor's house on a nearby farm until they could rebuild their own home. Da Long wasn't happy about it though, from what Jun could see and he clearly had every right to be. His father was gone forever and would never come back. Jun's heart went out to Da Long. They were both orphans, both victims of this sometimes cruel world.

\* \* \*

"Dont' go Jun! Please don't go!"

"I have to Da Long. There's something out there that I still need to find.

"You can't go. I'll be all alone!"

"You have your sister and Chen Wei to take care of. You'll all need each other more than ever now."

"And what about you?! Don't you need us as well?"

"I do, Da Long. More than you realize now. I'd never had a family until you brought me to your home. You gave me that opportunity and it's one I will cherish forever. You will always be my family, Da Long. Always. There are some things I need to take care of out there in the world. But I promise you that I will return. I can't tell you exactly when, but I will return."

"Promise?"

"I promise." Da Long wrapped his arms around Jun and the two of them held each other tightly for some time, tears pouring from both their eyes.

\* \* \*

After their final goodbyes, Jun and Shozoamon left and traveled away from the farms and Kunming, leaving the Yunnan province, and heading off into the unknown. For the next several years, they traveled through different provinces, seeing different places, and helping out people where they could.

One evening, they found themselves sitting at a table in a small little inn on a road in the countryside of the Jiangxi province. Several tables away, there was a young scholar named Teng who'd been entertaining a group of six merchants with different stories. He was a pretty good storyteller and Jun and Shozoamon were enjoying what he had to say. Teng was about to tell another story.

"This one's about Shuang Long Ji, the Legend of the Two Dragons, men who fight not for fame or fortune, but honor. They travel throughout the country, doing good deeds where they can and fighting evil where they find it. They're supposed to be fast. Fast like lightning." Jun and Shozoamon glanced at each other, both smiling.

"Well," thought Jun, "this should be interesting."

THE END