

Prologue

In the Forbidden City of Jaggerfall, upon a tower of glass and onyx I sat to plot revenge. Ever since Ash Maiden had died, I had haunted the black metropolis, watching the prismatic arrangement of lights pour down through empty turrets to the silent streets. Meditating on the koans to control the seething anger had failed me finally, forcing me to violent physical exertion in the forms until my arms felt like lead and my technique had degraded to sloppy movements my sensei would have beaten me for, were he still alive. Still I had continued from dawn and through to the next night, practicing the first movements. While peace proved elusive, clarity came to me in time through the direct, linear motions that predicated mastery and I realized that seeking to understand was impossible. The murder was inscrutable as a koan, but possessed no interior hidden meaning. It was simply a motive to do what must be done. Reconciling myself to revenge, I concluded that I must figure out the perfect way to do so, Then exhaustion overcame me, and I rested while my mind took up effort where my body stopped.

Willows grew in the river valley outside Jaggerfall's unbroken walls, crested like boiling clouds so thick they obscured the wet marshland. Walls and towers stood above the white fog giving the city the appearance of floating in the sky. On the highest tower I was deep in the sky, alone with stars and comets. It was fitting. Mars stood in the house of the Crow as it had when I was born. That too was fitting. Mars meant war, and the Crow meant death. Bad death, of the kind that left vengeful ghosts, followed in the shadow of the Crow. But now I was unsure if it stood for what had already occurred, or what would come after.

While I schemed footsteps echoed up from the cavernous staircase to the tower's lower levels. Someone was making a lot of noise, making too much of it for someone simply careless or untrained. I waited calmly because my muscles had no energy left to twitch while mentally I did somersaults. It took a long time for a head to appear.

Brilliant Void emerged eventually. His bald head emerged from the darkness first. It was neither handsome nor ugly, with no single feature that marred his looks, but no elegance of jaw or brow to attract the eye. There was more black hair in his eyebrows than anywhere else on his body. That stayed out of starlight for a while, as he regarded me, our environs, and then the night sky. I was very careful to keep my hands in plain sight, resting them in a beam of moonlight. Our tableau was uninterrupted by any outside force, and in time Brilliant Void emerged completely.

He was a big man whose eyes were on level with the top of my head. Instead of having a neck, his head was the fugitive victim of his hungry shoulders, who were attempting to envelope it completely. Each of his shoulders was wider than my chest with arms that had originally been tree trunks. His own trunk and legs were proportionately vast, and every inch of his skin was gnarled muscle. I rose once he stood on the rooftop with me and showed due respect.

“You've been a hard man to find,” he observed.

“One does not come to Jaggerfall if one wants to be found,” I answered.

“One should not come to Jaggerfall at all,” he replied.

“Well, I came,” I told him simply.

Walking forward, he stopped at the center of the oval turret and stared down. Stepping into a footprint left in sweat, he followed with another footstep that dropped easily into a horse stance. Step by step he followed the pattern on the ground, making strikes where they were obvious from the footwork. I watched and lamented, for he followed the pattern better than I had laid it. At one point he stopped and considered the next movement carefully, finally placing his right heel a hair further forward than I had. Then he stood and left the center of the ring, coming to stand before me.

“We are burying her at dawn,” he told me. “Her ashes lie in a silver urn in the Chapel of Six Gods. You must come. Her family will want to see you.”

“No,” I said simply. “She may be dead, but I won't recognize it. I won't watch her white urn put into the ground where she should have stood in white when she married.”

“It is not for you that her funeral takes place,” Brilliant Void replied.

“And it is not for her ghost! She won't rest simply because she's trapped underground with the worms!”

“Funerals are not for the departed. They are for the living, that those who remain may loosen their hold on her as she goes. But grief can kill, and you must share it with her mother and her father, that they do not carry the burden alone,” he chided me.

I looked up into his eyes. They were soft and kind, and ignored the hard bitterness of mine.

“I won't,” I denied.

“You will. Not because you want to, but because you must. If you loved her, you know she would want you to support her family.”

That hit me viciously, knocking the wind from my lungs and leaving me gasping on hurt and grief. I bent almost double, losing sight of the ground in the haze.

“Bastard,” I told him.

“You sit here selfishly while her family cries alone, you would turn your back on them in the moment of their most poignant grief, and you cry foul when I remind you of the truth of the matter? Your master would be ashamed.”

As always, Brilliant Void struck every vulnerable point necessary to leave me gasping on the ground. Without even raising his fists, he left me beaten as he departed into the gloom of the stairs.