

THE WARRIOR

Story by Wu De

Ten thousand smiles, tears, loves and lies all flash past in a streak of silver. For a moment the warrior held him there balanced on the cusp of two worlds. Then the silver sword slowly withdrew, its luster now dulled crimson. The warrior didn't clean his blade. Not this time. He sheathed it as it was, sullied with a man's poignancy, his everything. And it would never rise again. The martial arts had culminated in this warrior—in the length of his jet hair that swayed in the breeze; in his keen black eyes that looked at the aftermath spread out across the small valley below; and in the crow's feet next to them that seemed to be written in ancient hieroglyphs of war. It had been long since the sight or smell of death had disturbed him. His life had been like a journey across a road of corpses. Even victories had grown hazy with time. Three emperors had come and gone and so had their banners from his field, and colors from his mount. His soldiers weren't surprised when he came back down the hill on which the final charge had been made with a grim and distant expression. Nor did they think anything of the fact that he ignored their salutes of "General" as he passed by. But legends would be written about why he wasn't in camp the next day, and children would study of his ascension into Heaven in their mythology lessons even hundreds of years later. However, the truth is always beyond simplicity, plain enough to be profound...

It was a cool spring dawn the day after the battle and his aide-de-camps were gathered together in his tent discussing the last battle in the southern campaign. After the meeting, the general said that he needed to be left alone to prepare for the coming battle. No one thought anything of it at the time. He was a spiritual man, after all—raised in a monastery. He always meditated at least through the night before a battle. He once again ignored the soldiers' salutes as he steered his mount out of the camp late that morning and rode off. Many of his men would die a few days later still carrying with them the inspiration of his perfect poise, subtle and stern, as he rode slowly up the eastern hill from graceful white to silhouette that morning.

He rode on all night through the mountain trails. The beautiful sunrise didn't slow him a bit. He was focused on the image in his mind—an old man seated alone on a small cushion. The serenity in his posture had haunted the warrior's dreams since he was a boy in the monastery. When he had heard that such a wise man lived in the mountains in the south, he had begun using all the strategies in his great library of politics to get his army near enough for him to go and see the man. For weeks now he had been surreptitiously asking villagers his whereabouts. Even his highest lieutenants didn't

know about his quest to find the enlightened man. It had been so long since he had abandoned the notion of any real spirituality. His meditations were to focus and poise the mind and make a weapon of the body.

What seemed like a thousand eons ago, the statuesque general himself had been a scruffy little novice in a small village of the western provinces. He had studied martial arts like the other monks, and was told it was in defense, living in such a wild country with bandits that wouldn't hesitate to kill even a monk if they thought it would benefit them. In reality, though, the monastery was quiet and his martial studies were more a routine, or perhaps at best a small part of his spirituality. But the empire was never stable. There might be peace for a man's lifetime or childhood, but an empire lives longer than a man, and chaos is but a blink away in its eyes. The general's childhood had been between one of those blinks. His youth was scarred by a deep and drawn glance to the furrowed eyes of chaos. The memory stopped haunting his dreams long ago, washed away in a river of blood that flowed over and through his sword. But there on the mountain it swirled once again through his thoughts, but only in still paintings—each one capturing another piece of the horror that had come to rule his life. He had made a religion of death, and that night had been its creation:

He saw the bandits in their camp planning. He saw the monks sitting in morning chant. He saw the master sending him and one other novice to a neighboring village to find a man the master needed to speak with. Then he saw a glimpse of those two boys playing in the creek, the afternoon sun on their cheeks as they made their way to the village. They were happy to have a holiday from the routine of the monastery. But the strongest images were the ones that remained from the return trip with the villager. The smoke rising from the distant hillock. The dead and mangled monks. The burnt, blackened ones. The tears in the eyes of his two companions and the fire in his own. All of these images flew past his mind without commentary, without the need. It had been years since they had even entered his thoughts...

Letting go of his beginnings he returned to the present and marveled at the clouds that swirled around him as he made his way higher and higher through the mountains, slowly revolving around a thin trail that climbed endlessly towards the peak. And then the clouds were below him, all tinted outwards with yellows and oranges that swept away his thoughts and left him to dream of the Heavens just above our lives.

He turned a corner and came upon the hut. He knew it was the place. He had dreamt of it for the last few years. He could see the serenity misting around it, gathered there by the old man within. He left his horse and approached the house on foot. It was empty, but he felt welcome beyond courtesy. He gently set his sandals aside and entered. He sat at the great table hewn from a giant tree and studied the grains of the wood that swirled across its surface. Their truth eluded him. And there was nothing else in the hut to divert his attention, so he just sat contentedly awaiting the hermit's return. It could have been a moment or even a lifetime later when the old monk finally rounded the bend and smiled at the horse and then later again at its rider. He sat down across from the general and began to boil some mountain water. From beneath the table he produced a simple earthen pot and a jar. He brought forth some brown leaves from the jar and placed them so gently within the teapot. The leaves looked older and wiser than even the old man himself. He steeped the tea and brought forth two porcelain cups. He reverently used both hands to place one before the general in a gesture that had haunted his dreams and meditations for months now. He somehow knew that all of his answers were in this cup, as if it was the master.

The master poured the amber liquid into his cup and leaned forward, looking into its depth and smelling the rich aromas that lingered in the steam that rose from its brim. He saw within the cup many tiny particles of leaf swirling around towards the bottom. He followed the movements of one. With each turn of the leaf, his mind gathered momentum, allowing deeper thoughts than he had ever had to wash over his mind in great waves.

He understood then that there was a greater peace than the one his soul had yearned for. He had believed that through the swift justice of the sword the enemies of peace could be eradicated, that harmony reign supreme. He now understood that all matter was never at rest. And living things are the most complex of all matter, especially humans. Within each atom there is tremendous movement and change constantly rising and falling in elliptical revolutions—each one a slightly different gyration than the previous. The swirling spec in the cup was like all the other bits of matter in the world. So too was our history permeated with the triumphs of both peace and horror. Even if all the battles were won and harmony prevailed throughout the land, there would still arise another evil sorcerer, another re-



26bellion, another greedy tyrant to eventually restart the whole cycle again. The legacy of his great family, who had fought such evil for many generations, was a testament to this tenacity. He had achieved peace, reflected in the wavy Hamon of his beautiful katana. Perhaps that peace was enough for many. It had been what drove him these many years. And yet now he realized, looking into the amber liquid drifting around towards stillness, that it was but a taste of a more powerful understanding of what it meant to be truly at peace.

As each particle of leaf swirled in the cup, the greater stillness around it could still contain that movement and yet retain its serenity. He looked up and realized how the analogy applied to all that surrounded him. For every particle of matter there are trillions of acres of stillness. And all the vibrations of each and every atom of matter that exists is not enough to even cause the slightest percolation in the great black ocean within which they are engulfed. All of the movements of mankind throughout our past, present and future are forever enshrouded in a great expanse of quiet that extends outward to galactic eternity. Our greatest triumphs and our most depraved horrors are all just slight trembles in such an Existence. The universe is capable of containing within it great violence while still remaining, for the most part quiet calm and still. Even the cataclysmic explosions of great stars are not enough to ruffle the peace of it all. He looked at the master and understood that if he were to be in a deep meditative peace, the peace of a monk who had spent years alone in the mountains, then the rebellion of one cell in the master's little toe would never be enough to stain the deeper peace of his being. All the movement of all the matter that is— all the planets, stars, and beings that roam them—all of it could never make a loud enough noise to upset the quiet of space. All of the passion for good, for justice and harmony of men that he had fought for; all the peace he had cultivated in his own meditations on and off the battlefield; all of it was still movement within that great ocean of complete stillness. The rise and fall of empires, the death and consumption of billions of lives, the great battles in the name of justice and truth, all the intellectual libraries of knowledge preserved by just and good kings—all of it seemed such a complex dance when viewed through human eyes. And yet a slightly larger perspective in which it all was drowned was but a breath away. How could the swirling of one bit of leaf dust matter to the cup? The cup was content to contain it. How could the movements of all men, let alone one man, matter to the ocean of space? At perfect ease, the cup and space both just sat and meditated on eternity, seemingly ignorant of the tiny fluctuations occurring within them.

When he drank the loamy tea, his mind quieted. He let go of the great revelation his intellect had just been wrapped up in. However strong the inspiration, the

tea would still wash clean the mind and let experience reign. But just as he was drifting into that silence, one last thought echoed through his mind softer and quieter, fading away... He felt in his very being a sense of space and understood that he had been wrong. He had imagined all the matter in the universe floating in the ocean of deep, black stillness. He had imagined the movements of life and mankind somehow contained in a great god-like ocean of peace. He now knew that the space even permeated the matter. The stillness was right there, inside each particle of his being; that even the small movements of his life were themselves swimming around in what was mostly still. This is what he had sought. This was a peace not dependent upon the existence of harmony between men. This was a peace that no sword need defend. He had found the true emperor of Existence and seen through his eyes the perfection of all that is, from the vibration of the smallest material particle to the great swirling eddies of human lives as they dance through times of great joy and pain. It was all perfect and still. He smiled and left all words and thoughts behind. The feeling was enough.

For many hours they sat there, occasionally drinking another cup without any apparent notice. Only the first one had mattered. After some time his thoughts returned. He bowed to the master three times. And before he rose and walked away he looked deeply into the master's eyes and laid his sword on the table before him. It was the price for that cup of tea. He had known it even before he had arrived. The Way to truth wasn't in the perfection of the body. Nor was it in the perfection of morality on earth. For the first time in his life he walked without the sword of his ancestors. It had been his soul. Now it rested where it truly belonged. He felt lighter than the clouds that swirled below him. He had achieved what he desired, for the rest of his life was silent. And though legends were spread throughout the land, naught was ever heard of him again. Perhaps he really did ascend to Heaven...

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