

# Story of Swords

*from the Outer Chapters of Zhuang Zi – Chapter 30*

Long ago in old China, somewhere near the end of the Warring States period, there reigned a certain King Wen in the State of Zhao who was widely known across the land for his deep and devoted love of the sword. Proud and rugged glory-seekers from far and wide would flock to his halls to try their skills in one of his many infamous tournaments. They sought both the worthy challenge that could be found there and the high reward that could be won. Endlessly they fought, ruthlessly vying for supremacy over each other. Day and night the King watched as they danced and dueled, never tiring of the display. For years and years this went on, and every month hundreds of skilled warriors were either killed or maimed. His kingdom was in a steady state of decline because of it, but he seemed to take no notice. Crime was rampant along the roads. The outlying villages and guard-posts were weak and the officers were not in communication with each other. Rumors of intrigue and rebellion freely circulated amongst the population and other states were actively plotting ways to infiltrate the once great, yet now slightly distracted kingdom.

The King's son and heir apparent, Prince Gui, was fully aware of the dilemma and was deeply troubled by the dismal situation. Though try as he might, he could not get his father to consider anything other than who would be fighting in the next duel. He was desperate and offered 1000 bags of gold to anyone who might be able to bring the King back to his senses and the political tasks at hand. Though the prize was immense, nobody stepped up, deeply afraid of questioning or confronting the royal sword. Finally, after several weeks of nothing happening, one of the Prince's advisers approached him and said, "Your highness, I have heard that there is a certain wandering sage named Master Zhuang who is currently dwelling in the forest nearby. Folks speak quite highly of him. Perhaps he may have some insights for us."

The Prince replied, "Yes, good. Go and find this Master Zhuang, present him with the 1000 bags of gold and bid him to come here immediately."

When the adviser found Master Zhuang he presented him with the money. Master Zhuang refused it flatly, but agreed to come with the messenger nonetheless to hold counsel with the Prince. When they arrived, Master Zhuang asked the Prince, "What am I to do with this money? For what purpose would you plague me with this burden of wealth?"

The Prince replied, "I have heard of your curious ways and understand that you may have no need for this reward, but I simply thought that perhaps you could use it to improve upon your dwellings a bit, or disperse it amongst your disciples. But since you have refused it what more is there to say?"

Master Zhuang said, "It is just that the gravity of the task you set before me is so much greater than any monetary amount, no matter how large, could ever compensate. Your messenger has told me that you would wish me to cure your father of his swordlust and coerce him into giving up

his greatest joy. If I fail and am unable to dissuade him from this dangerous game, then is not all lost for me anyway? 1000 bags of gold could not save me from the executioner. This King of yours is not famous for his mercy. On the other hand, suppose I am effective in inspiring him to the kingly path and peace and prosperity is again restored throughout the kingdom. Would I not then have an ally in the King himself and the favor of the entire land, being free to come and go at my every whim? Is that not a value much greater than 1000 bags of gold anyway?"

The Prince answered, "Very well then, you have proven your worth as a wordsmith, and perhaps you may even be clever enough to convince the King of his errors. But what is your worth as a warrior? Don't you realize that my father will only listen to those who wield a sword. They usually have bristled whiskers and tousled hair, glaring eyes and rough speech, muscled features and close-fit clothing. These loose robes and soft features of yours do not appear to make you a worthy candidate for the job."

Master Zhuang replied bluntly, "I can handle a sword just fine. Show me the way to the King's chamber if you wish to see."

As they entered the hall and approached the King, Master Zhuang did not quicken his steps or stop to bow his head. The King was waiting for them with his blade drawn, "What is it that you wish to say to me, now that you've gotten an introduction from my son?"

Master Zhuang spoke plainly, "I hear that Your Majesty delights in the sword, and it is about the sword that I have come to see you."

"Oh? Are you saying that you have some skill you'd like to test?"

"If there were an opponent every 10 paces, I could walk unhindered with my sword for a thousand miles."

The King was delighted, "Ah, then you're a match for anyone in the world?"

"A master swordsman of the highest degree looks loose and easy to attack. He appears late in response, but is always first to find the heart. I'd like to show you how it's done."

"Good. Go to your quarters and await my command. I will prepare my best man." Master Zhuang left the hall and for 7 days the King held a tournament to find the best of the best. By the time he was done, over 60 warriors were either killed or maimed. He took the top 5 men and called for Master Zhuang to be brought into the hall. "Today we will see your skill. I have collected my strongest warriors to challenge you."

Master Zhuang bowed deeply, "I have been looking forward to this for several days."

"Would you prefer to use a short sword or a long sword?" The King held up two highly crafted swords, made by his own master swordsmiths.

Master Zhuang did not appear impressed. "As far as I'm concerned either would be fine. Whatever you prefer. But I have brought three very special swords of my own that you may be interested in. Would you allow me to show them to you before we begin?"

The King was a fan of all things sword. "Well yes, of course, I am eager to see what you've brought. Where are they?"

Master Zhuang opened his hands, "Why, they are right here. I call them Child of Sky, Lord of Earth, and Servant of Man. Which would you like to see first?"

The King squinted his eyes. "What the hell are you talking about? What Child of Sky?"

Master Zhuang stepped back. "Ah, my favorite. This sword is called the Child of Sky. It has the peak of the mountain as its point and the crest of the ridge as its edge. It has the surface of the lake as its blade and the fielded valley as its handle. The east and west are its hilt. The north and south are its shaft. It is sheathed in the four corners of the beyond and is hung on the belt of the horizon. It was wrought through the turning of the five phases, has been honed by the fluctuations of yin and yang, and is tempered by the virtues of mercy and courage. Wielded by spring and summer, it finds its mark in the fall and winter. Thrust it forward and there's nothing ahead. Lift it up and there's nothing above. Chop it down and there's nothing below. Whirl it around and there's nothing beyond. Up above it splits the floating clouds, down below it cleaves the ocean floor, and in between it decides the lay of the land. Using it just once will cause all the lords of the land to submit and give up their rouses. I call this sword the Child of the Sky."

The King gave an agitated laugh and was silent. A light tremor quietly spread throughout the room. He set down his sword, looked even more intently at the Master, and said, "Alright then. Show me this one you call the Lord of Earth?"

Master Zhuang smiled deeply. "Ah yes, the Lord of Earth. Right here Your Majesty. It has a thrust of quick and brave soldiers as its point and a stand of clear and honest soldiers as its edge. It has wise and loyal as its hilt, valiant and heroic warriors as its handguard, and worthy and able warriors as its shaft. Thrust it forward and no one can stand before it. Lift it up and no one can stand above it. Chop it down and no one can stand below it. Whirl it around and no one can stand beyond it. Up above it follows the course of the sun, moon, and stars, down below it follows the cycle of the four seasons, and in between it unifies the will of mankind and brings complete harmony to the four regions of the square. Using it just once is like a clap of thunder ringing throughout the land. None will refuse to submit and obey. I call it the Lord of the Earth."

The King was now gazing off absently into the distance. "And the last one then, the Servant of Man?"

Master Zhuang stood straight. "Well you know this one already. You've just now offered me a long one or a short one. I call it the Servant of Man. Mine is no better than yours, really. It has bristled whiskers and tousled hair for its point, glaring eyes and rough speech for its edge, muscled features and close-fit clothing for its hilt, and a readiness to fight for pleasure and gain as its shaft. Up above it will crack a skull or slit a throat. Down below it will burst a gut or cleave a limb. It is lost in a single moment, but there's always another to take its place. It is of little use in matters of the state or acts of spirit. Would you like me to wield it now for your pleasure? Of course, the swords Child of Sky and Lord of Earth are yours to choose from as well if you'd like. But if you prefer, as you say, to have me wield the Servant of Man instead, then I am ready now to employ it for you at your command."

At this the King said nothing and quietly stepped back. He withdrew to the rear of the hall and began pacing back and forth. Nobody dared to move. After several minutes, Master Zhuang quietly approached him, "Your Majesty, please sit down and ease your heart. Regarding matters of the sword, there is no more that can be said." The King abruptly excused himself and retired to his chamber. Master Zhuang spent the rest of the night in deep discussion with Prince Gui and quietly slipped out at dawn before anyone could notice. He was never to be seen or heard of in those parts again.

Meanwhile, the King remained in retreat for three months and did not speak to a single person. Little by little the capital emptied of all its glory-seekers as they were either killed fighting with each other or they took off to find bounty somewhere else. The King accepted only water and herbs from his attendants and appeared oblivious to the revolution that was occurring all around him. When he finally emerged from his retreat he appeared ravaged and worn, yet his eyes were bright and his face at ease. He embraced his son and turned south to walk outside. What happened in his room all those nights he never spoke of, but gradually peace and culture was restored to the land. Never again was there another swordfight in that hall, as no competing warrior dared to approach for as long as his reign endured.