Chapter 46. "Song of the Roving Swordsman"

The swordsman roams in his rude chin-straps.
A sickle-moon blade hangs, bright as hoarfrost,
from the silver saddle of his white steed.
Forthright as a shooting star,
he kills a man every ten steps,
nothing stops him for a thousand miles.
The deed done, he dusts off his clothes,
and the man and his name both disappear.

On a quiet day he stops by Lord Xinling’s for a drink,
unstraps his sword and lays it on his knees,
eats pork roast with Butcher Zhu,
and urges Hou Ying to toast with him.
Three cups, and they’re out with an oath —
the Five Peaks will fall before they break it!
Their eyes gone blurry, their ears burning,
their courage flares like white rainbows.

The kingdom is saved by the hurl
of a golden mace, shaking the capital.
For a thousand ages, these warriors
will light up the skies above their great city!
They stand unabashed before the heroes of today —
even in death, a swordsman’s bones smell sweet.
Why would you rather hole up in your study,
divining the future until your hair turns white?379

俠客行

趙客繚胡纓, 吳鉤霜雪明
銀鞍照白馬, 頭沓如流星
十步殺一人, 千里不留行
事了拂衣去, 深藏身與名
The third century BCE. What we call China is still only a crew of vying states, endemically at war. Lord Xinling, Prince of Wei, generous, curious, daring, ever humble before the wise, whatever their social standing. Thus he obtains the services of Hou Ying, a guard at the city gates yet also a hidden sage, and of Hou Ying’s client, Butcher Zhu. But Lord Xinling is also the younger brother of a less talented king, thus always the object of envy, mistrust and calumny.

The neighboring state of Zhao is under siege. Lord Xinling’s king dares not send his general and 100,000 troops to its aid. Xinling is honor-bound to Zhao’s defense, so Hou Ying tells him: “You will need those 100,000 troops, and to get them, you will need the tiger tally. One half of it is held by the King, the
other by his general. If you present the general with the King's half, he will have to accept your command of his troops. Then you can rescue Zhao. The King's favorite concubine owes you her life. She will steal the tally for you."

As Lord Xinling is leaving the capital with the tally, Hou Ying adds: “A general in the field may not always accept the orders of the King. Even after you show him the tally, you may have to kill him. Take Butcher Zhu with you, he can conceal a forty pound mace in his sleeve. Now I will see you off, and then four days later, when you have arrived, I will slit my throat.”

And so it is. But afterwards Lord Xinling remains ten years in Zhao, afraid to go home. Only when his King needs his services does he return. Services complete, his life is again in jeopardy. The Historical Records tell what happened next.

So Lord Xinling feigned illness and no longer attended court. He feasted with his retainers long into the night, drinking copiously, and was intimate with many women. For four years he enjoyed wine day and night. In the end he died of it.

Meanwhile Zhuangzi writes of the swordsmen with rude chin-straps, who kill a man every ten steps.

Chapter 30. Sword Talk

King Wen of Zhao loved swords. Swordsmen crowded through his gate, and he kept three thousand of them as retainers. Day and night they dueled before him, and every year over a hundred were wounded or killed. For three years the King's enthusiasm never flagged, and as his state declined, the feudal lords of other states plotted against him.

In desperation, the crown prince asks Zhuangzi if he can intervene with the King. Zhuangzi agrees.

“But,” said the crown prince, “His Majesty will only meet with swordsmen.”
“This is not a problem,” said Zhuangzi. “I love swords.”
“But the swordsmen His Majesty meets with all have hair like tangled brambles, bristly beards, rude chin-straps on their drooping caps, and short jackets. They glare pop-eyed and speak unpleasantly. The King delights in this. If you insist on wearing a scholar’s gown when you see the King, things will definitely go all wrong.”
Zhuangzi said, “Then please allow me to prepare the attire of a swordsman.”
Three days later the attire was ready, and he went to see the Crown Prince. The Crown Prince then went with him to see the King. The King was waiting with his naked blade drawn. Zhuangzi entered the throne room without haste and regarded the King without bowing.
The King said, “How do you intend to instruct me, now that you’ve gotten the Crown Prince to open the way for you?”
“I’ve heard that the King loves swords, so I have a sword to show you.”
“What authority does your sword hold?”
“My sword kills a man every ten steps, and nothing stops it for a thousand miles.”
The King was greatly pleased and said, “In all the world you have no match!”
Zhuangzi said, “A man with this sword

has no apparent form
but baits you with feigned advantage,
is last to make a move
and first to strike.

The King said, “Please go to your quarters and rest a while. I will give orders to prepare the sport. Then I will summon you.”
For seven days the King put his swordsmen to competition. More than sixty were wounded or killed. He chose five or six men to present themselves with their swords outside
the throne room. Then he summoned Zhuangzi. He said, “Today let’s test how you and these men pay homage to the sword.” Zhuangzi said, “I have long hoped for this.”

The King said, “What weapon will you use, a long or short sword?”

He said, “I can manage all of these. But I have three swords. Just tell me which to use. Allow me, though, to discuss them before I try them out for you.”

The King said, “Tell me about the three swords.”

He said, “I have the sword of the Son of Heaven, the sword of the feudal lords, and the sword of the commoner.”

The King said, “What’s the sword of the Son of Heaven like?”

He said, “The sword of the Son of Heaven? Its point lies beyond the north frontier, its blade is Mount Tai, its back the central states, its cross-guard the southern states, and its hilt the eastern states. It’s wrapped in the barbarian lands, sheathed in the four seasons, wound round by the Eastern Sea, and hangs from the belt of the Holy Mountains. It’s ruled by the Five Elements, determined by punishment and virtue, drawn by Yin and Yang, held by spring and summer, and used in fall and winter. When it strikes straight ahead, there is nothing before it. When it strikes upward, there is nothing above. When it strikes down, there is nothing below. When it whirls around, there is nothing on all sides. This sword splits the floating clouds above and severs the ligaments of earth below. If this sword is once used, the feudal lords return to order and all the world submits. This is the sword of the Son of Heaven.”

King Wen stood stunned, lost to himself. Then he said, “What is the sword of the feudal lords like?”

Zhuangzi said, “Its point is men of knowledge and bravery, its blade is men of purity and integrity, its back men of wisdom and goodness, its cross-guard men of loyalty and wisdom, its hilt men of valor and daring…”

The Kind said, “What’s the sword of the commoner like?”
Zhuangzi said, “The sword of the commoner is used by men with hair like tangled brambles, bristly beards, rude chin-straops on their drooping caps, and short jackets. They glare pop-eyed and speak unpleasantly. When they duel before Your Majesty, their swords chop heads and necks and split open livers and lungs. The men of this sword are no different from fighting cocks — at any moment their lives will be cut off. They are of no use in affairs of state. You, King, hold the seat of the Son of Heaven but love the sword of the commoner. With due respect, you are treating your majesty in a shabby way.”

The King then led Zhuangzi up to his throne room. The steward offered food, but the King just paced round and round.

Zhuangzi said, “Please sit quietly and compose your energies. The matter of the sword has been completely played out.”

For three months King Wen did not leave the palace. His swordsmen all committed suicide in their quarters.