

SEVEN DEVILS

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Smashwords Edition

to April Stuart

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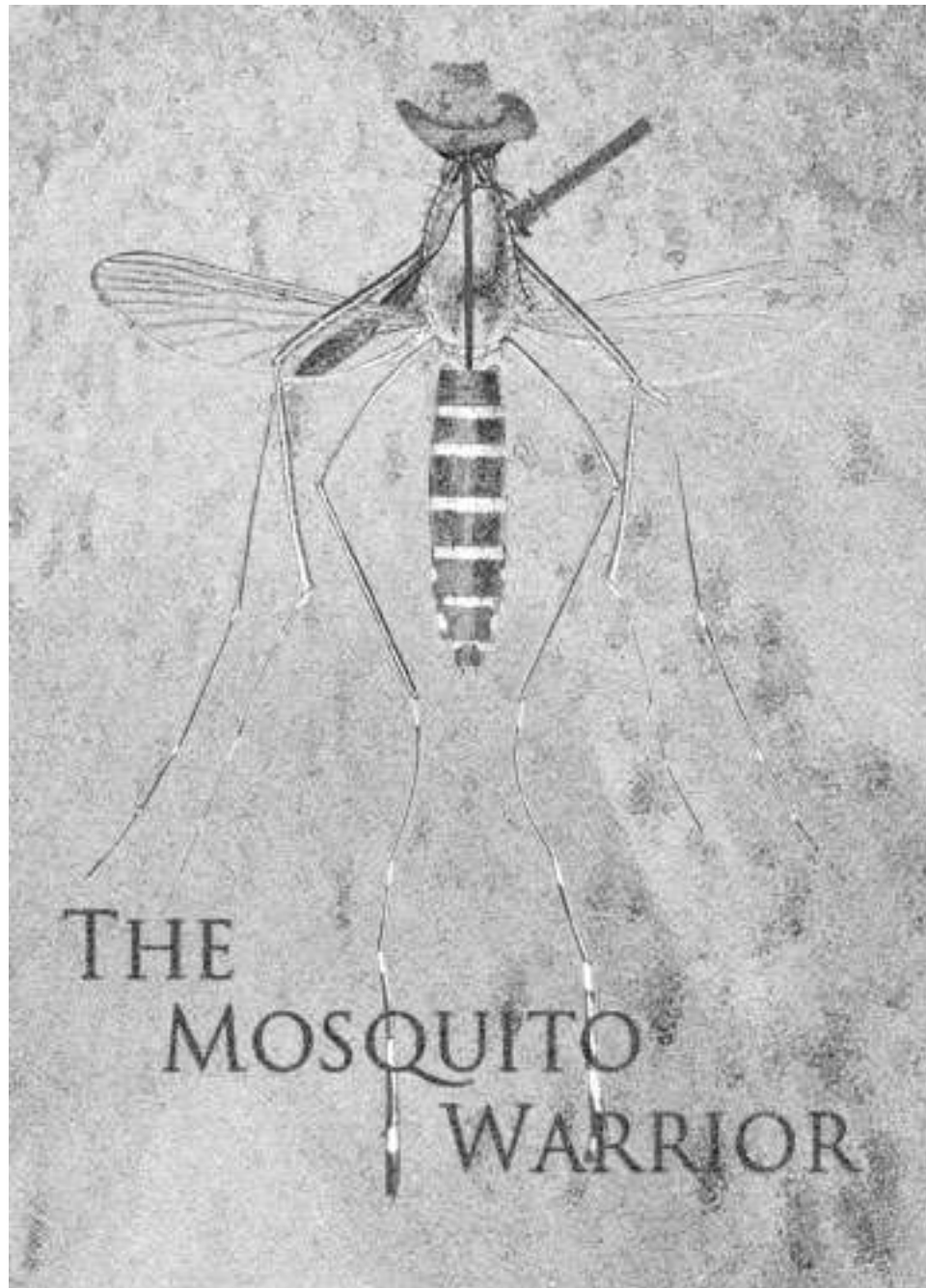
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a brief prologue

Sensei Ridley Lies About The Seven Devils

This is a story that I uh, I tell to all incoming students—well, real quick, let me introduce myself and these two gentlemen for those of you that're new to our class. You may call me Sensei Ridley. On my right is Master Chris; on my left is my brother, Master David. They are both black belts and you are to treat them as you would me – listen to what they say, do what they say. Okay?

[the students nod]

Respond “Yes, Sensei” to acknowledge.

[students respond, “Yes, Sensei.”]

Okay, take a seat on the mat. I'll try to keep the story quick.

[paces, thinking]

I grew up in Philadelphia, born and raised – well, until a few years ago, when I left for a bit and then came here and opened this school. But I'm going to tell you a story and it's from the first time I left America.

When I left, I went to study with a Sensei.

Let's call him Ki-jo.

He was about 5'5 – older – bald top, gray halo.

Uh round. Bigger—uh, bigger guy in weight. Kind of fat, to understate it.

Always smoked a combination of opium and tobacco from a tiny pipe – and I mean always, even when he was fighting.

And this man was...well, rough. He was a rough individual.

He was the most dangerous person I could find that would teach me.

He never liked me.

No question about it.

He *almost* respected me – which is important – but he absolutely, never ever liked me, never even enjoyed my company.

He was paid a far amount of money to teach me, and he did what I paid him for.

His house was in a forest.

There were smaller villages nearby, most of them farming.

Me – I lived in a cold, dark hut behind his large, beautiful wood house.

The area was particularly poor but Sensei Ki-jo – he lived in elegance. And no one ever bothered him unless it was to ask for his help or advice, or lessons, like me; it was an odd exchange, as he was seldom needed.

And the other students he had – let's just say he treated them differently.

But I'm off track.

[faces the students, hands behind back]

We trained together every day for two years.

Even while I healed from the broken bones he gave me, which were plenty.

Every day for two years—well, every day except for the two months he abandoned me deep in the forest far, far away. Probably sixty miles, maybe more.

Took me about two months to get back.

Two incredibly scary months in a foreign, poverty stricken land.

And it was during a horrendous seasonal rain—he uh...yeah, he was an asshole.

Taught me a tremendous amount.

Great teacher.

Big asshole.

Speeding right along, near the tail end of two years, villagers come to Sensei Ki-jo and ask for his help.

“There’s a band of robbers in our forest,” the villagers tell him. “They’re coming out to steal the harvests and poison those of us who fight, among other things.”

The gang’s described as small but organized.

Sensei Ki-jo dismisses it initially, saying they’ve moved on, except other villages come saying the same things.

So the peasants ask Sensei Ki-jo to track them.

Sensei Ki-jo explicitly promises their harvests back.

The villagers return home.

Sensei Ki-jo returns to...tending his garden, the only thing he seemed to enjoy.

And he sends me out to track this-this roving band of thieves. And I do as Sensei Ki-jo tells me, as I always did. Including the time he made me break my own finger.

[mocks snapping his middle finger back] Snap.

So out into this massive forest I went.

The issue wasn't so much the forest, which was scary on its own merits. There were snakes – poisonous ones that grow maybe 4 to 6 feet and were out in droves since it was the summer season. Spiders, fucking spiders – I hate spiders. I didn't hate them before but I *hated* them after being in that forest so long. They nearly killed me a few times, goddamn ugh spiders. They were everywhere, also very poisonous. Giant centipedes, giant bees, monkeys, wild boar, etc.

And um, rivers, which I'd have to cross, had a bunch of creatures – it was probably more dangerous than the land. There were these blue-ringed octopi which had no cure if they got you, that was it. Dead.

Lot of dangers in the forest, leave it at that.

There's still shit in that forest that hasn't been discovered yet.

But I had grown familiar with the dangers of the forest, learned well how to survive.

Sensei Ki-jo had taught me very, very well on how to survive. The issue wasn't surviving the absurdly dangerous forest so much as surviving an encounter with the many deadly pirates I was sent to *find* in the outrageously dangerous forest.

I follow tracks the villagers had told me were the bandits and uh, I sort of follow them under the presumption that the bandits weren't near, that they had already taken to the rivers and fled. Scavengers don't usually stay in the same spot too long so I went out as I would hunting as I would normally – with the only weapon I had, a bow-and-arrow – all while following the tracks of about ten men, give or take. As I followed the tracks it

would sometimes split out, like they were sending out scouts, so most of the time there were probably eight or so guys together at any one point.

[looks back to david, who gives a "wrap it up" signal]

So I find them.

On accident.

I'm out hunting when I find that the men had circled around me. So while I think they're north, they're actually directly east of me and retracing their steps. I'm pretty sure they did this because, the day before, I had found tracks that appeared to be of a scout that came back to make sure they weren't being followed.

Anyway, I stumble onto an ambush.

And there's all ten of them, all waiting.

And they immediately take me prisoner.

They tie me to a tree for a full day while they decide what they're going to do with me. They speak the local language but with a different dialect, something I don't know. Only bits, small pieces, single meanings.

"Kill" and "Ransom" are the two most common.

And after about twenty-four hours of me sitting against a tree, kicking away poisonous spiders and giant centipede, they still haven't made a decision. They keep me away from the camp but I'm close enough to smell the boar they roast—man, phew, I've never been so hungry.

I don't know why that's the strongest memory I have considering what happens next.

Next morning, at dawn, I wake because I get a whiff of a very distinct smell – opium and tobacco.

And I find Sensei Ki-jo smoking his pipe.

As there isn't much discussion afterward, I'm left assuming he followed about a day's pace behind, using me as bait.

Keep in mind he doesn't like me.

Keep in mind he's an asshole.

And also keep in mind that the group of men could have killed me almost immediately, or that a night strapped to a tree in a dodgy forest is one of the most dangerous, terrifying things you can do.

But here he was, saving me.

He...

Sensei Ki-jo gives me a katana.

Very beautiful, his favorite. All black, even the blade.

It's up on that wall.

[points to a black sword hanging on the back wall; rubs nose, thinks; clears throat]

Ahem.

He gave me three motions:

He was going to back off and fire his bow-and-arrow from a distance.

I was going to enter the camp.

And no one was to die.

I don't get to talk to him during or after to find out why no one could die – something pretty important considering that they were going to try very hard to kill me.

Sensei Ki-jo backs up about 40 yards. I...could not see any possibility of him hitting anything but trees with his bow-and-arrow.

(To his credit, he was a very good shot.)

But, I do as I'm told.

I stick the sword under my belt.

And I enter the camp alone.

Now this is the part of the story where you think I'm going to tell you it was all part of training, or I tied up everyone and saved the day...that would be a nice little wrap-up, happy ending and such...but that's not how my stories tend to find themselves ending.

They were scattered around a fire-pit full of red hot coals.

And I snuck – step-by-step-by-step, careful, quiet as a ghost – and I get into the camp to find two of them still awake. One of them has the only gun, a World War II rifle. He's sitting crossed-legged in the center of camp. I'm pretty sure he was just waiting for me to get close enough to shoot. The other one was slouched against a tree, sort of half-interested.

The rest of them were asleep.

Um, so the man with the gun and I catch each other's eyes a moment.

He's got black teeth, sort of smiling. Gun at my chest. Legitimately no chance. And he just—he had this eerie quality. Sinister, something ill.

I think I'm done for and, again...

An arrow comes from my right—boom—hits the guy in his arm. Arrow goes through his arm and into the wood stock of the rifle.

Noise, screaming – loud.

Next thing, everyone wakes to find me standing in the center of the camp.

I draw my sword.

They dash and move and roll and grab weapons and get up.

[*brief chuckle*] And the whole time, the most attention anyone gets is *that guy* sitting against a tree, still half-paying attention. I watch him lazily grab a sword and pick it up – they all have swords drawn by now – and he sort of shuffles to his feet.

I take off running.

Partly because I'm terrified of the nine men with swords trying to kill me but also, if Sensei Ki-jo taught me anything, it was to use the environment when you're overwhelmed. So I run in the general direction of the arrow, praying Sensei Ki-jo was watching and waiting. I run a zigzag pattern and return to section them somewhere in the middle. You see, they spread out – a very common tactical mistake. Had they stuck together, I wouldn't have been able to...

Well, as you can see, I'm here.

Had they bound together and moved as a single unit...

[*head side-to-side*]

I wound the first guy in the shoulder, then take his hand.

He's in the back, close to the camp, and obviously slowest.

A weak link.

They know my position.

An arrow wounds another as they close in, forming a half circle around me just outside the camp.

A bullet hits a tree near me. The man with his arm stabbed *into* the gun by the arrow is still trying to aim and fire at me with his left hand. He doesn't remove the arrow and unpin himself, for some reason, and it makes his aim sloppy and wide.

There's only six at that point, the lazy one off somewhere – I lost track of him – and one of them missing, a runner that went for backup.

Arrows stop after that and it's me versus six men with swords.

[removes shirt; shows elongated scars across his torso and arms; pauses a moment]

I'll start with the luckiest bit, which was when a man had me, about to get me in the back of my head with the long edge of a sword, when a bullet hit him in the shoulder. I was so happy because I thought it was Sensei Ki-jo and he had gotten the gun but, in reality, the gunman with the pinned arm missed me and hit his friend.

I'm pretty good with a sword.

I simultaneously fought four men alone.

[pauses; mimicking movements]

As I would push [*pushes*], swing [*swing*], advance [*advances*], they would do the same. Still in a half circle, the gunman behind me. I did my best to back away – away from the gunman, too – trying to prevent them from attacking front and back. Slow steps, quiet. It was interesting. No sound except feet in the forest. I kept hoping Sensei Ki-jo would fire four amazing arrows and take care of everyone but that just didn't happen.

So I stopped backing away, ready.

They—man, they cut me to ribbons. They slashed me a good five [*points to each of the five scars*] times. I'm okay with a sword but definitely not good enough to win a fight against four men by only wounding them.

[*gets up, walks to wall, removes sword*]

When it starts, two of them come at me. I cross their blades into each other [*mimicking movements with the sword*] with a swipe, then duck and jab [*ducks and jabs*] into the meat of one of their calves.

So one is wounded.

Another slashes me here [*points to chest*] as I stand.

I back away from the wounded one so he can't get me from the ground.

One of them circles around back.

I stand in the center [*poised with sword grasped in both hands like a bat*] and wait.

Again, silence.

I watch both sides.

They attack at once.

[battles three invisible men with the sword]

They get my chest again, my arm.

I wound one but not enough to knock him out, just a gash on his shoulder.

They back away.

I'm covered in blood.

Silence, waiting.

They charge again and I immediately get one of them across the chest. He's down and out. I block an attack from the one behind me and the one in front gets me here *[points under his ribs]*, then loses control and gets me here *[points to the outside of his thigh]* and the point of his sword goes straight down and hits the ground, gets stuck a moment.

I uppercut him right in the chin – down like a sack of bricks.

Then it's just me and the last guy. The gunman, he's silent and not around. The slow guy, he's disappeared. And there's still one guy that took off for backup but he wasn't coming back any time soon.

So this guy, we stare at each other a moment. About five feet apart, completely still, waiting for the first sign of movement from the others. There's a noise behind us, quick and gross and squishy – I'm thinking it's the gunman pulling the arrow from his arm.

Either way, it ignites the end of our sword fight.

[puts sword back; looks around]

We go strong. Hard. It's only a moment long.

We wound each other. He wounds me enough to stop me from fighting any more. *[points to the worst of the scars, the longest across his chest]* I fall down and he backs away.

I got him but it was more a defensive wound.

He's still standing, examining the wound on his arm.

Walks over to me, stands over me. Looks around. Stares down at me.

His sword's by his side. Just standing over me, looking down.

[pause]

And that was it. He just...I think he respected me. He could have finished it but he didn't. He left me there, soaked in blood, moaning in pain like the rest of his friends.

He just looked at me, gave me a short nod...

And that's the end of the story.

Any questions?

Is it true you own the buffet down the street?

I meant questions relevant to the story or to the class. But yes – not just me but all three of us. We own everything jointly.

Any other questions?

What was the point of the story?

A few points, actually:

Tell you how much of a badass I am.

Tell you anything is possible, if you work hard enough.

Explain that you are to do everything I say, no matter what. You do not question me, you do as I say – trust me, it won't be quite as dangerous.

Also, it's important never to go into battle alone unless you absolutely have to. Took a while for me to learn that one.

And always – I stress this, always – respect your opponent.

What happened to Sensei Ki-jo?

Um, something...not very pleasant. But I'm not going to get into that now.

Last time I talked to him was directly after the fight. He told me my training was over and to go home – I'm not really paraphrasing, either. He said it almost exactly like that. And because I took so much blood from the enemy, he gave me a name, too.

What was it?

the mosquito warrior

GOOD DAY – NAPPY ROOTS feat. GREG STREET

The song wakes me.

And so begins my day.

The song is Chris' choice; we alternate days. I tend to pick classical concertos since I enjoy waking up to a startlingly intense instrumental. Chris and Sadie often pick lighter hip-hop or rap, a genre I should be familiar with having grown up in Philadelphia but I am not. Lizzy and David pick cutesy fun songs. They've been playing Feist lately, something I give slight insults and faint arguments against (as I do with all their musical choices) but, truthfully, waking up to *Mushaboom* leads to a bright day...

I just accept it as a fact now.

Our three townhouses are connected by a series of speakers, several in each room (including the bathroom). The music serves as our wake-up alarm. We shuffle out of bed, add loose-fitting clothing if we slept naked (Chris and Sadie) then meet out on our respective balconies at 7:00 a.m. sharp. (Our three balconies are also connected, a waist-level wood gate and latch sectioning each.) We start with a communal nod, wave, or raise of the coffee mug to acknowledge one another; no one speaks before our daily stretches, and some of us are always more disheveled than others. David and his daughter, Lizzy, me by my lonesome in the middle, Chris and Sadie – we breathe in the fresh coastal air and finish by taking an extra moment of silence to look out over the ocean.

Then we head in.

Each of us have our own routine. (I just assume Chris' morning routine is sex, in one form or another, before cleaning himself, dressing, and heading out.) Depending on how much work I have during the day, I'll sometimes get a shower, dress well, kiss Lizzy, then head out; on slower days, I join David and Lizzy for breakfast and their walk to her school. There's a door leading from my kitchen into David's back hallway, and today I walk in to see Lizzy's thin frame at the kitchen table. We try to fatten her up but her metabolism keeps her tall and lean, rail-thin even; she's not a timid girl, at least not about her appearance, though she does keep her brown hair long and straight to cover her face when she wants to hide.

I've seen her hide out of sadness mostly; seldom does she throw tantrums.

There's an open school book in front of her at the kitchen table. Even though it's mid-summer, Lizzy enrolled herself in a summer school program – she did so without asking anyone and even used her own money. No one had urged it – in fact, David and Chris had looked forward to sleeping in an extra hour. She told us it was to keep busy and “stay pointy,” as she called it. David had her I.Q. tested at the end of last year and the results further cemented the fact that she was highly gifted.

“Here he comes, ask him,” I hear David's voice say while he cooks at the stove, just out of the doorway. I'm certain it's a math question before I've even closed the door and entered the bright hallway – neon pink on one side and neon green on the other. The colors are shocking to the eye after leaving my house, which is very plain and white and sterile, just how I like it – every corner visible and clean.

Each of us designed the interior of our houses.

Chris' house is the most interesting as it has hidden rooms and passages; it's also the dirtiest.

“Uncle Sandwich, I got a question,” she starts, watching me for a response.

“Please don't call me Uncle Sandwich...” I remind her.

She giggles.

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