



The slanting rays of the setting sun gave the near-empty strip mall a glowing aura. The parking lot was empty. Weeds had grown up between cracks in the pavement, fertilized by a generous supply of unchecked guano. An abandoned shopping cart kept company with a blue mailbox that looked as if it had seen better days. The empty shell of an old hornet's nest protruded down from the walkway overhang. Tissue-thin scraps of the nest were borne away on the wind. The concrete walls of the strip mall smelled vaguely of urine.

It hadn't always been this way, Robin reminded herself. She stood alone at the bus stop where she had just been let off and surveyed the empty parking lot. Three years ago the strip mall had been a pretty lively affair. There had been an upscale salon, an Italian restaurant, a video rental place. The corner occupant kept changing from a bank to a photo studio and back again. Tucked in next to the travel agency there had been an unobtrusive establishment called, grandiosely enough, Master Kaito's Justice Academy. That was back when Robin had owned a car. She'd driven by the Justice Academy more times than she could count without ever noticing the place. It was small and invisible, just like her. Unlike Robin, however, Master Kaito was extraordinarily patient. He'd waited until she was

good and ready for him to introduce himself.

Robin spared a glance at the intersection where she'd had her accident. She had no difficulty admitting now it'd been her fault. There had been rain and the pavement was slick. The ranking officer on the scene kept reminding her of the fact, probably because she couldn't stop crying and he didn't want to burden her with issues of culpability, not when there were interviews to be done. It had been little more than a fender bender but coming on the same day that she'd been laid off and unceremoniously dumped by her long-time boyfriend the accident had sent poor Robin completely over the edge.

After forty-five minutes of standing in the steady drizzle, sharing insurance information, talking to the police, watching the tow truck take her vehicle away and crying her eyes out, Robin discovered her cell phone battery had gone dead. It was the final indignity at the end of a very long day.

She had never felt quite so alone and powerless in all her life.

That was when she'd noticed the little man waving to her from the open door of the Justice Academy.

From that moment on Robin Esteban looked at the world with new eyes. Master Kaito ushered her in out of the rain. He had a towel ready and a hot cup of herbal tea. For a long while they just stood inside the door and stared at each other. The towel draped over Robin's dripping head as she sipped at the curiously strong brew and felt the warmth all the way down to her toes.

The two of them were precisely the same height, something Robin did not take for granted being as short as she was. They were also built identically with thin, wiry limbs, narrow waists, long fingers and not an ounce of superfluous body fat between them. He was ancient, both in body and in spirit, with a shaved head and tough, brown leathery skin. When Master Kaito smiled and his eyes danced Robin felt a strange longing for the happy face she'd once seen in the mirror a long, long time ago. But that face had grown world-weary, haggard and depressed. The corporate rat race had squeezed the joy out of everything.

Robin had managed a weak smile and returned the porcelain teacup.

“I need to use your phone,” she said in a small voice.

“That is not why you are here,” Master Kaito replied softly. “You came to me seeking balance.”

The way he’d spoken, as if stating an obvious fact, made Robin feel even more warm and welcome than had the herbal tea.

“I did?”

“Yes, little bird. All is in readiness. I have been preparing for you for a long time now.”

Three years ago the parking lot had been full of cars, the strip mall was fully leased and customer traffic was brisk. Back then, Master Kaito’s Justice Academy, which seemed little more than a karate studio or a women’s self-defense training center, had been full of students. They began to drift away after Robin had enrolled herself under Master Kaito’s tutelage. She hadn’t noticed at first, but after three months the public classes dwindled in size and frequency while her private lessons with Master Kaito had increased. In six months only a handful of his more promising protégés were in irregular attendance. After a year even they were gone leaving Robin as the only reason for the Justice Academy’s continued existence. Then the strip mall fell into decline as well.

Robin had been so focused on her training she’d hardly seen what was happening, but balance was in fact being served. As she’d grown stronger, both in body and in spirit, the physical world around the Justice Academy had weakened. It was almost as if Master Kaito were some metaphysical conduit able to squeeze the life force out of the surrounding region and inject it into the shivering, little wet bird that had lit upon his doorstep once upon a time.

Things really had deteriorated too, Robin thought as she crossed the weed-infested parking lot from the bus stop. A wooden sign had recently been erected to announce that the strip mall was slated for demolition in less than two weeks. The young woman slid her backpack down off of her shoulder and shook her head. Such an end was inevitable and did not come as any sort of surprise. Robin understood that after three years of intensive training in the secrets of balance she was about to visit her teacher for the last time.

There was the familiar sound of the hanging chimes as Robin opened the door and went inside. The chimes combined with the ever-changing aroma of incense to intensify the sensation that she was passing out of the normal world and into a place of hidden possibilities. It was dark and Robin's eyes took some time to adjust. For a long moment she stood still and inhaled the pungent scents. Orange blossom and jasmine this time with just a hint of rosemary. The small woman drank it all in through every pore in her body. She was going to miss the aromas of this place.

"The first lesson!" Master Kaito barked at her.

Robin could see him seated in the middle of the Justice Academy alone at a small table. A single candle next to the porcelain teapot was the only source of light. It illuminated only a small patch of the interior space; everything else was blanketed in total darkness. There was a space of perhaps twenty meters between Robin and the table.

"Justice is the natural result of a life in total balance," Robin replied softly. It was the first thing he'd taught her three years ago. Master Kaito had not explained what it meant. Instead he allowed her to discover the meaning of it for herself. She'd thought on it for six months making changes in her lifestyle that seemed to bring her closer to a balanced existence. She got rid of her car. Cut up her credit cards. Ate only fresh food that she could prepare herself. The changes she made allowed her to focus on her physical training with Master Kaito to unleash an energy source within her she'd never known existed. All of which served to foster her long lost sense of optimism.

"Remove your shoes, step forward three paces," Master Kaito told her, "and recite the second lesson."

Robin did as she was instructed. The floor beneath her switched from tile to bare wood. Her senses sharpened instinctively. Had the demolition of the mall's interior already begun?

"A heavy load is more difficult to balance than a light one," she said. The second lesson had been difficult to assimilate. She'd assumed at first that shedding the superfluous trappings of her previous lifestyle had sufficiently lightened her own load. But Master Kaito had been patient. It required another six months for Robin to understand she had to shed

all of the emotional baggage she still carried with her. She had an epiphany on her twenty-ninth birthday and wrote letters to all of the people she felt had wronged her at any point in her life. She put them into a manila envelope, fashioned a floating Japanese lantern and set her nagging negativity loose upon the Missaqua River as the sun set that evening. It was only after Robin had learned the second lesson that she'd been allowed to begin with weapons training.

“Three paces more,” Master Kaito intoned, “and the third lesson, please.”

Robin took two steps forward and stopped. Something wasn't right. She reached out into the darkness with all of her senses and knit her brow together before taking her next pace at a ninety degree angle to the left.

“You cannot take more than you give without unbalancing others,” she told her Master. Again her wizened instructor had provided his student with no extraneous content but rather allowed her to discover what meaning the third lesson had for her. At this point in her training Robin was able to look beyond herself and see the myriad and subtle injustices in everyone's daily lives. She'd landed a position doing data entry with The Pericles Corporation and saw with renewed clarity that those who succeeded often did so at someone else's expense. All too often those who were left unbalanced in the end were women. Robin became acutely aware of this pattern in nearly every facet of society. She began to understand the first inklings of what it was she was being trained to do. She saw how rare it was for someone who'd been made chronically unbalanced to right her listing ship on her own. And she saw how those who took more than they gave kept doing so with greater and graver consequences because there was no one who stepped forward to stop them.

“Three paces more,” Master Kaito instructed, “and the fourth lesson, please.”

The muscles in Robin's leg flexed in preparation to move but her brain shut the motion down in an instant. There was something on the floor directly in front of her. Something sharp and dangerous. She could not see it but the razor-sharp edges of the object growled at her silently. Robin sensed there was no way around the object. So she took a deep

breath, bent at the knees and hurled herself over it into the darkness. She did a somersault and came to a stop on a thin piece of plywood that swayed back and forth as if it were a bridge suspended over a bottomless pit. She stood and worked to regain her composure.

"I'll count that as three paces," Robin said, panting with the adrenaline rush.

"The fourth lesson then."

"Learn the difference between being in balance and standing still."

Robin smiled in the darkness. Understanding the fourth lesson was much like standing on the swaying plank of wood. There was a certain sense of accomplishment at being able to keep one's feet in such circumstances, but maintaining balance like that did not get one anywhere. That was as far as most people hoped to go in life, to be able to dance on the head of a pin and keep from falling off. With the fourth lesson Master Kaito taught her to beware of complacency, to embrace her own inertia. After a few months spent to assimilate this precept, Robin determined to wear the mask for the first time and accept her calling as The Thieving Magpie. She had never spoken to Master Kaito of this decision and he did not ask. There was a tacit acceptance by both of them which allowed her training to continue.

"Three more paces," her mentor said, "and the fifth lesson."

The table with the candle and the teapot were much closer now but a black gulf separated her from them still. Stepping off the moving plank of wood required a leap of faith.

"Look for balance in the most unlikely of places," Robin said and smartly executed a sideways twisting leap off the swaying piece of wood. The gaping blackness beneath her yawned in anticipation but Robin grabbed onto a thin copper pipe above her head. The pipe had broken out into a cold sweat but Robin remained a rock of composure and imperturbability. The pipe seemed to angle its way towards the table and Master Kaito. It was a stroke of good luck but Robin had learned that luck had little to do with balance and justice. The fifth lesson had taught her to hone a sense of constant vigilance, to be open to unexpected opportunities, to see possibilities in other people they could not recognize in themselves. As a result she had collected a unique group of allies in her quest to level

the playing field for all women. She was always on the lookout for the next recruit.

“Three paces more,” Master Kaito said, looking up at her and smiling. “And recite your current lesson, the sixth one.”

Robin made her way hand over hand along the sweating pipe until she was positioned above the unoccupied chair across the table from her Master.

“A body in perfect balance cannot fail unless it chooses to fall.”

For the last several months Robin had worked to assimilate this lesson into her training. At first it had seemed like such wonderful news, as if all the hard work had made her invulnerable. Lately, however, she had grown to understand the lesson involved a choice that not only could be made but would eventually become inevitable. Her days as The Thieving Magpie were already numbered.

“Have you learned the meaning of the sixth lesson?” Master Kaito asked.

Robin was slow to respond.

“I have.”

“Then join me for some herbal tea, little bird, while it is still hot.”

Robin let go of the copper pipe and dropped gracefully into the chair. The orange blossom and jasmine incense embraced her. Master Kaito poured and handed her a cup of tea as if they were meeting for the first time. Robin accepted the teacup and nodded politely. There was balance, she now understood, even in saying goodbye.

“I will miss you,” she said quietly.

“But not before I impart to you the final lesson,” Master Kaito told her. “I am still working to understand it myself, which is why your time with me must come to an end. There is little more I have to offer you.”

Master Kaito produced a flat box that looked as if it might once have been used to house a pair of gloves when they were new. He placed the box between them, lifted the lid and set it aside. There was nothing inside the box.

“You bring with you a symbol of what you have learned here,” he said cryptically. “It indicates the direction your training has taken you and

what you intend to do to bring about justice in this unbalanced world. You will place this symbol in the box and promise me you will never use it again.”

Robin bit her lower lip, confused and suddenly uncertain of everything she thought she'd learned.

“Is this the seventh lesson, Master?” she wanted to know.

“This is merely a correction in your course in case you have gone far astray from your proper path.”

Robin worked hard to fight off an anxiety attack. Had she gotten it all wrong from the very beginning? It suddenly seemed the most unlikely of intended outcomes that her kindly, sage martial arts instructor wanted her to be robbing people, dealing in stolen goods and cultivating an outlaw persona that had already put her on the Most Wanted List. How could she have misinterpreted everything so badly?

“As you wish, Master Kaito,” Robin said. She lowered her eyes in shame, opened her small backpack and removed the burgundy mask that defined her. She placed the mask into the box with a shaking hand.

“You are never to use that again,” Master Kaito repeated solemnly. He placed the lid on the box.

“You are prepared now for the seventh lesson which is this: Justice and balance are both merely illusions – only our desire for them is real.”

He lifted the lid back off of the box. Robin's burgundy mask had been mystically transformed. It was now a jet-black mask made of the most supple calfskin leather any craftsman had ever produced. Robin blinked tears out of her eyes and looked to her Master for permission to take it. He nodded his head slowly.

It might have been the incense or an unusually potent pot of herbal tea, but when Robin touched the calfskin she experienced a host of sensations that almost defied description. She held it in her hands and knew the mask was ancient, hundreds of years old. She put it to her face and smelled all of the places where it had been, from the dark, cool forest carpeted with moss and lichen that the King's deer loved to feed on, to the bitter, harsh brightness of the rocky Western plains where the horses ran wild and the long arm of the law had lost its grip. Robin drew the string

over her head to wear the mask for the first time and knew she had joined an elite fraternity of others that had done the same. Self-appointed outlaws dedicated to serving justice with the sword, the bow, the six-shooter or their bare hands. She stared across the table at her Master who had shed fifty years and looked young and fit, ready to tackle the city's most nefarious criminals along with the man who wore the calfskin mask.

"Kaito?" Robin said. "What's happening?"

"Give it time. It will pass. You are being called to those who have gone before. Soon your voice will join with theirs and you will be as one."

Robin shut her eyes tightly. Her skin had suddenly begun to burn. Her head felt as if it was being crushed in a vice. Memories that were not her own went crashing through her cranium at breakneck speed. Faces of people she had never met flashed past her mind's eye. She fought against a surge of nausea and vertigo and swallowed the cries that welled up in her throat. Then, just as suddenly as the sensations had gripped her, they subsided leaving her panting for air.

"Justice and balance are both merely illusions," Master Kaito said once again. His voice was distant and eerily disembodied. "Only our desire for them is real."

Robin opened her eyes and blinked several times until she was herself again. Her teacher was gone. She was left alone in the derelict strip mall with only the small candle and the rapidly cooling pot of herbal tea for company.