

7

I was wearing a big kind of coat with a huge hood thrown over my head and shoulders. I kept it pulled tight to my face like an ugly leper, or a saint might in the midst of enemies, and I looked around the Santa Rosa Metrodome and the crowd that began to fill the many thousands of seats. Morris sat beside me nervously sipping his triple scotch and water, occasionally shivering against the rising chill that I felt too. The air conditioning was on, and doing its best to start off cold, what would soon be an enormous sweltering box of sweat and blood and death. The familiar smells began to filter through to me beneath the cloak, and I was soon licking headworked bratwurst and sauerkraut, and candy apples and floss, and popcorn and beer, even though I do not like beer. The atmosphere was enough to get my mental dingedangle drooling, just the smells and the hot close presence of the human flesh stalking about on spidery legs. I watched the stadium fill.

I made a point of not staying at my rightful abode, the before mentioned penthouse apartment, opting instead to take up residence in the Holiday Inn type joint with herds of many holed-hookers in the main lobby and the room service with Greyhounds running to my room barking their sour barks. Prudence was necessary even though it galled yours truly somewhat to have to do the espionage with his enemies, far preferring the front charge on the back of an elephant blowing a trumpet and waving a flag; but the enemies I was dealing with had dark shadowy ways that kept them hidden, and I might never know they are there until

my brains spill forward in my lap.

So, I'm sitting there, anyway, watching the proceedings. The Metrodome filled up quick with all the angry, hopeful, tragic, bloodthirsty people wanting to shell out money for the spilled guts and the mangled heads. I understood their primitive longing better than they did, and what they could only headwork, I could feel with all the force and violence of my soul. I could rip the liver from my foe; they could only watch. They were cowards, afraid to do what their silent ugly souls desired, doomed to live their lives as shadows, as vultures, screaming over carrion. Nuke was a predator. He knew the score. This was East of Eden.

A horn exploded overhead that started Morris fidgeting again, and I almost set to him with a bruising pinch before my kinder spirit rallied and decided to wait for the real bloodshed. The horn was the call that went out at the start of the match that was to call forward all warrior spirits—which was part of the ambient romance of the occasion and the tang on the lemon. There was one heat before the title fight. The warm up was billed as: *EAST MEETS WEST- The Dreaded Chang of Japan will meet the blistering power of the Woodsman of North Dakota*. I could dimly remember reading about the Dreaded Chang and was momentarily surprised that he still lived. He was a Sumo wrestler gone bad, fallen from grace as it were and drummed out of the weighty Sumo wrestler corps. Anyway, he was also adept with the sword and the staff. I could see him approaching the stage with much fanfare and martial riff of Japanese drums and skin flutes.

I had never seen the Woodsman, but I had a fair guess from his picture that he played the buckskinned warrior technique while using a broad-bladed axe on his opponents. The point spread was not much in the yellow gambler rags, and I suspected that they were fairly matched. I saw the Woodsman climbing into the ring now, he wore buckskins, with a heavy bit of iron armor over his chest and head like the Spanish did when they fucked Mexico good and hard. The Dreaded Chang wore a prodigious quilted apron that could shelter a family of five, and a heavy wicker basket-type deal over his head for protection. The crowd roared when both took their corners, and the announcer started up the hem and haw.

“Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the Santa Rosa Metrodome for tonight's title fight. We'd like to welcome you all back again to this, the world's largest entertainment auditorium.” And then he went through the usual “in this corner weighing three hundred pounds” type thing and I kind of tuned him out wondering what had happened to Juan Matisse, and then figured he would announce the title fight only. I cogged a minor

insult in it all, since it was on the talent, blood and warrior chutzpa of your truly that this whole Metrodome was built, not to mention, Juan's new work schedule. I would have to find out how much he managed to profit from my ill-fated battle with Animan and take it back out of his skin. "LET'S RUMBLE!" the announcer bellows, and the bell snaps me out of my inner wandering around headworking stuff, and I look up to see the Dreaded Chang square off with the Woodsman.

Chang is slow, and he's a big target as he stomped around the concrete ring floor, but he is tall, about six and a half feet and the microthin sword he's swinging is about five feet long. They sort of circled each other momentarily, the Woodsman tall himself, and good at swinging around his broad-bladed axe. They ring-around-the-rosied a little more, and just as the crowd was about to start yawping foul, the Woodsman stepped in swinging low with the haft of the axe up ready to stop a return blow.

Chang is no jumper, and he just managed to get the sword down to parry the blow, before ringing two off the Woodsman's axe. They do a half-circle and the Woodsman again lunged in with two quick strikes at the chest and then the shoulders. The first one was parried, the second slashed across the wide stretch of blubber and muscle, but as he jumped back the longer sword of Chang snaked out and popped him through the hamstring. The Woodsman screamed and goes down but he's up again, I could see the boom and hovering cameras zeroing in on his leg that fountained red. Chang pressed his advantage though and thunders at the Woodsman raining one after another, six blows at him. He backed off and the crowd 'oohs' when they see red flowing down the Woodsman's chest. One of the blows hit good—that is clear to see on the eight giant flatscreens.

The Dreaded Chang got ready for another pass, and the crowd cheered as the Woodsman sort of dropped to his knee like he would pass out soon, and Chang pauses for a second to soak in the screams. I spotted the wily Woodsman's trick though and could see the blade he is palming fresh from a sheath hidden in his boot. It is about a foot long, but long enough. Chang went in again, shattering down three blows on the haft of the Woodsman's axe, wood chips flying, then the crowd screamed as Chang staggered back with the hilt of the dagger jutting out below his rubbery left tit like a new nipple.

Chang took a surprised look down, and lowered his guard a second—and the Woodsman leapt in with two quick blows, one almost severing Chang's left arm and the other lifting his big, pig-tailed head from his shoulders. It did a foamy spin in the air and bounced off the top rope

like a soccer ball. The huge body dropped spraying blood and twitching grotesquely, and as I watched, I felt a wave of near nausea creep into my guts as the dark stuff pumped and pumped on the concrete like grape juice. I bit the feeling back with flesh-ripping teeth.

The Woodsman managed to get a hand up for a cheer and then he collapsed. The crowd screamed and screamed, and I looked around at all the hairless maniacs and I wanted to be a shark again, only one that flies, and then I would show them the meaning of violence, blood and pain as my jagged maw grated its serrated teeth against their faces.

Paramedics climbed onto the platform with one slipping onto a knee in Chang's blood. They quickly went to work on the Woodsman, and soon had him out of the ring; then, the referee winched down on his long steel web from on high, and with heavy iron claws snatched up the head, then dragged the carcass of Chang over to the ropes and dropped everything into a waiting flesh car. This in turn closes up tight—the top bearing the symbol of the World Snuff Fighters Association—and trundles off on its robotic way. The referee then sprayed cleansers out of some hidden orifice and cleaned the pools of blood from the ring. Large chromium drains around its perimeter gurgled and groaned. All this while, the giant flatscreens that circled the stage replayed the fight with inset slow-motion close-ups of the most exciting blows.

I watch the crowd the whole time, and saw the red gleam in their eyes. Chang's head spun like a pinwheel dragging this long kite-tail of blood. The detail picked up by the tight shot and high-resolution three-dimensional cameras almost catch his eyes blinking their last startled blinks. I cannot help but slip into my professional showman routine, and though I could give the Woodsman points for cunning in a bad situation, I am a little disappointed that he did not go the extra mile and parade with the head. That had become customary in snuff fighting when there was a decapitation, and I could tell that the crowd sorely missed it. Philosophically, I decided that every fighter was not Nuke, and mused whimsically that perhaps the Woodsman was dying as he got the last strokes in. That would be nice.