

Part One

The Princess and the Blacksmith's Son

Chapter One

May I Introduce: Princess Violet

Once upon a time, in the faraway kingdom of Krakonia, there lived a king named Daniel the Seventh; the Seventh, because he was the seventh in a succession of kings of the same name. As a matter of fact, the whole dynasty was called the Daniel Dynasty and the kings were numbered because nobody remembered their family name. It probably appeared somewhere in the Kingdom archives, but besides the Royal Archivist no one ever cared to check it out.

King Daniel VII had a daughter named Danielle, but everybody in the realm knew her as Princess Violet. She was given this nickname on account of her eyes – at sunset, when the setting sun painted the sky with hues of gold, red and azure, the eyes of the Princess looked like the violets growing in the gardens of the royal palace. Princess Violet was very beautiful. Of course that's what they say about every princess, even if she is quite plain or even plain ugly. Truth doesn't matter in the case of royalty, and if one is of royal blood, one must be beautiful. But Violet was beautiful by any standard. Whoever saw her for the first time would stop and stare at her as if she were a picture in a museum. Her long hair cascaded on her back like a waterfall of melted gold, and her bright face with its slightly flushed cheeks resembled the porcelain figurines brought to Krakonia from the Land

of Xin. Her lips gleamed like red roses after rain, and in her eyes, as I have already mentioned, bloomed violets.

She was also very bright and loved to study. She studied history with the Royal Historian, arithmetic and the basics of realm management with the Lord of Treasury (who was her uncle), natural sciences, alchemy, astrology, and applied witchcraft with the Royal Wizard, and law, tradition, and codes of behavior with the Master of Ceremony. In short, she studied everything that a princess who would one day be a reigning queen should know.

All the loyal subjects of King Daniel VII, from the ragged beggars that wandered in the dusty roads of the kingdom to the high-and-mighty dukes and earls, loved and admired the beautiful, smart, and very well-educated Princess. When she was traveling in her golden carriage or riding her beloved horse Snow, the citizens of the towns and villages that she was passing through would come out and cheer her at the top of their lungs. As she was kind and compassionate she ordered her servants to toss copper and silver coins into the crowd. Some nasty tongues said that was the reason why the crowd cheered her. But we can assume the King's subjects weren't that greedy, and they cheered their princess out of love for her and not out of love for the money they collected in the dirt.

She might sound to you like the perfect daughter that every parent dreams of. But I promise you she wasn't. Those who were close to her knew she could be very mischievous and annoying. Sometimes she seemed to be in two places at the same time. She scampered through the palace like quicksilver, getting in everybody's way, and pulling pranks. By the way, she loved pulling pranks and was very good at it. They weren't very mean and sometimes were quite amusing (not to the victims, mind you). I'd like to give you a few examples of the funniest of her practical jokes, but I'll content myself with only one, not funny at all, but very relevant to the story. Actually it changed the course of Krakonian history.

She was also very stubborn, and once she set her mind on something, no one could persuade her to give it up. That was because King Daniel VII had lost his beloved wife at childbirth and transferred all his love to the beautiful baby girl, who was a carbon copy of her mother. Since the day she was born she was adored and pampered by

everybody around her. The word *No* did not exist for her. She got everything she asked for, and was never punished or even reprimanded. In short, she was a typical only child. I've told you that everybody loved the Princess, but this is not accurate. There were a few people who didn't like her at all. Especially the Treasury Lord's Wife, but I'll tell you about it later.

One day, shortly after Violet's tenth birthday, a team of twenty four Masters of Sword and Martial Arts arrived to Krakonia. Twelve of them were Nipponese and twelve Xinese and they came to train the soldiers of King Daniel in the fine art of killing and maiming. At his first audience with the King the head of the team, Grandmaster Sonny-San of Nippon and his second in command Grandmaster Mao-Lee of Xin, fell to their knees and their brows touched the marble floor in front of the throne.

"Why are they begging for their lives?" whispered the King to the Ceremony Master standing behind his throne, "Have they already done something wrong?"

"No, Your Majesty. That's how the Nipponese and the Xinese greet their Emperors."

"I rather like it." the King said, "Can't we introduce it in my court on a broad basis?"

"According to Krakonian law only criminals have to fall to the ground, Your Majesty. Therefore..."

"I know. Can you do something about this law?"

"It might be difficult to persuade our nobles to accept this form of greeting."

"I guess you're right," sighed the King, "I can force them to greet me in this respectful manner, but we don't want risk a rebellion over bowing."

He motioned the Grandmasters to stand up.

Mao Lee presented gifts sent by the Emperor of Xin: a dozen rolls of the finest Xinese silk. But the gifts presented by Sonny-San were much more impressive: two swords made of the finest Nipponese steel. The large one, resting in a golden sheath encrusted with fine stones, was meant for King Daniel, the small one, was a token for Princess Violet.

Actually the sword wasn't meant for her because the Emperor of Nippon thought that King Daniel VII had a son. In the realm of Nippon, girls weren't supposed to play with swords. The same was actually true of Krakonia, but this restriction didn't apply to the Princess, who could play with anything she wanted, including toys that were meant for boys. Sonny-San hesitated when he saw a princess instead of the expected prince. But before he could reach a decision about what should be done with this unforeseen problem, Violet snatched the sword from his hand.

"Thank you for the wonderful birthday present," she uttered happily.

Sonny-San opened his mouth and closed it again because he didn't know what to say. He couldn't say, of course, that this priceless gift wasn't meant for her. The Nipponese swords were considered the best in the world, and were priced accordingly. Only a handful of very rich dukes and earls in Krakonia could afford a Nipponese sword, and in order to buy one, they had to bid farewell to half of their annual income.

Violet immediately fell in love with her new toy. It was a complete novelty for her and it was one of a kind – she had nothing like it in her vast toy collection. And it was dangerous. In fact it wasn't a toy at all. It might have looked like one, because it was much smaller than the sword that her father received, but it was unquestionably a weapon. A weapon designed to cut throats and open bellies. When she unsheathed the sword – actually, a dagger – and looked at it, she felt a shiver run along her spine. The sharp, polished steel blade, sparkling with bluish light, held the threat of mortal danger.

With the unsheathed dagger in her hand, she roamed the corridors of the royal palace and the paths of the royal gardens, fighting bandits, dragons and all sorts of strange and terrifying beasts that crawled out from the Dark Forest into the royal court. The courtiers fled whenever they heard her approaching footsteps. They were terrified by a vision of a razor-sharp blade brandished by a girl who would never be punished. No one ever complained, because one doesn't complain about a princess. And there was no one to complain to. You wouldn't like to tell the King that his daughter has become became a danger to all, would you? I wouldn't.

The only man brave enough to do that was the War Lord, but he was far away in the West, fighting the King's current enemy. Finally, after Princess Violet had shaved off half of his magnificent mustache and almost cut off his nose, the Ceremony Master had mustered the courage to approach the King about this matter. As the first minister of his Majesty, he had to take a step before someone lost a more important body part than a mustache or, heaven forbid, before the Princess harmed herself.

He entered the King's quarters and bent in half. The King raised his eyes from the book in his lap. It was the first volume of the Krakonian History during his reign. Five more volumes were to come out in the next few years. The first volume described the first years of his reign and depicted him as a great warrior and his subjects' beloved ruler. The King liked the Royal Historian's accounts of his exploits and heroic deeds, even though he didn't recall half of them. He assumed that he must have performed them, because the Royal Historian wouldn't fabricate lies in an official history book.

"What is it, Master?" he asked.

The Master of Ceremony bowed again, pulling nervously on the remaining half of his mustache.

A smile appeared in the King's eyes. "What happened to the other half?"

"It was shaved off, Your Majesty," the Master said.

"By whom?"

The Master of Ceremony bowed for the third time.

"By Violet?" the King guessed.

The Master bowed for the fourth time and the King burst out laughing. "I wish I'd seen that. It must have been hilarious."

"Yes Your Majesty, it was."

The King looked into the somber eyes of his minister. "Then why are you so gloomy? It was just a prank. You know that Violet didn't mean to harm you."

"But of course, Your Majesty. It was just a prank, nothing more."

"Then why the long face?"

"Because I'm worried, Your Majesty."

"About what? That she might cut off a more important member?"

“I’m not worried about myself, Your Majesty. If Her Royal Highness wishes to separate a member or two from my body, I am at her disposal. That’s her royal birthright to dismember any one she wishes.”

“Then what worries you, Master?”

“That she might do harm to herself Your Majesty. A Nipponese blade can be very dangerous in an untrained hand.”

King Daniel VII cast his eyes down and thought for a while. “What do you advise? To take away the dagger?”

“Heaven forbid, Your Majesty!” exclaimed the Master, “One doesn’t take away gifts from foreign sovereigns, especially a gift from the Emperor of Nippon. The Nipponese are very touchy people and the Emperor might see it as an affront to his imperial honor.”

“What do you advise then?” asked the King impatiently, “And I advise you to advise me now. I’m in the middle of a very interesting part of my book.”

“The Princess should take lessons in Martial Arts, Your Majesty.”

The King looked at him incredulously. “Martial Arts?” he repeated, “Do you realize she is only ten?”

“I do, Your Majesty,” nodded the Master.

“Our tradition doesn’t let girls handle a sword. You of all people should know that.”

“I know, but since she got one and we have no intention of taking it away, she should know how to handle it, Your Majesty.”

The King pondered for a moment and nodded. “You have a point. If she is trained in using a sword she won’t hurt herself or anybody else for that matter.”

He liked the Ceremony Master’s idea for yet another reason – although he loved his daughter dearly he sometimes wished she were a son, especially when he realized that he would never have one.

Violet’s mother died giving birth. After a year of mourning King Daniel VII decided to re-marry and to produce a male successor to his throne. But before he could do that he went to war against one of his neighbors. After winning the war he celebrated the victory with his soldiers for three days and three nights in a row. The last night, completely drunk from sweet wines and meads he had consumed, he went out to empty his bladder by the old oak, which stood at the edge

of his camp. In his drunkenness he didn't notice that he was peeing straight into a hive of wild bees. The ferocious insects stung every exposed part of his body. After a few days the swelling was gone, but so was his ability to produce a son. This incident was never mentioned in the history book he had been reading.

If Violet shows some talent in Martial Arts, he thought, I could take her with me to fight my wars. She could be the son I never had. There was also a very practical reason to let her study Martial Arts – she was going to be the Queen some day, and she should know the arcane art of warfare. Even if she decided that war was not her thing, she should be prepared. As his illustrious father, Daniel VI had said: Always be prepared for war and you will never have to fight. It didn't work in his son's case – Daniel VII had always been prepared and he had always fought. Violet was his true daughter and she would probably follow his footsteps in this matter.

He turned to one of the guards standing stiffly in the doorway. "Send for Sonny-San," he ordered.

The soldier saluted and disappeared. A short time later he reappeared with the Nipponese Grandmaster.

"Have you managed to settle in yet, Grandmaster?" inquired the King politely.

"Yes, Your Majesty," replied the famous swordsman.

"I'm pleased," nodded the King, "What about my knights and soldiers?"

"What about them, Your Majesty?"

"Are they any good?"

Sonny-San hesitated.

"Well?"

"My team of masters just started to train them," he said, "It might take a while to bring them to a decent level. Martial Arts are not just the ability to swing a sword effectively. It's a way of life, Your Majesty. We have to reshape their thinking in order to..."

"I don't want their thinking to be reshaped," the King interrupted him, "As a matter of fact I don't want them thinking too much. I want them to swing their swords effectively, nothing more. The current war is in its final stage. I'm going to win because my War Lord is better than the War Lord of the enemy King. But my soldiers are not much

better than his, that's why the fighting is going on and on. The tribute I'm going to collect from the defeated enemy will barely cover my expenses. Therefore I plan another war next year to make up for the losses of this war. Will my soldiers become better by then?"

Sonny-San hesitated again, but when he noticed a deep line of discontent creasing the King's brow, he replied hurriedly: "They will be better than the enemy soldiers, Your Majesty. My team of swordsmen and I will see to it."

"I can hear a 'but' in your voice."

"But they won't be Sword Masters," Sonny-San replied truthfully, "It takes time to train a Sword Master."

"But you promise that they will be better than my enemy, right?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Well, that will do," the King smiled, "You have a six-year contract. I hope it's time enough to train at least some of them to be Sword Masters."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Good. I'd like to ask you a personal favor, Grandmaster."

"I'm at your disposal, Your Majesty."

"Would you be so kind as to train my daughter, Princess Violet?"

Sonny-San hesitated for the third time.

He had trained the Emperor's children and it had been an extremely traumatic experience. Learning Martial Arts involves a lot of bruises, cuts, broken bones and other injuries. The Emperor's children had been spoiled rotten and they didn't stop whining from the beginning of their training to the end. Each time they were hurt they would run to their mother to complain about Sonny-San's cruelty. He was in a plight: on the one hand the Emperor wished his boys to be Sword Masters; on the other the Empress wanted him dead for hurting her little darlings. As a matter of fact, Sonny-San had committed himself to train the Krakonian army just to get as far away as possible from the Imperial court.

And now he was asked to teach another spoiled brat.

He wanted to say no, but he knew very well that the King's polite request was actually an order. If one wishes to keep his head on his shoulders, rather than in his armpit, one doesn't refuse the King's

request. He saw the line of discontent reappearing on the King's forehead and he knew he had no choice.

"I will be honored to teach the Princess Martial Arts, Your Majesty," he said.

The next day Violet began her three-year journey into the mysteries of the Nipponese Sword and of other Martial Arts. In absolute secrecy of course, because the King didn't want to jeopardize her chances of getting married someday. Which man would want his bride to be a Sword Mistress, a woman who could cut him in half if he displeased her in any way? Only a few of Sonny-San's swordsmen knew the identity of his apprentice, but like all Martial Arts Masters, they could keep a secret.

If Sonny-San thought that after two or three lessons he would break Violet's spirit and send her to her daddy crying, things turned out differently. He did not expect to find her in the training yard at early dawn, but he did not show his surprise. At first, he demonstrated some very complicated moves, hoping that she would find them too difficult and decide that Martial Arts were not meant for a delicate princess like herself. She watched him fascinated and after a few trials performed them almost faultlessly. This time he was really surprised. In the following lesson he devised the most strenuous workout he could think of, but Violet wasn't deterred and took the abuse without a murmur.

"Let's have a break," suggested Sonny-San at noontime.

"Let's not," answered the relentless Princess.

"You need to get your second wind, Your Royal Highness."

"What's wrong with the first one, Master?"

He was even more surprised when she cut her forearm on a sharp rock edge and didn't shed a tear. She just sent a quick, disinterested glance at the trickling blood and assumed the required position.

"We have to attend to your wound, Princess," Sonny-San said.

"It's just a scratch, Master," she said, "Let's go on."

"You might get an infection."

"Let's go on, Master!" she repeated forcefully.

"As you wish, Princess."

It's impossible to count all the cuts, the bruises, the sprained ankles and dislocated shoulders she had suffered over time, but she never cried or complained, and biting her lip she went on with her training. If

one of the courtiers had seen her on the training ground he would not have believed his eyes. The spoiled and fragile princess disappeared and was replaced by a ferocious wolf cub. Sonny-San finally realized that the Princess would not quit and started to take her seriously.

First he taught her to fight without a weapon. “In Martial Arts anything can be a deadly weapon,” he said before he started the lessons, “Even your bare arms and legs.”

Then he taught her the intricacies of kicking, punching, chopping, ramming, elbowing, and kneeing. He taught her how to fall and how to get up quickly, how to leap high and swirl in the air, how to strangle and how to free herself from strangling, how to throw an adversary to the ground and how avoid being thrown to the ground. He taught her everything he knew until every part of her body became a lethal weapon that she could use with deadly precision. Sonny-San was truly amazed; within one year only Violet was able to effortlessly defeat any opponent her age and even much older than her.

The next year he taught her the Art of Bow and Arrow. He taught her to shoot standing up, kneeling, lying down, running and riding a horse. When she could to kill a fly in flight with one arrow, he taught her to kill two flies with two arrows at once. He knew already how talented she was, but was still surprised at the ease with which she had mastered the arcane Art of Bow and Arrow.

The third year came and it was time to teach her the Queen of Martial Arts. The Nipponese Sword.

“Before you even draw your sword you must foresee the outcome of the battle,” Sonny-San said, “Look into your adversary’s eyes and try to imagine the whole battle, step by step. The moment you’re able to do it, you’ve won. With a single blow of a sword, no more.”

Violet had seen the King’s knights fighting in tournaments and it took them a lot of complicated fencing to win.

“Just one blow?” she asked incredulously.

“Just one blow,” he nodded, “That’s what a true Sword Master needs to win a fight against a single opponent. Two blows against two opponents and three blows against three opponents.”

“Can you do it?”

“Yes, I can.”



“So will I,” she promised.

Sonny-San knew that she would, because he was already used to the agility of her mind and body. But he had a hard time digesting her swiftness – she had mastered the Single Blow Technique in just a few months. He had mastered it in a few years.

But he did not only teach her the noble art of maiming and killing. With her he accomplished the goal he could not achieve with the King’s knights and soldiers: he reshaped her mind. He taught her self-discipline and control of her thoughts and feelings, essential talents for becoming a true Sword Master. And above all he taught her to understand the adversary.

“A Sword Master must feel what his adversary feels,” he tirelessly repeated, “He must understand his opponent’s way of thinking. He must watch the eyes of his adversary, to see what hides behind them. And he must listen, not to what the adversary has to say, but to what hides behind the words. That’s the only way to win a battle.”

“But if I understand my enemy, I no longer want to kill him.”

“That’s right,” agreed Sonny-San, “A Sword Master is never eager to kill. He who knows his strength is not afraid to be compassionate. Besides, a true Sword Master can win a battle without drawing his sword,” he continued, “A glance is enough. When the adversary sees in his eyes that there is no point in confrontation he will step down.”

“Just one glance?”

“Just one glance.”

“Can you demonstrate it to me?”

Sonny-San turned to her full-face and his dark eyes became a black abyss that threatened to engulf her. His gaze lasted just a split second but it was enough to curl the blood in her veins. She shuddered and wiped the sweat dew that appeared on her brow.

“Can I learn it?” she asked.

“You already know it,” Sonny-San smiled.

She opened her blue eyes in wonder, “When did I learn it?”

“During the last three years.”

“Can I try it on you?”

“You can, but it won’t have the same effect on me that it had on you.”

“Why not?”

“Because I know the secret.”

She pondered a moment and asked, “Can everyone understand the glance?”

“Alas no,” Sonny-San sighed, “Many have tried to challenge a Master, and died under his sword. That could be avoided if they had learned to look and listen.”

Martial Arts have changed Violet. During the three years of training she turned into a composed and self-confident girl. Which was rather remarkable, because most thirteen-year-old girls (and boys) are quite wild and what they lack the most is self-confidence.

After three years of training Sonny-San one day sat down on a rock and asked Violet to sit by his side. “We are done, Violet,” he said.

He didn’t call her Your Royal Highness or Princess because they’d become very close during the years of training.

“You look tired, Sonny-San,” Violet said, “We shall go on tomorrow.”

“No, my dear. Your learning is over. Tomorrow I have to go back to Nippon.”

“Why?”

“I received a letter from the Emperor. He ordered me and the other Nipponese Masters to come back.”

“Has something happened in the Nipponese Empire?”

“Yes indeed,” nodded Sonny-San, “The Shogun of the North rebelled against the Emperor. His Majesty, your father, released me and my twelve companions from our six-year-contract, so we could go and help our sovereign to crush the rebellion.”

“What about me,” said the Princess with tears in her eyes, “I don’t want you to go.”

“I taught you almost everything I know, my dear,” smiled Sonny-San, “You are a true Mistress of the Nipponese Sword.”

He said it with a lot of pride and a little embarrassment. Pride, because every Master is proud when the student becomes his equal. Embarrassment, because what had taken him thirty years to learn, Violet learned in three. There was no doubt in his mind that in a couple of years, Violet would surpass him and become the greatest Sword Mistress in the world. But his pride in her conquered his embarrassment and he took her in his arms.

Violet hugged him tightly in return. "Don't go, Sonny-San."

"I must."

"Who will train me after you leave?"

"Grandmaster Mao-Lee," replied Sonny-San, "The Xinese swordsmen are staying for another three years, till the end of the contract. Mao-Lee is as good as I am. Well, maybe I'm better, but not much. He will teach you whatever I didn't, which is practically nothing."

The next day Violet escorted her Master to the harbor. Before he boarded the ship that would take him and his twelve companions to Nippon, he took his sword off his back and handed it to Violet. The sword was encased in a plain black sheath.

"Thank you," said Violet, and hugged him.

Sonny-San noticed a shade of disappointment in her eyes because the sword wasn't as beautiful as the one he had presented to her father.

"This sword is one of a kind, Violet," he said, "She had been forged hundreds of years ago in a volcano fire by a legendary Sword Maker. She is superior to your father's sword or any other sword, for that matter."

"In what way?" asked Violet.

Instead of answering, he drew the sword from its sheath, plucked a hair from his head and placed it gently on the blade's edge. He breathed lightly, the hair broke in half and its two pieces danced slowly in the air until they reached the ground.

"I've never seen a sword as sharp as this one!" exclaimed Violet in wonder, "Is my father's sword also so sharp?"

"Not even close," said Sonny-San, "But that's not all."

"What else?"

"The man who forged her was not only a Sword Maker but also a wizard."

"Is she magical?"

"Yes."

Sonny-San took her right hand and gently placed her little finger on the sword's edge. A few droplets of Violet's blood ran down the shining blade.

"What now?" asked Violet curiously.

“Now she is yours forever,” he replied “You can’t lose her in the heat of battle and no one can take her away from you. She will always find a way to get back to you before dawn.”

“But the sword was yours,” observed Violet, “Won’t she come back to you?”

“I gave her to you of my own free will and you made her yours by shedding your blood. I forfeited my ownership of the sword.”

“You talk about the sword as if it were a living thing,” observed Violet, “A female.”

“A sword is always a female,” said Sonny-San, “And yes, she is a living thing. Take her in your hand and you’ll feel it.”

Violet drew the sword.

To her astonishment she felt a slight tremor in the handle and she believed she saw it change so as to fit the shape of her hand. A moment later the sword didn’t feel like a foreign object any more; she seemed to merge with her palm and become an extension of her arm. Violet made a few fencing moves and the blade cut easily through the air as if the sword were guessing in which direction she wished to move her.

“Can she fight for me?” she asked.

“No,” smiled Sonny-San, “The fighting is your part of the partnership. She will help you by complying with your wishes.”

He hugged Violet once more and without looking back, hurried to the board of the ship. He didn’t want anyone to see the tears forming in his eyes.

He was a Swordsman, and Swordsmen never shed tears.

Richard Shiloh
