

# DEMON SLAYER

## Volume 2 Contents

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## Summary

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### 九: Celina's Decision. Tao's Last Chance.

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Banished from the imperial court for life, Alex returned to his old home, feeling defeated and depressed. The worst part of all this is that Celina is not here with him. He is free to go while she remains in the dungeon. He is exhausted mentally and physically, and just sat on the floor. Eventually, he fell asleep. He had a blanket wrapped around him, and he was sleeping with the Fire Sword in his hand. He decided that being depressed will not help his situation, and sleep might help him feel better in the morning.

\*Knock knock\* Alex woke up and he walked over to the door. He was dumbfounded when he saw Celina standing in front of him, soaked from the pouring rain. She stared at him with sad eyes, the eyes of a woman who needs someone right now.

“Your highness...”

“May I come in?” She walked in without waiting for his answer.

Alex knelt in front of her. “It is my fault! If I wasn’t so impulsive...”

“Don’t do this...” The expression on her face has not changed one bit. “It is not your fault...I am every bit as guilty as you are.”

“But...” Even though what she said is true, he remained on the floor.

"I am not the concubine anymore...please stand up."

Alex stood up. He only kneeled because of habits. They are no longer in the palace and no longer have any status. They are both commoners now.

"I did not know where else to go." she said.

"You can stay here as long as you like. All we have is each other." Alex just noticed that she was soaked from the rain. "You need to dry your clothes." He went to the bedroom to fetch some clothes. Once he came out, he handed them to her. "Change into these. Use my bedroom."

Alex stood by the window and stared at the endless rain.

Celina dropped the new clothes on the floor. \*Plop\* She began to unzip her dress. She took off the sleeves and shoulders and pulled the dress down her stomach and let it drop. Then she took off her undergarment and let it drop.

Alex faced her and he was dumbfounded to see her standing there **completely naked**. Ever since she entered his house, her head was facing down and her face was partially covered by her hair. But right now her entire face was seen, as well as her body. Her eyes were trembling as she stared in his direction. After going through what she went through, it's only natural for her to feel many strong emotions at once. Her eyes were inviting and loving and at the same time nervous.

Alex remained frozen and just stared at her natural features. His staring made her feel embarrassed and consequently she covered up her private parts and stared at the floor. He walked towards her and took off his shirt. Celina was pleasantly surprised as she looked forward. They both stared at each other's eyes in suspense...they knew the inevitable was going to happen.

He grabbed her arms and leaned in to kiss her on the lips. It was not a regular kiss, but a deep and passionate one. So many things happened at once, and they have lost everything. But this one kiss, this one moment made it all worth it. Celina's eyes closed...she can finally feel safe and secure with another man.

Alex wrapped his arms around her back, holding her tightly but tenderly. It's as if his fingers were digging into her skin.

She still remembered the very first time Alex kissed her. He just rescued her from the scoundrel Jiax. She was wearing nothing but ribbons, exposed and vulnerable...but that kiss made her feel safe...and for a moment all her problems disappeared.

That moment was so powerful she could not stop thinking about it. Her mind desired it and her body desired it as well. She's been yearning for that feeling ever since. They almost kissed last time, when she was on the floor, barely dressed, and Alex embraced her. Unfortunately they were interrupted by the servant knocking on the door. That left some emotion tension that was unresolved between these two.

But at last, they can now kiss without any distractions. It is their world...a world for two and no one else. At last, she knows what it is like to be kissed by the man you love, the man that you choose.

While still lip locked, he lowered her torso diagonally to make his face on top of hers and continued to swallow her lips. She just let herself go, doing nothing and letting him take control. Then they both fell on the floor.

It was all for this...she forgot she's the concubine...she forgot about all her problems and past pain...and she can be herself...

While the rain continued to pour heavily...inside Cheng's bathroom two people were using the same bath barrel. The man was kissing the woman's sternum and neck constantly, while she moaned and her head tilted back. "Uhhh...uhhhh...Alex! Alex! Uhhh!" Celina's arms were wrapped around his back. One of her hands grabbed his silver hair and pulled on it hard. Alex kissed her shoulder and her cheek all over.

"Do you remember when you caught me falling from the tower?"

Alex stopped what he was doing. "Yeah."

"At that moment I wanted to end my life. As long as I'm with you, I can continue living."

They kissed on the lips. Alex glided his lips to her chin and her neck, smothering her with kisses. Each touch was audible in the quiet room, with the exception of the sound of water splashing. His head went lower to the top of her breasts, kissing and biting with his lips while half his face was under water. Celina continued to moan and scream.

Alex reached down and grabbed her right leg and placed it on his shoulder. Her ankle was touching his cheek. "I don't want you to feel sad anymore. I'll do everything I can to make you happy." He kissed her ankle and her shin all over.

"If I were to die, I'd rather have it be done by your hands. I want the last thing I see to be your face." <sup>1</sup>

Alex looked up at her face and their noses were touching. "That's enough talk about dying. No more." He leaned in and buried his face between her breasts and let himself loose. His hand took her leg off his shoulder and placed it to the side. Her foot landed on the edge of the barrel.

"Uhhh...uhhh!" Her head tilted backwards. Her arms were spread out to the side. Her fingers squeezed the barrel firmly. Their movements became heavier and more violent, causing water to spill out of the barrel. "Uhhh...uhhh..." While it was wet and cold outside, these two were warm and cozy. <sup>2</sup>

The man named Liu Zhang is a secretive person, but today he was extra secretive, for he has meeting to go to. He specifically ordered his servants not to let anyone into his quarters. Being one of the royal family members, he enjoys the life of noble, with wealth, power, and status. But Zhang is not interested in money as much as the other lords. He has a dark and mysterious secret that he tells no one, and I mean no one.

He walked over to his mirror and saw his own reflection. He looked like a man in his forties, with a long, black beard and thick eyebrows. The gem on his neck glowed and his reflection became blurry, and turned into a silhouetted figure.

"Lord **Ko-Rashm**, what is your progress?" asked the face.

"Everything is going according to plan. King Liu drank the spice and now he is addicted to it...and now I have control of him. The Demon Slayer, on the other hand, somehow found the antidote. He had outside help, presumably from the other students of the War God."

"Where is the Demon Slayer now?"

"Hmmm, I had him banished from palace, thanks to a little discovery I made. Now that he is outside, he is unprotected, and it is only a matter of time before Tao gets him."

"What about **Ko-Ragnarok**?" asked the demon.

"His progress is remarkable, he is certainly is my prodigy swordsman." Zhang replied.

"Are you going to use Ko-Ragnarok to kill the Demon Slayer?"

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<sup>1</sup> This line she says will be important later on, when the Demon Brothers force them to fight to the death

<sup>2</sup> Original scene - They didn't have sex, they talked about Alex's childhood. But it makes more sense for them to be intimate during their time of crisis. Celina's clothes were wet from the rain so she had to take it off eventually.

"Alex Cheng is not as strong as he looks. I do not need to send Ragnarok to kill such an unskilled fighter. That is why I sent Tao after him. Ragnarok has a much more important mission – to find Li Cheng."

"That girl knows too much and has seen too much. Make sure you kill her as soon as possible."

"As you wish, **Demon King**."

The face vanished and turned back to Zhang's reflection and accordingly, his gem stopped glowing.

Alex came back from the kitchen, holding a teapot. He poured tea into Celina's cup. "Drink it while it's warm."

\*Knock knock\* They both became alert.

"You better hide." said Alex.

Celina nodded and went to the other room.

Alex answered the door and to his surprise, it was Zi and Jade, his two best friends from childhood. "Zi...Jade...what are you two doing here?"

"That is what I wanted to ask you." Zi said. Judging by his tone of voice, he was not happy about something. Jade was also troubled, and she stared at the floor uncomfortably.

"Why are you here and not in the palace? I heard that you have been exiled? Is that true, Alex?"

Alex was caught and he did not want to admit it, but how can he lie to his friends? "It is a long story..."

"I heard that you had an affair with the concubine. Please tell me it is not true!"

"Alex...it isn't true, right?" Jade asked, folding her hands in front of her. "You wouldn't do something like that, right?"

"I'm sorry." replied Alex. "I am guilty as charged."

Jade felt like an arrow hit her heart. She ran out the door, not wanting them to see her tears.

"You idiot, now look at what you've done!" Zi yelled angrily. "Jade was worried about you. How can you do such a thing?"

"It is a long story."

"I am your friend, damn it. You can tell me anything. But you don't have to go do something so stupid! What are you trying to prove? Of all the women...why the concubine? Did your brain grow rotten from all the fame you have received?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Zi grunted and grabbed him by the collar.

"You've lost everything. Don't you think things through? You are lucky you didn't get yourself beheaded!"

Alex still could not look him in the eye.

Seeing such violence, Celina was startled and accidentally made a noise. Zi noticed her and upon being discovered, she revealed herself. "Let him go. If you must blame someone then blame me."

"Your highness..."

"Do not call me that, for I am no longer the concubine."

"Why did you do this?" Zi asked. "Was being married to the king not enough for you. Is one man really worth the risk?"

"You are not me, so you will not understand." Celina replied.

"And I thought you were better than this...this is not some child's game you are playing. You're committing adultery of the worst kind!"

Alex: "Enough. Don't berate her any further."

Zi just let out a disappointed chuckle. "Fine...I will leave you two alone. I have nothing further to say." He slammed the door as he left the house.

Alex has certainly seen better days. He thought his best friends would understand him, but clearly, they do not. Perhaps what he did is stupid and immoral. But it is too late for criticism; what is done is done. He can only look forward, not backward.

Celina: "That was your best friend Zi and Jade, right?"

"Yes...I grew up with them."

"Because of me they are mad at you. I am sorry, Cheng."

"No, it's not your fault." Alex replied.

"I've become a burden to you."

"No," he said. "Not at all."

"I should leave." she said. "I do not belong here."

"No, you are not a burden." Alex grabbed her shoulders, which startled her.

"Yes, I have lost everything, even the support of my friends. So what? I took a risk and it was worth it!"

She was shocked to hear these words. Finally, he is speaking from his heart. Oh, how long has she waited for these words to come from his mouth, and what a wonderful feeling it is to be loved back by the person that you love.

"Just stay here for the night, please." said Alex. "We don't have anything but we still have each other."

They embraced just as they did back in the palace, but this one is much longer. They no longer have to hold back, fearing that they might be caught. They are in his home, and can express themselves freely without rules and time limitations.

King Liu was sad about his concubine's imprisonment, but there is one thing more important to him than anything else - the spice. "Give me...more...please." he shrieked, begging on his knees. Liu Zhang, standing up and holding the bowl, smiled wickedly. "I need more..."

Zhang: "Look at you, the leader of the Kingdom of Shen begging on his knees in front of me. How pathetic. You must be really dedicated to it. Here...have some." He dropped the bowl on the ground, spilling most of the liquid.

Liu Bei grabbed the bowl and licked off whatever drops it had left, and he licked the floor dry.

"Heh, you'd do anything for it, won't you? You can have as much as you want, as long as you obey me, your highness."

## [B] Title Contents

Last night was certainly a dark time for our heroes, and both of them were unable to get a good night's sleep. Although he wanted to, Alex could not bring himself to go to the room Celina was sleeping in, for he did not want to disturb her. Many dark and gloomy thoughts went through their minds, but now it is morning, and Alex can hear the rooster's cry. By morning, his emotions from last night were tame, and he felt calmer.

Going over to Celina's bed, he was about to say good morning to her. But there was nobody under the blanket. He pulled the blanket away, revealing just a letter. Of course, he picked it up to read it.



**"Alex, please forgive me, but I feel that we cannot be together like this. I have caused you much trouble, and I do not want to further inconvenience you. By the time you read this note, I will be gone. Farewell,**

**Celina Ce**

"No, Celina!" he yelled out loud. How can she do such a thing without telling him? He quickly got dressed and ran outside. Bam. He did not bother closing the door.

Celina did not mention where she was going in the letter, but find her he must. There are many things still unresolved between them, and Alex found himself wandering the streets of Yi Ling, hoping that Lady Luck will smile upon him.

There are five districts in Yi Ling, and to go through each one in its entirety will take one day each, if you do not eat or sleep. He is still determined to find her, with nothing but a letter to go on, and he will search every single inch of the city if he must.

A mysterious man wearing a hood was watching him from afar. He walked closer to his target, the unsuspecting Alex Cheng, his mind distracted by his mission. The man in the hood moved in quickly and **plunged his knife** into Alex. But Alex grabbed his hand just before he was stabbed.

"Who are you?" Alex demanded.

The man realized that he underestimated his target and struggled to get free. He struck Alex's chest with his free hand. \*Thud!\* Then he ran away, and Alex chased him.

"Wait!"

The hooded man ran through people, pushing them out of the way. He was quick, but Alex was just as fast.

"Hold it!"

The hooded man decided to take a detour and ran to the back alley. Alex was exhausted from the search, but he ran at full speed, not wanting his enemy to escape. The man reached a dead end, and he jumped onto the wall, and then jumped to the ground. Alex also jumped over the wall.

\*Doosh doosh.\* The man ran into the crowded streets again, pushing people and knocking over baskets. Suddenly, he stopped and turned around. Alex stopped running to catch his breath.

"Who are you?"

The man smiled and removed his hood and his coat, revealing himself to be Tao. Alex gasped. "You are that assassin from before!"

Suddenly, one of the jars on the table was shaking, and he looked up. A man was clutched to his ceiling, and his features were hidden in the darkness. The man, after being discovered, jumped down and landed in a crouch. He walked over to the frightened, chair bound Alex, revealing himself to be Tao.

"I have orders to eliminate you, Demon Slayer. Prepare yourself!"

"You think you can take me one on one?"

"I think you mean **we**." Suddenly, ninjas came out of hiding, startling the people. They jumped out of windows and came from the rooftops. The bystanders panicked and ran away. Before Alex realized it, he found himself surrounded.

Tao smiled. "This time your bodyguards are not here, and you will be taken down. It is the end for you!"

Alex was in a compromising situation, as he must fight alone. His eyeballs were moving left and right, mentally counting the number of enemies in the area. This one will be a tough one to pull off.

"Get him!!" said Tao.

The first wave of ninjas came at him with their weapons. Alex remained calm and motionless. When the time was right, he drew his Fire Sword and fought the ninjas with all his might. Clang! Cling! He slashed two ninjas in the stomach and they fell down bleeding.

Alex Cheng must remember to use circular movements and to keep his distance. He must wait for an opening and take that opportunity to strike. Clang! Two ninjas pushed their blades against his, resulting in a deadlock. Alex grunted and pushed them away. A ninja from behind kicked him on the back. Whack!

One of them raised his sword and struck it down. Alex blocked it and kicked him in the stomach, knocking him away. Can he win? He must win, for he cannot die without finding Celina first. It is too early for his demise. He has much to accomplish!

The scared citizens ran for their lives, pushing against one another. Celina was walking along the street in the opposite direction of everybody. She was not paying attention to anything in particular, just wandering aimlessly by herself. But when she saw everybody coming her way, she found herself having to push through the people to even take one step.

She stopped a random old lady. "What is happening?"

"There is a fight on the street. Many of them have weapons...and the one being attacked looks like the Demon Slayer."

Celina's eyes were wide open with shock.

"It is too dangerous young lady, you should leave." said the old lady, and ran off. Celina continued to go past the crowd, pushing and struggling.

Clang! Slash! The ninjas were moving all around him, and it is going to take a lot of perseverance and luck to get through this one. Finally, Tao jumped in and attacked. Clang! Clang! Alex blocked the first two strikes, and he moved back three paces to keep the distance. The looks on their faces were just like those of hunter and prey. Once he has the Demon Slayer's head on a silver platter, Tao will collect his reward.

Slish! One of the ninjas fell, revealing Celina behind him.

Alex: (Celina? What is she doing here?)

Tao: "It's that woman from last time."

The ninjas came at her, and Celina took out a second sword and prepared for their arrival. Swoosh! Slash! Using the Dance of the Sword Style, she attacked viciously.

Alex made a direct attack at Tao, who jumped to a safer distance. Two ninjas came at him, and he blocked their attacks. Quong! Alex's sword was glowing red. The ninjas were startled, but they attacked nonetheless. Clang!

Tao: (Does he really know how to use the Fire Sword?)

Slish! Alex stabbed the ninja in the stomach, and proceeded to stab the other one. Schleb! His movements were quick and precise. He stabbed the ninja's stomach, and pulled his sword out immediately so he can defend himself.

"Even if you have the Fire Sword, you are still an amateur!" Tao shouted while charging forward.

Alex retreated while defending himself against Tao's brutal attacks. Clang! Clang! His sword had a chain attached to it, and with that setup, he was able to throw his sword forward, and have it come back like a boomerang. Alex found it difficult to defend himself like this. Clang!

"Tell me, who do you work for?"

Tao threw the sword forward, and Alex blocked it. Clang!

"I see." said Alex. "I will make you talk after I defeat you!"

Tao smirked and swings his chained sword and used a variety of low and high attacks. Alex had no choice but to keep his distance, barely blocking the attacks. Clang! Clang!

Celina wanted to get to Alex, but she was occupied with some ninjas. Cling! She fought hard, but there was only so much she could do.

Tao swings his sword and slashed Alex's shoulder. It was but a minor scratch but it is proof that his opponent is a tough one to beat. Tao continued his ruthless attacks. Whoop, whoop, whoop.

Alex screamed and charged forward. \*Slish\* Tao jumped over him, avoiding the attack completely. This angered Alex, and he turned around and smashed his blade into Tao's. \*Schling!\* They were at a deadlock, and Tao gave a mighty push, and pushed Alex back a few paces.

With his free hand, he took out needles, placed between his fingers. Alex remembered them. "Poison needles again?"

Tao threw them, Alex rotated his sword like a fan to repel the needles. **Ching-ching-ching!** Suddenly, Tao appeared in front of him and kicked him down. Whack!

Alex stood back up and continued the fight. Tao charged forward and attacked aggressively. \*Clang, clang\* He pushed Alex's blade to the side, and he kicked him in the face. Whack!

As Alex stood up, Tao swings his blade, and knocked the Fire Sword out of Alex's hand. The hero took a step back. He is now weaponless, and this is Tao's perfect opportunity.

"I see. You are a Demon Slayer in name only. You are no good when it comes to slaying humans."

\*Slish slish\* Celina just finished off more men with her dancing moves. "Alex!!"

"Goodbye, Demon Slayer!" Tao threw his chained sword forward, and it was on a straight collision course for his chest.

Suddenly, Li appeared and cut off the chain! Tao's sword fell to the ground, and now all he has connected to his sleeve was a broken chain. Everybody was surprised by her appearance, especially Cheng. He, who thought he was gone for good, has Lady Luck to thank for his good fortune.

"You okay, Alex?" asked Li.

"I'm fine." he replied, still stunned.

"Tch. Another nuisance?" said Tao. After closer inspection, Li's face became familiar. "Can it be? You're the one that Duke Xiang was after?"

Li charged forward speedily and slashed. Tao avoided a fatal hit by jumping away. He grabbed the discarded Fire Sword.

Alex: "Give that back!"

Li: "I'll get him!"

Tao jumped to the rooftop and Li followed suit. Their jumps were quick and swift, and they went to the very top of the building to face other.

"Hand over the Fire Sword now. You should not defile it with your tainted hands!" said Li.

"Oh, you want it?" Tao took the **Fire Sword** and threw it into the air, and it fell somewhere.

Li was angered by his actions. "How dare you show such disrespect? The Fire Sword belongs to the War God. You are not worthy to even touch it."

Tao was upset by her insult, but he had a comeback. "The War God is no longer alive! He was defeated by a warrior named Ragnarok."

"Tell me, who exactly is Ragnarok?"

Tao shrugged. "How should I know?"



"Then you are of no use to me."

The fighters got into fighting stance and waited for the right moment to attack. They both charged into each other at the same time. Clang! They jumped and hit, clashing their blades feverishly, and there is no time to stop. Clang! Cling!

On the ground, Alex was watching the fight on the roof. Their movements were too quick for him to catch up to. They looked like shadows jumping into each other. Alex has forgotten that there are more enemies around. A ninja ran at him.

"Alex!" yelled Celina, throwing her sword at him.

He caught it and blocked the ninja's attack. Clang! He stabbed the ninja and continued to fight the others. Both him and Celina wanted to go to the roof to help, but they were already occupied.

Quong! Li and Tao exchanged some moves. They landed and stared with much intensity. Tao took out **needles** from his vest and stuck them between his fingers.

Li already knew what they were, and she tightened her grip on her weapon.

Tao took a step forward and jumped and threw the needles at her, and Li jumped away and landed in a crouch. Tao landed.

Li: "I see. So that is your style."

Tao threw the needles forward and Li ran straight into them, letting them hit her thigh, and one hit her shoulder. Tao was surprised at her recklessness, and he was caught off guard. She ran into him and knocked his sword away. Quong! Sligh! She hit his chest, and Tao jumped away to avoid a fatal hit.

Tao was aggravated. "Why you...you'd go this far to defeat me?"

"Using poison needles is a coward's strategy. Luckily for me I did some research before I came here." Li said.

"You'd let yourself be hit, knowing that the needles are poisoned?"

"Tao, your mistake is that you assume everyone will be afraid of your needles. It may have worked on others, but not me. You expect me to avoid them at all costs, which will put me into defensive mode. But why should I avoid the poison when I already have the antidote?"

Tao laughed. "I see. So that is your style."

"And now I shall use the Heaven's Wrath Style to punish you!" Li charged forward, and Tao revealed a **scythe from his sleeve**.

Li saw it and she could not react fast enough. Clang! She dodged the scythe but was scratched on the shoulder.

"Heh."

"Concealing poison needles and weapons within your body?" said Li, "You disgrace the honor of a true swordsman."

Tao: "Do you think I care about honor? I do this for money only." He threw his scythe forward, Li jumped away and the scythe hit the concrete. Smash! Just like before, his scythe was attached to a chain, coming out of his sleeve. Tao pulled his scythe back into his hand.

"Who hired you to kill the Demon Slayer?" Li demanded. Even though she knew he is not going to tell, she asked it anyway.

"The same person who is after your head. You have a pretty hefty price on your life, young lady."

"You are useless, I will get rid of you now."

Tao charged and threw his scythe forward. Li waited for the scythe to come. Frooom! It was going straight for her head, she ducked and knocked it to the side with her sword and then charged forward.

**"Heaven's Wrath Style: Heaven's Light!"**

Tao has left himself wide open, and he just stared in shock as he saw a bright

light as Li went past him. \*Slash! Slish! Slice!\*

Li put her sword back in its patch.

Tao was cut many times in that instant, and blood squirted from his wounds. He was still standing up, but already dead. He collapsed and slid down the roof, falling all the way to the bottom and hit the ground. Wham.

## [C] Title Contents

Seeing their boss dead, the remaining ninjas ran away. Alex and Celina were relieved that the fight is over. They went over to Tao's body, both having the same question in their mind. Alex confirmed it by turning Tao over and checking his pulse.

"He's dead." Alex announced.

"Who was that girl who helped us?"

"She is Li Cheng, my sister."

"Your sister?" Celina repeated. He has mentioned his sister before, but Celina never expected to see her under such circumstances.

Li slid down the diagonal roof and landed on the floor smoothly. "You should be more careful when you are outside, Alex Cheng."

"Li, thank you for saving us."

Li just stared at him coldly and tossed him the Fire Sword. "I think this belongs to you."

"Uh yeah, thank you."

"You must be Alex's sister." said Celina. "It is nice to meet you."

Li: "You call yourself a swordsman? You let the enemy take possession of the Fire Sword. Imagine if I had not shown up, then the sword would have been in enemy hands."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it, Alex! How will you answer to Master Genzo if you lost the Fire Sword, the most important gift that he gave you? To think that he trusted you with it, I do not know why. You are still an amateur."

"Amateur..." Alex repeated.

"Why are you outside and not in the palace?"

Celina and Alex glanced at each other and they knew not how to answer.

"Hmph. So it is true." said Li. "You were banished from the palace...I cannot believe this blasphemy!"

"Li..."

"Enough! Every action you take has consequences. I cannot believe that Shen Long and Fo Long are protecting you with their lives while you remain in the palace and fool around!"

Celina: "We were not fooling around!"

Li: "So you were that concubine."

Celina gasped, realizing that she just exposed her own identity.

Li: "I do not know what you two were thinking...having an affair. It is revolting! Now that both are you are exiled, you put yourselves in danger. Hold onto the Fire Sword, brother, and try to not lose it again." With that said, she jumped away. Flash!

Celina: "Hmph. What a rude woman! Who does she think she is?"

Alex: "She is right. I've made many mistakes...I almost lost the Fire Sword...the only thing that my late Master Genzo left me. I still have much to learn."

Alex and Celina went to the shoreline to further discuss something that they both had in mind, something that is incomplete between them. Between them, a conversation

is always awkward, and they have not spoken for a while. Celina just walked lethargically with Alex behind her, and she was afraid to turn back to look at him.

"Celina...I want to talk to you about the letter." said Alex. "Why did you run away?"

"I...I do not know."

"You think that you are a burden to me? Do you think that running away will make me better off?"

She turned around at last. "I don't know."

Alex took out the letter in question and ripped it into shreds. This unexpected action surprised her. "If you must leave, then I will not stop you. But you could at least say goodbye in person, not in writing."

This made her feel guilty. "Alex, I must come clean with you. There is something I have been hiding." As she spoke, she was uncomfortable, but she must finish the thought. "When I said that Liu Bei has been cured of the spice, I was lying. He did not accept the antidote. He is still under the influence!"

"What?" he exclaimed.

"I did not know how to tell you, so I decided not to. But the spice caused him to change his demeanor completely. He no longer trusts anyone and that is why he banished us. It was all my fault, Alex. If only I gave him the antidote, this would not have happened."

"Stop blaming everything on yourself!" Alex yelled. He was always soft-spoken and polite, but now he is yelling at her, and for all she knows, this is the first time she has seen him angry like this. Who can blame him? After all, he lost everything in one day. "You are just going to take all the blame...and then what? Run away and avoid everything? Why don't you stop being so selfish and think about the consequences to your actions! Don't you know how worried I was about you? Celina, I love you."

That last thing he said seemed to have given a shock and now she was wide awake. Finally, he admits his true feelings for her through his words and actions. He went all the way to the marketplace, put his life in danger, so that he can find her, even though she did not tell him her location. To search blindly, with such determination that he will find her...if that is not love, then what is?

Finally, Celina understands his true intentions. His eyes tell the truth. Tears dripped down her eyes from the joy she's experiencing right now. Finally, she understands what's truly in his heart and soul, and she knows that he understands her. At last, she has come to realize that the risk they took was worth it. It was worth it to have him rescue her from falling to death that time. It was worth to meet each other secretly in palace, hoping no one finds out. It was worth it to become exiled and lose everything.

She put her arms around him and embraced him and he put his arms around her. This embrace was the best one they had so far. The last time she embraced him, he did not embrace her back. But this time, it is different. They are no longer bound by rules and titles. No one is around to judge them or stop them from expressing themselves.

While still embracing, she looked into his eyes, and him into hers. They moved closer and closer to each other's lips. Their lips met and they kissed passionately, becoming two silhouetted figures standing on the beach.

Sitting in the darkness of her cell, Celina did not move for many hours. She wondered how her life could sink so low. One day she is a concubine, now she is a prisoner. A mere criminal in the eyes of the king. She committed an unforgivable mistake.

She became attentive when she heard footsteps against the silence of the dungeon. Thud thud thud. Someone opened the gate and was walking down the stairs.

A man in a brown hood came to the cell, and when the man dropped his hood, she was surprised to see his face. "Shhh, it's me."

"Captain Tai?"

"Yes, your highness." replied he. "I came to free you."

"You know that by doing so you put yourself at risk. The king is in a very irritable mood and if you are caught, he will not forgive you."

"I understand the risks involved." said Tai. "I am not clear as to the details of your misdeed, but I cannot stand by and watch you be treated like a criminal. After all...I owe you a favor from back then."

Celina walked up to the metal bars. "You don't have to do this, you know?"

"I know." replied he.

That was only several days ago. Yes, he committed a crime in the eyes of the law, so what of it? The only thing Tai knows is that Celina does not belong in a prison cell, absolutely not. Especially after what she did for him.

Tai walked by Zhang. He was about to walk past him, until Zhang greeted him. "Ah, Captain Tai. Good morning."

"Good morning Lord Zhang." he replied.

"You look troubled. Is something on your mind?"

"No, nothing particularly." Tai replied.

"You are not thinking about the concubine's imprisonment, are you?" asked Zhang.

The captain did his best to hide his reaction. "Well..."

"I know you respect her well, and you do not feel she deserves her sentence. But at times like these, you must know where your loyalties lie. You are to serve the one and only king. Forget about the concubine, and do not do anything foolish."

"I do not know what you are talking about." Tai replied. "But I humbly thank you for your advice. I must go now, adjourn." He bowed and walked away.

Zhang turned around and smiled. Yes, it is that wicked smile that he can have when no one is watching. The kind of smile that says he is the one responsible for the Demon Slayer's banishment and the concubine's imprisonment. He is the one who found out about their affair, thus, the one who ruined their lives.

Tai walked over to the bridge and began to ponder. Liu Zhang is way more cunning than he looks. There is a big chance that Zhang knows he freed the concubine...and he started this conversation to test his reaction. But wait, if he knows...why did he not do anything about it? Tai's eyes grew wider. Zhang wants to use that knowledge to blackmail him. That's gotta be it. This palace is full of people like Zhang he must tread carefully. Politics and schemes is not his area of expertise.

After those thoughts faded away, he thought about Celina. He did not ask her if she really was cheating on her husband. Even if so, does it really matter? He owes her a favor, a big favor, because without her, he would not be alive today. Indeed, it all goes back to that fateful day many years ago...

Before Tai became a captain, he was a soldier. All imperial troops start off at level one, and they must earn their promotions to work their way up. But Tai did not want to earn his promotions, he was too greedy to be patient.

One day, he was assigned to guard the royal treasure room. It was just him and one other soldier being assigned that day, as per General Chung's orders. Tai and the other soldier did as they were told and stood in front of the treasure room and did nothing but guard it. But there was an emergency at the palace, and all the soldiers were needed.

Tai saw this as his chance. He snuck into the **treasure room** and he was wowed by what he saw. There were so many relics and jars, and he had never seen this much wealth in his life. He knows he should not be doing this, but greed got the better of him, for he came from a poor background. Both his mother and father were peasants, forced to work hard and earn little money. But Tai wanted to change his family line...and all he has to do is sell one of these relics, and he will be set for life.

One particular jar caught his attention. It was a jar made of jade; a relic from the Han Dynasty. Tai picked it up and his eyes lit up with greed. Suddenly, General Chung stormed came into the room. "What do you think you're doing?"

Tai was caught by surprise and he dropped the jar, and it shattered into pieces as it hit the ground. Crack!

"That was one of the king's most valued treasures...and you broke it!" Chung shouted.

"Please forgive me!" Tai said, getting on his knees. "I did not mean to!"

Chung grabbed him by the collar and dragged him out of the treasure room. At this point, two soldiers held Tai by the arms and made him kneel.

"I did not mean to..." he kept on repeating.

"You infidel!" shouted the angry general. "You tried to steal from the royal treasure room...and you broke a priceless vase. You have no excuse for your actions, Tai. You will be executed immediately!"

Tai's eyes were wide open with shock. "No, please!"

This certainly was Tai's darkest moment, and when he thought it was the end, by a twist of fate, Celina walked by. "Why are you making all this noise in the palace?"

Everyone instinctively bowed as they should when a royal family member walks by. "Your highness." said Chung.

"What is going on here?" she demanded to know.

"This man tried to steal from the treasure room...and he broke one of the king's valuable jars. It was from the Han Dynasty and it is irreplaceable! That is why I am going to condemn this thief and behead him!"

"I'm sorry!" said Tai.

"Silence, fool!" Chung shouted.

"Enough!" said Celina. "Give him a second chance, general."

"But your highness!"

"I do not want blood to be spilled in the royal palace. Our kingdom is a peaceful one, we do not condone murder over a trivial reason."

"But he destroyed one of the king's treasures." Chung replied.

"The king has many treasures passed down from generation to generation. His wealth is nearly immeasurable." said Celina. "What is the value of one vase to him? Is this worth taking the life of a soldier? Life is the most valuable treasure of all...because every person has only one. These are my orders."

"You may be the only concubine but I only take orders from Lord Fei. You're new to the palace so you don't know how things work here."



"Little do you know that I am on good terms with Lord Fei and all the nobles. Sometimes they take my advice."

"Lady Ce, I suggest you do not intervene with military matters."

"Lord Fei has to answer to the king. And the king takes my advice. Do you want the king to view you as an incompetent general?"

Chung began to sweat. He assumed her to be just another pretty girl who doesn't know a thing, but he was mistaken. She has a fierce nature about her...and she knows how to play the game. "Yes my concubine," said Chung. "Consider yourself lucky, private. The concubine is in a forgiving mood today. But if I ever, ever catch you committing a crime again, I will not hesitate to behead you. Understood?"

Tai kowtowed with his head touching the floor. "I humbly thank you, General Chung."

"Hmph." Chung and the two guards walked away.

While walking down the hallway, Tai caught up to Celina. "Your highness."

Celina turned around. "Oh, it is you, Tai."

"I am honored you remembered my name. I do not know how to say this...but I owe you my life."

She smiled. "There are rules here that must be followed. If you break those rules, then you will be punished. Even so, there are rules that I do not agree with. You are not a thief, and I can see that."

"I...I didn't know what came over me," said Tai. "I'm really sorry."

"Enough. I know you are better than this. You have much potential...one day you will make a fine captain." With that said, she walked away.

Tai bowed and he could not believe his ears. He has always wanted to be a captain, but to hear it from someone else is certainly enlightening, particularly coming from the mouth of a concubine! Not just any captain, but a fine one, imagine that! He knew not how to repay her for sparing his life, but what he can do is work hard and make her words come true.

Since that day, he made an irrevocable vow to himself that he will become a captain, a fine individual who is respected by others. He worked harder than ever, and lo and behold, he is presently a captain. Tai is now back to the present, standing over the bridge. That certainly was the life defining moment that made him who he is today. Without the concubine's help, he would have been dead, and he would never have known how great he can become. That is why he helped her escape from prison, but deep down inside, he knows he owes her much, much more.

It was another day in the market for Jade. She and her grandmother own a jewelry store and she always puts on a smile for her customers. Half the time the customers buy because of her charm and enthusiasm. It is this very attitude that is necessary in the busy world of Yi Ling.

A man wearing a hood was watching her from across the street, unbeknownst to her. He was Rubble, the second of Ragnarok's hired assassins. He smiled confidently, knowing that this mission will be easy as pie. He thinks back to the time when he accepted the mission...

Liu Zhang sipped his tea as he was told of Tao's death. "Tao the mercenary has been killed by the Demon Slayer?"

"No." answered Ragnarok, "The foot soldiers said that a third person showed up to the fight. They say she was a girl dressed like a ninja. It must be her..."

"Tao's death is most unfortunate." said Zhang. "But it cannot be helped. That is why we have you, Rubble the Ice Hunter."

Rubble was standing at the doorway behind the curtains.

Ragnarok: "Master, you should let me take care of this."

Zhang: "This mission is too small for someone of your importance, Ragnarok."

Rubble is an expert in hunting down people, am I correct?"

"Yes, Lord Zhang." replied he. "I will gratefully accept this mission."

Ragnarok came out, pushing the curtains away as he did. "Do not fail me, Rubble. I have given you the Ice Sword, use it well."

"I will not disappoint you, Master Ragnarok. Just leave this to me." With that said, Rubble turned around and walked down the dark hallway.

Zhang took another sip of his tea. "Is it a good idea to give him the Ice Sword?"

"I have confidence in him, master." Ragnarok replied. "It is fitting that he uses the Ice Sword to defeat the Demon Slayer. If anyone is to use the Ice Sword's power, it is Rubble."

## [B] Title Contents

Ragnarok is a student of his master, but he has a student of his own. Eventually every swordsman wants to pass down his legacy to the next generation, and Ragnarok has chosen Rubble as his star pupil. He could never forget the circumstances under which they met.

It felt like only yesterday when Ragnarok and Rubble were staring at each other with their cold, deadly eyes. Time stood still as they bared their fangs at each other, standing on the snow.

That certainly was the turning point of Rubble's life. After meeting Ragnarok, he became stronger than ever. Now, he is back to present time, watching Jade from across the street. Rubble walked over to the store and Jade greeted him right away.

"Can I interest you in anything, sir?"

"Umm, yes." he replied. "I am looking for your finest products. I am looking for a gift for my wife."

"Well," said Jade, "We have some of the finest necklaces and earrings here."

"No, I am looking for your finest, high quality products. Every jewelry salesman has a secret stash, it is a well known fact."

"Very well. Come with me." Jade replied, and went into the store.

Rubble followed her in, pushing the curtain out of the way as stepped into the store. Jade went to a dusty old box on the corner and patted the dust off it. She opened the box. "You must be a traveler." she said. "I have something that will be perfect for your wife." At this point, she stopped talking when she felt a cold, hard blade touching her face. Rubble had his sword pointed at her, and she grew nervous.

"I need you to come with me, girl. If you cooperate I will not hurt you."

Jade was scared for her life, and her eyeballs moved left and right, thinking of what to do. Her back was facing him and apparently he has his sword pointing at her. But he does not see what is in her hands. "Who are you?" she asked.

"Just come with me quietly."

She turned around and threw a bag of dust at him, and he covered his eyes. Jade pushed him and ran for it.

"Ugh! Why you little!" Rubble ran out of the store and saw Jade running down the street, pushing against everybody.

Jade was exhausted as she pushed people out of the way and knocked over baskets. She ran into an alley and eventually reached a dead end. When she turned around, the hooded man was there. He removed his hood and cape, revealing his true appearance – a white bearded man wearing a wolf's skin as a scarf.

"Who are you? I have never offended you or did anything to you!" she said.

"No you have not." Rubble replied, "But you can lead me to your friend, the Demon Slayer."

"Alex? What do you want with Alex?"

"That is none of your concern." Rubble said, walking forward. "Just be a good girl and come with me."

Jade was not about to be kidnapped without a fight. She struck her fist forward, Rubble grabbed it and slapped her, making her fell down.

"I hate to be rough but you left me no choice."

"Let her go!" shouted Zi, standing on the wall.

Jade: "Zi!"

Rubble: "Who the hell are you?"

Zi crossed his arms. "Isn't it obvious? I'm the good guy and you're the bad guy, and I am here to save the girl."

Rubble: "Stay out of this if you know what's good for you."

Zi jumped off the wall and landed. "You'd go as far as to hit a woman. That is unforgivable."

Rubble smiled. "This isn't a fantasy novel, boy. The good guy doesn't always win."

Zi: "It is the stronger one who wins." He drew his sword.

"I agree." Rubble replied, drawing his sword.

Zi recognized the design of the sword. (Is that the legendary Ice Sword? Don't tell me...he is the infamous Ice Hunter? What is he doing here in Yi Ling?)

Rubble made the first strike and Zi blocked it. \*Quong!\* He can feel the man's strength just from that one hit alone. Rubble continued his assault, making left and right swings, while Zi defended. \*Claaaang.\*

Rubble: "You are out of your league, boy!"

Zi: "We'll see about that!" He lowered himself and pointed the sword forward, and charged. "Hyaaaah!" He made his strike and Rubble jumped away and landed.

Zi charged again and Rubble's Ice Sword began to glow, showing a vibrant white color. Zi saw it but he did not care, he still charged at his opponent.

"Ice Blizzard!" Rubble made a heavy swing. Whoop! A gush of energy went towards Zi and hit him, knocking him against the wall. \*Smash\* Not only was his weapon knocked away, but Zi's body cracked the wall and his head was bleeding. He fell down. "Ugh...ahhh..."

"That will teach you to mess with the Ice Hunter." Rubble put his weapon away and left with Jade.

So his suspicions were true. His enemy's identity has been confirmed. But the question is why. Why does someone like the Ice Hunter, who comes from another kingdom, want Jade? It is too late to save her because he lost the fight. Zi felt dizzy and fell unconscious.

Alex and Celina just finished a life and death battle with Tao, and now they have earned some peaceful time alone. Alex was training by himself, performing all the routines that his master taught him. Celina was sitting in proximity of him, watching the skyline. It is peaceful here indeed, it is a place where they can be themselves without restrictions.

"Alex Cheng!" screamed an old lady.

Alex stopped what he was doing to look at her.

"Alex Cheng!!"

"Do you know her?" asked Celina.

"She's Jade's grandmother!" Alex replied.

The old lady showed up crying and wailing.

"Mrs. Lee? What's the matter?"

"It's Jade!" said she, weeping. "My granddaughter has been kidnapped!"

Alex was shocked. "What? By who?"

"He left a letter..."

Alex snatched it from her hand to read it.

**"If you want to see your woman alive, come to the address written below. If you do not come, then she will not live to see tomorrow."**

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At the end of the letter there was an address and a signature that read Rubble.  
"Who gave you this letter?"

"I don't know!" cried Mrs. Lee. "By the time I was at the store she was already gone."

Alex crumbled the piece of paper. "Rubble...no doubt it is one of that assassin's comrades. Whoever sent him here to kill me sent another one. Damn it. He knows that I know Jade."

Mrs. Lee got on her knees and grabbed Alex's clothes. "Please, you must save her. She's my only granddaughter!"

"Please, stand up." Alex replied, feeling uncomfortable.

Celina helped the lady stand up and started to comfort her.

The next thing they did was visit their injured friend. Zi was lying in bed with multiple bandages on his chest and arms. Alex sat down besides him. "Zi, what happened?"

"I was beat up, can't you tell?"

"I'm glad you're alright." said Alex.

"Of course I am." Zi replied. "Who do you think I am? Do you think I'd die easily?" Even though he was aching all over, he sucked it up and tried act tough. But Alex knows this is just an act, for he knows his best friend well. This brings them back to old times, when there was a situation just like this, except it was reversed. Alex was the one in bed, with an injured right arm, and Zi was the one taking care of him.

"I'm relieved you still have your ego." replied Alex. "Who did this to you?"

"The same person who has Jade. He calls himself Rubble, the Ice Hunter."

Alex: "Apparently he wants me, but he is using Jade to get to me. He is going to pay for this!"

Celina: "Alex, you are not thinking about fighting him, are you?"

"What else am I supposed to do? Let him kill Jade?"

"But you do not know who you are dealing with." said Celina. "The Ice Hunter is one of the most feared warriors from the **Kingdom of Leinwan**. His name became famous during the war between the Leinwan Kingdom and the Shen Kingdom many years ago. It was winter time in the north and the battlefield was covered with snow. Our kingdom's soldiers were at a disadvantage due to the terrain and the Ice Hunter

proved that he is the master when it comes to the cold. Our soldiers were murdered, and entire groups disappeared without a trace."

Zi: "In the ice and snow he is unbeatable. That is why he is called the Ice Hunter. Because he will hunt you down and you do not stand a chance."

Alex: "But what business does someone have in this kingdom? It does not make sense. He is a war veteran, so why does he want me?"

At this point, Shen Long and Sui Long showed up, uninvited as usual.

Shen: "The war has been over for a while now, it is possible that he seeks to reclaim his title by killing you. You are famous in this kingdom, Sir Cheng. By killing you he will become famous once again and people will be reminded of how they feared him back in the war."

Sui: "The person who hired him has connections with Leinwan. To be able to hire someone like Rubble...he has a lot of money and influence."

Alex: "Someone like one of the lords of the imperial court."

Celina: "The imperial court? But how can that be?"

Sui: "I know it is hard to accept, your highness, but it is very likely there is a traitor by Liu Bei's side. Duke Xiang was a demon and he was able to disguise himself as a duke and betray his king from the inside. There is still one more person who is Duke Xiang's follower who has not revealed himself yet."

Celina: "A traitor? But who can it be?"

Alex: "The identity of the perpetrator is not important. We will find out eventually, but right now Jade's life is important. The Ice Hunter has issued a challenge to me, and I must go."

Celina: "No you cannot. You are no match for him! This is clearly a trap to lure you out."

Alex: "I can't just sit by and let her die. I must do something. If it is a duel that Rubble wants, it is a duel he will get."

Shen: "We are coming with you, Sir Cheng. Your safety is our priority."

Sui: "Our sole responsibility is to protect you."

Celina: "I am coming with you too."

Alex: "No...Jade is my friend. This is not your problem."

"Non-sense. I thought we were supposed start our new life together? Your problems are my problems." Celina replied. "You cannot sit by and let your friend die, and I cannot sit by and let you get hurt."

Alex understood her words and her intentions, and he nodded. Why stop her from coming when it is clear that she will do it regardless of what he says? This is one of the few times in his life Alex has felt so connected...clearly he has the support of the people around him. People care about him and he does not have to do it alone.

Mrs. Lee was still crying and she went over to the group. "Please, you have to save her. Don't let Jade die."

Alex: "Mrs. Lee, I promise I will get her back. Even if it means fighting the Ice Hunter."

"The Ice Hunter is behind this?" Li asked herself quietly. She was hiding behind the wall, listening in to everything they said. She heard the sound of the door opening and she quickly jumped away.

Alex, with Celina, and the two masked men, walked out of the building. Shen Long put his hand on Alex's shoulder. "This will be a dangerous mission. There is a chance you will not come back alive."

"I understand." Alex replied without turning around. Sure, he is afraid, but he is strong and willing to fight. The Fire Sword gives him strength, and he knows that the spirit of the War God is watching over him, and that is all he needs.



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十一: Jade is a Hostage! Demon Slayer vs. Ice Hunter.

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In some deserted backyard, Jade was being held captive by the Ice Hunter and his henchmen. She was tied up by the wrists from a rope hanging vertically. Her ankles were tied up to a wooden pole on the ground. Ninjas were standing on the walls and by the doors to ensure full security. Rubble smiled and put his word to Jade's chin.

"Ha ha ha ha! What a lovely young lady we have here. It's too bad you will have to be our bait."

Jade: "You are a scumbag!"

Rubble: "Eh? What was that?" He pointed the sword at her face. "I think my hearing is blocked."

"Why did you bring me here?"

"To lure out a certain man. The Demon Slayer."

"Alex Cheng? What business do you have with him?"

"That's not your concern, little missy." Rubble replied. "Your job is to stay here and be quiet until he comes."

Jade was scared, not just for herself, but for Alex as well. What intentions does this swordsman have?

The four heroes have arrived to their destination, which is the address written on Rubble's note. The wind was strong today and they walked against the unsettling dust. Rubble and his men have been waiting patiently for the honored guests to show up.

The grand doors opened. Creeek. Alex, Celina, and the two masked men, Shen Long and Sui Long walked in, not knowing what to expect. Rubble was standing in front of Jade, tiled up with two ninjas pointing their blades at her. Rubble was a fair-skinned man with a white beard. He was dressed like it was winter, with an overcoat, boots and a wolf's skin as a scarf. He was holding an axe over his shoulder.

Jade: "Alex!"

The ninja poked her stomach with his sword and she kept quiet.

Rubble: "Ah, welcome. If it isn't the famous Demon Slayer. You are the very person I saw at the Demon Extermination Ceremony. They say you are a great swordsman, the one who slain Duke Xiang."

Alex: "Enough of the small talk! I came as you requested. So what do you want?"

"Oh, you're a very straightforward person, aren't you?" Rubble replied. "I thought I told you to come alone?"

"But you are not alone either." Alex replied, glancing at all the ninjas.

"True enough."

"I came, now let Jade go." said Alex. "She has nothing to do with this."

"Not so fast." said Rubble. "I am curious about your skills...how about we fight one on one..."

"I accept. Now let her go."

"I did not finish. Let's wager on her life, shall we? If you defeat me, I free her. However, should you lose, the lady loses her life."

Shen Long and Sui Long were shocked, as was Celina.

Alex: "What? That is ridiculous! How can I accept those demands?"

"Oh, are you not confident in your skills as a swordsman?"

Alex grunted. "If you wanted a duel, you did not have to resort to such a cowardly way of getting me here. I would have accepted it without a second thought. But Jade is innocent and she has nothing to do with us!"

"Fine, Demon Slayer, how about we wager on your Fire Sword? If you lose, you will surrender your Fire Sword to me, and I lose, I will free the girl."

Jade: "Alex..."

"What happens to her if I lose?"

"I will free her. Whether you win or lose, she will be set free. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Fine. But you let her go right now."

"Hey I have the hostage and I make the rules around here." said Rubble. "I will let her go once the duel is over. She is my insurance that you will not escape."

Alex: "How do I know you will not go back on your word?"

Rubble: "And how do I know your guys will not attack me when we have our duel?"

Alex: "Fine, you have my word they will not interfere. As long as your men do the same."

"Agreed."

Celina tapped Alex's shoulder. "Alex, are you sure about this?"

"Just leave this to me." he replied confidently.

The two duelists walked towards each other to the center of the room. "We can finally begin." said Rubble.

The hero got into fighting stance, with his hand on the handle of the sword, ready to pull it out at moment's notice. Everyone else watched in suspense as the hero prepared mentally for battle. With the blink of an eye – they charged! Whoosh. Rubble's axe and Alex's sword hit and made loud mechanical noises. \*Klunk-klunk-klunk\*

Rubble swings his axe mightily with the intention of chopping his opponent into pieces, while Alex was defending himself. It is clear that Rubble dominated the fight despite his choice of weapon. Clang! Alex's movements were those that his master taught him – never let your guard down and always be in motion. Being in motion gives you momentum when you strike, making your attack more powerful.

Whoosh! Clang! Alex blocked another attack. Rubble was showing his aggression early on by attacking non-stop. He swings his axe hard and Alex rolled out of harm's way, and the axe hit the ground. \*Crack!\* It left a crack that everyone noticed.

Celina: "Alex, you can do it."

Sui: "Considering who he is up against, Cheng's chances of winning are slim.

Celina looked at him offended. "What are you saying? Aren't you his allies?"

"Indeed we are his allies, but we must assess the situation as it is." Sui replied in a calm manner. "We are on his side and we must be prepared in case Alex Cheng loses, because Rubble may challenge us next. Even if Alex wins, Rubble may go back on his word. If that scenario arises, we have to be the ones to save Jade."

Shen: "Cheng is a good swordsman but he is not a war veteran like our friend here. He is one of the most feared warriors who served the army of Leinwan during the war between their kingdom and ours. Right now he is using an axe. The sword is faster and the axe is slower, but it has more power. I am certain that the axe is not his primary weapon."

Sui: "Which means that Rubble isn't even showing his true skill yet. If he were holding a sword this would be a completely different fight. Rubble is toying around while Alex is trying hard."

"No, it can't be." Celina muttered in denial.

\*Clang!\* Alex blocked another strike. His blade pushed against the axe. Scrrrr. They jumped away. Rubble threw his axe like a boomerang and Alex ducked it just in time. Whoop-whoop. The spinning axe hit the wall. Chop!

"Oops!" said Rubble playfully. "There goes my weapon. Luckily for me, I still have one more." He grabbed the shell and held it horizontally and drew the sword out slowly.

Shen: "Is that..."

Sui: "The Legendary Ice Sword?"

Celina was shocked to hear this. She thought Alex's weapon is special because it is the Legendary Fire Sword. But his opponent also has a legendary weapon?

Now the two warriors stared at each other while in fighting position. Alex had many mixed thoughts and he is filled with uncertainty, but he hid it well and stands strong. It will take some determination and wits to beat a more skillful opponent. Rubble was certain that victory will be his, it is just like any other fight has been through.

Deep in the northern Xizang Mountains, there was a war going on. The weather here is always cold and the floor is covered with layers and layers of snow. A blizzard is common and many people get lost and freeze to death in deserted places like these. This is a most unnatural place for a human to survive. However, there is one exception, and he is known as the Ice Hunter. He is the one who thrives in the cold.

A group of ninjas dressed in white were on guard, watching for possible enemies. Their commander left post to look for the nearest town. All of a sudden, a figure came out from the under snow. The ninjas turned around in surprise and Rubble slashed them. Three other ninjas saw it and they drew their swords and charged. Slice! Slish! They did not stand a chance. The snow became red snow.

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" laughed the man with the fox skin scarf. "I am invincible!" His laughter echoed through the mountains.

He was a criminal, sentenced to life in prison, but under special circumstances, the kingdom let him go on the condition that he fights in the war. He is too good for them to ignore. Indeed, Rubble has proven himself worthy. But his reign of glory was short-lived.

One day, he was walking through a blizzard, he saw a silhouetted figure in front of him. Because of the snow, he could not make out the person's face. Rubble knew that he had to fight this man. He grabbed his sword and walked forward.

The man's features became clear as they walked closer to each other.

"Who the hell are you?" Rubble asked.

"I am the one called Ragnarok, the strongest swordsman in China."

"Strongest? Ha! I am the strongest in these mountains. I have never been defeated!"

Ragnarok grabbed his weapon. "You think you are, but I will teach you a thing or two about swordcraft."

"Oh really?" Rubble replied arrogantly. He has killed many bozos like this guy before, and this one is no different. Or so he thought. "What can you teach me?"

"I will teach you how to submit to me." Ragnarok drew his Ice Sword.

"You really are stupid, aren't you?"

They ran towards each other and exchanged some moves. \*Cling! Cling!\*

Rubble: "That sword you have...it is different than regular swords. After I defeat you I shall have it!"

"Oh, is that so?"

Rubble charged forward and screamed like a madman. Rangarok's Ice Sword glowed with energy and he took a mighty swing forward. "Ice Blizzard!" Froom!

Rubble did not know what hit him. "Ugh...such power...how can this be?" He was bleeding and on his knees. "You have the Ice Sword...you are Chu Yen?"

"Wrong! Chu Yen is a name of the past. I am Ragnarok, the name of the future. Now do you recognize who the superior swordsman is?"

"Yes, I admit defeat!" Rubble cried out, fearing for his life. "Please spare my life!"

"Why, certainly. You are useful to me. I will teach you the way of the sword and make you a better assassin. Follow me and you cannot fail."

## [B] Title Contents

Yes, the very move that was used to defeat him will be used to defeat Alex Cheng. Rubble's sword glowed and it gathered energy. Alex grew cautious and observed. Rubble swings his sword, and a strong gust of air in the shape of a curve came at him. Froom. Alex dodged it. The wind broke some pots.

Shen: "If Rubble has the Ice Sword...then this means...the Brotherhood is the one after Alex's life?"

Sui: "Cheng has to know that his opponent is using the Ice Sword. You must not make any hasty moves!"

Rubble swings it again. Froom! Alex dodged to the side. Froom. Froom. The hero jumped left and right to avoid the deadly airbreakers, while the others watched on the sidelines, not able to do anything. Froom! Crash!

Alex dodged another airbreaker. But the upcoming one is the real attack. "Ice Blizzard!!" Rubble swings his sword and a thick shockwave was produced, and it hit Alex, knocking him down. His shoulder was bleeding.

Celina: "No!!"

Shen put his arm in front of her, seeing that she took a step forward. "Don't be hasty. We cannot interfere with their duel."

"But...we can't just stand by and watch."

Shen: "We must not make any hasty moves."

This is too much to bear with. How can she just watch while the most important man in her life is being beat up? Shen Long is right, if they make any hasty moves, then it is all over for everybody, including Jade. They are here to rescue Jade, but Celina is here for Alex.

The hero was wounded, but not down yet. He was crouching while leaning against his sword. That last attack took a lot out of Alex.

Rubble: "Hah hah hah hah. It's just as I thought. The Demon Slayer is a mere title...you have no skill with the sword. You're just a worthless swordsman."

"You be quiet!" The Fire Sword glowed red.

Shen: "Is he going to use it?"

"Ohhh, what's this?" asked Rubble, holding the sword over his shoulder. "So you **do** know how to use the Fire Sword, eh?"

Alex and Rubble charged into each other and clashed their blades. \*Clang!\* They were now in a deadlock, pushing each other with their bodily strength.

"You are still an amateur." Rubble whispered to him while they were face to face. They grunted and moved backwards.

Back at home, Mrs. Lee went over to the bedroom to check up on Zi. She brought in a cup of hot tea, freshly brewed. It is the least she can do to help the poor young man

who tried to save her granddaughter's life. But when she pushed aside the curtains, she found an empty bed.

In the backyard, Zi was training, despite his injuries. He knows it is not a good idea, but to hell with good ideas. His pride has been wounded and he must train hard so that he will not face another defeat like this again.

Meanwhile, Liu Zhang continued to put the pressure on Liu Bei by using the spice. By now, it is clear who has the power. Zhang brought to his attention a scroll, one that contains a new law. A law that favors Zhang, of course.

"If I sign this, will you give me the spice?"

"Of course." Zhang replied. "Anything for you, your highness."

The king signed without hesitation. Zhang snapped his fingers, and a servant came in, holding a bowl of the spice. The servant was actually Ragnarok in disguise.

Liu Bei snatched the bowl and drank like a wild animal who has been deprived of water for days. He gulped it down like it was nothing.

"Drink up, my king. Ha ha ha ha!"

Rubble made another Ice Blizzard attack, and Alex held his blade vertically and blocked the attack. Froom. The shockwave was cut in half by the blade and the energy hit him on the sides. It cut him on the shoulder and pieces of his robe. He almost lost balance from it. "Aaaaagh!"

Jade: "Alex, don't lose to him."

Suddenly, Rubble was in front of him, and Alex jumped away from a deadly swing. Whoosh. He landed a safe distance away.

The two warriors charged and clashed their blades many times. Clang, clang, clang. Rubble took a hard swing and Alex stepped back after losing balance. He charged recklessly and Rubble blocked his attack and kicked him in the chest, leaving him on his back.

Alex got up and blood dripped from the corner of his mouth.

Rubble became relaxed seeing his opponent suffer. "Heh. You have no talent at all. I wonder how Tao was killed by the likes of you?"

"So the other assassin's name was Tao?" Alex asked, wiping his mouth. "You must be here to take his place. Who hired you to do this?"

"Why did the War God bother giving you the Fire Sword? What a waste it was. That's why the old fool is dead."

"Do not insult my master. He is one of the best swordsmen who ever lived." Alex replied angrily.

"Apparently not, because he was killed by someone stronger."

Now Alex was pissed off. "Who killed the War God? Tell me now!"

"It does not matter." said Rubble. "Your master was defeated, and so shall his student."

"Answer my question!"

"If you must know, he was defeated by a man named Ragnarok."

"Who the hell is Ragnarok?" Alex asked. "And where do I find him?"

"Ragnarok is the leader of the future! He eliminated a criminal like the War God and that is only the first step in the creation of a new kingdom."

Rubble did not answer the question and that made Alex even angrier and his Fire Sword was glowing deep red, and flames grew out of it.

"Oh, what's this?" Rubble's sword glowed as well, and they waited before making their attack. Everyone else watched in suspense.



Rubble used the Ice Blizzard and Alex countered with an equally powerful shockwave made of fire. The two shockwaves hit and cancelled each other out.

Both Celina and Jade were too shocked for words.

Shen Long: "Did you see that?"

Sui Long: "Cheng is able to use the Fire Sword to such an extent? His progress is impressive."

Shen: "Despite that, his enemy still has the upper hand."

The fighters continued to clash their blades together, one with the Fire Sword, and one with the Ice Sword. \*Clang!\*

Alex charged recklessly and attacked, Rubble blocked it and in the same motion, slashed his leg. Alex rolled on the ground and stood back up. "Ugh! You..."

"No!!" screamed Jade. It was painful to watch her childhood friend be beaten up because of her. The Ice Hunter has killed many without remorse, and Alex is no different. What if he goes back on his word and kills him?

"Heh." Rubble threw some more airbreakers, and the hero had to dodge them. Froom, froom. With an injured leg, it was quite difficult to move around. Froom!

Cheng landed several paces away. He needed a plan, but there is no time to think. He must rely on his instincts. Jumping around will be pointless. He must take a risk and attack. Rubble threw another airbreaker, and Alex jumped over it and charged forward with his glowing sword.

Rubble continued to put the pressure on by throwing more airbreakers. Froom! Froom! Alex could only evade from side to side and jump around due to his enemy's quickness. His leg was bleeding and his pants were turning red. He must make the attack now or he will be a sitting duck.

Rubble's sword glowed brightly as Alex charged forward. He took a mighty swing, releasing the Ice Blizzard, and struck Alex in the chest. \*Wham!\* He fell down and dropped the Fire Sword.

Everyone was shocked at what happened. The Ice Hunter walked over to the fallen hero and pointed his sword at Alex's chin. "You lose." Rubble announced.

The harsh reality of his words set in. Alex lost his composure and this is the result of not thinking things through. He is now at his opponent's mercy.

Rubble picked up the discarded weapon. "This now belongs to me. The Fire Sword is too good for you anyways, Demon Slayer. Ha ha ha ha ha!"

Celina ran to the fallen Alex but she stopped halfway. He was on his hands and knees, remaining still in this position. He was deeply disappointed with himself, and Celina can tell he is in a lot of mental pain. "I lost...I'm no good at all!"

Celina turned to the man with the wolf skin. "You've won, Ice Hunter. Now let the girl go, as you promised."

"Sure. I will let her go...to another world."

"You wouldn't!!" Celina shouted.

Rubble made the hand signal, and the ninjas standing near Jade prepared themselves.

Shen Long and Sui Long ran as fast as they could. The ninja grabbed his sword and pulled it back, getting ready to cut her neck. Suddenly, he felt a piece of metal cut through his stomach. Shen released his sword and the ninja collapsed. Sui attacked the other ninja and slashed him.

Celina drew a sword and Rubble threw smoke bombs at the ground. Poof!

Rubble: "See ya later!"

Celina: "You scoundrel!" She coughed and was not able to see anything.

Shen cut Jade free. "Are you alright, miss?"

"I'm fine!" Jade replied. "What about Alex?" She saw nothing but smoke.

The rest of the ninjas charged at them. Shen and Sui defended themselves. Celina fought the ninjas in the smoke. Slish. Slash.

Jade ran into the smoke to her friend. "Alex? Are you alright?"

Apparently, he is not. "I'm useless. I lost the Fire Sword, the only remnant I have of Master Genzo. In the end I'm just a mediocre swordsman. I don't deserve the title Demon Slayer."

Celina: "Enough, Alex. Now is not the time for this. We need to go after the Ice Hunter."

"What is the point?" Alex replied. "He is probably long gone by now."

Shen Long grabbed Alex by the arm, essentially lifting him up. "Listen, we need to go after him now. He may have won the duel but he tried to kill Jade. We can still take the Fire Sword back."

## [C] Title Contents

Gallop gallop. Rubble pulled the sword partially out of its patch. (Finally, the Fire Sword is in my possession. Master Ragnarok will give me a nice reward for this.) His mission is now accomplished and he stares at his prize with a smile on his face. All the other missions he has had were nothing but chores, but this one is a true victory. It is too bad the Demon Slayer was unskilled, he wanted a good fight.

Suddenly, an arrow came at him and he tilted his head to dodge it. Whoosh! It cut off pieces of his scarf. He grabbed the horse reins and pulled hard, and the horse whined and came to a stop.

"Who dares attack me?" Rubble demanded. More arrows flew at him. He jumped off the horse and landed. Fwop fwop.

"Show yourself you coward!"

A figure came out from the woods and slowly her figure was revealed as she came into the light. "You are the coward." said Li. "You kidnapped a girl and used her as a hostage, and after the duel, you broke your agreement. You are a scumbag not worthy of living."

"You sure have a big mouth, young lady. Who are you?" Rubble demanded.

"I do not give my name to the dead. Someone like you is not worthy to use the Fire Sword. Now hand it over."

"Why you-" Rubble drew his sword. He has never been spoken so rudely before, and he is going make sure this girl gets it. "You are going to regret this, girl." He gathers energy into the sword and it glowed white. Li drew her weapon.

Rubble released the Ice Blizzard and Li jumped over it, avoiding the shockwave. But she did not stop when she landed. In a continuous, swift motion, she continued to run forward, holding her sword horizontally. Rubble charged forward. "Yaaah!"

"Heaven's Wrath Style - **Heaven's Retribution!**"

They went past each other and everything happened in slow motion. Rubble saw the attack, but he was not fast enough to react in time. He should have blocked it, but instead, he took it at full damage. Pieces of his scarf were cut.

"You...you were the one who Duke Xiang was looking for..." he muttered and collapsed. Blood dripped out from the many wounds inflicted upon him.

By the time the group showed up, it was too late. All they saw was Rubble's corpse. Shen Long walked over to touch his chest. "He's dead. And the Fire Sword and Ice Sword are missing."

Celina: "Whoever killed him must have taken it."

Jade: "But who could have done such a thing?"

Sui Long had his suspicions. "Could it be her?"

Alex was wondering the same thing. He walked away from the group, going into the trees. "I know you did it. Show yourself."

Li walked out from the darkness. "Very good, brother. Your senses are getting keen."

"I had a feeling it was you."

"I believe this belongs to you." Li threw him the patch with the Fire Sword in it. Alex caught it with one hand. "You lost it in combat again. If Master Genzo were alive, he'd be disappointed in you. You still have much to learn, younger brother. You should train some more."

"I don't need you to tell me that. Where is the Ice Sword?"

"I am going to keep it as a souvenir for my victory. Now I have a legendary sword too. Until then, try not to lose it again." Li walked into the darkness.

This certainly is a surprising turn of events. What was first an agonizing defeat turned into a surprise victory. Cheng feels a little better now that the Fire Sword is back in his possession, but this opens a whole new set of questions. Who exactly is his sister, Li Cheng?

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十二: The Tragedy of Shen  
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The sun just rose above the skyline and birds chirped at the morning light. The horizon lighted up brilliantly and the sky was clear blue. It was the sign of a peaceful day, a well deserved one after much battling. Alex Cheng's defeat by the Ice Hunter put a serious dent in his pride, and last night he slept restlessly. This morning, he woke up as early as the sun did, walking outside to the backyard. He pulled the Fire Sword out of its shell and staring deeply into it, he began to notice little details that were not noticed before.

Details such as its size and weight and its design. The sword's pommel (the bottom-most part), the handle, the guard, and particularly the blade edge. Its design is unique enough to make it distinguishable from regular swords, yet its weight and structure are the same as any other. The blade of the Fire Sword is said to be unbreakable, for it is carved by a legendary blacksmith, one unlike any other.

Alex became depressed that he does not know the sword as well as his old master did. Master Genzo was a master of the art of war, he could wield virtually any weapon and use it to its full potential. He could make the Fire Sword glow upon will, and turn it into flames at an instance. It is unfortunate that Alex cannot do the same.

Jade and her grandmother can no longer do business in Yi Ling. They feared that Jade's life is still in danger, and they have fled to another city. And this is Alex Cheng's fault, because Rubble used Jade to get to him. Because of him, his good fiend Jade lost her business and she must find a new home. It will be rough for a girl and an old lady to travel alone.

Alex got into fighting stance and trained like hell. Celina just woke up and saw him working hard. She could not find herself interrupting him while he is training like this, so she watched silently. It was the just like the time when the same thing happened back in the palace. She came to his quarters and found him training and just watched with admiration. This time, however, there is no need to run away.

While doing various techniques and forms, Alex noticed that someone was watching him. They just looked at each other from the distance. He walked over to her.

"You awake?" he asked.

"Yeah." she replied. "But it looks like you woke up before me."

"I did not sleep well last night." Alex replied. "I keep saying to myself that everything is okay. But everything is **not** okay. I lost my Fire Sword in combat and there is no excuse for my incompetence."

"Alex, don't say that."

"What my sister said about me is true. I am a useless swordsman."

"No, that's not true at all!" Celina said.

"I only killed Duke Xiang by sheer luck. I do not deserve the title of a Demon Slayer...it is only fitting since I no longer have that title. I still need the protection of my bodyguards because I cannot protect myself. I do not even know if I can protect you."

"No! Stop saying that. I think you're a great swordsman." Celina spoke in a voice as fierce as he is. "Master Genzo chose you to be his successor for a reason. He sees something in you that you do not yet see. I remember that day in the palace when you were training hard, just like you were this morning. You train harder than any other self-proclaimed swordsman I know! For someone who works as hard as you, you are not worthless. Not in my eyes."

Then she **touched his face with her hand**. Alex was shocked by her words. He did not know she cared so much, yet he has always known. The look in her eyes told the truth, there is not a hint of a lie.

"Alex...you've saved my life....and gave me a new life. If it was not for you, I do not know where I'd be right now. You gave me a reason to live! I believe in you." she said sincerely.

How could one not feel loved and enlightened to hear this from the one he loves? The look in her eyes made all the worries in the world go away. Alex touched her hand. "Thank you, Celina."

There are, however, bigger problems than Alex's self confidence. The assassin known as Ekin is the latest of Ragnarok's hired men, and he is being chased by the warriors of the Council of Heaven. He ran away to an abandoned house and he has no intentions of leaving without a fight.

Six of the Council members approached him from the front. One of them happens to be Vincent Chan, the one who uses not swords but fans as weapons.

"Alright Ekin," said the group leader, "We have you cornered. Just surrender and we will go easy on you."

"I do not surrender." said Ekin. He drew his sword, and the fighters gasped at its magnificent glow.

Member-A: "The rumors are true! He has the **Thunder Sword!**"

Member-B: "We must take precaution."

Member-C: "He may have the Thunder Sword, but not everybody can use it! Attack!"

All six fighters charged at him. Ekin fought them as they came, dodging their attacks. Clang! Cling! He blocked Member-A's attack and kicked him away. Whack! His movements were swift and quick, and hard to predict. Two guys raised their swords high and Ekin blocked them both, and slashed them in the stomach. \*Slish!\*

Vincent threw his steel fan forward, and Ekin dodged it and it hit the wall. He charged at him directly and their blades clashed, resulting in a deadlock. Ekin pushed Vincent's blade down, and then pushed forward with so much force that Vincent was propelled backwards, and he lost balance and fell.



Member-C: "We must all attack him at once!"

All of them charged at him. Ekin smiled and raised his sword up high and it produced thunder and became a rod of electricity. Zzzzzzzt! Everyone near him was given the shock of their lives. They screamed in agony and they did not have a chance against the sword's mighty power.

Only one survived and he crawled away. "Impossible..." said Vincent, looking at his fallen comrades. "The Thunder Sword is this powerful?"

"You are next." said Ekin.

"You stole the Thunder Sword from Master Taishi and you attack the Council's members. You are a bastard who does not deserve to live!"

Vincent took out his steel fan and threw it forward. Ekin knocked it to the side with his weapon. Whack! Vincent charged and attacked furiously. Ekin defended and Vincent could not find an opening to hit him. Clang! Ekin stepped back as he dodged the attacks.

Vincent took a hard swing and his opponent blurred out of sight. Vincent was caught by surprise as Ekin appeared behind him. Vincent turned around to block. Quong! Ekin broke his sword and slashed his stomach, Vincent jumped back but he was still hit. Slash!

"Now you can join your comrades in hell."

Suddenly, Li came from the top of the wall and landed. "Not so fast."

"An interference?" said Ekin. "I see, so it is you. It saves me the trouble to have to find you."

"All I want is that Thunder Sword." said Li. "It does not belong to you."

"Hmph. You are going to challenge me as well?"

Li drew the Ice Sword, which Ekin recognized immediately. "Oh, so you have the Ice Sword. That means you are the one who assassinated Rubble."

"You are going to join him soon."

"Is that a matter of fact?"

"Li..." said Vincent, "Be careful. He is dangerous."

"I know what I am doing." Li replied.

Li charged forward and attacked using the Heaven's Wrath Style. Ekin blocked her assaults confidently without breaking a sweat. Fighting is like a walk in the park of him. Whoosh! He ducked to avoid a hit, and he swings his blade upwards, Li quickly jumped away. It was close to hitting her chin.

Alex has his Fire Sword, and Li has the Ice Sword, but the Thunder Sword is equally as powerful and well-known amongst the martial arts world. But it is not the weapon that makes the warrior, it is the warrior that makes the weapon. Ekin has proven himself to be a worthy adversary, and he will not be as simple as Tao or Rubble.

Li threw a bunch of daggers at him, and he deflected them with his sword. Cling-cling! Ekin powered up the Thunder Sword. \*Zzzzzt\* A wave of thunder smashed the ground, and Li jumped away. (He can use utilize the Thunder Sword's powers?)

Ekin attacked with full force, screaming its name, "Thunder Wave!"

The wave of electricity came hurling at her, and she evaded. Zzzzzt! Kabam! The ground was left with a burn.

(How can I get near him?)

Ekin threw another Thunder Wave. Li jumped up but the energy hit her legs and she was electrified and fell down. Vincent came to her. "Are you alright?"

Hearing the footsteps of other swordsmen, Ekin decided that it is time to leave. "It is over for now." said he. "You will not be so fortunate next time." He jumped to the roof and made a clean get away. Li watched him without blinking. She was upset that



someone is able to utilize the Thunder Sword's powers, while she has not yet learned how to use the Ice Sword.

King Liu was sitting in his chair with much uneasiness. Liu Zhang and his servant came in and presented him with a scroll. His servant was actually Ragnarok in disguise, wearing regular servant clothes.

"Your highness. I need to pass a certain law...a law to allow random searches of people's homes and property. But all laws must be approved by the king himself, that is why I require your signature here. Once I have your signature the law can take effect immediately."

"Random searches?" said Liu Bei. "But why?"

"Trust me, sire. It is for the good of the kingdom. We will never know if someone is hiding a traitor in their home, so it is a good idea that we know exactly what is in our cities. This will enforce people's respect for us."

"But this is intrusion of privacy..."

"I'd suggest you do it without question." said Zhang, getting straight to the point. By now he knows he is in control and no longer needs to be polite. "If you want to continue to taste the spice, then you will pass this law. Once you do, I will bring you enough spice to last you the rest of your life!"

"**The spice...**" Even saying the word makes him thirsty and aching for more. Liu Bei took the scroll and took out his **imperial seal**. It is a stamp to be used only by royalty, passed down from the royal family for generations.

Zhang smiled wickedly as he was signing it. "Good. Very good!"

In the darkness of the night, Liu and his subordinate were discussing some secret matters. Holding up the scroll, he said: "At last! I had him sign the law. I have succeeded where Duke Xiang did not."

"Congratulations, master." said Ragnarok.

"This is only the beginning. I now have the king under my control. The duke thought he could force people to do something, but that is not the best way. The best way is to have him willingly do it!"

"Indeed." Ragnarok replied. "And now you are the only person in the kingdom who knows of the spice. You can use it on other people as well, and after one sip they will obey you like dogs."

"How are things going on your end?" Zhang asked,

"The Council of Heaven is interfering with our operations. They are not making things easy for us."

"The Council members are nothing but parasites of society. They're nuisances and they will be removed sooner or later."

## [B] Title Contents

Liu Bei walked drunkenly to the **royal sanctuary**, the place where the spirit of his ancestors reign. There are stones inscribed with the names of every single person who was born with the name Liu. One of them belongs to Liu Shen, Liu Bei's grandfather. Liu Shen was the one who established the Kingdom of Shen, and the Liu's are a proud family. But right now, Liu Bei is ashamed to carry that name. How can he face his predecessors when he is being manipulated by one of his men?

"What should I do?" he asked the stones. "What can I do?" Liu Bei continued to wallow in pain, wailing and lamenting at his predicament. It is all because of the spice. Would it not be ludicrous to give up everything for a mere plant?

Without them answering, he found the answer. Physically, he cannot resist the spice...but there is one other thing he can do.

It was a stormy night, lightning flashed and thunder roared loudly. Sitting in his throne chair, Liu Bei was contemplating something violent in his mind. It is not the way a king should think, but this is the only thing he can think of besides the spice. It is Liu Zhang's fault. He will not submit to Zhang, as he had submitted to the duke. No, that will never happen again.

Walking outside, Liu Bei walked up to Zhang, who had his back turned to him. Zhang, hearing footsteps, turned around to face the king. "Oh, your highness. Should you not be sleeping at this hour?"

"Why should I be sleeping? Because you say I should?"

"Hmmm?"

"I am the king of my kingdom..." said Liu Bei, walking forward cautiously. "And I will be treated as such." He did not realize that his face was pale and wrinkly, and his eyes were darkened with restlessness. Resisting the spice made him physically weak, because he would not eat nor drink anything else.

Zhang glanced at the sword Liu Bei was holding. "Sire, you are not thinking of fighting me, are you?"

"I must execute you...I will not let you control me any further."

"Don't you want more spice? If you kill me, you will never see it again."

"I don't care!" Liu Bei shouted. "You have been using the spice to control me. I will not be your slave anymore!"

"You have made a foolish choice, my king!"

"Liu Zhang!!!" The king charged forward.

Zhang waited for him to come, smiling confidently with his arms folded behind his back.

"Yaaaaah!!!" The king thrusts his sword forward, and a shadow jumped out of nowhere to block the attack. \*Clang!\*

Zhang smiled as Ragnarok made it just in time to defend his master.

Liu Bei was startled. "What? Who are you?"

"My name is Ragnarok, and I cannot let you harm my master."

They struggled with their blade deadlock and Ragnarok pushed him away. Liu Bei charged and attacked wildly. Ragnarok defended himself well, and it is unfortunate that Liu Bei does not have the skill nor the strength to win this fight. Quong! Quang!

The king's sword was knocked away from his hand, and Ragnarok stabbed him in the chest. **Schleb!** The pain came as surprise, but he was more horrified by the **blood**. He stared at his own palms with bloodshot eyes, his hands shaking uncontrollably. He fell down and grabbed his bloody chest.

Zhang walked over to the fallen king and took Ragnarok's sword. "What a shame...if only you continued to obey me, you could have lived longer."

"You are a traitor!" yelled Liu Bei. "You are nothing but a scoundrel! Heaven will punish you for this!"

"Heaven punish me? Ha ha ha ha!" Zhang broke into fits of laughter. "Then heaven should have done so four hundred years ago. Let me tell you a little story...about a certain Han King..."

"Once upon a time during the Han Dynasty, there was a greedy king who ruled the land. One day, a traveler brought him something of utmost interest - an herb that tastes better than any food or drink in the world - known as **the spice**. Once the king took the first sip, he became addicted to it. He became infatuated with the spice and could eat nothing else."

Liu Bei's eyes widened as he listened.

"But the traveler vanished without a trace, and so did the spice along with him. The king desired the spice so much that he did not eat or drink anything else, and he eventually grew mad. He abandoned all those around him, and he committed suicide. What a tragic tale...of the king who threw away everything for just a taste of the spice. After he killed himself, his son took the throne and became the next Han King. But he was living under his father's shadow. His father ruined the kingdom so badly that his son could not recover...With poor leadership, the imperial army grew weak...and the demons attacked them. What a shame...an entire dynasty was ruined by a single man..."

Liu crawled backwards as Zhang approached.

"And do you know who brought the traveler to see the king? That is correct! It was one of the king's most trusted advisors...he alone ruined the king's life and destroyed the kingdom!"

Liu Bei was too shocked for words. The story is not just a story, but the truth. And the advisor who ruined the Han Kingdom was none other than the man standing before him...but he is not a man, for no man lives that long. He is a demon. Liu Bei did not want to die, it is too early to die. He got up and ran.

Zhang slashed him from the back, and blood gushed out of his wound. Liu Bei fell face flat and a pool of blood surrounded his body. During the final moments of his life, he felt nothing but remorse, regret, and anger. For he is just like the fabled Han King...he who consumes the spice becomes **consumed** by the spice. Like the Han King, he abandoned the only family he had - his concubine.

Liu Zhang walked over to the dead body. "Long live the king! Ha ha ha ha ha!!"  
Ragnarok: "What should we do now?"

"We must dispose of the body and make sure no one ever finds it. His majesty's death is most unfortunate. The king has been murdered by one of Duke Xiang's followers. We must find the king's murderer and bring him to justice."

Ragnarok smiled. "Hai!"

Ever since they rescued Jade, things have been peaceful for Alex and his new companion, Celina. They finally received what they wished for - some quiet time together. They are both quiet people and they dislike crowds and noisiness. This makes the perfect surrounding for them - the beach, the sound of the water hitting the shore, and the fact that no one is around to disturb them.

They were both sitting on boulders, contemplating their new life. Alex picked up a rock and threw it across the lake, and the rock hit the water three times before sinking. Sploosh-sploosh-sploosh.

"How is Zi doing?" asked Celina.

"He is recovering. Despite how he looks, he is a strong person. He was the one who went with me to the Valley of Death."

"I see. He must be a reliable person, then?"

"Yes, your highness."

"There you go again." she replied.

"Sorry, it is a force of a habit, Celina. I have been thinking about our future. Since we are both commoners again, we will have to both get a job and earn a living. I have to hide the fact that I am the Demon Slayer, otherwise it will cause more problems. Because of me, Jade and her grandmother have to leave Yi Ling and conduct business in another city."

She touched his hand. "Do not blame yourself."

"Zi was also injured...and I bet he is still mad about the whole affair thing."

"It is not them I am worried about. You are still someone's target, Alex. Whoever hired Tao and Rubble to assassinate you will surely send someone else after you."

Captain Tai arrived and Alex's hand instinctively reached for his sword, and Celina signaled him to stop. As Tai came closer, Alex recognized him and became at ease.

"Lade Ce and the Demon Slayer?"

"You made it. I was worried that the address I gave you was not clear." said Celina, smiling.

"Captain Tai." said Alex, "You are the one who helped Celina escape from the dungeon. Thank you. I do not know how to repay you other than to say thank you."

"I appreciate it, but this is no time for gratitude. I have some bad news that I must tell you..."

"What is it?" inquired Celina.

Tai hesitated. "What I am about to tell you is shocking...please prepare yourselves."

"What is it?" Alex asked impatiently.

Tai swallowed hard. "King Liu Bei is dead...he was murdered."

Celina felt a thunder bolt struck her heart. "No! You are joking, right, Tai?!"

"I am sorry." Tai said, looking at the ground.

"It can't be...who did it?" Alex asked.

"We do not know. The high officials are conducting an investigation as we speak. I am sorry. I know this is sudden. I am as shocked and angry as you are."

"D-Dead? He cannot be dead!" Celina blurted out. She fell on her knees and screamed. "No! Liu Bei...Liu Bei!!" Tears streamed down her eyes and she was sobbing sadly.

Alex got on the floor and grabbed her shoulder. "Celina..." There is no way he can ease her pain other than to experience it with her. Even though there was no love between them, Liu Bei was still her husband, and she was emotionally attached to him. They were husband and wife for a few years, after all.

"NO! It can't be true!! No!!"

Celina bowed politely in front of the king and addressed him properly. "Your highness."

Liu: "I am pleased to meet you, Miss Ce. Your performance out there was phenomenal. I have never seen a dancer quite like you."

She blushed at the compliment. "Thank you, sire."

Fa: "Celina is one of my proudest achievements. She works very hard at her craft."

Liu: "Yes, your hard work shows in your performance. Say, Miss Ce, would you like to come to the palace? The lords and officials would love to see you perform...and you may raise the standards for our dancers. Celina was staring at the floor uneasily.

"Uhhh...well...it is such a gracious offer...I don't know...it is too prestigious for me."

"Non-sense. Your performance is fitting for a royal audience." said Liu.

"I c-cannot take the offer. I am sorry." she replied shyly and left.

Fa: "Celina! Come back. I am sorry about this, your highness. She is just overwhelmed by your presence...you are the most important person in the kingdom. But I will talk some sense into her." She ran after Celina and Liu just stood there like a deer in headlights.

Why would any dancer refuse such an offer? Now he is even more curious about Miss Ce.

Liu was pleased that she decided to speak with him. "Ah, Miss Celina, I am so happy you have decided to accept my offer."

"Please, your highness, I want you to know I am going there only for the performance. I have not agreed to anything yet." she replied.

"But of course. I am not a pushy person. You can make your own decision. But please, allow me to show you a glimpse of what you can have. I shall send a carriage for you tomorrow morning."

"That is not necessary. I can walk with my own two feet."

"Oh certainly no. A fair maiden like you should not have to walk. Wait for the carriage." He did not give her the chance to say no.

Celina can never forget the how the king treated her. She was worried, since royalty has a reputation of treating women poorly. On a warm summer day, he was walking with her around the garden. He was so sincere and kind to her that she felt obligated to return the favor. Even though the love was not there, she felt his kindness as he embraced her tightly. "Celina, I will take care of you for life." he once whispered in her ear. No other man has said those words to her, and indeed, Liu Bei kept his promise. He gave her a grand life that she could only dreamed of.

But those happy times were over when she was kidnapped by the Duke and tortured by his bandits. Ever since that day, her life has become a downwards spiral into oblivion. Alex rescued her from certain doom, and after a series of fateful encounters, they fell in love. But Liu Bei took away her one chance at happiness. He imprisoned her and banished Alex from the palace forever. He has every right to be angry, and also, he was under the influence of the spice.

No matter how badly he treated her, he is still her husband nonetheless. He was not a bad person at all, in fact, he was a great king. And he shall forever be remembered as such.

## [C] Title Contents

After Celina was done crying, she wanted to be alone and not be disturbed, even by Alex. She sat on the floor, leaning against the door and did not move or do anything for several hours. Alex wished that he can comfort her in some way, because isn't that what a man's job is supposed to be? But he cannot help her other than to wait until she feels better. Staring at the large body of water before him, Alex felt sad at the king's untimely death.

"I am sorry." Tai said, looking at the ground.

"It can't be...who did it?" Alex asked.

"We do not know. The high officials are conducting an investigation as we speak."

Who could have done such a thing? Who would dare murder King Liu? This thought made Cheng angry, because he too feels the king was a good person. Despite the banishment, King Liu did everything to help Cheng...he gave him the title of Demon Slayer and made him famous. Liu Bei was a kind king, a king who thinks of the people first, rather putting his own needs before the people. That quality is rare, because most anarchists are corrupt tyrants.

Alex secretly wanted to repay Liu Bei for all he has done for him, but alas, he can never repay that favor. His death is truly the tragedy of the Kingdom of Shen.



Everybody in the palace was sad and grief-stricken at King Liu's sudden death. They wanted to keep it to themselves until they have the issue resolved. All the high officials were called to a secret meeting at the **royal banquet room**.

Lord Yu banged his fist on the table. "Damn it!" Out of all the nobles present, he is the most righteous one and has always supported the king as well as the Demon Slayer. "Who dares to commit such an atrocity! That person must be punished and sent to hell!"

"Please lower your voice, Lord Yu." said Lord Sima. He is a man of noble birth and always behaves like a gentleman, and thus dislikes loud people and screaming in general. Although he does not have the Liu name, he is a distant cousin of the late king. Liu Bei's father, Liu Zho had a sister. She married another man from a wealthy family and thus took on the surname of Sima. They had a son who is the present Lord Sima. "We understand you are angry, but we must deal with this in calm manner if we should find Liu Bei's murderer."

Lord Fei was also present. He is also related to the king, but much like Sima, he is connected to royalty by blood. "It is unthinkable that someone was actually able to get into the palace and do such a thing. We must tighten our security!"<sup>3</sup>

Lord Sima put a fan over his face. "Hoho. That is useless. The murderer must have had connections with someone on the inside. That is why he is able to move in undetected. The one responsible must be someone powerful and influential."

"So does that mean the suspect is one of us?" asked Tai. The room became silent and everyone gave each other accusing looks.

Lord Fei then said: "If it is anybody, it's you, Captain Tai. You are the prime suspect."

"Excuse me?" said Tai.

"Think about it." said Fei. "At one point the king almost had you executed for stealing from the imperial treasure room. You must have held a grudge for him since that day."

Tai stood up and slammed his palms on the table. "I find that accusation ridiculous! Not only that, but your story is completely wrong! It was the general who wanted me to be executed but the king spared me!"<sup>4</sup>

"Out of everyone here you have the best motive to do so!" Seeing a scapegoat, Lord Huong jumped on the opportunity to accuse someone, as long as the suspect is not himself. He is an influential lord who controls provinces in the southern part of the kingdom. "Everyone knows that soldiers are violent and corrupt!"

Tai: "Oh? Where were you during Operation Dragonfly? Were you hiding under a rock while we were fighting with our lives? Or were you plotting with Duke Xiang?"<sup>5</sup>

Huong: "What did you say, you damn thief?"

"Enough!" yelled Liu Zhang, who was silent until now. "We will not be able to solve anything by pointing fingers and arguing with one another. It is a waste of time. Right now our priority is to appoint a new king. According to Heaven's Mandate, the new king shall be the one who is the next in line in the royal family. And that person is none other than myself, Liu Zhang."

Yu: "How convenient it must be. You are the next in line to take the throne. You should be the prime suspect, Liu Zhang."

Huong: "I agree with Lord Yu. How do we know you are not the killer?"

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<sup>3</sup> Added more background info for Lord Sima

<sup>4</sup> Fei says that the king wanted Tai to be executed, which is wrong. Original version: Tai did not correct him

<sup>5</sup> Original: Huong was not present at the meeting. Tai's rebuttal was directed at Fei.

Zhang: "You will suspect me for that reason alone? Do you have any proof?" No one answered him. "If you don't have proof then you are full of hot air. My first act as king is to form a committee to find the late king's killer."

Yu: "That's ridiculous that a suspect should ascend the throne. There are other candidates here related to Liu Bei."

Zhang: "Without a leader all you are going to do is waste time pointing fingers at each other. According to Heaven's Mandate, the closest blood relative takes the throne. Liu Bei has no son so the next in line is myself. The new king has already been appointed, whether you like it or not. And to suspect a king is treason, is it not?"

Lord Yu gasped. He quickly glanced around the room to see if he has supporters. Captain Tai is against the idea of Liu Zhang becoming king, but he is just a soldier without much power. Lord Huong is a sycophant who will latch onto whoever is the most powerful, and his eyes say that he is on Liu Zhang's side. Lords Sima and Fei are corrupt and only does things in their best interest. Everyone remained silent and silence means consent. In other words...Lord Yu is alone. He had to comply, lest he should become a suspect.

Liu Zhang stood up. "I see no one here has objections, so it is decided then. But rest assured, I will find the late king's killer no matter what. I will not rest until I find the person who murdered Liu Bei!"

The death of the king has affected everyone one way or another. Servants talked amongst one another about the possibilities behind his death. But none of them were told the truth by the authorities...because they need not know. The truth is irrelevant to them. A servant's job is to serve their leader, no more, no less.

Everyone was sad and angry over Liu Bei's death. But his death is good news to one person...the new King of Shen. Liu Zhang has ordered a committee to investigate Liu Bei's murderer. But of course, they will not find anything, because Zhang is the one who is in charge of the committee, and he will not let them find any evidence which points to him. The committee is nothing but a fraud.

Lord Yu has already dropped the subject of Zhang being the suspect, but Tai still has his suspicions. The king, dressed in a royal gown that touched the floor, walked across the red carpet. The royal officials all bowed in respect as he made his grand entrance. Finally, King Liu Zhang takes his rightful seat at the throne, the seat which belongs to the very person he murdered.

Indeed, it is a proud day for him, for he has waited a long time for this. He would have been happy controlling the king from the shadows but becoming the king is also part of his plan. The king is the most powerful person in the Kingdom of Shen, and as is all the kingdoms; this is the way things are since the beginning of the Chao Dynasty.

A servant raised his arm, signaling everyone to be at ease. "I now present to you the Fourth King of Shen, King Liu Zhang! Long live the king!"

"Long live the king!" everybody shouted at once. "Long live the king!"

Still inside the house, Celina has cried enough and wants to rest. Alex did not want to go in and disturb her, so he remained outside. Right now, he was carrying two buckets of water, balancing them on his shoulder. A servant came up to him, and Alex put the buckets down.

"Sir Cheng?" asked the middle aged man.

"Yes? Who wants to know?"

"I am a messenger of **King Liu Zhang.**"

"King Liu Zhang?" Alex repeated stupidly. But as he thought about it, it does make sense. Zhang is the next in line for the throne, and now that Liu Bei is gone, he has succeeded to the throne.

"His representative is inside the carriage and he would like to have a word with you.

"Fine, I shall speak with him."

Celina looked out the window and realized that Alex was talking to a servant of the palace. But what is he doing here?

Four men were accompanying the carriage which was attached to a horse. The man inside opened the door and stepped out. Alex bowed.

"There is no need for that, Sir Cheng," said Chu Yen. He was wearing a red robe made of fine silk, which what high officials typically wear. "My name is **Zho Yueh**. I heard that you were living here."

"I am honored that you made a personal trip here. How did you find me?"

"It was not hard at all. All I had to do was find the records of your name and from there I have your old address."

"I do not know what to say. You need not come here to visit me personally," said Alex.

"Non-sense. We are all on the same side, are we not? I am sure the death of Liu Bei is very saddening and shocking. I assure you that the I am doing everything I can to find the killer and we will punish him thoroughly. Liu Bei was wrong to banish you from the palace."

Alex's eyes darted left and right as he was thinking. "But did you know about... my crime?"

"Oh yes I heard about it. An affair?" Chu Yen smiled. "Men have affairs all the time. You just happen to have picked the wrong woman. With the king no longer alive, your affair means nothing considering what you've done for our kingdom. I would like to re-title you the Demon Slayer. No one else can fill that role better than you."

This was too good to be true and Alex was silent.

"Why Cheng, is something the matter?"

"Uh, oh no. Not at all. No words can express my gratitude."

Celina continued to watch with much curiosity.

"I am also aware that the concubine Lady Ce is being imprisoned. She is not a criminal and a lady like her does not belong in the dungeon. The king has already pardoned her. That is all. I will be on my way back to the imperial complex."

"Farewell, my lord," said Alex.

Chu Yen went back to the carriage and the man whipped his horse and they rode away into the darkness.

When they were gone, Celina came out from hiding. "Alex." <sup>6</sup>

"Did you hear what he said?" asked he.

"Yes. This is a surprising turn of events," she replied. "He still thinks I am in the dungeon. I must go back before he finds out I have escaped."

"You want to go back to the palace?"

"Yes." Celina said affirmatively. "I want to find out who killed Liu Bei." Her decision is made and her resolve is clear. Alex also desires to go back to the palace. Even though Liu Zhang is still a suspect, why refuse such an offer?

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<sup>6</sup> Original: Liu Zhang personally visits Alex. It doesn't make sense - kings don't do that, especially a crafty one like Liu Zhang

Inside the carriage, Chu Yen's smile was gone and his face was making a grimace. "Tch. Sometimes I wonder if I should become an actor instead. Why should I have to suck up to a so-called hero like him?"

"It can't be helped." said the horse rider. "Lord Zhang, ahem, I mean the king wants to bring the Demon Slayer back into the palace so it's easier to watch him."

"Hmph. It's true. I sent two assassins after him and they were both killed. Cheng has too many allies we don't know about. If he's inside the palace he won't be able to do much. But he's a joke! He's no match for me when it comes to swordcraft!"

The horse rider lowered his head so that his hat covered his eyes. "I know. You are Chu Yen of the Four Brothers. In other words, you alone are the strongest swordsman in the kingdom."

Sometimes, life happens too fast for Alex Cheng. One day he is wealthy, the next day he is penniless, and tomorrow, he will once again become wealthy. Indeed, the recent events have been a roller coaster ride for him and Celina. There is still much uncertainty in the air, and the best thing he can do now is to go with the flow.

Tai took Celina back to the underground tunnel, the very tunnel from which she used to escape last time. Ironically, they are sneaking her back **into** prison. Before their trip, they made her dress dirty purposely to make it seem like she was in prison the entire time.

The gigantic wooden doors have once again opened to Cheng, and the moment that he steps in, he is once again the Demon Slayer. Indeed, that is the plan; for he will enter the court through the front, and Celina through the back. But Alex is hesitating. Something does not add up. Is Liu Zhang truly a kind king, or does he have ulterior motives? Why he is helping him out? If he is not the suspect, then who is?

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### 十三: Liu Zhang's Offer. The Rescue Mission.

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Somewhere on the streets of Yi Ling, there were sounds of fighting and men yelling. The people nearby gathered their things and walked away, pretending they did not hear anything.

\*Clang!\* Ekin knocked down a guy and ran off. The Council members arrived and everyone except one went to help their fallen comrade.

"Are you alright?" Vincent asked.

"I'm fine!" yelled his comrade.

Vincent helped him stand up and they continued the chase.

Ekin ran down the alley and turned to the right, and the Councilmen were right behind him. Once they made the turn, they saw no sign of Ekin.

All they saw was a fence with two imperial guards standing there. The Councilmen walked towards them and the guards crossed their weapons.

"Hold it. This is imperial territory." said guard. "Only those with the imperial seal may enter."

"We are searching for a criminal named Ekin. We lost him once we got here. We believe he has entered the premises."

"There are no criminals here." said the second guard. "Now leave or else."

The Council members glanced at each other. "We can't antagonize the imperials." one member whispered to another.

"Fine! We will leave." said the leader of the group. He walked away and everyone followed. "Damn...we were so close." The leader of the pack took one last look at the building and walked away. He had suspicion that the imperials may be hiding the criminal, but even if so, what can they do about it?

Ragnarok came into the room to where Ekin was. "The imperials are gone. You can now be at ease, Ekin."

"Thank you master. They found me because I was not careful."

"Don't worry about it." Ragnarok replied. "The Council is hot on your trail, so you should stay here until things quiet down. We don't want the Thunder Sword to fall into the wrong hands."

"You are right."

"Just remain here until you receive further orders." Ragnarok left the room. He was so upset that he did not know there was a grimace on his face. "Damn you Taishi...after all these years you're still a nuisance."

Creeeeeek. A soldier unlocked the door to the cell. Celina, sitting there by herself, winced at the light. King Liu Zhang has ordered your released you." said the soldier. "You are free to go."

She stood up and stepped out, and let the soldier take her upstairs. Celina remained silent the entire time, curious as to what will happen next. She was brought to the royal hallway where the new King of Shen was waiting for her.

Zhang is sitting on Liu Bei's chair, the chair that once belonged to her husband. It is indeed an eyesore to see another man sit at that chair...especially a man that might have murdered him. But she must hold back her thorn like irritation and act her part. She kneeled. "Your highness."

"Please, stand." said King Zhang. Seeing her white dress all dirty, he felt bad for her. "I do not know why Liu Bei put you in prison. You were the concubine after all, and it is not the place for a young lady like you."

"He was going through some things..." Celina replied, pretending to be ignorant of the spice. "He has changed...but I do not know what it is that made him change so much..."

"Nonetheless, I am very sorry about your husband's death, Celina the Concubine. Excuse me, I meant to say Lady Ce. After hearing about your imprisonment, I knew that I had to do something about it. And you are now free and if you wish, you may remain a member of the royal court. And I will find the person who killed Liu Bei, I promise you."

"Thank you, Lord Zhang, um excuse me, King Zhang. Forgive me I am still not used to it. Things are moving too fast." Celina replied. Little does he know that she was actually free before he became king. She was free to do as she please in the outside world. This is nothing but an act of politeness, it is all part of the plan.

"I understand." replied the king. "You must be tired. My servants will bring you new clothes and send you to your quarters." Little does she know that he is the one who killed her husband, and knowing Celina, she is always ignorant of what is going on around her. Setting her free is nothing but an act of politeness, she is but a mere pawn in his grand scheme.

The Ice Hunter walked over to the fallen hero and pointed his sword at his chin. "You lose."

Losing can do many things to a swordsman's pride, particularly when the Fire Sword, his master's last gift given to him, is on the line. Cheng was training alone in the



backyard, still thinking about that terrible defeat. In that fight, which lasted only one hour, he understood the difference between his skill and Rubble's skill. While doing his forms, he thinks back to War God's training.

"...Do not get so excited yet, young man. My training will not be a regular training you have received from other so called masters. It is going to be rough."

"Yes sir. I am ready for anything!" Alex replied eagerly.

"...the sword is the hardest weapon to use. One does not simply wield a sword and become an expert. A true swordsman uses a sword **style**, a set of rules and disciplines for using the sword, and styles are developed and passed down from generation to generation."

Alex swings the blade angrily and it caught fire.

"Arrows are a long range weapon. They are very effectively. But what happens if an archer finds himself fighting up close? The spear, on the other hand, is long-ranged and has more power, however, it is slower. The sword is a balanced weapon. It is faster than the spear and much deadlier. The blade of the sword is sharp enough to cut the human flesh, and even bones if enough force is applied."

"I know...Master Genzo. I understand everything, yet I am still weak as a swordsman. What must I do to improve? Argh!"

Lei just came in and she was watching him. He saw her and she became frightened. "Lei?"

"Sir Cheng, I do not mean to disturb you."

"What is it?"

"I came to tell you that Lady Ce has been freed from captivity."

"Good." Alex replied. "At least our new king keeps his word."

When Lei was about to leave, Alex called her name and she turned around. "Thank you for helping us." said Alex. "You are a good friend to Lady Ce. But I'm sure she already knows."

Lei smiled for the first time since he has seen her, and she left. She is the only one of the few trustworthy people in the palace, this palace full of manipulation and lies. Alex is glad to have her around because it makes things much easier. Lei knows quite a bit about Celina, but she does not have been told about their affair. But she is not as stupid as she looks, for she has her suspicions of what is going on between Celina and Alex.

Celina was invited to breakfast by King Zhang, and of course the message was delivered by a servant. It is impolite to decline the king's invitation, so she accepts it. The only peculiar thing is that they are eating in a restaurant outside of the palace.

Once she came in, she bowed. He gave the signal and she became at ease. "Welcome, Lady Ce. I am glad you can make it." said Zhang.

"You are treating me to a meal?" she asked, sitting down. "What is the occasion, your highness?"

"Why, none other than to celebrate your freedom. Now please, enjoy yourself." Zhang gave a hand signal, and a servant came and poured tea for Celina.

She did not feel at ease sitting with Liu Zhang because she knows he has an ulterior motive. He has never been this nice when he was a lord, so why the sudden change? The servants stood on the side, waiting for orders. If there are no orders, they are to remain there like statues.

"What is the matter? You have not touched your food."

"I am not hungry." Celina replied. She instinctively knows that the food is poisoned with the spice. Celina's memory is fairly accurate, and she recalls that Zhang

was the one who found Cho, the man who brought the spice to Liu Bei. Indeed, it all makes sense now.

"Please, you must eat or drink something." Zhang insisted. "You have been fed garbage in the dungeon, so I must make sure that you at least have a decent meal. I just want to make sure you are taken care of, Lady Ce."

"Thank you, but I have no appetite." By now there are no more suspicions; she is certain that Liu Zhang is Liu Bei's killer. There is no way she will fall for his trap. Liu Bei has fallen for it, but she will not and she must play it smart if she wants to avenge him. That night, she was offered the spice, but she refused it because she truly had no appetite. And today, she will use that same excuse.

Zhang was disappointed that she did not take the bait. "That is fine. I understand that you went through a lot. You must be saddened by his death."

"Thank you for your concern, sire." said Celina. "But you need not do this."

"I am truly sorry about what happened. Liu Bei was a good king. But right now we must look forward." says Zhang. "I know this may be sudden, but I have a proposal for you. As the new king, I am looking for a concubine. I may already have found the perfect candidate." He touched her hand, and she withdrew.

"Sire, please do not joke around."

"I am not joking." Zhang replied. "I am serious about this, Lady Ce. It will benefit the both of us if you accept the offer."

Celina was truly surprised by his request, and she did not know how to act her way out of this. "Sorry sire...but I cannot accept such a prestigious offer. You do not want me...I am nothing but a relic of the old king."

"Non-sense, Lady Ce. Do you really want to live as a widow? You know what it is like to be a concubine, do you not? Do you want to give up all that prestige and power? You are the wife of the late Liu Bei, so it only makes sense if you are my wife. This way, you can still have what you have lost!"

"Sire...please understand...I only marry for love. I do not do it for convenience."

"Do you love Liu Bei?" Zhang asked.

This is a hard question to deal with, but Celina must lie her way out of this.

"Yes." she replied while looking down.

Indeed, Zhang knows she is lying. If she did love him, why would she cheat on him...with the Demon Slayer? But he must play his part and act like he does not know. "Very well. I know this is sudden, and I will not force you into this." said he. "I will give you some time to make your decision."

"Thank you for understanding." Celina bowed and walked away. She did not expect him to propose like this, and it is must be a trap. There is no way in hell she will marry a scumbag like him.

Zhang thought that he could talk her into it, but apparently, it will take some work. She is still damaged from all things she has been through. He only brought up marriage because it is part of the plan. He could care less about human customs between males and females. Why would a demon like him want to marry a human?

## [B] Title Contents

Ragnarok came into Liu Zhang's private room and kneeled. "Your highness."

Liu Zhang gave the signal and Ragnarok stood up. Since they are alone, they do not need the formalities. Ragnarok's formal act is a compliment to Zhang's accomplishment.

Zhang was writing a new law on a scroll, one that he wanted to pass for a while, but he could not because he was not the king. But now things are different, because he

is the one who makes the rules. It certainly is different sitting in the king's chair, as Zhang used to have to bow down in front of Liu Bei every time.

"Congratulations, my master. You certainly have outdone yourself. Now that you are the king, you can do anything you want."

"Yes, it comes with the title."

"Now we can escalate our plans." said Ragnarok.

"Not yet." Zhang replied. "We do not want to arouse anyone's suspicion that we killed Liu Bei. We must be cautious." replied the king.

"But sire...you are always cautious. But now you can do as you wish...no one dares speak ill of you."

"Liu Bei was not cautious...and look what happened to him. And remember what happened to the Han Kings, the Tin Kings and the Chao Kings? Dynasties have fallen because kings were reckless."

Ragnarok realized his master's words of wisdom and changed the subject. "But why do you want to marry the former concubine? She is of no use to you."

"On the contrary, Ragnarok. I will use her to get to the Demon Slayer. I already told you about their affair, have I not? She is nothing but a fool who rides with the currents. If I control her, I can use her against Alex Cheng **and** Captain Tai. I was surprised to find out that Tai feed her from the dungeons."

"Sire, I am telling you she is bad news. You cannot marry the enemy!"

"That is true...for I am a demon, and a demon cannot marry a human. Perhaps I should have you marry her?"

Ragnarok was surprised. Is he joking or not?

"I am just kidding." Zhang replied. "Just follow my lead, Ragnarok, and I promise you our dreams will be realized. Soon, I will announce that you are the War God's slayer, and I will appoint you as the general of the Shen army, and you will be a true hero."

Ragnarok's eyes lit up as he was hearing this.

"People will be looking at you with admiration and respect. You are my best pupil, thus you will train the soldiers, and they will obey you. You will have an army at your disposal and you will be remembered as the greatest general in history!"

"Yes, your highness!"

While walking in the garden, Celina happened to run into Liu Zhang. "Your highness." she greeted, bowing.

"Ah, Lady Ce, have you made your decision?"

"Sire...I appreciate your offer, but I am afraid I will have to decline." she replied.

Zhang seemed disappointed. "Are you sure? I am giving you the offer of a lifetime. You can regain what you have lost, and I promise you I will treat you better than Liu Bei did."

"Liu Bei treated me fine." she replied, trying not to get offended. "He was a fine king and a good husband. I am sorry, but I cannot marry you, sire."

"Tsk tsk tsk. So stubborn, are we not?"

"Excuse me?" she asked. "Sorry, but I have matters to attend to."

As she walked by him, he grabbed her hand. "We can skip the formalities, Lady Ce. I am the king now and I can get whoever I want. Just be obedient and accept my offer."

She shook his hand off. "Is that how it is? You claimed that you will be a better king than Liu Bei, but you are the same as Leinwan's king. You are a tyrant and you are corrupt!"

"Why do you refuse me?" Zhang asked. "Is it because you already love someone else?"

"Someone else?" she repeated. "Please do not joke around, sire. Liu Bei is the only person in my heart."

"Oh? Is that right?" said Zhang. "Are you sure about that? You don't love another man...a man like the Demon Slayer?"

A lightning bolt struck Celina's heart. How does he know this? Can she act her way out of this one? "I beg your pardon, sire?"

"I am not stupid, Lady Ce. I know of your affair."

"What are you talking about? You are not making sense."

"Stop playing dumb. Do you think I am ignorant? Why would Liu Bei put you, of all people, in the dungeon? You, his beloved wife, his prized treasure...he gave up the kingdom for you when Duke Xiang kidnapped you...he cares about you so deeply, yet he put you in the dungeon. Because you betrayed his trust. Why would he banish the Demon Slayer, one his most trusted people? It is because you had an affair!!" Zhang said, pointing at her.

Celina grunted. Seeing her reaction, he smiled.

"And why do you suppose the former king knows of your affair? Someone must've told him."

"You..."

"That is correct." said Zhang. "I was spying on the two of you. It is because of me you two were banished. What cruel irony...the person who trusted Liu Bei the most is the one who betrayed him! Oh imagine how angry the king was when he found out that his beloved concubine was cheating on him! He banished the Demon Slayer and put his wife in prison...but shortly afterwards he was mysteriously murdered. Who do you suppose the prime suspect would be? The man who is the adulterer, the two-timing traitor! Imagine all the hate people will have for him and the concubine...he will be put to death, and so will the concubine."

Celina drew her sword. "You...bastard!"

"You would bare your sword against the king? That is a crime punishable by death!"

"So if I marry you, you will not say a word about the affair? Is that your offer? I cannot believe you'd stoop as low as this."

"Mind your tongue, woman. I am the one in charge now. I can have you silenced forever if I wished."

"No, Liu Zhang." she replied. "You are the prime suspect. You are the next in line to inherit the throne and that alone is enough of a motive to commit murder."

"Who is going to believe that story?" Zhang asked. "It is my word against yours."

"You never liked Liu Bei in the first place because he continually declined your laws. This scenario sounds awfully familiar, does it not? Much like Duke Xiang...the high lord who was jealous of the king and wanted everything for himself. You just passed a law for random searches...it sounds like Duke Xiang's proposal. You are Duke Xiang's follower...you are a demon like him."

Zhang began sweating, but he remained calm. "Hmph. You can say what you want."

"Why are you so secretive all the time?" Celina asked. "It is because demons need to feed on human souls, and you do not want people to see you? And why is it that you took several trips to Leinwan without the king's permission? You made absolutely certain that no one knows...what are you planning? Are you making a secret



deal with the general of Leinwan, perhaps to start a war, and have Shen collapse? That would be perfect motivation for you to take out the king."

Zhang swallowed hard. How does she know of those trips? He told no one about them, yet she found out somehow. She is not as stupid as she looks, and he underestimated her.

"Enough!" he yelled. Zhang whistled and soldiers appeared.

Celina found herself surrounded. So, he had this planned the whole time?

"Ha ha ha ha!" Zhang laughed. "What do you say now? Will you change your mind?"

"Never!"

"It is unfortunate that it must end this way. Men, seize her."

Two soldiers approached. "Sorry, but we must obey him."

Celina glanced at Liu Zhang, and as she was about to be seized, she realized that she must not give up without a fight. She hit the soldier on the right with the bottom of the sword, and hit him in the chin. She hit the other soldier with her left arm and kicked him away. Whack!

More soldiers charged at her. Celina drew her second sword and fought back. Clang, clang.

Soldiers appeared in front of Zhang to protect him. Zhang was surprised by her movements. (How surprising she actually knows how to fight. It seems I underestimated her.) Indeed, he is surprised and impressed at the same time. He always saw her as a naïve, weak woman, but is that all just an act?

Celina fought the troops with circular swipes, and they could not find an opening. One troop came from behind, Celina turned around as quick as lightning and slashed him. Schleb!

(This style she is using...it looks familiar...)

"Dance of the Sword first form: Dance of the Lion!" Clong! Clang! Quong! Soldiers fell left and right as she was spinning in circles and attacked with her double sword. Slash! Slish!

Zhang: (This is just as I expected. The style she is using is the Dance of the Sword Style. So it is true...she has learned this from her teacher at the dance theatre, Master Fa. Female dancers from the east were rumored to have been assassins, and their dance routines were actual fighting movements. Not too many can master this style.)

"Second form: Dance of the Tiger!" Slish! Celina crossed her arms over her chest, and slashed a troop with both blades at the same time. It was doubly as deadly as a regular attack.

The soldiers were now being cautious. As she advanced they stepped back, and when she retreated they move forward. She looked around, counting the number of troops.

Zhang: "Seize her!"

The men charged and attacked. Celina continued her circular swiping movements, and they were still not able to land a single hit on her. "Third form: Dance of the Eagle!" She did a somersault jump, and slashed two guys in the neck while in the air, and when she landed, they collapsed.

Zhang gave the signal with his right arm. More soldiers charged at her. One of them came directly at her and stabbed his blade forward. Celina did a middle split, and his blade missed her head, while her blade hit his stomach.

"Ugh!" The guy was surprised as he coughed blood. Two guys came from behind. Celina quickly got up and rolled into them and slashed their legs. Then she tripped the first troop, and she slashed the second. While the first is still on the floor, she stabbed his chest.



Liu Zhang was becoming frustrated. "She is just one woman! How hard can this be? Capture her now!"

Even the men protecting Zhang charged forward. At this point, Celina realized that now they are being serious. Zhang could have sent all his men at once from the beginning, but apparently he wanted to see how long she will last. But now, he probably wants her dead.

(She has already shown the first three forms of the Dance of the Sword Style. If I am correct about this style, then the next form will be...)

"Dance of the Dragon!" Celina began to spin like a tornado, and her blades became spinning razors. She cut through the group of men and they all screamed.

"Ugh!" "Aaah!"

No one can even get close to her. Clang! Clong! Her blades were swinging unpredictably high and low, and once she is in front of you, there is not much time to react. Whoosh-whoosh-whoosh.

(This is the final move of the Dance of the Sword Style. Her movements are too fast to be seen by a regular person. It is both an offensive and defensive move, and it is truly worthy of the name dragon. The power of the form depends on the user's physical stamina...and her attack has one but fatal weakness...)

Celina stopped spinning to stare in Zhang's direction. Zhang knew she was coming for him. She began to spin again and went for him. Zhang blocked the double blades as quickly as she attacks. Clang-clang-clang-clang! When things looked unfavorable, he leaped to the side.

(You will not escape!) Celina thought. She changed her direction and headed straight for Liu. He smiled and awaited her arrival. When she was in front of him, he rolled on the ground and slashed her ankle. Sliiiish.

Celina lost her balance and fell to the ground and rolled a few times. As she tried to stand up, Zhang was in front of her, and he attacked. Clang! He knocked away both her swords, and he kicked her in the stomach, knocking her down.

Liu smiled as she got back on her feet. (Impossible...how does he know the Dance of the Dragon's weakness?)

Soldiers came to seize her, and she still resisted. One of them punched her in the stomach, and that knocked the wind out of her. She fell to the ground and the troops dragged her up by the arms.

"I must say," said Liu, "You put up a valiant fight. But I'm afraid you were destined to lose. The style you were using...it is called the Dance of the Sword. It is impressive, but nothing I have not seen before. You still have one last chance to change your mind. I will pardon all your crimes if you accept my offer."

"Never! I would rather die than succumb to your demands!" she yelled.

Zhang sighed. "Still stubborn to the end. Men, take her to the dungeon." The men dragged her away. "You men are useless...it took you this much effort to capture a woman. I am going to have to put you through intensive training."

[C]    Title    Contents

On a dark and stormy night, Shen Long was making another attempt to visit his sister. But like last time, something was keeping him from taking the initiative. It was pouring outside and he was just standing on the roof motionlessly.

The girl in the house was sitting on her rocking chair and carving wooden dolls. Although she was blind, she can still make fantastic wooden figures by feeling the contents with her hands. As a matter of fact, she is one of the best, and the owner of the

store always needs her to make more dolls because of the demand. During days like these, she is glad to be indoors.

Water dripped from the tiles of the roof. Shen jumped to the ground quietly and watched **Xiao Ye**. She looked so peaceful and tranquil doing what she is doing, and he did not want to bother her. It is an awkward feeling he has. Somehow, just watching her and knowing she is safe is satisfying enough. He jumped off.

Xiao suddenly sensed something and dropped the knife and doll. She ran outside but there is nothing but wind and rain. "I know you are here! Show yourself!" (I am sorry, sister.) Shen disappeared.

After thirty seconds, Xiao gave up and went back inside, thinking she heard it wrong.

A man wearing a hood and rugged clothing went to the dungeon. It is exactly what he expected – it was damp, dark, and there was a foul smell about it. It is a place fit for beggars and criminals, but not for someone like Celina. She does not belong here. He went to her cell and saw her sleeping. She was chained by the wrists to the wall, and her ankles were chained as well.

"Pssst. Pssst."

Celina opened her eyes. "Who are you?" she asked sleepily.

Alex removed his hood. "It's me."

She was wide awake now. "Alex? It's you."

"I came to get you out."

"No. You better leave while you can."

"Why? Tai has freed you before and I will do the same." Alex replied.

"No, it is too risky. Zhang comes in to visit me every so often. If I am not here he will know you came." said Celina.

"I cannot let you stay in a place like this."

"You will be discovered. Do not give him a reason to arrest you. Zhang knows of our affair..."

"What?"

"He is the one behind Liu Bei's death...he has not admitted it, but I know it. His goal is to frame you for Liu Bei's murder. You must not do anything suspicious at this point."

Alex grabbed the wooden bars. "Damn it. Our enemy has now become the king. Isn't there anything we can do?"

"There is one other way. I know someone who can overthrow Liu Zhang. You must find him."

"Who is it?" Alex asked.

"His name is **Liu Cao**. He is also a member of the royal family. Zhang is not actually the next in line to take the throne...but Liu Cao is because he is Liu Bei's half brother. But because of his absence, Zhang is the next in line. Cao currently resides in the west...in the Kingdom of Leinwan."

"He is in Leinwan?"

"I already sent him a message several days ago, and he is due to come in two days. You must retrieve him."

"But what is a Liu family member doing in Leinwan? Aren't the two kingdoms rivals?"

"There is no time to explain." said she. "Cao is coming from the Yangtze River due west of the Xizang Forest. Time is of the essence."

Alex nodded. "I promise you I will get him here safely. Wait for me, Celina."

Celina smiled as he left. Even though she is in jail, at least she knows that someone still cares about her as much as she cares about him. That thought alone will get her through the tough times.

"The former concubine has been imprisoned." Liu Zhang announced to his henchmen. "She refused my hand in marriage...I was giving her the deal of a lifetime, yet she refused me without even thinking about it. That stubborn fool, it is no wonder Liu Bei threw her in there."

"Master," said Ragnarok. "That woman is not trustworthy. Just eliminate her."

"No, not yet. She is still useful." Zhang replied. "She will be the bait for the Demon Slayer. There is something about her that made Liu Bei give up all his power for her sake. Perhaps it is her beauty, or her allure...I do not know. As a demon, I am glad I do not have these...human desires."

"I see." Ragnarok replied. "I wonder if the Demon Slayer will be as foolish as Liu Bei is. You can do anything as a king. Nothing can stop you now."

"Nothing...except for one person."

"What do you mean?" Ragnarok inquired.

"The former concubine is smarter than she looks. We cannot underestimate her. I predict that she has already contacted **that** person..."

"Who? Who can possibly challenge your throne?"

"He is Liu Bei's half brother, Liu Cao. He was the next in line to take the throne, but he abandoned his kingdom and went to live in Leinwan."

"Master, are you saying that...if he shows up to the palace...you have to give up the throne to him?"

"That is precisely why I am worried." replied Zhang. "My plans will be ruined if he makes a surprise appearance. Even though he is considered a traitor by some, the high lords will favor him over me because they dislike me. Ekin, I need you to find him and kill him before he ever steps foot in the palace."

"Yes, sire." said Ekin. "Consider it done."

When Liu Zhang was alone, he stood at the edge of the balcony. (My suspicions were correct after all. The concubine pretends to be weak and stupid to throw you off. During breakfast she refused to eat because she knew about the spice! I'm not surprised she knows since she's close to Liu Bei. Her being not hungry is just an excuse. But her actions are limited now that she's back to the dungeon. Your plan to bring Liu Cao will not succeed! I will win this battle of wits!)

Alex Cheng explained the situation to his bodyguards, Shen Long and Sui Long, and without wasting time, they head off to their mission. The three of them were standing on a boat, rowing the paddles. Alex brought a backpack with food in it, and his sword, and nothing else. He is ready to face whatever comes his way.

But he does not know that Liu Zhang knows of their plans. Celina has already fallen victim to him, but he will not let the same happen to himself. Whoever Liu Cao is, he will have all the answers. Alex must bring the real king back to the Shen Kingdom, but the mission will not be as easy as it sounds.

Celina was grief-stricken upon learning of King Liu's untimely death. In an instant, she was no longer the concubine and no longer a member of the royal family. When Liu Zhang ascended the throne, he promised Celina freedom from her imprisonment. However, his favors come with a price, and in this case, in the form of a marriage. Of course, she refuses and they ended up fighting, and she became imprisoned once again. Now, the only way for Alex to save his loved one is to find the man named Liu Cao.

Alex and the masked men made it to shore. They get off the boat to walk on land. Alex examined the map. "We are going this way," he announced, and off he went. His bodyguards have no choice but to trust his judgment.

They walk through trees and bushes for about half an hour. Little did they know that someone is watching them from above. At some point, Shen's keen senses picked up something. "We are being followed," said he.

"They have been trailing us," said Sui.

Alex grew worried. To be attacked in a place like this is not good. "What do we do?"

Shen: "Run for it!"

And they ran, and the followers chased them. At some point it became apparent that the followers are quicker than they are and they cannot be outrun. These men, surprisingly, are imperial soldiers.

"Who sent you here?" asked Cheng.

The soldiers drew their swords and stood in a formation.

"I am Demon Slayer Alex Cheng," said he, taking out the imperial seal. "You are to leave us at once."

One soldier charged at Alex, and they clashed blades.

Sui: "It looks like they are not in the mood to talk!"

Shen: "I will bet you anything that the king sent them!"

Clang! Cling!

Alex pointed his sword forward and charged into the enemies. Slash! He kept his attacks low to avoid their high attacks, aiming mostly for their legs and waistlines. One of them came from behind and slashed. Alex blocked. Quong! Alex pushed him away, and slashed his chest. "Ugh!" He fell.

In the trees, someone was observing their movements. The shadow figure jumped away. Shen was in a power lock with a soldier, and another one came from behind. He pushed his sword with force, and the soldier in front of him lost balance. Shen bent down and stabbed backwards, stabbing the guy behind him. Schleb. Then he pulled the sword out of the guy's stomach and stabbed the guy in front.

Quong! Slash! Sui Long finished off two more troops. Only one remained, and he feared for his life. He ran away to the other side. Whoop-whoop-whoop.

A dagger flew at him and hit him on the neck, killing him instantly. Li jumped from a tree and landed.

Shen: "It's you, Li."

Sui: "Just in time."

Alex: "Sister..."

"I'm glad to see you too. Shen Long and Sui Long, I will accompany the Demon Slayer on this rescue mission. You two stay behind to look for the enemy. I am sure there are more of them."

Sui: "Li, are you sure about this?"

Li: "Just Alex and I alone are enough. I need you two to keep the enemy at bay so we can move forward."

The two masked men gave each other a glance. "Very well Li. Good luck." They ran off.

Alex was speechless since everything was happening so fast. Li went past him. "Come on Alex, let's go."

"Uh, alright." he said, following her.

A scout came to make a report. "Sir, there are actually four of them, not three as we originally thought."

"Four?" Ekin inquired.

"Yes. One of them was hiding. She is skilled in stealth and deception. Also, they split into two groups of two,"

"Is that right? They want to confuse us?"

"The two with masks are moving backwards. The other two continue to head north." replied the scout.

"Whatever they are planning, they will not succeed." Ekin drew his sword.

"Go!" His soldiers dispersed.

As she was spaced out, Alex was looking at her the whole time. Then she noticed him staring. "What is it?"

"Uh, nothing." Alex replied. "It's just that...I'm surprised you know about our plan."

"Listen, I dislike the new king as much as you do. Whoever this Liu Cao person is, he had better make a better king than Liu Zhang."

"Celina trusts this person. And I trust Celina's judgment."

"So, how are you two getting along?" Li asked.

Alex paused for a moment. It is an unusual question coming from Li. Is she asking personal questions because she is trying to make up for lost time? Or perhaps they never had a complete conversation ever since she ran away from home? "We are doing fine...she understands me and I understand her."

"Do you love each other?" she asked.

"Of course. There is no question about it."

"Was it worth it?" Li asked.

"What do you mean?"

"This love...was it worthy being exiled and imprisoned?"

"Absolutely." Alex replied, surprising her a little. "If I had to do it all over I would have done the same thing. Say, sister, have you ever been in love?"

What an absurd question. "No." she replied. "Never."

"It's no surprise. You have been running away your whole life. But maybe one day you will find someone you like."

"I highly doubt that." she replied.

They continued to travel, pushing branches and leaves aside. It is quite strange that he is traveling with his sister on a mission. It is a familiar, yet unfamiliar feeling. He has known her since childhood, but they have not been together in over ten years. There is so much Alex wants to say to her, yet when she is here, he is at a loss of words. All questions seem to fade away.

"Sister."

"Yes?" she said, looking back at him.

"I am glad you are here."

"I don't know what you are talking about. I am only here because it is part of my mission. I don't want the kingdom to be overrun by demons like fifty years ago. That's all."



It was a typical Li response, and Alex smiled anyways. The last time he saw her was after she defeated Rubble, returning the Fire Sword to him. Their reunion was not exactly a happy one because she criticized him harshly. But this time, they can finally spend time and get to know each other again.<sup>7</sup>

Not long later, Li sensed that they were being followed. "They are right behind us."

"You can tell?" asked Alex.

"Yes. I am trained in the art of stealth, and I know when someone is sneaking up behind me, even if he is far away." Li replied. "No matter how sneaky someone is, I can sense him."

Ekin and his troops showed up.

Li: "It's you!"

Ekin: "Li Cheng...I find it surprising that you are here."

Li: "Why are you here? What do you have to do with all this?"

Alex: "Why do you have imperial troops with you? Did Zhang put you up to this?"

"These questions are meaningless." Ekin smiled and gave the signal. His troops charged.

"Yaaaah!"

Alex and Li charged into the crowd, and the blades began to clash. Clang-clang-clang.

Ekin swings his blade forward, producing an airbreaker, and Li jumped over it. Froom. They did the stare for a few seconds.

"Hmph. Only the Ice Hunter knows how to wield the Ice Sword properly."

"The Ice Hunter was defeated by me, which gives the right to the sword to me!" She let the sword charge up and swings it. "Ice Blizzard!"

Ekin threw an equally powerful wave, made of thunder. "Thunder Wave!!"

The two forces collided and their energies cancelled each other out.

Li: "You have the Thunder Sword, so this signifies that Chu Yen is involved, isn't it?"

"I am not answering questions!" Ekin charged and they clashed their blades, ending in a deadlock.

Alex wanted to help his sister, but he was occupied with the troops. He fought his way through them. Slish. Slash.

Ekin pushed Li away, making her lose balance, and kicked her in the stomach. Thud. She rolled on the ground a few times. Alex charged into Ekin and they fought.

Li got up but troops got in her way. "Just get out of my way."

The troops charged and she blocked them. Clang!

Ekin and Alex hit each other non-stop and then jumped away. Alex's eyeballs glanced left and right. He realized that he cannot win in this situation and ran to the side. Ekin and his men chased him, and they ran parallel to each other until they reached the river. Splash splash.

Li finished off the two troops and saw what was happening. Ekin was smiling as he pointed the Thunder Sword downwards at the water. She knew what he was planning, and she screamed. "No! Alex!"

Alex ran forward, pointing the blade forward, screaming at the top of his lungs. The Thunder Sword was now charged with electricity and Ekin plunged it into the water. Froom! Everyone in the water was electrified. Ekin's men were screaming as they received the shock of their lives.

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<sup>7</sup> The last time he saw her was when he discovered Master Genzo's death - this is wrong

Alex felt paralyzed and could not move a step closer. His vision was becoming blurry, and his body felt hot. Li quickly jumped to the water and grabbed Alex, and jumped to the other side of the land.

Ekin stared at them as he was panting for breath. Without further ado, the heroes took their chance and escaped.

[B] Title Contents

Alex was injured and Li was tired. After much running, she set him down. "What were you thinking?" Li yelled. "He's an assassin with the Thunder Sword, and you should have been more careful! You should have run away instead of fighting him."

"Run away? And leave you behind?"

"I would have escaped too. In situations like this you have to worry about your own survival!" Li did not realize it, but scolding her brother is the role of an older sister.

This time, however, Alex did not receive the message well. "What am I supposed to do, then? Let him hunt us down like animals? Let them do as they wish...while Celina is rotting in prison?"

Li looked at him and saw that he was telling the truth. Obviously, it was something he did not mention before.

"She has already been through enough." said Alex, staring at the ground. "During Duke Xiang's betrayal, she was captured as a prisoner and used as a political negotiating tool. And now, she is Liu Zhang's captive, being used as a tool again. She doesn't deserve this! To be able to set her free, isn't that worth risking my life for?"

Li did not know how to reply. She herself has never loved anyone (or perhaps she does not remember how to love). But seeing Alex like this, so dedicated to his mission, all for the sake of one person, is this what they call true love? The type of love that is unconditional and not bound by time nor space, and the feeling that can cause a calm man to go insane?

She finished bandaging his wounds and they both leaned against the same tree on opposite ends. "We will take turns sleeping. One of us sleeps and the other stays awake."

"You're always careful, aren't you, Li?"

"Of course. You can never be too cautious."

"Is this how you've lived your life for the past ten years?" Alex asked.

"Of course, Alex. If you have seen what I have seen, and been through what I have been through, you'd feel the same as me."

"Probably."

Evening approaches as they converse under the tree. The sky turned from azure blue to light orange. Soon it will be night.

"Sister?"

"Yes?"

"Back when I killed the demon...why did you run away? You didn't even say goodbye. I finally found you, but I was not able to speak to you. There was so much that I wanted to say to you."

Li did not know how to respond.

"Why did you disguise yourself as Fo Long and fight alongside me? Is because you do not want to see me?"

"No, it is not that." Li replied. She remembered a recent conversation she had with Sui Long.

"You are still stubborn as ever, Fo Long." Shen Long replied. "Take my advice, treasure your family because they are irreplaceable. I myself have a sister, and I know what it is like to be separated from her. Siblings were meant to be together."

"I have already heard that story before." Li replied. "I just want to be left alone, if you don't mind."

Sui Long's words of wisdom still stuck in her head. Perhaps it is time to get to know her brother? "You are now the Demon Slayer. Your fame is widespread and you hold the power of a lord even though you come from a commoner's background. You have done fine so far without me."

That was probably the most Li has ever spoken to him without scolding him. Yet again, here is that familiar but unfamiliar feeling. It is just like when they were kids, sitting under the tree on opposite sides, staring at the star filled sky like they were tonight. They would talk about anything and everything until they fall asleep. Tonight it is no different, except now they are adults.

"I just want to get to know my sister." Alex replied. "I could have spent my time doing other things, but instead I was determined to find you...all these years...I wanted to find out the truth."

"I am worried so that's I left you...I wanted you to have a normal life. But apparently you became a target as well."

They can hear the sound of the crickets and the owls. Both of them grow weary and sleepy.

"You could have stayed with us after Duke Xiang's defeat." said Alex. "A girl like you shouldn't be running around...killing others...living a life of fear. I just want you to have a normal life."

"A normal life?" Li repeated dully. And the truth is, she is afraid to be with him. Afraid to settle down and live a normal life. No, she can never live a normal life, not after what she has seen. Those days are over. Li Cheng has too much...there is no way she can explain what she has experienced to anyone. Not even her brother.

"What have you been doing for the past ten years?"

"There is too much to explain."

"I understand if you don't want to tell me." Alex replied. I will wait for the day...when you are ready. I know I made a lot of mistakes recently. I had an affair with the concubine, and she became the former concubine. If I had not been banished, I could have prevented Liu Bei's death. I lost to Tao and the Ice Hunter, and both times I almost lost the Fire Sword. How will I explain to Master Genzo if I do? But I am still learning...hopefully one day I will be as good as you are, sister. Hey, do you remember what mother used to do to us when we'd come home late? She'd be so worried she'd scold us and then make us rake the fields."

There was no response coming from her end for she is already asleep. Alex knew without looking. He looked at the night sky. Being hunted down in a strange forest isn't as bad when you are doing it with your sister, the person who you grew up with.

The little girl known as Li traveled through the forest. She was lost and ran desperate through the bushes. There can be no worse feeling than to be scared and alone, especially in the Valley of Death. A man in a straw hat jumped down from a tree and landed directly in front of her. He came with two companions with masks.

Li was shocked. She had a sword, but she has no idea how to use it.

"Who dares trespass into the Valley of Death?"

"You...you are...the legend is true!" said Li nervously. "You are th-the War God!"

"You come here knowing this?" said the man, drawing his sword. "Have you any last words?"

"D-Don't kill me!" said Li. "I...I'm not an enemy."

"That is what they all say."

Li got on he knees and cried. "Please...I have lost my home and everything I ever valued. I have no where else to go. Please, teach me the way of the sword, master."

The War God was in disbelief. "What did you say? I cannot believe what I am hearing."

Li bowed with her forehead touching the ground. There can be no greater dedication for making a request than to do this. "Please, teach me, War God. I am willing to learn."

"I do not take students. Go home, little girl." The War God turned around and walked away.

Li stood up. "That's a lie! What about those two masked men?"

"They are different." replied he in the straw hat.

"How are they different? You are willing to train them but not me? Is it because I am a girl?"

"It is none of your business."

"I will not leave the valley until you accept me." said Li.

"I only accepted Shen Long and Sui Long only because they are exceptional."

"I can be exceptional too!" said Li.

At this point, the War God turned around to look her in the eyes. They were filled with fire and dedication. He has not seen such intense eyes in a long time. Only one other showed such fire, and he was part of the Brotherhood.

"Little girl, why did you come here? Why did you run away from home?"

"Because...I saw something I should not have seen." she replied. "I was a servant working in the imperial palace...and I saw Duke Xiang turn into a demon. And he saw me...and he is after me, I know it. I cannot stay in Yi Ling anymore."

The man was shocked. "Duke Xiang?"

"I have no home to go back to." Li continued. "If you are not going to train me, then kill me. Don't ignore me! I want to learn the way of the sword. I can repay you...I can wash your clothes and cook your food...anything that is in my ability."

Shen Long and Sui Long glanced at each other and they looked at the War God to see what his decision would be.

"If I train you, do you promise me you will kill Duke Xiang?"

"Absolutely." Li replied. Her eyes suddenly showed hate and bloodlust, which surprised the War God.

"But let me warn you, my training will be rough. I will not go easy on you because you are a girl."

Li stood up and wiped the tears. "Thank you, master."

A boat traversed the misty river. There were two men on the boat, one was rowing it with a paddle, and the other man was wearing golden armor. He stared at the morning sky. This man has blue hair and a calm face, the face of someone who is cold-blooded and calculated, a face that has been through harsh trainings and brutal battlegrounds.

The servant speaks. "We are almost at the borderline of Shen, Lord Cao."

"Good." **Liu Cao** replied. "I cannot wait to finally meet this person called the Demon Slayer."

The heroes continued their walk. "Are we almost there?" Li asked.

"Almost." Alex replied. "We need to cross this path here and we will be at the river. Once we cross the river we will meet our friend."

"This map had better be correct."

"Celina gave me the map, and I trust her judgment."

In front of them was a small body of water, shallow enough for them to walk across. Their pants became wet as they walked through the muddy, diluted water.

Li suddenly stopped. "Brother, do you hear something?"

"There is nothing here."

"I am sure something is in the water." Li replied.

"You are paranoid." Alex replied and continued to walk.

"I am never wrong about these things."

Suddenly, something grabbed Li's foot, and she gasped. Alex turned around. "What is it?"

Li struggled to get free, as the creature grabbed both her legs. Then she saw one of the creatures slowly coming out of the water, standing directly behind Alex. "Alex!!"

Alex turned around and he was shocked. These creatures, known as water demons, hide well in water since their skin has a dark blue color. Their eyes are those of reptiles – yellow and vicious. Their face is a cross of a fish and a man, but mostly fish, and their bodies were covered with seaweed.

The demon grabbed Alex and pushed him down. Li drew her sword and stabbed the demon trying to hold her, and the demon screamed as it bled. More of them came up, and Li slashed them.

One of them has Alex in a headlock, and he was being drowned. He elbowed its stomach and turned around and punched it in the face. \*Pow Pow\* He drew his weapon and stood with Li back to back. These water demons continued to come out of the water. It is as if they were hiding the whole time, waiting for their victims to show up.

Luckily for our heroes, these creatures were slow and stupid. All they can do is grab you, bite and scratch, much like zombies that seek blood.

\*Slash! Slish! Slice!\* They cut the demons to make a path and run for it. They ran all the way to land, but these creatures can walk on land as well. They chased them all the way to the edge of the river.

They lost the horde of demons for now. They saw a row boat and got on without thinking. "That was a close one." said Alex, paddling.

"We better hurry up and get to the other side."

"What were those things?"

"They were water demons." Li answered. "These unintelligent creatures hide in forests and swamps and attack passer-bys. There have been many stories of people being attacked by these demons, so it is a good idea to travel with bodyguards."

"Are they the remains of the Demon-Human War?" Alex asked.

"Not exactly. They have existed from the beginning. But there are too many to get rid of. Only a higher level demon can control lower demons."

"I see that you have learned a lot in these ten years." Alex commented.

"I have learned more than I wanted to learn." Li replied quietly. Suddenly, her expression grew serious. "Alex, row faster!"

A creature's hand grabbed the boat. Alex stood up and stabbed the creature's head, and it went away. Then two of them grabbed the boat from Li's side. She stabbed them and let go. More and more of them grab the boat, and Alex could not paddle anymore. The boat was small and light, and the creatures rocked the boat back and forth, and Alex and Li were losing balance. They managed to flip the boat over. Splash!



Now they were in the water, surrounded by bloodthirsty creatures. Li took out daggers and stabbed them. \*Schleb!\* They fought hand to hand with them, pushing and punching them to get to the shore. Splish, splash.

Somehow, they were able to make it through and swam quickly to land. The demons chased them as they ran on land. After a while, Alex and Li slowed down, seeing no more demons around. They were tired and wet, but at least safe for the time being. Alex lost the map somewhere in the water, so now they had no direction. They have no choice but to move forward.

They walked into the mist and they could hardly see a thing. Things would be worse if they were attacked here.

"I think we are lost." Li commented.

"I lost the map but I memorized the path." Alex replied. "Our friend is coming from straight ahead, I am sure of it."

The two waited for their mysterious companion to show up and it was hard to see anything in this mist. They waited for an indefinite amount of time, but Alex was certain that he will be here. Hopefully nothing has happened to him yet.

From the far side they could see a silhouetted figure standing on a boat. Could this be him? It had to be. Lo and behold, it is indeed, the man known as Liu Cao, the man who will be the next King of Shen. As his boat drew closer, his features were revealed.

Alex was surprised as he took a good look at him. He was taller than average, and from what he can tell, he has much experience in fighting. He had short, blue hair, with a nice clean cut, and the face of a calm fighter. But his eyes were those of a beast, untamed and unleashed. He was wearing golden armor with a sword patch attached to his waist line.

He stepped off the boat. "I am Liu Cao."

"And I am Alex Cheng. This is Li Cheng."

"So you are the Demon Slayer? I finally get to meet you." Liu Cao shook Alex's hand and gave him a strong, firm handshake. "Celina the Concubine has told me much about you. I finally get to meet the man who saved the kingdom." He grabbed Alex's shoulders, which startled him a bit. "Although I thought you'd be a little bigger." Then he turned to Li. "And you are Li Cheng. Pleased to meet you." He took her hand and held it and bowed like a gentlemen.

Li was embarrassed and withdrew her hand. She did not expect him to be so formal and polite. "Nice to meet you...the pleasure is mine."

"I know we have much to discuss." said Liu Cao, "But time is of the essence. Do you know your way back to the city of Yi Ling?"

"Of course." said Alex. "You are in good hands, sir."

"I still cannot believe that Celina the Concubine is being held captive like a criminal."

"She no longer bears the title of concubine." Alex replied.

"My mistake." Cao replied. "Her maiden name is Lady Ce. She mentioned you many times, Cheng."

"Oh, really?" Alex grew curious. "What did she say about me?"

"Let's see. That you are a reliable and trustworthy person. And Lady Ce herself is trustworthy. If she trusts you, then so do I."

"She is lucky to have a friend like you and Li." said Cao.

"We actually are not that close." Li replied.

"You probably have known her longer than I have." said Alex.

"Actually, I have never met her face to face."

"Really?" Alex responded with a surprised expression.

"I left the Shen Kingdom before she was married into nobility." Cao explained. "These past several years we have been writing letters back and forth to each other. She is my penpal, and probably my only friend from Shen. She tells me nearly everything in her letters. After Duke Xiang's betrayal, she stopped writing me, and I grew worried. I wish I could have been there to help my brother Liu Bei. But everything worked itself out. But now another evil has crept up in the royal family...it is being infected by an insect named Zhang."

"He has caused a lot of problems for us." Alex responded.

"If Zhang murdered Liu Bei, that means he is a demon. And demons cannot be allowed to be kings. This is a wrong that must be corrected."

Alex and company walked through the mist, back to the swamp. The water demons were waiting for them, and they were thirsty for blood.

Alex and Li drew their weapons. "Stay back." Alex told Cao. "We will handle this." They charged into the horde and slashed away.

Liu Cao drew his sword and charged into the fight. Slish! Slice! He cut the demons like they were nothing. Alex was surprised that he fights so well. His attacks were quick and efficient. Slash! He cut off a demon's head with one swing.

"I take it you have been trained?" Li asked.

"I have been training my whole life." Cao replied. "It is no wonder they call you the Demon Slayer. You really do slay demons."

The rest of the water demons gnarled at them and charged. \*Slish! Slish!\*

Suddenly, a dagger hit one of the demon's necks, and it collapsed.

Ekin and his crew arrived. Now is the time to prove himself, Alex thought. Ekin gave the signal and the soldiers screamed and charged forward. The three heroes charged into the group and fought. It was a chaotic group battle, and it is everyone for himself.

Alex slashed his way through the troops and went straight for Ekin. Clang! He blocked Alex's attempt and pushed him away.

"How did you come into possession of the Thunder Sword?" asked Alex. "Tell me!"

"That is none of your concern. I will make sure Liu Cao never makes it into the palace!" They charged and hit on the blades. Clang! Ekin kicked Alex into the tree. Doosh! Then he ran towards Liu Cao.

"No!!" screamed Alex.

Cao blocked Ekin's incoming attack. Clang! They jumped away from each other and got into fighting stance. Cao's stance was peculiar, for he actually knows a fighting style, the style known as the **Eagle Style**. Alex and Li noticed this.

Ekin charged forward and Cao blocked his attacks methodically. Clang. Quong! Cao's movements were calculated and precise, as if he has practiced these moves hundreds of times before. The enemy had a hard time finding an opening.

Alex: (Incredible. He must have underwent intense training...is this what he learned during his seven years in Leinwan?)

Cao swings his sword hard enough to create a barrier of air, and the air was strong enough to make something break. Whoosh. Ekin jumped away from the airbreaker.

Even Ekin has noticed Cao's skill. Only the toughest of swordsmen can create an airbreaker, it takes many years of practice before one is even ready to learn the airbreaker technique. Ekin smiled. "You have done well, but I'm afraid your journey ends here." The Thunder Sword gathered electricity.

Alex: "Watch out!"

Ekin threw the Thunder Wave forward and struck Cao directly in the chest, knocking him against a tree. Thud!

Ekin thought he had him for sure, but he became surprised when Cao stood up. Alex and Li finished off most of the soldiers. Ekin knows when a battle cannot be won. "Retreat!" He and his men disappeared as quickly as the wind.

Alex went to Cao. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." Cao replied. "The thick armor has protected me from his attack."

But Alex is not stupid. He knows even if one is to wear Cao's golden armor, taking a devastating attack such as the Thunder Wave could render one immobile and paralyzed possibly for life. Yet Cao is standing firm as if nothing has happened. What exactly did Liu Cao's training look like? He must have underwent hell in order to become this strong.

At last, the danger has passed. Once the heroes make it back to Yi Ling, they will be able to free Celina and overthrow the tyrant king. But Zhang will not be unprepared for their arrival. What new twists and surprises await them back in the palace?

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### 十五: Heaven's Eye. Fight for the Throne.

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King Zhang is not happy about the fact that the mission is a failure. Ekin was kneeling and he apologized. "I am sorry, sire. I did what I could."

"It is not your fault." said Zhang, getting up and walking.

"But more importantly, what are we going to do now?" asked Ragnarok.

"It is simple. Even if they know I tried to have him killed, we will pretend like nothing happened. They have no proof that I am behind this."

Ragnarok and Ekin are surprised. "Sire," said Ragnarok, "This palace is our territory now. We can easily assassinate him when he is here."

"No, he is with Li Cheng." said Ekin. "We also have the Demon Slayer to worry about, including his mysterious bodyguards. It will not be easy to approach him."

Ragnarok: "Li Cheng is here? So she finally showed herself."

Zhang: "Do not do anything drastic. What we will do is greet my relative with open arms."

Two soldiers drag the front doors of the imperial complex open. Creeeek. Everyone came to see what the commotion was about. Liu Cao came in with Alex and Li by his side. His appearance can be that of a rose in a bush of thorns. Some of them whisper to each other about how magnificent and tall Liu Cao is. Not only is he tall, but his golden armor makes him stand out even more.

One servant came in their path. "Oh, Lord Cao, what a surprise to see you. You must be tired, please let me take you to your quarters."

Liu Cao looked down at him. The servant was actually afraid of him, because Cao was taller than him by a head. "There is no need for that. I must see the king now."

The servant bowed. "Yes, right away my lord."

The group of three was taken into the royal hall.

The doors to the royal hall opened, and in they came. The imperial audience was already here, made up of all the high officials and lords and royal family members.

Everyone who knows him was surprised that he has returned. Lord Yu and Tai watched without blinking. Lord Sima and Lord Fei whispered to each other.

"Isn't that Liu Cao...he is Liu Bei's brother, is he not?" "But I thought he left the family seven years ago?" "I heard that he came from the Leinwan Kingdom. Does that make him an enemy?"

They were talking loud enough for Alex to hear. But he noticed that Cao does not let it get to him at all. He is not the type who accepts criticism. He is a strong character indeed.

Sitting on the throne chair was King Zhang, standing next to him was his subordinate, Ragnarok, dressed like a high lord.

Cao, Alex, and Li kneeled before the king.

Zhang walked down the stairs and welcomed his relative with a warm gesture. "Please stand. Lord Liu Cao, what a surprise to see you here! It has been a while, has it not?"

"Seven years and three months to be exact." Cao replied.

"Aye, indeed." Zhang replied. "It has been seven years and three months since you left the palace to study at the Leinwan Kingdom. You have learned plenty, haven't you?"

"Plenty." Cao replied. "I had a good master. But enough about me. I have one question in my mind that I need to get out. Who killed my brother?"

"We are still investigating that matter. But do not worry, we will find the killer and put him to justice. But enough about the bad news. I am sure you are tired, Lord Cao. My men have prepared a place for you to live in. You can go to your quarters and rest."

"That is not necessary." Cao replied. "There is something I must discuss with you now."

"Certainly, we can discuss this over tonight's banquet."

"No, it must be discussed now." said Cao.

Zhang dislikes his mannerisms. It is clear that he has a problem with authority, but Zhang must play his part. "What is it that can be so urgent?"

"This is about Lady Ce. I heard that you imprisoned her?"

Zhang frowned. "She is our prime suspect in Liu Bei's murder."

"She is innocent." said Cheng. "She would never do such a thing."

"How would you know, Demon Slayer?" asked Zhang.

"Lady Ce is kind and loving. Why would she kill her own husband?"

"Maybe she has a deceptive personality."

Alex was pissed off and Li noticed. Tai also noticed that he was clenching his fist.

"The evidence is compelling."

"What evidence?" asked Alex. "She was imprisoned when Liu Bei was murdered. It could not have been her."

Tai came out from the crowd to stop the conversation. "Enough of this. Today is a joyous occasion. We are to celebrate Lord Cao's return from his long trip. We must make him feel at home." His little speech saved Alex from a lot of potential trouble, even if he may not realize it. Alex Cheng was this close to disrespecting the king, and if you disrespect the king, you may be beheaded.

The other lords came to the group. "Lord Cao, you certainly are taller than I remembered." commented Lord Fei.

"You must have learned much from Leinwan. I bet you are twice the swordsman you were when you left." said Lord Sima.

"I bet you have wooed many women on your journey." said Lord Yu.



The lords continued to compliment Cao and Liu Zhang hated the fact that he became the center of attention. "Enough!" shouted the king.

Everyone got back in their place. "Lord Cao must be tired from his long journey." said Zhang with a smirk. It is thanks to him, who sent the assassin after them that made their journey long and tiring.

Li was angered as much as Alex was, but she is better at controlling her anger and remained silent.

"Servants, please take Lord Cao to his quarters."

"Hold it, sire." said Cao, raising his arm. "Not so fast. There is one more thing I need to discuss with you."

"Lord Cao, I cannot free Lady Ce until she is proven innocent. I'm afraid that is the way things are. The king writes the laws and enforces them."

"My thoughts exactly." Cao replied.

Zhang found it disturbing that he is not intimidated at all.

"When the king passes away, the next heir in line takes the throne. Since I am his half brother, the throne belongs to me."

Zhang cocked his eyebrows. So, his cousin has finally used his trump card. But Zhang has a card of his own. "That is true, Lord Cao. However, due to Liu Bei's sudden death, we needed to find an heir immediately. Due to your absence, I was the second in line to inherit the throne. If you were here a week earlier the throne would have been yours. I'm afraid you'll have to wait for me to die or something."

A bunch of the men laugh at his remark.

Zhang: "I am sorry, Cao. I'm sure you would have made a great king."

"That still does not change the fact that I am the second in line. The mandate clearly states that the closest living blood relative of the deceased king shall take the throne."

Zhang smiled. "But Cao, you have not been here for seven years. Are you even part of the royal family? Are you a citizen of Shen...or a citizen of Leinwan, the kingdom that is our sworn enemy? You have turned your back on your responsibilities. And by doing as such, you have forsaken your right to the throne. The lords here are happy to see you come back, but I am not sure they are ready to accept you as king."

There was chatter amongst the crowd. First they complimented him, but now they criticized him. "King Zhang is right! Can we really hand over the throne to someone who will turn his back on us?" "What if he runs away again like he did last time? Who knows how long he will return?" "I heard that he hated Liu Bei and he hates politics. He's just barbarian in golden armor!"

Alex cannot believe what he was wearing. Again, Cao was not disturbed by their chatter at all.

Cao raised his arm, and everyone became silent. "I admit that I have made mistakes in my life. But you must allow me to correct my wrongs. I went to Leinwan not because I abandoned Shen, but it is for Shen's sake. I have learned much about their language, customs, their way of life...and how their military works. In order to defeat the enemy you must know your enemy. If you do not wish to give up the throne, Liu Zhang, then I shall call forth my right...by the name of **Heaven's Eye**."

Everyone was shocked. "Heaven's Eye?" repeated Ragnarok. He had no clue as to its meaning, as did most of the audience.

Yu: "Heaven's Eye...but that's..."

Seeing the reaction, Shu Tai stepped to the middle of the two parties. "Gentlemen, please let me explain. Heaven's Eye is an old unspoken tradition that developed as early as the Chao Dynasty. Whenever there is a dispute over who is to inherit the throne, the matter is settled in a duel. The king is the leader of the people,



and when there is confusion as to who the king should be, then we leave it in heaven's hands."

Ragnarok: "A duel?"

Li: "Yes, it is the best way to settle this, naturally. Neither one wants to give up the position. If we cannot settle it with words, then we can settle it with the sword."

Sima: "But of course. The sword represents strength and leadership. The sword rules the people. Thus, a strong swordsman makes a strong king."

Ragnarok: "A duel...with swords? Ha ha ha! You have a lot of nerve challenging his majesty to a duel. This should be an easy match for you, right sire?"

Zhang gave him an angry look and Ragnarok became silent.

Cao: "Do you accept, sire?"

Zhang: "I have no choice, do I? Heaven's Eye is an accepted tradition that supercedes any written laws. I bid you good luck, Lord Cao. For the next time we meet, it will be on the dueling grounds."

Cao, along with Alex walked away. Li took a good look at Ragnarok as she walked with her companions. He looks familiar, but she cannot make out his face from the crowd. Something is not right about him. She cannot point out what it is, but her instincts tell her he is a dangerous person. Her instincts are never wrong.

## [B] Title Contents

It is almost time for the match, and the audience has already gathered. Heaven's Eye only occurs when there is a dispute over the throne, and much of the time, it is passed down from father to son. This is a rare occasion indeed, an occasion that may occur once in five hundred years. Nobody wants to miss an event like this.

"Are you sure you can handle this?" Alex asked.

Cao was wiping his word with a handkerchief. "Liu Zhang doesn't look that strong. I should be fine."

Li: "Alex, don't be such a worrywart. Lord Cao has been trained in martial arts longer than you have."

"I am worried that he might pull something during the fight."

"Relax." said Li. "There is going to be an audience. He will not be able to cheat. Victory is ours for certain."

Captain Tai showed up. "It is time."

The chosen fighting ground is an open place in the garden. The pond was in the background.

Shen Long and Sui Long are here to see the fight for their own curiosity. They always watch Cheng from a distance.

The two competitors step closer to each other. Captain Tai speaks. "I will be the referee of this fight. You two are fighting to become the heir to the throne. Whosoever wins this match is crowned to be the King of Shen. You lose if you surrender, fall unconscious, or die in the fight. Do you agree to these terms?"

"I agree." Cao announced.

"I agree." said Zhang.

"Good. The Heaven's Eye match begins!"

The two got into fighting stance and gave each other the look. Their hatred for each other showed in the intense look in their eyes. When two fighters are about to fight to the death, they often stare in the eyes to intimidate each other. But this is no ordinary fight to the death. It is a fight to determine the fate of the kingdom.

Cao made the first strike, and Zhang blocked. Clang! Cao continued with swift movements and does not give his opponent a chance to strike back. Clang-clang-clang. Sparks fly from metal collisions.

Zhang jumped back to a safer distance. (This style he is using...it is the Eagle Style from the west.)

Cao charged forward and slashed. Whoosh! Zhang dodged and blocked. Clang. Alex: "Liu Cao is actually winning. He has the advantage."

Li: "It is just as I thought. He is overpowering his opponent with his Eagle Style."

Alex: "Strange, I thought Zhang would be stronger than this."

Ragnarok: (Liu Cao is most unfortunate. My master will soon show his true skill.)

\*Quong! Quong!\* Cao continued his devastating swipes while Zhang kept on dodging and stepping back. Whoosh. Zhang made an offensive attempt and their swords clashed and they were in a power lock. They grunted as they pushed each other, using all the force from their bodies.

Cao is physically stronger and pushed forward, and Zhang lost his balance. He stepped back and maintained his fighting stance.

Shen Long: "Something is peculiar about the way Liu Zhang is moving."

Sui Long: "It is like he does not want to fight. Or rather, he is studying his opponent."

Whoosh. Zhang dodged some swings. (He is not bad at all. To have mastered the Eagle Style and integrated it with his own style. But this match will end soon.)

The fighters were at a running distance from each other. Zhang and Cao screamed and charged forward for the final hit. They clashed their blades into each other. Everybody waited in suspense to see what would happen. Quong! Zhang's sword fell out of his hand and landed on the floor. Cao pointed his blade at Zhang's neck.

[Split screen - 3] [Alex, Li, Tai].

Ragnarok: (Impossible!)

The wind blew hard. Tai was dumbfounded for a second, and then he snapped out of it. "Lord Cao wins the match!" he yelled. This caused quite a reaction from everybody. They do not know whether to be happy or displeased. Either way, they have a new king.

Cao promptly put his sword back into its sheath.

Heaven's Eye is named as such because in Chinese culture, people refer to heaven as a divine being. The Gods reside in heaven, a place where mortals can never hope to reach. Heaven's Eye is the omni-potent eye, the all seeing eye that determines every mortal's fate. The title of king is too grand and important for any mortal to decide, thus it is up to heaven to decide who is fit to be king.

Everyone except for the king knelt on the floor. "Long live the king!"

Even Zhang knelt.

"You're not bad...for an amateur." said Cao.

Zhang tried his best not to be offended and he remained calm. "Congratulations, sire. You won fair and square."

As Cao walked past him, he made one more remark. "Perhaps you should consider taking lessons."

The match is over. Ragnarok and his master were standing on the fence, watching the blue pond. "Master..." says a disappointed Ragnarok, "Why did you throw the match away? You had him where you wanted him. Why did not use your true skills?"

"Ragnarok, there are still many things you do not know about me. Such as how I think. Why should I reveal my true sword skills...in front of so many people? People look at me and think I am weak, and if they see me beat him, it will raise some suspicions."

"But now we cannot control the kingdom. Liu Cao is on the Demon Slayer's side. The king, the Demon Slayer, Li Cheng, and the widow Celina are on the same side. They must be eliminated."

"My dear student, I did not make it this far by recklessly showing off. I use my sword when it is absolutely necessary. I have lived in this human world for almost five hundred years. I have studied almost every single sword style there is in China. For me to defeat an amateur like Liu Cao is as easy as taking candy from a baby. But I would rather not let them know. My identity is of the utmost importance. I must hide it no matter what. No one is to know or even think that I am the **Vanishing Warrior**. As for Liu Cao, I will use the spice on him. One sip and it is all over."

Ragnarok: "I...I apologize, master. It seems I still do not fully understand your intentions."

As stated in the law of Heaven's Eye, Liu Cao is now the new King of Shen. A servant put a crown on his head and he sat in his rightful place. Alex and Li are standing directly in front of him. The horn blowers blew their horns.

All the nobles and officials standing to the side bowed down. Alex and Li kneeled. "Congratulations, sire."

"You may stand." said King Liu Cao. "I am much honored to be seated here. I assure you, I will become the greatest king Shen has ever known! Our kingdom will prosper and become the most powerful kingdom in China!"

"Long live the king!" yelled everybody.

Alex and Li look at each other and smiled. Finally, their objective is complete. Going through the dangerous forest to retrieve him was worth it. Lord Zhang was not happy about this, and nobody noticed the grimace on his face as he stood in the audience.

For his first act as king, Liu Cao wants the release of Lady Ce from the dungeons. She was brought to the courtyard by two guards. As expected, her white dress was dirty all over, and her face was dirty as well. She was delighted to see Liu Cao. "Your highness...you're exactly what I imagined you to be. "

"Ah Lady Ce, you are as beautiful as I imagined you'd to be. "I am sorry I could not get here sooner. These past few days must have been tough for you."

She ran up to him and embraced him, a move that surprised everybody. Alex was the most surprised, as he has never seen her open up like that to someone else besides him. Celina told him that she and Liu Cao are merely pen pals so this is the first time they have met. But they are acting like they've known each other for years. After a long embrace, she stood by Alex's side.

"You are finally free, Lady Ce." said Alex.

"I appreciate everything you've done for me, Demon Slayer." she replied.

"It must have been hard to live in that dirty prison."

"It was not completely bad." replied she. "It makes me appreciate what I had and I learned not to take things for granted. The guards were nice to me since they know who I am."

"You must be tired." said Cao. "You should get some rest, Lady Ce. Worry not, for I will find who killed your husband."

The guards accompanied her to her quarters. It is customary for a widowed concubine to live in the **Cold Palace**, a residential area in the imperial palace. This is a place designated for widows and other “leftover” from dead nobles, such as orphans and what not. In other words, this is the place of abandoned people who have no other place to go. <sup>8</sup>

Alex was sitting by himself in a dark room lit by candles. All the windows and curtains were closed. He just finished discussing something important with his two masked bodyguards. Then he sensed someone outside the door. Shen Long and Sui Long jumped out the window in a flash.

The door opened and Celina came in. “Alex...”

“Celina?” He dropped his sword on the ground. \*Clunk\* The Fire Sword is his most prized possession, and it’s always in his belt or in his hands. Only the sight of Celina’s face can make him drop the Fire Sword to the floor.

“Alex!” She ran to him and gave him a big hug. Somehow, he expected this, but he was still surprised.

Tears drip down her eyes as she sobbed on his chest. She let go and wiped her eyes.

“Aren’t you being watched by the guards?”

“I told them to go to the banquet first. I had to see you alone. I was so scared while I was in the cell. So scared and alone. The only thought that kept me going was that I’d see you again!”

“I always keep my promises. I don’t care how dangerous the mission is, if it means that you will be free...”

“There were many times when I thought you wouldn’t make it back alive.” said Celina.

“Nothing can stop me when you are by my side.”

They stared into each other’s eyes and embraced again.

## [C] Title Contents

Li came out of the building accompanied by two female servants. They helped her dress in a high class gown, and she looked completely different. Alex and Celina were dumbfounded to see her appear like this, especially Alex. It is the first time he has seen her with her hair down, except when they were kids. And Li was also wearing makeup. The eyelashes bring out the beauty in her eyes, as it matches the color of her dress.

“Wow sister, you look beautiful. Simply stunning.” said Alex.

Li blushed. “I do?”

“Of course you do.” said Alex.

“No I don’t. I don’t even like these clothes. How can you high class people wear this drag?”

“It suits you well.” said Celina. “For a split second I could not even recognize you.”

“Really?”

“You should dress like this more often. It makes you more attractive to men.” said Celina.

“D-Don’t patronize me.” Li replied.

“Come on, the celebration is about to begin.” said Alex.

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<sup>8</sup> Updated in 04/16/2020

Just then, Zi showed up, also dressed in high class clothing. "Alex, hope you don't mind if I drop in."

Alex: "No problem. You are invited to join us."

Zi: "I wouldn't want to miss all the food and wine." Then he looked at Li and his eyes lit up. "And who is this lovely lady here? I never met you before?"

Alex: "Umm, she is my sister, Li."

Zi took her hand, and she did not like it. "Oh, so this is your sister. Alex, you never told me she is drop dead gorgeous?"

Li withdrew her hand. "And who are you?" she asked. But it is just a question of formality, she knows exactly who he is. He is Alex's companion from the very beginning. Li met him when she was still disguised as Fo Long, the masked fighter.

"I am Alex's best friend and teacher."

"What teacher?" she asked. She knows that Zi is no teacher, Alex learned everything from Master Genzo. But she is not good at pretending or acting.

"Why, I taught the Demon Slayer everything he knows. Where do you think he gets his moves from?"

"Like I care!"

"Ah, you look like you need a bodyguard. Beautiful young ladies like you get attacked all the time. I shall be your personal protection against the perverts. I insist."

By now, it is apparent that Li is annoyed. "Protection? Yeah right, you can't even protect yourself. Alex tells me you're a gentlemen, but apparently, you're one of the perverts you just mentioned." She walked past him.

Zi seemed to enjoy it. "Oh, playing hard to get, eh?"

Li: "I am going by myself. See you!"

Alex: "But..."

Ce: "The banquet is starting any minute now. We should go."

Li walked by herself to the other parts of the palace. It is not because she wants to avoid Zi, but she wanted to see if anything has changed since the last time she was here. About eleven years ago, she was accepted to be a servant in the palace, and it is considered a great honor for a commoner. She could still remember how happy her parents were when she made the announcement.

"Congratulations, Li!" said her mother. "My little girl is growing up so fast."

The father was happy too. "See Alex? You should be more like your sister. She is hard working and diligent."

Indeed, she was happy too. It was worth it to see how happy her parents were. To receive your parent's praise and the look in their eyes when they are proud of you, isn't that what every child wants?

But her dream turned into her nightmare when she saw something she should not have. As Li walked past an unused building, she recognized it. It was the building that used to be inhabited by Duke Xiang.

Li was cleaning the wooden floor judiciously and she decided to take a break. Wiping the sweat off her head, she heard a noise from inside. Even though she was not supposed to spy on others, her curiosity got the better of her. Looking through the cracks of the door, she peeped into Xiang's room.

Xiang seemed to be talking to himself. Or rather, his mirror reflection. She did not make out what Xiang was saying, but clearly he was upset, judging by his loud voice. Then he slammed his palms on the table and looked down. His face was changing its form. Li cannot see his face, but the reflection of his face. Then Xiang turned around, and he looked like a cross between a human and a demon.



The girl became terrified and she stepped back, and accidentally kicked over a bucket of water. Splash. How careless. Xiang heard the sound and ran outside, and saw Li, a little girl with her hands over her mouth.

"You...what did you see?"

"Nothing!!" she yelled. "I swear!" Then she ran away.

And that was eleven years ago. Li has trained herself well, she is not afraid of anything. Yet when she is walking past this building, she is afraid. Perhaps Xiang's ghost lives in there, waiting to haunt her. She brushed that thought aside and walked away. This was the one part of the palace she did not want to remember, but this is place where everything began.

Zhang's servant, Ragnarok, walked by her. When he went past her, she felt a chill. She turned around to take a better look at him, to make sure he is the person she thinks he is. There is no doubt about it, he is the enemy.

The banquet to honor the crowning of the new king is just like the banquet after the Demon Extermination Ceremony. It was dark and loud with a happy atmosphere. By now, most of the nobles were drunk and they were red-faced.

King Cao raised his cup of wine. "Drink men. Drink and eat as much as you desire, for today is a joyous occasion."

Everybody cheered. Celina was kind of intimidated in this kind of environment. She hates noisy places, and this place is extremely noisy. Good thing for her she is sitting next to Alex, and feels at ease. Li was sitting beside him as well, and she did not utter a word.

Alex: "Li, you did not touch your dim sum."

Li: "Is it really okay to eat all of it?"

"Of course. Whatever is on your table is yours. I bet you never had a meal like this before, right?"

Celina pours Alex some wine. "Here you go."

Zi was there, but he was standing behind Alex like a statue, just like the other guards. This is not exactly what he wanted, but at least he is here with his best friend.

Everyone was happy and loud and eating like pigs, but Li could not eat a bite, not after what happened outside. (That man...there is no doubt about it...he is Chu Yen. But what is he doing in the palace? How did he get in? Who is his master?) All these fools are celebrating, but they have no idea what is going on. (They have no idea how much danger they are in.) She clenched her fists on her lap.

Lord Fei stood up and held his wine in the air. "I want to honor our new king, the great King Cao! May he bring prosperity and wealth to our kingdom!"

All the men cheered. Tai stood up. "May he live for another thousand years!"

At this point, Zhang stood up and clapped his hands. A servant came in and presented the king a bowl with a cover on it.

Zhang: "As a tribute to your crowning, I present to you the most delicious tasting soup in the entire world."

The servant opened the cover, revealing a bowl of soup. It was hot and smoke was coming out.

"Consider it my gift to you, sire."

As Cao put down his wine, he remembered something from earlier.

Celina ran up to him and embraced him, a move that surprised everybody. During the embrace, she whispered something in his ear. "Be careful of Liu Zhang. Do not eat or drink anything he offers you."

Cao stuck his hand out. "Thank you for your offering, but I decline."

"But sire, you must. It will delight your taste buds. This is Liu Bei's favorite drink."

"He was a kind king, but he did not amount to anything. I am nothing like him and I will not drink anything that he drank. I will surpass him in every way - I will adopt all his strengths and none of his weaknesses!"

All the men cheered while Lord Zhang had a grimace on his face.

After the banquet, Zhang and Ragnarok took a walk outside. They were both pissed off about something. Zhang's plan has failed, Cao did not fall for the spice. Alex or Lady Ce must have warned him beforehand. They are smart and cautious. Now that he lost his kingship, it will be difficult to control Liu Cao.

Ragnarok had concerns of his own. (That woman who I saw...she is Li Cheng...there is no doubt about it. Even though she looks different, I cannot forget her face.) It is a gut feeling he has and his instincts are never wrong.

A ninja was watching them from the top of the tree. Dressed completely in black, he was one with the night.

"You can stop hiding now." Zhang.

The ninja was surprised. He took out a sword and leaped down silently. Whoosh. "Very good, Liu Zhang, you scoundrel."

"Are you from the Council?"

"This is divine retribution, Zhang!"

"You are unlucky I am in a bad mood." Zhang replied.

Ragnarok drew his sword, but Zhang signaled him to stop.

The ninja charged forward and Zhang blocked the attack like it was nothing. Zhang continued to dodge, then he attacked the ninja, who went on the defensive. Clang! Using a combination of moves, Zhang knocked the ninja's sword away and stabbed him in the stomach. Schleb!

The ninja fell down bleeding. "Ugh..."

Zhang took a necklace with a blue jewel. "Farewell." The jewel started sucking the ninja's life force and he screamed like hell as his body shriveled up.

"AAAAAH!!!"

Zhang has successfully taken another soul.

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## 十六: Demonic Treasure: The Sacred Bead

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In the darkness of the night, a group of people were unloading boxes from a carriage. Inside the boxes were weapons such as swords and arrows and bows. These boxes are heavy, and only the strong, muscular men are given this job. The Council of Heaven has to do their operations in secret because of the strict laws being enforced by the new king. These laws restrict non-imperials from holding weapons, and forbids the trading of weapons from one city to another.

This makes things difficult for the Council, so they have to do this secretly and not be caught. There was a thick fog tonight, thus making it the perfect night to deliver the shipment.

"We're under attack!" yelled a scout. Slash! He fell.

The others became alert and drew their swords.

"What is happening?" asked one of them.

"Is it the imperials?" asked another.

"I don't know. Keep your guard up!"

They could see nothing through the fog. Suddenly, there heard a guy scream in agony.

The troops became scared. "W-What's going on?"

Out of the mist came a warrior dressed completely in black. He wore a hat with a **veil** over his face. The mysterious fighter charged and slashed another guy. The fighters fell one by one, and the survivors grew more scared upon hearing the death cry of their comrades.

When the **man in black** came out to the open, they charged at him. Whoosh, whoosh. His movements were quick and swift, and the human eye can barely catch up to his movements. Whoosh! Slash!

Only two fighters remained. Fighter A panicked and charged forward. The man in black blocked A's attack and stabbed him in the stomach. Fighter B was scared out of his mind, but he charged anyway. The man in black jumped over him, his body spinning like a top and landed behind him, and stabbed B in the back. Slash!

Now that everyone is dead, the man in black put his sword back into its shell and walked away as silently as he came.

The next morning, Council members immediately reported this incident to the Headmaster of the Council, Taishi Tze.

"They are all dead?" said the old man in disbelief. "All of our transporters were killed?"

"Yes headmaster. Our path has somehow been leaked to the enemy." replied the member. "I was there when it happened. It was all done by one person."

"One person?" Taishi repeated in awe. "How can this be? Who is he?"

The member was still shaking in fear. "I did not see his face...he was wearing a veil...and dressed in black. His movements were like that of a ghost. He was too fast...and horrible. I...I can't bear to think about it!" He grabbed his head in pain.

Taishi touched his beard. It is a habit he has had for years. When one grows a long beard, he tends to touch it from top to bottom. "But our men have been trained by me personally. They are not amateurs. Who can this one swordsman be..."

"Could it be the same person who killed the War God?"

"Hmmm." Taishi replied. "That is a good possibility, but my instincts tell me otherwise." (*Could this be the doing of...the Vanishing Warrior?*)

Ragnarok knocked on the door, and when there was no response, he opened it and walked in. He found Liu Zhang with his palms on the table, looking down as if he was gasping for air.

"Master?"

Zhang turned to face him, and his face was swollen and he was sweating all over. For some reason, his face was pale and wrinkled, as if he grew fifty years overnight.

"Master, you look ill. Are you alright?" Ragnarok inquired.

"Damn it...my time is almost up." he replied, moaning for breath. "We demons have a fatal weakness...we cannot stay in a human form for too long. There is a price to pay when I stay in this form. Our kind needs to digest human souls in order to remain human."

"But what about the soul you took the other night?"

"The problem is this." Zhang said, taking out a necklace from under his collar. "This is a demonic jewel, one that we use to take human souls. But lately, this jewel's

power is waning, and it is becoming increasingly ineffective. When this jewel runs out of power, I will revert back to my demon form, and when they see me, they will kill me for sure!"

"Then we will just find another demonic jewel!" Ragnarok replied. He is a simple person, for he always has a simple and straightforward answer to every problem.

"It is not that simple. This jewel is composed of a rare substance that can only be found in certain parts of the country."

"Then I shall go and find this substance."

"No, I need you here, Ragnarok. It is much too far of a journey for you to take."

"Then we will send Ekin. He is always on time with his missions."

"No, there is a quicker way," said Zhang. "We have one such jewel in the palace in the royal treasure room. Liu Bei calls it the **Sacred Bead**. This Sacred Bead is made up of the same metal as my jewel is, and it is the perfect solution. The only problem is that I must ask for the king's permission. I should have taken it when I had the power. What an oversight I have made."

"What if Cao says no?" asked Ragnarok.

"He will not decline me, for I know his weakness. Liu Cao is all about pride and looking good. I shall use that to my advantage," said Zhang, smiling sinisterly.

Liu Zhang came to meet the king personally. Like always, he must kneel and stand only when the king says so. He could have remained being the king, but he chose to submit to another because he did not want reveal his true skills. This is the path he has chosen, and he is beginning to regret it.

"Stand," said Liu Cao. "What can I do for you?"

"Sire, I want to talk to you about an urgent matter."

"Oh, and what might that be?"

"It is regarding the Sacred Bead. With your permission, I'd like to have it in my possession," said Zhang.

"The Sacred Bead?" Cao repeated. "It is a piece of jewelry that has been around since the Han Dynasty. My grandfather, Liu Shen, took it from the Hans during the war and it has been a family treasure ever since. What would you do with such a thing?"

"Sire, there are some important events coming up in my life and I'd like to use it as a good luck charm. All the family treasures are accessible by family members, and since no one is using it..."

Cao is wondering what Zhang is plotting. There is much tension between these two, particularly after Cao took his throne.

"How unfortunate," Cao replied with a smile, "I need to use it too."

Zhang did not know how to reply. He just stared in awe.

"The king gets to choose first, correct?" said Cao. "It is rather unfortunate, because I need a good luck charm as well, for I need to run a kingdom. If only you had taken it earlier. I know you must be disappointed."

Zhang grew upset. "You are only taking it because you do not want me to have it."

"Oh? Do you need it that badly?" Cao replied. By now, there was no need for formalities. It is only them alone in a room. "Do you want to duel over this too?"

Zhang smiled. "In fact, that is what I was thinking. Let us wager the Sacred Bead, shall we?"

"Are you joking?" asked Cao. "Have you not learned your lesson yet?"

"It will not be us who will be fighting. I already learned from our last fight that I am not match for your graceful skills. But I shall send my best subordinate to

participate in the fight. What do you say, sire?" Zhang bowed as he said this. He was smiling on the outside and inside, knowing he can talk Cao into this.

"It sounds interesting. Very well. I shall send **my** best subordinate to participate in this duel. The winner shall receive the Sacred Bead."

"Very good sire. It is settled then."

When hearing the news, Ragnarok offered to volunteer. "Master, let me do it. I will win that duel for you."

"No." said Zhang. "It is much too early for you to reveal yourself. I cannot afford to have your identity revealed, lest it will ruin everything."

"How about I send in my stead my star pupil Ekin?"

Zhang nodded in agreement. "Ekin, I am counting on you."

"I will not let you down, my lord." said Ekin.

"But Liu Cao knows what Ekin looks like." said Ragnarok.

"Ekin shall wear a mask." said Zhang. "No one will be able to recognize him. Even if his identity is revealed, it does not change a thing. I have been playing politics in the palace for a long time, and Liu Cao will find out who really runs the show!"

Liu Cao has already picked his fighter, who is none other than the Demon Slayer. "Sire, I appreciate you picking me, but I am not sure I am the right man for the job."

"Sure you are. You are the Demon Slayer, the hero of this kingdom."

"But in this duel I am not allowed to use the Fire Sword's powers. And I am not confident with my sword skills." <sup>9</sup>

"You survived the fight in the forest while rescuing me, did you not?"

"My sister is much better than I am." said Alex.

"Yes, but she is a woman, and it is taboo for a woman to hold a sword. I can change the rules as I wish, but the kingdom is not ready to accept such a radical change. With all the betrayals that have happened in the royal family, you are the only person I can trust here, Cheng. We do not know what Lord Zhang is up to. This Sacred Bead has been in the Liu family for generations and he is requesting it. Whatever he plans to do with it, I will not let him have it."

Alex folded his hands and bowed. He has no choice but to accept the invitation, and he might as well prepare for it.

## **[B]** Title Contents

In the heat of the sun, Alex was training topless in his backyard. He was sweating like a pig before. Whoosh! He jumped and swings the sword around in a precise manner. Every move he makes is what the late Master Genzo taught him.

Celina was watching him behind the column. For some reason, she likes to watch him from afar during his training. When he trains, the look on his face is so serious, it is the face of someone with a lot of passion and strength. Watching him give her this strange yet comfortable feeling that she is safe. It puts her at ease.

Sweat was dripping on his muscles. Alex is one of the small percentages of men who have a six pack on their stomachs. This is a sign of discipline and strength. This is a sign of discipline and strength. A well-built body is a sign of a good swordsman.

Whoosh! He took deep breaths between motions. Breath in and breath out.

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<sup>9</sup> 04/16/2020 - In the duel the Fire Sword's powers are not allowed



Shen Long and Li show up to watch him. Alex's keen senses tell him that people were watching and he stared at Celina's direction. She felt guilty to be spying on him, and she went towards him with a towel on her hands.

"You've been working hard." said Celina, taking the towel and wiping his forehead. "You should take a break and have some tea."

"Thanks Celina." replied he. "This is a very important duel and I have to do my best."

"I know you will." He just stared at her as she wiped his forehead.

Shen Long: "They sure are close, are they not? You could take some notes, Li."

Li: "Hmph. They should get a room. This is not interesting at all." She walked away.

The duel is about to begin, the setting is the dueling grounds where tournaments and festivals are held. King Liu Cao and Lord Zhang were sitting next to each other, watching the arena. Alex came to the arena in his usual attire – a red gown with a yin yang symbol on its front.

There was but a few in the audience, as this is a private matter to be settled.

"I see you picked the Demon Slayer as your representative. Very good choice." Zhang commented.

For some reason, every remark made by Zhang seems sarcastic and insulting. Cao is going to find out why he needs the sacred bead, and it will definitely not fall into his hands. "I selected my fighter. Where is yours, Zhang?"

"Patience, sire."

The opponent of Alex showed up on the other side of the arena. He was a tall man wearing a mask.

"What is the meaning of this?" Cao demanded.

Zhang: "He has his personal reasons not to disclose his identity. It is not against the rules to have his identity hidden, right, sire?"

(What are you up to now, Zhang?) "Fine, As long as he can fight. The winner of the duel shall receive the sacred bead."

Captain Tai came to the arena. "The duel ends when one of you gives up, falls unconscious, or is killed. Understood?"

Li and the masked men were in the audience, along with Celina. Zi was watching from the doorway, as he is worried about his friend. Ragnarok was watching the fight from a distance.

Li: "Who is that masked man that Alex is going to fight?"

Sui Long: "The question is...why is he concealing his identity?"

Shu Tai gave the hand signal. "Begin!!"

Both fighters drew their swords and stood in their fighting stance. Alex cannot read his opponent because his face is covered, but his opponent can read him. The mask is quite intimidating and is making him nervous. Alex shook off his nervousness and relaxed himself. As long as he follows his master's training, he will do fine.

Both fighters charged forward and smashed their swords together. Clang! Then they jumped away. It is said that swordsmen can judge their opponent's strength from one hit. After a few seconds, they clashed again.

Li: "Something is peculiar about his movements. His fighting style looks familiar."

Shen Long: "His foundation and forms are solid. Cheng has a tough opponent."

The masked man continued to advance while Alex retreated. Clang! He did not give Alex the chance to fight back. Whoosh! He kept on using high swings, moving in unpredictable patterns.

Zhang: "What do you think of my fighter, sire? He is skilled, is he not?"

Cao smiled confidently. "Even if he is, Cheng will not lose to him. For he is the student of the War God."

"He is the one who slain the duke who was a demon. But I was not there to see if myself. I wonder if Cheng knows the difference between an ogre and a swordsman?"

Yet again, Zhang threw another back handed insult. While Alex was fighting his duel, these two men were fighting with words. "The War God does not hand his Fire Sword to any average swordsman. I have seen Cheng's skill in person."

"Ohhh. This should be interesting."

Liu Cao smiled. "Cheng personally escorted from Leinwan to the capital city. He protected from an assassin who attacked us in the forest."

"Ohhh. What a dangerous world we live in."

"Funny that no one knew of my arrival...except for the lords of our kingdom. I wonder who hired that assassin?" Liu Cao asked. Liu Zhang was sweating and did not respond.<sup>10</sup>

Clang! Alex blocked an attack, and the masked man kicked him in the stomach, making him fall. Thud.

Celina: "Alex!"

Li was just as worried, but she kept her composure. (Alex, you have to remember Master Genzo's training!)

Alex was in a crouch, and he stood up. He took a glance at the audience, and he was reminded that people are watching him. Both Celina and his sister are here rooting for him, and he cannot look bad in front of them. And most importantly, the king is counting on him to win.

Alex took a deep breath and remained still like a statue. The masked man's eyes widened and charged forward. Alex rolled to the side to dodge the attack. Quong! Ekin's blade hit the concrete. Ekin continued his relentless assault, and as Li observed his movements carefully, she recognized them.

Li: "That fighter...his style is the same the one who attacked us in the forest. I hope Alex notices this."

Celina: (Alex, you can do it. I know you can!)

Clang! His opponent was putting on the pressure. Alex was tired of moving backwards, and he thrusts forward. Clang! They clashed their blades together, resulting in a power lock. All the force from their body was projected into the swords, and it became a contest of sheer strength.

"Ugh...aahh..."

Alex struggled and pushed forward with all his might, but it was not good enough. They pushed their blades to the side and went past each other. Whoosh! It was a critical moment and all the observers watched in suspense.

After they went past each other, Alex received a cut on his shoulder, and the masked man's mask cracked and fell off. His face was revealed and everyone was surprised.

Li: (So my suspicions are correct. It is the assassin who attacked us in the forest. His name is Ekin!)

Cao recognized him but he kept a calm face. (He's the one who attacked us back then.)

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<sup>10</sup> 04/16/2020 - Updated the conversation between these two enemies

Cao blocked Ekin's incoming attack. Clang! They jumped away from each other and got into fighting stance. Cao's stance was peculiar, for he actually knows a fighting style, the style known as the Eagle Style. Alex and Li noticed this.

Ekin charged forward and Cao blocked his attacks methodically. Clang. Quong! Cao's movements were calculated and precise, as if he has practiced these moves hundreds of times before. The enemy had a hard time finding an opening. Cao swings his sword hard enough to create a barrier of air, and the air was strong enough to make something break. Whoosh. Ekin jumped away from the airbreaker.

## [C] Title Contents

The fighters faced each other. Alex knew who he was up against, but he remained silent and continued to wonder, just as Liu Cao is at this very moment.

King Cao glanced at Lord Zhang, who was smiling. (Damn you Liu Zhang. Why are you using the assassin that you sent to kill me? Are you acknowledging that you are the perpetrator? Are you trying to entice me?)

"I'm afraid the Demon Slayer is out classed." said Zhang.

(Why are you using him? Do you not have another fighter at your disposal? Are you trying to say that you can get away with whatever you please?)

Ekin pointed his sword forward and charged. Alex charged and they hit a few times. Clang! Cling! Ekin swings his blade down, Alex blocked it, and they struggled. Alex pushed his opponent's blade away and jumped back. "I'll show you what true strength is!"

Ekin charged forward and Alex ducked his opponent's swing and slashed his leg.

Cao smiled. "Do you still think your prized fighter can win?"

Zhang took a sip of tea. "It is not over yet. A fight like this has many twists and turns and a miracle can happen at the end."

Ekin is now on the defensive as Alex grew more aggressive. Clang! Clang. Alex did a jump attack, and Ekin blocked it. Quong! Sparks fly from the metal hitting.

Li: (How is Alex able to use the Fire Sword's powers? How is he able to do it, yet I cannot use the Ice Sword's powers? What am I missing?)

Ekin swings his blade hard, creating an airbreaker. "Hayaaaah!"

Alex blocked it with an airbreaker of his own. Froom! The two forces cancelled each other out.

They charged into each other once again and let loose their fury. "Why do you work for Liu Zhang?!" said Alex as the sparks flared.

"It is none of your concern!" Ekin shouted while dashing.

The two exchanged moves. "You're part of this whole conspiracy, aren't you? Who is Ragnarok?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Clang! "Stop lying!" Alex yelled, swinging his blade angrily.

Ekin jumped away from the sword's swing. "You certainly were fond of your master, weren't you? I wonder why the War God gave you his Fire Sword. It is a waste to hand it to you."

"This coming from someone who works for a corrupt lord?" said Alex.

"Lord Zhang has always been loyal to Liu Bei."

\*Quong! Quong!\*

"Bah, what non-sense!" Alex shouted. "He is Liu Bei's murderer!"

"You accuse him of murdering the previous king? You, who had an affair with his concubine?" Ekin smiled.

Something struck Alex's nerves. He no longer cared about the duel, he just wants to silence this scumbag for good. He charged recklessly and attacked. They ended up in a power lock where they push their blades against each other. Ekin's sword created electric sparks and shocked Alex's hands. With this chance, Ekin knocked Alex's sword away. \*Clang\* The assassin then pointed his blade at Alex's neck.

Everyone was shocked. Li had to hold it in and not react too strongly, but her fist was clenched tightly. (That bastard cheated. He used the Thunder Sword's ability in a sneaky way. But I caught it. I wonder if anyone else caught it.)

Liu Cao's eyes were shaking from anger. (He clearly cheated. That happened so fast but I saw electricity from out of that sword.) <sup>11</sup>

Just moments ago, Alex was sure he would win the duel, but now, he finds himself at his opponent's mercy because of one crucial mistake. Never lose your temper in the fight; it can cost you your life.

"The fight is over." Zhang announced, clapping. It was an interesting fight indeed. But the more skillful fighter always prevails."

"Liu Zhang, how many underhanded tricks will you use just to get your hands on that jewel? Is it that important to you?"

"I must take the bead, if you will please."

Ekin put his sword back into its shell and walked away.

A servant came with a box in his hands, and he opened it. Inside was a shining blue gem with a brilliant glow. Ekin took the gem and raised his fist in the air. Zhang walked towards him and he handed the gem to Zhang.

"Well done, Ekin. You will be rewarded for your achievements."

Celina and Shen Long and Sui Long went to Alex. "Are you alright?"

"I lost the match."

Cao walked over to the group.

"I am sorry, your highness. I failed you." said Alex with his head down.

"No." Cao replied. "You did your best, Cheng. There is no reason for you to feel bad. Liu Zhang is a sly bastard. His fighter was wearing a mask to throw you off."

"Sire..."

"It is thanks to you that I was able to make it here alive to even claim the position of king. I, as the king, will always be indebted to you." said Cao.

"Thank you sire."

Lord Zhang wore the Sacred Bead as a necklace. "Finally, the Sacred Bead is now in my hands. Today is certainly a joyous occasion."

"That is good news, master." Ragnarok said.

"And it is all thanks to you, Ekin."

"It was nothing. I was merely my job." replied the assassin.

"This demands a celebration." said Zhang. "Men, eat as much as you want! Dinner is on me!"

The men cheered and raised their cups in the air. The soldiers were eating and drinking happily away. They were inside Zhang's personal mansion inside his complex, and from afar, their loud laughter and yelling can be heard clearly. It became a festival of drunken men and it is out of control.

Ekin is the center of attention since he is responsible for this event. Ekin and some other guy were having a drinking contest. Once they were done with one bottle, the others brought more. Ekin's competitor passed out on the table, making him the

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<sup>11</sup> 04/16/2020 - Update - Ekin won by cheating

winner. They cheered and clapped for him. His face was red and he was completely drunk, but he continued to drink because he feels like he is on top of the world.

Even Liu Zhang was tipsy. "Men, drink and be merry! Drink all you can!"

Ragnarok, on the other hand, was the only person in the room to remain sober. He does not want to be like these wild boars, drinking like they do not have a care in the world. No, he is not the party type, he is the serious type. That is how he has always been. (Now that master has the Sacred Bead, he can now absorb more souls and remain in his human form. This bead bought us more time.)

Ekin walked out of the house and went into the courtyard. He was drunk to the point where he cannot walk properly. He can still hear the noise from the party, but as he walked further on, the noise disappeared. All he heard were crickets chirping in the silence.

Out of the mist came a silhouetted figure...and as he walked closer into view, Ekin saw that he was dressed completely in black, and he had a veil over his face.

"Who're you?" Ekin asked drunkenly.

"Your behavior is disgraceful." said the man in black. "You are a fighter of the palace and this is how you conduct yourself?"

"So what's it to ya, huh? You wan a piece of me?" Ekin drew his sword. "You'll be sorry!" Ekin charged forward and slashed. The man in black disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Whoosh! The man in black appeared behind him. Slish! Slice! Before he knew what happened, Ekin was cut into pieces. Blood squirted out from his wounds and he collapsed.

The man in black put his sword back into its sheath and walked away as silently as he came.<sup>12</sup>

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### 十七: Xiao Ye: The Blind Prodigy

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After becoming the Demon Slayer, life is but a struggle for our hero, Alex Cheng, who faces one dangerous situation after another. After Alex and his sister successfully retrieves Liu Cao, the destined king, from the forest, he challenges Liu Zhang to Heaven's Eye. Liu Zhang accepts, and ends up forfeiting his position as king.

As if he did not have enough to worry about, Alex was chosen to fight in a duel against a masked man, whose identity is Ekin, fighting for a royal family treasure. For the Demon Slayer, this is but the beginning of a series of adventures, a long and valiant struggle where he meets new allies and discover his true enemy, who could be right under his nose.

Liu Zhang and Ragnarok received word of Ekin's death in the morning, and they are both surprised. "Ekin is dead?" Ragnarok said.

"Yes, my lord." said the servant. "We found his body in the woods."

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<sup>12</sup> Original: the Messenger of Death killed Ekin without a reason. Update: It doesn't make sense for the Messenger to get the Thunder Sword here



Zhang: "Did you see who did it?"

Servant: "I don't know, sir. But he was killed during the night, and the attacker must have known our location."

Ragnarok banged his fist on the table. "It must be the imperials. they are angry that Ekin defeated the Demon Slayer in the duel. It must be it!"

"No, Ragnarok, we must examine this carefully. How many wounds are on his body?"

The servant hesitated to answer. "Uhh, about that..."

"Speak up." Zhang demanded.

"His body was cut into several pieces. All the cuts were clean and precise..."

Ragnarok gasped. "Chopped into pieces? But who do we know has that kind of ability?" Then he addressed Zhang. "Master, do you think it was Cheng's bodyguards, or perhaps Li?"

Zhang touched his beard. "The cuts were clean and precise. Ekin was drunk when he left, but I am sure none of those people could have done this. No, it has to be someone else. Someone extraordinary."

"Could it be someone in the Council?" asked Ragnarok.

"It is all speculation, my pupil." said Zhang. "In any case, we longer have anyone who is skilled to do our dirty work. On top of that, we lost the Thunder Sword. But I have good news. I was able to get in touch with two assassins from Leinwan. They are notorious for their brutality."

Meanwhile, I have to inspect Ekin's corpse."

Ragnarok bowed as Zhang walked out of the room.

"You're hiring new henchmen?" Ragnarok asked.

"We currently have so many enemies now it is getting hard for me to keep track of them. Ekin will be the assassin who works inside the palace while I need another to work outside the palace. This time it is an assassin pair and I have been looking to hire for a while but I am finally able to get in touch with them." said Liu Zhang.

"Do they match up to the Ice Hunter's level and Ekin's level?"

"Rest assured, Ragnarok, these two are no amateurs. They are from the Assassin Lodge in the Shu Kingdom. But they never stay in one place for long. They are expected to arrive today, so give our guests a warm welcome."

Ragnarok bowed as Zhang walked out of the room.

Ragnarok met his new "henchmen" on a deserted street. "I never expected my new allies to be you two...Jin and Roh, the **Demon Brothers**."

The one on the left is Jin, the younger of the duo, he has short, black hair, and an untrustworthy face. To his right is his elder brother, Roh, with mixed white and black hair, and the face of an experienced veteran. These two make up the deadly combination known as the Demon Brothers.

"We are here at your service." said **Jin**.

"We will kill anyone no matter who our target is." said **Roh**.

"Did you come from the Shu Kingdom?"

Roh smiled. "Originally yes. But I have killed people in all four kingdoms."

Alex Cheng was on his way back from the market. It is his favorite place to go in Yi Ling. He goes there even if he need not buy anything. For him, it is merely a hobby to see what is on sale, what is the latest and most popular product that people want.

As a kid, he was always fascinated with all the different fruits they have on display. His sister used to take him out and buy watermelons. Li would buy them in bulk, and little Alex would try to hold one, but eventually he'd give up and let Li carry it. Once they reach home, Li cut the watermelon open and they would eat it and have fun. Indeed, those were good times. But the Li he knows now is a different Li, yet he knows that deep down inside, the old Li is still in there somewhere.

As he was walking, he sensed something wrong, and he ducked. Whoosh! A dagger flew past him and hit the wall. Twang! He saw a man dressed in black standing on the roof. Alex grabbed his sword and jumped up there.

"Who the hell are you?" Alex demanded. "Do you think it's funny to throw daggers at people?"

"Alex Cheng...the Demon Slayer..."

Alex grew worried, realizing that this person is not here for pranks. "That is me. "What business do you have with me?"

"You are not worthy of the title Demon Slayer." said the veiled warrior.

Alex grunted. "Who are you to judge me?"

"There is a demon who resides in the imperial palace...yet you do not realize it. He is getting away with crimes and you are not doing anything about it. You call yourself a demon slayer?"

"I've heard enough from you!" Alex charged forward and slashed.

The Messenger of Death disappeared, or seem to have, and appeared behind him. Alex was sweating in nervousness. Can he really be that quick?

"I will come back for you...the one they call Demon Slayer." The Messenger of Death turned around and jumped off the roof.

Alex ran to the edge of the roof to catch up, but by that time, his enemy has already disappeared...as if he vanished into thin air. What a strange encounter indeed. What does it mean for our hero?

Alex is supposed to meet his group at a designated place, a place where they can talk in private without being disturbed. Our hero was still thinking about the encounter with the man in black, but his thoughts dissipated when Celina greeted him.

"Alex!" she said enthusiastically.

"Celina." He returned the enthusiasm with an embrace.

Li and Shen Long and Sui Long were here as well.

Li coughed on purpose, and Alex and Celina stopped their embrace. Alex speaks. "Everybody. Thank you for coming."

Sui: "Has everybody been gathered here yet?"

Alex: "Captain Tai is not able to join us because of his duties as a captain. But we do have one more person who is joining us, his name is Zi Lai. He should be here at any moment."

"Yo!" Zi shouted as he came into the courtyard. "Looks like the party just got started. I was worried that I might be late."

"You **are** late." Li said.

"Oh, if it isn't the lovely young lady from the palace." said Zi. "And Lady Ce, you look beautiful as always."

"What a bunch of meaningless compliments." said Li.

"I consider compliments a form of formality." Zi replied. "It is not meaningless, it is merely the truth."

"You have not even been around half the time. Are you really trustworthy?" asked Li. Shen Long touched her shoulder, but she shook him off.

Sui Long: "Everyone here is a valuable asset to our group. Zi fought hard and even risked his life to save Cheng's friend, Jade. He was injured by the Ice Hunter, but he has recovered in a short amount of time, which is truly amazing."

Zi: "Yep. A strong man like me heals fast."

Li: "A strong man would not have been defeated by the Ice Hunter."

Shen: "Li, enough."

She continued anyway. "I defeated the Ice Hunter with no problem at all, and he was the one you had so much trouble with. Can you really be of benefit to our group?"

"Oh my," said Zi in a playful tone, "We got a tough one here. The pretty girls usually are the tough ones." Then he grabbed her hand. "But that is exactly what I like."

Li withdrew her hand and kicked him in the leg. "Go hit on someone with your own intelligence, you chauvinist pig!"

"Ouch!!" Zi grabbed his leg and hopped around in stupor. "Ow! Alex, didn't you teach her any manners?"

"Enough fooling around." said Alex, who was silent on this whole debate. "We must get to the matter at hand, so please. You all know why we are meeting today. We have a big problem on our hands, it is much bigger than we can imagine."

Shen Long: "Somebody is after Alex Cheng's life. We believe it is Liu Zhang."

Li: "It is Liu Zhang, there is no doubt about it. The masked fighter who Cheng fought at the duel is the same man who attacked us in the forest."

Alex: "I don't understand why he would do that. Zhang is the careful type, yet he made such a blunder. Did he not think that I would not remove Ekin's mask?"

Sui Long: "Perhaps he did it on purpose, to send us a message."

Zi: "But why Liu Zhang? What did the Demon Slayer do to offend him?"

Nobody could answer that question, but Li spoke up. "Because he is a demon." Everyone paid attention to her. Her speech is always short, but to the point. "He is a demon...just like Duke Xiang. He is one of Duke Xiang's followers. That is the only logical explanation."

Alex: "Then why did he help us during the rebellion? He could have betrayed us if he wanted to."

Li: "Think about it. That would be a risky move for him to kill you, Tai, and Lord Yu in one place. Like you said, Zhang is the cautious type. So cautious that he would even help kill Xiang if it meant covering up his identity."

Alex: "Is he really part of the Liu family?"

"I do not know." Li replied. "But many years ago, I was a servant in the palace...Duke Xiang and Lord Zhang would often meet each other to converse. I never knew what they conversed about, but now I have a pretty good idea. I was too nosy for my own good...one day I saw something I should not have. I peeked into the duke's room to see his face deformed. And he saw me. I was scared so I ran away...I ran away from home so that my family could be safe."

Indeed, Alex can tell that she is having a hard time telling the story of her past. Up until now, he never received a proper explanation, but to see her talk about the past for the first time is good enough for Alex.

"And there is more..." Li continued with her fists clenched. "I know who Ragnarok is..."

Zi: "Ragnarok? You mean the one who killed Master Genzo?"

Li: "He is...Liu Zhang's disciple!"

Everyone was shocked.

Celina: "His disciple? Then is his true name?"

Li: "It is not important...but he is someone who is incredibly strong. Not even I am sure if I can defeat him a fight."

Alex: "We have many dangerous enemies, and we are going to need as much help as possible. Aren't there other people who can help us in our cause?"

Sui: "There **is** one other person."

"Who?" Alex asked.

"Not, not her." Shen replied.

Sui: "You cannot live in denial, Shen Long."

Alex: "Who is this person you speak of?"

Shen stared at the floor. "My sister..."

Everyone became surprised.

"Her name is Xiao Ye she is a skilled swordsman just like us...I do not want her involved. She is fine the way she is."

Sui: "You have not seen her in over twelve years. When you came back to Yi Ling, you had every opportunity to see her, yet you refuse. She misses her older brother."

"It is not the right time!" Shen replied. "I am not worthy to see her. Xiao makes an honest living despite the fact that she is blind, yet I am her brother and I am a wanted criminal. She is a strong person...even though she lost her sight years ago she is still able to live like a normal person. She is better off without me."

## [B] Title Contents

The blind girl was sitting in bed with a blindfold on, and she was crying because tonight would be the last time she will see her brother. Shen Long has bid farewell to his sister and packed his belongings and walked under the midnight light. He has resorted to thievery and murder to get money so that his sister can have the operation that can restore her eyes. But his actions have caused him to become a wanted criminal, and he can no longer stay in this city.

Somewhere out there, a young girl was at home, sitting on a rocking chair, doing her work. She was a doll maker, and she was particularly good at it. Holding a knife, she carved the block of wood in her hand. Her eyes were closed as she was working, and as a matter of fact, her eyes are always closed because she is blind. But that fact did not stop her from pursuing this profession. Even though she cannot see, she can feel the contents of the wooden block, feeling the details with her fingers.

Her skills cannot be ignored, as proven by the popular demand of her dolls. On the shelves were other wooden sculptures she had carved with much attention and passion.

Outside, it was pouring and thunder roared. On rainy days like these, the girl thought about someone she cares about very much. But alas, that person is long gone, and she lives alone in this quiet house.

Shen Long was standing on the rooftop, watching his sister. He was soaked in the rain yet he remained still the entire time. He had a strong desire to go inside and greet the girl, but he could not. Something inside of him was holding him back. Perhaps guilt or remorse, but nobody really knows what is in his heart.

When Shen grew tired of watching, he left. The girl thought she heard something. Because of her blindness, her keen sense of hearing is exceptionally sharp. She can hear footsteps from far away, and she can tell by those footsteps if the person is skinny or fat, whether or not he is running or walking, and even the which direction he is going to. But the heavy rain distorted her sense of hearing. She thought that a particular person was coming to visit her, perhaps watch her from afar...but she brushed that thought aside and continued her work.

"She still resides in the southern district." said Shen. "But I am not ready to see her...it is better this way."

Alex, who had no knowledge of this, was shocked to hear such a touching story. "Shen Long..."

Behind the wall, some eunuch was spying on them. When he gathered enough information, he walked away and accidentally knocked over a jar.

Suddenly, Li sensed the vibrations on the ground. "Someone is watching us!" She ran to the exit.

"Wait!!" Alex yelled. He ran after her, and Celina followed suit. Shen and Sui ran after them.

Li lost sight of the eunuch. The others showed up. "The spy got away."

Shen: "Shit! He heard everything...and that means he knows where my sister is. She is in danger."

The young lady in question walked over to the souvenir store holding a bag of item. The store owner saw her and greeted her. "Xiao."

"How's business?" asked the blind girl.

"Business is great as usual. Thanks to you. Do you have more dolls?"

"Like always." She put the three dolls on the table. "This time I tried using a new style, it will be popular with the girls."

The owner examined one of the dolls. "Ohhh. Beautifully crafted. A job well done as usual, Xiao. Here is this week's payment." He handed her a bag of coins.

She took it.

"Aren't you going to count them?" asked the owner.

"I trust you. You would not short change me." Xiao replied. But in fact, she can feel the contents of the bag and its weight and determine that it is the right amount.

Her dolls are one of the best out there and they sell well. She is able to make an honest living just selling wooden dolls. She works with the storeowner, who does the coloring and decoration for the dolls, since she cannot see colors. He sells the dolls and gives her the profit. They work well together, for he is an honest person just like she is. Most people would take advantage of a blind girl, but not him.

Without wasting any time, the heroes rushed to the southern district. Yi Ling, just like all the other provinces of Shen, is made up of five districts. This particular one is the poorest district of Yi Ling. Even though it is the capital of the kingdom, it is somewhat poverty stricken and has a high crime rate. There are but a few imperial officers stationed here, and much of the district is left unguarded. The houses and property here are the most affordable, but it comes with the price of danger.

Shen Long led the group through the streets, and they were surprised by the surroundings. Yi Ling is supposed to be the richest and most prosperous province of them all, yet they have a neglected area which was ignored for such a long time.

"Your sister lives in this kind of place?" Celina asked.

"Yes, unfortunately." Shen replied. "It is where we grew up."

Back at the house, Xiao was sitting on the rocking chair, making another doll. Since she cannot see, she has to feel the doll's contents with her fingers. She feels every bit of detail and carves it very carefully. Each doll she creates is unique, and quite popular with the children. The customers asked who created these dolls to satisfy their own curiosity, but Xiao asked the storeowner to keep her identity a secret, for she does



not want to be disturbed. Creating art is her passion, and she does not need to be acknowledged for doing what she loves.

The perimeter is quiet, which is the perfect environment for her. She needs absolute silence to concentrate.

A group of loud monks entered the courtyard. She can hear them before they even step foot into her property. Judging from their footsteps, there were five of them.

Xiao stepped outside, knowing that they came here to cause trouble. "May I help you gentlemen?" she asked politely.

The leader of the pack, an overconfident monk, approached her. "Ohhh, what do we have here? A blind girl?"

"She's pretty cute. It's too bad she doesn't have any eyes." said another.

Xiao is annoyed by their rudeness. She can smell the alcohol on their breaths. They were drinking and somehow stumbled upon this area.

"Say, little lady, why don't you come with us and have a fun time?"

"No thank you." she replied.

"Come on. I bet you've never seen a man's genitals, have you?"

All the monks laughed.

"Why don't you hang out with us and see what a real man feels like?" He touched her face, and she smacked his hand away.

"Don't touch me." Xiao had to hold back her anger, for she is not one to fight, even though she can, and she is exceptional at it. Fighting is always the last resort in a dispute, and when she must fight, she fights all out.

"Ohhhh, we have a tough one." said the monk sarcastically. "I like tough girls." He grabbed her chin. This was the last straw. Xiao grabbed his hand and broke it, and struck his chin with her palm. Whack!!

The other guys grew hostile. "You just hit the boss!"

One monk came at her from the right, and she elbowed him in the stomach and punched his face with her fist. Whack! One came from the left and tried to grab her. Xiao grabbed his arm pulled him forward, making him lose balance, and punched him in the face and kneed him in the stomach, and elbowed him on the back. Wham!

The leader of the pack, the one who was knocked down, ran towards her. Xiao drew her sword and pointed it at him, and he stopped right there. "Ohh, what do we have here? A blind girl holding a sword! Ha, what a joke!"

"I will only say this once." said Xiao. "Leave the premises or suffer the consequences."

The monk gritted his teeth. "You will regret pointing a sword at me, blind girl." He drew his sword. "This will be easier than taking candy from a baby!"

She did not want the encounter to end this way, but alas, they have left her no choice. Several times Xiao has run into people like these, people who have no regard for human life. The first time it happened, she lost her eyes. She was merely a child, and powerless against the circumstances.

But when she learned how to hold a sword, no one was able to pick on her anymore. Those who were foolish enough suffered the dire consequences.

The monk charged forward and screamed. His footsteps echoed against her super sensitive hearing, which allowed her to pinpoint his exact position. Thump. Thump. Thump. Xiao can hear everything. The sound of the blade as it hit the air told her where the blade was.

Clang!! She blocked the attack successfully. The monk struck again, just to have it blocked. "What?!" He continued to attack, Xiao blocked and slashed his stomach. Slish!! He fell.

The other monks drew their swords and attacked. Xiao's hearing is so refined that she can distinguish their footsteps. Clang! She slashed one of them in the knee, and he fell and grabbed his wound and cried.

Two of them charged at her. She went through them and hit them with lightning speed. Slash. A second later, they collapsed.

One of them came from behind, and Xiao quickly turned around to block his attack, and slashed him in the stomach. Slish!

Before they knew what happened, the monks were on the ground and groaning in pain.

Xiao put her weapon back into its shell and turned around. "You call yourselves monks? You pick on the defenseless and I have no tolerance for such behavior! I should just kill you, but you are lucky I actually have a conscience. Now leave before I change my mind!"

The leader grew, scared for his life, ran to the exit. Slish! Blood dripped and he collapsed. Xiao gasped and turned around.

The monk was killed by Roh, who stepped into the courtyard. "Not bad...for someone who cannot see."

"Did you hire them?" Xiao asked.

"These insignificant pests? Please, do not associate me with them." Roh replied.

The monks grew angry. "What did you say about us, old man?"

Roh smiled. "You have already lost, can't you just accept the fact that you are useless and leave?"

They grunted and charged at him with their swords. "Yaaaah!"

Roh drew his weapon and made quick work of them. Slish! Slash! Unlike Xiao, he did not hold back and killed them right away.

Xiao was startled by the sudden change in the situation. Her efforts to spare their lives was wasted, but more importantly, she finds herself facing a skilled swordsman. Judging by his footsteps, he is skilled in the art of stealth, and he is fast and swift.

"Just who are you?"

"It is meaningless to reveal my identity to those who cannot see." said Roh. "But I am here to bring you with me. If you cooperate I promise you will not be hurt."

Xiao drew her blade.

"Is that such a wise idea?" Roh remarked. "I have never fought someone who is blind before. This should be interesting."

Neither of them moved a muscle as they bared their fangs at each other. Xiao is usually confident in her skills, but the appearance of this mysterious swordsman may endanger her life.

## [C] Title Contents

The heroes came into the alley and they were greeted by a group of ninjas. Everyone drew their weapons.

Zi: "We have some company."

Li: "Does this mean that our adversaries got here before us?"

Sui Long: "Most likely."

Shen Long: "I will not let them get Xiao!" He charged first.

Swords were hitting all over the place, and things became chaotic. Alex fought hard using the Heaven's Wrath Style, as Celina used the Dance of the Sword Style.

While everyone was occupied, Li saw an opening. She ran at one ninja and he was about to strike when she jumped and stepped on his shoulder, and went past him. She landed in a crouch, and ran forward. The ninjas chased her.

Slash! Shen just finished off a ninja. "Sui Long, Cheng, I am going ahead. You handle this!"

Xiao and Roh went past each other, hitting on the blades. \*Cling!\* It is said that experts can judge their opponent's strength just from one hit. Xiao realizes that he is no ordinary opponent, perhaps someone of exceptional talent.

They both turned around and continued to hit. \*Quong! Quong!\* Roh was fighting aggressively while she remained defensive. She had no other choice for she has the disadvantage of sight.

Li, who escaped the group fight, ran down the street to the outer walls of the residence. She stopped when she saw someone standing at the entrance. Jin had his arms crossed and he was leaning against the wall casually. He took several paces towards her slowly, and his care free attitude was an eyesore to her.

Li recognized his face, it is the one from those wanted posters. (Jin of the Demon Brothers? The wanted criminal from Leinwan who was never caught. What is he doing here in Yi Ling?)

Jin had smirk on his face until he saw she was holding the Ice Sword. (Hmm? She has the Ice Sword? So she is the one who defeated Rubble the Ice Hunter? This certainly is interesting.)

(If he really is Jin, then I must take precaution.)

(She must be Li Cheng, the sister of Alex Cheng, the Demon Slayer.)

Both fighters bared their swords against one another. They can choose to fight immediately, but they would rather not. "Let me pass."

"I'm afraid I cannot do that." Jin replied. "You're going to have to turn around and go away peacefully."

"That is not happening. Move or else!" said Li. (But no matter who he is...)

(No matter who she is...)

(I'm going to take him down!)

(She is not going pass this point!)

Li and Jin charged forward and clashed their blades. \*Clang!\*

"Dance of the Tiger!" Slash! Celina just finished off two ninjas.

Alex and the others continued to fight the large group of ninjas. They will finish the job eventually, but they are in a hurry to save Shen Long's sister. There is no way they can fight their way through, so they have no choice but to put their hopes on Li and Shen Long who already went ahead of the pack.

Xiao blocked Roh's incoming attack, but left herself open. Roh kicked her in the chest, leaving her rolling on the ground. She stood up immediately after she fell and put up her defensive position.

"My dear," said Roh, "If you cooperate it will save you a lot of pain."

"Cooperate with a kidnapper? You are no better than those drunk monks!" she replied.

Roh charged and attacked, and Xiao jumped out of the way. Whack! He ended up cutting a wooden column.

Xiao jumped to the roof, and Roh followed. They continued their sword fight on the roof.

Li attacked viciously, slashing left and right. Jin dodged with ease, as if he was not trying at all. Li became frustrated but she continued her assault, hoping that she will get him if she is fast enough. Slish, slish!

Jin blocked the next attack and counter attacked. Li jumped away to a safer distance. Jin smiled and swings his sword hard, creating an airbreaker.

Li held her sword vertically to block the shockwave, but it was not enough. It knocked her down and she rolled on the ground. Dooosh! Not only was she battered and bruised, but her perception of the fight is different. Her chances of winning has diminished, realizing how skillful her opponent is.

Jin approached. Li had to think of a plan, otherwise this could be the end of her. She wanted to use the Ice Sword's power badly, but has never figured out how to use it. Alex was able to use the Fire Sword's true powers, so why not her? She is more skilled than her brother, yet she is not able to do what he did? Is this why master handed the Fire Sword over to him, knowing he has the ability to activate the Fire Sword?

She needs the Ice Sword's powers badly, if only she had it she may be able to win this fight. And suddenly, her desire came true as the sword began to glow.

Jin stopped and became worried. (What is this?)

Li was surprised when she saw the vibrating glow, and she could feel its presence in her body. She did not understand why this is happening, but now is not the time to figure things out.

She charged into the enemy. Doosh! Jin blocked the attack and she pushed, forcing him to jump backwards. Li threw an airbreaker at him, and he jumped over it. Froom!

Overconfident and thinking that victory is definite, Li charged at him and did a jump attack. Whoosh! Jin dodged, stepping to the side, and she left herself open. Jin kicked her in the stomach, knocking her down. The glow on the Ice Sword has disappeared.

At this point, Shen Long showed up.

"Be careful, he is strong." said Li.

"Ohhh?" said Jin. "Who do we have here?"

Shen was surprised to see who his opponent is. "Jin Demos of the Demon Brothers?"

"Oh? I see my reputation precedes me even in this kingdom." Jin replied.

"What are you doing here?"

"It is none of your business."

Jin and Shen Long ran forward and exchanged moves. Clang! They both clashed their blades aggressively and then jumped away.

"Did Liu Zhang hire you to attack us?" Shen Long asked.

"Like I told you, what I do is none of your business!"

"How much is he paying you?"

"Silence!" Jin charged forward and thrusts his blade horizontally.

Shen blocked it, but the tip of the blade hit his shoulder, and he moved a few paces back.

Jin: "I expected more from one of the Demon Slayer's bodyguards."

"I will not let you harm my sister!" Shen charged and attacked aggressively, swinging his sword like an axe.

Jin went on the defensive and stepped back as Shen pushed him further and further back. Eventually, he was able to push Jin into the entrance.

Shen Long saw Xiao fighting on the roof. "Xiao!!"

When Xiao heard that voice, she was surprised. It sounds familiar...can it be...her brother? While she was distracted, Roh blurred and appeared behind her and whacked her on the back. She fell and he caught her and put her on his shoulder.

"Noooo!" screamed Shen Long. He charged at Jin.

Jin threw an airbreaker at him, and it hit him dead on, knocking him against the wall. Crack!! Shen's straw hat fell off, and his head was bleeding from the impact.

Li ran into the courtyard to attack. Jin blocked her assault and knocked her on the ground. Then Jin ran to the roof to join up with his brother.

"No...Xiao..." cried the fallen Shen Long.

Roh: "What a shame, you were too late. This girl is with us now."

With that said, the Demon Brothers jumped off the roof and escaped.

Alex, Sui Long, Celina, and Zi came to the scene, but obviously, they were too late.

Alex: "What happened?"

Shen Long walked a few paces and fell on his knees. "They took her...they took Xiao Ye...and I was not able to save her."

Li: "I was of much help either..."

Zi: "They're probably going to use her as a hostage. We have to get her back somehow."

Li: "It will not be that easy...for our enemies are the Demon Brothers."

Sui Long gasped. "Are you serious?"

Zi: "Demon Brothers? Who the hell are they?"

Celina: "They are the most feared swordsmen in the Leinwan Kingdom. It is misfortune that they are our enemies...and in order to get your sister back, we must fight them."

Not only did the heroes lose Xiao, but now they have two powerful adversaries to deal with. For one of them to be able to defeat Shen Long and Li, will they be a match for these wanted criminals?

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## 十八: Shen Long's Past. Xiao Ye's Future

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Standing on a cliff, Shen Long had to absorb what just happened. "It is my fault. Why couldn't I save her when she was right there?"

"You could not have known." said Sui Long, always the logical one out of the two. "You were occupied with Jin and the other Demon Brother came and took your sister. The Demon Brothers are fearful opponents. But more importantly, you are hurt. Let me bandage your wound."

"No, I am fine." Shen replied. "I still you all an explanation."

"Sorry, but I cannot stay for the explanation." said Celina. "I must go back to report this to his highness. He trusts me, so he will help us on our endeavor. He will send the imperial police force and find your sister's whereabouts."

"Make sure you hurry. And farewell, Celina." said Alex.

"I will. And you be careful, Alex." She pulled the reigns. "Hiyah!" The horse whined and galloped away.

Alex: "As we are speaking right now, Zi is asking the townsfolk if they saw two men carrying a woman. Do not worry Shen Long, we **will** find your sister."



"I was so close." Shen said while clenching his fist. "This is the second time I could not save her. What kind of brother am I?"

"Stop speaking like that." said Sui. "Such talk is non-sense."

"I know." Shen replied. "I am supposed to be a ruthless warrior like my master. I am the first student of the War God. I have never felt emotions for anyone or shown any signs of weakness. I have but one weakness...there is only one person in this world I care about." He turned around to face the others. Shen Long took off his straw hat and removed his mask for the first time.

Li and Alex were watching in suspense. Even Li, who has trained alongside him, has never seen his complete face. She never asked him about it, she respects his right to confidentiality, until the day he is ready to reveal himself. And that day is now.

Shen Long turns out to be a middle-aged man with wrinkles throughout his face. His hair is brown and curly, and they reached down his shoulders, since he does not cut them. "I have never revealed my identity to anyone other than Master Genzo...until now. Shen Long is the name given to me by Master Genzo. My real name is **Jiang Ye**. Before I became what I am, I was an ordinary person just like any of you."

Alex: "Why did you conceal your identity?"

I keep my face hidden because I am a wanted criminal in Yi Ling. For someone like me, no place is safe." said Jiang. He begins to explain the story of how he became what he is...

Many years ago, in the southern district of Yi Ling, there lived two siblings. Their names are Jiang and Xiao. The Ye siblings were orphans growing up in a tough neighborhood. They cannot afford to rent anywhere else so they have to live in the southern district. This is the worst part of the city as the crime rate is highest here. The Ye siblings did not resort to crime, however. They remained good people and made an honest living.

Xiao does pottery and Jiang is a merchant who buys and sells weapons. It is a good profession to have since weapons are in high demand, and they can keep some of the weapons for themselves to use, just in case. The two siblings lived happily, despite the tough times, and they smiled all the time.

But one day, a bunch of scum bags broke into their house to rob them. Crack! The thief smashed the pot on the ground. Guys were opening their drawings and searching through their stuff.

"We have nothing of value!" shouted young Jiang. "Leave us alone!"

Xiao was hiding behind her brother, scared and shaking.

"What do you have in your pockets?" said the thief, approaching the kids.

Jiang and Xiao backed up. "We don't have anything of value! Just let us be."

The thief grabbed Jiang by the collar and punched him in the face, knocking him down.

"Brother!!" shouted Xiao. She grabbed the thief's arms, who pushed her on the floor.

Jiang: "Leave her alone!"

The thief kicked Jiang violently, and Jiang, on the floor, could do nothing about it. Thud! Thud!

Xiao grew scared, and she took out a knife from her pocket and ran to the thief and stabbed him in the arm.

"Aaaagh!!" screamed he. "You bitch!" He slapped her and she fell.

He took out a sword and walked to the girl.

Jiang: "No!!" Two bandits grabbed Jiang by the arms, securing him tightly.

Xiao crawled backwards. "No...no!"

**Slash!! Blood splattered on the floor as Xiao's eyes were cut.**

Xiao screamed and covered her eyes as she bled on the floor. Xiao is Jiang's only sister in the world. Their parents died young, and thus she is his only family. They grew up together, and his obligation is to protect her. Xiao has always been a cheerful and happy girl, and a hard worker...and she does not deserve this. Jiang was pissed off beyond words.

Jiang shook off the thieves holding him and punched one of them. Thud. He grabbed the thief's knife and stabbed him, and stabbed the guy to his left.

The bandit who slashed Xiao ran out the door. Jiang chased him and slashed his back, and consequently he fell. The thief turned around and shrieked as Jiang stabbed him on the chest. Schleb! Blood splattered on Jiang's face, but he did not care, for he continued to stab his enemy violently in a fit of rage. "Die! Die!" Schleb! Schleb! The person was already dead, but he continued to stab, until he saw Xiao crawl out of the door.

"B-Brother!!"

"Xiao!"

The other thieves, seeing the atrocity, ran away. Jiang went to his fallen sister. "Don't worry Xiao, I'll take you to a doctor right away!!"

Jiang spoke with the local doctor as Xiao was waiting in the other room, sitting on the bed with a blindfold over her eyes. Jiang did not want her to listen in to the conversation.

"How is she, doctor?" Jiang asked worriedly.

The doctor hesitated to answer. "I'm afraid her condition is bad. Her eyes are badly damaged and she needs an operation. It will cost a hefty some of money and I am not sure if someone of your status can afford it."

"I will come up with the money. Please give me some time." Jiang replied.

"Time is of the essence for your sister." replied the doctor. "The sooner she gets the operation, the better her chances of recovery." With that said, the doctor packed his things and walked out.

This indeed is a morbid moment for Jiang. He was merely a boy of twelve, and he must come up with a large sum of money in order for his sister to be able to see again. As if things were not hard enough already, life is one hardship after another.

Ever since that day, Jiang resorted to stealing. How ironic it is, for he became what he hated. His sister lost his eyes because of crime, and this problem shall be resolved by crime, that is his justification.

Time after time, he came home with money, extra money on top of his usual salary. He was able to buy food and give it to his sister.

"Here." he said, handing her some pork buns.

"Where did you get the money for this?" Xiao asked him.

"Uhh, my boss was nice enough to give me a raise, so now we have more money." Jiang replied. "Things are looking up for us."

"Brother, are you stealing?" Xiao asked.

That question startled him. "No, of course not! Your brother is not like that."

Xiao touched his hand. "Brother...I know when you are lying to me." Ever since becoming blind, she was not able to do much. Doing pottery is a challenge, but not to mention basic things such as changing clothes and walking to the well to get water. But when one sense dies, another sense becomes stronger. Xiao relies mainly on her hearing, and it has become so good to the point that she can tell a lie from the truth.

"Xiao, if I don't steal, then we won't have enough money. And if we do don't have the money, then your eyes..."

"I don't care about that. What is lost is lost. I don't want you to go bad, brother."

"Listen, we need to make a living somehow," said Jiang. "Those bastards broke into our house and steal our things, and they robbed you of your sight."

"Two wrongs don't make a right!"

Jiang walked to the door. "Just be happy with what I bring home, sister." He walked away.

Jiang Ye did not listen to his sister's pleas. He continued to steal. Each time he succeeded, he grew cockier, and as a result, he stole more the next time. When he walks down the street, he wears a straw hat to cover himself. One day, he happened to see two familiar people – the thieves who robbed his house. He just stared in awe.

The thieves looked at him and ran away. Jiang chased one of them, running all the way to a dead end.

"Wait dude, you don't want to do this..." said the thief, putting his hands in front of him.

"You should have thought twice before you broke into my house and blinded my sister."

"It wasn't me...you already killed the dude who did that!"

"You're just as guilty as he is," said Jiang, approaching him closely with his sword.

"No...please!" Schleb! He was stabbed in the stomach and consequently he collapsed and died moments later.

Jiang could not believe he just did that, as he killed a man for the second time. He turned around and saw someone watching him, and that someone ran away. Someone had just witnessed him murdering someone, and that spells trouble for Jiang. He grew worried and went home and acted as if nothing had happened.

## [B] Title Contents

However, that was not the last incident. Jiang continued to steal and sometimes kill in order to preserve his own safety. Jiang thought he could get away with it, but one day, the imperial police came to his house to question Xiao. He hid himself in the bushes until they left. Of course, Xiao claims that she does not have the slightest idea of where her brother is.

That same night, Jiang made his decision. "I do not want to be a burden to you, Xiao. If I leave town, then the police will not suspect you."

The last thing he handed her was a bag of money, and he bid his sister farewell. Xiao objected to him leaving, but he did it regardless. She did not say anything as he left the room, she just sat there and cried silently. That was the last time she saw her brother.

After they parted, Jiang Ye went to the Valley of Death to escape society, and ended up facing the feared God of War. He surrendered himself and asked to be the War God's student, and he was accepted. Xiao, on the other hand, remained where she was and made a living making dolls.

Thus, that is the story of many years ago, the tragic tale of the separation of two siblings who could have had a normal life, but circumstances drove them apart.

Alex and Li were surprised to hear such a touching story. Li has known Shen Long for a long time, and she never heard the entire story until. This certainly does sound like her background, when Li left home and became separated from Alex.

Shen: "And the rest is history. Each one of us has our own story of why we beseeched Master Genzo. I wanted learn from him so I can be stronger and protect my sister...Sui Long, you were a criminal just like myself. You can way from the law and came to the Xizang Forest. Li, you ran away because you were being chased because you saw something you should not have. Cheng you came to look for Li. I promised my father I'd look after my sister while he was on his deathbed. I failed again and I have not kept my promise. I am unworthy as a brother. This is why I must rescue her no matter what."

Alex: "I never knew...I am sorry."

Zi returned. "I went around the neighborhood asking if anyone has seen two men kidnapping a woman, but no one has seen anything. But I do have one source, I am not sure if he is reliable."

Jiang: "It is better than nothing."

Zi: "I found the store where Xiao works at and spoke to the store owner. He was there when she was kidnapped, and he followed them. He did not trail them all the way, but there is an abandoned warehouse in the direction of where the Demon Brothers went to, so there is a high chance Xiao is held captive there."

Jiang: "Then we must hurry."

Sui Long grabbed Jiang's shoulder. "Hold it. I know you tend to lose your cool from time to time. You must stay in control."

"I know, Sui Long." Jiang replied without turning around. "I do not need you to lecture me."

In the dark corridors of their hideout, Jin came to visit his prisoner. He was a monk dressed like a priest, resting on the hay peacefully. When Jin came to the cell, the monk ran to the bars and grabbed it and screamed and hissed at Jin, who did not flinch at all.

"Let me out...let me out! I do not feel well!" yelled the monk.

"Do not worry." Jin replied. "You will feel better soon enough...everyone goes through this awkward phase when they are becoming demons."

"Demon? I do not want to become a demon! I want to be set free!"

"You will be freed soon enough, and you may kill as you please. But for the time being, do remain here, won't you?" Jin said in a sarcastic voice. He walked away.

The monk continued to scream and thrash about in the cell.

Xiao was tied up in another cell down the hallway. Her legs were tied up and her wrists were tied behind her back. It was dark with almost no light, not that light matters to her. After all, she has been living in darkness for the past eleven years. She uses her other senses to "feel out" her surroundings, and she can feel that this cell is very unpleasant. It reeks of dead rats and the air is damp.

She can hear a man screaming down the hall, presumably the monk in the cell. Then there were footsteps of someone she recognized – the man who kidnapped her.

Roh came to the bars. "How are you doing my dear? Getting used to it?"

"What is happening over there?" she asked.

"Do not concern yourself with it. Just worry about your own well being." Roh replied.

"Who are you?"

"What does it matter to you? Even if I tell you my name you will not know what I look like."

"If you will not tell me your name, you must be ashamed of it." Xiao replied. "I would be ashamed too, if I kidnap a blind girl and keep her locked up in a cell under the ground."

"Ohh?" said Roh, "You can tell we are underground?"

"There certain things that I can figure out without the ability to see."

"Indeed. You were able to fight me even though you cannot see. I must commend you for that, girl. I am Roh Demos of the Demon Brothers."

"Demon Brothers?" she repeated. "What business do you have here? What do you intend to do with me?"

"All you have to do is be obedient and stay here. We will not kill you, we just want to lure your brother out."

Xiao was shocked. (My brother?)

"If your brother shows up, then so will the Demon Slayer and his sister. Once they enter our hideout, they will not be able to leave alive." Roh walked away.

"Hmmm." King Cao was sitting in his thinking posture. He was resting his cheek on his hand and crossing one leg over the other. "Who is this person we are looking for, Lady Ce?"

"She is Xiao Ye...my friend." Celina replied. The truth is that she has never met Xiao before, and she hates to lie, but at certain times, she must bend the truth to put things in her favor. "She lives in the southern district but she was kidnapped by criminals. And the worst part is that she is blind, sire. I am really worried about her welfare."

"So they would stoop so low as to use a blind girl as a hostage?" asked Cao. "Is Liu Zhang behind this?"

"I do not know. But the ones who kidnapped her are the Demon Brothers."

That name struck a nerve in Liu Cao and now he is fully interested in the situation. "The Demon Brothers...from Leinwan? The notorious criminals...the ones that were never caught?"

"I take it you have heard about them?"

"They have been said to kill an entire group of mountain bandits all by themselves. Their level of swordsmanship is unparalleled. I have never met them personally, but I have heard much about them." Liu Cao stood up. "If they are linked to Liu Zhang, then we have much trouble on our hands. Lady Ce, I will send a rescue team to find your friend. You will have fifty men to accompany you and obey your commands."

Celina, satisfied that her goal is accomplished, bowed. "Thank you, your highness."

The heroes went to the building in question, and sure enough, ninjas were waiting for them there. Alex, Zi, Li, Shen Long, and Sui Long drew their swords as the ninjas charged into them.

Inside the courtyard, Roh was waiting with his arms crossed. "I see...so they're here already. They're faster than I thought."

Slash! Alex finished off two enemies. He looked to the left and right, and people were fighting everywhere. Such is the scene of a group fight, there is chaos everywhere, and one must lookout for himself.

Li threw smoke grenades on the ground, and smoke was released, covering the area. Amidst the chaos, Alex went ahead, despite not wanting to leave them alone. He went to the courtyard, and seeing that it is empty, went straight to the building.



Jin was watching him from the wall. He had a wicked smile on his lips, a smile that signifies he has something sinister planned for our hero.

Thanks to the confusion she caused, Li was able to get out of the battle and entered the courtyard from the back. There, Roh was waiting for her.

(He's the other Demon Brother...Roh Demos.)

"Go ahead." said Roh, which surprised Li. "You came here to save your friend, right? Your blind friend is waiting for you inside. Do not worry, I will not get in your way. I am here for Shen Long only."

Is he serious? Li ran past him, expecting him to attack at anytime, but he did not, just like he said.

Alex Cheng was searching the hallways of the basement, and he had trouble doing so because of the lack of light. There were no windows and no candles, and he must rely on his other senses should ambush him. Li Cheng was on the other side of the hall, and she heard footsteps coming the intersection.

Schling! She pointed her blade at Alex, and he gasped. When she realized who it was, she retracted her weapon.

"Did you find Xiao yet?"

"No." Alex replied.

"Don't you think this is a little suspicious? This place is not guarded at all. The Demon Brothers let us in too easily. This has to be a trap."

"I see what you mean." Alex replied. "But is it a good idea to back out now?"

"We can still regroup."

Xiao heard two people talking down the hallway. "Is anybody there?" she screamed.

Alex heard the girl's voice. "That's her!" He ran down the hallway.

"Wait!" Li shouted. "You idiot!"

Alex made his way to the cell. "You must be Xiao Ye."

"Who are you?" asked Xiao.

"We came here to rescue you." Alex replied proudly. "We are friends of your brother."

"My brother?"

"Indeed. Jiang has told me all about you, Miss Ye."

Li sensed someone watching them, and sure enough, there was a creepy monk who was staring at them with his bloodshot eyes.

Li: "Who are you?"

The monk's face was as pale as a ghost, it is apparent he is ill. "Blood..."

Alex: "Are you connected with the Demon Brothers?"

"Blood...I must have your blood!!"

Li: "Alex, be careful. Something is not right about him!"

Xiao: "What is happening?"

Celina, riding on the horse, came to the meeting point. A scout came to her and bowed. "Lady Ce, one of our men has discovered a building with suspicious activity. We believe this where Jin and Roh are hiding."

"Good!" said Celina. "Inform all the men to meet at that location. Let us be our way." She pulled the reigns, and the horse whined and galloped away.

The men followed her on foot, and they were trained to be able to keep up with a horse.

Shen Long came to the front yard to see Jin standing before him. They both knew that they would have a rematch here. The look on Shen's eyes indicated that he has no intention of backing down.

"I do not know what business you have here, Jin, but I am getting my sister back no matter what."

Jin smirked. "Sure, you can have her back...that is, if you can defeat me."

"Then you leave me no choice."

"Do you know who you are dealing with? My brother and I have never been defeated before."

"That is because you never fought the student of the War God!" shouted Shen Long.

"Ohhh? Is that so? Perhaps you are angry about our last encounter."

"Then let us settle that score right now."

"Agreed."

They charged into each other and exchanged moves.

Meanwhile, Sui Long ran along the walls of the confines. A bunch of daggers flew his way, and he jumped over them and landed in a crouch. Roh was standing there.

"So the rumor are true...the notorious Demon Brothers are in this territory."

"You came here, knowing who I am and what I am capable of." said Roh.

"You work for the devil, and I have nothing more to say to you." said Sui Long.

"Very well then...I shall add you to my list of casualties."

Sui Long charged forward and slashed, and Roh jumped over him and landed. Sui was surprised at his speed, but he will not let that get the better of him. They clashed their blades. \*Clang!\*

"You are unarmed. Leave now or else I will have to use force." said Li to the monk.

The monk did not respond, nor did he seem to understand her words. He was sweating like hell, much more than a regular human can sweat. His eyeballs look like they have lost all life in them.

Alex and Li drew their swords. The monk groaned in an inhuman voice. Energy was being released from his body as his body grew in size. "Uuuugh!! Aaaagh!" His skin color turned from pale white to hateful red, and his feet grew taller and thicker. His face became twisted and grotesque, with sharp, barbaric teeth and two horns. His eyes were those of a predator, and his limbs were muscular. Within a minute, he had transformed into an ogre in front of their very eyes.

The heroes just witnessed the transformation of a human to demon, something that is indeed an eye-opener.

"What is happening!?" Xiao yelled in shock. She can only hear what is happening, and none of these sounds were familiar to her.

The demon ogre took a step forward. Thump. Xiao grew increasing worried and frightened.

Alex and Li stepped back as the drooling ogre approached.

"What now, Li?" asked Alex.

"Aren't you the Demon Slayer? This is your specialty!"

"I've only slain one demon so far!"

The ogre approached in its threatening manner, and it will be a challenge for the heroes to fight this creature in such a narrow corridor.

Alex ran to it and slashed. The ogre blocked with his bare arm, much to Alex's surprise. Then he whacked Alex, knocking him down.

Li ran at it and slashed. Whoosh! The demon moved its arms away, dodging the attack. Li stabbed it in the stomach, but her sword only made it half way through. The creature smacked her against the wall and she fell. Wham!

"No, sister!!" screamed Alex. His Fire Sword glowed red and caught fire.

Li's Ice Sword was glowing as well. (Is it reacting to the Fire Sword?)

The ogre seemed to be scared of the fire, and flinched as Alex waved his sword around.

"Let me out!!" screamed Xiao from the cell.

Li: "Patience! We're coming!"

"Roar! Roar!" screamed the ogre as Alex slashed its arms.

Li: "Take over. I will free the girl." She ran straight to the Ogre and slid between its legs and came out the other side.

"Let's go!" said Alex, enticing the demon to come after him.

Li went to the cell and slashed the wooden bars. It fell apart and she went into untie Xiao.

Crash! The ogre broke a piece of the wall in anger. Alex ran away. Li ran to the opposite side, holding Xiao's hand.

The hallway structure was basically a square, so Alex and Li will eventually meet up somewhere on the other side of the building. Smash, smash. The ogre broke more pieces of the ceiling as it chased its prey.

Alex and Li and Xiao grouped up.

Shen Long was injured, and his straw hat had fallen off. He was kneeling from the pain inflicted by his opponent.

Jin, of course, indulged in his enemy's pain. "What's the matter? Is that all the student of the legendary War God has to offer?"

Hearing that insult, Shen stood up and prepared for another round.

"Roarr!!" The ogre tried to grab Li, but she jumped away just in time.

Xiao threw daggers at the ogre's chest, and one of them hit its eye, and it screamed in pain. This gave Li the chance to stab it in the stomach. But this time, it worked, for her Ice Sword was activated, and the stab became extra painful.

Alex leaped up and slashed the demon's neck, and it roared one last time before it fell backwards. Thump!

Sui Long and Roh leaped to the air and hit, and went past each other. Sui's shoulder was cut and it bled. It was but a scratch, but this clearly showed Roh's skill, as he is able to hit people in the air. They turned around to face each other. Sui Long is always calm and logical, and in this situation, he is mostly likely going to lose the fight.

Roh was about to attack, but he stopped when he heard a commotion outside. Imperial police officers charged into the perimeter.

"What a shame. It looks like our fight will have to be canceled." said Roh. He ran away.

Jin is just as smart as his brother is. He knows when the situation is not in his favor. "You are lucky this time, Shen Long. The next we meet you will die for sure." Jin

ran away. Normally, Shen would chase him, but not in his condition. He fell to the ground and grabbed his wounds.

Imperials came to his aid. Celina got off her horse. "Shen Long? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, it's nothing." he replied stubbornly.

"You are bleeding!" Celina exclaimed. "These wounds need to be treated."

Sui Long came to the scene.

Celina: "Did you find Xiao Ye?"

"No...Cheng and Li went in before I did. Perhaps they are still inside."

Sure enough, Alex and Li bring Xiao out.

Shen Long was overjoyed to see her at last. "Xiao..."

Upon hearing his voice, Xiao became surprised. She had to be certain that this voice is her brother's voice. After all, she has not seen him in many years. Indeed, it is her brother. "Jiang...is that you?"

"Yes...it's me Xiao!"

They ran into each other and embraced tightly. "Is it really you, brother?"

Shen Long removed his mask, revealing his face once again. "Yes...it really is me."

She proceeded to touch his face all over. "Yes, you **are** my brother." Tears streamed down her eyes.

The others were touched to see this reunion of two siblings who have been separated for over eleven years. Xiao knew not what to say, but she just cried, and for the first time in a long time, these were tears of happiness. Jiang himself could not help it and cried. "I'm sorry." said Jiang. "I should have seen you sooner."

Li became embarrassed at such an emotion display, and she walked away.

Zi was watching the scene while leaning against the wall. "It is truly touching indeed." he said as Li walked by.

"You sure are satisfied...for someone who has not done a thing!" Li walked away.

"Ouch...harsh."

Celina looked at Alex, and he looked back at her. They both agree that they had done a good thing.

Celina instructed the police to go back to their posts since the mission is over. The next step for Xiao is to have Jiang introduce her to his friends.

"Everyone, let me properly introduce you to my sister, Xiao Ye. These people are my friends. My life and death friends."

Zi was the first to introduce himself. "Hi there. My name is Zi Lai, and I'm the Demon Slayer's best friend. "I never knew that Shen Long's sister is a beauty. You surely are a rose among a bush of vines."

"Thank you, Mr. Lai."

He was offering a handshake, but instead she touched his face.

"Ohhh, very forward, aren't we?" said he.

"You must excuse her." said Jiang. "She cannot see what you look like, so she touches your face to get an idea of what you look like."

Zi: "I don't mind at all. She can feel me wherever she wants."

Nobody said anything about his comments, since they are used to it by now.

Xiao: "You certainly have a playful side, Mr. Lai. You like to flirt with women but you are very insecure."

"Me? Insecure?"

"You also are hiding something very important. You have a past that you are not proud of."

Zi: "Uhhh, what?"

Xiao: "Not only can I read your faces, but I can determine what kind of person you are." She moved on to Sui Long, who took a step back.

"I'd prefer if you do not read me."

She touched his face anyway. "You are wearing a mask? Very well, I respect your right to privacy." She moved on to touch Celina's face.

"I am Lady Ce, but you can call me Celina."

Xiao's hands ran through the contents of her face, going from top to bottom. She touches her forehead, then the eyes, the nose, cheeks, mouth and chin.

"You certainly are a beautiful young lady. And you are a very kind person." That reading is indeed accurate. "But you seemed to be full of stress and you worry too much."

The next person was Li. "So you were the person who rescued me from the demon. Nice to meet you, Li Cheng."

Li: "You are not going to read me too, are you?"

Xiao: "Ah, you are very young indeed. You are head strong but you have a lot of doubt and uncertainty..."

"Enough." said Li. "I am not here for you to give me a personality test."

And finally, the last person was Alex. He blushed as she was touching his face. He is not used to this kind of touching from another woman other than Celina, and since Celina is here, he is embarrassed about it. "Alex Cheng, the famous Demon Slayer? Indeed you are a strong person, you are very dedicated and you strive to get better. But sometimes you feel that you are powerless and overwhelmed by the situation."

Once again, she is accurate, though no one would admit it. But they all agreed that she has amazing reading abilities, much like a psychic does.

Xiao bowed to everybody. "Thank you so much for rescuing me. I owe you my life. I cannot repay your kindness with money, but if there is anything you need me to do, I will do it with the best of my abilities."

Alex Cheng spoke up. "Miss Ye, your brother has told us all about you. Even though you cannot see, you are able to fight with the sword...that is extremely admirable and rare indeed. Will you join us in our fight against the demons?"

Xiao replies, "Fighting demons? Very well. Consider me your ally."

"Welcome to the team." said Alex.

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## 十九: Let the Journey Begin

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The heroes can finally take a breath of relief when they rescued Xiao from certain doom. The Demon Brothers are still on the loose, and the imperials are on their trail. They are trained professionals, so it is best if this task is left at their hands. On a side note, Liu Cao seems to have taken a special interest in catching these criminals. Nobody knows exactly the motivation behind it, but perhaps he has heard much about them from being in Leinwan for several years.



After his fight with Jin, Jiang was seriously injured and resting in bed. There were bandages on his upper body with dried blood on it.

"Hang in there, Shen Long. You will be fine." said Alex.

"Of course I will. I am the first student of the invincible Master Genzo."

Alex smiled.

"Listen, Cheng. The person who did this to me is **no** amateur. He is Jin, the younger of the Demos brothers. Roh is the teacher, and Jin is the student, and even the student was able to do this much damage to me. Do not underestimate them because it is a fatal mistake to do so. They are given the name Demon Brothers because of their inhuman strength. No one has ever defeated them in combat because of their strong sword craft. There is not a soul in the Shen Kingdom who does not know them. Try to avoid a one on one fight with them."

The infamous Demon Brothers are dressed in their usual black attire. They are laughing and standing on a ground filled with corpses...corpses of highly skilled swordsmen they just killed.

"Very well. I will take your advice to heart. In the meantime, get some rest." replied Alex.

"Oh, can you do me a favor?" inquired Jiang.

"What is it?"

"Can you please take care of my sister in my absence? I am unable to attend to her needs, not like this."

"Sure thing. You have done much for me, so I owe you, Shen Long."

"Look at me...I am supposed to be your bodyguard, yet I cannot protect you in this condition. I cannot even defend myself."

"No." said Alex. "You did fine. You saved me from Tao and many other fights. I am safe now, for I am in the palace."

"But Liu Zhang is living in the same palace."

"He will not do anything stupid under the watchful eye of the king." Alex replied calmly. "He will be caught and tried eventually."

Li came into the room and leaned against the wall with her arms crossed. "So, how's he doing?"

"Shen Long lost a lot of blood, but it is nothing life threatening. He will recover soon."

"Well, that's a given." Li replied. "If Shen Long can't even handle a few minor scratches, then he has no right to the title of the first student of the War God. He has been through worse before...I've seen it. He will be fine."

"Sister, perhaps you should be nicer...he is your comrade."

"I am telling it like it is." Li retorted. "And I treat everyone equally." With that said, she walked away in her usual arrogant manner.

Meanwhile, Zi was up to his usual antics. "Ah, yes, this is the training ground." There is where high class swordsmen like myself come to train daily."

"Really?" Xiao asked. "If the training ground is this luxurious, then the rest of the palace is even better. Life must be really good in the imperial palace."

"But of course." replied Zi, always trying to sound intelligent to impress a young lady. "Only the most important and influential people may even glimpse at this palace. The army accepts only the best fighters to represent the kingdom. And in my case, I am both skilled and high class, so that is why I am here, able to take you on a tour of this place."

"You sure like to brag, Mr. Lai."

"Oh heavens no. I am but a humble man. I don't really like those high class women. They're too stuck up. I like normal girls who have exceptional beauty...like yourself." He took her hand. "It is too bad you cannot see. If you had a mirror you'd be impressed with your marvelous beauty."

Xiao laughed. "Really? Are you just saying that to make me feel better?"

"To call you a beauty is an understatement."

Li coughed on purpose, and Zi and Xiao turned their attention to her. "Having fun on your little 'tour'?"

"Mr. Lai was just showing me around the palace."

"What's the point if you can't see it?"

Zi: "C'mon Li, be nice. Miss Ye is our special guest."

Xiao: "She is right. True beauty cannot be fully appreciated if it cannot be seen. That is why it makes no difference where I live. I think it is more troublesome to live in a large place since it is harder to find things."

Alex and Sui Long showed up.

"Who is there?" Xiao asked.

Alex: "Your senses sure are keen, Miss Xiao."

"Oh, it is you, Mister Cheng."

"You may call me Alex. I have an update on the whereabouts of the Demon Brothers."

"Have you caught them yet?"

"No." Alex replied. "Some of the civilians have been reported to see them in the western district. We are tightening our security in that area."

Xiao: "But they are hard to catch...as a matter of fact, they have never been caught."

Alex: "Never been caught in **Leinwan**. But we have Liu Cao as our king, and he is extremely strict. I am sure that no criminal will be able to escape from our well trained troops."

Zi: "If they are hired by Lord Zhang, then he can just give them the imperial seal and they will come here...and that means we're screwed."

Li: "That would be a stupid move on his part...and to come up with this idea proves that you're stupid. Why would he do that? If the Demon Brothers are in here, then they might as well turn themselves in."

Alex: "But what if they wear a disguise? Ekin entered the palace because he was wearing a mask."

Li had no response to that. Alex has a point, and she is the one who feels stupid.

Meanwhile, Celina visited the king at the royal hall. Cao was once again in his thinking position, with his chin resting against his hand, and one leg crossing the other. "Lady Ce, I am pleased to hear that your friend has been rescued from the clutches of the kidnappers. How is she doing? What was her name again?"

"She is Xiao Ye."

"It must be tough being blind. I cannot imagine how she can live by herself."

"Not to worry." said Celina. "She is capable of taking care of herself."

"How did you meet her?" asked Cao.

"Uhh, she is a friend from long ago. I knew her before I married Liu Bei."

"I see, I'd love to eventually meet her, but right now I am busy with many things. We need to do something about Liu Zhang. That bastard is probably planning something else as we speak. I know it. All I need is an excuse to arrest him."

"Yes, I know. It will be hard for you, even though you are the king. We do not have any evidence of his wrongdoings. He is quite popular with the other lords, and arresting him will caused much turmoil in the court."

Cao: "In any case, do not leave the palace. Leave only if it is absolutely necessary. The assassins who call themselves the Demon Brothers are out there. I know of their abilities...I hear their name in Leinwan many times...and rumors are usually true."

"Thank you for your concern, sire." Celina turned around and left the room.

Liu Cao did not tell anyone this, but he actually **did** run into Roh one time...but it was a fight he is not proud of. And he will tell no one of it.

Liu Cao finds himself in a predicament, as he is about to face off with Roh, the renowned assassin. They bare their swords at each other, but Cao is not sure if he can win. The wind blew hard. The moment shall arrive when the fight starts, and when the fight starts, it can only end one way...with a winner and a loser.

Indeed, that was a horrible day he'd like to forget. And now, the very same person who defeated him is now roaming about in **his** city. He will do whatever it takes to catch the Demon Brothers to regain his pride.

## [B] Title Contents

"Miss Ye, we are happy to have you with us." said Alex.

"Thank you, it is an honor to work with the Demon Slayer." said Xiao. "Never in my life did I think I would have the privilege to be able to take a step inside the imperial palace. Cheng, not only did you save my life, but you are helping my brother with his recover, and you are letting me stay here. I cannot possibly repay you." She bowed. It is customary for someone to bow to a non-authority figure if that person feels gratitude. Bowing shows appreciation and humbleness.

Alex was uncomfortable with such a compliment. He waved his hands in front of him. "No, it's no problem at all. Don't be so modest, Miss Ye. You are Shen Long's brother. He did me many favors, so I am merely repaying him."

"You are the one who is modest, Mister Cheng." said Xiao.

"Please, call me Alex, Miss Ye."

"Please, call me Xiao."

"So umm, how is your stay here? Did Zi take you on a tour?"

Zi: "Of course I did."

Xiao smiled. "Indeed, and I enjoyed it very much."

Alex: "Umm yeah, I heard from your brother that you are skilled in sword craft. I find that quite impressive. I simply must see it for myself."

Li: "A blind person who can fight? What an oxymoron."

No one paid attention to her comments. Xiao was bothered by her, but she held it in. "Indeed. I learned my sword craft from my master. He is one of the best in the kingdom."

Li: "Was your master blind too? I guess he must have low expectations...if his students are blind. I wonder if he knows what he's doing."

Xiao: "Miss Cheng, I do not mind your rude comments, but please do not insult my master."

Li: "Tch, talking tough all of a sudden? Can you really hold a sword? Can you really be of benefit to our group?"

Sui Long: "Li, stop it."

Xiao: "I'll have you know, my master has trained some of the best martial artists in the nation!"

Li does not find that impressive, for her master is the one and only War God.  
“His standards must have been low for him to pick you.”

Xiao: “I have heard enough. You are extremely rude.”

Li: “I bet you’ve never even send a sword before.”

Xiao: “For your information, a sword was the very last thing I saw before I became blind. Your words are strong and confident, so I am assuming you can back it up with your sword craft?”

“Of course. I mastered the Heaven’s Wrath style thanks to my training from the Legendary Master Genz, one of the Four Brothers of China.”

“Just because your master is from the Brotherhood does not make you better than others!”

Zi: “Alright, ladies, enough. Stop it already.”

Li: “You stay out of this. Now, Miss. Xiao, I suppose that **you** can back your words with your sword?”

“Is that a challenge?”

“Did I stutter?”

Zi: “Li, be nice to her. It’s her first day here.”

Xiao extended her arm. This action signified him to be quiet, and that she can stand up for herself. She pulled the sword a little bit out of the shell, revealing the middle of the blade.

“Words mean nothing. If you want to duel, let our swords do the talking.”

Li smiled because she was thinking the same words. “Hmph. Fine by me. Just for you, I will not use my Ice Sword. I will use a regular sword.”

“As you wish.”

Sui Long and Zi clearly do not want to see this match happen, but they cannot stop it. And to say that men have big egos is only half the truth. Alex, however, is thinking otherwise. He is curious as to how Xiao fights.

The two fighters were about ten paces away, standing on solid, concrete ground, the type of environment that Xiao prefers. Everything was silent as no one uttered a sound. The wind can be heard clearly.

Li was the first to draw her weapon. \*Schling\* Xiao’s head was facing sideways. She relies on her ears rather than her eyes, so it matters not which face she faces; she will be fine as long as she can hear her opponent.

Li: (This will be a piece of cake.) She charged forward and slashed, and Xiao blocked it. \*Cling\* Li stepped back. (What? That must’ve been a fluke. She just got lucky.) Li waited a few seconds to strike again.

Xiao did not move at all and waited for her opponent to come. Li is a true ninja indeed, for her footsteps are stealthy and quick. But as long as they make a sound, Xiao can pinpoint her location. Thump thump thump.

In the world of darkness, Xiao can “see” the footsteps. Each time her foot hits the ground, a vibration is produced in the form of a wave.

Li slashed left and right. \*Cling\* Xiao was able to block every single attack. Li grew impatient and struck harder. \*Cling\* Xiao stepped back as Li advanced.

Xiao took a risk and attacked. Li jumped to the air, somersaulted and landed.

“Do you still think blind people are worthless?”

Li was ticked off. She charged and thrusts her sword forward, and Xiao dodged to the side. Whoosh. Whoosh. Her moves were swift and tricky. Li was having a hard time predicting her movements.

The ninja girl jumped and slashed, but she only hit the ground. Xiao appeared a few paces away and got into fighting stand. She stood on one leg while the other leg

was raised up at an angle. Her sword is pointing forward and her free arm is extended to the side.

Sui: "That style..."

Zi: "Is it..."

Sui: "Yes. It is a rare style that not many people use. It was developed by martial artists from the east...the **Walking Crane**."

Li also knew the style's name, but she does not care. Her pride is blocking her judgment. (Walking Crane? Big deal! I will show you that my Heaven's Wrath is superior!)

The ninja girl charged forward, and Xiao took a step forward and strikes with her sword. Li had to step back. What was that? Li cannot get near her. She tried again, and Xiao blocked and attacked in the same motion. Li has to step back a few more paces. Now she is worried she may not be able to back up her words.

At this point, Celina showed up. "What is going on?"

Alex: "They are having a duel."

"A duel?" exclaimed Celina, ever the pacifist. "But Miss Ye is blind. We must call it off."

"No. I want to see what she is capable of...she is doing just fine."

\*Clang!\* Xiao went on the offensive. Li, now growing cautious, took a defensive stance. Xiao was moving forward, keeping her body low and her sword high so that is hard to hit her.

Li was tired of backing up, so she jumped over her.

Both of them were now standing still. (How can this be? Is she reading my moves?) Li was extremely worried...will she lose to a blind person?

While Li Cheng fights for pride, Xiao fights for a different reason. She may be blind, but she is tired of hearing that word and being insulted for it. She adopted the Walking Crane to prove to others that she is just as capable as they are, perhaps even better than the average swordsman. But she only fights if it is absolutely necessary, for she is wise enough to know that fighting is not always the answer.

Xiao continued her offensive. They jumped around and exchange moves while the observers watch in awe. It is unanimously agreed that Xiao's sword craft is nothing short of miraculous. But Li's speed and reflexes are not to be ignore either.

Clang! Cling! Xiao made a strike, immediately following another strike. Clang! Her blade missed Li's hair by a few inches. Li jumped away to a safer distance.

This fight is not what the ninja expected. Li was tired and panting for breath. Not only is Xiao keeping up with her, but she is actually a worthy opponent.

Li decided that it is time to stop fooling around and end this match. She got into her offensive position, and Xiao can sense that something dangerous is about to happen.

Li charged forward, Xiao slashed. Li jumped up. "Heaven's Wrath Style - Heaven's Retribution!"

Xiao quickly jumped away from the point of impact. Li's strike missed, but in a continuous motion, she ran forward and knocked Xiao's blade from her hand. \*Clang\* She pointed her blade at Xiao's head.

It was over in the blink of an eye, so to speak.

It was over in the blink of an eye.

Alex: "That was...absolutely astounding!"

Sui: "I agree. Her sword craft surprised even me."

Zi: "I'm speechless. You can search all of the Shen Kingdom but not find a girl like her. She is a rare gem indeed."

Li picked up Xiao's sword and handed it to her.



"You win. You were able to back up your words with your sword craft after all. You are an exceptional swordsman."

Li turned her head. "No, **you** are the exceptional one. I actually did not expect you to put up such a resilient fight. If I made even one mistake, you would have won." For once, she is being humble. "I had to admit," said Li, "You had me surprised. Not only can you handle the word well, but you mastered the Walking Crane Style. You truly opened my eyes, so to say."

"I'm glad you finally understand." Xiao replied. "Ever since I lost my vision, I had to rely on my other senses. During the first few days I was blind, I was scared out of my mind. I could not see a thing or find anything. I was...just blind. Slowly but surely I got used to it. I walked around with a stick to make I don't bump into objects on my way out of the house. I may have lost my vision, but as a result my other senses grew stronger. Much stronger. My hearing allows me to determine exactly where you are in relation to me. I hear your footsteps and from that I am able to determine at what speed you are running towards me."

Xiao did not move at all and waited for her opponent to come. Li is a true ninja indeed, for her footsteps are stealthy and quick. But as long as they make a sound, Xiao can pinpoint her location. Thump thump thump.

"I hear the sound of the sword hitting the air clearly. I can tell exactly where the sword is and its length just from the sound alone."

Li attacked from the left and right. Each time she moves the sword, the sound of the blade hitting the wind is clearly audible, and Xiao can determine where the blade is, and its length as well. Whooooosh!

"So you see, based on all these pieces of information, I make a mental picture of what is happening," said Xiao. "I used to live in a world of darkness, but I do realize that even blind people can still live without their sight. You can say it is both a blessing and a curse."

Everyone was amazed at her explanation.

Xiao: "I can use my nose to smell people...you see, high class people have a distinct smell to them. They smell different than peasants. Because of the clothes they wear and the fragrances they spray on themselves. I use my sense of taste to determine what food I am eating or drinking. I am also trained to sniff out poison. Even with wine, by the way it smells and by the way it tastes, I can tell you the name of the wine. And most importantly of all, I rely on my hearing. See on the roof? There are two birds."

Alex and Li looked up. Sure enough, there are two doves squawking at each other.

"There is also a barrel of water behind me, and it is dripping water."

They looked over there, and sure enough, water was dripping from a barrel.

Li: "That's simply amazing! You can hear such small things from so far away?"

Xiao: "I tend to hear better when things are quiet. When I first met all of you, I use my hands to feel out your faces. This is how I "see" your faces...and how you feel on the inside. And I see that you, Miss. Cheng, are afraid to accept someone who is different."

Her mental read is accurate once again. Li smiled for the first time in a long time. "It seems that I've misjudged you, Miss. Ye." She offered a handshake, and Xiao shook it.

Everyone smiled and they were happy that the conflict between these two has been resolved...for now.

In the sunny afternoon, Xiao was in the backyard feeding doves. The doves were flopping to the rice she was throwing on the floor. She seems to be enjoying it.

The rest of the group converse in the room. "She must have trained hard to acquire her sword craft." said Li. "I wonder who she learned it from?"

Alex: "Perhaps it is self-learned?"

"That is impossible." Li replied. "No one can master the Walking Crane by oneself. Her master must be someone decent."

Sui: "I see that you are starting to respect her. This is healthy attitude."

Li: "Yeah, whatever. I just wonder...how much better she could be if she can see...isn't there something we can do?"

Alex: "Hmmm. Maybe there **is** something we can do."

Alex brought Xiao to the royal hall. They both kneel before the king. "Long live his majesty."

Liu Cao stood up from his chair and walked towards them. "Ah, Miss Ye, you must be the famous blind prodigy that everyone is talking about." He gave the signal for them to stand up.

Alex stood up and grabbed her arm, helping her stand up. "Thank you so much for letting me stay here, sire."

"No need for thanks." Cao replied. "Any ally of Sir Cheng is an ally of mine. You must have been through a lot. I hope they did not treat you badly in the prison."

"I am fine, thank you for your concern." Xiao replied.

"How long have you been blind?"

"Twelve years."

"It must be hard to live by yourself." said Cao. "Not to worry. Upon command, I can summon the best doctors from the kingdom to come here and help you."

"I am indebted to you, sire." said Xiao.

## Title Contents

Xiao was sitting in bed and the doctor just finished examining her eyes. He was the same imperial doctor who examined Celina when she was ill. Alex walked up to him. "Doctor, can anything be done?"

The doctor rubbed his long beard and thought long and hard. "Hmmm, her injury is too old. I'm afraid there is nothing I can do with my current ability."

Alex: "Doctor, can't you do anything? Is she going to be blind her whole life?"

"I am sorry, my lord. I cannot create miracles."

Alex: "Then I will summon the best doctors from the land, and have them all examine her."

Xiao grabbed Alex's sleeve. "Sir Cheng...it is alright. I appreciate everything you and the king are doing for me. I do not need a doctor. I have already accepted my fate a long time ago."

Alex: "But your sight was unfairly taken away from you."

"No, it is okay. I am used to it. To be honest, I did not expect even the best doctor in the world to be able to help me."

Alex came outside with a depressed mood. "The doctor cannot do anything. He said that he cannot create miracles."

Li: "Hmmm, this sure seems hopeless. There must be a way we can help Miss. Ye. Hmmm..." Suddenly, the word "miracle" gave her an idea, and she pounded her own hand. "I got it! Alex, we can bring her to the temple!"

"The temple?" He gasped. "You don't mean..."

"The Temple of Enlightenment."

"Of course!" Alex exclaimed. "With their holy healing powers, they can heal any injury."

"No matter how old it is." Li added.

"But the path there will be dangerous. I remember Zi and I going there and we were almost killed by bandits...alligators...killer bees, and many other things."

"That's because you're both inexperienced. I've been there before and I remember the path there. It is worth a try, is it not?"

"The Temple of Enlightenment?" Xiao repeated.

"Yes." replied Li. "The monks there can heal any bodily injury."

"But is not just a rumor?" Xiao asked.

"It is supposedly a legendary place but I know it exists because I've been there. I know the path may be dangerous, but it is the one key to restoring your eyes."

"Thank you, but I kindly decline."

"Huh? What?" Li asked dumbfounded.

Xiao: "I am used to living the way I am. You and the others have done much for me already. I have done nothing for you and I can't accept any more favors."

"But..."

"It is safer to remain here, is it not?"

"Alex can get us escorts...we will be perfectly safe."

"Li, I have already accepted my fate long ago...that I will not be able to see...not with my eyes at least. There are certain things that one has to accept."

"Don't tell me you prefer to stay blind?" said Li.

"I do not consider myself to be blind. I am perfectly capable of doing things you normal people can do. But after our fight, you already knew that, didn't you? I would rather not risk our lives to gain something that may or may not happen. But thank you for thinking of me, Li."

Li was at a loss of words. Alex came over. "I'll talk to her." His sister nodded and walked away.

Xiao: "Are you going to convince me to go there too?"

"Miss Ye, I will not force you to do something you do not want. My sister and I thought you might want to have your eyes cured...and return you to the way you were twelve years ago."

Standing on the rooftop, they were both facing south, where the summer breeze went past them.

"The truth is..." Xiao pulled out her sword slightly. "Whether I see or not makes no difference. Perhaps it is better to stay this way. I have seen many ugly and grotesque things in this world. When I lost my vision I saw nothing but dark, red blood for a few days. My hometown is the Yi Ling southern district. Many crimes happen due to poverty and the way people are over there."

"That certainly is true. You may not want to see again." said Alex. "But do you think your life was so bad before? At least you had a brother who cared for you. He even resorted to crime just to get money to get you a doctor. What Jiang did was certainly not right, but the point is that he did it for you."

Xiao listened to him attentively. He's speaking in the same wise way that he spoke to Celina when she was about to commit suicide. Alex does not even know he has this natural skill of making people see things from a different perspective. It is a rare leadership quality indeed.

Alex: "It is true that the world is an ugly place. I have been some horrible childhood experiences myself. I used to have a scar on my right arm that prohibited me from using a sword properly. But thanks to the monks at the temple, that old scar is gone. If it wasn't for them, I would not be who I am today. The world is filled with

ugliness, death and despair, but on the flip side, it is full of beauty, life and grace. Perhaps you were too focused on the bad things to remember the good things. Sight is one of God's greatest gifts to us humans. It is better to see than to not see. At least in my opinion. But ultimately, the choice is yours." He walked away.

Xiao was seriously considering his words. They certainly have some truth to them. She's always been able to read other people, but now she is the one being read. And she had to be honest to herself. Is she really happy with the way she is?

Xiao went to visit Jiang in his room. "I am going now, brother." she said.

"Xiao, I've always pictured what you would look like when your eyes are opened. I remember them clearly...they were the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen."

"How are your wounds?"

"I'm fine." Jiang replied. But his voice indicated otherwise.

She touched his shoulder, and he groaned in pain.

"Ughhh..."

"You should come with us. The monks can heal your wounds."

"No, you go ahead." said Jiang. "In my condition, I will only slow you down. This journey is for you. Besides, your brother is the first student of the War God. All I need is some rest and I will be good as new."

Li and Xiao are at the front gate of the imperial complex. Two guards pull the gigantic doors open.

Celina: "Good luck, you two. Take care."

Li: "We will. I will take good care of Xiao."

Xiao bowed. "Thank you all for your care. I am indebted to you."

Alex: "Sister, wait." He handed them the imperial seal. "Just in case you run into trouble."

They took it. Li smiled. "Thank you, Alex."

Just as they walk out, Jiang came with the aid of his friend Sui Long.

"Xiao..."

"Brother..."

"Be careful out there." said Jiang.

"Thank you, brother." Xiao hugged him. "I will come back and see your face with my own eyes."

"I'll be waiting for that day." Jiang replied and grunted in pain.

Sui: "C'mon now, let's get you back to bed."

The two women leave the front gate and the guards closed the door. Creeek. The last thing they saw was Xiao and Li waving happily.

Nighttime came shortly afterwards. Li suggests they go to a stable to buy horses. The owner is an old man with a short beard. He came to greet his customers. "Ho ho, what can I do for you two young ladies?"

Li: "We'd like two horses, the fastest ones you got."

"Sure thing." replied the owner. He led them to a certain part of the stable. A horse is locked up in a wooden stall. "These will do."

"Thank you. How much will it cost?"

"I see that you two are in a hurry. Just two silver coins will do."

"Wow, so cheap?" said Li. "Thank you so much."

The old man replied by laughing.

As Li and Xiao were on their way out, they say thank you once more and went on their way. They pulled horse's reigns to make the horses move with them. They will ride the horses once they leave the city.

The old man went back to the stable. A man was waiting for him in the darkness. He jumped off the ceiling and revealed himself.

"Ah. You startled me." said the owner.

"Did you do it?" asked Roh.

"Yes, I did as you instructed. I gave them the diseased horses. They are guaranteed to fail on their journey."

"Good. You did well." Slash! Roh stabbed him.

Once the heroes arrived at the border of Yi Ling, Xiao's sharp senses told her something is not right.

"Li, do you hear that? We are being followed."

"Yeah, I feel it too."

Ninjas revealed themselves. They came from all directions and the heroes found themselves surrounded. Xiao was always cautious and her hands were on the sword, getting ready to pull it out at a moment's notice.

Li pulled out the Imperial Seal. "Hold it! This is the Imperial Seal. If you attack us, it is a crime worth beheading!"

The ninjas drew their swords and approached.

Xiao: "These fighters seem to not care about the law."

"Good." said Li. "Then I will have no regrets disposing of them."

The ninjas attacked. Li is a ninja herself, and she is able to dodge their attacks and hit them at opportune times.

Xiao can fend on her own, even though it was somewhat noisy. Clang! She blocked some guy's attack, knocking his sword upwards, and slashed him horizontally. Slash! A ninja came from behind. Xiao sensed his footsteps and turned around, ducked and stabbed him. Schleb!

The heroes found themselves overwhelmed. Suddenly, a ninja on a roof shot an arrow. It landed near Li's foot, and she was startled. The ninja loaded another arrow.

Suddenly, an arrow hit that ninja's neck and he fell off the roof. The arrow came from a man dressed in white. He jumped and landed on the ground.

Li: "It's you, Vincent!"

A bunch of other swordsmen arrived, all dressed in blue.

"Attack!" said Vincent.

Now it has turned into a group swordfight. The Heaven's Council men overwhelmed the ninja forces. They were killed left and right. The group of ninjas determined that they cannot win this fight, and they ran away.

Li went to Vincent. "Thank you for your assistance. It's safe to say you saved our lives."

Xiao: "Indeed. What would we have done without you?"

Vincent: "Uh, it's no problem. We the members of the Heaven's Council always do what is right."

Li: "We are actually in a hurry to get somewhere."

Vincent: "Oh? Outside the city? How long will you be back?"

"It will be a while. But we will be back sooner or later. I really appreciate what you did tonight. Maybe one day I'll join the Council." She and Xiao got on their horses and galloped away.

Vincent was surprised that Li said what she said. Maybe she will join the Council one day? Even if it is just a maybe, it is better than a no.



For Xiao, her journey is just beginning. She, who has lived in the southern district her whole life, will journey to the wilderness...and this journey will be a spectacular one unlike any other, for it is the journey to restore her sight.

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