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Part 2

Somewhere in ancient China, in an area called the Xiyang Forest, a group of bounty hunters were traversing the forest, led by their leader, a famous and renowned swordsman. They were all wearing heavy clothing and thick armor, holding several weapons each. They have gathered together for a reason, so that they can get the prize, a prize that is worth dying for.

They have been traveling for days, and the path so far has been rough and dirty, but it is nothing to these warriors. One of them suddenly heard a sound in the trees, and he gasped. He thought nothing of it and shrugged it off, thinking that he was just seeing things. But then he saw a shadow amongst the trees, and then he grew nervous. "Sir, are you sure this place is safe?" he asked. "We are entering the **Valley of Death**, home of the legendary **War God**!"

"Bah, what non-sense are you speaking?" replied the leader, a brute. "Do not tell me you are scared?"

"The War God is said to have killed all those who trespass in this valley. According to the legend, no one has ever seen him and lived."

"That is merely a rumor. We do not know if he even exists. And even if he does, he will be no match for us. Each one of us is the best in what we do, and we have nothing to fear. Now keep marching!"

The bounty hunter stayed silent and did not say a word. The men marched on, and the bounty hunter stared at the wilderness. He was still not convinced that they are

completely safe, but he did not want to get left behind, so he quickly followed the group.

Little did he know, his suspicions were correct. He did not know who or what was following them, but they are not safe. A silhouetted figure observed the group from the trees. He was wearing a straw hat and rogue clothing. After observing, he jumped away.

The hunter saw a glimpse of someone jumping in the trees. It was so quick it could have been anything. He shrugged it off. Whoosh, whoosh. That sound again. Something is not right.

"Sir, I really think we are being followed."

"Bahhh!" said the leader. "Am I surrounded by a bunch of cowards? If you guys are scared, then you can turn around and go home. From this point on there is no turning back. Now keep marching!"

Doosh doosh doosh. The warrior snuck up from behind the group and attacked the last guy in line. "Agh!!" He was already dead.

Everyone turned around and saw the warrior in the straw hat.

"Who dares trespass into the Valley of Death?" said he.

The bounty hunters grew nervous. "It is him...it really is him...the legendary God of War!" one of them shouted.

"Ha," said the leader, "Today is my lucky day. I get to meet the famous War God himself...once I kill you I will become the strongest fighter in the entire country! Now, charge!!"

All the bounty hunters charged at once. "Yaaaah!"

The War God, with his straw hat covering his face, remained calm and still. "All those who trespass must die." He drew his sword, the legendary **Fire Sword**, and the second he took it out of its sheath, it caught fire. Froom!

In an instant, he charged forward with lightning fast speed and slashed the warriors. Slish! Slash! They did not know what hit them. Each one of them were killed in one hit.

The leader was shocked beyond belief. "This c-cannot be..."

"It is your turn." said the War God.

"No!! You die!" The brute screamed and charged forward and raised his sword to the air. Whoosh!

The War God ducked and stabbed the brute in the stomach. Slish! His blood dripped on the ground, and he realized that he has no hope of surviving. The warrior in the straw hat pulled his sword out of the guy's stomach, and he fell to the ground and he was surrounded by a pool of blood, his own blood.

The grass became red and tainted with their corpses and the War God walked away as silently as he came.

DEMON SLAYER

Legend of the Fire Sword

It was a busy day as usual in the province of **Yi Ling**, the capital city of the **Kingdom of Shen**. A certain man was sitting down and eating in his favorite restaurant, quietly minding his own business and sipping his tea. The restaurant is usually loud and filled with lots of people, but today there are less people so it is relatively peaceful.

Since this is the capital, the people here are always busy and doing business. A lot happens in this city, but none of that concerns this young man. He did not care about living the life of a high lord. He is considered to be a peasant, but life as a peasant is not so bad.

The silver haired man was staring out the window at the street. Everyday hundreds of people come in and out of Yi Ling. He wonders if one of those people can be his sister. He hasn't seen her in over ten years, and it has been a very painful journey searching for her. She just disappeared one day without warning, and **Alex Cheng** has been looking for her ever since.

Outside, a group of brutes were making a commotion. Hua and his gangster friends were joking and laughing loudly in an annoying way. People who walked by glanced at them, and went about their way, not wanting to get involved with these annoying people. Not only were they loud, but their physical appearance is not to die for either. They were wearing ragged clothing, torn, smelly, and their pants were rolled up. They also carried swords and other hidden weapons in their bags and clothes.

Coming into the restaurant, Hua went to Alex's table. He sipped his tea, and noticed a shadow covered him.

"Can I help you, gentlemen?" Alex said politely.

"Heh." The brute put one leg on the chair. "You are sitting on **my** table. I dislike people who sit on my table."

"Your table?"

"That is correct. Everybody in this neighborhood knows Hua. And this is my table."

"How is this your table? It does not have your name on it."

"Hey boss," said another brute. "He just talked back to you."

Hua grunted and laughed. He grabbed Alex by the collar. "Look boy, I've been sitting at this table every week. If you're smart you'll leave now. Unless, of course, if you want trouble." Then he let him go.

Alex fixed his shirt, then got up. "I am sorry to have caused you trouble," he said reluctantly. But of course, on the inside he did not mean that. He wanted to beat the living daylights out of these brutes. But violence is not the answer, and he walked away.

"Hold it," said Hua.

Alex stopped without looking at him. "What is it?"

"Don't forget to bow down the next you see me."

Alex walked on as the gangsters laughed. Today is not the day to start a fight. He just wants to drink his tea peacefully and not cause any trouble. He had a sword on him, but so do the brutes.

Life is not easy in Yi Ling, the capital of Shen. Making a living is making a living while **living**. Mess with the wrong people, and you and your family are pretty much screwed for the rest of your life.

Even though Yi Ling is a heavily guarded area, the imperials have no power over the street gangsters, hooligans, loan sharks and other punks who live on the borderline of the law. They can pretty do anything they want and get away with it, whether it be theft, assault, rape, or even burning down someone's house.

[A] Contents

Despite what happened to Alex, the city is not all that bad. Alex enjoys walking through the marketplace, probably the busiest place in town. The streets were always crowded with anxious shoppers. A few stores were selling fish, and the storeowners were yelling and trying to get customers. Other stores sold fruits and vegetables, and customers were bargaining and eager to get a deal.

That is what a typical day is like in the marketplace, and Alex did not like crowded places. He came here to see a certain friend. She and her grandmother owned a jewelry store, and that store is her main source of income. **Jade Lee** was busy selling to customers and then she saw Alex and waved enthusiastically.

How can one not return the enthusiasm? "Hey Jade," Alex said. "How is business?"

"Business is terrific! Would you like to buy some jewelry?"

Alex stared at the necklaces for sale. "Hmmm..."

"Ah, may I interest you in this one?" She took the one in the middle, holding it at eye level. The necklace was sparkling gold, and its diamond was bluish purple.

"What is so special about this one?"

"This necklace is truly an antique. It is said to have been worn by the wise King Solomon. Centuries ago he came to China to visit King Chao, who took him as a guest. Solomon offered his necklace as tribute to Chao's hospitality."

"Hold on there a second. And since when did King Solomon visit China?"

"Ehh. Somewhere down the line he came to the east. He definitely visited King Chao."

"Okay Jade, stop making up stories."

She snapped her fingers. "Damn. That one always worked."

Alex slapped his own face. "Argh, people buy the necklace for the necklace itself, not for the story behind it. Besides, how many of these stories you tell about these jewels are real, and how many are fake?"

"Hey, most of them are real."

"Whatever. I was on my way home. I'll catch you later."

As he walked, she said "Wait. Are you doing anything tonight?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"Well, if you are not busy or anything, maybe I can come overnight and make dinner. It is not healthy to eat food from the market, trust me on this one." she said, staring at the floor.

"Ummm, okay, no problem."

"Okay great!" she said with excitement. "It's a done deal. See you tonight at sunset."

They waved each other goodbye. Jade was already thinking of what to cook for dinner.

Alex Cheng opened the door to his home and closed it. His friend was sitting at the table, waiting for him. Alex was a little startled that he's already here.

"Welcome home, Alex."

"When did you get here?"

"Just a few moments ago." **Zi Lai** replied.

"Zi? Did I not tell you that you should wait for someone to get home first before entering his home?" said Alex.

"Yeah, you did, but that doesn't apply to us. C'mon, we're best friends, aren't we?"

"Anyways, do you have news on my sister?"

"Yeah, and it took me a while to find out. I ran into this old man who owns a stable. He says many years ago, he recalls seeing a little girl ask for a horse. She was buying a horse to travel someplace out of town, in a place called the **Temple of Enlightenment**, up in the Xiyang mountains. No one knows how long she stayed there, or if she's still there. That's the last anyone has seen of her."

"The Legendary Temple of Enlightenment?" Alex repeated.

"Yes. Legend says that people who enter the temple will be healed by the monks over there, no matter what injuries you have, you will be miraculously healed."

"The Temple of Enlightenment..."

"You are not seriously considering going, are you, Alex?" asked his friend.

"That is the only clue we have about my sister."

"This is ridiculous." Zi replied. "We do not even know if it exists."

"I have been searching for her for half my life." Alex replied, determined. "I am not going to rule out any possibilities."

Zi sighed. "I know it's useless to try to talk you out of it. I had a feeling it was coming to this."

Their conversation was interrupted by Jade knocking on the door.

"You expecting company?" Zi asked.

"Uhhh...oh yeah!" He just remembered that Jade was supposed to come. "Yeah, sorry."

Standing outside, Jade knocked again. "Alex, are you inside?"

Zi's face turned suspicious and naughty. "Oh, **that** kind of company. Alright, I'll let you two be."

"Hey, don't get any ideas. It's just a visit."

"Sure, sure." Zi left the house from the back.

"It's not what you think. You need to clean your mind sometimes." Alex said.

As he did, Jade opened the door. "Is someone else here?"

Alex: "Oh no, why?"

"I thought I heard you talking to someone."

"Ummm no. You must've been hearing things."

Jade smiled and put a bag on the table. "Anyway, I brought us the food."

"What did you bring?"

"It is a secret. You will find out when it is cooked."

"Okay..."

She went into the kitchen to set up everything. As she was cooking and humming, Alex was thinking of his sister. Li Cheng is her name, and she disappeared when he was a kid. He's been searching for her ever since. Her disappearance was mysterious and still unsolved, and he made it his life mission to find her and find out why she ran away.

In the backyard, ninjas entered the perimeter and gathered at the center. They were all dressed in black, except for one. He was wearing red armor. He removed his mask, revealing his face. He was **En Lo**, the leader of this operation. "Men, scout the area and find the man named Alex Cheng and kill him. Kill anyone else you find."

"Hai!" they all said. Then they dispersed, going in different directions.

Meanwhile, the two were enjoying their dinner. Jade was smiling the whole time. Alex picked a spring dumpling and ate it.

"How it is?" Jade asked.

"Mmm, it's great." he replied.

"I'm glad you liked it. Have some more."

"Thank you."

Alex picked up another dumpling and just as he was about to put it in his mouth, he felt something. As a warrior, his senses are sensitive to any sound that is unusual. The ninjas were running along the roof very quietly. But no matter how quiet they are, their footsteps made vibrations. Alex just remained still, holding onto the chopsticks.

"What's wrong, Alex?" Jade asked. "It doesn't taste good?"

Alex had no more appetite. "Jade...there are intruders outside."

"What?" she said in surprise.

"Shhhh! We're in danger."

"How do you know?"

"Trust me!" Alex took her into the bedroom. He took out his sword. This made Jade nervous. "You hide in the closet." He opened the closet for her.

"But what about you?"

"I'll be fine. Just wait here, okay?" He took out a long knife and gave it to her. "Take this just in case." Then he shut the closet door with her inside. "Remember," he whispered. "Don't move or make any sounds. I'll come back for you, I promise." He left before she can say anything.

[B] Contents

Just outside the entrance, Zi Lai had a feeling that something was wrong. He went back inside, and saw people running around on the roof.

"Who are they?" he thought. They must be thieves. But since when do thieves come in large numbers, and since when do they have such skills? They're definitely not thieves. They're more like...professional assassins. And that means they are after Alex Cheng's life. Zi quickly ran back to the house.

Jade remained in the closet for the duration of time, shivering and shaking all over. Two ninjas came into the room. They rummaged through Alex's furniture and personal belongings. Jade swallowed hard as they searched. Her life is on the line, and if she is so much as to sneeze, she is doomed.

Alex went outside to the yard and quickly jumped into the well. He held on to the rope, and did his best to not make any noises.

En Lo consulted with one of his ninjas. "Did you find anything yet?"

"Not yet, my lord." He bowed.

"Well, keep searching. We saw him go into the house, and we have this place surrounded, so there is no means of escape."

"Right away." The ninja ran and went into the main building.

En Lo loitered around, observing the environment. "Could he be hiding?" he wondered.

Alex pulled himself up, grabbing the edge of the well. In a crouching position, he took out his sword as silently as possible.

"So that is where you are." En Lo said without looking.

"Uh."

En Lo turned around, throwing a dart at him. Whap. He caught it. En drew a sword.

"Hmm, not bad." Alex commented. "You can sense me even if I am completely silent."

"Hmph, please. I am trained in the art of ninjitsu. No matter how sneaky you are, I can sense you."

Alex jumped and slashed. Clang. Their blades collided. Then they backed away. An expert can judge an opponent's strength from the very first hit. It shows the warrior's power and balance. They both conclude that their opponent is strong. They continued their fight, exchanging a few more moves.

Now, Alex and En were approximately ten paces from each other. They both got into fighting stance, preparing to charge. Alex had his blade pointed forward, while En kept his horizontal and close to his chest. The wind blew hard. Tree leaves fell. A certain leaf landed on the ground - it was so quiet one can hear the leaves fall. Suddenly, they charged.

Slash!!

Both were hit in the upper arm. Alex saw drops of blood on the floor - and it was his own. En covered up his wound. A slice of his suit was exposing his skin.

En stuck two fingers into his mouth and whistled. It was a signal for his men to come. Alex was aware of that, but before he could move a step, ninjas were behind him.

"Damn." Alex said. He looked around. Ninjas came from the side. He was completely surrounded, and he realized that he is just moments away from death.

Back in the bedroom, the two intruding ninjas searched on. "We have not checked the closet." one of the ninjas said.

Jade feared for her life. Her heart beat suddenly went up ten times faster. It was beating faster as the ninja approached. Just when he touched the closet door, they heard the whistle.

One told the other to go outside while he remained.

Jade sighed in relief. This bought her time...but if she remains inside, she's only prolonging the inevitable. She saw that there's one person left and thought she had a chance to kill him. But she never took a life before. Her hands were trembling and stone cold. Her heart was beating so much she thought it'd pop out of her chest.

She took a deep breath and relaxed. She counted in her mind - three... two... one...go! The door slammed opened, she jumped out and stabbed the ninja in the chest.

"Ugh!" He was caught totally by surprise. He fell and she landed on top of him. She made an attempt at his neck, but he grabbed her arm. She stabbed his lower arm, and he screamed in agony. And then - schleb. She struck him in the neck, and blood squirted out like a fountain.

Jade got up and took a few steps back. She was scared as hell and her heart was still pounding. It took her a few seconds to absorb what just happened. She just killed a man. Indeed. Committed a murder. Even though he's a ninja, she still did not feel right killing him. She gasped and did not want to stare the blood any longer, and ran away from the room.

Alex fought a desperate battle. Ninjas came and attacked, and he hit them. Slash, slash. More of them came. He blocked them while retreating. *Cling! Clang! * He kicked the ninja and knocked him down. Thud. He jumped, putting his foot on the wooden column, and sprang himself up to the roof. The ninjas followed suit.

"Damn it!" Alex exclaimed. "Why do you want my life?!"

One ninja ran, while two others jumped. He blocked one running, and the ones in the air slashed. He rolled away, receiving a cut on the arm.

"Ugh."

They continued to attack, and one kicked Alex, making him fall to the ground. Thud. He got back on his feet immediately. There were too many in front of him and he cannot guard them all.

"Hmph. Say your prayers, rogue. This is the end of the line for you." said En Lo.

Alex kept his guard up. (Is this the end of my life? I still have not accomplished many things!)

En Lo: "Finish him off."

One ninja in the group attacked. Alex was waiting for him to come, and suddenly an arrow hit him in the neck, and he died right after collapsing. His eyes were wide open, while his blood formed a pool.

"What?!" En Lo said in surprise.

Everyone looked up. Alex was shocked. Zi Lai held a bow, carrying a quiver of arrows in his back. "You guys are having a party without me? How rude!"

"An interference. Kill him and Cheng."

Alex wasted no time, he attacked while the ninjas were distracted. *Slice* He fought four or five in succession. Zi jumped down from the roof and fought the rest of them. En Lo watched in anger and frustration.

Zi threw his quiver at a ninja, he caught it. While distracted, Zi jumped up high and cut his head.

As swords collided everywhere, a knife came out from the door way and hit a ninja on the head, and he collapsed. It was Jade.

Alex: "Jade? I thought I told you to stay inside."

En Lo: "Kill the woman too."

The ninjas stared at her. Jade shrieked and ran back inside. Alex stood in the ninjas' way. "Back off. No one hurts her." *Clang* Moving his arm so much made the wound open up. More blood dripped. "Ugh. Damn it."

Zi ran to his friend's aid immediately. Doosh doosh. He kicked the ninjas out of the way, and pushed them back.

En saw an opening and attacked Alex. Alex blocked but wasn't fast enough for the second hit. Slash. He was hit in the stomach. "Aaaaagh!" Blood squirted, he fell on his knees.

Zi got in front of Alex. Suddenly, Jade came out, holding a rake and charged and screamed and charged wildly. "Yaaaaaaah. How is this for size?"

The ninjas stepped back. Jade stood next to Zi.

En Lo: (These are no ordinary swordsman. This man who helped Cheng has superb skills.) He smiled reluctantly. "You are lucky this time. Next time your lives will not be spared." He made a hand signal, and the ninjas retreated - they ran and jumped over the back gate. Then En Lo followed suit. They were all gone within seconds. Ninjas were trained to be fast and deadly.

Alex groaned from the pain. He had three cuts in total and he was losing blood fast. Jade and Zi were horrified.

"Are you alright, Alex?" Jade asked worriedly.

"I'm fine. These are but minor scratches."

"We need to take you to a doctor immediately." Zi said.

"No." said the fallen hero. "Not a doctor. They will surely find me again."

"Who are those guys anyway? Why do they want you dead?" Zi asked.

"I am not sure, but I have an idea of that man's identity." He took out a golden badge-like object.

Jade and Zi stared at it in surprise. "What is this?"

"It is the imperial seal." Alex responded.

"Imperial seal? That means they are royal troops?" said Zi.

"Yes. I stole it from that man when I was fighting him."

Suddenly, Alex and En Lo charged.

Slash!!

Both were hit in the upper arm. Alex saw drops of blood on the floor - it was his own. En Lo had a wound as well - a smaller one. But Alex got what he needed - he took something from En while in contact with him. He looked at it briefly. "No...this cannot be." he whispered to himself.

"But why would the imperial troops want you dead? What did you ever do to them?" Jade asked.

"I do not know for sure, but I have an idea. There is no time to explain. He coughed blood. "Urrrgh."

"Alex! Alex!"

His vision became blurry, and his legs weakened. His body, for some reason, weighted ten times heavier, and he fell unconscious on the concrete.

[C] Contents

"No! Don't leave!" screamed the child, who was Alex when he was younger. "No!!"

The little girl with black hair was about to leave. She had already packed her belongings. "I'm sorry Alex...I can no longer stay here. I will be a danger to you all."

"No, sister!" Alex did not care what she said, and continued to cry out with tears streaming down his face. He wanted to run after her, but he was being restrained by two hands from behind.

"Sorry, brother." said Li Cheng, and she left and never looked back.

While unconscious, Zi and Jade set him on the bed and bandaged his wounds. One on his stomach, right arm, and left elbow. The one on his stomach was most severe.

"But why...why does the king want Alex dead? Alex never did anything wrong!" Jade exclaimed.

"I am not so clear myself. But being Alex's friend for so many years, I am not surprised they came to kill him. There was one other time, a few years ago, when the

imperial troops came to have his head. But we were lucky enough to escape with our lives. Now, somehow they found us."

"You mean, you two are on the run from the law?"

"Yes. Alex even changed his name to avoid suspicion. His originally name was not Alex, you know?"

"I know. But Alex never mentioned someone is out to kill him. Just what exactly did he do that caused all this?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, but I can't answer that question. Alex was on the run when I already met him. But it has something to do with his missing sister."

Alex moaned in his sleep. Jade went to him, and put a wet cloth on his head.

"Do not worry, Jade. I will take care of him. Please go outside and fetch some water for him."

"Okay."

Minutes later, Alex groaned and sweated and squirmed. Zi washed his face, and put the wet cloth on his forehead. "You will be fine, buddy."

Alex's eyes opened slightly. "Ugh."

"Alex? You awake?"

"Yeah. I feel so fucked up. Where am I?"

"In my house. You are safe. The imperial troops will not find you here." Zi replied.

"Ugh. We have to leave in the morning."

"Leave? To where?"

"To the Temple of Enlightenment. It is our only choice." He sat up.

"You are shitting me, right? You are not going anywhere in your condition." Zi grabbed him by the shoulders. "Just rest until your wounds heal."

"These wounds will take forever to heal! We have no time, Zi! Do you understand? The man we saw is an imperial troop! And something is not right...because since when does the imperial army send trained assassins to do their dirty work?"

"Hmmm. That is true." Zi said.

"They will surely find us. They are hot on our trail. The Temple is our only chance. I might as well find my sister while avoiding certain death. Who knows...maybe once we get to the Temple they will be able to heal my wounds?"

"Ummm."

Alex grabbed Zi's shoulders and looked him in the eye. "Look Zi, you are my best friend. You have always been there for me, and I have always been there for you. Now, I ask that you be there for me one more time. Help me find my sister."

Zi sighed and nodded. "Fine. Agreed."

Alex smiled. That's what friends are for, right?

En Lo scanned left and right, making sure no one sees him, and opened the door, went inside, closed the door. Duke was walking to and fro, waiting for his good news. En felt nervous, wondering how the Duke will handle the bad news. He kneeled.

"Honorable **Duke Xiang**."

"Well. Did you kill that rogue?" Xiang asked.

"Ummm."

"Speak up."

"We did not kill him. He had help. It was almost as if he expected us to come. I am sorry, my lord."

The Duke was not pleased to hear these words, and it showed on his facial expression. "You failed?"

En Lo put his head down. "Please my lord, give me one more chance. I will have his head for sure."

The Duke was biting a piece of cloth and pulling it in anger. "Grrrr. Grrrr. He is supposed to be dead! And yet he is still alive. And by now he is on the run. How can we get him now?"

"Please forgive me, Duke. Give me one more chance."

"Fine! One more chance it is." He pointed at En Lo. "And you had better get him this time. I will give you three days."

"Three days? I need more time."

"You will have three days and not a second more! Got it?"

"Yes, m'lord."

"Now go. I am not in a good mood."

En Lo walked backwards to the exit, closing the door on the way.

In the heart of the kingdom of Shen exists the Imperial Palace, the place where the royal family resides. It is the toughest stronghold in the kingdom, guarded by thousands upon thousands of imperial guards, who are highly trained swordsmen. Their duty is to serve their master, and the king, with their lives.

Aside from being the safest, it is also the wealthiest structure in Shen. Only a select few may enter its premises. Peasants can only dream about what life is like as a resident of the palace.

Sitting at the dinner table was **King Liu**, and beside him was his wife, the concubine **Celina Liu**. The food that they ate was nothing short of the best, made by the finest chefs they have staffed in the palace. Celina picked up an oyster with her chop sticks and fed it to Liu, who chewed it slowly and then swallowed it. "Mmmm. It is delicious." he said.

"Then have some more." said his concubine. She picked up another oyster and moved it over to his mouth. She put her other hand under the food just in case it drops. "Say aahhh."

Liu closed his eyes and swallowed the oyster and chewed on it slowly, enjoying its taste. Food tastes even better when it's served by a beautiful woman. His wife Celina can be said to be a trophy wife, one that no straight man can resist. She was wearing a thin, white dress made of silk, with an oval neck line. On her wrist were many bracelets, only the most expensive ones that a commoner cannot possibly afford. On her neck she wore a necklace made of diamonds, and it contained a rare purple gem. It is considered to be one of the rarest jewels in all of China.

King Liu wore a yellow silk gown, and it is the highest quality any one can ask for. One his chest bore the word "Shen" in a red color. He was wearing a crown made of pure gold.

He is the envy of all men, not only because he is the king, but he has military and political power and no one can argue with him. His word is the law, and those who disobey him disobey the law. And also, he is fortunate to have found such a beautiful and loving wife such as Celina.

A servant came into the room and kneeled. "Your highness." In a monarchial society such as Shen, it is required by law to address the king and other nobles properly. Failure to do so will result in unthinkable consequences.

"It had better be important for you to interrupt my dinner." said King Liu.

"My apologies, but Duke Xiang wants to see you, and he says it is urgent."

"Duke Xiang? Very well." said Liu. "Bring him in."

Duke Xiang came into the room and bowed. "Your highness." Then he turned to Celina. "My lady."

She replied with a smile.

"I am terribly sorry as I did not know you were eating. Had I known I would not have come here to interrupt your meal."

"You are already here. You might as well tell me what you need."

"Sire, have you read my proposal for the new law?"

The king thought for a moment. "The new law? Do you mean the one which calls for random searches?"

"Yes. I would to know what your decision on it is."

"Duke, I simply cannot pass such a law."

Xiang got mad, but he held it in. "Why not?"

"Because that law goes against the principles of the Kingdom of Shen. We are a kingdom that is about the people. To search people's homes randomly is a violation of their privacy, and doing so will make them lose their trust in us, the authority figures."

"But sire, the other three kingdoms allow random searches. I do not see why we should not do the same."

"My dear duke, what the other kingdoms do is none of our concern."

"But sire, think about the benefits that we can reap. The populace cannot be trusted. We will never know if there are criminals hiding under someone else's roof, or even spies from other kingdoms." said the duke.

"Authority and power is about trust and respect, Duke Xiang. If we cannot trust the people, then how can we expect them to trust us? Our kingdom is different than other kingdoms. Shen is built on the philosophy of honor and unity, and that is what makes our kingdom special and unique. We have been prosperous for many years, and we shall continue to do so."

"Well said, your highness." said Celina.

By now, the duke realized that he cannot win this debate. It is better not to argue with the king than risk being beheaded. He was defeated, but he will not give up. He bowed his head low, and said, "Very well, sire, I concur with your judgment."

"Very good then. Anything else?"

"Umm, yes actually. Earlier tonight a rogue attacked some of the royal troops and killed them. This man is very skilled in the art of sword fighting and is to be considered extremely dangerous."

"So capture them."

"He has escaped. With your permission, I shall put up wanted posters of this man all over Yi Ling. One of our men has seen his face, thus we should be able to find him."

"My guard told me everything that he saw. He was even lucky to run away with his life. This man, 'Alex Cheng' is not to be taken lightly."

"Hmm, very well. Do so."

"Thank you sire." The Duke turned around and left with a smirk on his face. His law may not have been passed, but at least his visit was not a complete waste of time.

On the very next day, wanted posters of Alex Cheng and his companion, Zi were put all over town. They were posted on almost every public domain - restaurants, brick walls, community postings, etc. The townspeople stopped what they're doing and looked at the posters, discussing it amongst each other.

They were saying things like: "Wow, how despicable. We have to watch out for this guy." And things like: "There are so many bad people roaming this place." What is happening to our town?

Alex and Zi, carrying their belongings, walked towards the exit. Then Jade came out of the house and screamed, "Hey, wait!"

The men turned around. Jade walked up to Alex, giving him a bag with a lunch box inside.

"What is this?" he asked.

"This is in case you get hungry on your journey. When you eat it, you will be thinking of the person who made it for you."

"Oh. Thank you very much."

Jade tightened Alex's hand on the lunch box. "Be careful on your journey. Do not die, okay?" Her eyes were getting wet.

"Of course I will not die so easily. Do you know who you are talking to?"

Jade forced a smile. "I know, Alex Cheng. Good luck!" She ran back inside.

Alex and Zi walked out.

"You know Alex, once we leave, there is no turning back."

"I know. I do not plan on turning back. I know I have to find my sister no matter what."

"I can see you are very determined, Alex."

"Of course. I have to find out what happened to her no matter what. I have one and only one sister."

"Yes. But there is a thin line between determination and obsession."

"Are you saying I am obsessed?" Alex said.

"Are you not?"

"If your sister was missing, you would do anything you can do to find her, wouldn't you?" Alex asked.

"I would, but without sacrificing my own life in the process. I would search for my sister, no matter how many years it takes. But I do not ignore those who I love and care about. You know, Jade is not that bad. She spent all morning making that food for you."

"Indeed. She's been very supportive of us, especially when we need her."

"What do you think of her?" Zi asked.

"She is a good person and a great friend...but a terrible salesman." Alex said.

"No, that is not what I meant." Zi said in frustration. Sometimes he cannot believe how dense and ignorant his friend is. "I mean...are you fond of her?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"C'mon. She came over the other night. There must be more going on that I think it is." Zi said with a naughty tone.

"Just stop it. I think of Jade as...more like a sister."

Zi gasped playfully. "Like a sister? So she's a replacement for Li?"

"No!!" Alex chased Zi, who was laughing, and they ran down the street like little children playing a game of tag.

After fooling around, the two friends walked to the restaurant that they always go to.

"Say Zi, want to have breakfast before heading out of town?"

"Sure thing. We cannot travel on an empty stomach."

"Then it is decided."

Just before they walk a step further, they heard loud and annoying laughter. Hua and his group of brute friends claimed the streets. Everyone got out of their way.

Alex: "Oh great...it is him again."

Zi: "Yes, I have heard of this man. The local bully, Hua. He is bad news, so let's stay away from him."

"He should stay away from us."

Just then, Hau looked at Alex.

"Oh shit." Alex exclaimed.

Hua and his gang walked towards the two men. "Hey, it is that punkass from last time. How are ya doing, buddy?" He put his hand on Alex's shoulder. Zi got worried, for Alex had a history of bad temper.

Alex brushed his hand off. "Get your dirty hands off me. You took my table last time, so what do you want now?"

"Heh. Show some manners, punk. Like I said, it is my table by right."

"Look," Alex said. "We did not come here for trouble. We just want to get some food and leave. I assure you we will not sit at 'your' table this time."

"You think we can just let you go that easily?" one of the brutes said.

"What do you guys want from me?"

Hua: "Oh it is not you that I want. I would not even waste my breath on you, but I want money. See this?" He took out a piece of wrinkled paper from his pocket, and opened it up and shoved it into Alex's face.

Alex grabbed the paper and stared at it. It had a picture of himself. It said Wanted. Alex Cheng. Considered to be extremely dangerous - if you see this man, tell the authorities immediately. Your cooperation is respected.

"What the hell is this?!" he said in disbelief, staring at a detailed drawing of his own faced. "This is absurd!"

Zi was just as surprised as his friend.

"Heh, it seems you have offended the wrong person." Hua said. "There is a reward of five thousand li on your head."

Suddenly, Alex figured it out...it must have been En Lo's doing. They want him dead. "Crap...it has to be him...the Duke."

"The Duke?" Zi repeated.

Hua: "Now punk, come with us so we can get our reward - if you cooperate we promise we will not hurt you...too much" He smiled.

"Thanks for the offer...but I am sorry to have to decline. He shoved the wanted poster into Hua's face."

"Uuuugh!"

The brutes drew their swords. Zi and Alex ran, jumped up, stepped on Hua, and landed behind the brutes. Hua fell on his back.

The brutes chased them like cat and mice. Hua got up, and the others were already far away. "Get those damn punks!" he shouted.

Alex and Zi ran for their lives. Doosh doosh. They pushed the people who got in their way.

"Hey watch it!" said a passer-by. Then he saw a gang of brutes running toward him, and quickly ran away in cowardice. "Yeeek!"

The heroes ran for their lives. Doosh doosh. "Alex, the barn yard!"

"Okay!"

They ran into the barn and jumped over the fence. The brutes ran inside just to get hit by a running horse. Crash! The horse whined and stood on its hind legs, as Alex pulled its reins. "Hyah! Hyah!"

Zi's horse came out. The horses ran parallel to each other and ran to the outer fence. It was going to be a big jump, so they pulled the reins extra hard, and the horses whined and leaped over the fence. They were leaping in slow motion, as the brutes watched in surprise. The horses jumped over them while they ducked for cover.

They continued galloping all the way to the end of town. Once they assumed they were safe, Alex and Zi looked at each other.

"This is a great idea, Zi."

"Yeah. Hopefully the owners will not be mad."

Gallop gallop.

In the forestry area of Xizang, two horses walked about. The travelers have been traveling for days now, and they still have not found the Temple of Enlightenment. Zi and Alex already used up half their food supply. And the sun wasn't friendly either. Traveling in the sweltering heat is like going through hell, a really long hell.

Alex took out a water bag and helped himself. Gulp gulp. He drank it thirstily. He did not care if he drinks all of it, since there is bound to be a pond or lake close by. Zi wiped his forehead with his arm. He was sweating like a pig.

"So tell me something, why **did** your sister run away?" Zi asked.

"Hmmm. It was a long time ago, but I recall something she said to me..."

[D] Contents

Little Li Cheng, no older than fourteen years old at the time, worked at the Imperial Palace. Her job, as servant, is to do as she is told. That morning, she was walking along the grand halls of the palace, scrubbing the floor and walls. As she performed her duties, she heard a man screaming in agony. Someone might be hurt, she thought. She hurried to the source of the screams, and peeped into the Duke's private quarters.

"Aaaargh Garrrrgh." The Duke screamed and groaned, head facing down, hands on desk. He was sweating heavily, and his face began to change.

Li peeked through the door crack. Only one eye could see inside, so she closed her right eye.

"Aaaaagh. Aaaagh." The Duke's face was turning red, really red. His facial features began to twist in an ugly grimace. Horns grew from his head - his cheeks withered and slid down his face, hanging down his chin. His ears grew longer and pointier. Then he turned around, and that was when Li saw his grotesque face.

Li was on the verge of screaming. This is definitely not something she is supposed to see. She ran away and in her haste, accidentally kicked a bucket of water, spilling it.

"Who is there?" the Duke yelled, hearing the sound.

Li gasped and ran for it. Duke bust the door open and saw a little girl running away. "It is you!" he said, recognizing her. She ran and ran, and turned at the corner. She hid in another's room, sat on the floor and breathed hard. It was the most horrific thing she saw in her life. Her heart was pounding hard against her chest. *Bup bup. Bup bup*

(I did not just see that. The Duke noticed me. He will surely kill me. I have to hide!)

The little girl went home, scared the entire time. Little Alex went to his sister, who was completely spaced out. She was breathing hard, her pupils were dilated and her eyes were wide open with shock.

"What is matter, big sister?"

"The D-Duke...is a monster!"

"Huh?"

Li grabbed her brother's shoulders and shook him. "Do you hear what I am saying? He is a monster! A demon! And he saw me. I am screwed!"

"Big sister, stop it!"

She ran into the house. Alex just stared at the door, wondering what happened.

Not long after that, his sister decided to run away from home. "Goodbye, brother. I'm sorry..." she said, waving with tears.

"No...sister!" Alex screamed, and he wanted to go after her, he was being pulled back by two hands, presumably his father.

"I'm sorry!" she cried with tears, and left the premises.

"No...sister!!" That was the last time he ever saw her.

"That is all she said to me before she ran away from home. The Duke is a monster, she said."

"The Duke, a monster? I agree, especially with all the laws he's passed out lately. But what did she mean?" Zi asked.

"I have been trying to figure that out for a long time. My sister must have seen something she was not supposed to. She is a full time servant who works in the palace. She made good money for her age. My parents thought her future was all set...until one day she came home, all scared - like she has seen a ghost. So my guess she saw something that the Duke did not want her to see. Otherwise, she would not have run away so quickly without even explaining why."

"Hmmm. That also explains why Duke Xiang is after her and you. Since you are her only living family member, he assumes you know where she is. Or perhaps that you know of the Duke's secret. I am certainly not surprised if Duke Xiang was doing something that cannot see daylight. I wonder what he was doing? Murder? Rape? Smuggling drugs?"

"I could give a damn what he is doing behind closed doors. That son of a bitch is responsible for this. For everything. I swear to God, one day I will kill him and behead him and put his head on a silver platter."

"Calm down." Zi said, smiling cautiously.

"Zi...how is our progress?"

Zi took out a map. "We are about ten miles away from the Temple of Enlightenment."

"How did you figure that out?"

"I am merely doing an estimation. No one knows exactly where it is, so I am going by the location as told in the legends."

"Well, it is a legendary place, so I would not expect to find it easily."

"The rumors say that it is in this area." Zi said, pointing at the spot on the map.

"It will be a long way there. But we have to do it, because it is the only clue on your sister's whereabouts, right?"

"She is probably all grown up by now. Will I be able to recognize her?" Alex asked himself.

Zi noticed that his friend is daydreaming again, and it will be pointless to talk to him.

Alex looked to his left and saw tall mountains. "Hey Zi, why don't we go through those mountains? It is a shorter way to the Ninjiang forest."

"You want to go through that place? It is not a wise idea." Zi replied.

"How come? Why take the longer, more dangerous route, when you can just walk through the valley? I heard there is a valley between the mountains."

"If you want to die, then go and take that path."

"What is wrong with that path?" Alex inquired.

"That, my friend, is the **Valley of the War God**...some call it the Valley of Death. That is the place where the legendary God of War resides."

"The God of War?"

"Yes. Legend has it he has lived there for over a century, killing all those who trespass into his territory. No one who has seen his face has ever survived. You heard of this legend, right?"

"Yes," Alex said. "It is the story that my parents used to tell me to scare me... but I never thought it'd be in this forest."

"In any case, we should take the longer way, if we want to live to find the temple."

"But I wonder...his existence is only a rumor, right?"

"Alex, the temple is real. A few people have seen it. And the God of War has actually slain hundreds of people in the past few decades. Just listen to me and take the path I suggest. Besides, if you went by yourself, you will be dead for sure."

"Hey now, what is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Take it however you wish." He pulled the rein, the horse whined and galloped.

And so, the travelers journeyed on, going through the wilderness. It was not their first trip outside of Shen, but they did not have enough time to make the proper preparations for this trip. They have a map, but a map will not prepare them for dangers of the wilderness.

As they went by a few trees, a bee hive fell from a tree, and a swarm of bees flew out. Zi and Alex just happen to walk on the hive's path. "Bees! Aaah!!" They pulled the horse reins, and the horses whined and galloped faster.

"Aaaaah!" they screamed as the bees chased them.

They escaped, and nothing serious happened...except for a few stings here and there.

Xiang walked along the hallways of the imperial complex with a grimace. He went past **Lord Lee**, one of the king's main subordinates, and did not even greet him.

"Duke Xiang."

"Oh, if it isn't Lord Lee. What is it?"

"You did not even say hello to me. Is something the matter?"

"Oh nothing." Xiang said grumpily. "His majesty did not agree with the new law I proposed to him. He is throwing it down the drain."

"Oh what a shame." Lee said in a sarcastic tone. "Better luck next time."

"I am not in a good mood. Do not push it." Xiang said, and walked away.

"As you wish" Lee said, smiling.

As Xiang left, General Chung came up to Lee. "Lord Lee." He bowed.

"General Chung, good day."

"Watch out for Duke Xiang. He is not one to mess around with."

"I know. He has done a lot of shady stuff in the past. But I am not scared of him."

"In any case, take precautions around the duke. There is something about him that I do not trust."

[E] Contents

There were tents setup at the camp. The group of hunters was making their plans for the morning. Lanterns and candles were there to provide light.

En Lo was looking at a map of the Xizang province. "Hmmm, they are heading towards the Ninjiang forest."

One of the soldiers was standing next to him by the table with the map. "Sir, is not that the forest that is considered the most dangerous for travelers? There are numerous stories of demons attacking passer-bys, and sights of spirits and other phenomena."

"Yes. And that is exactly where we are heading to." replied En Lo.

"But sir, why are we spending so much effort for this one man? Once he leaves Yi Ling, he is no longer in our territory."

"Do not question the Duke's orders. Just do as you are told. This man named Alex Cheng is extremely dangerous. We must find him and kill him as soon as possible, lest he kills more people. Even if he is running away and hiding, there is a chance he will come back to Yi Ling in the future when our defenses are down. And then he will kill more people. That is why we must track him down immediately. Understood?"

"Yes sir. I am sorry." The soldier saluted.

"Okay, this is the plan. Cheng is not far from where we are. He is heading towards the Ninjiang Forest, and I believe his destination is the legendary Temple of Enlightenment. We will take a shortcut through the north and find the Temple before he does and kill him, and anyone else who sees us, if necessary." En Lo slammed his hand on the table. "Everybody, do you understand your mission?"

"Yes sir!" the soldiers said in unison.

The journey continues for the heroes. At some point, they reached a river that was not on the map. They could not find the ends of the river, so they had to accept the sad realization that they have to abandon their horses.

"I think we have to cross this river." said Zi.

"No, there has to be another way. Look at the map carefully."

"Alex, the map does not show the river! It is just a rough sketch of the land."

"Damn it, if we leave our horses, it will take us twice as long to reach the temple."

"That is a nice way of putting it. But we have no choice. Let us not waste any more time." Zi hopped off his horse. Thud.

"Damn it!, I can't believe we have to do this."

"You know Alex, you should not swear so much. It is so...un-gentlemen-like."

"Well, **you** are one to talk about politeness." He hopped off his horse. "Alright Betsy, you are free to go."

"Betsy?"

"I name all horses Betsy."

"I do not want to know." Zi replied.

The alligators swam about lazily. Some were sleeping, others opened their huge mouths to make noise.

"Okay..." said Alex, "Just exactly how are we going to do this?"

"Ummm. Simple, I count to three, and we both run across as fast as we can."

"You must be joking. Are you an idiot?"

"Alex, what did I say about being a gentlemen?"

"What kind of gentlemen jumps across a river, by stepping on alligators?!"

"Ready? Three...two...one!!"

They ran like hell with their feet hitting water. Splish splash splish splash. The alligators sensed them come, and they all gathered to one place and opened their mouths.

"Yikes!!" Alex ran through the alligators, stepping on them, using them as stepping stones.

Zi jumped on them. Flash. Flash. He was already on the other side.

Splish splash. "Ahh...ooh...eeeh." An alligator in front of him attacked. Alex kicked it in the mouth, and then ran to land. He panted for breath.

"Hey you made it." Zi said.

"Zi, since when can you move like that?"

"I always did. You just never noticed, you were always busy focusing on your missing sister."

"Really?" They continued walking into the woods. "I never found out who your master is. Who is he?" Alex asked.

"Why do you need to know?" Zi retorted.

"I am simply curious."

"It is not important. We are better off discussing how we can reach the temple."

"Why can you not tell me?"

"Why must you know?"

"I thought we were friends!"

A snake crawled from a tree, staring at the two men, and hissed at them.

Leading the way through the forest, En Lo and his men traveled as planned. They were going through many of the hardships that Alex and Zi were going through -

hot weather, perspiration, not enough water, tiredness, and the dangers of the wilderness. However, they are more prepared and they have more people, so they view these challenges as inconveniences at most. But the men do admit to themselves that they were not trained nor prepared for this kind of hardship.

En Lo studied his map carefully. "Hmm okay. The shortcut to the Sacred Area is through that valley." he said, pointing at the mountains to the left.

Soldier A: "Over there? But sir, that is the cursed Valley of Death! Anyone who trespasses to the valley will be killed! Even the strongest of swordsmen have fallen to the legendary **War God**."

Soldier B: "The War God? We are surely no match for him...fighting him is not in my job description!"

En Lo: "Non-sense! War God? Valley of Death? Pah! These are merely rumors."

Soldier A: "It is the truth! No one who has walked the path of that valley has survived. If we go there, we are surely doomed."

Soldier B: "Oh goodness. Suicide is not a wise idea."

"Am I dealing with cowards?" En said, frustrated. "You are scared of rumors? So what if there is a War God? How can any human be that good? They said he's lived for over a hundred years, and no human lives that long. And if he is not human, he is demon. Demons do not exist. Even if he does exist, he is only one person, while we have many. How can he fight us all?"

The soldiers looked amongst each other, and they agreed with their leader's words. They realized how silly their fear was, and by rationalizing it out, they no longer feel fear.

"Now come on. We have a criminal to catch." En said, leading his men down the doomed path.

[F] Contents

Walking along, the heroes became tired. Zi kept on complaining, while Alex assured him they are very close to the Temple. "Oh mannn. I am so tired. Let's take a break, Alex."

"We cannot afford to take a break. Stop being lazy and let us move on." Alex dragged his friend by the hand.

Little did they know, they were being watched by bandits from a distance. Jiang grinned maliciously as he spied on them, and when the men walked by, he signaled his men to follow him. Then he left his spot.

Walking, suddenly Alex felt a jolt of pain on his stomach. "Uuugh."

"What is the matter?"

"My wound...it hurts."

"Just bear with it. We are almost there."

"You always say that. How far are we?"

"Too far." said a third voice.

The heroes paid attention to the bandit, who was ten paces away from them. Some of his bandits were behind him. Others came out from hiding and the heroes saw that they were outnumbered.

"What bad luck...mountain thieves?" said Alex.

Jiang smiled at that remark. "Thieves? You can think of us as merchants. We are conducting a fair trade. We will take your gold and belongings, and in return, we will give you a quick and painless death."

"You are joking, right?" Zi said.

"Sorry, but no deal." Alex said.

Jiang's men came closer to the heroes. "You do not understand. You have no choice in the matter! Now, men, kill them!"

Alex and Zi pulled out their swords - schhhhhh. The bandits screamed and charged. Swipe! They fought their way out, but they both got injured. They ran for it. The bandits chased them, and they were faster. Zi stopped and hit - clang!.

Alex stopped running, until Zi yelled: "Go!! Just go!"

Reluctant, he ran away, with a hand over his wound. Zi kicked the bandit down, and then ran for it. They got separated.

Alex ran until he reached a cliff, and under that was a water fall. He was on the very edge, and he did not like heights.

The bandits approached.

"Heh, there is no escape, boy. Just hand over your money. You are not stupid enough to jump down there." said one of the bandits.

"You don't know me very well."

"What?" said the bandit, grunting.

Alex took a leap down. The bandits ran to the edge. Whoosh. Splash.

"He's crazy. He actually jumped!"

"With his injuries, and considering the height of the fall, he is not going to live. Let's go." said Jiang, and his men left.

[G] Contents

Moments later, Alex's head popped out of the water, and he took a deep breath. He brushed his hair out of his face and rubbed his eyes with his sleeves. He had to swim to land, despite how painful it was to do so. He crawled himself to land, and rested on his stomach. His was still injured, and thanks to the bandits, he had extra wounds to worry about. His clothes were soaked with blood. He felt exhausted and tired and hurt. He crawled forward, but didn't go far. Alex closed his eyes.

He heard a faint sound. The sound of music. He opened his eyes to see what it was. His vision was blurry, but it cleared up in a few seconds. The music was very soothing and pleasant, yet sad and melancholy. He crawled forward and saw a woman in a white, skimpy dress, blowing into a horn.

This woman's dress had ribbons all over it. Her face was as white as snow, just like her dress. There seem to be sparkles coming from her face. Sitting upright on the boulder, she noticed Alex, but she continued to play the horn as if he was not there.

Alex, for a moment, thought he was seeing things, but she is indeed real. The music she is playing is real.

"Help me..." he muttered weakly, his hand reaching for her. "Help me..."

Chirico stopped playing and sat facing Alex. "My...what happened to you, mortal?"

"I am dying. Please help me."

"Help you? But I am no doctor. I cannot do much to help, I am afraid. It is such a pity, is it not?"

"Stop playing around." he said. "You wouldn't just watch someone die in front of you, would you?"

The spirit laughed. "And you assume I would help you, did you not? You must have come from a fight. That is what you mortals do. You always fight and fight. Since the beginning of time you have been at war with your own kind. When will your people ever learn? You not only hurt each other, but the forest as well. So, why should I help you, mortal?"

"P-Please...I am bleeding to death. Don't just sit there and watch. Either help me or kill me!"

Chirico stood up, and threw some bandages at him. "Here you go. Bandage up your own wounds. Now you cannot say I did nothing to help. Farewell!" She vanished into the trees. Flash.

She did not help him, but bandages are better than nothing. He crawled to the bandages and began applying them onto his wounds.

Alex Cheng sat leaning against a tree. He needed time to rest and regain his strength. He did not know where his companion went to. He can be lost, or worse, be killed by the bandits. From this point on, he is on his own.

Alex was thinking about the woman he just met before...but was she a woman at all? Perhaps a forest spirit? Was she really one? He heard from folklore about these spirits - usually they're female - and they're playful and mischievous. Only few people ever get to see them - since these spirits always run away. It is considered good luck if you run into one.

It was almost night time. Alex was tired. So tired, so painful. Time to rest. He really wanted to sleep, but fear kept him awake - he feared someone or some animal might attack him while he's vulnerable. But eventually, after a few hours, realizing nothing is going to attack him, he fell into a deep slumber.

[H] [Contents](#)

As planned, En Lo and his men were passing through the Ninjiang forest. Their exact location was unknown, and his men were scared and frightened. No one wanted to voice it, except for one brave soldier.

"Sir, are you sure this is a good idea?" he asked.

"Of course, I am never so sure in my life." replied En Lo. "We have walked all this way. We are not going back now. It will be foolish to take the long way instead of the short way."

The soldier remained silent for the duration. As they walked on, a silhouetted figure watched them from the trees. Then he jumped away. A soldier saw him move - but he was so fast he only saw a flash in the sky.

"What was that?" replied one of the soldiers.

"What was what?" said En Lo.

"I could swear I saw something."

"It is a figment of your imagination. Now keep walking." said their leader.

A man in a straw hat watched them from the trees and he jumped away. Flash.

One of the troops thought he heard something and looked in that direction. He stopped walking, and the soldier in front of him said: "What is the matter? Keep moving."

"Oh sorry." He kept walking. Flash. He turned around again, but saw nothing. Now he was curious and scared. He was certain he something moved behind him. But then he decided to keep walking - and suddenly, a warrior came from behind, grabbed him, and covered his mouth to prevent him from making noises. Stab. No one noticed him missing.

En Lo: "See men, we are still fine. War God? Please? I do not buy into that nonsense. It is all a bunch of baloney!"

"I agree, sir." replied the troop who doubted him.

En accidentally stepped on a skull. He looked at it with disgust. "What the hell..."

Suddenly, one of the troops stepped into a trap - a rope got his ankle and pulled him up, tying him upside down from a tree branch. "Aaaaah! Help!"

Everyone paid attention to him.

En: "What the? Help him down."

A bunch of arrows came from nowhere and hit the upside down man. He screamed painfully before dying. Now the soldiers were scared and they panicked.

"It must be him...the legendary killer!"

"Oh no! We are doomed!"

En: "Do not panic! We must stay together!"

A man in a straw hat appeared behind En. He looked behind. "Huh?" The man disappeared.

An image of the same one appeared to the left. Then disappeared. Flash. The soldiers could not keep track of where he was.

(There is more than one of them!) En thought. "Stop panicking! We have more manpower."

The warrior jumped down, and slashed one of the soldiers. The others ran away in fear.

"Cowards!" En shouted angrily.

The ones who ran were intercepted by two men in straw hats, and killed instantly. Slash.

"No!" En screamed in frustration. "We can beat them! Do not run away!"

But everyone ran in one direction. En Lo ran after his troops, screaming angrily.

As they ran, some were left behind. They were targeted and killed right away. Slash.

Two soldiers saw that they were surrounded by three of the straw hat men. They were trembling all over. They sucked up their fear and charged. The warrior jumped through them, slashing their necks. They died.

While running, En was intercepted by the real War God. He froze at first, but got into fighting stance. "You are not real! There is no such thing as a War God."

The War God approached him without saying a word, drawing the **Fire Sword**. En was sweating heavily. They charged - clang! The warrior made a clean swipe at him - and he blocked. Whack! After the hit, En's sword was shaking, and so were his arms. He realized it's going to be a tough fight. The troops came to their captain's aid. But they couldn't get close to the warrior. He swings his sword so much that no one could go near him, let alone attack.

Warrior number two finished off the remainder of troops. Number three and four joined the fight against the main group. En and two of his men fought the War God valiantly - but to no avail. Cling! Clang!

The War God ran away - so they chased him. One troop fell into a pit. "Aagh!"

En and the troop stopped running. "Grrrrr."

The God jumped down, and slashed the troop. "Agh."

En ran away to join with his group. There were only five of them left. En Lo stood in the middle of his four troops - they had swords pointed in all directions. All of them trembled in fear.

The four God warriors approached. The straw hats covered their eyes. Three of them wore masks, and the real War God had no mask, but the straw hat covered up the top half of his face. Each one of them moved in step by step.

Now En was desperate. He had to think fast, or it is game over. "Damn it. It cannot end like this."

One of the troops was so scared, that he went insane and charged by himself.

"No!" En screamed.

The second he came in contact with the enemy, he was slashed and killed.

En: "Argh, that is it! Listen men, do not fear. We can still win this. There is only one War God, the rest of them are his servants. The real one is that one." He pointed. "We will all attack him, got it."

"Y-Yes sir."

"Okay, now!" En shouted, and charged. The three men charged.

The War God slashed the first one. The other two ran the other way.

"You idiots!"

The troops were intercepted by two of the masked men. Slash! Slash! They died.

Now, only En Lo himself was left. "Now wait a minute...can we talk about this?!" he said, holding his trembling sword.

War God: "All those who enter the Valley of Death shall die and there are no exceptions."

En charged. Swipe! Dodge. Swipe. Clang. Block. The War God slashed him on the knee and kicked him at the stomach. Thud. He fell on his knee. "Ugh...no." Then he

saw a skull on the ground and gasped. He did not want to end up like that...he did not want to be another one of the War God's victims.

The warrior approached coldly. En screamed and charged. "Yaaaah!!"

The warrior jumped, slashing his neck in the process. En died in slow motion. His head rolled to the ground, and seconds later, his headless body collapsed.

The three masked warriors jumped away. War God put his blood-stained sword back into its sheath and walked away from the battlefield.

Little Li Cheng leaned against the wall, frightened to death. Her breathing was hard and long.

"Hey sister." said little Alex. "Hey, what is wrong? Is something the matter?"

The black haired girl stared at the ground and did not look at her brother. "The Duke...he is a monster!"

"Huh?"

She looked at her brother and grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "I can't stay here any longer! He is going to find me and I will be a goner for sure! I have to leave!" She ran away.

"Hey sister, where are you going?"

"Big sister!" screamed little Alex. He reached for his sister, but two hands from the back grabbed him. "No! Don't go!"

Cheng Li walked, then turned around. "I am sorry, little brother, but I have to go, or else they will get me. Please, take care." She waved goodbye with tears streaming down her face. She ran away, still shedding the tears of sadness.

"No!" Alex screamed. His tears flowed down his face like a river. "Nooooo!" That was the last time he saw his sister.

Flash.

The grown up Alex woke up with a cold sweat. "It was all just a dream. It seemed so real."

Something was licking his face.

"Ah!" He crawled away from the baby bear. "Oh... it's just a baby. Come here little fella." The bear went to his garment and sniffed it. "Huh?" Alex pulled the garment away from the bear, who was biting it. "No, it is not for you. This is not food." He wore the garment. "Get lost. Go back home." Then he walked away.

Splash. Alex splashed water on his face and he felt more refreshed. He saw his own reflection in the water. He did not see his own face much, since he always avoided seeing himself.

(So this is me? What am I doing here? I am being hunted by imperial troops and mountain bandits.) Alex realized that he was lost in more ways than one. (When will I find her?) The water made waves, distorting the image of his face. He started to have other thoughts now. Maybe I did waste my life away? Maybe Zi was right...there is

more to life than trying to solve this mystery. But I am already here. I cannot look back now.

Alex put the water bag into the water, waited a few seconds, then pulled it up and closed the top. He will need this water later on. When he got up he gasped and nearly dropped the bag in his hand as he stared face to face with a tiger. The tiger roared, showing its sharp teeth. Alex took a step back, then two, steps, then three, and then ran for it.

Doosh doosh. The tiger chased him good and it was catching up. Alex turned around while running. The tiger was faster than him. Alex stopped running all of a sudden, and turned around and drew his sword.

Now he and the tiger were facing each other, standing a few paces away.

Chomp. The tiger bit the sword blade and it has no intention letting go.

Alex punched the damn animal in the face many times. Finally, it released the blade. Then he slashed. It hit one of its legs. The tiger growled in pain, and then it gave up and turned away.

Alex sighed. "Phew. This place is too dangerous. I will not last long in my condition. I must find a way out fast."

"What?!" Xiang shouted, banging his fist on the table. "En Lo and his men were all killed in the Valley of Death?"

The soldier was kneeling. "Yes my lord. I saw everything with my own eyes. They were all brutally murdered by the War God."

"To think that the War God actually exists. En Lo was one of my best assassins."

"We were no match for them. They were too fast. I am even lucky to escape with my life."

Xiang then calmed himself. "Fine. You did what you could. You did well."

The soldier looked up. "Thank you, my lord."

"Your duties are over...and thus you are no longer needed here."

The soldier gasped. Slash! He was hit in the chest before he could react. The Duke held up his necklace, and the demon jewel glowed.

"No!! Forgive me sir!"

Xiang: "It is too late for forgiveness." The jewel flashed. It was sucking the man's life.

"No! Noooo!"

It kept sucking at the fallen soldier's life, and he was screaming helplessly as his skin was withering away. He grew old almost instantly. Then his body disintegrated, leaving behind only bones.

Flash. The jewel stopped glowing. "Heh. Another soul added to my collection. And that means more energy for me." He threw a handkerchief over the corpse's face.

The spot where he hit the table started to crack.

[I] Contents

Despite how difficult it was, Alex Cheng walked on and on. Occasionally, he felt a jolt of pain on his wounds, and he grabbed it and groaned. But he did not stop to rest,

for the dangers of the wilderness will surely get him. As far as he is concerned, resting makes no difference, it will not heal his wounds any faster.

He saw a tall mountain wall ahead. "What is this?" He walked closer. "Hmmm. Is this the Gate of Hope?" There were no animals nearby, only insects. Only a few trees resided, as there were mostly grass and flowers.

On the wall lay two black statues in kneeling position, head facing down, holding swords. There was a jewel on the wall two stories high. Alex guessed that the jewel is what will open the gates. Alex climbed the wall and grabbed the jewel, and it came off easily. He jumped down. Thud.

The wall moved, making a loud creaking noise in the process. As the gigantic doors slowly opened, Alex worried, as the ground was shaking. When the gates opened, a valley was revealed.

"Amazing... the Temple of Enlightenment should be right around the corner." Alex felt fear, but curiosity at the same time. After much hesitation, he walked in, making a determination not to turn back.

The statue's eyes glowed red. It moved its head, and then its whole body. Both statues stood up.

Alex walked along the path, humming happily. His joy went away when a chain went around his neck. "Huh?" It pulled him to the ground. "Ugh." He was being dragged backwards. Alex looked up and saw the statues, and he became frightened and confused at the same time.

"What the hell is going on?" He unchained himself and stood up.

The statues approached, drawing their swords.

"This...cannot be happening."

The statues' eyes glowed in anger. Their intentions are clear. Alex attacked one of them, plunging his sword into its chest as hard as he could. He smiled, thinking he killed it, or at least injured it. But it did not show signs of pain. The statue knocked him down. Whack!

It raised its sword high, and brought it down with a mighty swing. Alex quickly rolled away. Chop!!

Both statues charged forward and attacked. Luckily for our hero, their movements were slow and mechanical, allowing him to run away. The second statue threw a chain, which caught Alex's ankle, and pulled him down.

"Ugh!"

The second statue pulled the chain, pulling Alex closer to them, and then stepped on his stomach, where his wound was.

"Aaaaah!" he screamed in pain.

He tried to get the statue's foot off him, but it was too heavy. The statue pointed its sword down and stabbed, Alex tilted his head to the side to dodge it. Alex twisted his lower body up, putting his legs around the statue's leg, and he used force to make the statue lose balance and collapse. He proceeded to cut the chain off his leg.

The first statue approached. Since swords will not work, perhaps brute force might. Alex ran forward and did a jumping kick, effectively knocking the statue down.

Then he ran away and never looked back. He did not know if the statues were chasing him or not, but the important thing is that he is safe now.

When he thought he was far enough, Alex stopped running to catch his breath. His injuries were becoming unbearable. Fighting those statues made his wounds open up, and that is not a good sign for him, who is still lost in this place full of danger. Hopefully, his journey from here on will be an easier one.

[J] Contents

After much traveling, Alex Cheng saw a sign, and although he could not make out what the words said, since they were written in a different language, he was sure the sign is one that leads to the Temple. He has never been so certain of anything in his life. His instincts and feelings told him as such. The sign had an arrow that points to the left, thus he went to the left, behind the group of trees.

When he arrived at the site, he was simply amazed at what he saw. The Temple was before his very eyes, and it seemed to be glowing. He was literally frozen with shock, as he is in disbelief that he actually found the temple of legend.

The structure leading up to the temple was a staircase made entirely of stone. One must walk all the way up, step by step, and once he reaches the top, there is the main entrance, which was between two large columns. Alex's heart was beating rapidly as he walked up the stairs. As he entered the main entrance, he stepped inside and noticed the area was a big empty field, surrounded by old buildings. These must have been hundreds of years old.

People were training, holding bamboo sticks and hitting the air. Alex watched them without moving.

A certain three who were not training noticed the stranger standing dumbfounded at the entrance and went to him. **Chan**, a big and muscular monk over six feet tall, approached Alex first. His tall and strong appearance has been advantageous to him in many battles.

"What are you doing here, stranger?" Chan asked.

"I..."

"We do not welcome outsiders here."

"Who is in charge?" Alex asked. "I need to speak with the one in charge."

"There is no point asking for that." Chan replied. He moved forward, and Alex stepped back.

The other two students came behind Chan, laughing and smiling.

"Now, now, do not be mean to our guests." said **Fu**, a monk of average height and with an appearance of that of a child.

"We apologize for Chan's rude behavior. He likes to scare people for some reason." said **Shang**, a short girl with black hair.

Cheng smiled stupidly.

"You are a visitor from the city, are you not?" Fu asked. He walked around Alex, examining his attire. "We do not get visitors often."

"What a nice sword you have. Mind if I see that?" Shang asked.

Alex passively let her take it. Shang took the sword to have a closer look.
“Hmmm. It is nicely carved, but it is very ordinary. There is nothing special about it.”

The tall one, Chan, touched Alex by the shoulders, and he can feel the monk's strength from that press. “You are from the Kingdom of Shen, are you not? I can tell.”

Alex grew worried with the girl playing with his weapon. “Ah...can I have that back?”

“Sure thing.” she replied, and threw it at him, and he caught it.

“I must speak with your leader. This is an urgent matter.”

“Our leader is very busy.” Shang said. “You may have to wait. Oh, by the way, my name is Shang Tsu. Pleasure to meet you.” She shook his hand.

“I am Fu Chen.”

“And my name is Chan Lou.”

“My name is Alex Cheng. It is a pleasure to meet you all.”

The teacher came to see his students and noticed three of them surrounding someone who was not dressed in proper attire. In fact, his face was not familiar. “Ah hem. What is happening here?” asked Guan Du.

The three students quickly stood in one line. “Sorry master.”

“Go back to training.”

“Yes sir!” they said in unison, and ran merrily back to class.

Guan took a good look at the visitor. “Hmmm, what brings you here, outsider?”

“Forgive my trespassing. My name is Cheng and I come here from far away. I am from the Yi Ling province of Shen.”

“Yi Ling? That is very far. You must be tired from your journey. I will show you around. My name is Guan Du, and I am one of the teachers in the temple.”

And so, Guan showed him the various parts of the temple, starting from the training field to the cafeteria.

“Welcome to the Temple of Enlightenment, young one. This is a very holy and sacred place. This place has existed for thousands of years. It is almost as old as civilization itself. The original founders were persecuted during the Chao Dynasty. Our founders were prohibited from practicing religion, which the people judged as witchcraft or sorcery, and even black magic. Our founders were treated as if they were demons, even beasts of the lowest level.”

“Amazing...” Cheng replied.

“The temple's founders also developed the ability to heal, which is what we are known for. I believe you came here for that reason, am I correct, Cheng?”

“Kind of.”

They continued walking along the second floor of the building complex. Below them were students who were training vigorously.

“Cheng, we believe that the human body is the greatest invention God has given us. It is so complex, yet so simple. We humans have conquered vast lands, created weapons of destructions, and we have advanced in science, yet we do not even understand ourselves.”

“I agree.”

Guan continued his explanation. "The human body is actually capable of healing itself. We do not need any medicine or herbs. However, most people, or shall I say, ninety nine percent of people do not know the secret – that the body and mind work together as one – one cannot function without the other. The body without the mind is just an empty, lifeless shell. Think of it as the yin and yang, one cannot exist without the other. The human body has billions of neurons and micro particles traveling around. Think of them as the law enforcers of the body. One man can heal any injury he wishes, no matter how big or small the wound or the length of time it has been there."

"Really?"

"Yes. The key is to know how to use it. Our monks are experts in that." Guan looked below at the hard working students. "Our temple was built on the principles of honesty and integrity. We pride ourselves on our rigorous training program and the discipline that our students receive. Many of us were born and raised here, and die here. Our students came to us, having an injury that no doctor can heal. But we were able to heal them, and through time, they become stronger. All of them do not want to leave once they discover the tranquil and peaceful life they can have here."

"I understand." Alex replied. "The outside world is full of hatred and ignorance and violence."

"Indeed. Over here we have acceptance, tolerance, and peace."

Afterwards, they visited the dorms, and shortly thereafter, the cafeteria.

"This is where we dine." Guan announced. "We believe that the right diet is essential in maintaining a strong, healthy body."

"Let me guess...there is no meat?" Alex asked.

"No, not even an ounce. Vegetables and natural herbs give us all the energy we need to stay alive and do our activities. Meat and poultry will only make you fat."

They walked some more.

"Master Guan, I have yet to tell you the reason why I came."

"Oh?"

"The main reason is...I am here to find my sister, Li Cheng."

Guan had a shocked expression on his face, but his back was facing Alex, so he did not see his face. "Li Cheng?"

"She is my older sister. I have not seen her for many years. She ran away from home when we were little. I heard that she came to this very temple, so I traveled a long way here, hoping to find her."

Guan thought of Li Cheng, the little girl who came many years ago. He remembered her face very clearly, the face of that bright, cheery little girl. He trained her for a while, and when she grew older, she left the temple.

(Li Cheng...she once mentioned she had a younger brother. So this is him? Who would have thought this man is the cute girl's younger brother?)

"Master Guan?" Alex inquired. "Is it true that she came here? Is she still here?"

Guan turned around. "She **did** come here before. But I am afraid she is no longer here. She left several years ago."

A rush of disappointment came over Cheng's face. "Oh...it is alright. I did not expect to find her this easily."

"I am terribly sorry."

"Do you know where she went?"

"She did not tell me exactly here, but she is somewhere in Yi Ling."

"Yi Ling? That is where I came from!" Alex exclaimed. "Damn it! I came all the way here...just t-to f-find out..." Suddenly, he felt a jolt of pain on his stomach. "...that she h-has been in Yi Ling all along..." His other wounds started to hurt. "Ughhhh..." He fell on one knee with one hand grabbing the fence.

Guan held him up. "Are you alright, young man?"

"Ugh..." Alex fainted.

"Cheng! Speak to me! Cheng!"

[K] Contents

In the first few moments of consciousness, his vision was blurry. Seconds later, things became less blurry and he saw two people watching him, Guan Du and another monk. "Uhhh..."

"Thank goodness." said Guan. "You are finally awake."

Alex sat up. "Damn it. How long have I been sleeping?"

"A whole day."

"I have wasted much time already."

"We have treated your wounds." said the other monk. "I am afraid you have some deep cuts on your body. You must have run into mountain bandits."

"You are right. The trip here was not an easy one."

"I see." said Guan. "Everyone who came here has the same problem. Many died trying to find this temple. You should consider yourself lucky. Your wounds should be better now. But we still need to train you on how to heal yourself."

"Heal myself?"

"Remember when I said that the human body has the ability to heal itself no matter what kind of injury it is? Once you learn this secret technique that has been around for thousands of years, it will be beneficial to you for the rest of your life."

"Alright." Cheng said weakly. "I will leave it up to you, master."

"Gee, he is finally awake." said Zi.

Cheng was shocked. "Zi? You are alive!!"

"Of course I am, you big dope. No bandit can kill the great Zi."

"Thank goodness. You had me worried there."

"These monks sure are something. It's only been a short and my wounds feel better already."

"You should get some rest." Guan said, and he and the other monk left the room.

When morning came, Guan took Alex to an empty room. Along the way, they came across another monk. Appearance-wise, he was different than other monks. He was wearing a gray robe that touched the floor as he walked about. His hair and beard

was completely white, and it was long enough to reach his stomach. He also wore a big pearl necklace.

Guan kneeled immediately. "Master Ho Sai."

Alex stood there stupidly and then he kneeled.

Ho Sai took a quick glance at the two and walked past them with grace.

Alex and Guan stood up. "Who was that?"

"Idiot." He hit Alex on the head.

"Ow!"

"That was Master Ho Sai, the most powerful monk among us, and the leader of this temple."

"Oh."

"You better remember that. You must show him the utmost respect and never, ever offend him."

"Understood." replied Alex. "But can I ask you one thing? What makes him the most powerful one?"

"Master Ho Sai is known for his spiritual powers. He has the God-given ability to foresee events in the future. He can tell one's entire life just by touching him!"

"Really?"

"Yes. He truly is a human phenomenon. We are much honored to have him as the sage of this temple."

Alex stared at Master Ho Sai as he walked down the hallway. The other students greeted him by bowing respectfully. Alex began to wonder. If he truly does have these special powers, then he must know where Li Cheng is.

Finally, the first training session has begun. "Now, sit down." Guan instructed.

Alex did as he was told. Guan's assistant monk and Zi were watching from the side.

"Today I am going to teach you how to meditate. First sit upright and cross your legs. Now take a deep breath and close your eyes. And clear your mind." Guan said.

Alex tried to clear his mind.

"Do not think of anything. Do not think of your sister, or the bandits who attacked you, or anything else that has been on your mind lately. Do not think about money or women or anything material possessions."

"Is this really going to work?" asked Zi.

"Silence please." said the monk with a finger over his lips. "This is a very delicate process."

"Sorry."

Guan continued. "Your mind should be clear. Now I want you to imagine what I describe. You see nothing but a blank space. A black, empty space. Picture this in your mind."

Alex's eyes twitched as he concentrated.

"Picture a vast, black space, as big as the universe itself. There is nothing there but blackness. Absolutely nothing. Picture stars. There are bright, glittering stars

everywhere. Millions of them – no billions – countless ones. They all shine so bright, if you look too close into one of them you will go blind.

Alex had a mental picture of the universe with lots of bright stars.

“Now breath easy...in, out, in, out. Relax yourself. Let your muscles relax. You are very relaxed. You have no worries. No stress. No fear. No nothing. You are as carefree as the wind. Let your body relax. Pretend you are not in this world anymore. Now, focus your energy. There are countless energy particles inside of your body. Feel them out. Focus your energy into one spot. Pretend you see them. Concentrate. Feel the energy in the universe. It is everywhere. It is inside of you – it is in the very air that you breathe.”

Now Alex has entered a trance. His fingers were shaking.

Zi grew curious. (Is it really working?)

“You no longer feel pain. Your wounds are nothing to you and they will not get in the way of your journey. Concentrate that energy you have just manifested into your wounds...they are healing your wounds. Your body itself is a temple of healing. That is right, Cheng. Good. Good. Now keep doing it.”

Half an hour passed and Alex woke up. “Uhhh, what happened?”

Guan smiled. “Congratulations. You have just successfully meditated.”

“I did? Hmmm, so that is what meditation is. For some reason, I feel a little better now. It is like when I wake up in the morning and get a rush of energy. I feel so...rejuvenated.” He touched his wound. “Ow. But my body is still the same.”

“Heh. Healing takes time. You must be patient, young one. Now I want you to master this technique of meditating by doing it twice a day. In fact, you should meditate while you sleep. This way will save you a lot of time.”

“Understood.”

Zi: (Amazing. This is the power of the Temple of Enlightenment. These monks are the masters of the mind. They are using meditation to heal physical injuries. They know that is the mind that heals. This is getting interesting...)

When the sun came across the horizon, birds chirped and the forest came to life. Zi came into Alex's quarters to wake up him. But when he opened the door, he was surprised to see Alex already awake. “Rise and shine...oh, you're up already. This is not like you.”

Alex was looking out the window and did not look at Zi. “It must be this place. There is something holy about it. I am not sure what it is but maybe it has something to do with the monks.”

“I can feel it too.”

“Zi, do you know anything about Master Ho Sai?”

“Well, I know that he is the leader of this place. Why?”

“Does he really know everything, as the rumors say?”

“Well...I don't know.” Zi replied.

“If he truly is a psychic, then he knows where my sister is.”

"Oh, I see." said Zi. "But I do not think you can just ask him like that. He usually does not let strangers talk to him."

"I must ask him, one way or another." said Alex.

"Sure, go for it. But don't do anything stupid."

Alex responded with a smile.

[L] Contents

At some point during noontime, Guan once again helped Alex with his meditation. This time, they meditated together, going through the same process as before. Both of them closed their eyes and kept their minds clear.

"Cheng...do you feel it? That energy vibrating inside of your body."

"Yes...I think so."

"Harness the energy. Do not lose control of it. Control it. This is your life energy. This is what makes the human body a healing machine."

"Yes..."

As they meditated, their bodies were glowing.

While his companion was doing some healing, Zi walked nonchalantly along the hallways with his hands behind his head and whistled. One of the monks saw him.

"Excuse me, are you the one named Zi Lai, one of the new residents?"

"That would be me."

"Let me ask you something, what is your purpose in coming here?"

"I am here for the sake of my friend Alex." Zi replied.

"Oh, you are a good friend."

"I guess I am."

"But since you are here," said the monk, "Why don't you join our martial arts classes. You can become a student and become stronger."

"Well..."

"You and your friend are on a journey, correct? I heard you two barely escaped from the grasp of mountain bandits. I know you will not stay here forever, so eventually you will have to leave and face danger again. Why not be better prepared?"

"I guess you have a point. Heck, why not?"

"But I want you to know this training will not be easy. It will be rigorous and rough."

"Rough is my middle name!"

While Alex and Guan were meditating, Alex opened one eye to peek. "Master Guan? Master Guan?" There was no response, and it was safe for him to escape. Alex got on his feet, as quietly as he could, and walked towards Ho Sai's quarters.

When he reached the entrance, he saw the old man in meditating position. It felt wrong to go in and interrupt him, but there is a question that he must have answered.

"Ah-hem. Master Ho Sai? It is me, Alex Cheng, the newcomer." He walked in casually.

Ho Sai's eyes opened. "Alex Cheng. What is it?"

"Forgive my intrusion." he said, kneeling. "But I want to ask you something...do you really have God-like knowledge about the world? Are you really able to predict the future and see images of the past?"

"Yes. You want information from me, about your sister, am I right?"

Alex was shocked. Then he smiled eagerly. "You truly are wise. I cannot hide anything from you."

"Sorry, but I cannot give that information."

"Why not?"

"Because you are not supposed to know. Giving this knowledge will break the rules of the **universal force**."

"What universal force do you speak of? I just want to find out where my sister is. I've been looking for her my whole life. Please, I beg of you."

Guan came in. "Cheng, what are you doing? Do not bother our master." He grabbed Alex and began to drag him away."

"Please, just tell me!!" pleaded Alex.

"Please accept my apologies, master. I will discipline him better." said Guan.

Ho Sai continued meditating as they made a ruckus.

After they left the room, Guan said: "What do you think you are doing, stupid? I told you not to bother him?"

"But I must find out!"

"If Master Ho Sai chooses not to tell you, then that is the way it is. From now on, you are not to get within five feet of Master Ho Sai, understood?"

Alex sighed. "Understood." That is what came out of his mouth, but in his mind, he still has not given up.

The Duke stood by the table with his arms leaning on it. He was staring a picture of a bunch of faces, each with lines connecting to another. It represented the Liu hierarchy, with King Liu on the top of the chain. Below him were face portraits of his trusted him and officials.

"Hmmm. The King's two closest people are Lord Lee and General Chung. Once I eliminate them, controlling the king will be easy." He circled Lee and Chung's faces with a brush. "Heh. I almost have enough souls to transform into my demon form. Once I gather enough souls, King Liu is history." He laughed maniacally.

Alex slept uncomfortably at night. He had the same dream as before, except this time it was more detailed.

Little Li Cheng leaned against the wall, frightened to death. Her breathing was hard and long.

"Hey sister." said little Alex. "Hey, what's wrong? Is something the matter?"

The black haired girl never looked at Alex, but stared at the ground. "The Duke...he is a monster!"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Li grabbed Alex by the shoulders, which shocked him. "The Duke is a monster...he's going to get me sooner or later! Don't you see! I'm not safe here anymore!"

"Big sister!" screamed little Alex. He reached for his sister, but two hands grabbed him. "No! Don't go!"

Li Cheng walked, carrying a bag of her belongings, and then turned around. "I am sorry, little brother, but I have to go, or else they will get me. Please, take care of him." She waved goodbye with tears coming out of her eyes. She ran away, still shedding the tears of sadness.

"No!" Alex screamed, his hand desperately reaching for Li. His tears flowed down his face like a river. "No!!" The hands of his parents grabbed him tightly.

A bright flash appeared, and everything became blank.

Alex woke up and he was back in reality. He was so sure that he was still ten years old, still with his family...and his sister. That was a few seconds ago. Now, he is back in his bed, in his quarters of the temple. The first thing he did was to pull his shirt up to check on his wound. To his surprise, much of the wound was gone.

"Wow, my wound healed this much in such a short time. This is truly the Temple of Enlightenment. At this rate, I should be able to recover in no time."

Guan Du and his assistant were talking in their private quarters. "Sir, what do you think of our newcomer, Alex Cheng?"

"He has a lot of spirit, I will give him that." Guan replied. "He came all the way here from Yi Ling to look for his lost sister. From here to Yi Ling is quite a distance, and he has been through a long and dangerous journey."

"Those wounds are the result of his encounter with mountain bandits?"

"Yes. These bandits are all over the wilderness. They are nothing but beasts."

The monk touched his beard. "Cheng is making remarkable improvements in his body. Then again, so does everyone who learns our meditation practices. But I noticed there is one wound on him that does not seem to be healing."

"Do you mean the one on his right arm near the shoulder?"

"Yes, that one."

"That is not a recent wound, my friend."

The monk, who had his eyes closed the entire time, opened one of his eyes.

"We can use meditation and natural herbs to heal his injuries...the recent ones, at least. The injury on Alex's arm has been there for many years now." said Guan.

"Oh, I see."

"Alex Cheng...I see a lot of potential in that young man. He is an average swordsman, but I know he is capable of much more. That wound on his arm is keeping him from reaching his potential."

The old monk rubbed his beard.

"Because of the serious damage to his triceps, he is unable to use a sword to its full potential, along with other physical limitations. If that wound were to disappear and he if he were to reach full power...and if he were to hold a sword..."

Alex walked by the outer hallways. His sleeves were rolled up, and his old stitched up wound mentioned by Guan was clearly visible. It has been there since childhood, and it is something that he has to learned to live with.

"Then?"

"Then...he'd make a great swordsman. I just know it."

Alex greeted Zi with a wave, and they began chatting and laughing.

"Even I do not know Cheng's true potential. But we will find out once the wound heals...with our help."

Zi: "So, any luck with the grand master Ho Sai?"

Alex: "No. I am going to ask him again."

"Didn't master Guan tell you not to go near that guy again?"

"I do not care what he says. I have to find out where my sister is one way or another."

"Okay man...well, I'm not going to stop you. It's your choice."

"So you have been training with the other students?"

"Yeah." Zi bit an apple.

"How is it?"

"It's great man. I can't believe how many cute chicks there are. There's Yi, and Yan, and Shang, and..."

"Sigh...you never change."

"Heh." He nudged Alex on the arm. "C'mon, you want some chicks too, don't cha? You know Alex, you should lighten up a little. Don't take life so seriously. Otherwise life might just pass you by like that." He snapped his fingers. "And then it's all over. And in the end, you regret not getting all the women you could've gotten."

"Zi, that is probably the furthest thing from my mind right now."

"Okay man. Sometimes I wonder, Alex."

"I just do not have time to fool around. I am here for a reason."

Zi shrugged. "You're the boss."

[M] Contents

At midnight, the Imperial Palace was as silent as a ghost town. Crickets chirped. Everyone was sound asleep except for two particular men.

Xiang made his move. "I will take that." He took his opponent's game piece away from the board.

"Argh." Lee said in frustration. "I thought I had that territory for sure."

"Heh. The object of the game is to conquer the most territory with the least possible pieces. Do not forget that."

"But you are too diversified, your pieces are scattered and unaided. My pieces are grouped together and concentrated. They have more power." Lee made his move.

"But you are losing, and that means your strategy is not working." Xiang said with a smile. He made his move.

"Argh. In any case, let us get down to business. Why did you call me here so late at night?"

"Lord Lee. You cannot consider that I just want to play Go with you? Must I want something from you?"

"You certainly did not call me out at this time of night to play a game."

"That is correct." Xiang said. "I called you here to tell you about a conspiracy that has been around for nearly fifty years."

"Conspiracy? What conspiracy?" Lee asked, focused on the game.

"A conspiracy which involves demons disguised as humans, who are trying to crush the Liu family."

"Surely you are joking, duke? What non-sense are you speaking?"

"Oh, but it is not non-sense, I assure you."

Lee looked straight into Xiang's eyes. "Who is in charge of this...conspiracy?"

"I am." Xiang was holding a knife behind his back. "And I need you as a sacrifice." He threw the knife into Lee's neck.

"Aaaagh!" Lee fell, slammed his hand on the game board, and all the game pieces fell off. Lee crawled away and drew a knife from his pocket.

"I am afraid I cannot allow you to do that." He pulled out a sword from a sheath and slashed Lee. Then he grabbed the jewel on his necklace and it sucked the life out of Lord Lee. Zzzzzzt. Before long, his skin and flesh rotted into his bones and only his skeleton was left.

The crime has been done. Lord Lee is no longer, and he has become another soul for the duke to absorb...and he is one step closer to releasing his demon form.

Ho Sai walked gracefully about the inner halls of the temple. Alex waited for him to come and then intercepted him. He bowed politely. "Master Ho Sai."

"You again?"

"Yes, it is me, Cheng. I humbly thank you for being in my presence. There is no greater honor in the world than to be in the same place, breathing the same air as you, sir."

Ho Sai showed his hand. "Save your flattery, boy. I will not give you the information that you seek. Now, if you do not mind, begone. I have much to do."

Alex's efforts have gone to waste and he grew angry. "Why won't you tell me?"

"I have already explained my reasons. There is no need to explain it again."

"Please sir, I need to know!"

"No." The monk walked past Alex.

Alex turned around and kneeled. "I am begging you, Master Ho Sai! I have been searching for my sister for years. I came all the way from Yi Ling to the Temple of Enlightenment after hearing news about her being here. Now that I am here, she is not here. I have to know where she is. I spent most of my life looking for her. Right now you are the only one who knows where she is. Please tell me."

Ho Sai sighed. "Young man, I have seen many things in my life. I cam across many people like yourself, who are on a quest for something. They are always hasty, taking action before thinking things through. Many of them are dead, and those who are still alive live a life of regret. If you want to end up the same way, then keep doing what you are doing."

He continued walking, and Alex followed him until they reached the highest floor of the building. At this point Ho Sai stopped and stared at the sky.

"I do not know why I was born with such abilities, the ability to know things, as I know you would come to me before you even came. I know that you would step into this temple before I even met you. I know what you are going to ask before you even open your mouth. I even know your parents' names and what year they were born. I honestly do not know why God gave me the gift of unforeseeable knowledge and the ability to see the future. What I see is not the future, rather, images of a possible future. Perhaps I am the lucky star...one who is born at the right time at the right place. God chose me to have these gifts...it is both a blessing and a curse.

"Knowing everything is not necessarily a good thing. Do you understand, Cheng? Sometimes I foresee a good event, and I look forward to it. But other times, I foresee a bad event, and no matter how I wish it will not happen, it will happen. But on rare occasions, my visions are wrong. I have learned that it is humans who determine their own destiny, not God, not the heavens, not the universal force. I am afraid that you are not ready for the upcoming hardships you will be enduring. You are still injured, Cheng. You can barely hold a sword. What good is it if you know where your sister is? Will it help? You will die before you even reach her. What good will come of that?"

Alex was stunned by this man's speech. He was honored. "Hmm. I thank you very much for telling me this, Master Ho Sai, but does this mean you are never going to tell me what I want to know?"

"Only time will tell." he simply said.

"I assure you, I will not die! My injuries will heal soon. I am a healthy man. I will heal quicker than normal people." Alex bowed.

"That is still not good enough." Ho Sai turned around. "With your level of sword skill, you will not make it through your journey! Just give up, Cheng!"

"Never! I will show you what I can truly do, Master Ho Sai. I will heal and then I will train hard. Then I will show you what a true a warrior I am." Alex lifted his head up, and stared directly into Ho Sai's eyes.

Ho Sai was shocked. He saw the fire in Alex's eyes...the fire of passion. The burning passion of life that resides in oneself. He never saw anyone with such fire, such

desperation, such determination...except for one other person. One just like Alex himself.

He remembered very clearly. He remembered seeing a little girl in front of him, one with long, black hair. She looked straight into his eyes without blinking. Her hands were folded together in a bowing position. That little girl was Li Cheng, the sister of the person bowing before him.

Ho Sai touched his beard. "We shall see." he said and proceeded to walk away.

Alex: "I will not let you down, master! Just watch!"

[N] Contents

Alex meant what he said to Ho Sai. That night, he ate very fast. He put the bowl over his mouth and used his chopsticks to sweep the rice into his mouth. The other students noticed his peculiar way of eating.

"Cheng, are you that hungry?" Fu asked.

"Why are you eating so fast? You will choke yourself." said Shang.

"I have to eat more so I can heal faster and get stronger." Alex announced. He scooped more rice into his bowl and he ate it ravenously.

Fu: "But if you eat so fast you will not enjoy it."

"I'm done!" Alex said, slamming his bowl on the table. Everyone on that table stared in bewilderment. Alex left the cafeteria before anyone else.

That night, he made sure he had a good night's sleep. He did not have dreams about his sister leaving him.

Early the next morning, Cheng woke up feeling energized. He did not need anyone waking him up. He charged into the bathroom, brushed his teeth and washed his face, and he was ready. He went into the training room and sat down and began meditating.

Guan walked by and he was impressed that Alex meditated without anyone having to instruct him. Guan was also impressed that he learned the technique so quickly. Cheng opened his eyes.

"I'm sorry, did I distract you?"

"No, actually, you are the just the person I have been looking for. Can I ask you something, master?"

"What is it?"

"Can you train me? Zi is training with the other students right now, and I want to learn the ways of the temple."

"But Cheng, it is too soon for you to begin training. Your wounds have not completely healed."

"I have wasted much time already, and I cannot wait any longer. Please sir, teach me!"

"Fine, but we will have to wait a few days. We do not want to make your injuries worse."

Cheng's eyes lit up. "Thank you sir!"

Guan smiled. How can he not be delighted that his student is so eager to learn?

Meanwhile, King Liu has just learned about the death of his subordinate. "What is this? Lord Lee has been murdered?!"

"I am sorry about this, sire." said General Chung.

"Your highness," said another subordinate. "When we found him he was already dead."

"Do you have any clue as to who killed him?"

"We are investigating this, sire."

The king banged his fist on the chair. "Find the murderer immediately! Lord Lee has been my friend for many years. Whoever did this will pay dearly."

The underling was scared and trembling. "Yes sire, right away!" He left the room.

Liu Bei sighed and rested his head on his hand.

Chung: "Your highness, I sympathize with you. Our murderer somehow snuck into the palace. Either that or he was already within the palace premises."

"You are saying he is inside this palace? He is one of us?"

"No. Lord Lee was playing Go with the murderer before he was skilled. It must have been one of the officials. I'd be very careful, sire."

General Chung came to the rooftop of the meeting place. Xiang was waiting for him right there. "Alright Duke, what is this about? What is with all the secrecy?"

"Greetings General Chung, I need you to come with me." Xiang went to the roof door, opened it, and started walking down the ladder.

Chung: "Hold on a second. What is this about?"

"Just come down and I will tell you."

Xiang: (Chung, you are as cautious as always. But no matter what I am going to get you.) "Trust me on this, general. Just come down with me."

"I wish I could say I trust you, Duke Xiang. Just tell me what is this matter about, or I will leave."

"Very well. I will tell this only to you. This is about Lord Lee's sudden death."

"Lord Lee? Do you know who killed him?"

"I cannot say for sure. This matter is not that simple. This is about a conspiracy of demons trying to take over the kingdom. Demons are disguised as high officials and they are planning to murder the real officials to get to the king himself."

"Demons? Are you speaking the truth?"

"Yes, Chung. You know it and I know it. Demons do exist. This matter is of the utmost importance. You can come with me now, or choose to walk away from this. Who knows, you might end up being one of their victims. Lord Lee has already fallen."

General Chung thought about it for a while.

Duke went down the ladder. "It is up to you."

Chung made up his mind. "Alright, wait up." He stepped on the ladder and went down. After three steps, the ladder broke. Crack. "Uhhh..." He slid down and fell. Crash. "Oww...Duke help me!"

"Oh, I **will** help you..." Duke said, holding a sword.

"Uhhh...uhhh..."

"...go to another world!" **SLASH!**

Blood dripped all over the place. Chung's breathing got slower.

Xiang took out his jewel and it sucked the life out of Chung. His skin deteriorated and rotted into his bones.

"Hah hah hah!! Hah hah! Finally. I have all the souls I need to complete my transformation. At last...my ambitions will be realized!"

Back at the temple, Cheng was completely focused and present at what he was doing. Every morning, he woke up, get to the infirmary, grab a broom, and start sweeping the leaves off the floor. He'd sweep until every single leaf was gone, and then he'd grab a bucket, fill it with water, get a cloth, and scrub the dojo floor. He cleaned it by pushing the cloth against the floor, while running with his feet. Left and right, left and right, front and back. When he was done the floor was sparkling clean and when he saw his own reflection, he was satisfied.

Zi and Cheng shared the same room, with their beds on opposite ends. Zi yawned and woke up. He was surprised to see that Alex had woken up before him...again. Back home, Zi was always the one to wake up him. Curious, Zi looked out the window, and saw Alex diligently scrubbing the dojo floors.

Back at the temple, Alex was completely focused into what he was doing. Every morning, he'd wake up, go to the infirmary, grab a broom, and start sweeping the leaves off the floor. He'd sweep until every single leaf was gone. Then he'd grab a bucket, fill it up with water, get a cloth and scrub the dojo floor. He pushed the cloth against the floor while running with his feet. First left, then right. Left and right. He would not stop until the floor became sparkling clean.

Zi and Alex shared the same room, with their beds a opposite ends. One morning, Zi yawned and woke up. He was surprised to see that his companion had woken up before him again. Curious, Zi looked out the window and saw Alex diligently scrubbing the dojo floors. "You gotta be kidding me...I never seen Alex working so hard before."

Once done with the floor, Alex started cleaning the walls. He was humming as he did his chores. He did not mind the hard work because he had a compelling reason to do so. He was hoping to touch Master Ho Sai's heart by his actions, and consequently Ho Sai will be willing to reveal the whereabouts of his sister. Cheng believed that it will happen and he thought of nothing else.

Cheng did not realize it, but his arm felt better over these past few days. He was able to do more. He did not know why this happened, perhaps it has something to do with the healing treatment, but it allowed him to work harder.

Guan and his assistant monk came by. The monk nodded in praise. "A hard working young man he is, don't you think so?"

"Indeed he is." Guan replied.

Eventually, Guan Du began training Alex. At first, he thought Alex would fall behind so he gave him private lessons.

"Alright. Good." Guan said, as Cheng maneuvered the bamboo stick. He used it to hit the air, and performed a stance, doing it step by step as he was taught. "Good. Good."

Then Cheng went meditating. By noon time, Cheng went to fetch water. He came back, carrying two buckets, with a rod over his shoulders. It was hard work, but Cheng made it look like he did it with ease, even though he was tired. When he came back he put down the bucket of water.

Fu: "Wow, that was pretty quick."

Cheng: "I have the water, master. Do you need more?"

Guan: "Yes, I need two more buckets, please."

"No problem." Cheng replied. He left to retrieve more.

Fu and Shang were nothing short of amazed by his perseverance. "Wow, what a guy he is."

Later on, as planned, Cheng began training with the other students. He would train at the same fast-paced rate they would be training at. Cheng also had his other duties – washing the floor and the walls and fetching water, among other things.

Within a week, Cheng was able to keep up with the other students, to everyone's surprise. Guan was impressed indeed. When the students performed their martial arts forms, they all moved together in a synchronized fashion. Cheng was able to blend into the crowd, yet he stood out.

Guan noticed Cheng's fast learning rate. As he watched the students practice, his eyes were caught on Cheng. Guan remembered seeing the fire in his eyes. The very same fire that someone else had...a little girl who was here years ago...a girl named Li Cheng. Guan wondered if Ho Sai noticed the same thing.

After training came dinner. At the cafeteria, Alex was eating fast as usual. He swept the chopsticks so fast that it hit the bowl and made clinking noises. Clink. Clink. He almost poured the rice directly into his mouth. A hard worker needs more nutrients, and the other students expected him to choke at any moment.

Those who sat at his table, namely Shang, Chan, Fu, and Zi, watched in bewilderment.

He slammed the bowl on the table. "More please!"

The monk poured him another bowl, and he made it disappear within moments. Thud. "I'm done!" Then he stood up and left the room.

Shang: "What is with him?"

Fu: "I know what you mean. Why is he in such a hurry? Food is meant to be enjoyed when one consumes it slowly."

Chan: Heh, he probably thinks he's better than us because he can eat faster. He is making a futile effort to keep up."

Shang: "Chan, that is not true."

Chan: "Heh. He is not going to catch up."

Shang: "That's so mean."

Chan: "Hey, it is what I think. Excuse me for being honest."

Zi stared as Alex left the room. Something is not right with his friend. Yes, he has made some startling improvements, but why did he change so much in such a short time? What has caused him to act as such? Does he really want to see his sister this desperately?

Once again it is time for training. Guan led the group of students. He performed some attack combinations, and the students followed his movements precisely.

Ho Sai and his servants came by walking on the platform. The students were absorbed into their training and no one noticed Ho Sai's appearance. He was staring at all the students, but one in particular...Cheng. Still thinking about the conversation they had the other day, the master realized that Alex reminded him of Li, the cute little girl who grew up here. Within a few years, she was developed into an outstanding warrior. Will the same happen for her brother?

[O] Contents

Night time came and all the students were in their quarters sound asleep, as mandated by the curfew. Those who disobeyed the curfew, or any of the temple's laws were punished with no exceptions. This applies to even the teachers. Zi was tired from training all day and he slept like a pig, snoring loudly.

Alex, however, could not fall asleep despite being tired. He was lying down with his knees bent and his hands under his head. He was still thinking about that fateful day...

"The Duke, he's a monster!"

Many questions arose from that memory. What did my sister see that frightened her so much, causing her to run away? Did she see something that she was not supposed to?

The Cheng family used to live together in one house. The household consisted of four people – Alex, Li, and their parents. Li just made the announcement that was selected to work as a servant in the Imperial Palace. Her parents were overjoyed and they praised her like she was made of gold, and for all they knew, she **was**. For it is a great honor to be chosen to be a servant of the king and his high lords, it is the dream of every young girl. The only other most important thing in a girl's life is to be married to a rich man."

"Imagine this, my little girl has finally become a big girl now." said her mother.

And to this her father said, "And she is going to make tons of money. All your years of hard work paid off, Li."

Their compliments made Li blush. "Thank you mother and father. I will not disappoint you. I will work very hard!"

Everybody was happy except for Alex. He sat quietly by the kitchen table, absorbed into his own thoughts. For he was just a child who put no value on money, but on family. He grew up with Li, and if she has to go to the palace, she will not be

here anymore, and he will be lonely. He got along with only his sister, and not other kids in school.

Months have passed and Alex was showing some startling improvements. His actions have raised eyebrows and stirred up much gossip about him. Whenever he sparred with someone, he usually won, no matter what weapon was used, whether it be a sword, bamboo stick, or fist to fist combat.

Alex and another student began to spar. The other student knew of Alex's skills, but he was also confident in his own skills. They held the bamboo sticks tightly and fought. Clack. Clak.

Shang and Fu abandoned their fight to watch this one. "He sure is good." Shang commented."

"I say he is just showing off." said Fu.

"He truly is a hard worker. His discipline is respectable."

"What, do you like him or something?"

Shang hit him on the arm.

"Ow."

"Don't be ridiculous. Let us get back to training."

While meditating, Ho Sai suddenly received a shocking vision. His eyes opened wide and he was perspiring. "Another one of the king's officials has been killed. King Liu is really angry now. He will soon be betrayed by one of his own. When this happens, I fear the worst for the future of Yi Ling..."

"First Lord Lee has been killed." Liu Bei said angrily. "And now General Chung. The biggest suspect is Duke Xiang. He is always scheming something and conducting business behind people's backs. I will wait no longer, it is time to arrest him and put him on trial!"

Three servants kneeled before the king.

"Men, I want you to surrounded the premises of the palace and let no one come in or out. Understood?"

"Yes sire!" shouted the one in the middle.

"Bring the blasted Duke to me immediately."

"Consider it done." said the one in the middle, and all three stood up in unison.

The Duke observed from his window like a spy. Soldiers were running all over, searching for th wanted man. The Duke laughed maliciously. "Look for me all you want, it is already too late for you humans. I have absorbed enough souls to reach my demon form. It is over for you."

Suddenly, there was a knock on his front door and it came crashing down. Wham!

Captain: "Duke Xiang, we are hereby ordered by the King of Shen to arrest you!"

The Duke laughed. Soldiers ran past him and surrounded him. Their pointy spears were ready to stab at a moment's notice. Despite this circumstance, he was still laughing. "Foolish mortals...you think you can stop men now?"

Captain: "Just obey my orders and we will not hurt you."

Your concern should not be me; you should worry about your own lives!" His demon jewel began flashing. The soldiers gasped. His body began to glow and suddenly, a bright flash. Lights flared from the floor. His clothes shredded as his body outgrew them. The soldiers stared in bewilderment. Never in their wildest imaginations have they seen something this hideous. Within seconds, Xiang, who was a man of average height, is now seven feet tall, with muscles the size of boulders. His fingers became talons, and there were bones sticking out of his shoulders and his back.

The demon's shadow covered the captain. "God have mercy on us..."

Outside the building, there were sounds of fighting and men screaming. The bloodshed ended quickly. The room became a room of blood and corpses. The Duke ripped out the last survivor's head and he ate it.

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Liu Bei resided in his private quarters. "Blast it Duke," he said to himself, "You will pay for this. It is only a matter of time before I get you."

"I beg to differ, sire."

Liu Bei saw Xiang's reflection in the mirror and turned around. He was back to his human form.

"You bastard!" Liu drew his sword. "You are responsible for Lee and Chung's deaths, are you not?"

Xiang smiled. "It is all according to my plan."

"Your scheming days are over. I will put your head on a silver platter!"

"Not quite..." said Xiang, playing with his mustache. "I still have one trump card."

"And what would that be?"

Xiang took out the necklace that belonged to Celina.

Liu grunted. "No, you didn't!"

"Ahahahaha! I would not me if I were you, your highness. Your concubine is at my disposal. Her life is under my control."

The king took a deep sigh and dropped his sword. "What do you want?"

Xiang walked forward to confront the king face to face. "Oh, you know what I want. I want complete control of your kingdom...and you will obey, if you want your woman to live."

The kidnappers laughed maliciously as they watched their victim whimpering and cowering in fear. Celina, without knowing why, became the hostage of these bandits, and she was scared for her life. She was tied up to a chair, with her arms behind the chair, and her wrists tied up tightly. Her ankles were tied together. Her mouth was gagged by a cloth and she could not say a word. She could only moan and make noises as she sat there and watched in fear as these men decided her fate.

One of the kidnappers was Lord Huong, one of the elder high lords. "Now that we have the king's concubine captive, King Liu Bei is under the Duke's control."

"We should just keep her in the dungeon." said one of the bandits.

"No, let's keep her here where we can see her." replied Jiax, the leader of the bandits. "What should we do with her?"

Huong: "The Duke's orders are to keep her alive. As long as she is alive, you may do anything you please."

"Anything, you say?" Jiax asked, staring at Celina.

"Anything. The Duke does not care." With that said, he left the room.

Then Jiax turned to the tied up victim and smiled. All the bandits were staring at her and smiling. These men were bandits, made up of thieves and murderers, the lowest forms of criminals. And judging by the greedy, perverted looks in their eyes, Celina knew what they were thinking, and she struggled and squirmed in the chair, and moaned and moaned, pleading them not to come closer. Tears of fear drip down her eyes.

Jiax took out a knife and pointed it at her face. She moaned. "MMFFF!"

"Well, it looks like fate brought the concubine herself under our disposal. Maybe I should cut your pretty face."

Her eyes stared at the knife's blade in fear and she turned to the side.

"Hmmm, which side of your face should I cut first? This side?" he said tauntingly, and then moved the knife to the other side of her face. "Or this side?"

Celina turned her head the other way and moaned. "MMFF! MMFFF!"

A bandit grabbed Celina's hair from behind and tilted her head up. "C'mon boss, let's just strip her and take everything off at once and have our way with her!"

"Patience." Jiax replied. "We are going to take it slowly...that is the more enjoyable way." And he stared at the woman's frightened eyes and pointed the knife at her chin, and moved it down to her neck. "And we're going to take her...piece by piece..."

The king sat on his chair, not moving and sweating nervously. The Duke appeared from the back of the room. "It is time to pass your first law of this month, your highness. And the law that I want you to pass out is...the one that you rejected when I presented it to you."

"That law...which permits soldiers to search people's homes?" said Liu.

"Precisely."

"But this is outrageous, it is completely against everything that Shen stands for. Shen is a country of freedom and protection from invasion of privacy!"

"Do you want to keep your principles or your life?"

Liu took a deep sigh. "Why do you want to pass this law?"

"That is none of your concern. Just do it and Celina Liu stays alive."

The evil man stared at the poor woman, all tied up and helpless. Celina was stripped completely naked, and the only thing between her and the pervert was a long

pink ribbon tied around her body. She was tied up from her breasts all the way down to her ankles. There were enough loops to cover her body, but there were less loops on her legs, so it was practically exposed. Her hands were tied up behind her back, and because her legs were wrapped together, her motions were limited. Her panties were stuffed into her mouth, and she could not speak a word.

Jiax laughed and grinned evilly as he watched his victim suffer. Celina squirmed and moaned and prayed for mercy, but she was not going to get any mercy. She was completely helpless and she was practically his sex toy. He drew a knife and pointed it at her neck, and Celina turned her head to the side and moaned with tears streaming down her face.

"We're going to have fun tonight, baby." he said.

He pointed the tip of the blade at her forehead, and then tantalizingly moved the blade down to her nose, just between her eyes. Her eyes were shaking with fear, and they were wet and flowing with tears. He put the blade on her face and she turned to the side, wincing and moaning fearfully.

"Should I leave a scar on your pretty face?" he taunted.

Then he pointed the blade at her chin, and poked her. She moaned. Then he put the knife on her neck. Jiax could see her breathing hard. She must be scared out of her mind. He kept on poking her chin and enjoyed her suffering.

Jiax held the knife up and stabbed at her, and she quickly turned her head to the left side to dodge it. The knife hit the pillow. Plop! Then he took it out and stabbed on the left, and she turned to the right. Plop! She moaned and groaned. "MMMF! MMF!" Jiax kept on stabbing left and right, while she dodged for her dear life.

He laughed maniacally as he did so. "Ha ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha!" Plop! Plop!

He moved the blade down to her breasts, and she kept on moaning and pleading. "Mmmfff!!" The blade went between her breasts, and then down to her stomach. Then down to her legs. He poked the tip of the knife at her thigh, almost piercing her skin. "Mmmfff!"

Jiax moved the knife between her legs, and slowly moved into her sacred area. This could be the most painful and humiliating moment of her life. Just the suspense itself was bad enough, as he was about to destroy her womanhood. He laughed as the knife slowly made its way up the ribbons, getting closer and closer to her sacred area. "Mmff! Mmmffff!"

[Q] Contents

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" Xiang laughed. He tilted his head back, holding a cup of wine, and carelessly spilled it. "I finally have everything I wanted! Everything is going smoothly as I planned."

"Congratulations." said Lord Sima, one of the king's former officials.

"Amen to the great Duke. Victory is ours." said Lord Fei, another corrupted official.

Xiang gulped down the rest of his wine. "Ah, the sweet taste of victory."

Fei: "Allow me to take the job of replacing Lord Lee."

Sima: "This reminds me, I have someone I'd like you to meet."

The grand doors opened and a tough looking person in armor came in. He had a sharp beard, huge eyebrows and broad shoulders. He wore a helmet with a red feather on it.

Sima: "Meet General Tsu, General Chung's replacement."

"General Tsu reporting, sir." He bowed and folded his hands.

Xiang: "Excellent. I assume you are a capable warrior, worthy of the title of general?"

Tsu: "Absolutely, sir." He drew his sword and performed some moves.

Xiang: "Brilliant, simply brilliant."

Duke Xiang was staring at the mirror. His reflection became blurry and rippled, as if in water. The image of Xiang turned into a shadow-like figure.

"Everything is going according to plan, my lord." said the Duke.

"Excellent." replied the shadow.

"After nearly fifty years of preparation and waiting, we have reached our glorious day."

"Keep up the good work. Make sure you do not make any blunders." said the **Demon King**.

"Do not worry about it. No one is a challenge for me at this stage."

"What of the criminal named Alex Cheng?"

"He is too insignificant to worry about. He fled to the forest of Ninjiang and he is probably murdered by mountain bandits."

This morning, when Alex woke up, he felt different. He felt like a different person, as if something is going to change drastically in his life.

Zi sat up on his bed. "Rise and shine, Alex boy. You beat me again. But I almost matched you today."

"Zi, something about today feels different."

"Huh"

"We have been training here for months, but it feels like years. I think it is time for us to go."

"Time to go? Just like that?" Zi asked.

"We are here for a reason, remember, Zi?"

"But...what about the babes?"

"There are plenty of women back in Yi Ling."

"Ahh yes. Including the one woman that you like, Jade."

Alex looked away. "Do not be ridiculous. She and I are good friends."

"Only friends?"

"In any case, we need to speak with Master Ho Sai right away."

Guan Du was bowing in front of Master Ho Sai. The old man sat at his usual place on the platform, a few inches above the floor. He touched his long, white beard as he spoke.

Guan: "Master, I do not know if you noticed, but one of our students has particularly high potential."

"Do you speak of Alex Cheng?"

Guan was a little bit surprised. But this is Ho Sai after all, the all-knowing sage. "Yes sir. His skill is improving at a phenomenal rate. Give or take a few months, and he could be a high class swordsman. Why, in a few years...he could even match the skill of the Four Brothers of China."

"Indeed, I see that as well. I have noted his progress."

"Should we advance him to the next class?"

Ho Sai pondered that for a moment. "Hmmm..."

All of a sudden, Alex and Zi came in. "We want to see Master Ho Sai."

Guan: "Non-sense. You have no business here. I told you not to disturb our master."

"Let them in." said Ho Sai, much to Guan's surprise. "I need to speak with them alone."

Guan was unsatisfied, but he obeyed. "As you wish."

Alex and Zi approached within three paces of Sai and bowed. "Master Ho Sai."

"What did you come to speak to me about?"

"I think you already know that, master." Alex replied.

"You want to leave the temple, correct?"

"Yes, master. I figured that it is time to move on. I'd like to thank you very much for hospitality and your training. The students here treat me as if I am their brother, although not long ago I was a complete stranger. I feel very welcomed here, and it is unfortunate, but I have to continue my journey."

"Where are you heading to?" Sai asked.

"To find my sister, of course. Since you refuse to tell me where she is, I have to find her myself. Master Guan mentioned that she is in Yi Ling."

"Hmmm, very well then."

Zi: "We are very grateful for your services. Please tell the monks here we really appreciated what they did for us. We have already packed our belongings. We will take the shortcut back to Yi Ling."

Guan was spying on them, and he was shocked to hear this.

Sai: "The shortcut? Do you mean the Valley of Death?"

Alex: "That is the one."

"No you can't!" Guan said, revealing himself.

Sai: "You were spying on us and you disobeyed the rules."

Guan: "Forgive me master. But I had to do it because I care about these two students. I object to you going to the Valley of Death."

Alex: "Why? It is better than taking the long way."

Guan: "Haven't you heard the rumors? Do you know why it is called as such? Because to enter is to invite death. This is the place where many were killed by the legendary War God. All those who trespass have lost their lives."

"We are not trespassing, we are just passing by. The valley is public property." Zi said cunningly.

Guan: "Do you think the War God cares about that?! Please, do not take that path!"

Alex: "I don't want to take the path from where I came. It makes no sense. This War God figure...he is only a folklore used to scare children. I am not scared of him."

Guan: "You are mad! To go is to commit suicide! No one who has entered the Valley came out alive!"

Sai: "On the contrary, Mr. Guan Du, there have been a select few who came out of the valley alive. Yes it is rare, but not impossible."

Guan was frantic. "Sir, are you serious? You are sending them to a death sentence."

Alex: "Master, maybe we will pass by and not run into the War God at all. Who knows? The forest is so big. He cannot be everywhere at once, right?"

Guan: "Do not go, please. If not for me, do it for your own sake. I have had friends who entered the valley...they were some of the best martial artists around...and they never came back." Those painful memories caused him to clench his fist tightly and grimace.

"I am not one of those friends." Alex replied.

Sai: "Enough. Cheng has already made his decision. I say he should pass the Valley of Death."

Guan: "Sir..."

Sai: "Time is running out. Alex and Zi needs to get back to Yi Ling as soon as possible, and the quest way is through the valley. Duke Xiang has already taken control of King Liu. But no one knows of this. You must stop him from taking over the kingdom, Cheng!"

Alex: "Duke Xiang? He is the reason why my sister ran away in the first place. He is the cause of all my problems."

Zi: "Rumors of his corruption are widespread, but who knew he'd do such a thing?"

Sai: "There is no time to explain the details. You must stop him before he controls all of China. Once that happens, I am afraid the future will not be bright. Sai did not want to tell them about his visions of a burning town, where everything is on fire, and victims are running hordes, being slaughtered by demons."

Alex: "Understood. Let us go."

Guan stood in his way. "No, I will not let you waste your life like that. Cheng, you came here injured, barely able to hold a sword. And this temple has changed your life. And now you are going to throw it all away? You are no match for the God of War!"

Zi: "Hey, we are talking about my man Alex here. He has been training hard and so am i. His improvement crushed the learning curve!"

"I agree that your improvement is like none other I've seen before, but even the best of swordsmen are slain by the War God. They all thought they could take him on, but in the end, they were fools."

Alex: "I don't care if I die or not. I came here for a purpose, and that is to find my sister. She has been away for most of my life, and if it is the last thing I do, I must find out why."

Guan was shocked. Looking at Alex's eyes, he saw the same burning fire as before. Alex meant what he said. Guan took a deep breath and looked down, and then looked into Alex's eyes. "Fine, if you must go I will not stop you. It is your own path. I will let you leave on one condition...you must defeat me in a match."

Everyone was shocked.

"Deal!" Alex accepted the challenge without hesitation.

[R] Contents

Fu, Shang, and Chan were armed with bamboo sticks.

Chan: "So, you want to leave and fight the War God, eh? You're getting too cocky!"

Alex and Zi were both equipped with sticks. Guan watched from the back.

"I appreciate your concern, but I have already made my decision."

Fu charged and yelled. Zi attacked and their sticks collided. Clack! They exchanged some moves.

Alex charged into Shang and Chan. Clack! Thud! Thud! Alex performed circular movements and kept spinning his attacks as to prevent them from getting close to him.

Clack, clack, clack. Fu pointed his stick forward and thrust it. Whoop, whoop. Zi knocked his stick to the side, and hit Fu in the stomach. Thud. The pain caused him to drop the stick and he fell on his knees.

Zi: "I am coming, Alex!" He ran to the side, but Fu put the stick next to his feet, tripping Zi. "Ugh!"

Chan ran towards Alex, who was distracted. Clang! Alex blocked the attack. Shang thrusts her stick forward. Alex pushed Chan's stick away and dodged just in time. He jumped over them and landed behind them.

The three students continued their assault. Pang! Pong! Pang! Alex hit Chan in the chest, then he moved the stick up, hitting his chin. Thud. He swings it to the side to hit Shang's leg, and she fell. Fu jumped and attacked. "Yaaah!"

Alex blocked, and then he countered with a forward strike to Fu's stomach.

"Ugh!" Fu dropped the stick and grabbed his stomach in pain.

Guan slammed the bottom of his stick on the floor. Thud. "Alex Cheng, you can still change your mind."

"Never!" Alex yelled as he charged. Their sticks collided and they snapped at collision point.

Guan was shocked. From that one hit, he can judge his opponent's strength. "Very well. You may go." He did not want to say those words, but say them he must.

For he knows that a lion who cares about his cubs lets them loose into the wild so they can truly grow strong.

Alex and Zi bowed. "Thank you sir.

"May God be with you." Guan replied.

The three students, Chan, Fu, and Shang bid them farewell. "Bye!! Good luck, guys!" Shang shouted enthusiastically.

The two companions waved with the same level of energy as they have received, and they walked down the long staircase that they first came upon.

On their way to the Gate of Hope, Zi asked his friend, "Are you sure about this? There is no turning back."

"Master Ho Sai says so, and I believe in his words."

"Alright then. Finally, we are going to meet your sister. I wonder if she's cute?"

"Hey..."

"Just kidding!" Zi said, running like a kid.

"Get back here, you runt!" Alex ran after his friend. They laughed and playfully chased each other like children in the wild.

[S] Contents

In a certain room in the palace, a woman was screaming and running for her life. Celina was being chased by Jiax, who was enjoying the process. Celina was wearing practically nothing, the only thing covering her body was a long piece of pink ribbon, tied around her private areas.

Celina's back was against the bed post, and she was panting for breath. The bandit approached her, with a perverted smile. Her hands were covering her chest, and she feared for her life. There is no telling what this man - or animal - is going to do to her. She's never been in this kind of situation before, and it's not something she could imagine, not in her wildest nightmares.

Jiax charged at her, and she ran for it. He grabbed the loose ribbon in the air and pulled it, and thus pulling Celina into him, and he grabbed her and let himself loose. Poor Celina struggled to get free while he kissed her all over with his dirty mouth. She managed to get free and ran for it. She went straight for the door and grabbed the knob and turned it, but it won't open. She kept on turning it desperately, but it was no use. Celina turned around and saw Jiax smiling at her.

"Are you looking for this?" said Jiax, holding the key. Then he put it into his pants. "Come and get it."

Celina's back was against the wall and he was closing in on her, and there was no escape. She just stood there like a deer in headlights as he approached. He grabbed her and kissed her on the lips, and tears drip down her eyes. Jiax's hand grabbed her leg and shoved his hand up to her hip, and into the ribbons. His hand moved about while he continued to taste her lips and there was nothing she could do about it.

Then he put his face on her breasts and kissed it all over. Then he grabbed her and pushed her onto the floor. She moaned in pain. She crawled and crawled for her life as he followed her. They both knew she couldn't escape, but she still had to try, and try

she did. She crawled to the bed, and Jiax grabbed her by the hair and turned her around.

Tears of helplessness drip down her eyes and he slapped her. Smack! She fell onto the bed. He got on top of her and let himself loose. Jiax closed the curtains and ravaged her. The two shadows in the bed struggled and they became one. Celina screamed at the top of her lungs. Her cries of agony were in vain. They were the only ones in the room. Just the two of them, the rapist and the victim, all alone in the room.

Once Cheng and Zi reached the gate, the two statues approached.

"It is them again." Alex said.

"Yeah, these guys again." Zi replied. "I had trouble getting past them last time."

"Same here, but this time it will be different. We are not going to be dominated."

The statues ran towards them, drawing swords. Their eyes glowed angry red. The heroes ran towards them and drew their swords. With their new found skills, they fought with ease. This would be their first true test as warriors. Cling, clang, cling.

Alex dodged the swinging blade, and attacked the statue ferociously, hitting it everywhere. Pieces of it cracked, but the statue did not budge.

Zi dodged and jumped away from it. He just noticed something. "Hit the jewel on their foreheads!"

Statue A swipes its sword forward, Alex ducked and pushed the statue's arm aside, and slashed its forehead, breaking the jewel. Crack. Without the jewel, the statue collapsed like it was clay.

Zi hit the second statue's head, breaking the jewel. Crack. It crumbled and fell apart.

Alex and Zi gave each other a high five. "Yeah, we are awesome!" Zi exclaimed.

No statue was going to get in their way. With their latest victory, they were more confident than ever to face the fearsome War God.

Jiax just finished his activity, and now it is time to sit back and relax. In his hand was the jewel necklace that belonged to the concubine.

"Hmmm, very nice. I wonder how much this is worth?"

Celina, still naked and wrapped in ribbons, was lying on the floor. She crawled towards him. "P-Please...give it back..." she pleaded. She crawled until she reached him and grabbed his ankle. "P-Please...give it back ..."

"Oh, is it that important to you? That worthless scum of a king gave it to you, didn't he? Heh." He dangled it in front of her. She tried to grab it, and he withdrew. Then he dangled it, and she tried to get it, and he withdrew. "C'mon, what's the matter? Don't you want it?" He kept on teasing her and playing with her, while she hopelessly tried to grab it.

Celina's life as the concubine is pretty much over, as she is now a prisoner of these bandits. She has already been violated and harassed, and pretty much lost everything that is important to a woman. But that necklace was very important to her, it's almost as important as life itself. It was a present from the king, a very special

present received on a special occasion. It was something that she always wore and never let it stray from her sight.

And she did not want to lose this irreplaceable necklace to this bandit. It is the only thing she has left...the one thing that she has to keep her going on.

Jiax kept on teasing her, dangling the necklace in front of her, but with just enough distance so she could not reach it. Poor Celina kept on trying to grab it. But she was too weak to do any more and she passed out on the floor. "Uhhh..."

"Awwww, What's the matter? I thought it was important to you." He tossed the necklace a few feet away. "What's the matter? Why don't you get it?"

Celina opened her eyes to look at it. Celina crawled over to the necklace. She tired and beaten up from the torture, but she still crawled, using whatever energy she had left.

The necklace was so close, and she was getting closer and closer, and her heart was beating rapidly. Almost there...she reached for it with all her might, and she grabbed it. Suddenly, Jiax put his foot on her hand.

"Aaaah!" she groaned, and her hand let go of it.

In addition to stepping on her hand, he smooshed his foot on it, making it extra painful.

"Aaaah!"

Then he proceeded to kick her in the stomach. "King Liu was betrayed by his own people! He is worthless, and so are you!" Thud!

Celina groaned. "Aaah! Aaah!"

Jiax kept on kicking her, and she shed tears of pain. A gentle woman like her wasn't meant to take this kind of punishment, especially from a brute. He has no regard for human life, and he's nothing but a woman abuser. Thud. Thud.

First, she was raped, and now, she is facing this hell. Celina thought that it was over, but it is far from over. As if being raped wasn't bad enough, she is being beaten for no reason at all. This was only the beginning of her never ending suffering.

Before, she cried and cried, and thought that she had no more tears left. But there was still more tears to be shed, tears of pure pain. Thud! "Aaah!! Ahhh!!"

Celina had no power to fight back. She was so weak she couldn't even stand up. She just groaned and groaned and her eyes became flooded with tears.

[T] Contents

The heroes have finally made it to the Valley of Death. Alex was almost certain that they will not run into the so called War God. Luck will be on their side and they will just pass the area and leave quickly. Zi, on the other hand, was not as confident as his companion was.

As they walked on, a shadow figure observed them from the trees above. He vanished in an instant. Zi saw something from the corner of his eye, and he looked in the suspected direction, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"What is wrong?" Alex asked.

"It's nothing."

"Don't tell me you are scared of the War God."

"Who me? Scared? Do you know who you are talking to? I can take anyone one. I want to see how good this guy really is." That is what he says, but little did Alex know that Zi is an expert when it comes to stealth. He would know if someone was following them.

"That's the spirit." said Alex. "Honestly, I do not believe that anyone in this world can be this strong."

"Well, you never know."

A silhouetted figure watched them from behind the bushes. Flash. Zi sensed it and he stopped walking.

"What is it?" Alex inquired.

"You sense it, don't you?"

"We're being watched?"

"What should we do?" Zi asked.

"In situations like these...we should run for it!!" And they ran as fast as they could.

Suddenly, a figure dropped in front of them. He landed in a crouching position. His face was covered completely by a straw hat.

"Damn it..." Zi exclaimed. The heroes ran the opposite way.

More warriors in straw hats dropped down from the trees. There were four of them in total. The heroes were surrounded. Alex began to sweat.

"Who dares to trespass into the Valley of Death?"

"So, you are the legendary warrior the God of War, right?" said Alex with an arrogant tone. "Rumors of your name have spread far. But honestly, I do not see why they make such a big deal about you."

The War God smirked. "You sure talk big for someone of your caliber. Prepare for your end."

"We'll see!" Alex drew his sword and attacked head on. Sui Long, the first masked warrior, jumped and landed in front of War God. He drew his sword and attacked. Alex and Sui Long clashed their blades. Clang! Cling!

Shen Long, the second masked warrior, jumped in front of Zi. He decided to run away. The masked warriors threw chains at him and he dodged them. Shen Long drew his sword and charged. Fo Long, the third masked warrior, threw his chain at Zi's leg and caught it. While Zi was distracted, Shen attacked. Zi blocked. Clang! Zi pushed Shen away with sheer force. Fo Long pulled the chain with Zi's leg, dragging him down.

"Ugh!"

Shen stabbed at Zi, who rolled away.

Clang! Clang! Alex pushed Sui Long out of the way, and he ran forward, heading straight for the leader. The War God ran with super speed, a speed that Alex never saw before. In an instant, he drew his sword and swiped, running past Alex. When Alex turned around, he realized that a piece of his shirt was cut.

They ran into each other and exchanged moves. He could barely keep up with the War God's movements. Clang! Clang! His sword was hit and he was pushed back, and his blade was shaking. That was the difference between their skills.

War God jumped and slashed, and Alex dodged. Whoosh!

Alex and Zi ran through the woods as the War God and his three masked men chased them. The four hunters were faster runners than the heroes. War God ran past them and landed in front of them, and Alex froze at such a display of speed.

[U] Contents

"Hold it." Cheng said. "God of War, I want to fight you one on one. Do you accept my challenge?"

"What difference will it make? You are still a dead man regardless." replied he.

"Are you scared to fight me fairly? Do you think four on two is a fair match? The one that I heard in the legends isn't a coward."

The hunter smirked. "Have it your way. I assure you my comrades will not attack. Can you guarantee your friend will not attack?"

"I can vouch for him with my life."

Zi nodded. The three warriors bowed and stepped to the side.

Zi: (I hope he knows what he's doing.)

Alex Cheng and the War God stood still while staring at each other, just as two tigers bare their fangs before the bloody fight. No one moved for what felt like an eon. The wind blew hard. Leaves flew by. The dust began to settle.

Alex tried his best to keep his composure. He knows he's facing a legend, but he still had that burning fire in his heart.

The War God kept his head low. It was hard to read his emotions; his straw hat covered most of his face, and only his mouth was seen. His right hand was inches away from his sword handle, ready to pull it out at an instant. One can imagine what swift movements he'd make. He'd draw the sword faster than the eye can see and slash something.

Sui Long: "I must commend your comrade...he dared to challenge the War God to a one on one duel. But it is pointless."

Zi: "What are you saying?"

"He does not stand a chance."

"Puh! You're just talking. We received advanced training from the Temple of Enlightenment!"

"That does not matter." Sui Long replied. "No swordsman has ever defeated our master."

Zi: "There's a first time for everything." (Alex, I hope you have an escape plan. I don't want to die here.)

Alex will need to use everything he learned in the temple in this fight. There can be no room for mistakes.

Without a warning, both warriors charged. Flash! They ran and slashed. Clang!

Cling. Clong. When they were five paces away, War God jumped and did an aerial attack, and Alex jumped away, leaping from tree to tree. Doosh, doosh. The hunter chased him. They leaped and hit in the air. Clang!

When Alex landed, he felt the sword's vibration from the collision. His hand was shaking as well. (I have to aim for his leg. It is my only chance.)

Fo Long: "This is becoming interesting."

Sui Long: "Your friend does not stand a ghost of a chance. I admit he has potential, but he is out of his league. Master Genzo has reached the 15th level of mastery of the **Heaven's Wrath Style**, while your friend is using an obsolete style used by monks."

Zi: "Hmmp, say what you want." (Alex...you have to survive!)

"Yaaaah!!" Alex screamed as he fought on.

Clang! They clashed their blades some more. The dominant one in the fight was clear, War God was advancing while Cheng was retreating. Clang! Cling!

They charged forward and pushed their blades against one another's, resulting in a power lock. The winner of this power lock is the stronger one. The loser will be thrown off balance, leaving him open. Both grunted as they pushed with all their might.

Alex pushed his opponent's blade to the side, and he slashed his opponent's leg. Immediately afterwards, War God slashed his shoulder, and they jumped away.

(I cannot believe he actually hurt me.)

The fighters exchanged yet more moves.

(This person isn't bad...) thought the War God to himself.

Clang! Cling! Swipe!

(But it's nothing I haven't seen before.)

Schling! War God pushed Alex's sword to the side, then hit Alex's stomach with the back of his sword. He felt a sudden jolt of pain in his stomach, and it was paralyzing. The War God struck Alex's chest with his palm, causing him to stutter backwards. Then the hunter jumped and kicked Alex in the face. Whack!

The hero fell. He was dizzy and injured from the strikes, but managed to get himself off the ground.

"It is meaningless to continue this further." War God said in an authoritative tone.

Alex began to get up. He stuck his sword on the ground, using it as a handle to push himself up to his feet. He stuttered a bit before standing still. "What are you talking about? I had you right where I want you."

"So stubborn? Are you that eager to die?"

"No, eager to defeat you!"

The War God showed his fighting pose, and his sword began to glow red.

Shen Long: "He is about to use it...the power of the Fire Sword!"

As the two fighters charged into each other, Zi and the three observers held their breath.

Clang! Alex's sword went flying to the air, spinning and finally landed on the ground. Alex himself was lying on the dirt.

"This little game is over." announced the hunter.

Alex managed to get himself up, crouching on one knee. As War God was about to make the kill, he spoke up. "Hold it...just hear me out. I did not come here to make trouble. I came here to look for someone."

"You are looking for the devil, and you are about to see him in a second."

"No, I came here to look for my sister. I did not mean to cause you trouble. Please, let me through!" said Alex.

The War God was still not convinced. "Your personal trifles are of no importance to me."

"We have been separated since we were kids! My sister is Li Cheng! Have you seen her?"

The War God froze in place. "Li Cheng?"

"Yes, she is my sister! I am Alex Cheng, her brother!"

"How did you hear about that name? Who exactly are you?"

"I told you, I am her brother! I need to find her!"

Fo Long ran in between them. "Sir, he is looking for Li Cheng. He is her brother. He is not our enemy."

Zi and Alex both were shocked.

Alex: "You mean...I am spared?"

"Hmm, consider yourself lucky, young man. I **do** know your sister." replied the War God.

Alex stood up. "Really? Where is she?"

"I ran into her a few years ago. Unfortunately, I do not know where she is right now."

Alex became disappointed. "I see."

The masked warriors went to their master. "Master, what do we do with these two?"

The War God pointed at Alex. "You...Alex Cheng."

"Yes."

"I have heard about you from Master Ho Sai."

"You know Master Ho Sai?!"

"Cheng, do you really want to see your sister?"

"Yes I do! I'll do anything to see her again. Master Sai told me that I must kill Duke Xiang, and I will do so if it means I can see Li again."

"Very well. Are you ready for what awaits you?"

"I am ready for anything." Alex replied confidently.

War God saw the fire in this young man's eyes. He smiled internally. "Very well."

And so, the legendary warrior decided to take Alex as his student. At first, Alex and Zi were so shocked they couldn't even close their mouths.

"Really?!" Alex said.

“Yes. This is per instruction of Master Ho Sai. Let’s just say I’ve been expecting you.”

“You mean...I am to be trained by the legendary God of War?”

“Heh. Do not get so excited yet, young man. My training will not be like the regular training you have received from other so called masters. It is going to be rough.”

“Yes sir. I am ready for anything!”

“I must warn you, you might lose your life if you do not keep up with my pace. But when I’m done with you...you will be a different man. You will become a true master of the sword.”

“Yes sir, I understand!”

What a twist of fate it is for our heroes. Their greatest adversary is now their master, and they are about to be taught the lesson of a lifetime. They are safe for now, for they are in the Valley of Death, the place where no one dares to trespass. But what of the fates of those captured in the Imperial Palace? What does Master Ho Sai predict for our hero, Alex Cheng?

Part 2

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It was a glorious morning in the Valley of the War God as the sun rose up to the skyline. The sky went from black to dark red, and to yellow within minutes. It certainly is amazing to see how fast things can change, how quickly darkness can turn to light almost immediately. The heroes had to duel with the legendary, undefeated swordsman known by all as the God of War, yet now he is their master. The tides of fate have turned quickly in their favor, just as darkness turns to day quickly.

Zi was lying down on a tree branch, eating an apple and enjoying himself like he did not have a care in the world.

"What's up Alex, why so quiet?" Zi asked.

"No reason." replied Alex, sitting on the same branch.

"Still thinking about your sister?"

"Yeah."

"We'll find her, man. Don't worry about it."

"*Sigh* It's just that, every time I come close to finding her, she's further away. I feel so hopeless...I just don't understand...where in the world is she? Is she deliberately running away from me?"

"She's back at Yi Ling, dude."

"Yes, and once we get there, she probably won't be there. We came all this way to the temple, and she left a few years ago. Why am I always one step behind?"

Zi tapped him on the shoulder. "Don't worry too much, man. It's a small world, we'll find her eventually. We will search every single female in China if we have to. Every young, sexy, single female."

"Do you think about anything else besides girls?"

"Heh, the only thing more important than a woman is my sword. I'd never go anywhere without it."

"Then hold onto your sword tight, because today you are going to need it."

Cheng was ready for the War God's first training session. They both bared their swords at each other.

"Cheng, before we begin, I want to remind you that this is going to be tough."

"I am prepared, War God."

"You may call me by my real name, Master Genzo."

"Yes, Master Genzo." replied Alex.

"Before I start straining you, I need to know what your skill level is. I want you to come at me and give me everything you have. Do not hold back, just as we fought before."

"Alright." said Alex. He got into fighting position and charged forward.

They exchanged several moves.

"Interesting." remarked Genzo.

"What is it? Am I good enough?"

"You are using the sword as if it is bamboo stick."

"I am?"

"You are holding it with both hands, and you never change your combinations. Holding it with both hands gives the sword more power in the swing, but it limits its movements. Thus your movements are rigid and inflexible."

"It must be a habit from the Temple." Alex replied. "They forbid the use of swords because of their peaceful ways. They use only bamboo sticks. I had to practice with my sword in secret."

"Let me tell you something about the art of war; you need to know how to use a variety of weapons in order to survive. Just the sword alone is not enough. You need to prepare in case if your sword shatters during combat. And what if you lose it? You need to be prepared for everything and anything."

Alex listened with all ears to Genzo's wise words.

"Let me tell you something, Cheng, you need to be conscious of what weapon you are using at the moment. A bamboo has different applications than a sword. It is longer and has more reach, and it is lighter and faster. But one does not use a bamboo stick for killing, rather its main use is to disable the enemy. A sword, on the other hand, is designed to kill. But it is heavier and shorter than a bamboo stick and much harder to use.

In fact, 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. In China alone, there are thousands upon thousands of sword styles, and each one of them is unique. Some styles are better suited than others. Some are more commonly used. But I personally use the **Heaven's Wrath Style**, because it suits me best. This is the style I will teach you."

"Yes, master."

"Let us continue, shall we?"

Alex nodded. They continued fighting.

Zi still loitered about, shaking his leg and humming.

Fo Long walked by the tree. "Hey, Mr. Lai."

"Hmmm? What's up?"

"Your friend Cheng has just begun training with Master Genzo."

"Yeah I know. I'm just chillin' up here."

"Why don't you come down? You are going to with Cheng on his journey, correct? So you need to receive training as well. But Master Genzo can only train one person at a time. My students and I can train you."

"Ohhh, three people training me at once? Sounds interesting." Zi leaped off the branch and landed on the ground. "Great, let's do it."

"Alright," said Fo Long, "But I'm warning you, we are not going to go easy on you."

Zi smiled. "I don't expect you to."

After a long, hard day of training, the trainee was tired. However, the lesson still not over. "Come with me." Genzo said as Alex panted for breath.

"Wait! Where are we going, master?"

"I want to show you something." He led his pupil to the high end of the cliff. From there they can see the forest from a bird's eye perspective. The wind felt different up here.

"Wow..." Alex exclaimed.

"Up here it feels different, doesn't it?"

"It sure does." There was a long silence, and Alex spoke up, "So why did you bring me here, Master Genzo?"

"You want to become like me, do you not?"

"Definitely. Every student wants to become his master some day."

"Being a master swordsman has a price, a very expensive price." said Genzo.

Alex turned towards him. "I don't mind at all! I can handle anything."

"Fool!" scolded Genzo. "You say that, but you cannot handle it! You are still young and you think you are invincible. You think you can take on the whole world by yourself? Let me tell you...my life is a hardship."

Images of himself when he was younger, running away from town. He was holding a bag of his most prized belongings, hugging the bag tightly. As he walked through the crowds, he kept his head low, and his hat covered much of his face.

"...Many years ago, I was branded a criminal, one of the nation's most wanted. Scared for my life, I had to flee from society and live here in the valley. Because there was a bounty on my head, many hunters tried to come here to capture me-

In the field of bamboo trees, Genzo was hiding, chased by ruthless bounty hunters. The hunters were closing in on him.

"Where is he? Let me at him!" one guy said.

"No, when we find him, he is mine!" said another.

"We shall see who gets him first." said the leader.

Suddenly, Genzo ran for it, and the hunters saw his silhouetted figure. They chased him. They had numbers, but Genzo was sly and tricky. He speed was hard to match, and he was hiding most of the time. He finished the bounty hunters one by one.

"Thanks to my skills, I kept myself alive. But that only infuriated the government further. The more hunters that came after me, the more I killed. The more I killed, the higher the bounty became, and more hunters wanted me. It was an endless cycle of death. I just wanted to be left alone, but they continued to come after me. As the years passed by, my real name was forgotten. People began labeling me as the "Forest Hunter", among other names, and eventually, my name became the "God of War." I did not choose this name, it was branded upon my by the society that cast me away."

Genzo trained alone in the woods. He held a bamboo stick, hitting it against the bamboo trees. Doosh.

"...As the years passed my fighting skills improved. I could not only wield a sword, but a variety of other weapons as well. Since I had nothing else to do, I trained

day and night, day and night. Fighting became second nature to me. I am the best of the best...but at what price? My life is nothing but a void...filled with hate, sorrow, fear, and death."

The ground was filled with bloody, lifeless bodies. The river turned from bright blue to red...

"For the past fifty years I have been living alone. With the exception of my three apprentices, I have neither friends nor family."

Alex was shocked by his speech. War God was staring at the sky the whole time he was speaking. His tone of voice was one of regret and remorse...and there is nothing more tragic than an old man who cannot turn back time.

"So you see Cheng, being the best swordsman isn't always beneficial to you. Because when you are at the top, others become jealous of you. They will always try to knock you off and you will never have a moment of peace. There is an old proverb - everybody wants to be the general, but you better think twice before wanting to be the king. This is the price I paid to be the king of swordsmen."

Alex was overwhelmed by this man's speech, much like the time he was overwhelmed by Ho Sai's speech. "I see...by the way, what crime did you commit that made you so hated?"

Genzo tipped up his straw hat and Alex saw his eyes for the first time. "Nothing. They betrayed me." With that said, he walked away.

The wind blew hard. Alex was dumbfounded. *Nothing. They betrayed me.* Those words stuck in his head. All this trouble...all this killing...was because someone betrayed him?

Cheng's training continued and it was as rigorous as Genzo described it to be. But Shun is a fast learner and hard worker and the discipline he received from the temple allowed him to excel quickly, surprising Genzo's other students. Zi showed considerable improvements as well.

Day by day, Cheng trained with the best. There were certain lessons that he just did not get, but he kept an open mind regardless, knowing his master's reputation.

All the lessons were uniform, but there was one particular lesson that stood out for Cheng.

Genzo: "Okay Cheng, today, I will teach you something very important. It is often called the 'Move that Saves Lives.'"

They circled each other as they talked.

"The Move that Saves Lives?"

"This technique I will be teaching you may be useful to you one day; it is called the Phoenix Palm. Remember when I told you that one must learn to use a variety of weapons in order to be an effective fighter? What if one faces the scenario where he has no weapons? He has only his fist and legs. The sword may be the oldest weapon in mankind's history...but there is one weapon that is even older than the sword...and that is the body itself. The Phoenix Palm is useful when there is a hostage situation. Observe."

Genzo stared at the two boulders in front of him. One was placed behind the other. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath in and out. He did a circular motion with his arms, and he charged. "Hyaaaah!" He slammed his palm against the rock. "Phoenix Palm!!" The rock in the back cracked.

"Amazing!" Alex exclaimed. "How did you do that?"

"It takes years of practice. I am going to teach you the fundamentals and after that it is up to you to learn it on your own."

"Understood, master!"

Thus, the heroes trained daily. Master Genzo's discipline is much strictly than that of the Temple's. Alex and Zi did nothing but train. If they were not eating or sleeping, they were training. After months of this grueling repetition, Master Genzo decided that it is time to move on to the next step.

The three masked warriors stood behind Genzo. Zi and Alex stood side by side facing Genzo.

"I am afraid that this is all I can do for you." said the War God. "Our time is limited because I know you are in a hurry. If you want to kill Duke Xiang, you had better hurry. But in these few months, you have learned more than you did in your lifetime. Your training is not complete, and it never will be. Just remember that training lasts a life time. But I feel that you are ready. Congratulations, Cheng."

"Thank you, master." said Alex, bowing.

"You too, Zi Lai. You have improved much whilst training with my students. I bid both of you good luck on your journey."

"Thank you, master." Alex and Zi said, and bowed.

"But before you go, I have one more thing for you, Cheng." He grabbed the patch on his waist and held it horizontally. He pulled the sword out of the patch, and it shined in Alex's eyes.

"This is..."

"This is the **Legendary Fire Sword**. It has been with me everywhere, and it shall help you in your journey."

Alex was shocked. "This is the Legendary Fire Sword..."

Zi: (This is the sword mentioned in the legends. How did the War God came into possession of this?)

"No...I can't possibly accept this...this sword has been your companion for many decades!"

"Yes, it has been a good companion...and now it shall be your companion. This sword will protect you from the demons."

Alex took it and held it like gold. "Master...I don't know what to say...I can't thank you enough. I cannot repay you in any way..."

Genzo: "You can repay me by slaying the Duke. I have my personal grudges against him. One more thing. Shen Long, Sui Long, and Fo Long, you shall accompany these two on their way to Yi Ling. Help them slay the Duke."

Alex: "R-Really?"

Zi: "Master, we are overjoyed. You really need not do this. We will be fine."

Genzo: "You need all the help you can get. I have already instructed my students to do as such from the beginning."

The three warriors bowed. "Yes master!"

Genzo: "Good luck, my warriors."

Our hero, Alex, has ended his training with the War God. It was a rough and brutal time, much tougher than his training from the temple, but today he will walk away a different man...with one of the best swords in the world. It is a priceless gift that he will never let his eyes off of...

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The king sat on his chair, shaking and sweating nervously. The Duke came out from behind. "It is time to pass your first law of this month, your highness. And the law that I want you to pass out is...the one that you rejected when I presented it to you."

"That law...which permits soldiers to search people's homes?" said Liu.

"Precisely." The Duke replied.

"But that is an invasion of privacy. It will make the citizens angry and we will lose their support. It is completely against everything that the Shen Kingdom stands for."

"Your highness, I suggest that you think about a certain somebody before you reject what I am proposing. Which is more important, your principles or the lives of those you care about?"

Liu Bei took a deep sigh. "Why do you want to pass this law?"

"That is not of your concern, your highness. Just know that by approving this law, you can guarantee the lives of Lee, Chung, and your precious concubine."

The king took the scroll and put his stamp on it. "This law is now official." said he reluctantly. "I want to see Celina."

"Do not worry, she is doing fine...and will continue to live as long as you continue to obey me."

"Duke Xiang, if you hurt even one hair on her, I'll-"

"You'll what? Behead me?" said Xiang. "Are in a position to make demands, your highness? If anything happens to me, my men will kill her immediately."

Liu grunted and his fingers grabbed the chair angrily. "I need proof that she is still alive and well."

The Duke smiled. "You will see her eventually, at regular scheduled intervals. Do not worry, she is doing fine."

But in fact, Celina is not doing fine. She crawled and crawled for her dear life. Jiax followed her like prey, planning to do many perverted and unspeakable things to her. The poor woman had nothing to cover herself but pink ribbons, tied around her body, covering only the essentials.

Celina crawled desperately, using whatever strength she had to move, moaning as she did. Jiax was amused at her vain attempts to escape, but it makes the process more fun when she resists. Celina knew that she had no chance of escape, but try she

must, for she did not want to be harassed anymore. What else is someone in her situation to do, for she is just a helpless woman caught in an unforgiving situation.

Jiax stepped on her leg and she groaned in pain. "Ugh!" He continued to step on her leg while she groaned. Then he stepped on her behind and she groaned. "Ugh!" He enjoyed torturing her, it gives him a sense of satisfaction to hurt a poor woman like this. But this is only the beginning.

He grabbed her by the ankles and dragged her away. Her fingers grabbed the carpet tightly as she was being dragged. Sccccrrrrrr.

Jiax then lied on top of her and embraced her soft body. He put his face in her hair and smelled her and sighed in pleasure. He kissed her shoulder and her neck. While he violated her from behind, he was holding her wrists with his hand, and they were so soft and nice to touch. Her fingers grabbed the carpet tightly, pulling and squeezing it desperately.

He kissed her back, feeling her skin all over with his face and lips. She was completely helpless in this position, and all she could do was cry and yell and thrash about. Her suffering meant nothing to him.

As he violated her from behind, his hand moved about her arm, feeling her skin all over. Then he shoved his hand into her thigh and up the ribbons, and Celina groaned even louder.

This red-carpeted room belonged to the king; it was a sacred place for meetings and ceremonies. But this room has now become her hell. It is on this very red carpet where she will be raped horribly. This carpet has lost its sacredness and sanctity; it has become dirtied and defiled.

Then Jiax turned her over. He grabbed her thrashing arms and pushed them to the side, where they can't move anymore, and he laughed. He kissed her shoulder and Celina turned her head to the side and shrieked as he touched her with his filthy lips.

Jiax let out the inner beast inside of him and he was not holding back. He kissed her neckline, her neck, and her shoulders.

She moaned and groaned, and she was too weak to even offer resistance. His mouth and beard felt disgusting to her. No words could describe the suffering and torment she is going through, and she doesn't deserve any of this.

Jiax's hands locked her wrists to the floor. He put his face into hers, and she just stared at him with pure fear. "No...please..." she pleaded with tears.

"Who's going to save you now?" As he spoke, she could feel his breath. "That worthless king isn't going to save you!" With that said, he forced his lips onto hers. Her fingers grabbed the carpet tightly while his hands were locking her wrists.

It was truly a horrible feeling indeed as he tasted her lips fully. Celina was completely and utterly helpless, and she tears of sadness streamed down her face. This situation was never fair to begin with...she happens to be at the wrong place at the wrong time...for she is the king's concubine. She was minding her own business and one night, she was captured and brought here to be this pervert's sex slave.

Her feet kicked and thrashed about, while her fingers grabbed the carpet tightly while the lip lock continued. Poor Celina could do nothing in her situation, as she is

physically overwhelmed. Every single moment was revolting, and each second felt like ten years.

For Celina, this has to be the single most painful moment in her life, thus far. The tears continued to drip down her face, and there was nothing she could do but continue to suffer.

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The warriors journeyed back to the Yi Ling province, and this time, the forest wasn't as scary as last time. Perhaps they are used to the hardships of the wilderness, or perhaps their training gave them confidence to conquer just about anything. Either way, their trip to leave the forest was faster than their trip into it.

As they walked through the muddy land, pushing away large leaves, Alex decided to break the silence. "You know guys, you really don't have to do this."

"We do it because Master Genzo instructed us to do so." replied Sui Long.

Zi: "You warriors are pretty loyal."

Sui: "Indeed we are. Master Genzo did everything for us. I ran away from home many years ago, I had no where to go. I came upon the War God, and not only did he spare my life, but he took me in as his student."

"I see. It's probably a similar story with you two, right?" Zi said, referring to Shen and Fo.

Fo: "Yes."

Cheng: "I am grateful that we are not traveling alone, and I respect master's decisions. Once we get to Yi Ling, we have a lot of work to do. I can't wait to find my sister."

Sui: "You sure talk about your sister a lot."

"Yeah. We have been separated since we were kids. It was about ten years ago, and I remember it like it was yesterday. I wonder what she looks like now."

Sui grew silent.

Late at night, a man in red armor walked silently to a secret in a certain building. **Captain Tai** knocked on the door. A guard from the inside opened the "eye-hole" to look. "Who is it?"

"It is me, Shu Tai."

"What is the password?"

"Dragonfly."

"You may enter." said the guard. He proceeded to unlock the door and opened it so Tai can enter.

Inside, the room was dark and all windows were closed. These people were obviously secretive and did not want others to know about this meeting. The only source of light was candles that were scattered about the room.

Lord Yu and Liu Zhang were sitting by the table. They stared at Shu Tai as he approached.

"Captain, what took you so long?" asked Yu.

"My apologies." Tai replied, "I had to make absolutely certain that no one saw me."

"The security has increased." Yu said. "Our activities are severely restricted."

"Well, as long as you are here," said Zhang, "We were just discussing something of utmost importance."

Tai sat down on his reserved seat.

Yu: "Is it true about the rumors I have heard going around the palace?"

Zhang: "Yes, unfortunately. The Duke is up to his old tricks again, and this time he is in way over his head. He kidnapped King Liu's wife and holding her captive within the palace."

Tai: "For what purpose? So he can have control of the kingdom to himself?"

Yu: "Yes, that is correct."

Huong: "Is he mad? Does he think he can get away with it?"

Yu: "Xiang planned this operation in much detail...for years. As long as he has Lady Celina captive the king is a mere puppet in his hands."

Tai banged his fist on the table. "Damn it, I knew we couldn't trust that bastard. Why does King Liu trust him?"

Zhang: "Even if so, could not get rid of Xiang because he has not done anything. But when he was about to be arrested, he hired mercenaries and let them into the palace and hold the concubine hostage. Right now he has all the power. We should be concerned with our own lives. Several royal officials have been murdered, namely Lee and Chung. I worry that we will be next."

Huong: "What do you suggest we do?"

"Firstly, we must find out the location of the king's wife and rescue her. We must lay low while we gather the information."

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As the party of five came back to Yi Ling, Zi stretched his arms and yawned. "Aaaah, we are finally back home." He and his companions walked down the street a little differently than before. Before they had two, but now they are five, and better swordsmen.

"So this is the province of Yi Ling? This place is nice." commented Sui Long.

"Yes it is." replied Alex. "It is the pride of Shen. The food is the best here."

Someone's stomach growled. "Speaking of food..." said Zi, touching his stomach. "We haven't eaten a decent meal in days. I'm hungry guys, let's go grab a bite."

Alex: "Good idea. I know where we should go. It is my favorite restaurant."

Fo Long: "Please show us the way, Cheng. A warrior cannot fight on an empty stomach."

Zi: "Right indeed!"

The group went into restaurant, they picked their table and sat down.

The waiter came over enthusiastically. "What may I get you gentlemen?"

They made their orders. As Zi poured tea for his party, they heard laughter from the other side of the room.

Shen Long: "What an annoying bunch."

It was Hua, and he was drinking with his gangster buddies, they were laughing and having a ball.

Alex: "Oh great. It's Hua, one of those people who like bully others with numbers. He is bad news. We should leave before he sees us."

Fo Long: "Why should we leave? We are the War God's students and we are not afraid of anybody."

Alex: "Look, I just don't want to cause any trouble. It is not worth it. We should go now."

Just then, Hua saw the commotion on their table and he recognized Alex. He stood up and walked over to their table and his gangsters followed him.

Alex: "Oh God, not now..."

Hua loudly slammed his hand on the table. Fo had to strain himself.

"Well looky who we have here? If it isn't Cheng the loser! Ha ha ha ha! I never thought you'd be stupid enough to come back to this city after you ran away like a coward last time."

Alex: "Look, we are just on our way to the exit."

Zi chimed in. "Listen buddy, we are not in the mood for this non-sense. Why don't you leave us-" He just stared when Hua drew his sword and pointed it at his chin. "-alone?"

Hua: "Be quiet you! I am the only one talking here. So Cheng, do you realize that you have a huge bounty on your head? I don't know what you did to upset the authorities, but you sure have offended the wrong person. And today I will collect my bounty."

Alex: "This is between you and me. Leave them out of this."

Hua looked at the other three. "Heh, I see you've brought other friends here as well. What's with the masks? Are your faces too ugly to be shown in public? Ahahahaha!" The gangsters laughed.

Fo reached for his sword, and Shen grabbed his hand. Fo looked into his eyes, and Shen's eyes told him to calm down.

Alex: "Don't provoke them. They are serious swordsmen. Just take my advice and go peacefully and nobody will be hurt."

"Nobody will be hurt, but someone is going to die." Hua said, grabbing Alex by the collar.

Fo stood up first, then Shen and Sui stood up. "Let him go." Fo demanded.

"What was that?"

Fo: "Our job here is to protect Cheng. You will let him go or else."

Hua: "Or else what, numbskull?"

Fo grabbed Den's wrist and twisted it.

"Arrrgh!" Hua screamed. Fo surprised him by showing him how strong his grip was, even though he's shorter than other guys.

All the gangsters drew their swords. Fo let go of Hua, pushing him away. Hua gently touched his injured hand. "You son of a bitch...kill them!" The gangsters attacked. Everyone drew their weapons. Slash! Clang! Clang!

It was a messy fight. Dishes broke and tables were flipped. The owner and waiters watched with fright. "Oh no, they're messing up our restaurant!"

The customers ran for their lives.

Slash! Slice. Dice. The masked warriors made quick work of their foes. Alex took Hua head on, as he wanted to settle this grudge. Alex slowly drew his sword from its sheath...and he was excited because it is the first time he gets to use the Fire Sword in a fight. And he will make this one count. Clang! Clang! They clashed their swords together. Hua's low-quality sword broke in half as it collided with Alex's sword. Crack!

Hua: "No way...how can you be this good?"

"I am a different person." Slash! He slit Hua's throat, and he just had a look of surprise on his face as he collapsed.

The gangsters were lying on the floor.

Zi: "So much for laying low."

Alex went to the waiters, who were frightened by him. "Sorry for the mess we've caused." He handed one of them a bag of gold. "I hope this makes up for it."

As the group of five walked down the street, Jade came to them. "Alex, is that you?"

"Jade..."

Zi: "Long time no see!"

Jade ran into Alex and gave him a hug and burst into tears. Then she hugged Zi. "I thought you guys were gone for good!"

Zi: "Us? No way."

Jade: "Are these your friends?"

"Yes." said Alex. "Let me introduce you to them. This is Jade. This is Shen Long, Sui Long, and Fo Long."

Zi: "Wow, you can tell them apart? I still have trouble tell them apart."

Jade bowed politely. "Please to meet you."

Sui: "The pleasure is ours."

Fo: "Come on Cheng, it is getting dark. We should get going."

Alex: "Jade, we have to go."

Jade: "So soon? Where are you going? To find the Duke? Don't do it, it's too dangerous."

Alex: "I know Jade, but I have to do it. That is what we came back to do. I can't explain it, but it is kind of my destiny."

The five men walked on. Jade watched them go. She was shocked to see Cheng change so much. He was more confident than ever. His eyes and tone of voice showed it.

Four people carrying a carriage came to the front of the imperial palace. They were Zi and the three masked men, dressed in servant's clothing. Two guards, one standing on each side of the gate, placed their swords in front of them. "Who goes there?"

Zi was a little bit nervous. "I have official business here." he said confidently, and took out the imperial seal. This was the seal that Alex stole from En Lo during their fight. He knew it will be useful eventually.

The guards glanced at each other quickly. "We are not told that we have visitors tonight. Who is in the carriage?"

Zi: "Excuse me? We have the imperial seal, and you should let us in without question."

Guard: "Sorry, but these are the king's new orders. We must check the identity of everyone who goes in and out of these premises."

The lord stuck his head out of the window. He was actually Cheng, but he was wearing a fake mustache and a wig. "Is there a problem, sirs?"

Guard: "You are..."

Alex: "Lord Tien."

Zi: "How dare you not recognize the famous Lord Tien! Why, you should be ashamed of yourselves!"

The guards glanced each other again.

Alex: "Now now, don't be rude. I am here to see Duke Xiang for official business. I hope there no problems here."

Guard: "No problem, sir. You may pass."

They took the carriage into the palace premises, and when no one was around, they went to an uninhabited place.

Cheng took off his fake mustache. "Phew. I can't believe this idea actually worked."

The warriors changed back into their regular clothes and proceeded with their plan. They sneaked around the hallways of the outer palace. A guard passed by and they quickly hid somewhere. When the guard was out of sight, they continued sneaking.

The masked men hid in the bush, while Alex and Zi came across one of the buildings. They leaned against the wall close to the window and listened in to the conversation. Inside, two lords were having a conversation about the conspiracy.

Suddenly, a guard saw them. "Hey you, what are you doing?"

The heroes quickly ran for it. But soldiers showed up in front of them and they became surrounded.

"Crap!" Zi exclaimed.

Shu Tai happened to pass by and he saw the scene. "What is happening here?"

Soldier: "Captain Tai, these intruders somehow got into the palace. We caught them sneaking around."

Tai: "These gentlemen are with me. I gave them permission to come."

Soldier: "Is that true?"

Alex: "Well, of course. Tai is our good friend." He took out the imperial seal and showed it to them.

Tai was shocked that he had the seal.

Soldier: "Very well then. Next time, don't wander around so late, especially when the Duke has strict rules regarding curfews."

Alex: "Yes, sorry about the inconvenience."

The soldiers walked away and the heroes were safe.

Zi walked towards Tai. "Thank you so much. I can't even express how grateful we are."

Alex: "Indeed, we owe you one, Tai."

Tai: "You warriors are not from around here are you?"

Alex: "That is correct. We do not belong to the royal family and we are not a member of the imperial court. We heard about the betrayal of King Liu and we want to solve this problem."

Tai: "How do you outsiders know about this? And where did you get the seal. Anyways, come with me, I will take you to a safe place where we can talk."

[E] Contents

Tai led the group to the secret headquarters of the other lords, outside of the palace perimeters. He bribed some of the guards to not tell others about their exit of the palace. The secret place was dark and only a single candle illuminated the room. When Tai came in, the other lords watched them.

Zhang: "You are late again, Tai. Who did you bring with you?"

Tai: "Gentlemen, I'd like you to meet these people. They are...uhhh, hired mercenaries."

Yu: "Have they come to join the resistance?"

Tai: "Yes, that is what I hired them for."

Zhang: "I see. In that case, welcome to our group, warriors. My name is Liu Zhang."

After everyone introduced themselves, Alex made a request. "Before going any further, I'd like to ask a question, if you don't mind. Do you know someone named Li Cheng? She is my long lost sister, and she used to work in the palace. I haven't seen her in many years."

Fo Long tapped Alex's shoulder. "Now is not the time for this."

Alex: "If you know anything about her, please let me know."

Zhang: "There are thousands of servants in the palace. And the fact that she has not been here in years makes it even harder to find her."

Yu: "Sorry, but we are unable to help you."

Alex was disappointed once again. "It's okay. I'm sorry for interrupting the meeting."

Not long afterwards, everybody in the room was ready to hear Lord Yu's debriefing. He begins by saying: "Gentlemen, you came at the right time. Things are so chaotic right now, not just in the palace, but in all of Yi Ling. It all started with Duke

Xiang. That vermin was never trustworthy to begin with. He had a bad reputation of doing shady things. He never admits it and there is no evidence against him. Neither could we convict him because of his status with the king. His highness is too trusting...and he has become Xiang's puppet.

This whole coup d'état happened so quickly we did not notice it until it was too late. It happened at the blink of an eye. It all started with the murder of Lord Lee. We thought an assassin did it, but we then realized it must have been done by someone on the inside, namely the Duke. Then the death of General Chung. Now the king is being controlled by the Duke. Everything he does is under the Duke's supervision."

Tai: "We believe this is happening because Xiang has kidnapped the king's wife."

Zhang: "He put a woman before the kingdom. He is a foolish king. He could have prevented this from happening. First Lee, then Chung. The Duke is replacing key officials with his own men. At this rate, he will have complete control of the Kingdom of Shen. We must not allow that to happen! This is a critical stage we are in. We cannot make a single mistake or it is over. Xiang is ruthless and he shows no mercy. To fail is equivalent to death."

Shen whispered to Sui: "This situation is worse than I imagined."

"Indeed." Sui whispered back. "Our master did not mention it would be this big."

Tai: "To be able to replace people so quickly, it is as if everything has been planned ahead of time. Years in advance. Even decades."

Zhang: "This will not be easy at all."

Tai: "If we do not fight, death is certain. Even if we run, they will find us sooner or later. Do not forget about the latest law just passed - officials have the right to search anyone's home for any reason."

Yu: "Here is our plan." Everyone looked at the map. "We are going to break into the castle and find the Duke and kill him. We believe he is the key to the entire operation, once we get rid of him, we'll get rid of his officials one by one. The problem is how to get into the castle. Thanks to the Duke, security is tight. No one is to get in or out of the palace, with the exception of the most important lords."

Tai: "We are still able to get in, but not out." He took out a large piece of paper. "At the rate things are going, we're going to be next." The paper showed small portraits of people - people of the imperial court. Many of them have an X across their faces. "Xiang has taken them out one by one, and there is no doubt we are next."

Yu: "Xiang knows by now we sneaked out. Which means if we go in the normal way, we'd be committing suicide. There is no way in without breaking down the doors and alerting everyone. Fortunately, there is a way." He pointed to the map. "There is a secret underground tunnel from the outside that leads inside. This secret has been carefully guarded for generations ... only the king's most trusted men know of this."

Alex: "An underground tunnel?"

Yu: "Yes, it leads directly through the water ways into the interior of the palace. We are not sure which body of water it leads to, so you're on your own from there. This

tunnel has a major history significance. During the Tze dynasty, there was a massive war. The Tze forces were losing, and the battle took place in none other than the palace. Seeing no way to win, the remaining members of the Tze family used the tunnel to escape, fleeing death. The enemy never found out what happened.

So here's the plan. Cheng, Lai, and you three, you go through the tunnel, along with some of our troops, while we distract them by attacking the front. This will divert their attention towards the front, so you have less troops to deal with. We will commence at tomorrow night at eight o'clock at night sharp."

After the debriefing was over, everyone went about to do their own thing. Alex stood on the roof, staring at the evening sky. The sky was bright orange, indicating that the sun was about to set on the horizon. Fo Long saw him up there and he jumped along the building to reach the roof. Doosh, doosh.

"It is not safe to be outside." said Fo. "You will be easily spotted by the enemy."

"Fo Long, do you see that?" Alex asked, pointing in the direction of the palace. "The imperial palace. I have never been there in my entire life, and tomorrow night, I am going to break in to kill Duke Xiang. I feel that whatever is going to happen tomorrow is going to be the biggest event of my life. It is as if my whole life was leading up to this moment. Sometimes I wonder to myself, is it fate or just coincidence?"

"I see." Fo replied, and he stared at the scenery with the same admiration.

King Liu sat on his chair, drowning in his own negative thoughts. An image of someone's murder came up.

The victim was crawling and reaching for Liu, screaming for help. "Why King Liu, why?! I've always been loyal to you!" Slash! Slash! Blood splattered.

Xiang: "How unfortunate for him, for he does not know that I control the kingdom now!" His wiped his bloodstained sword. "Men, get this corpse out of here. We do not want to dirty his majesty's carpet."

"Hai!" said the men, and they dragged the body away.

He witnessed the whole thing, yet he was powerless to stop it. (What I have done? I am sorry, my people, I have failed you! Please forgive me, I have no choice. May Buddha have mercy on your souls.)

Cheng was not able to sleep that night. How could he, knowing what tomorrow will bring? Little does he know is that people are thinking about him.

Jade gazed into the stars in the sky. She held onto the pendant on her neck. "Please, God, give your blessings to Alex. May he overcome his obstacles and survive tomorrow."

Master Ho Sai was pondering about the same person. (The critical event will be tomorrow night. Tomorrow, Cheng will either be a hero...or a dead man.)

The infiltration crew consisted of Lord Yu and some of his men, and Alex, Zi and the masked warriors. They traveled through the wilderness outside of the city and came upon the lake in question.

Yu: "Zi, are you good at swimming?"

"Swimming is one of my many talents." he replied cunningly.

"And you Cheng?"

"I have been swimming as long I've been born."

"Good. What about you three?" Yu asked.

Fong: "Do not worry about us. We are skilled in many areas."

Yu: "And I assume that you all know how to use a sword. Let us proceed."

The heroes jumped into the lake and swam. The [waterways](#) connected to the tunnel, which was a cave-like structure. They reached the surface, and went towards land. They walked forward. The tunnel was pretty ancient; full of moss and spider webs.

On the other front, the resistance army was ready. Zhang and Tai were riding on horses.

Tai: "Sir, I am not sure about this."

Zhang: "This is the only way to put Xiang out of commission."

The archers stood in a line. They lit their arrows on [fire](#) and shot them to the air. One of the guards at the top of the tower saw the army coming. He was shocked. "We are under attack!" [Twang!](#) An arrow hit his chest. "Uuugh!"

This is when the imperial archers came and fired back.

A soldier came into the royal hallway and walked towards Xiang to whisper into his ear. "What?!" exclaimed the Duke. "Are they mad? They are trying to attack me?"

King Liu gasped.

"Fine then, I will show them my power. Send the bulk of the guards to the front!"

"No, don't start a war!" Liu said.

Xiang: "Do not worry about it, your highness. I will eliminate those traitors for you. Anyone who betrays the king must be beheaded!"

As per his command, most of the guards rushed to the front to defend.

Alex and Tai's group came up to the surface of the pond, taking deep breaths as they came to the surface. They were in confines of the recreational areas.

A guard came by and saw them. He panicked and ran away. Fo Long leaped at him and slashed him before he could escape. But more guards showed up. They charged. The heroes charged, and when the two groups clashed, a big sword fight ensued.

Clang! Slash! Clang!

Alex and Zi fought well, proving that their training was worth it. But amongst the chaos, they became separated.

When Zi was done with his enemies, he lost sight of his friend. "Alex? Alex! Damn it!" He saw more guards coming at him, and he had no choice but to flee.

Not realizing that he was alone, Alex ran through troop after troop, slashing them as they came. **Slash. Slice.** He left a trail of blood.

[F] Contents

A woman's screams were heard on the roof. Celina ran up the steep slope and tripped on the tiles. Jiax was right behind her, crawling on the tiles to get her, and she was crawling to get away from him. This was the roof, and there was no place to run to. Jiax approached her with his perverted smile like always, and she backed away until she was at the edge.

"Going somewhere?"

"Stay away!" Celina shrieked. "Or I'll jump!"

"Oh, are you threatening me?" Jiax said, amused.

Celina looked down, and from this height, it was a one day ticket to death. "Stay away."

Jiax continued to advance like animal would slowly approach its prey. He grabbed the cloth and pulled her into him, and kissed her lips. She struggled but to no avail. He enjoyed her lips to their full extent, and then he grabbed her arms and pushed her, and she fell off, and just when she did, he grabbed the loose end of her ribbon cloth.

Celina was now dangling by the ribbon, and her hands grabbed the ribbon.

Jiax laughed. "What are you going to do now, baby?" He kept on pulling and letting of the ribbon, dangling her up and down.

"Please...stop it!" she shrieked. If her hands slip, then she will fall down naked, and it is the last thing that she wants to happen. Imagine all the embarrassment when the people find about her death. Death? She was not ready to die. Not like this. "No! Please!"

She could feel the breeze of the wind. Poor Celina has to suffer such indignity...being violated day in and day out. And the whole time she couldn't do a thing to defend herself. And now her life is being toyed with. That is what her life is to Jiax, mere entertainment."

"Don't let go...please!" she shrieked with tears.

"I could spare you...if you promise me one thing. Be my slave for the rest of my life. How does that sound?"

"Anything..." said Celina, with tears streaming down her face.

"What? I can't hear you." Jiax said, dangling the cloth.

"Anything!!" she yelled.

"Much better." Jiax pulled the ribbon up, and then he grabbed her by the chin. One hand was pulling the ribbon, and his other hand was grabbing her chin. "By the way, I lied." He kissed her lips and right after that he let go of the ribbon and she fell a little.

"Aaaah!"

"Heh. I have no use for you anymore."

"No...no!!!" cried Celina.

"The fun is over...I will miss you. Give your greetings to the devil for me." said Jiax.

"No!!"

"Three...two..."

"No!! Please!!"

"One..." And then let go of it for good.

While falling, Celina thought that her life was over for good. Her whole life flashed before her eyes in those few seconds. Unfortunately, the last few moments of her life were not happy memories. She was young and wanted to do many things, but now she can't do any of them. Her life was taken away by a brute, tortured and raped day and night for no reason. And this is the end of her sad pathetic life.

She closed her eyes and shed her tears, and they sparkled in the sky.

Alex came to the area and after deciding that it's safe, he relaxed for a bit. But then he saw a woman falling from above. He ran to the spot and spread his arms, getting ready. Plop! He caught her and prevented her from hitting the concrete. Celina opened her eyes, thinking she was dead, and she was shocked that she's still alive.

Both stared into each other's eyes in disbelief. Celina thought she was gone for good, but then this man saved her life. He came out of nowhere and caught her, and she was speechless. And Alex was speechless as well, because it isn't everyday that a beautiful and naked woman falls into his arms. She had only pink ribbons to cover herself. He thought it was a dream of some sort, she was real and in the flesh.

"Are you...okay, miss?"

"Yes..."

"Ohh, uhuh." Alex put her down so she can stand up.

Suddenly, Jiax came out from the exit and Alex quickly ran to the side. They clashed their swords together.

Alex: "You work for Xiang? Your days are outnumbered?"

Jiax was confident he'd win, since he was bigger. "Heh, you got a lot of guts coming in here, little man."

"Little?"

Celina took this chance and ran away. Jiax watched her from the corner of his eye and he smiled.

Alex charged forward and slashed, Jiax blocked and kicked him in the stomach. Thud! Suddenly, guards showed up from the rear.

Jiax: "Okay boys, take care of him!" Then he went into the building.

"Oh no!" he exclaimed, realizing that he's after that woman. He ran after him, but the guards went to the entrance, blocking his way.

Alex Cheng just stood still. He must fight these troops to get past them, and he got into fighting position, just as his master taught him.

The room was empty and quiet. Celina breathed hard, sweating all over. She put her hand on the column and rested herself against it. She silently prayed to Buddha that

the bad man will not torture her anymore. She never gets a break, and now might be her golden chance to escape this place.

But just when she had one moment of relief, Jiax appeared from behind and grabbed her breasts. "Aaaah!"

He squeezed them tight and played with them while she moaned in pain.

"You ain't going nowhere. You are mine for the rest of your life. Ha ha ha ha!"

He had her from behind, and she could do nothing to defend herself. Jiax forced himself onto her, rubbing his body against hers, and put his face into her hair. Then he grabbed her by the hair and pushed her on the floor.

She turned around to lie face up, and Jiax was standing there, smiling like always. Celina feared for her life. Jiax drew his sword. What is he planning?

Slash! Cheng just finished off one enemy, but there are still more. He ran to the side, and the troops chased him at the same speed. He jumped onto the wall and ran along its contents. One of them jumped to the wall and charged. Alex slashed him and kicked him off. Cheng then did a somersault in the air, and the guards watched dumbfounded. He descended upside down and attacked. **Slash!** He hit three men at once.

When Cheng landed in a crouch, they were already dead and they collapsed.

The other troops became startled, but there were still more of them, and they charged and screamed.

Cheng charged, slashing his way through the guards. Slash. Slice. It turned into a **bloodbath**.

Cheng was finally able to get to the entrance. Before he entered, Jiax came out with Celina under his grip.

"Don't move, boy, or she gets it."

Cheng grunted.

Jiax: "No sudden movements, boy. Or else."

Celina struggled in vain. Jiax's arm was around her neck, and her hand was holding his arm, trying to pull it off.

Alex: "Is everyone who works for Xiang as despicable as you are? Using a woman as a hostage?"

"Oh, it take it that you care about her. I will give you a chance to save her life. I will let her go if you stab yourself."

This is a bad situation he put himself in. Cheng truly wanted to save her life. She is innocent and has nothing to do with this, and even though he doesn't know her, he must make a choice between her life and his own. There is one thing he can do and that is to call his bluff.

Cheng: "Why should I? I don't even know her."

Jiax: "Oh, so you are just like me, you don't care about other people. Then you won't mind if I do this, right?" He grabbed Celina's thigh and ran his hand all over it. Celina groaned helplessly.

Cheng gasped. This man is sick beyond belief.

"No, please!!" she said. Jiax was touching her most private areas, and he was doing it in front of a stranger. She was completely embarrassed.

Cheng: "What are you doing? Stop it!"

Jiax: "I thought you didn't care about her?" He grew excited and aroused from touching her. He moved his hand up the ribbons, and touched her sacred area. "What are you going to do, boy? Ha ha ha ha!"

Jiax's hand moved to Celina's breast and he grabbed it. He squeezed it round and round, and he smelled her hair while doing this. Then he kissed her shoulder and her neck.

Cheng was extremely angry. This man is despicable. The Fire Sword in his hand was glowing red. Jiax noticed Cheng's reaction, and he enjoyed pissing him off. One hand was grabbing her breast, and the other went between her thighs.

"Uuugh! Uuuhh!! Uhhh! Please stop!"

Jiax licked her shoulder and her neck with his tongue. Celina was suffering and humiliated.

"Uhhh...uuuuh!"

Cheng's fist clenched tightly.

Jiax took it one step further by grabbing her head, making her face him and kissing her lips. And he enjoyed them to the fullest.

"MMMFFFF!!"

There was limit to Cheng's patience, and he has had enough. He charged forward. Jiax pushed Celina into him and ran into the building. He caught her and they just stared into each other's eyes and remained silent in shock.

Cheng was mesmerized as he stared at her bright and innocent eyes. This woman, in his arms, was beautiful and completely different than other beautiful he had seen. Her body was flawless, her skin was smooth and perfect. And her eyes were so bright and lively, and warm and welcoming. Celina was too scared to say anything, and just stared at him dumbfounded.

He could not resist it and kissed her lips. When he was done, he let go. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll take care of that scoundrel. You find a safe place to hide."

She looked into his eyes and believed him. His words were strong and confident and somehow she knew he's trustworthy. Cheng ran into the building and she watched him leave. Seconds later, she broke out of her trance like state, and realizing that she wasn't wearing much, she hid somewhere in the bushes.

[G] Contents

After that ordeal, Alex went into another building of the imperial complex. This place was too big and he was lost, so he took out a map and examined it closely. "Hmmm, this is where the royal hall is. And I am here, in the garden. I have to go this way." He crumbled the map and shoved it back into his pocket and hurried off.

In one of the conference rooms, General Tsu and his men were having a meeting. Being informed of the outside raid, they were taking precautionary measures. Suddenly, Alex kicked down the door and charged into the room, and everyone became startled.

General Tsu stood up. "Who the hell are you?"

"You are the one of the people who work for Xiang, aren't you?"

"You're right on the dot. I am General Tsu. You must be one of Lord Yu's followers."

Alex drew his sword. "If I eliminate you, then the Duke's forces will be disempowered."

"Ha ha ha ha! You want to challenge me? You have a lot of nerve, boy. You are either really confident, or really stupid."

Alex charged forward and Tsu's troops attacked. Slash! Wham! Tables were turned and things broke in the fight. Tsu joined the fight and dominated. Alex was pushed back. Slash! Alex was pushed to the wall, and knocked down one of the torches. The fire spilled over and touched his blade. His sword caught the fire and the fire spread throughout the entire blade.

Alex: "This...this must be the power of the Fire Sword!"

Tsu: "You have the Legendary Fire Sword? That's impossible. The Fire Sword belongs to the War God of the valley. How can a simple man like you possess such a weapon?"

Alex smiled as the troops came at him. Slash! The burning sword hit and burned their skin at the same time, like a double attack. Using quick movements, he made quick work of the pawns.

Cheng: "Master, I cannot possibly accept such a gift. I am unworthy of it."

War God: "You need it more than I do. It has been my companion for many years. This sword, when activated, will become fire itself. Thus, it is called the Fire Sword. It will slice an opponent's flesh and give them a burning sensation at the same time. That is what makes it so deadly."

Slash!! Alex just finished off another guy, and there was no one left.

Tsu: "It must be a fake. Yes, that's right, it is a fake. You can't fool me!"

The two warriors fought valiantly, hitting hard with their swords and they exchanged some moves.

Tsu: (He is not all bluff. His skills are top class. And his sword is dangerous, but I will not let it burn me.)

The general screamed like a barbarian and ran forward. Alex blocked his attack, but the force of his push was so strong that Alex was pushed back, and his feet scraped the floor. Scrrrrrch!

Tsu jumped to the wooden confines of the ceiling and remained there. Then he jumped down and pointed his sword downwards, and hit the floor with all his might. "Ground Smasher!!" Doosh! When the sword came in contact with the wood, it broke apart, and pieces of it flew everywhere. Alex quickly laid low and blocked the flying debris with his sword.

The general's attack made a hole on the floor, and the force of his strike made a ripple that sent pieces of wood flying everywhere.

Alex: (That was a close one.)

Tsu laughed out loud. "Ha ha ha ha. That was the Ground Smasher, one of my specialties. Are you impressed?"

"It was a nuisance."

"What did you say, punk?" said Tsu, who was upset.

"I dare you to try it again."

"With pleasure!" It is a shame, for General Tsu is a prideful warrior, and sometimes his pride blinds him.

He jumped up to the platform, and Alex followed suit. They stood on the same piece of wood.

Tsu: (What is doing? Is he trying to copy me? Does that idiot think he can do my move just by seeing it once? He will die for his stupidity!) Both of them jumped down simultaneously and smashed their swords into the ground.

The flying debris from both of their impacts cancelled each other out, but some pieces of wood pierced their bodies. They were knocked down.

Tsu got up. "Impossible...How did you learn my technique...just like that?"

"That is no technique, it is just a trick. Anyone with half a brain can learn a trick."

General Tsu grew angry and he swings his blade forward. The Fire Sword grew red and became embed in fire and Alex swings equally as hard, breaking Tsu's sword, and slashed him in the stomach. The general was surprised that he was beaten by someone with more skill.

Alex put his sword back into its case. "This is a technique."

He collapsed and died.

A soldier standing on the tower was shot by an arrow, and he fell off. That is what Lord Zhang saw as he looked through his binoculars. Archers fired back and forth. Ground troops ran to the fortress's wall and put ladders on it in hopes to climb up and attack them. As expected, the front of the palace became a battlefield.

"What is the situation?" inquired Captain Tai. Both Tai and Zhang were riding on horses. They were ready to escape if there is any sign of danger to them. After all, without them there is no resistance.

"The imperials are doing a good job of defending the palace. It will be difficult for our forces to get in."

"All we need to do is break down the front door." said Tai. "Once there is an opening, our forces will run inside and scatter, and there will be no stopping them."

Zhang: "Yes, but the question is how many soldiers are stationed inside? I would assume Xiang knows that we would rebel, and thus made proper preparations."

Tai: "How many soldiers can he possibly acquire in such a short time? Our men are familiar with the palace, it is not foreign to us. But I am particularly worried about Lord Yu and his group."

Zhang: "Isn't he safe with his mercenaries?"

"I hope so. They are the ones who are supposed to rescue the king."

[G] Contents

Hiding in the bushes, Celina watched the soldiers move about. There was a lot of activity in the premises. Is there a battle being fought nearby? She did not understand what was happening. In fact, she did not understand anything at all from the beginning. All she knew was that she was scared and alone. She was wearing nothing but ribbons. She just did not want to be harassed anymore.

Nearby, Zi was hiding as well. He crawled through the bushes as silently as he could. Just then, he saw some movements in the bush a few inches from him. He got nervous, thinking it was an enemy hiding. So he got ready, counted to three in his head, then jumped into the bush and attacked.

Celina screamed as he grabbed her arms, pushing them on the floor, he was on top of her. She was weak and unconscious. Zi thought he was dreaming. She was not wearing anything except for the pink ribbons. Her breasts were partially exposed, and he just stared at those things in awe. What luck he ran into, he thought.

Celina moaned a little and opened her eyes. Seeing a stranger on top of her, she gasped in fear.

Zi, seeing the fear in her eyes, realized that she thinks he's an enemy. "It's not what you think," he muttered.

Celina pushed him away and crawled backwards. Zi was dumbfounded as he saw her full figure for the first time. She was attractive from head to toe, and she had a body that no straight man could resist. Her legs were almost entirely exposed, and she had the smooth, flawless skin that was begging to be touched. The only thing covering her frail, naked body were loops and loops of ribbons. The top of her breasts were revealed, and they were just the perfect shape, large and round and they just could not be ignored. And her face was beautiful as well, particularly when she is fearful.

"W-Who are you?" she said. "You're one of them, aren't you?"

"One of them?" Zi repeated stupidly.

Celina stood up and attempted to run away.

"No, wait!!" Zi yelled, running after her. He grabbed her shoulder and made her turn around to face him, and he noticed how beautiful she was. The way that she flung her hair in the air, the way that she was looking at him with her innocent look, everything about her was graceful. Her eyes were big and innocent, and she stared at him like a frightened, wounded animal.

He was dumbfounded for a moment. Celina turned around and ran for it.

"Hey, wait!" Zi shouted. He chased her and grabbed the loose ribbon and pulled it, and she was spinning away like a human top. More of her breasts were revealed as she was spinning helplessly, and Zi couldn't believe his eyes. Even though he pulled it by accident, he did not regret doing it at all. He was not about to let her get away.

Celina just stared at him with her frightful eyes, scared of what he might do next. He might try to pull it all off and expose her completely. She instinctively covered her breasts with her hands.

"It was an accident...I didn't mean to!" Zi said, with his hand still on the ribbon. Even though he said as such, his hand did not let go.

"No!" she screamed.

Zi pulled the ribbon, and pulled her closer to him.

"You must listen to me...I'm..." He stepped forward and tripped on a rock, and fell on top of her. *Thud*

Zi's face landed on something soft and cushion-like, and it felt comfortable. As he moved his face against it, he realized that he was on this woman's breasts.

Celina stared at him in awe, not knowing what to do. Zi quickly sat up and once again tried to explain himself. "It was an accident! I didn't mean to!"

She screamed and pushed him away, making him fall on his behind. Celina crawled backwards until she was against a tree. "No...stay away from me!" she pleaded.

"Please, listen to me." said Zi.

Celina stood up and then ran to the side. Zi grabbed her from behind with one hand over her mouth. "Listen to me." he whispered in her ear. "I am not the enemy. It is dangerous here so we have to be careful. I will let you go, but don't run away. Do you promise?"

She had no choice so she nodded in agreement. Zi let her go. Celina sat down against the tree and took a sigh of relief.

"Listen, whoever you are, I am not a bad guy."

"Then who are you?"

"My name is Zi Lai. I work for Shu Tai and we are having a rebellion against the Duke."

"Why should I trust you?" she replied.

"Because if I worked for the Duke, I would have already had my way with you, and then probably killed you. Why would I ask you to trust me?"

Those words of logic finally made her listen. "That does not mean I should trust you. How do I know you are not lying?"

"Fine. I am not asking you to trust me completely. Once I help you escape this place then you will believe me. We should move to another location, it's not safe to walk around...wearing that." Zi said.

Celina knew he was referring to her exposed body, and blushed and looked away.

"Don't worry. Like I said, I am here to help you." Suddenly, he sensed footsteps from nearby. Two soldiers walked into the perimeter. "We have company. Come this way before they find us."

Zi, taking her by the hand, walked over to the opposite side, where the wall was located. They crouched low and are hidden underneath the thick bushes.

"Hey I thought I heard something here." said soldier A.

"Are you sure?" asked soldier B. "Should we have a look around?"

Zi: (This is bad. If they discover us here, it will be inconvenient for me to fight with her around. If we fight here they will surely call for help, and since we are in the

middle of the enemy's territory, we will be surrounded.) "Listen," he whispered to Celina, "No matter what you do, don't make a sound." Zi looked at her and became shocked when he saw a snake slithering about the tree behind her.

Its head was close to her hair and was about to make its way to her shoulder. "What is it?" Celina whispered, being uncomfortable with his staring.

"Don't move an inch," he replied.

Celina, feeling something slimy on her shoulder, saw the snake's head and began to scream. Zi suddenly pounced on her and placed his lips upon hers to stop her from screaming. If she screamed the soldiers would hear them, and they will be attacked. Zi landed on top of her, and his lips were pressed against hers firmly, while he grabbed her wrists, keeping them from moving.

Celina opened her eyes and found herself in an awkward situation. With his lips firmly pressed against hers, and her wrists held down, she could do little to struggle. This man claims he is her ally, yet is taking advantage of her. Poor Celina, she wished this would and be over with, for this is a situation she has been in countless times, and is once again forced to endure. Each second feels like an hour, and each hour feels like a day.

The soldiers walked by the very bush they were hiding under and stopped. "I see nothing here. It must have been your imagination. Come, we have to join the fight," said soldier B, and off they went.

Once the soldiers left completely, Zi stopped the kiss and they just stared at each other. Celina shrieked and slapped him.

"You're welcome for saving your life."

"Was that really necessary?" she asked angrily, still blushing from being embarrassed.

"I didn't know what else to do." Suddenly, Zi sensed more soldiers coming this way. "There are more soldiers. Hurry." Without even a chance for her to speak further, Zi stood up and began to move.

"Why should I trust you?"

Zi turned around to face her. "If you want to live, then follow me. Or you can stay here by yourself while you're half naked." He said, taking a quick leer at her body.

Celina blushed, covering herself with her arms. There was no time to think about it; this stranger, despite what he did, is the only person who can help her escape. She followed him as he snuck past the soldiers.

[H] Contents

Cheng, following the map's directions, ran to the next building. On his way there, he heard sounds of fighting. Shen Long and Sui Long were being attacked. Immediately, he drew the Fire Sword and jumped in to help his allies. The three of them stood together and charged at the soldiers with all their might. Cling! Clang! Slash! Slash!

The group fight ended, and the winners were of course, were the heroes.

Sui: "Cheng, I must say, your skills has improved. From the day you met the War God until today, you have made much improvements, not just skill-wise."

"Thank you." Cheng replied.

Sui: "You had us worried. I am glad you are safe."

"I was separated from the group during the first fight." Cheng replied.

Shen: "I know. We were separated from Captain Tai in the process, and we do not know where he is."

Sui: "We are basically on our own."

Suddenly, the door broke down, and a horde of troops charged in.

Sui: "We must flee!"

Cheng: "This way!"

The three ran up the stairs inside the tower. They continued to run until they reached the roof and slammed the door shut, and locked it by placing a piece of wood horizontal it, attached to the wall. The troops could not open the door and they used force. Bang! Bang!

The altitude they were standing on was beyond ground level, and if they were to jump, it would be to the death.

Cheng: "Now what?"

Shen: "So it has come to this. We either fight or jump to our deaths."

Sui: "I foresee this day coming since I left the Valley of Death."

Cheng: "There has to be another way for us to escape!"

Shen: "There is no means for all of us to escape, but there is a means for you to escape." He pointed at the rope that was attached to the other tower.

Cheng: "That is too high, I can't make it!"

Shen: "You can with our help."

Cheng: "You mean...but what about you two? Shen Long and Sui Long?"

Sui: "Do not worry about us. Our mission is to ensure your safety, and we intend to carry that mission to the very end."

"Your mission?" Cheng inquired.

Sui: "We are following Master Genzo's orders. What happens to us is not important. Your safety is our top priority."

The soldiers were at the brink of breaking the door. Bang! Bang

Sui: "Hurry Cheng, we are out of time!"

Alex nodded.

Sui Long jumped onto Shen Long's shoulders. Alex ran towards them and leaped up, stepping onto Sui Long's hands, and Sui gave him a boost up. This is probably the biggest and most dangerous jump he will take in his life, and one that he will never forget. "Aaaaaaah!!" He reached with all his might and grabbed the rope tightly.

It swings him all the way to the other tower. His feet hit the wall first, as he planned, rather than letting his body hit the wall, which would be stupid. He saw a window below him and jumped into it and rolled on the floor.

Shen: "It looks like we made it safely."

Sui: "It is unfortunate that I cannot say the same for us."

The door broke down, and in comes a barrage of angry soldiers who thirst for blood.

Shen: "So, this is how it ends, hmm?"

Sui: "Without Master Genzo, we would have been dead already. I will embrace death with honor."

The masked warriors got into fighting position and charged bravely into the horde of soldiers and fought with the best of their abilities, for it could be the last fight of their lives.

[I] Contents

Once inside the castle, Alex by chance saw Fo Long. "Fo Long, I am glad to see you."

"Where are Sui Long and the others?" Fo asked.

"I don't know." Alex replied. "I don't even know where Zi is. Our entire group was separated. How are the outside forces holding up?"

"They are making progress, but the palace's defenses are strong. It will take a lot more power to penetrate this area. We another group coming to the underground tunnel. We can only hope that they succeed."

"Do you know where the king's chambers are?" Alex asked.

"Yes, this way." Fo ran down the dark hallway, and Alex followed.

Soldiers were in their way, and they fought valiantly. Clang! Clang! During the fight, Alex accidentally knocked over a torch, and it set fire to the carpet. Froom! Usually, that is a bad thing, but for the Fire Sword, it is a blessing. The sword, like before, turned red and became a sword of fire, and he slashed his enemies. Slashhh!

Once their work is done, they continue to run down the hallway and into the royal hall. They saw a silhouetted man sitting on the king's chair. But it was not the king who was sitting there, it was the Duke. Lightning flared.

"Welcome to my kingdom, my subjects." said Xiang.

"Your kingdom? You stole it from the real king. Give it back to whom it belongs."

"Enough chit-chat." said Fo. "We have come a long way to fight you. Come down and face us, Duke Xiang."

"Unfortunately, I will not be your opponent today. He is."

Liu Bei came out from the curtains and came up to the chair.

Alex: (This the famous King Liu Bei? Is he being manipulated by the Duke?)

"Eliminate these annoying pests immediately." said Xiang.

"As you wish." Liu replied in a monotone voice. He drew his sword and ran down the stairs.

As Alex prepared himself, Fo suddenly got in front of him, surprising every body. He intercepted Liu's attack and they jumped up. Xiang threw some needles at Fo, and while distracted, Liu kicked him away. Dooosh.

"No!" Alex shouted. He attacked Liu directly. Clang!

Liu jumped back and did his stance.

Alex: (He is using a long range sword. The disadvantage to using this kind of weapon is that it is slower. And master told me that the Liu family uses their own fighting style, one that is not to be underestimated. I must be careful.)

Xiang smiled as he witnessed the duel. (This swordsman doesn't stand a chance.)
The two fighters clashed their blades.

Xiang, upon taking a closer look at Alex's sword, became worried. (That sword...can it be?)

Liu took the initiative and attacked, and Alex counter attacked. Clang! His sword glowed red and had burning flames, and the flames made a wave of energy, and Liu jumped away from it to avoid harm.

Xiang stood up. (There is no doubt about it, that is the Fire Sword. There is only one sword like it in the world. How did this man possess such an item?!)

Clang!! Both warriors backed up.

Xiang: "Interesting. To give my servant such a hard time, you must have an interesting origin. What is your name?"

"My name? My name is Alex Cheng, the descendent of the Cheng family."

That name struck Xiang like a thunderbolt. "Cheng?" Indeed, he is the one Xiang was searching for. The one who he sent En Lo after. The brother of that little girl who sneaked up on him and saw him in his semi-transformed state years ago. The girl who ran away before he could silence her.

"I changed my name and my identity because of you. My sister ran away from Yi Ling because of you." said Alex. "Now that I think about it, every single problem in my life was your doing!"

The Duke got angry. "Liu, finish him now! Or else you will not see your wife alive! Kill him!!"

Liu: "Sorry I have to do this, but I must end your life here?"

"Why are you doing this?" Cheng asked.

Liu made his move. Whoosh. He was too quick for the eye to see. Alex blocked with his sword vertically. Calng!

"Why are you working for this madman?"

"I haven no choice. If I don't do it my wife will be killed."

"Enough!" Xiang shouted impatiently. "Stop talking and kill him already!"

Fo was recovering from being unconscious. "Ugh..."

Liu charged and slashed. Alex jumped over the blade and landed behind him. Liu turned around and made a forward stab, Alex blocked and was pushed backwards. "Listen to me, your highness. It doesn't have to be this way!"

Xiang: "Don't listen to him!"

Liu: "What would you know? You don't know what I've been through!"

"Listen to me. This man will not only ruin your life, but your entire kingdom. Hundreds of thousands of lives are going to be ruined if this goes on. Shu Tai and his men are fighting to save you as we speak. Wherever your wife is, I am sure she does not want to see you like this. Please, King Liu, wake up."

Liu was shocked beyond words. The words of this swordsman struck true. What has he been doing this whole time?

Xiang was getting impatient with Liu's indecisiveness. For some reason, he was getting angrier and it's uncontrollable.

Liu was still in shock. "I can't...I can't let this happen...to my kingdom...to my people..."

Alex: "Your highness..."

Suddenly, Xiang threw a dagger at Liu's back, and he fell forward. "Argh!"

Fo ran at him and slashed the Duke in the back. The Duke threw a smoke bomb and ran away. Fo coughed. "That slippery bastard...you're not getting away!" He ran into the darkness.

Alex went to pick up the king. "Your highness..."

"Do not worry about me," he said weakly. "Go and find the Duke...avenge my fallen comrades. This is my imperial decree...as the King of Shen..."

Alex accepted his command. "As you wish, your highness. I promise you it will be done," he said in a strong and confident tone. With that said, he ran off into the darkness.

[J] Contents

Meanwhile, Lord Yu and what remains of his group are fighting for their lives in the palace garden. Clang! Clang! There were soldiers everywhere they went and they cannot afford to take a break.

At the front lines of the battle, the resistance soldiers fired archers and hit the troops from above. But the imperials have archers of their own, and they fired down below. Several men were hit and they screamed before their death.

A group of ten resistance soldiers grabbed a log and slammed the giant wooden gates. Bam! They stepped back, then charged forward. Bam! The others were too occupied with their own enemies to stop them from breaking the door. And eventually, it broke open. This is the chance they've been waiting for. Everyone charged in and screamed. "Yaaaaah!"

Zhang: "Well, they finally broke through. We actually have a chance of winning."

"All our planning was well worth it."

"It might be dangerous, so we should move further away."

"Non-sense." Tai replied. "A true warrior does not run away from danger. I will go in to the battle and join my comrades." He drew his sword and pulled the horse reins, and the horse galloped into the gate.

Zhang: "No, come back, you moron!" It was too late for Tai to hear him. Zhang sighed. "If you want to die, then it has nothing to do with me."

Sui and Shen were still fighting for their lives.

"There must be a way out." Shen shouted. "I do not want to die yet."

"Neither do I. But there is no way out."

"Is this our destiny? Is this what Master Ho Sai predicts?"

Just when things were looking grim, resistance soldiers charged in and attacked. Clang! Clang!

Sui: "They broke through the front!"

Shen: "I knew they could do it!"

Now the heroes have a renewed sense of hope. Rather than fighting to die, they are now fighting for life, certainly a much better motivation.

Xiang walked limply back to his room, to his drawer, where the mirror stood.
“Demon King! I am calling you!”

The face on the mirror appeared. “What is the matter, mighty Duke?” it said.
“Things are not going as planned?”

“Those blasted mortals ruined everything. I need more power!”

“Look at you, Raz-Tul. You are pathetic. You cannot even hold the castle on your own. But I shall give you one more chance.” The face’s eyes glowed.

Xiang started sweating heavily. His body grew bigger and his skin became red. “Arrgh! Uugh!” White fur grew from his shoulders and hair, and his face turned into that of an ogre, and within minutes, he was in his demon form. He was now a grotesque giant with spikes on his back.

“Do not fail me again.” said the face in the mirror.

“Damn you Demon King, I am tired of taking orders from you. From now on I take things into my own hands.” He ripped the mirror from the desk and walked outside.

“What are you doing, fool?” yelled the face.

“Shut up!” Xiang shouted back. He smashed the mirror on the floor, cracking it into pieces. The face was gone and there was silence.

Alex and Fo came to the scene and they were horrified at the sight of such ugliness. “What the...”

Xiang turned around and roared, and they became frightened.

Zi took Celina to the dark hallways of the inner castle. They hid behind a column. “It is not safe. I can sense danger up ahead.” Zi said.

“Where are you taking me?”

“To see the king, of course. You can’t fight, so you stay here while I go ahead.” She nodded and he went off.

Cheng and Fo Long charged at the oversized demon. Xiang scratched and swiped with his claws, and occasionally threw a punch. They could not subdue the beast. Xiang slashed and hit Fo, and his hat fell off for the first time. Wham! He fell down.

Cheng charged bravely forward and made his attack. The demon grabbed the sword with his hand and punched Cheng in the stomach. Thud! Cheng coughed blood and was knocked away.

Suddenly, Zi showed up. “Don’t worry, I came to save you!”

Alex: “Zi!”

Xiang turned his attention to Zi and ran at him. Zi ran and slashed the demon’s shoulder. Xiang snatched the sword from him and bent the blade. “You think your human toys can kill me?”

Zi: "This might!" He threw daggers at the demon's chest.

Xiang was bleeding and he screamed. He smacked Zi away. Whack! Cheng saw his chance. He grabbed the Fire Sword and he leaped and slashed Xiang's back.

"Uuuuuuuuaaagh!" Xiang turned around and smacked Cheng away, knocking him against the wall. Xiang ran away into the darkness.

[K] Contents

Celina walked limply through the hallway. She was instructed not to move from her spot, but she felt that she will be discovered eventually if she remained in one place. The poor woman has already been through hell, and she just wants to be rescued and have this nightmare end already.

She gasped as she heard the footsteps of a giant. The demon Xiang was in front of her, and she was horrified at the sight. The demon took a big step forward, and he growled at her.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!!"

Alex heard the scream in the hallway. "Hurry, this way!" Him and Fo Long ran towards the source of the sound.

Celina has never been this scared in her entire life. She's been through a lot, but this is just unreal. But he is real and in the flesh. She took a step back and just stared at him with wide open eyes. Tears dripped down her eyes and she tried to scream, but no words came out.

How is she to defend herself in this situation? She's just a woman, covered by nothing but ribbons, and she has to face an overgrown, grotesque demon, with claws and muscles. She just fainted and fell on the floor. Xiang came over to her and picked her up and ran away.

Once he reached the end of the hallway, he put Celina down and stared at her with his evil eyes. Celina moaned and woke up. She screamed when she saw the demon. "No, no!!!" she yelled.

The demon's shadow covered her, and she crawled backwards. Her body was shaking all over, her arms and legs trembling at the sight of this monster. Xiang walked towards her step by step, while she crawled backwards. Her tear-filled eyes were shaking and wide open, and her mouth was wide open. Xiang put his claw on her chin, and she just stared at him like a helpless infant. He could easily grab her neck and strangle her to death, but that would take the fun out of it. He wanted to torture her and enjoy himself while doing so.

Tears dripped down her eyes.

"Look who it is, Lady Celina!" snarled the demon. I've always hated you and the king! He always had the final say!"

His claws moved down to her breasts, and she gasped.

"No longer will I be oppressed. I've always wanted to possess you and now I have you." His claws cut some of the ribbons, revealing more of her breasts, and she gasped helplessly.

The Duke grabbed her by the arms and picked her up and licked her all over with his filthy tongue.

"No!! Please! No!!!" She was crying for her life.

She tasted good and he continued to lick her.

"Let her go!" Alex shouted.

The duke turned around and pushed Celina onto the floor. He snarled at the warriors. "You again? You are nothing but a pest! I will crush you like a bug!"

"Go ahead and try." said Alex. He and Fo got ready.

The duke charged at them. Fo fought him and Alex ran to Celina.

"It's you..." Celina said in shock.

"You'd better leave this place, it's not safe."

Celina nodded and hid behind the column.

Slash! The demon's claws scratched Fo's chest, leaving four marks on his clothing.

"Ugh!"

The demon snarled at him. He continued slashing with his claws, and Fo dodged. Whoosh, whoosh.

Alex: "Watch out!"

Suddenly, the demon slashed at Fo's face, effectively ripping off his mask, and it fell to the floor. Surprisingly, Fo turned out to be a woman.

Alex: "You're a girl?"

"What's it to you?" she said with a tough attitude. "A girl can't be a swordsman?"

The Duke recognized her face. He thought of the servant who spied on him on that day several years ago. Even though she is grown up now, they have the same look and same eyes. "You...you are that girl? You are Li Cheng!"

That name struck Alex like a lightning bolt. "Li Cheng? You mean...you are my sister?"

"Yes." she replied. "Sorry for the deception, brother."

Zi was barely conscious. His vision and auditory senses were weakened, but he had an idea of what's happened.

"But why..." Alex asked.

"I thought it'd be better if you didn't know." Li replied.

"I've been searching for you all this time, and you have been with me all along. What irony of fate."

Duke: "How touching. It simply brings a tear to my eyes. You two can reunite in hell!" The demon roared and pounded its chest like a gorilla.

Alex and Li jumped around the demon and slashed him. Whish! Whoosh. The Duke screamed in anger and pain. Smack! Alex was hit.

Li charged forward and the demon grabbed her sword and kneed her in the stomach. Thud! Then he grabbed her and put her in a head lock.

"Ha ha ha ha! One more step and the girl dies."

"Let her go." said Alex.

"Stay right where you are."

Alex's grip on the sword grew tighter, and his blade grew redder, and its flames burned.

Li: "Alex...forget about me...kill him!"

"I can't!"

"You must use the Phoenix Palm."

"The Phoenix Palm?" Alex suddenly had a flash back of War God's training.

"I will teach you something very important. It is often called the 'Move that Saves Lives' ... it is called the Phoenix Palm." Then War God demonstrated it to his pupil.

Alex took a deep breath and put the sword back into its patch and he took on a fighting stance. It was the deciding moment of his sister's fate, and his own fate as well, because if he makes even the slightest error, his sister's life will be lost. It is the move that saves lives only when applied properly.

Xiang: "What are you doing? You still want to fight?"

Alex Cheng can feel the blood boiling throughout his body, and his heart was beating rapidly. His sister's fate...the person who is his sibling, the one that he seeks for ten years is in front of his very eyes, in the death grip of this ogre. But he must remain calm at all costs.

Suddenly, he opened his eyes, and he was ready for his trial. "Huyaaaah!" Alex charged. His palm struck Li's stomach. Everyone was shocked.

Li was speechless, as her life is one the line.

Suddenly, Xiang coughed blood. "Uargh..." The demon lost his grip on Li, and Alex jumped, drew the Fire Sword, and slashed the demon's chest. Slish! Blood squirted out like from the wound. "RAAAR!"

Alex continued to slash the demon mercilessly. Xiang is the cause of all his troubles. He is the reason why Li ran away from home, and Alex lost his family and lived alone for the past ten years. Indeed, Xiang is the cause of his suffering. He summoned all his anger and cut the demon's head off. It rolled on the floor. Doosh doosh.

Li fell on her knees, then face flat on the floor. But then she got up. "I'm still alive. You did it, Alex!"

Alex: "The Phoenix Palm...it truly is the move that saves lives."

Suddenly, the door busts open, storms of soldiers came in. Fortunately for them, they were the soldiers of Lord Zhang and Captain Tai.

During the commotion, Li ran at the window and jumped out.

"Wait!!" Alex yelled. It was too late, she was already gone.

The troops helped Zi get up.

Tai walked up to Alex, and upon seeing the demon's dead body, he opened his mouth in shock. "Did you do that?"

Zi: "Yes he did. I saw everything."

Tai: "You have slain Duke Xiang!" He put his hands on Alex's shoulder, and it shook him for a second. "You are going to be a hero!"

Alex knew not what he meant, but he knew that he had accomplished his mission. God placed him here for a reason, because it was his time to shine, and shine he did. Looking back on the journeys he has had in the past few years, he and his companion Zi, who is always with him, have been through a lot together.

The faced mountain bandits, killer statues, and went through the Valley of Death. They have trained day and night at the temple and under the tutelage of one of the greatest martial arts masters in China. All those trials and tribulations were worth it, because they were leading up to this very moment of triumph. And Alex secretly think to himself, is this the future that Master Ho Sai envisioned?

Alex Cheng, no longer dressed like a rogue, wore the attire of an official lord. His gown and pants were made of silk, and he had a ribbon on his waist to carry his sword. On his chest bore the symbol of the yin yang.

King Liu and several of his servants arrived. The first servant speaks: "The king arrives." Everyone bowed and Alex bowed.

"Long live your majesty."

"Alex Cheng, stand." said King Liu.

Alex stood up.

"The ceremony will begin shortly. Prepare yourself, hero."

Celina walked towards King Liu. "If you do not mind, I would like to have a word with him."

"Very well. But make it quick." Liu walked past her and his servants followed.

Alex took a good look at Celina and recognized her immediately. She was the woman whose life he saved earlier. "Y-You're Lady Celina?" he asked nervously.

"Yes. I am Lady Celina, the king's sole concubine."

He bowed and stared at the floor, afraid to make eye contact. "It's an honor to meet you." He blushed and his heart was pounding rapidly. He was worried she might bring up what happened that night.

"No, the honor is mine." Then she touched his hand. "Thank you for saving our lives." she said and smiled warmly. Her warm, genuine smile made Alex feel at ease.

"You're welcome, your highness. I was doing the right thing. I happened to be at the right place at the right time. Call it destiny if you must." Alex was glad she did not bring up anything.

The horns blew. Alex walked down the red carpet, and there was chatter amongst the audience. Alex bowed and King Liu walked down the steps.

"Alex Cheng. As the King of Shen, I have my duties and I cannot leave your actions unrewarded. You decided to join the resistance and saved my life in the

process. You fought bravely and slain the demon known as Duke Xiang. You did what even the bravest of soldiers could not. Thus, it is my honor and privilege to make you a high lord of the imperial court. You will live a life of luxury and riches and you shall receive the title of that of a hero. From now, wherever you go, your name will be known to all! You are Alex Cheng, the **Demon Slayer**. A slayer of demons and the protector of justice and all that is good."

Alex opened his palms, as Liu handed him the royal sword. Alex bowed and then stood up. "I thank you, your highness."

Everyone in the crowd slapped and cheered loudly.

Liu smiled. "Well done, warrior."

Celina smiled as well, seeing him get the recognition he deserves. Jade and Zi cheered and screamed loudly, and their voices were louder than others in the audience because they are friends with Cheng. Jade jumped up and down and hugged Zi tightly.

Sui Long and Shen Long, although quiet, are happy for their friend. "Demon Slayer, eh? Not a bad name."

"Maybe this is what Master Genzo sees in him."

Alex still can't believe this is happening to him. It is like a dream come true. Everyone is cheering for him and for his honorable accomplishments.

Ho Sai, meditating, suddenly opened his eyes. "That young lad...he did it. He saved the Kingdom of Shen from certain doom. Even I had not predicted such a...surprise." Ho Sai smiled for the first time in a long time.

Guan and his students, Chan, Fu, and Shang, continued about their duties. They know not of the events of the outside world, but they can never forget the impact that Li and Alex left on them. Even though Alex's stay was short, his spirit and passion left a mark that can never be erased.

The War God stood by the mountain edge, watching the skyline. He is no psychic, but somehow he too knew about Cheng's success.

After the ceremony, Alex walked the halls of the palace alone. He needed some quiet time, especially after all the crazy things that have taken place. He now understood why Ho Sai allowed him to enter the Valley of Death. All the events lead to one another, and eventually led him to become the Demon Slayer. It is part of his fate.

No words can express the satisfaction he felt right now. One day, he was running away from the law, and the next, he became an imperial lord. Everybody loves him, especially the king, and he has friends who will never part from him. But despite all this, one thing is missing. He found Li, who was Fo Long in disguise. But now that her identity is revealed, she has disappeared again, for what reason he knew not.

Looking out the window, Alex was thinking that she could be anywhere in the kingdom, and only the sky can see where she is. Alex thought that if he was the sky,

then he can find her. And he secretly swore to himself that he will find her no matter what it takes.

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Main Characters - Legend of the Fire Sword		
Name	Role	Type
Alex Cheng	Main character, has been searching for his sister, becomes a student of War God	S
Zi Lai	Alex's best friend, expert swordsman	A
Jade Lee	Alex's childhood friend, jewelry saleswoman	A
Fo Long	Third student of War God, wanted criminal	S-A
Shen Long	Second student of War God, wanted criminal	T
Sui Long	First student of War God, wanted criminal	S
Celina aka "Lady Ce"	The king's concubine	S
King Liu Bei	King of Shen	R
Duke Xiang	Eunuch, demon who wants to take over the kingdom	A
Shu Tai	Captain of the army, former thief	T
Ho Sai	Monk who can supposedly predict the future	T
Guan Du	Teacher in Temple	S
Chie Du	Teacher in Temple	S
Chan Lou	Student of Temple, Alex's rival	A
Fu	Student of Temple, Alex's friend	R
Shang	Female student of Temple, Alex's friend	R

Nobles		
Lord Liu Zhang	Eunuch, supporter of Lord Yu	T
Lord Yu	Eunuch, supporter of Bei	S
Lord Sima	Eunuch, supporter of Yu	T
Lord Fei	Eunuch, supporter of Yu	T

Lord Huong	Eunuch, supporter of the Duke	T
Lord Lee	Eunuch, Xiang's rival	T

Minor Characters ¹		
En Lo	Xiang's imperial captain	T
Kiyang	Mountain bandit	A
General Chung	General of the army, Xiang's rival	T
General Tsu	Duke Xiang's replacement for General Chung	T
Hua	Local gangster who used to bully Alex	A
Jiax	Leader of his gang of brutes	A
Manchu	Leader of northern tribe	S

¹ Updated characters table. Zhao Zen is replaced with Hua. Liu Tai becomes Shu Tai. Liu Yiu becomes Lord Yu.