

DEMON SLAYER

Legend of the Fire Sword

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Summary

一： Yi Ling: A Place of Danger And Misfortune

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[B] [C] Contents

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 was 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.

It was a busy day as usual in the province of **Yi Ling**, the capital city of the **Kingdom of Shen**. A certain young 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 quiet.

Since this is the capital, interesting things happen everyday, and the streets are always flooded with people. Many travelers come here to hopefully start a business and make it big, and in the same way, people leave the city to go to different cities. Everyday, poor men become rich, and rich men become poor. Living that kind of life is fulfilling for some, but none of that concerns this young man. He had long, silver hair, the natural color with which he was born with.

Alex Cheng 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 has not seen her in over ten years, and it as been a very painful journey searching for her. She just disappeared one day without warning, and he 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 reveals much about their nature. They were wearing ragged clothing, torn, 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 asked 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 and stood up. "I am sorry to have caused you trouble." he said reluctantly, and even bowed. Naturally, he despised these brutes and their methods. Secretly, he wants his fist to meet the brute's face. But violence is not the answer, because it is not worth it. Alex walked away, holding in his anger.

"Hold it." said Hua.

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

"Don't forget to call me master the next time you see me."

Alex walked on as the gangsters laughed. All he wants is to drink his tea peacefully and mind his own business. Although he did carry a sword on his body, it is not the time to use it.

Although they say that Yi Ling is the richest city in the kingdom, life is not easy for the lower class peasants. Making a living is not the hard part, but the hard part is to live to spend your money. There is one fundamental rule that anybody should follow: do not pick fights with the wrong person, lest it can cost you your life and your family's lives.

Despite having its own police force and being a heavily guarded area, the authorities will not do anything about people like Hua. They do not have the time nor the resources to deal with every small criminal that roams the streets. The less

monitored areas, particularly the slums, are filled with gangsters, loan sharks, murders, rapists, and people who do what they want.

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.

Alex did not like crowded places, but today he came here to see one of his best friends. 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 and they're backed by facts."

"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.

1 - B Title Contents

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.

En Lo drew his sword and stared at the reflection on his blade. He has already failed once, and now he must prove himself to his master to redeem his reputation. Being a captain of the imperials, reputation is everything to him. He will do anything to gain reputation, even it means murdering someone that he does not know.

He has orders from the Duke Xiang to kill the man named Alex Cheng. If everything goes according to plan, Alex will not leave his home alive. Indeed, he will redeem himself tonight.

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

"How is it?" 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.

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 and 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 swordsmen. 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, jumping over the back gate. En Lo was the last to retreat. They were all gone in less than 3 seconds, as expected of trained professionals. A true ninja is 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 badge." Alex responded.

"Imperial badge? 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.

"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.

1 - C Title Contents

Within the confines of the imperial palace, a certain armored man was walking down the halls. **Shu Tai** is an imperial soldier, and having such a title is a source of pride and honor for one's family. Being a soldier meant serving one's kingdom, being an authority figure, and being an example to society.

"Captain Tai." addressed one of his subordinates.

"Yes?" replied he.

"Good job on capturing those criminals. We have been after them for months, yet you captured them within a week." said the soldier.

"Thank you." Tai replied, and bowed, and went on his way.

Truthfully, Tai did not capture the criminals for the praise, although it is nice to have peers respect you. Within a short time, he became captain of the army due to his calm and intellectual nature, as well as his diligence and hard work. Most would be happy to be a captain, but not he, for he has much bigger promotions in mind.

Like many others, he enlisted in the army because he was poor and needed money to take care of his family. His mother and father worked hard their whole lives, yet they barely scraped by. By being in this position, he hopes to make money by serving his kingdom wholeheartedly. Some soldiers abuse their privileges by abusing

citizens, gambling, and engaging in illegal activities, but not Tai. He does not tolerate such behavior, and will make sure that he walks the right path so that others will do the same.

As he approached the courtyard, he saw a woman in a white qipao sitting on the bench, looking at the flowers behind her. This woman was none other than **Celina**, the king's favorite concubine. Tai could not help but stare at her from where he is, admiring her beauty. The qipao she wore was white and made of silk, and had simple patterns on it. There were two incisions on the side of the legs, revealing up to half her thighs, which is the perfect amount - not too much and not too little. The dress had short sleeves on the arms and a low neckline. Celina had her hair tied to a pony tail, and had makeup on her face.

Unlike other women of her status, she did not wear jewelry, with the exception of a bracelet and earrings. As a matter of fact, Tai thought that she'd look better without any jewelry. Perhaps that is what distinguishes her from other rich, snobby women - her plainness. No, that is not the correct word to describe her, for she is not plain in any way. It is hard to put it in words, and Tai felt a sense of ease, staring at the beautiful flowers and leaves behind her, and with her sitting there, it is very picturesque.

When Celina noticed someone watching her, she looked at him, and he became slightly embarrassed. "Ah-hem. How do you do, your highness?"

"Oh it is you, Captain Tai." she replied in a soft voice. Her voice is usually low and unobtrusive, as she is shy around others, particularly men. She has been like that her whole life. But Tai is one of her good friends, and of the few of the opposite gender she can speak to comfortably. "Congratulations. I heard about your new arrests."

"Ah. You know?" he said, a little surprised.

"Word has its way of getting around. Whether it is a big victory or small one."

"Yes. I am honored to receive your compliments, your highness." said Tai, bowing.

"You need not be formal around me." she replied. "But I would not be surprised if you receive another promotion very soon. The general likes hard working soldiers."

"I am looking forward to it."

A female servant came by. "My lady, his majesty the king wants to see you."

"Very well." Celina said, standing up. "We will talk again."

"Yes." Tai replied as the two walked away.

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?"

"Well, kind of." Zi replied. "But you knew...didn't you?"

"I've always had a feeling...that you two were hiding something. But just what exactly did he do that caused all this?" she asked.

"I'll tell you everything later. Right now we need to take care of him."

Alex moaned in his sleep, and Jade 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...where am I?"

"In my house. You are safe. The imperials 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 must be joking! 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 soldier! 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...if they can find my house they can find yours! 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 eyes. "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 in relief. He knew he could count on his best friend.

The Duke was walking to and fro, waiting for his good news. En Lo scanned left and right, making sure no one sees him, and opened the door, went inside, closed the door. 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 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 wife. 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. On 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 monarchical 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 to the two. "Your highness."

Celina 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, Shun "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, referring to her jewelry selling techniques.

"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.

Alex Cheng knew that his journey was going to be rough and long, filled with hardships and such, but he is determined to find his sister. He has been waiting for ten years, and at last, he will not wait any longer and take action. With his best friend Zi by his side, Alex will find the journey much more enjoyable and less lonely...with a friend like Zi, this journey will not feel like a journey at all.

二: A Test of Survival: Journey to the Temple

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[B] [C] Contents

Alex Cheng and Zi Lai have been friends for over nine years, and one can say they are best friends. Zi is one of the few that Alex can trust, especially during times of crisis. Being an expert in information gathering and stealth, Zi reports to Alex every bit of news that could lead to his sister's whereabouts. However, his sister's disappearance is most strange, for it is difficult to find her. Alex has been searching the city of Yi Ling for ten years straight, and one day, he heard from Zi that she could be in the Temple of Enlightenment.

Alex and Zi walked about the streets, taking one last look at their hometown before they set off on their journey.

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

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

"Then it is decided. Today it is my treat." said Alex.

"Really? You sure are in a good mood today."

Alex smiled. 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."

Just then, Hua looked at Alex, and he and his gang proceeded to walk towards the two men. "Hey, it is that punk from last time. How are ya doing, buddy?" He put his hand on Alex's shoulder.

Zi got worried, for Alex has a silent rage about him. Whenever he is about to fight seriously, he has that look in his eyes, something that Zi has seen before. And just now, Zi thought he saw that look in his eyes.

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 people want from me this time?"

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. Reward for capture: 5000 taels

"What the hell is this?!" he said in disbelief, staring at a detailed drawing of his own face. "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 taels on your head."

Suddenly, Alex figured it out. "It must be him..." It is no coincidence that the night before he was attacked by assassins, led by an imperial soldier. En Lo must have made a report to Duke Xiang. The Duke was after Li Cheng, Alex's sister, and since he cannot find her, has gone after Alex. Yet after all this time, he did make a wanted poster. So why now?

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 and cracked his fists.

"It is tempting but I will have to decline your offer." Alex crumbled the paper and threw it at Hua's face. While distracted, Alex charged and punched him on the cheek. *Pow*

The brutes drew their swords. Zi and Alex away. The brutes chased them like cat and mice. By the time Hua got up, his men were already on the chase. "Get those damn punks!" he shouted.

Alex and Zi ran through the crowded street, pushing the people who were 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!"

They did not want to slow down, because trouble awaits them if they do. While running, Zi pointed ahead. "Alex, the barn!"

"Right!"

They ran to the barn and jumped over the fence. The brutes, upon arriving at the fence, decided to approach the building slowly. They slowly crept their way to the entrance, their swords itching for some blood.

Suddenly, the door burst open and two horses came out, with Zi and Alex riding on each, and they crashed into the group of brutes. *Wham*

The horse whined and stood on its hind legs, as Alex pulled its reins. "Hyah! Hyah!"

The barn owner came running out. "Hey, don't steal my horses!"

"Sorry about that!" said Alex, throwing a bag of coins on the floor. Then he and Zi galloped away.

The owner, upon seeing a bag of gold coins, kneeled down and grabbed it immediately.

Once they assumed their safety, Zi and Alex looked at each other. "We could've used that money." said Zi, ever the greedy one.

"What good is the money to us in the forest?"

"Heh, I guess you're right. Hopefully no one else wants that 5000 tael bounty on your head."

"So, my head is worth that much, eh?" Alex said with a smirk on his face.

This is the first time Alex has smiled in a long time. Zi is relieved to see him smile; perhaps he is excited about the adventure, the journey into the unknown. Or perhaps he is finally going to find his sister. Alex Cheng has no idea if they will find her or not, but the mere idea of finding his sister is the one thing that brings joy to his life. After all, he has been searching for her for ten years, and today, he will finally take the step to track her down.

As Jade was preparing to close the store, she was carrying a box of jewelry. She tripped over something and dropped the box, and one diamond fell out and cracked on the floor. Jade picked up the pieces and stared in awe. "Oh no."

Jade's grandmother, an elderly lady wearing a hood, came to her. "What is the matter?"

"This is supposed to be a good luck charm. Now it's broken...I'm afraid it could be an ill omen for Alex..."

"Don't worry too much, Jade." said her grandmother. "Alex Cheng is a reliable man. He is with Zi, so they will be fine."

"I hope so." she replied.

Once the travelers left the border of Yi Ling, they assumed they were safe. However, the danger has only become for them. They have traveled in the Xiyang forest for three days now, and they never expected their trip to be this hard. Zi and Alex already used up half their food supply. The sweltering sun only added to their hardship.

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.

"Man. I can't believe we're doing all this for a woman we haven't met yet." said Zi.

"I never asked you to come with me." Alex replied coldly.

"Oh come on, don't be like that. I thought we were pals?"

"Complaining will get us nowhere."

"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..."

2 - B Title 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...considering all the unfair laws that he has passed. But I think when she said it, she meant something else. 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." said Zi. "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? Smuggling drugs? Or something worse?"

Alex grunted. "I could give a damn what he is doing behind closed doors. That bastard is responsible for my sister's disappearance, and he sent someone to kill me and Jade the other day. He is also the one who put the bounty on me. He is responsible for everything...and one day I will bring him to justice...by putting his head on a silver platter."

"I understand how you feel, but I never saw you as the violent type."

"Zi...how is our progress?"

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

"How did you figure that out?"

"I am merely doing an estimate. 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 when he does this it is pointless to talk to him.

As they continued to travel, Alex looked to his left and saw tall mountains. "Hey Zi, why don't we go through those mountains? It is a shorter way through the Xiyang 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 between the mountains?" Alex asked.

"Go take that path if you do not value your life."

"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 hunts his prey."

"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. Surely, you have heard of this legend, right?"

"Yes," Alex said. "When I was young, my parents used to tell me this story to scare me. The God of War is a fearsome swordsman whose name brings fear to even the strongest of men. Some say he is not a man, but a demon with a sword."

"I'm glad you know." Zi replied.

"But his existence is only a rumor, correct?"

"Alex, rumors exist for a reason. The War God has actually slain hundreds of swordsman 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 ahead.

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."

As the journey went on, the horses were tired from running, and must walk slowly. Although it was not their first trip outside of Yi Ling, they have never traveled through the wilderness for this length of time. Alex Cheng did not have the time to make the proper preparations for this trip. If he had stayed in Yi Ling for another day longer, there could be a dozen bounty hunters on his trail.

The only real guiding device they had was a map, but the map will not prepare them for the 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's horse just happened 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.

Duke Xiang was rather upset tonight as he stared at the scroll on the table angrily. This scroll's contents consist of the new law that was rejected by the king. This is the second one that has been rejected this month, and he grew impatient. He slammed his fist on the table.

"Ugh...damn Liu Bei...who does he think he is?" Xiang said to himself. "My influence over him is becoming less and less effective...ever since he married that woman...he has been infatuated with her. She must have been telling him to listen to the other eunuchs instead of me." He grabbed the gem on his necklace and stared at it.

"Nonetheless...the plan must continue. I will have to take a risk, so it seems. Perhaps I should start with Lord Lee."

Indeed, Xiang and Lee had a bad history. Their encounter earlier today was proof that Lee will only get in his way. Removing Lee from existence will surely make his life much more headache free...perhaps he should do something unexpected. Xiang smiled wickedly as he stared at a painting of Lee.

At night time, the soldiers set up tents at the camp. En Lo was looking at a map of the Xizang area. Lanterns and candles were there to provide light.

En Lo was looking at a map of the Xizang province. "Hmmm, according to their direction, our targets are heading towards the Xiyang 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 a threat to us."

"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 Xiyang 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.

2 - C Title Contents

Alex and Zi reached a river that was not on the map. The map they bought is the most accurate one they could find, but unfortunately, all maps are only an estimate of the shape of the land, they are not entirely accurate. "There's a river." said Alex.

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

"Cross this river? It's too deep. We can't do it with our horses."

"Then we will have to get off them." 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."

"We have no choice. Let us not waste any more time." Zi hopped off his horse. Thud.

Because they could not find the ends of the river, Alex came to the sad realization that he has to abandon his horse and walk by foot.

"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." said Alex.

"Betsy?"

"I name all horses Betsy."

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

The two proceeded to cross the river, getting their pants wet in the process. There was nothing to dry it off but the sun's glittery rays. The forest grew thicker as they walked on, and traveling became more difficult, as their vision was blocked by trees. Zi took out his map every half hour or so, making sure they are on track.

Eventually, Alex and Zi reached a swamp-like area. To move ahead they must cross this marsh. The alligators swam about lazily. Some were sleeping, while 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 gentleman?"

"What kind of gentlemen runs across a river occupied by alligators?!"

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

They ran as fast as humanly possible with their feet hitting water. *Splish splash* splish splash. The alligators 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 like stepping stones. *Doosh doosh* He was already on the other side.

Splish splash "Ahh...ooh...eeeh." An alligator in front of him attacked. Alex drew his sword and slashed it. There was no time to hesitate, for there were more alligators coming from behind. Alex continued to run through the thick water and finally made it to land. He panted for breath.

"You made it." Zi said.

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

"I always did. You just never noticed because you were always busy focusing on your swordcraft."

"Really?" They continued walking into the woods. "Come to think of it, I never found out who your master is. Alex asked.

"That is not important." Zi retorted.

"You know, there are a lot of things I do not know about you, Zi. You never talk about your past much."

"Oh? As opposed to someone who lives in the past?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" asked Alex.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"You never told me about your parents...or anything of the sort."

"We can talk about that another time. We are better off discussing how to get to the Temple." Zi said, walking ahead.

"Hey, 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; such as hot weather, perspiration, tiredness, and the countless 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 alright. 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."

"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."

Soldier B: "Maybe he's a demon!"

En Lo: "Fool! Even if he is a demon, he is one, 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 Lo said, leading his men down the doomed path.

Traveling without a horse can prove to be tiresome and Zi wanted to take a break. "Mannn, I am so tired. Let's take a break, Alex."

"We cannot afford to take a break. Stop being lazy and walk." Alex said, dragging his friend by the hand.

Little did they know, they were being watched by bandits from a distance. The leader of the group, Kiyang, grinned maliciously as he spied on them. When Alex and Zi went past a certain point, Kiyang signaled his men to follow him.

Suddenly Alex felt a jolt of pain on his stomach. "Uuugh."

"What is the matter?" asked his friend.

"My wound...it hurts."

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

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

"Too far." said a third voice.

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

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

Kiyang 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 call that a fair trade?" Zi said.

"Sorry, but no deal." Alex said.

Kiyang'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. *Schling* The bandits screamed and charged. "Yaahhhh!"

Alex and Zi clashed swords with the first few that attacked them. *Clang* They slashed the thieves and more came to attack them. Zi and Alex decided to run, as per

their usual tactic, but the thieves were just as fast, if not faster than they were. Zi turned around to face the thieves.

"Go ahead."

"But..." said Alex, hesitating.

"Don't worry about me, just go!"

Reluctant, Alex ran away, leaving his companion behind. Kiyang raised his arm, signaling half his men to go after Alex.

Zi slashed a bandit and jumped back to a safe distance. The thieves screamed and charged at him.

"There's no way I am going to let you kill me. Not here, not now." Zi said, smiling.

Alex ran until he reached the end of a cliff, and beneath the cliff was a water fall. Kiyang and ten of his men approached him.

"Heh, there is no escape, boy. Just hand over your money." said Kiyang.

"Hmph. Am I going to die here...without even finding my sister?"

Kiyang gave the signal and two of his men charged forward. Alex dodged their attack and slashed them both. *Slash*

Alex felt another jolt of pain on his stomach and grabbed his wound. "Ugh...not now."

Kiyang: "You came here injured? You have a lot of guts, boy. Hyah!" He slashed and Alex blocked. *Clang* Kiyang kicked him in the chin, knocking him down.

Now Alex was standing on the very edge of the cliff.

"Just give up this futile fight. You are not stupid enough to jump down there."

Alex Cheng smiled. "You don't know me very well."

"What?" said Kiyang, grunting.

Alex took a leap down. The bandits ran to the edge. The cliff was so high that they did not even hear the splashing sound when Alex hit the water.

"He must be suicidal. He actually jumped!" said one of the bandits.

"It is no loss for us." said Kiyang. "He did not look like he had much money. Considering the height of the fall, and the fact that he is injured, he has no chance of surviving. C'mon." The mountain thieves left.

While submerged in the water, Alex thought this was truly the end of him. His body was too weak to even move, his eyes saw nothing but the blurriness of the river. His eyes slowly closed, but then opened when he saw his sister before him. Indeed – it was the angelic face of Li Cheng, his missing sister; the one he has been seeking for nearly a decade. Alex did not know if it was real or not, but the only itself was motivating enough for him to keep living.

With his last bit of strength, he moved his arms and swam up, all the way up towards the light.

Moments later, Alex's head popped out of the water and he gasped for breath. Never did he thought he could survive a fall of that latitude. 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. Alex, once he reached land, crawled himself away from the water and just laid still.

His clothes were soaked with blood from multiple wounds. He still has not recovered from the blow En Lo dealt him back in the city, and thanks to the bandits, he has new wounds to worry about. On top of that, he was separated with his best friend Zi, and he could be dead at this moment. There was no time to even worry about his friend; he must first worry about his own survival.

As Alex was resting, 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 that circled her limbs. Her face was as white as snow, as is her body. Her hair was long, silky and black, and there seemed to be sparkles coming from her face. Alex thought he must be dreaming, considering the mental state he is in, it would not be surprising if this was a hallucination.

The spirit continued to play the horn as if he injured man was not there.

"Help me..." he muttered weakly, his hand reaching for her. "I've been attacked by bandits."

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 fooling 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 were better than nothing. He crawled to the bandages and began applying them onto his wounds.

Alex Cheng sat against the nearest tree he could find and rested. He needs to regain his strength before he should even move. As for his companion, his whereabouts are unknown. Hopefully Zi escaped the attack of the bandits and is on his way looking for Alex. Certainly, there is a possibility he can be dead, but if Alex knows his best friend, being the clever one that he is, will not die so easily.

His mind wandered back to the woman or spirit he just met. Was she really one of the rumored forest spirits? He heard from folklore about these spirits – usually they're female – and they're playful and mischievous. Only a few people ever get to see them since these spirits always run away. It is considered good luck if you run into one, so should Alex thank his luck, that this spirit gave him these bandages?

Night time fell upon the forest, and Alex has learned from his journey that it gets cold at night, despite how hot it is during the day. He was extremely tired and in pain, desiring to sleep, for he will forget about his pain while unconscious. However, the thought of someone attacking him in his sleep kept him awake. Eventually, after a few hours, realizing that nothing is going to attack him, he fell into a deep slumber.

As planned, En Lo and his men were passing through the Xiyang 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.

"See men, we are still fine." said En Lo confidently. "There is no such thing as a War God. I do not buy into that non-sense. It is nothing more than a rumor!"

"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, and as a result, a hidden rope caught his ankle and pulled him up, tying him upside down from a tree branch.

"Aaaaah! Help!"

Everyone paid attention to him.

"What the? Help him down."

A bunch of arrows came from nowhere and hit the man who was upside down. He did not have a chance to scream before dying. The other soldiers panicked.

"It must be him...the legendary killer!" said one of them, shaking nervously underneath his armor.

"We are doomed!"

"Do not panic! We must stay together!" En commanded.

A man in a straw hat appeared behind En Lo. After feeling his presence En Lo turned around, but no one was there. The image of the same man in a straw hat appeared elsewhere, and the soldiers, seeing him, panicked and pointed their spears forward.

That is impossible, En thought. How can anyone move his fast? Could this person be a demon? The image of the warrior continued to appear in various places. Suddenly, two soldiers screamed as they were slashed on the neck. "Ugh!" "Aaah"

This made the rest of the group panic more.

"How is this possible?" En Lo mumbled to himself while staying on alert. Suddenly, the answer came to him. *(There is more than one of them! So that is how he is*

doing it...this is the trick of the so called War God?) "Everybody stay together!" En Lo shouted.

Unfortunately, most of them were not able to hear him, as they were fighting the attackers. *Slish! Slash* More of them were killed, and the men panicked.

"Stop! We must regroup!" En Lo shouted in vain. Only those who were near him heard his words, and they stayed together. Those who strayed too far off the main group became lamb for the slaughter for the warriors in straw hats.

Two particular troops ran through the woods, fearing for their lives. Two of the straw hat warriors landed in front of them, and they were trembling all over. The troops charged forward, and the straw hats jumped and slashed their heads, killing them instantly.

En Lo found himself in a desperate situation, one which he was not prepared for. (So this is how they confuse you!) He pointed at one of the straw hats, and said, "Everyone attack him now!"

The troops obeyed and charged towards their target. Suddenly, En Lo was intercepted by the real War God. He froze at first, but he stood in fighting stance. "You're not real." said the imperial, still in denial of his situation, "There is no such thing as a War God."

The War God, without saying a word, got into fighting stance. They charged. *Clang* After several hits, En Lo's sword was shaking, as well as his arms. Now he truly realized the strength of his opponent.

The group of soldiers went after their target, but their target ran away, making them pursue him. One of the soldiers fell into a pit, and unfortunately died from falling into spikes.

Another one was caught in a rope trap, and he was hung upside down, making him easy to kill. The straw hat jumped and slashed him.

En Lo grew more frustrated and impatient, watching his men die in vain. "This can't be happening!" he said, sweating heavily.

Only four of his guards remain, and he stood in the middle of them. They pointed their spears forward at the enemy. The four War Gods appeared, approaching slowly from all sides.

(Damn it, is he really the War God?) thought En Lo.

One of the guards panicked and charged forward by himself. "Yaaaah!"

"No!" screamed En Lo.

When he came into contact with the enemy, he stabbed.

"Argh! Listen men, do not fear them." said En, still trying to control the situation. "We can still win this. There is only one War God, the rest of them are frauds. The real one is that one." He said, pointing. "We all attack him, understand?"

"Y-Yes sir." they replied hesitantly.

The four men charged forward valiantly. The War God slashed the first two and they fell to the ground. The other two panicked and ran away.

"Damn cowards!" En Lo shouted. Now he was alone, facing off with the straw hat warrior. "Wait a minute...can't we talk about this? You want money don't you? I have plenty of it!"

"All those who enter the Valley of Death shall die." said the War God. "There are no exceptions."

En charged recklessly and attacked. *Swipe* *Clang* The War God slashed him in the knee and kicked him in the stomach. *Thud*

En Lo fell on the ground and he saw a skull lying next to him and gasped. That skull was one of the War God's previous victims, and En Lo will become just like him. Now somewhat delirious at his situation, he actually laughed out loud. "Ha ha ha! War

God? What a joke? You're just a mass murderer!" He charged and clashed swords with the War God while the other masked warriors watched.

Slish En Lo was cut on the stomach, and he fell down. As the War God approached his victim, preparing to make the final strike, his sword turned red and within seconds, became embodied in fire. Seeing the sword catch fire, En Lo realized who his opponent is. "You're...you're Master Genzo...one of the Four Brothers!"

As he uttered those words, his neck was cut and blood oozed out of his wound, and thus, his lifeless body collapsed.

The three masked warriors jumped away, vanishing into the trees. The War God blood 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*

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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."

The bear walked away, disappointed. Alex decided that it's time move from this spot, since the adult bears might be lurking around.

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 was beginning to have doubts about his journey. Perhaps he did waste his life away, as Zi said. There is more to life than trying to solve the mystery of his long lost sister.

Alex shook his head, telling those thoughts to go away. (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 was tailing him and it was catching up. Alex turned around while running and saw that the tiger was faster than he was. Realizing that he cannot outrun the animal, Alex stopped and turned around.

He drew his sword and he and the tiger were facing each other, standing a few paces away. Alex's heartbeat increased rapidly as he found himself facing off with a predator of the wild. He had no experience fighting a tiger, nor was he in a condition to do so.

The tiger roared and bit the sword. *Chomp* Alex tried to shake it off but it had no intention of letting go. Still struggling, Alex punched the animal in the face. Finally, it released the blade. Alex slashed one of its legs, and the tiger growled in pain.

Alex continued to stand in fighting position, and the look in his eyes showed that he was not willing to give up, despite being wounded. The tiger 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 of here."

"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 soldiers."

"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 stabbed in the chest by surprise. The Duke held up his necklace, and the demon jewel glowed.

"No!! Forgive me sir!"

"It is too late for forgiveness." The jewel flashed and began to suck the half-dead soldier's life away.

"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.

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 is a waste of time, as it will not help his wounds heal faster.

He saw a tall wall-like structure ahead. "What is this?" Upon closer inspect, it appeared to be man-made. "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, the ground was shaking, making Alex worried. Yet he was also excited about what was on the other side. 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 erect.

Alex walked along the path, humming happily. His joy ended 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 is going on?" He unchained himself and stood up.

The statues approached, drawing their swords. Alex stepped back, his hand eager to draw his weapon. There was no time to find out why these statues want to hurt him, he has yet again found himself in a dangerous situation.

The statues' eyes glowed in anger. Their 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 Alex, 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. With the little time he had left, Alex grabbed the loose chain and tied it around the first statue's leg. With the other end of the chain, he tied it around the second statue's arm, and stepped back. Being bound together, the statues were clumsy and fell on top of one another.

With this chance 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 good for someone who has to travel alone in the wilderness. Hopefully, his journey from here on will be an easier one.

After much walking, Alex Cheng saw a sign that was written in a language that he did not understand. Alex was certain that the sign leads to the Temple; he was never so certain of anything in his life, as his instincts and feelings told him as such. The sign had an arrow that points to the left, thus Alex 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 in the said legend.

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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 is between two large columns. Alex's heart was beating rapidly as he walked up the stairs. As he entered the main entrance, he saw a big empty field, obviously a training ground. The field was surrounded by old buildings, dating to at least 300 years old.

A group of youngsters were training diligently in the background. Some of them held bamboo sticks and fought one another. In another corner, one monk was teaching his peer how to hold a bamboo stick.

Alex wanted to approach them, but for some reason he just stood and watched, as if content just looking at them. A certain trio who were not training noticed the stranger standing at the entrance with a dumbfounded look on his face.

Chan, a bulgy and muscular monk over six feet tall, approached Alex first. His tall and strong appearance has been advantageous to him in many fights.

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

"I..."

"We do not welcome outsiders here."

"Who is in charge here" Alex asked. "I need to speak with your leader."

"Are you a bandit? We do not tolerate thieves here." 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.

Alex 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 so she can have a closer look.

"Hmmm. It is nicely carved, but it is very ordinary. There is nothing special about it."

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

"Yes, I traveled a long way here." 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 Zu**. Pleasure to meet you." She shook his hand.

"I am **Fu Chen**," replied the short monk.

"And my name is **Chan Lou**," replied the tall one.

"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. "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 thus, Guan Du took him to the various parts of the temple, beginning with the training grounds.

"Welcome to the Temple of Enlightenment, Cheng. We welcome all outsiders and treat them like our own people. The temple has been established for approximately 300 years, it is three centuries old. Our teachings, however, are as old as civilization itself. The original founders of our group were persecuted during Chao Dynasty. Our founders were prohibited from practicing religion, which the people judged as witchcraft or sorcery, and even black magic. They were treated as if they were demons of the lowest level."

"Amazing..." Cheng replied.

"The temple's founders developed a way to heal our bodies faster than medicine and science can. Some people call it a miracle, but for us it is our way of life. Our location is very difficult to find because we do not want people to expose our secrets. For years at a time, we might not have a single visitor, but those who search deep enough will find us. I believe you came here because you want to know our secrets, correct?"

"Uhh, yes," replied he reluctantly. Cheng did not want to mention the real reason he is here, not yet.

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 area." 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 are born and raised here and die here. A few of us were once outsiders, they came here with injuries that no doctor can heal. But we were able to heal them, and through time, they became stronger with our training. Once they come here, they do not wish to leave after 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."

After walking down the hallway, Alex spoke up. "Master Guan, I have yet to tell you the reason why I came. I did not come for the temple's secrets, but..."

"Oh?"

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

"Your sister?" Guan replied with a blank expression.

"Yes, we separated when I was only ten years old, and I have not seen her since. My sources tell me that she came here to the Temple of Enlightenment to run away from the law. Her name is 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?"

"When I heard that she came to this very temple, I left my home and traveled very far to come 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. "Li **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 where, 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 to find out..." Suddenly, he felt a jolt of pain on his stomach. "...that she has been in Yi Ling all along..." His other wounds began to get the better of him. "Ughh..." 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!"

"What?!" Xiang shouted, banging his fist on the table. "En Lo and his men were all killed by the War God?"

The soldier was kneeling. "Yes my lord. I saw everything. I am even lucky to escape with my life."

"Indeed, you have done well." Xiang said.

"Thank you, Honorable Duke Xiang."

"You are a brave soldier, so I shall give reward you for your services." Xiang took a knife from his sleeve. "Indeed, you shall be compensated..."

The soldier looked up. *Slash* He was stabbed in chest. "Ugh! Duke..." The soldier fell to the floor, blood oozing out of his wound.

"Your reward is to join En Lo in hell!" The Duke held up his necklace, and the demon jewel glowed.

"No! Forgive me sir!"

The jewel flashed and began to suck out the man's life.

"Nooooooooo!"

Xiang smiled wickedly as the jewel sucked out whatever was left in the fallen soldier's life, while he screamed helplessly. His skin withered away and he grew old within minutes. Eventually, his body disintegrated and only bones remained.

Flash The jewel stopped glowing. "Hmph. Another soul added to my collection. And that means my life has increased by another ten years." He threw a handkerchief over the corpse's face.

The table where he hit started to crack.

四: The Temple's 300 Year Old Secret

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His vision was blurry during the first few seconds of consciousness. Then he saw two bald people, and after his vision cleared up, he saw Guan Du and an old monk staring at him.

"Uhhh..."

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

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

"A whole day."

"I've wasted much time already."

"We have treated your wounds." said **Chie Du**, the other monk. Like the others, he was bald, but he was older than most. He had a short, white beard and a white mustache, and he keeps his eyes closed most of the time. Nobody really knows why; some think that he has bad vision, but others think that he does it on purpose. "I am afraid you have some deep cuts on your body. Have you been fighting a lot lately?"

"Um yes. The trip to this temple wasn't exactly smooth." Alex replied.

"I see. Many died trying to find this temple. You should consider yourself lucky that you are still alive. Your wounds should be better now. But we still need to train you on how to heal yourself."

"Heal myself?"

"Remember when I said 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 benefit you for your whole life."

"Okay." Cheng said weakly. "I'll leave it up to you."

"Well, gosh, he's finally awake." Zi said, coming into the room.

Alex was completely shocked. "Zi!! You're alive!"

"Of course I am you big dope. Those bandits were too weak to kill me."

"Thank goodness. I thought you didn't make it."

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

"You should get some rest." Guan and his assistant left the room.

When morning came, Guan took Alex to the healing center. Along the way, another monk came in the opposite direction. Appearance-wise, he was different than the others; his robe touched the floor as he walked about. His white beard was long enough to reach his stomach, and he wore a pearl necklace. This man had a presence about him that made Alex feel uncomfortable.

Guan knelt immediately. "**Master Ho Sai.**"

Alex stood there stupidly, and then knelt.

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

"Who was that?"

"Idiot." He hit Alex on the head.

"Ouch."

"That is Master Ho Sai, the leader of The Temple, and the most powerful one amongst us. You'd better remember that. You must show him the utmost respect, and never, ever offend him."

"Oh." Alex said with a care free attitude. "But can I ask one thing? What makes him the most powerful?"

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

"Wow...really?"

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

Alex looked at Master Ho Sai as he walked about down the hallway. The other students greeted him, bowing with respect. If he truly does have these special powers, then he must know where Li Cheng is, Alex thought.

"Sit down." Guan Du instructed.

Alex did as he was told. He and Guan were sitting across from each other, on top of a piece of concrete. Chie and Zi were watching from the side.

"Today I am going to teach you how to meditate. First sit upright, crossed legs. Now close your eyes. Clear your mind."

Alex tried, but there were too many things in his mind.

"Do not think of anything." Guan said. "Do not think about women, or money, or alcohol, or any material possessions that you may have. Do not think of your sister, or anyone else that you care about deeply, nor anyone you have a grudge against. Forget about your anger and your hatred."

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

"Silence please. This is a delicate process." said Chie Du.

"Sorry."

Guan continued. "Now, your mind should be clear. Now I want you to see what I describe. You see nothing but a blank space. An empty void. Picture this in your mind. Picture a vast, black space, as big as the universe itself. There is nothing there but blackness. Absolutely nothing. Picture stars. Bright, glittering stars everywhere."

Millions of them - no billions - countless ones of them. They all shine so bright, if you look too close into it you will go blind."

Apparently, this was working. Alex's eyes twitched as he focused hard on the images that Guan was describing.

"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 that you see them. Concentrate. Feel that energy in the universe. It is everywhere. It is inside of you - it is in the very air you breathe."

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

Zi got curious now. [\(Is it really working?\)](#)

"You no longer feel pain. Your wounds are nothing to you - they will not get in the way of your goals. 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, Alex. Good. Good. Now keep doing it."

Half an hour passed. Alex woke up. "Huh...what the heck happened?"

Guan smiled. "Congratulations. You have successfully meditated."

"I did. Wow...so that's what meditation is. You know, for some reason I feel a little bit better now. It's the same when I wake up in the morning and get rush of energy. I feel so...rejuvenated." He touched his wound. "Ouch. But my body feels the same."

"Heh. Healing takes time, Alex. Now I want you to master this technique of meditating. Do it twice a day. In fact, you should meditate while you sleep; this saves you time."

"Understood, Master Guan."

Zi watched his friend's lit up face, and realized that meditation is the real deal after all. [\(Amazing. This is the power of the Temple of Enlightenment. These monks are the masters of the mind. They are using meditation to heal physical injuries. They know that it is the mind that heals. This is getting interesting...\)](#)

4 - B Title Contents

With only a dimly lit candle lighting the room, the Duke examined the piece of paper with names written on it. These were the names of the king's trusted officials, as well as the king himself, in the middle. He was looking at a particular name, that of one of the eunuchs, **Lord Huang**.

Knock knock

"Who is it?"

"It is me, Huang."

"Come in." said the Duke.

Huang came in and closed the door.

"Did anyone see you come here?"

"No, I am very careful, as you asked me to be." Huang replied.

"Good. By coming here, am I to assume that you are on my side?" asked the Duke.

"I am on the side that is most profitable." Huang replied. "I will offer you support as long as your plan is full proof. I do hope you are as smart as you claim to be, Duke Xiang."

"Rest assured, Lord Huang. If I am caught, you will never be suspected of being

an accomplice. You being one of the eunuchs of the court, lack power. But when I control King Liu, I will make it so that you are the most powerful eunuch in the court! How does that sound?"

"How many others are involved in your secret plan?"

"Enough for this to succeed." the Duke replied cleverly. "But our biggest obstacles are Lord Lee and General Chung. Once I eliminate them, controlling the king will be easy." He circled their corresponding names on paper.

"You are not planning on killing them, are you? Doing so will put you at greater risk."

"I have my ways of dealing with it. You just need to do your part, Huong."

"Then I take my leave." Huong closed the door behind him.

"Heh. Lord Huong, one of the eunuchs who are overshadowed by Lord Lee. He is a greedy warlord who wants more prestige and power. He is just a simple man waiting for the right opportunity, so his actions are easily predicted. All I have to do is get rid of my obstacles...and then I will have the whole kingdom in my hands." Then he burst into maniacal laughter.

Zi came to Alex's quarters to wake him up. When he opened the door, he was surprised to see that Alex was already awake and active, unlike back in Yi Ling, where Alex would sleep until the late morning. "Rise and shine. Oh, you're already awake. This is unlike you."

"It must be this place." said Alex. "It gives off a strange, yet comforting energy."

"Yes, I can feel it too. There is something holy about this place. Perhaps this is why they call it The Temple of Enlightenment."

"I would be enlightened if I knew where my sister is. Hey Zi, do you know anything about Master Ho Sai?"

"He's like the big kuhuna of this place." Zi replied. "Everyone respects him as he is the headmaster and he oversees everything. He inherited his position by being a descendant of the original founders."

"Master Guan told me that he is a psychic, one who can see the future. If he truly is psychic, then he knows where Li is."

"Oh, I see. But I do not think you can ask him freely. He lets only the masters talk to him. You are an outsider, so you may have to pull some ropes."

"I must ask him...one way or another."

"Please don't do anything stupid."

Alex smiled. "Never."

Later in the noon, Guan again helped Alex meditate. They went through the same process of keeping their eyes closed and keeping their minds crystal clear and focused on their breathing.

"Cheng, do you feel it?" said Guan. "The energy vibrating inside your body."

"Yes...I think so."

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

"Yes..."

Their bodies were glowing and Alex felt much lighter, like his body was made of feathers. He felt that his injuries were closing up, and subsequently, his body is healing little by little.

Zi was walking about the place, with his hands behind his head, whistling in a carefree manner. Shang saw him and proceeded to greet him. "Hey, are you Zi, one of the newcomers?"

"Umm, yes. And you?"

"My name is Shang. Can I ask you something? What is your purpose in coming here?"

"I'm here for the sake of my friend Alex."

"My, you are a good friend." said Shang.

He laughed. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"But since you are here, why don't you join our martial arts classes? You can become a student under chief instructor Guan Du. He will surely make you stronger."

"Well..."

"You and Alex are on a journey, correct? I heard you two barely escaped from 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 to let you know, it will not be easy. Training will be vigorous and rough." said she.

"Heh, that's my middle name!" Zi replied.

It has already been an hour into the meditation, and Alex opened one eye to peak. "Master Guan? Master Guan?" There was no response from him, for he was already in the deepest stages of his meditation. Alex got on his feet as quietly as possible, and walked out of the room. As he traversed throughout the hallway, he crept like a ninja, looking left and right for whoever might see him.

He crept into Ho Sai's room and saw the old sage in meditating position. It is not his usual style to do this, but there is a question he must ask.

"Ah-hem. Master Ho Sai? It is me, Alex Cheng, the new guy." 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 unforeseen knowledge about the world? Are you really able to predict the future and see images of the past?"

"Yes. You want information about your sister, am I correct?" asked the old man.

Alex was shocked. "Uhhh...yes you are right. You truly are wise. I cannot hide anything from you."

"Unfortunately I cannot give you that information."

"What? Why?"

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

"I do not understand this universal force...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 Master Ho Sai." He grabbed Alex and dragged him away."

"Please, tell me!!" Alex cried out.

"I am so sorry about this, Master. I will properly discipline him."

Ho Sai continued meditating as they made a ruckus.

Guan successfully dragged Alex out of the room. "What do you think you're 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. "Yeah, understood."

Alex slept uncomfortably at night. He had the same dream that haunted him since he was a child, but this time, he dreamt about the events that happened after Li's disappearance.

"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.

Alex Cheng, now separated from his parents, walked in the darkness alone. He was only a child of ten years or so, and being the first time away from his family, was frightened. His family was not here, and he did not where to go, and he just wanted to find a place to rest.

A silhouetted figure of man stood at the other end of the street, and he was carrying a sword patch. Alex knew that this stranger had bad intentions, and he grew weary. Lightning struck, revealing the man's features for a split second. Suddenly, the man charged forward and drew his sword, and Alex quickly drew his weapon.

Slash Alex fell to the ground, with blood oozing out of his right arm. "Ugh!! Aaaaah!!" The pain was unbearable, too much for a child of his age. He lied there, helpless and weak, with the rain hitting his face.

As the assassin approached him, Alex thought that it was the end of his short life. Suddenly, a shuriken hit the ground.

"Leave him alone!" shouted a child's voice from the rooftop.

Surprised, Alex looked up to see someone willing to defend him. Zi leaped down from the roof and drew his sword. "Let's go."

The assassin stared at the child, but as the moments pass, he ran away. Zi quickly hurried over to the fallen child, offering his hand. "Hey, are you okay?"

Alex woke up and yawned lazily. He looked across the room to see Zi sound asleep. Alex smiled as he was looking at the one who saved his life back then. It was so long ago, yet it felt like yesterday that event happened. They have become friends ever since Zi saved him.

He proceeded to pull up his shirt and check his stomach. To his surprise, his wound has healed dramatically. This is indeed a miracle of the Temple of Enlightenment. Eventually, Alex will be able to train again, and become stronger so that he can accomplish his mission.

4 - C Title Contents

Chie was talking quietly with Master Guan Du. "Sir, what do you think of our new comer, Cheng Alex?"

"Hmm, he's okay. He came all the way here looking for his sister. It takes quite while to travel here from Yi Ling. He has been through a long and dangerous journey."

"Those wounds are from mountain bandits?" Chie asked.

"Yes. These bandits increase in numbers all the time. They are outcasts of society, and will attack anybody that passes by." Guan replied.

Chie touched his beard. "Alex is making remarkable improvements in his body. We have seen people heal amazingly fast, but Alex is an exception amongst them, isn't he?"

Guan smiled. "Yes, he reminds me of Li Cheng."

"Yes, I remember her. She was quite the fireball, if I do say so myself. Although his body is improving, there is one wound that does not seem to be healing."

"You mean the one on his right arm, near the shoulder?"

"Yes." Chie confirmed.

"That is not a recent wound, brother." Guan said.

The monk opened one of his eyes. "Ohh."

"We use meditation and special natural herbs to heal flesh wounds. They work extremely well on recent ones. But old wounds take a little bit longer. The scar on Cheng's arm has been there for many years now."

"Oh I see."

"Cheng...I see a lot of potential in that man. He is an average swordsman, but he could be better...a lot better. That wound on his arm is keeping him from reaching his potential."

"Full potential, you say?"

"Surely. Because of the serious damage on his triceps, he is unable to extend his arm to a certain length, along with other physical limitations. If that wound were to heal...he'd reach full power...and if he were to hold a sword then..."

Alex walked by the outer hallways. His sleeves were rolled up, and the stitched up wound mentioned by Guan was clearly visible.

"Then...he'd make a great swordsman." Guan said. "And I have a feeling that he is meant to do big things."

"How do you suppose?" Chie asked.

"It's just a gut feeling I have about this boy." Guan replied. "And I'm never wrong about my students."

During the break, Alex and Zi loitered by the balcony. Although Zi planned on getting to know the other monks better, these two friends still tend spent a lot of time together.

"So, any luck with the grandmaster Ho Sai?" Zi inquired.

"No, but I am going to ask him again." Alex replied, staring at the ground.

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

"I don't care. I have to find out where my sister is, one way or another."

"Well, I know it's pointless to stop you. It's your choice." Zi is speaking from experience, because knowing Alex in the past, once he has made up his mind, he will not change it easily.

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

"Yeah." Zi took a bite into the apple in his palm.

"How are the classes?"

"It's great man. I can't believe how many cute chicks there are. There's Shang Zu, and then there's Yi, and of course Yang."

Alex sighed. "You never change."

"Heh." He nudged Alex on the arm. "C'mon, you agree that some of these girls are good looking, don't you? 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. Then you'll regret it in your senior years not enjoying your youth."

"I don't have time to worry about these things." Alex replied.

"Sometimes I wonder, Alex. You don't like to talk about women. Are you interested in men?"

Alex looked at him with a shocked expression. "What?"

"Just kidding! Remember, lighten up." Zi threw the apple core and caught it with his mouth, and subsequently swallowed the whole thing.

Master Ho Sai walked gracefully about through the inner halls. Alex was hiding behind a column, waiting for him to come, and then came out. He bowed politely.

"Master Ho Sai."

"You again?"

"I humbly thank you for being my presence. There is no greater honor in the world than to be in the same temple, breathing the same air as your highness."

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

Alex grew angry that his plan did not succeed. "Why won't you tell me?"

"I have already explained it to you. I will not repeat myself?"

"Please, sir! I need to know!"

"No." He walked past Alex.

Alex knelt on the floor. "Please, I just want to know where she is. I have been searching for her for ten years. I came all the way from Yi Ling to the Temple of Enlightenment after hearing news about her being here. But it turns out that she is not here, and I have to start searching from scratch. I spent most of my life looking for her, and right now you are the only one who knows where she is. I beg of you, tell me."

Ho Sai sighed. It seems that this young man's humbleness and persistence has touched him. "Young man, I have seen many things in my life; I came across many people just like yourself; those who are on a quest for something. They are always hasty, taking action and not thinking things through. The end result is their demise. If you do not want to end up the same way, I suggest to listen to my words."

He continued walking, Alex followed, until they reached the highest floor of the building. Ho Sai stared at the sky. "I do not know why I was born with such abilities - the ability to know things - as I know that you would come before you even came. I know you are going to ask about your sister before you even open your mouth. I even know your parent's names and what year they were born in. I honestly do not know why God gave me the gift of unforeseeable knowledge. And it is not the future that I see; they are the images of a possible future. Perhaps I am the lucky star, born at the right time at the right place. God chose me to have these gifts...it is both a blessing and a curse.

"Do you understand, Cheng? Knowing everything is not necessarily a good thing. Sometimes I foresee a good event happening, and I look forward to it. But other times, I foresee a bad event, and no matter how I wish it would 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. It is not the heavens, nor 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? If you continue down this path, you will die before ever seeing Li Cheng. What good will it be to you?"

Alex was stunned by this man's speech, as expected of a sage like him. "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." He 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 train very, very hard. Then I will show you what a true swordsman I am." Alex lifted his head up, and stared directly into Ho Sai's eyes.

Ho Sai was shocked as he stared into Cheng's eyes. They were the eyes of fire and passion, burning passion that resides in oneself. He never saw anyone with such fire, such desperation, such determination...except for one other person. One just like Alex.

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, not blinking. Her hands were folded together in a bowing position. That little girl was Li Cheng, Alex's sister. Ho Sai touched his beard. "We shall see." he said, then walked away.

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

At midnight, the Imperial Palace was silent as a cemetery. Crickets chirped. Everyone was sound asleep. Inside a certain building, however, two men were not sleeping.

Xiang made his move. "Heh." He took two pieces of his opponent's away from the board.

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

"Heh. The object of this 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." He made his move.

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

"Argh. Anyways, let us get down to business. What do you want from me?"

"My, Lord Lee, can you not consider that I just want to play territory with you. Must I want something from you?"

"If you want to play territory why would you invite me in the middle of the night? Besides, we have never played before. Don't you think that makes you suspicious?"

"Lord Lee, people think that Liu Bei is a good king. But in fact he is a weak king and his authority is mediocre. Many of the court officials are unhappy with this situation." Xiang made his move on the board.

Lee looked up. "The king promotes peace and tranquility. If someone else were king we'd be plunged into war. We should be thankful for the prosperity he has given us."

"But have you considered that some people prosper even during war?" Xiang asked.

"I do not understand what you are getting at, Duke Xiang." said Lee. "I do not know why you invited me here at this time of night. I also do not understand why you secretly enlisted so many soldiers into the army in a given period of time."

Xiang looked at him suspiciously. "Oh, you know?"

"Do not take me for an idiot. General Chung knows this too. You have quite the reputation for scheming, my duke. Is it possible that you are planning a rebellion?"

The look in the Duke's eyes have changed. He no longer needed to act. "Ha ha ha ha. You have it all figured out, don't you?"

"I also had a feeling that you wanted to kill me tonight. But luckily I am smarter than you. My bodyguards are outside waiting for me. The second you try anything, they will charge in and arrest you."

"Oh? Is that so?"

Lee's men were waiting outside the perimeter. A silhouetted figure ran through the bushes silently, unbeknownst to the guards. The assassin's movements were swift enough to be undetected, even when he was behind one of the guards. *Slish* He stabbed the guard in the neck. The other guards saw the assassin, who was wearing a ninja outfit, and attacked. *Slish* *Slash*

When Lee heard the screams, he grew nervous. "What is going on?"

The Duke had a wicked smile on his lips. "You thought that I did not know you had your guards ready, Lee? How naïve you are. You did not anticipate that I hired an assassin to dispose of them?"

Lee stood up. "You!"

The Duke took out a knife from his sleeve and threw it at Lee's chest. "Arggggh!" Lee fell, slamming his hand on the game board, and all the game pieces fell off. He crawled away, and then took out a knife from his pocket. "You traitorous dog!"

"I am afraid I cannot allow you to do that." The Duke took out his demon jewel and it began to glow a greenish color. "You were able to see through my plan, but unfortunately, it is too late for you. But I will tell you one thing even you do not know. I am a demon in disguise."

Lee's eyes widened. "You...you..."

The jewel sucked the life out of Lee, and his flesh rotted into his bones. Eventually, only his skeleton remained.

Alas, it is another soul that Xiang successfully absorbed; and he has gained another ten years of life, and one step closer to releasing his demon form.

The ninja assassin snuck into the room and closed the door behind him. He removed his mask, revealing the face of a middle-aged man with a mustache.

"Good job, Tsu."

"Thank you, Honorable Duke Xiang." replied he.

"Lee has already fallen. Once my plan succeeds, you will no longer need to live in the shadows. You will be General Chung's replacement...due to his untimely death."

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The Duke walked over to his mirror and waved the demon jewel in front of it. The mirror responded to the jewel and the reflection of the Duke was beginning to become distorted. His image became a wave-like appearance, like that of looking into a reflection in water, and his face in the mirror became a silhouetted figure.

"Ah," said the voice in the mirror. "Kor'Shengan...or shall I say the Honorable Duke Xiang."

"Forgive me, my lord, I wanted you to contact you sooner," said Xiang, "But I had much business to attend to."

"How is your progress?" asked the silhouetted face.

"Things are going well. I was able to bribe some of the eunuchs to get them on my side. I also got rid of that pest, Lee. With him out of the way, I no longer have to worry about the supports of the king, since he was their main influence. All I have to do is get rid of the next pest, the general, and the next phase of my plan will be initiated."

"Do you require the help of Ko-Ragnarok?"

"No, I can do this by myself. I will prove to you, my **Demon King**, that I can take over the kingdom without any help. I will have the king at my finger tips." Xiang replied.

"Very well then. Keep me informed of your progress."

"As you wish, Demon King."

The face in the mirror faded away, and it became normal again, showing the reflection of Xiang.

As agreed, General Chung came to the rooftop of the said meeting place. Xiang was waiting for him there. "I came as you requested, Duke. What is with all the secrecy?"

"Ah, General Chung, I need you to come with me." The Duke opened latch on the roof and began to walk down the ladder.

"Hold on. I am not coming with you until you tell me what this is about." said Chung.

"This is an urgent matter. I will explain once we go downstairs."

"I am not coming down until you tell me first."

(Heh, Chung, you are as cautious as always. But no matter what I am going to get you.) "General, we have been allies for so many years. Is it possible that you do not trust me?"

"Should I trust someone with your reputation? My time is precious, tell me what you wish to discuss, or I will leave."

"This is about Lord Lee's disappearance." Xiang replied, luring the bait.

"Certainly you have noticed too, have you not?"

(Lord Lee? Aren't you the one who is responsible for this? Why are you bringing it up to me? Could it be that you are not the one behind this?)

"I know someone who may be of help to us. But if you wish to brush this incident off, then that is fine by me." Xiang continued to walk down the ladder.

Now Chung was confused and curious at the same time. "This had better not be a waste of time, Duke." He decided to brush off his doubts and climb down the ladder. In the middle of his climb, one of the rungs broke, and he slid down and fell. *Crash*

"Blast it!" cried the angry general.

Suddenly, a stranger with a blade attacked him, and he quickly dodged.

Whoosh Unfortunately, the fall broke his leg, and consequently, his movements were hindered. The assassin stabbed Chung in the stomach, pushing the blade all the way until it came out of his back. Then the assassin took the blade out, letting Chung fall down. "Ughhh...aaah!"

Duke Xiang walked in front of Chung.

"Uuugh. Duke, help me!"

"Oh, I will help you..." Xiang said, holding a sword. "...Go to another world!"

As Chung stared at Xiang's evil face, he understood everything. Xiang was responsible for everything, his suspicions were correct.

Before the meeting, Xiang used a saw to weaken one of the ladder's rungs and marked it with paint, so he would recognize it and not step on it.

Chung should have trusted his own instincts, but he fell for the trap, and now, it has cost him his life.

Slash! Blood splattered all over the place.

Xiang took out his demon 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!"

An advisor came to his majesty's side to whisper something into his ear. He was not pleased, judging by the grimace on his face. "General Chung has been missing for two days...first Lee, and now Chung." Liu Bei said angrily.

Lord Yu stepped forward. "Sire, the biggest suspect is Duke Xiang. No one else would do such a thing but him. He is always scheming and doing things without authorization."

Liu Bei hesitated and touched his beard. "What would he want from those two?"

"Nobody knows precisely what Xiang is thinking. Who knows, those two could already be dead? I suggest that the Duke be arrested."

"I concur." said the king. "He has gone too far this time. He must be arrested and punished accordingly."

Lord Yu kneeled.

"Lord Yu, surround the premises of the palace. Make sure no one gets in or out."

"Hai!" Yu stood up and walked away.

The Dark Room

Contents

Celina walked about the outdoor hallway. At night time she enjoys taking a stroll by herself to gaze at the stars. No one else was in this perimeter, making her an easy target. She gasped when she saw a man emerge from the darkness, a man she has never seen before. He was wearing rogue clothing; nothing that fits the formal attire of the palace. Jiax grinned as he approached the frightened woman.

"W-Who are you?" she asked.

"Come with me and I promise I won't hurt you...too much." he replied.

Judging by the way he looks, and by the way he talked, Celina was certain that this stranger was up to no good, and she grew more frightened, and stepped back cautiously as he stepped forward.

Jiax grew excited as he approached his prey, who was scared and trembling all over. Her hand was over her mouth as she stared at his threatening presence. She stepped back until she bumped into someone. She turned around to see another unfamiliar face, the face of a bandit grinning at her. Celina gasped and stepped away from him.

The situation grew worse, as there are two of them now, one on each side. How many could be hiding? Being unarmed, the only way to escape this desperate situation is to run, but what if they are faster than she is? Two more bandits appeared from the gate, and they were walking towards the hall.

Celina's back was against the door, and upon leaning on it, the doors opened and she stuttered inside. Jiax and his companions came inside.

Coming into this dark room was her biggest mistake, for she had no chance to escape now. The four bandits came in, and one of them closed the door. They all grinned and laughed.

"No, no!!" she screamed. Celina walked backwards as Jiax advanced, and she tripped over a stone, and landed on her back. She crawled backwards and shrieked and yelped as she did.

Jiax pointed the sword at her forehead, and she gasped. "Where are you going, your highness?" Tears dripped down her eyes as she was at the mercy of this bandit. Jiax poked the tip of the sword on her face, and she moaned and shut her eyes.

"Uhhh..."

Then he pointed the sword at her dress and moved down on it, making an incision between her breasts. "Uhhh..." Celina moaned and stared in awe.

The bandits made some noise as Jiax made the cut, because they liked what they were seeing.

Celina's face was blushing red from the embarrassment, and tears streamed down her face as she stared at the sharp blade. "Please...stop!"

Jiax moved the blade down to her exposed leg, moved it to where the incision was. Celina gasped and feared for the worst. Is this really happening, or is this a mere nightmare? These men came from nowhere and have her trapped in this dark room, and are going to strip her? She is the king's concubine, and if they defile her, how can she possibly live this down? That is the only thing she has left as a woman, her body and her reputation, but tonight, she might lose everything.

The mere thought of being stripped in front of these horny men made her scream in terror, and she quickly crawled away from him. She got up on her feet and ran for her life. Two of the bandits grabbed her arms and shoulders, trying to keep her still. But she screamed and struggled, and they tore off pieces of her white dress. *Sillish*

"Aaah!" She shrieked and continued to run as they tried to stop her. *Sillish*

Celina fell on her knees. The men laughed at her attempts to escape. She was panting for breath, desperate to escape this horrendous situation. Celina holding onto the wall, stood up and tried to run.

One of the bandits grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her back. "Ugh!!!"

Then he did a karate chop on her back, effectively knocking the wind out of her. *Whack* The pain came as a surprise, and the poor woman could not take such a blow. Her eyes were wide open and her mouth was wide open, but no sounds came out. She lost all feeling on her body in an instant, and her legs gave out. Celina fell on her knees, and then fell completely.

Her vision became blurry as she was almost unconscious. The bandits laughed and continued their banter.

Celina crawled on the ground desperately, naively hoping that she can escape, while the men behind her laughed maniacally. She was weak and semi-conscious from the beating, but she used whatever strength she had left to crawl forward. One of the bandits grabbed the poor woman by hair.

"What an easy job this is. I can't believe we're getting paid to do this." said he.

Tears drip down her eyes as he was pulling her hair, while she could do nothing. All Celina wanted was to leave this place and be left alone, and not become of these bandit's conquests. Unfortunately, fate is not on her side.

The bandit smooshed her face on the floor, while she shed tears of pain and humiliation. Jiax stuck his sword into the ground just inches from her face. Celina stared at the cold blade in terror, wondering what fate awaits her.

The Duke was spying out of his window, observing the activities outside. Soldiers ran all over the palace, searching for the wanted man. All of the Duke's servants were being seized by the imperials and arrested without even being told why.

"They are coming for me." Xiang said to himself, "The king has finally caught on, it seems. But it is too late. I already have his favorite concubine at my disposal...and I have absorbed enough human souls to reach my demon form."

Suddenly, his front door was knocked down. *Wham* The lieutenant came in first, followed by his men, and they drew their weapons. "Duke Xiang, we have an imperial decree from His Majesty to arrest you."

The Duke stood up and laughed. Soldiers ran past him and surrounded him. Their pointy spears were ready to stab at any moment, yet, despite his situation, he continued to laugh. "Foolish humans, did you think I'd let you come in that easily?"

"Just surrender and we will not hurt you." said the lieutenant.

"Your concern should not be me; you should worry about your own lives!"

The soldiers became weary when his demon jewel began to glow. They do not know what to expect, and some were moving away from him. The ground began to shake, the air became tenser, and nearby objects were shaking. Lights flared from the floor and the Duke's body grew in size, shredding his clothes apart. The soldiers stared in bewilderment, but they remained in position.

With seconds, the Duke, who was a man of average height, was now seven feet tall, with the face of an ogre, and skin that is blood red.

The lieutenant was as frightened as anyone else was. "God have mercy on us!"

If one were standing outside, he'd hear sounds of fighting and screaming. The imperials did what they could do subdue the overgrown monster, but they were slaughtered brutally. It would be too violent and graphic to discuss how they were killed; one only needs that the end result is a room full of blood and dead bodies.

"Impossible!" said the lieutenant, lying on the floor with a wound on his chest.

The Duke approached him, and the soldier, paralyzed with fear, just watched in horror as the demon's hands grabbed his head, and ripped his head off. *Scrrrr* The demon then ate the soldier's head.

An imperial came over to whisper into Yu's ear. "What?" Yu exclaimed. "They are all dead? This is not good...we must contact his highness right away."

"That is not a good idea." said a fellow imperial soldier.

"Captain Tai?"

"The Duke's plan is already in motion, and if you go now, you will be caught as well." said Tai.

"What do you suggest, then?" Lord Yu asked.

"We must lay low and gather information first. Duke Xiang wants to control the king, but we must find out how and for what purpose."

Liu Bei was in his private room, impatiently walking to and fro. "Blast it. What is taking them so long to make this arrest? Blast it, Duke Xiang, once I have you I will get an answer out of you."

"Long live his majesty." said Duke Xiang, entering the room.

"You...you were scheming when I was away from the palace!" Liu Bei shouted, pointing at the eunuch.

"Scheming? No no, I was merely **cleaning up** the palace for you...cleaning it of its filth and corruption."

"The only corrupt one here is you. What have you done with Lee and Chung?"

"Ohh, so they are important to you." said Xiang. "How much are they worth to you?"

Liu Bei grunted angrily. "Your scheming days are over! Guards!"

"That is not going to work. Your guards have left the building already." said Xiang with a wicked smile.

"You..." Liu Bei grabbed a sword from the table and pointed at Xiang.

"I would not do that if I were you, your highness."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"I still have one trump card up my sleeve."

"What would that be?" Liu Bei asked.

Xiang took out Celina's diamond bracelet. "Does this look familiar?"

Liu was shocked. "Celina! You son of a bitch!" He proceeded to attack Xiang.

"If you hurt me you'll never see her alive again. Her life is in my hands now, so you'll choose wisely if you want her to live."

Liu grunted at his predicament; this was a hard decision to make, but ultimately, he decided to submit, and withdrew his sword.

"Ahahahahah! I knew you'd be important to you."

"What do you want, Duke?"

"Oh, you know what I want, your highness...all I want is complete control over your people. And in return, I will keep Lee, Chung, and your woman alive. Otherwise, you will never see them again."

Bound To A Chair

Contents

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..."

Back at the temple, Alex was completely focused on his chores and during training, he was giving it his best. Every morning, he'd wake up, go to the infirmary, grab a room and start sweeping the leaves off the floor. He'd sweep until every single leaf was gone, leaving it spotless. Next, he'd grab a bucket, fill it up with water, and grab a sponge and scrub the wooden floor. There was no easy way to clean the entire floor, he'd push the sponge against the floor while running with his feet, running back and forth until he cleaned all the tiles.

Zi woke up and yawned lazily. Expecting to see his best friend on the opposite bed, he looked that way, but the bed was empty. He was surprised to see that Alex had woken up before him...again. Curious, Zi looked out the window, and saw Alex diligently scrubbing the dojo floors. "This guy is serious. What a hard worker he is."

When he was done with the floor, Alex started cleaning the walls. He was humming and smiling as he did his duties. He did not mind the labor, because now he has a compelling reason to do so. By having a change in attitude, he will touch Master Ho Sai's heart through his actions. And Ho Sai will return the favor by telling him the whereabouts of his sister. Indeed, it is a shot in the dark, but Alex believed in nothing else but that.

Also, his attitude has changed because his right arm was beginning to feel better. He could do more than usual. The old scar is finally healing and it allows him to work harder.

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

"Yes, he is indeed." Guan replied.

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Once Alex's body was in acceptable condition, Guan began to train him. 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."

The lessons took place in the late afternoon. At noon, Cheng meditated for an hour. After that, he went to fetch water. He came back from the well carrying two buckets with a rod over his shoulders. It was hard work, but Cheng made it look like it was a breeze to do.

His peers observed him working while they took a break. "Wow, he fetched two buckets pretty quickly." said Fu.

Alex placed the buckets on the floor. "I have the water, master. Do you need more?"

"Yes, get me two more buckets, please." Guan replied.

"Yes master." Cheng left to fetch more.

"What a hard worker he is." Shang commented.

"Indeed. And to think not long ago he couldn't even get out of bed because of his wounds."

"He sure works harder than most of the people here." Shang said, looking at Chan.

Chan grew displeased.

"Sorry. It was just a joke." she said, laughing it off.

"What is the big deal? He is nothing but a show off." said Chan.

Eventually, Alex Cheng began training with the other students under their rigorous program. In addition to the classes, he had to perform his other duties, washing the floors and fetching water, amongst other things.

Within a week, Cheng was able to keep up with the other students and follow their pace as if he had been training for years. Guan, who was leading the class, was impressed indeed. When the students performed their martial arts forms, they all moved together in one synchronized unit. Alex blended into the crowd, yet, in a way, he stood out.

Guan shouted out the instructions as the students performed. His eyes were fixed on none other than Alex. Only weeks ago was he still in bed and not able to do anything, yet today, he is practicing effortlessly. Indeed, Alex reminds him of Li. When the girl first came in, Guan worried that she might not be able to keep up with the others, but surprisingly, she was blended in, and as a matter of fact, she eventually surpassed most of Guan's best students. These two siblings are much alike, and Guan wonders if Ho Sai is thinking the same thing.

During dinner time, Alex ate like there was no tomorrow. He moved the chopsticks so fast it hit against the bowl and made clinking sounds. *Clink clink* He almost poured the rice directly into his mouth. His companions watched in awe. Even Zi had not seen him this hungry before.

Thud He slammed the bowl on the table. "More please!!!" Alex said.

The monk poured him more rice, and once it went into Alex's hands, he did the same thing, lifting the bowl with his left hand and pushing the rice into his mouth with his right.

Fu looked at his own bowl and felt ashamed because he did not finish even one bowl. He has always been shorter than average, so he has not paid much attention to his diet.

"I'm done!" Alex announced. "See you guys later." He promptly left the room.

"He finished four bowls of rice while we barely finished one." said Shang.

"What is up with your friend? Is he in a hurry?" Fu asked.

"Beats me." said Zi. "Why not ask him yourself?"

"He probably thinks he is better than us because he can eat faster." said Chan in his usual negative tone. "He is making a futile effort to keep up."

"That's because he has a lots of other chores that he has to attend to." Fu said.

"Other chores? But our master doesn't work anyone this hard. Even Zi doesn't have to do so much." Shang replied.

"He was never given the chores." Zi answered. "He does them voluntarily."

This surprised the monks. "Really?" Shang said, a little shocked.

"I don't know what's going through his mind." said Zi.

Chan pretended that he was not interested in this conversation, but the truth is that he was extremely bothered by Alex. "He's just showing off so he can impress Master Guan. He really has no shame."

As Zi continued to eat, he was in his head about this whole change in Alex's attitude. What caused him to change so much? Does it have something to do with his conversation with Master Ho Sai?

The Temple can be said to be a healing institution and a martial arts schools mixed into one. Run by the teachers, whom are commonly referred to as masters, the Temple has strict rules that inhabitants must abide by if they wish to stay. For example, there is a curfew that must be adhered to, and those who are caught awake after 10:00 PM are punished with no exceptions.

Normally Zi would complain about such a rule, but tonight he slept like a pig since he was exhausted from training all day.

Alex, however, could not sleep, despite having worked harder than Zi. He was lying in bed, with his hands under his head."

"The Duke, he's a monster!"

Those words echoed in his mind over and over. He turned to the side and continued to think about what happened ten years ago.

Li Cheng came into the house, barely able to contain her excitement. "Mother, father, you will never guess what happened. I have been accepted as a servant to work in the imperial palace!"

Her parents praised her as if she was the golden child.

"That's my little girl. She is finally a big girl now." said her mother.

"You're going to make lots and lots of money and marry to a rich man, maybe even into nobility. All our years of hard work finally paid off."

In this society, reputation is everything. One's whole life purpose is to contribute to society in such a way that gives honor to the family name. The Chinese put so much emphasis on reputation that one can say that reputation is more important than money itself.

Li blushed. "Mom, dad, I won't disappoint you."

Everyone was happy, but Alex was not. He sat quietly at the kitchen table, listening to all their words. Being a child, he did not understand the concept of reputation or money; all he knew was that his sister is going to a far away place and leave him behind. His sister was his best friend, and probably only friend, because he did not get along with other kids at school.

It is once again time for training. Guan performed several stances and the students followed. Ho Sai and his servants walked by. The students were focused on their training and no one noticed Ho Sai's appearance. He was watching the students but staring at one in particular...Cheng. Still thinking about their conversation from the other time, he could not help but think of Li Cheng. They are so much alike, and Alex does not even know it. Slowly but surely, he is following his older sister's footsteps. At first, Li seemed like the type to be bullied, but within a few years of training, she became an outstanding swordsman.

Alex continued his training, sweating in the heat of the sun. He wiped his forehead and did not bother taking a break. Guan continued to watch with admiration. Alex, so young and full of energy; this is the essence of youth.

Zi, on the other hand, lazily sat on the wall, eating an apple. He went to several classes already and cannot stand how boring and redundant it is. Often times, he'd sneak out of class and just sneak around.

Since all the students were training and the adults were preparing food, this is Zi's perfect chance to snoop around. He heard of a library in the Temple that has a useful knowledge base, one that cannot be found in the outside world. Curiosity and

greed are prime motivators for him, as he is one who constantly worries about making money and having a harem of beautiful women.

He peered down the hallway, glancing left and right to make certain that no one is here. Cautiously he opened the doors to the library and walked in, rummaging through pile of books.

Shang dropped from somewhere and tapped him on the shoulder, which startled him.

"Shhhh." she said, putting a finger on her lips. "You don't want them to find us, do you?"

"What are you doing here?" Zi asked.

"I should be asking you that question. It is forbidden for guests to be here. If they catch you, the consequences can be dire."

"I was just curious." Zi replied. "But students are not allowed here either. You can't rat me out unless if you rat yourself out."

"I won't say anything, if you don't." she replied.

"Why don't we make this our little secret? I don't tell, you don't tell."

"Fine. It's a deal." They shake their pinkies.

Hunter And Prey

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 obviously enjoying the process. She was wearing practically nothing; except for ribbons tied around her body. The pink ribbons covered only the essentials, everything above the thighs, and the breasts and below, and everything else was exposed.

Celina's back was against the bed post, and she was panting for breath. Her hands were covering her breasts, 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.

She did not even have time to think about how she got into this unfortunate situation; to be trapped in the bedroom with this horrible man, with most of her skin exposed. The ribbons were tied around her body in loops, but it takes only one tug to pull it all off and expose everything.

Jiax approached her slowly, with a perverted smile and a hungry look in his eyes, and his hands were itching to touch something. Her eyes were shaking from fear, and she trembled all over.

Jiax tried to grab her, and she ran away. "Aah!" She hid behind the other bedpost, and Jiax went after her. "Aaah!" He constantly chased her, giving poor Celina no rest, as she tried to avoid him at all costs. It was a fun process for him to chase his prey, knowing that he will catch her eventually.

"Heh heh heh, come here..." he taunted.

Celina stepped back as Jiax approached her, and her back hit the wall, and she stared at him with frightful eyes. She tried to make a run for it, and Jiax grabbed the loose ribbon in the air and pulled it, consequently pulling her into him. He grabbed her and violated her all over with his hands and his lips. He kissed her back and grabbed her breasts while Celina struggled to get free.

She shrieked as she was being touched by his dirty lips, kissing her back, her shoulders, and her face. Tears of pain drip down her eyes as she screamed and yelled. Never before has a man treated touched her like this, to treat her in such an inhumane way.

Celina continued to struggle, after all, that is all she could do in a situation like this, and when Jiax's grip loosened, she ran for it. He grabbed her by the shoulder and slammed her against the wall. "Ugh!"

"I have you now." he whispered against her ear. He smelled her hair and sighed in pleasure; she smelled good; as a beautiful woman should.

He kissed her shoulder and her back, while his hand went to her thigh and went up the ribbons. "Ugh!!" Poor Celina groaned as he violated her from behind.

Jiax then grabbed her and threw her on the floor. Celina crawled and crawled for her life as he followed her. No matter what, she had to try, even if she knew that there was no chance of escape. After all, a woman in her situation cannot think logically, let alone think at all. She was acting on pure instinct and emotion, and crawled towards the bed. She grabbed the bed and tried to get her self up, and rested against it, panting for breath.

But she knew that he was right behind her, and her instincts told her that something very, very bad is going to happen to her...and that what awaits is not escape, but a world of pain and suffering...the kind of suffering that she did not even imagine would be possible.

Jiax grabbed her by the hair, pulling her head backwards. "Uhhh..."

Now directly behind her, he whispered into her ear. "You don't have rights anymore...you're going to be my slave..."

Tears of helplessness drip down her eyes.

"Anything that is yours is now mine...including your body!" He grabbed her breasts and she moaned.

Then he made her stand up, by pulling her hair, and he pushed her onto the bed. He turned her around and began to ravage her, and she screamed at the top of her lungs. They were the only ones in the room. Just the two of them, the rapist and the victim, all alone in the room.

Weeks have passed by and Alex was showing some startling improvements. Whenever he sparred someone, he would always do well, be it a contest of swords, bamboo sticks, or bare fists. Guan Du obviously noticed his trend in skill, as he monitors the progress of all his students.

A particular student was about to spar with Alex. He knew of Alex's skills, but he was also confident in his own skills. It is customary to bow to your opponent before a fight. It is a sign of respect and mutual agreement to fight fair, and is very common in the martial arts world.

Alex and the monk bowed and hit each other with the bamboo sticks. *Clang clang*

Shang and Fu were supposed to be sparring, but instead they watched Alex's fight from the other side of the wall.

"He's doing well!" Shang commented.

"Not bad for a newcomer." said Fu. "Alex's opponent is Tong. I lost to him badly last time."

"But Alex is on even ground with him. He sure is a hard worker." she said, leaning her chin on her hands.

"What, do you like him or something?" Fu said slyly.

"Don't be ridiculous." She hit him on the arm.

"Ow!" But even Fu must admit, Alex fared well against someone who is more seasoned and experienced. Perhaps this is the fruit of his training.

Clang clang Alex and Tong rested to catch their breath, and resumed the fight. (Just watch, Li, I am coming to find you!) With that thought in mind, he charged forward, screaming valiantly. "Yaahhh!"

When Master Ho Sai meditates, he wishes to not be disturbed, and does it in the privacy of his own quarters. But today he suddenly received a shocking vision. His eyes opened wide and he was sweating. "Another one of the king's people has been killed...King Liu is very angry...and a demon is going to control the kingdom. I fear the worst for the future of Yi Ling..."

六: Trouble in the Temple
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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."

The Defiling Kiss

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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. They were face to face 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. The pain and horror came as a surprise...and she experienced what was the single worst moment of her life.

It was truly a horrible feeling indeed as he tasted her lips...as well as the inside of her mouth fully. Celina was completely and utterly helpless, and her eyes grew wide open and even more tears streamed down her face.

Her fingers squeezed the carpet tightly as his hand was holding her wrist. 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. Poor Celina could do nothing in her situation, as she was physically overwhelmed. Every single moment was revolting and unbearable, as she felt his tongue inside her mouth. 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.

Back at Yi Ling, a certain someone was worried about the two heroes. Jade was doing laundry with her grandmother, and as she did, she stared at the western direction of the sky. (Alex and Zi, I hope you two are doing okay. Please come back safely.)

As the sun rose Alex yawned and got out of bed, ready for his daily routine. First, he'd go and scrub the floors of the residential buildings. By now he was familiar with the floors of the whole residential building, since he cleaned them everyday. By the end of his chore, the floor would be sparkling clean. After that he'd clean the walls, and they too end up being sparkling clean.

Chan just woke up and stepped out of his room and yawned. He was a bit startled by this, the fact that Alex actually is a hard worker. However, this only made him more jealous. He walked forward, suddenly having an urge to talk to Alex.

While Alex was scrubbing, he saw feet in front of him and looked up. "Huh? Oh hey Chan, what's up?"

"Top of the morning, Alex."

"What are you doing up so early?"

"Just checking out the scenery." Chan replied. "You work this hard every morning?"

"Yes. I want to do a good job to impress Master Guan and Master Ho Sai. I do not want to let them down."

"Impress them? You're still just a newcomer, Alex. Master Guan isn't impressed by people showing off. He only respects people with skill."

"Well, uhh, I'm not showing off. I just want to do a good job cleaning. It's my way of repaying the people at the Temple for healing my injuries."

Chan grinded his teeth, unbeknownst to Alex. "What, so you clean earlier than others. Big deal. That doesn't make you better than us."

"Huh? Excuse me?" Alex said, a little confused.

"Why don't you cut the act? Master Guan doesn't care about you. Your little hard working innocent act is making us look bad. Just realize who are the real warriors here." said Chan, and he walked away.

Alex was confused, thinking to himself, what was that about? Maybe Chan needed to let off some steam. Out of all the students, Chan is the strangest and hardest one to figure out, so Alex shrugged it off and continued his cleaning chores.

After morning chores and breakfast, it was time to train. As usual, Master Guan came to the front of the students and started talking about the philosophy of fighting. "...Fighting is only a last resort when all other things don't work out. And one must never fight just to show off. The principles that Master Ho Sai instilled in me are hard work, integrity, and honesty. These principles are the foundation of our culture in the Temple of Enlightenment..."

After the oral lesson, it is time to begin hands on training. All the students will follow the master's movements. Guan stood in a horse stance, and all the other students did the same. Guan punched. "Hyah!"

All the other students punched and shouted: "Hyah!"

"Hyah!" "Hyah!"

Master Sai came by to watch them train. He nodded in satisfaction, seeing how synchronized the students are. Everyone of them has been here for a while, and by now, they should be good martial artists. Slacking off is not tolerated in this place, and if one should be caught doing so, he shall face strict consequences.

"Hyah!" "Hyah!"

Guan wants the best out of all his students; he does not hold back during his training sessions. Today, however, his attention is fixated on a certain student – Alex Cheng. His sudden appearance is a surprising one. For some reason, he started working hard...harder than all the others. His work ethic clearly stands out from the other students...just like his sister long ago. What made him change so fast?

Chan Lou noticed Guan was looking at Alex. Even the master is paying attention to Alex more than others, and this makes Chan angry.

When the synchronized movements were done, it is time to move to the next phase.

“Okay class, it is time to put today’s lessons into practice. Find a partner and begin sparring.”

Immediately, all the students grabbed a bamboo stick and found a partner. Zi and Fu decided to take each other. Alex grabbed a stick and he and Chan met at the eyes. They stared at each other for a good two seconds, and they decided to take each other without uttering a word.

Whack! Whack! The entire arena was full of sounds of bamboo sticks hitting. *Whack. Whack.*

Chan attacked Alex fiercely, not giving him a single chance to retaliate. *Whack* Alex had to back away while blocking.

Zi noticed how serious Chan was today, but he had to focus on his own fight. *Whoosh* He dodged Fu’s bamboo stick, and attacked.

Pom Alex blocked holding his stick horizontally. Chan kept on hitting vertically and swinging it and hitting him from the side. *Pom!* Then he swings it up and hit Alex in the face. *Thud*

A bruise appeared on Alex’s face, and this is when he realized he must take Chan seriously. He charged forward and attacked with aggressive strikes, and now he is the one who is advancing. *Clunk clunk*

“Okay students, sparring is over.” shouted Master Guan.

Everyone stopped except for those two. Alex and Chan continued to hit each other. They were so focused on each other that they did not hear their teacher’s announcement.

“I said stop!” Guan shouted.

But they continued fighting with angry looks in their eyes. Suddenly, Guan grabbed a stick and went in between them, knocking both their sticks away. They fell down. *Pom pom* They were surprised.

“Sparring is over.” Guan repeated. “If you two really want to compete, do it after class.”

“Sorry master.” Chan said.

Both of them bowed to Master Guan as he left the arena. Chan gave Alex a nasty look, and then walked away.

6 - B Title Contents

During lunchtime, the usual three sat together. Shang, Fu, and Chan have been friends for many years now and they always sit together for lunch. Alex and Zi sat at the very next table. Being the fat one in the group, Chan usually eats like a pig, but today he is dissatisfied with his meal. “What is with the food today? It tastes like crap.” He grabbed a piece of meat from his bowl and threw it backwards, hitting Alex’s head.

Without turning around, Alex knew it was Chan who did it. Zi saw it what happened and noticed how angry Alex was. “Don’t get upset...it’s not worth it.”

“Chan, you shouldn’t waste food like that.” said Shang.

"This meal isn't fit for warriors like us." said Chan. "Look at this fish, it's disgusting." He threw the fish on Alex's head.

Zi grew more worried. "Let's just sit somewhere else shall we?" He let out a chuckle. Alex continued to eat as if nothing happened, but he was burning on the inside.

"What is wrong with you?" said Shang. "You're acting like a child."

"All I want is a decent meal, that's all. Look at this rice, it is of poor quality. I wouldn't feed this to the dogs." He took the bowl and threw it backwards, splattering the rice on Alex's back.

Alex banged the table and stood up. "You don't like the food? Do you know how many kids are starving out there in China?"

Chan stood up and since he is taller than Alex, he has to look down to see him face to face.

"You have a problem with me?" he said in a threatening voice.

Shang and Fu pulled on Chan's sleeve, signaling him to stop, but he was too arrogant to listen.

"I have a problem with you wasting food."

"Alex, stop it." said Zi. "We are guests here. You don't want to make trouble for us, do you?"

"The only trouble maker here is him." Alex said.

"You should know your place, outsider." Chan replied.

Alex grew angry and Zi tried to grab him, but Alex pushed his friend away and grabbed the tall monk by the collar. "Outsider? What's your problem, anyway, you overgrown monk?"

Chan grabbed Alex's arms, and shoved him in the chest, and as a result of this force, Alex hit the table behind him. *Wham*

"Oh no!" Zi said, knowing this cannot end well.

Alex stood up. "That's it, I outta-"

"What's going on here?" Guan Du asked, coming into the room with Chie Du.

Everyone froze. "Nothing Master Guan, nothing at all!" Shang replied, trying to save her friends from punishment.

"Are you two fighting? That is against the rules."

Chan and Alex bowed. "Sorry, master."

Guan was displeased and spoke in an authoritative tone. He does this expects everyone to follow the rules no matter what. "Cheng. You are a newcomer, so let me tell you that righting is against the rules of our Temple. It is not to be tolerated."

"Hai. Sorry master." Alex said, bowing.

"And as for you Chan Lou, you are older and more experienced. You know the rules by heart. I am disappointed in you."

"Sorry master."

Guan turned around. "After your meal, both of you come outside to receive your punishment. We treat guests the same way we treat our students, and we make no exceptions."

Cheng sat in front of the lake, throwing rocks at it. He was depressed due to what happened earlier. He wanted to impress Master Guan, but ended up being punished instead. This is a very frustrating moment for our hero, as he wonders if all the hard work he went through paid off.

Shang and Fu came by to visit him. "Hey, how're ya feeling?" Fu asked.

"I'm alright. Don't worry about it." replied Alex politely. But it's actually eating him up on the inside.

"Alex, I hope you don't think badly of Chan because of this." said Shang. "The whole thing is a misunderstanding."

"Is it?" asked Alex. "I know I'm not supposed to fight, but he started with me first. I didn't do anything to him."

"It's just that...well...it's something about him that you don't know. You only came in the temple for a short while." she replied.

"What is it?"

"You see, Alex," Fu said, beginning to explain. "Master Ho Sai has strict standards for the students of this temple. We are a society that exists outside of civilization, so the only law here is that of the masters and our headmaster, Ho Sai. Many people leave their homes hoping to find The Temple, and some never do find it. Those who do find us end up becoming students. Most of us were born here and live here our whole lives."

"It is a privilege to be accepted into The Temple and living amongst us." Shang added. "However, those who fall behind on their training do not have a right to stay here."

"So you're saying that..."

"Chan has been getting lazier and lazier...he's eating more and training less. And the teachers notice this. Not so long ago, Master Guan Du had a personal meeting with Chan...and it didn't go well." Fu explained.

"What happened?"

"Master Guan said that Chan's progress is amongst the lowest of all the students, and actually, in master's own words, he is the weakest link. At this rate he will be kicked out of the temple."

Alex was shocked.

"Chan is getting one last chance to redeem himself. And then all of a sudden you show up and you work so hard that you gain the teacher's attention. Master definitely notices you. I guess Chan feels that you are his replacement. We understand how he feels. Please consider the feeling of one who is about to be cast away...he will have to live in shame. Please...don't blame him." Shang said.

Shang and Fu walked away, leaving Alex by himself...absorbing what he just heard. So this is why Chan is acting hostile towards him, because he is borderline on the "cast away" list. There is no greater dishonor than being cast away from the Temple of Enlightenment.

As part of their punishment, Alex and Chan must live together in a building separate from the residential quarters. This is the very corner of the temple, a place where misbehaving students are confined here in solitude. They shall remain here until they learn to get along and cooperate, said Master Guan.

So that night, Zi had no one to accompany him to bed. He lied on his bed awake, with hands behind his head, staring at the stars and listening to the sound of crickets. He wonders how his best friend is doing at this moment.

Alex and Chan have yet learned to cooperate. They have to fight over who gets which bed, and Alex gave up and let him have the better one. That night, neither of them got any sleep, due to their distrust of each other. Alex slept with one eye open, fearing that Chan might catch him off guard when he is asleep. Chan had the same thought.

All day, the two have avoided each other. Chan occupied one side of the backyard, meditating,, while Alex occupied the other side, practicing martial arts..

Chan opened one eye. "Can you keep the noise down? I am trying to meditate."

Alex continued to perform the movements. "I need to keep up with training. I don't want to fall behind."

"Fall behind? It will take you years to catch up to the students." said Chan, hoping to break his spirit. "Do you think it is this easy to learn the martial arts of our temple?"

"If it is that distracting, maybe you should meditate somewhere else."

Chan grunted. "Somewhere else? If it wasn't for you, I'd wouldn't be here in the first place."

Alex turned around. "What did you say? You started the fight with me. This is your fault, Chan!"

"Blaming me for your own irresponsibility? How naïve of you, Cheng. I don't know what the masters see in you."

"Mind your own business. I am practicing and I am not making any noise. I won't come to your side so you should do the same." said Alex, a little upset.

"Fine! So be it!" said Chan, ending the conversation.

6 - C Title Contents

At nightfall, Chan was pouring water into the well from a bucket. *Splash* Alex came over. "Do you need help with that?"

"I'm fine, I don't need your help." Chan replied.

"I thought we were supposed to work together? Master Guan instructed us to do so." Alex said.

"It doesn't matter what he said. As long as the job gets done, it's fine. I am going to do it all by myself and master will be impressed. I don't need your help."

Alex continued to talk, which bothered Chan. He was never a social person to begin with. "But you're ignoring Master Guan's orders."

"I said I'll be fine. You'll only get in the way, scrawny one."

Alex took offense to that. "Scrawny? Just because you're bigger doesn't make you better." He grabbed one of the buckets.

"Hey, put that down." Chan grabbed the bucket.

"I'll show you I can do everything you can." said Alex.

"I said put it down!"

"Let go!"

They both struggled and the bucket ended up spilling over. *Splash*

"Now look what you've done." said Chan. "I told you to stay out of my way!"

"I told you to let me do it!"

They both grunted at each other and their hatred only increased.

"Listen, you're just an outsider." said Chan. "Don't think you know everything."

"You're not following Master Guan's instructions! No wonder he's kicking you out."

"What did you say?"

Alex realized that he said something he should not have. At this point apologizing will not do, and instead, he continued his insults. "I know what's going on. You're just a pathetic person, that's all!"

"Why you!" Chan made a punch, Alex ducked and hit him in the stomach.

Being a bulky body, Chan can take such a hit with no problem. *Woosh* Alex dodged Chan's powerful fists while moving backwards. Alex punched, Chan blocked, and punched Alex against the well. *Wham*

Alex got up and ran forward, grabbing Chan's waist. Chan kned him in the chest, and pushed his body forward, and Chan got behind him, and put his arm around Alex's neck.

Chan now has Alex in a head lock, and they both groaned and struggled. Alex felt the big, bulky arms on his neck, and he elbowed Chan in the stomach constantly. *Thud thud* Chan had no intention of letting go, despite the jolts of pain he felt.

The Wrestling

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Jiax has Celina in a headlock from behind. She screamed and made all kinds of noises as she struggled to get free, but nothing worked. She could feel his big, bulky arms crushing her neck little by little, and she thought she was only moments away from death. Tears of helplessness stream down her eyes as she groaned and tried to get the hand off her. Jiax's free hand grabbed her breast and squeezed it, and she moaned with tears.

Chan lifted Alex up by the neck, and he was now in a strangle hold, a very dangerous position. "Uuugh! Arrrgh!"

Little did he know, there was someone else out there suffering as much as him; no, this person is suffering much more than he is.

Jiax grabbed Celina's neck, lifting her off her feet. She was as helpless as putty in his hands. Her weak, frail hands can't possible pull his muscular hands off her neck, and Jiax smiled as he has complete power over her. She moaned with tears streaming down her face, knowing this might be the end of her sad life as she knew it.

Celina found herself losing consciousness, her breathing was limited, and she couldn't even utter a word. She thought about her master, the one person in the world who truly cared for her. Unfortunately, she has not seen her master in years, and she is not here to help poor Celina. She is all alone in this predicament, and will die alone.

Is this how her life is going to end, to be killed by the hands of this brute? Celina closed her eyes, and shed tears of pain and sorrow...

Alex grunted angrily, and breathed heavily, and tried to pull Chan's hands off his neck, but it was not working. So he grabbed Chan's face and tried to push his fingers into his eyes. Chan groaned in agony while strangling Alex. He had no choice but to let go, and they both backed away from each other.

Jiax let go, dropping Celina to the floor. *Thud* She fell on her knees and her upper body just collapsed to the ground from sheer exhaustion. She grabbed her neck and coughed in pain. *Kuff kuff*

Jiax could have ended her life at any moment, but that would not be fun for him. His orders are to keep her alive, which is fine with him, since he can torture her more. Celina continued to cough, with fresh tears still in her eyes. Jiax kicked her in the stomach. "Uuugh!!"

Poor Celina, first she was strangled, and now kicked in the stomach. She's a frail woman, and has never been treated this way before, ever.

Kapow! Alex was punched and his back hit the well. Chan ran at him and punched, Alex dodged to the side, slipping to the ground. Chan grabbed him and they wrestled on the floor. Both their hands were occupied, so they were grabbing and twisting each other for a while.

While on the bed, Jiax got on top of Celina and grabbed her wrists, twisting them, while she struggled in vain. He loved wrestling with her, because no matter how hard she tries, he always wins. It is never fair for Celina. She moaned in pain as he put her arms to the side and put his face between her breasts, and she moaned. "Uhhh..."

She continued to scream in vain as he violated her for countless hours, behind the curtain of the bed.

Both were now battered and bruised, and tired from all the fighting. Alex had bruises and scratches all over his face, and countless other bruises unseen on his body. Chan's condition was no better, for he had blood oozing from the corner of his mouth, scratches on his face, and tears in his clothes. They both stared at each other while panting for breath. They still had much hatred in their eyes, but their bodies could not handle it any further.

"Had enough yet?" said Chan.

"I'm done whenever you're done." Alex replied.

"If you want to fight some more, then I'll be happy too."

"I think it's enough already. Do you want another week of punishment?"

Chan looked away. "Tch. I don't want to stay here another second with you."

"Then let's stop for now." said Alex.

"Fine."

"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 according to plan smoothly." He was celebrating with some of his conspirators, who all had a part in the takeover.

"Congratulations." said **Lord Sima**, holding up a cup of wine.

"Amen, great Duke." said **Lord Fei**, another one of the eunuchs. "Victory is surely ours."

Xiang sipped the rest of his wine. "Ahhh. The sweet taste of victory."

"It is unfortunate that Lord Lee is gone. His majesty still thinks he is alive, is he not?"

"I told him that Lee and Chung are both still alive, but in fact, they are dead." Xiang replied. "They would be nuisances if I kept them alive. The king only cares about his concubine, anyway."

"I shall take the job of replacing Lee." said Fei. "He was one of the top eunuchs who served under his majesty, but he was too arrogant and short sighted for his own good. All his units will now be placed under my command."

"Before I forget, there is someone I'd like you to meet." said Sima.

The door opened, and a tall figured man came in, wearing heavy armor and a helmet. His facial features were that of a brute and fighter, with thick eyebrows and a black beard.

"Meet General Tsu, he is General Chung's replacement."

"Generatl Tsu reporting, sir." said he, bowing and folding his hands.

"Excellent. I assume you are a capable warrior, worthy of the title of general?" said Xiang.

"Certainly he is." Sima said with a fan over his face. "He is the leader of one of the biggest northern tribes. He has quite the reputation on the battlefield, and all those who hear the name Tsu tremble in fear. Tsu, why don't you show the Duke your fighting abilités?"

"You bet, sir!"

Tsu took out a halberd and performed some martial arts for the spectators.

"Brilliant, simply brilliant." said Xiang. "With him, no one can get in our way from total domination."

Xiang once again stood in front of his mirror and waved the jewel in front of it. His reflection began to distort itself as if in water, and his image became that of a silhouetted figure.

"Everything is going according to plan, my lord." said the Duke.

"Excellent." said the dark voice of the unknown figure.

"We have planned fifty years and have been patient all for this glorious day."

"Keep up the good work. Make sure you don't make any blunders." said the Demon King.

"Don't worry about it, my king." replied the Duke confidently. "With the king under my control there isn't a thing I cannot do."

"Make sure you eliminate all obstacles to our plan. Watch out for the other eunuchs, especially those who are suspicious of you. And what of the girl who saw your face?"

"Her? That was many years ago, she is not important."

"She has a brother, doesn't she?"

"I already took care of him." said Xiang. "Leave everything to me, I will have everything settled soon."

The two detainees continued to face each other while sitting down on the floor. Their anger died down a little bit after resting a while, but they still did not trust each other.

"Listen," said Alex, breaking the silence. "I heard about your situation from Shang and Fu."

"My situation? Those two talk too much."

"I assure you that I have no intention of replacing you."

"Who said you were?" Chan replied. "A newcomer like you think you can take my place? Hah, you wish."

"I didn't even know about it until Shang told me. I'm not even going to stay for that long. I still have a journey to complete."

"Tch. You and your stupid journey. Just because you have a missing sister doesn't make you special." Chan remembers Li Cheng's cute and adorable face. She was one of the most popular students at the temple because of her hard work and willingness to help others. She'd always have a smile on her face and make an attempt to talk to everyone. "Everyone treats you good all because you're that brat's brother. Why do you even waste your life searching for someone you can never find?"

"What did you say?" Alex asked, now extremely offended. "Do you know how it feels to be in my situation? If you had a sister who ran away from home years ago, wouldn't you want to know why?! I've been looking for her for more than half my life. My parents and I got separated when I was still a kid. This scar on my right arm...I have it because an assassin tried to kill me. I was left to die by myself. I was only ten years old...left all by myself, bleeding in the rain. It was Zi who saved my life. If it wasn't for him...I wouldn't be here. We worked hard just to find out that my sister was here in this very temple. And I came all the way here just to find out she is not here anymore. She could be dead for all I know!"

Chan felt guilty listening to Alex's touching story. When he made eye contact with Alex, he could see the seriousness in Alex's eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you had such a rough life." he said in a low voice. Usually he was loud and arrogant, but now, when he realized how wrong he is, he is ashamed of himself. It turns out he

misunderstood Alex and his intentions...well, because he is actually a good person, and Chan could not believe it at first.

"Yeah...well...I don't usually tell my life's story to other people. If we want to end our punishment early, we have to cooperate."

"Fine then. Just this once."

"So then, what do you say? If you work hard, Guan will think better of you. But first, we have to show him that we can work together."

Chan smiled. "Very well then. I won't fall behind you."

Alex and Chan smiled, and they shook hands. From a distance, Master Guan saw their interaction, and he was satisfied in his heart. They have hope after all.

The very next morning, the detainees woke up with a completely different attitude. When Guan was carrying the buckets of water, Alex offered to help, and he actually accepted the help. Little by little, Chan would approve of Alex and become something called a "friend." Any chore that one does, the other one does, and by doing so, they learn about each other's strengths and weaknesses, as well as their true personalities. Eventually, their hatred turned into friendship, and rivalry turned into cooperation. Perhaps this is what master hoped for by detaining them together. Whether that was his intention or not, that is how the two are now.

七: The Next Step: Saying Goodbye

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A week after their detainment, Alex and Chan were released from their punishment quarters and allowed to resume their normal lives. Alex continued his hard work routine – waking up early to scrub the floors, sweating a lot during training, and eating very fast. Amazingly, Chan is working as hard as he is, if not harder, to everyone's surprise. In the morning, Alex and Chan were scrubbing the same floor, as if competing to see who is faster. Yes, they are definitely competing without verbally announcing it.

During training, they gave it their best. They punched the hardest, kicked the hardest and screamed the loudest. During lunch, they ate the fastest. The just tilted the bowl towards their mouths and use the chopsticks to swoop the rice down.

Both Alex and Chan finished at the same time and slammed their bowls on the table. "Seconds please!" they said in unison. The serving monk was surprised.

Zi, Shang and Fu were surprised and they stared in awe. Only one week ago, the two hated each other to the point where they had a fist fight, yet today, they seemed to be working in unison. What happened during the one week they were detained? Did they both finally decided to get along? Whatever the reason may be, Alex and Chan are better off now than a week ago.

After a long day of hard work, nightfall came rather quickly. Alex was taking a bath in a barrel, listening to the sounds of crickets chirping outside. Now that he had a moment to rest, he closed his eyes and began to meditate.

This time, however, his mind was not clear, but rather clouded with a terrifying vision. When he opened his eyes, he was no longer at the temple, he was back home in Yi Ling...on a deserted street. It was raining hard at night; he could barely see a thing. And Alex found himself shorter...he was the height of a child.

Alex, in his child form, ran desperately to get home, but a dark shadow appeared in front of him. The man smiled like the devil himself would before slaughtering its victim. He had long, black hair, but his face was blocked out. Alex stared at the tall figure and trembled, dropping his belongings.

"No, no..." Despite the fear of facing a grown man, Alex drew his sword and pointed it at the stranger.

Alex and the stranger ran towards each other and attacked. *Clang* Alex was hit on the arm and he screamed and writhed in pain. The wound was too much for a child to bear and he fell to the ground while bleeding heavily. He was defenseless and pretty much left to die. The rain poured hard, washing his blood away. The child was frightened and scared as he was on the brink of death...and about to die alone. Once he is gone, no one will remember him. Tears streamed down his face as he watched the assassin come closer and close, and making his move. *Slash*

Alex suddenly woke up and found himself in the barrel of water. He instinctively touched the scar on his arm. To his surprise, the scar is not the same size. It has been gradually shrinking without him noticing. It must be due to the healing of the monks, he thought. Perhaps one day it will be gone for good, or perhaps that is just wishful thinking.

The Mirror Of Humiliation

Contents

Celina crawled backwards as her tormentor approached her. Her eyes were shaking and her arms trembling in fear. Jiax was approaching her with that wicked smile of his, and made a grabbing gesture with his hands. As his shadow covered her, she gasped.

Jiax thought that she had a nice expression on her face; she had the perfect look for a victim. The only thing she had to cover herself were pink ribbons, wrapped around her body in only the essential areas. But other than that, her skin was mostly exposed, from her legs all the way to her upper thighs, with nothing but loose ribbons covering that area. And the ribbons only covered the middle of her breasts, and everything above that was exposed.

Celina felt extremely vulnerable; it would be no different if she was completely naked. But this man had already seen her natural form, and even violated her in ways she could not even imagine. But now she must once again face that kind of harassment. She turned over to crawl away, and he grabbed her by the shoulders, lifted her, and slammed her on the desk. *Wham* He held her by the head, and he also had one of her arms, and twisted it behind her back. The poor woman couldn't resist at all, as she was physically dominated by this brute.

This was very desk where she puts on makeup everyday. Being the king's concubine, she is expected to look her best at all times. Her personal servant is the one who assists her with various things, such as fixing her hair, and putting powder on her face. But most of the time, Celina refused to be helped, and would rather do it by herself. She'd spend at least half an hour by the mirror, making sure she looks beautiful before even stepping outside. That is what she is expected to do. But today, this desk is the place where she will be violated and harassed brutally.

Celina was bent over on the desk, with Jiax grinding against her, and keeping her from escaping. She groaned and screamed while Jiax's hands squeezed her breasts, while he was grinding her from behind. "Uhhh!! Uhhh!!"

He put his face into her hair and smelled it, sighing in pleasure, while he continued to squeeze her breasts with his filthy fingers. He kissed her neck, and then kissed her shoulders, rubbing his dirty face all over her silky skin.

"Aaaah! Aaaah!!" She screamed as she was being violated all over.

When he got bored of this position, Jiax decided to take the humiliation to next level. He grabbed her by the hair, and forced her to look at the mirror. "Look at your pathetic face." he said. "I want you to see what humiliation is."

Staring at her own reflection, she looked pathetic indeed. Tears were streaming down her eyes, and she was sobbing and whining. This was indeed humiliating on a whole different level, as she was forced to watch herself being violated from behind by this vulgar brute.

How could this have happened? There was no time to even think about how she ended being his hostage...and his sex slave. Looking at herself, she thinks she must be the unluckiest woman in the world, to have to face this torture and indignant suffering. This must be a nightmare of some sort, a long, recurring nightmare that she will wake up from eventually.

But that is not the case, for this is real. All the pain and agony she feels at this moment is real, and worst of all, there is no escape from it. Her fate is to be abused sexually by this horrible man, who forces her to stare at the mirror...the mirror of her humiliation.

Jiax continued the abuse, kissing her neck and shoulders savagely. His hand grabbed her breasts and squeezed them and squished them like playthings. His body was pressed against hers, with her slightly bent over the desk, and it was an extremely uncomfortable position for her. No one can even imagine this poor woman's pain as she just stood there, withstanding all the physical pain and mental pain as well. Her hands were flat on the desk, and she clutched them into fists while she screamed.

"Aaah!! Aaaah!!" Celina's tears dripped on the table. "Aaah!!" She had already shed countless tears, and thought that she had nothing left, yet the tears keep coming. Her eyes were completely wet and blocked her vision, and her screams continue, even when her throat was completely dry.

Jiax then grabbed her by the head and slammed her face into the mirror. He was laughing at her, because her pain is his enjoyment. He kept pushing her head, as if trying to shove her face into the mirror. Tears streamed down her eyes as she suffered some more.

Then he pressed her upper body against the desk. Now she was completely bent over. Jiax then ravaged her back while Celina continued to cry in vain.

When the sunlight from the window hit Alex's eyes, he woke up and yawned. Today, something felt different. The birds were chirping louder than usual, and the sky seemed to be at its bluest. Alex sat up to stare at the bright yellow sun.

Moments later, Zi woke up. "Darn, looks like you beat me again. But I almost matched you this morning."

"Zi," Alex said, without looking away, "Something about today feels different."

"Huh?"

"We've been training here for months. It feels like years." said Alex. "We've gotten too comfortable here. I think we are ready to move on."

"Move on? Just like that?" Zi said, a little disappointed.

"We're here for a reason, remember, Zi?"

"Our training isn't complete yet."

"According to Master Guan, it is never complete." Alex replied. "I do not want to stay here longer than necessary."

"Ahhh darn it. And I was just getting to know Shang."

"There's more women back in Yi Ling than this temple, Zi."

"Ahhh yes. Including the one woman that you like. Jade."

Alex looked away. "Don't be ridiculous. She and I are good friends. Best friends."

"Only friends?"

"Anyways...we need to speak with Master Sai as soon as possible."

The Portrait

Contents

"Aaaaah!!" Celina groaned as Jiax grabbed her head and shoved her face on the carpet, ripping off pieces of her hair. He was laughing and enjoying the process of screwing her, while she struggled for her dear life.

She was lying face down on the floor, with Jiax on top of her, and there was nothing she could do in her position. Tears dripped down her eyes as he grabbed her by the hair and did whatever he pleased. He lied on top of her and kissed her shoulders all over, slobbering himself on her smooth skin. To Jiax, she is only a toy, a piece of meat here for his entertainment. Why would he care about her well being? If she loses a few piece of hair, or if she gets a few bruises, it's not his fault, it's her fault for resisting.

As Celina was being ravaged from behind, she screamed and moaned in agony. Her fingers grabbed the carpet tightly while she shed tears of pain and sadness. She did not even have a chance to defend herself, and must face such unspeakable horrors everyday ever since she was captured.

As the ravaging continued, she stared at the portrait of King Liu on the wall. Not having seen the king since she was imprisoned, the portrait is the only thing she can look to as a sign of hope. Even if it is a slim chance, perhaps the king will put an end to all her suffering. Yet, it is not so, for she is being tortured at this very moment.

Her arm reached out for the portrait, reaching as far as she could, while she was being ravaged by the brute. he reached and reached, but to no avail. Has the king betrayed her and left her for dead? When, if ever, will he rescue her? Why must she face such an unfortunate fate?

There were no answers. She knew nothing, yet for some reason, she is being punished. Why are the heavens so cruel? What did she ever do wrong? Celina continued to wonder, shedding tears of sadness, as the brute continued to ravage her for what seemed like an eternity.

7-B Title Contents

Guan was kneeling in front of Master Sai. The old wise man sat at his usual spot on the platform, a few inches above the floor. He touched his long beard as he spoke.

"Master, I do not know if you noticed, but one of our students has particularly high potential."

"Do you mean Alex Cheng?"

Guan showed a little bit of surprise. But this is Ho Sai after all, the man who knows everything. "Yes sir. His skill is improving at a phenomenal rate. Give or take a few months, he could be a high class swordsman."

"Indeed. I see that too. I have noticed his progress."

"Should we advance him to the next class?"

Alex and Zi came into the room, and Ho Sai opened his eyes.

Guan stood up. "Alex? Zi? What are you doing here?"

"We are here to see Master Ho Sai." Alex replied.

"Non-sense. I told you not to disturb our master."

"Let them in." said Sai, much to Guan's surprise. "I need to speak with them alone."

Guan was a little unsatisfied, but he obeyed. "Yes sir." As he left, he walked by Alex. "Don't take too long," he whispered.

The heroes approached within three paces of Sai and bowed down. "Master Ho Sai."

"Come. What did you come here to speak to me about?"

"I think you already know that, master."

"You want to leave the Temple, do you not?"

"Yes, master. I think it is for us to move on. Please don't take offense to this...I thank you from the bottom of my heart for everything you've done for me, and Zi. Thank you so much for your hospitality and your training. The fellow students treat me as if I'm their brother, although not long ago I was a complete stranger. I feel very welcomed here, and it's unfortunate, but I have to go."

"Where are you heading to?" asked Ho Sai.

"The answer is obvious, isn't it? I am going to find my missing sister. Master Guan mentioned that she is back at Yi Ling, and that is where I am heading to."

"Hmmm. Very well then," replied the old sage.

"We are very grateful for your services," said Zi. "Please tell the monks here we really appreciated what they did for us. We've already packed our belongings...and we'll be taking the shortcut back to Yi Ling."

Guan was actually spying on them, and he was shocked to hear these words.

"The shortcut?" inquired Ho Sai. "Do you mean the Valley of Death?"

"That is correct."

"No you can't go there!" Guan said, coming out from hiding.

Sai rubbed his beard. "You never did leave, and you overheard everything."

"I am sorry, master. But I had to do it because I care about these two students. And I object to you going to the Valley of Death."

"Why not?" asked Alex. "It sure beats the hell out of taking the long way."

"Haven't you heard about the rumors?" Guan replied frightfully. "Do you know why it is called the Valley of Death? To enter is to invite death itself. This is the place that is haunted by the legendary War God. He kills anyone who trespass into his territory."

"We're not trespassing, we're just passing by. It's open to the public," Zi said jokingly.

"I highly recommend that you do not take that path!"

"I don't want to take the path where I came from," Alex replied. "It makes no sense to take the longer path when there is a shorter one. This War God figure, whoever he may be, I am not scared of him."

"You are mad! Going there is suicide! No one who's entered the Valley of Death came out alive!"

Ho Sai spoke: "On the contrary, Guan Du. There has been a few people who came out of that place alive. Yes, it is a very small chance, but they do have a chance."

Guan was frantic. "Sir, you are not serious? You're sending them to a death sentence!"

"Master Guan, maybe we'll pass by and not run into the War God at all. Who knows? The forest is so big...I mean, he can't be everywhere at once, right?"

Guan, however, still stood by his beliefs. "That is wishful thinking, Cheng. Don't go, please. If not for me, do it for your own sake! I've had some friends who entered the valley...they were some of the best martial artists around...and they never came back."

"I am not one of those friends," Alex replied arrogantly.

"Enough," said Sai, showing his palm. "Cheng has already made his decision. I have already allowed him to go to the Valley of Death."

"Sir...why are you doing this?" Guan asked.

"Our temple does not force anyone to stay. When they leave the temple, where they go or what happens to them is none of our concern."

Then Guan figured out something. "Is this one of your predictions?"

"If it is, would you still stop them?" Ho Sai asked in his usual emotionless tone. Guan was surprised to hear his master say such a thing, and he did not know how to respond. Little did Guan know, Sai was thinking about the vision he had the other day while meditating. The vision of the burning city, where people were engulfed in flames, and society became nothing but death and chaos. Demons ran rampant amongst the burning city, killing every human in sight. It was too horrific to describe, and so he told no one of this vision. For some reason, Ho Sai's feelings told him that the vision might become reality if Alex does not back to Yi Ling.

"Let us be on our way." Alex announced, and began to walk out.

Guan stood in his way. "No!" he said with much sternness in his voice. I will not let you waste your life just like that. Cheng, you came here injured, barely able to hold a sword. And this Temple has helped speed up your recovery, and in essence, saved your life. Are you just going to throw it all away? You are no match for the War God!"

"Master..." Alex hesitated to speak, as he stared at his teacher. He no longer considers Guan a teacher, but Guan, on the other hand, still sees him as his student, and that is why he is standing in the way.

"Hey, do not forget who we are talking about here." said Zi. "He has been training aggressively ever since his recover. His improvements crushed the learning curve!"

"I agree that your improvement is staggering. But even the best of swordsmen are slain by the War God. They all thought they could take him on. You will surely die."

"Going on that path is the quickest way to Yi Ling." Alex answered. "It makes no sense to take the long way back...there are as many dangers over there as there is in the Valley of Death. We were attacked by mountain bandits and faced many perils to find the Temple."

"If you go to the Valley your death is guaranteed!"

"I do not care if I die or not." Alex retorted, surprising nearly everyone in the room. I came here for one purpose only...to find Li Cheng. She has been missing for most of my life, and I will find her, even if it is the last thing I do. Now that I know she is in Yi Ling, I must go there as soon as possible before she vanishes again."

Guan was shocked as he looked into Alex's eyes, which a burning fire in it. Cheng has shown much dedication and tenacity in his training, and that is because he has a mission to fulfill. It is his life's mission. To stop him would be to kill him on the inside. Yet still, he will not let his student die for nothing.

Guan sighed. "Fine, if you must forfeit your life, I will not stop you. It is your choice...I will let you leave on one condition...fight with me first."

Everyone was shocked.

"If you cannot even defeat me, you have no right to face the War God."

"Fine, then, master!" replied Alex confidently.

King Liu just finished writing on a scroll, and handed it to Xiang. "Excellent, your highness. This new law will surely help us make progress."

"You are using these to tyrannize the people..." said the king, worried and agitated.

"On the contrary, sire, stricter laws help stabilize the kingdom. Sometimes we must sacrifice our freedoms for security. I am sure the people will appreciate what we are doing for them."

Liu Bei grabbed the armrest with his fingers. "I did what you ask of me. Now, can I see my wife."

"Do not worry about her. Rest assured, you have my word that she will be kept alive as long as you do as I say."

"How do I know she is still alive?"

"I wouldn't do anything to harm her, sire. After all, she is still useful to me." The Duke replied. "But it seems you will not be at ease...so here." He took a strand of hair from his pocket and handed them to the king. "Here, this is a memento of her."

Liu clutched the hair tightly in his grip. "Celina...I'm sorry...it's my fault you have to go through this." Then he stared at the Duke with angry eyes. "You better not hurt her."

"Of course sire. We treat her with the utmost respect, fitting of royalty."

The Knife Torture

Contents

It was another torture session for Celina she laid on the bed, tired from all the abuse. But she receives no rest as her abuse continues. Jiax pointed a knife at her face, and she could feel the cold, hard steel against her skin. She turned to the side to avoid looking at it. Jiax laughed as he was playing with her, he enjoys using fear to mess with people's minds.

Jiax put the blade on the other side of her face, making her head turn around to the other side. "Uhhh..." Tears drip down her eyes. Celina is normally a shy person, particularly around men. She has had this fear her whole life, and marriage into nobility did not solve her problem. It made it only worse because she rarely spoke to other men other than the king himself.

But now, she must face a horrible man, a rapist with a knife, whose intentions are unknown. He is physically stronger than her and he has a weapon, while she is just a woman and she is weaponless. She just happens to be captured, caught by surprise, and now is under his complete mercy, and he is free to do as he wishes to her.

He kept on tapping the knife against her face. "I should just cut you up right now." he said, and smiled wickedly. He put the tip of the blade on her forehead, and tantalizingly moved the blade down to her nose.

Celina breathed hard and shut her eyes, dreading each and every second. Every second feels like an eternity and she just wished it would be over. He moved the blade to her lips and let it stay there for while.

Then he guided the knife down to her chin and poked it several times. Celina moaned and shed tears. Her wrists were tied up to the bed, and she can do nothing to defend herself.

Jiax moved the knife down to the area between her breasts and he poked them. He found it a turn on to touch her body with the knife. For some reason, this is a thrill to him, a sick hobby that he can indulge in and make this poor woman suffer. He cut off a few ribbons on her breasts, and continued to move the knife down.

Celina tried to think about something else, but it was no use. Nothing can take her mind away from what's happening to her right now, and she must live through each horrible moment of it.

Then he pointed it at her thigh. Celina prayed to God that he is not doing what she thinks he is doing. He tapped the blade against her thigh and moved it higher...closer to her sacred area. She gasped and just watched in horror as Jiax moved the knife closer and closer to it, a woman's most important area. She prayed and prayed and wished him to stop, but no, it was no use.

The knife touched the ribbon on her leg, and he continued to move the knife into the ribbons. The suspense is too much to bear, and Celina watched in horror while Jiax grew more excited. Finally, he stuck the knife in there, and she screamed for her life.

“AAAAAAAAAAHHH!”

The pain was only there for a split second, but it was a thousand times more painful than the worst pain she has ever felt. She let out one loud scream with tears coming out of her eyes, and her fingers grabbed the bed sheet.

Jiax grabbed her chin and made her face him.

Celina shut her eyes and tears dripped down her face, and her fingers grabbed the bed sheet.

7-C Title Contents

Pong Fu, Shang, and Chan stood together, slamming their bamboo sticks on the ground.

“So, you want to leave and go against the War God, eh? You’re getting too cocky!” Chan taunted.

Alex and Zi were equipped with sticks as well. “I appreciate your concern, chan. But I have already made my decision.”

“We are not going to hold back!” Fu yelled.

“I don’t expect you to!” Zi retorted.

Fu charged and let out his battle cry. “Aaaaaah!” His stick clashed with Zi’s stick. *clang*

Shang and Alex charged into each other and struck. *Thud thud thud* Shang was the one who was least willing to do this. But she, like the others, did not want Alex to leave, and is willing to fight him to make him stay. She doesn’t want to lose another friend. *thud*

They ran into each other and pushed against each other’s bamboo sticks. Alex showed his superior strength in the power lock by pushing Shang, making her lose balance and falling down.

Chan charged into the fight and attacked Alex directly. He always wanted to fight Alex, and this is his perfect opportunity. This time, however, there is no anger or resentment involved, this is a contest of skill. *thud thud*

Zi knocked Fu away. “I’m coming, Alex!” He ran to the side, but Fu stuck his stick in front of Zi’s feet, tripping him. “Ugh!”

With Alex distracted, Chan attacked him. *Clang* Alex blocked his attack. In a power lock, Chan is clearly the superior one in terms of strength, and Alex had a hard time pushing his opponent. Shang ran at him and thrusts forward, and Alex dodged it just in time. She struck low, and he jumped over her and landed behind her.

Zi and Alex stood side by side, while the three monks stood in unison. They continued their assault. *Pang! Pong!*

Alex swings the stick to hit Shang’s legs, and tripped her. Chan screamed and was about to raise his bamboo stick and strike, when Alex hit him in the chest. *thud* He motioned the stick to move up, hitting his chin. The one-two combo knocked Chan out of commission.

Fu thrusts his stick forward, Zi ducked and thrusts his stick into Fu’s stomach.

“Ugh!” Fu dropped his stick and grabbed his wounded area in pain.

Guan Yu slammed the bottom of his stick on the floor. “Alex Cheng. You can still change your mind.”

“Never!” Alex replied firmly.

Guan assumed fighting position and they did the stare. Everyone knew that something intense was about to happen, for it is the fight between pupil and teacher. In this fight, no one hated each other, but their disbeliefs are in disagreement, and this is how warriors must get their point across.

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. "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 thus, Guan Du took him to the various parts of the temple, beginning with the training grounds.

"Are you two fighting? That is against the rules."

Chan and Alex bowed. "Sorry, master."

Guan was displeased and spoke in an authoritative tone. He does this expects everyone to follow the rules no matter what. "Cheng. You are a newcomer, so let me tell you that righting is against the rules of our Temple. It is not to be tolerated."

"Hai. Sorry master." Alex said, bowing.

"And as for you Chan Lou, you are older and more experienced. You know the rules by heart. I am disappointed in you."

"Sorry master."

Guan turned around. "After your meal, both of you come outside to receive your punishment. We treat guests the same way we treat our students, and we make no exceptions."

Indeed, they have been through a lot since the day Alex came upon the Temple. From the first moment they met, Guan had taken a liking to Alex. His judgment was confirmed by watching Alex's growth throughout these months. However, Guan did not want to admit the fact that, the reason why he likes Alex is that he reminds him of Li Cheng. They are years apart, yet so similar in many ways.

The moment of truth will be decided soon. Without uttering a word, they charged into each other. "Yaaah!" "Yaaah!" Their bamboo sticks collided. *Clack* They went past each other without even blinking.

Both their sticks snapped at the collision point. Guan was shocked. A true master can judge an opponent's strength from a single hit. In that moment, Guan changed his mind, and decided to give way. "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 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.

Chan smiled as he watched his friend leave. He, unlike Fu and Shang, did not feel sad. Even though he considered Alex an enemy at one point, he is now a friend. They have an unforgettable bonding experience while being detained for those seven days. That he did not mind, for the punishment brought him a much greater reward – a true friend.

Alex and Chan exchanged glances, and they both seem to have the same thought. One day they will meet again, and they will test their skills to find out who is the truly superior one. But for now, Alex has his own quest to fulfill, and his chapter in the Temple has finished.

On their way to the Gate of Hope, Zi asked, “So, are you sure about this?”

“Master Ho Sai says that this is my path, and I believe him.” Alex answered in the affirmative.

“Alright then. Finally, we’re going to meet your sister. I wonder if she’s cute?”

Alex stopped walking and looked at his companion.

“Just kidding!” Zi said, running like a kid. “I’m not going to hit on her!”

“Get back here you punk!” said Alex, running after his friend. They laughed and had a blast while running towards the setting sun.

八: Danger! Encounter With A Legendary Warrior

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[B] [C] Contents

Our heroes Alex Cheng and Zi Lai have completed their exit from the temple and have set foot back into the wilderness. Although they felt sad about leaving, the sadness quickly dissipated because they had each other. They were best friends from the start, and will remain so until the very end.

They will now enter the Gate of Hope once again, and after that, the Valley of Death, the place that Guan Du warned them about. Is Master Ho Sai’s prediction true, or will their fate be the same as that of En Lo?

Back in the palace, King Liu spent many sleepless nights regretting his decision. He was worried about the kingdom as a whole. After transferring most of his power to the Duke, became the Duke’s puppet; taking his orders and doing as he wishes. All this time, Liu still has no idea where Celina was being held, or anything about her well being, for that matter. While he sat in his chair, waiting in hopelessness, Xiang continued to devise schemes under the direction of a higher power.

In the populace, there is a massive outrage with soldiers searching people’s homes...for the most ridiculous reasons...if they have a reason at all. The soldiers barged into the home of Jade’s neighbors. The husband and wife watched in fear as the soldiers searched their belongings, breaking anything carelessly. These imperials have no regard for personal privacy whatsoever, nor the safety of the citizens.

Jade and her grandmother heard the ruckus, and came outside to see what was happening. They could only stand alongside the husband and wife, and shook their heads.

“What has our city become?” said her grandma.

Jade was angry that the soldiers did as they pleased, but there was nothing she could do about it, except hope that she is not the next one to be searched.

The Discovery

Inside the bedroom chamber of the palace, there was a silhouetted figure of a woman kneeling in the bed. Because curtains were covering the bed, her details could not be seen from the outside. She remained still in a defensive posture, and has not moved for the past few hours.

Upon closer inspection, the woman had only ribbons covering her body, and without those she would practically be naked. Celina's arms were crossed over her chest, and she was somewhat shivering and shaking. It was a defensive posture that she instinctively took on even when no one is around. But who can blame her, after all the horrors she has been through?

She has been harassed physically and mentally, and given no rest. The bad man comes in whenever he feels like it and does horrible things to her. Poor Celina never suffered so much pain and indignity...

Being a concubine, she has always been a woman of dignity and image, and would never do anything to hurt anybody. She's always had a kind heart and treats everyone tenderly...yet the world does not treat her this way. Being imprisoned by this bad man, and not knowing where the king is or if he will ever save her, Celina lamented her situation. She regrets being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and regrets existing.

As she held her own chest tightly, tears drip down her eyes as she thought about the many horrible, unspeakable things have happened to her. Celina was tired of crying, yet she continued to cry and lament her situation...and she thinks about a particular time when she was abused...

In the bedroom, there were sounds of a woman moaning in agony, and there were two silhouetted figures behind the curtain. The man was on top of the woman, touching her all over like the animal that he was. He was caressing her stomach with his face while she moaned in pain. "Mmmm, you smell so good."

"S-stop, please..." she muttered weakly.

Jiax's hands grabbed her breasts tightly, as his face was still on her stomach. He moved his face to her breasts, and caressed them while Celina groaned, her head thrashing about. Unable to do anything else, her hands grabbed the bed sheet.

"Uuuh! Ugh!"

He could feel her breasts through the thin ribbons, and let himself loose, as her breasts were so soft and warm and tender.

Celina's head tilted up and she let out screams while he violated one of the most sensitive areas of her body. "Ugh...uhh! You're m-making a big mistake."

"Oh, is that so?" he replied with his hand still on one of her breasts. "There's nothing wrong here. You're a woman, and women are supposed to be used by men." He put his hand on her right thigh, and moved it closer and closer to the ribbons, and went under the ribbons.

"Uuuh!" Celina moaned, turning her head side to side. "You c-can't do this...uhhhh! The king is going to punish you!"

Jiax grabbed her by the chin. "Is that so? Then where is he now? Why isn't he protecting you?" He continued to rummage his other hand between her legs, causing her great pain and discomfort.

"Uuuuh!! Uuuh!" she moaned, with tears dripping from the corner of her eyes.

"Let me tell you a little secret. The king has no power anymore. He gave up his all his power to the Duke just to keep you alive."

Celina, upon hearing this truth, was shocked beyond words. Her eyes grew wide opened and she gasped. Jiax put his lips unto hers, and consequently, tears streamed down her face.

Now she finally finds out the truth from this brute's mouth. But she had no time to even be surprised, as she was being raped by this brute. One can only imagine which is more painful, the fact that she is delivered the truth about the kingdom, or that this man's disgusting tongue is inside her mouth?

Jiax went down to her neck, running his mouth along its contents, down to her neckline, and her breasts. She groaned, while her head thrashed left and right.

Indeed, everything now makes sense. The palace is now under Duke Xiang's control, as well as the eunuchs and the military forces. King Liu has now become his puppet. It is all part of his grand scheme, and the sad realization is that Celina is just a part of his scheme.

"And as long as the Duke is in charge, we can do whatever we want." Jiax went down to her stomach and kissed it all over, and caressed his face on it. He grabbed her legs and put his head between them, and began munching as if it was candy.

Celina moaned with tears while her fingers grabbed the bed sheet. It was extremely painful and uncomfortable, and her head tossed and turned while she groaned.

"No..." she muttered in disbelief. "He wouldn't give up his power for me..."

Jiax smiled and stared at her perversely as his hand was holding her legs, and his head was between them. "Oh, he cares about you more than you think. After all, you are his greatest treasure. And I can see why." Then he shoved his face between her legs and started munching again.

Celina screamed and her head tossed and turned as he violated her in ways that no one has done to her before. Her fingers grabbed the pillow tightly, and tears dripped from her eyes as she screamed at the top of her lungs.

"Demon King," said Duke. "The palace has been successfully taken over. King Liu is under my complete control."

"Very good." replied the face. "How is the search going?"

"The law has already been passed officially. Our soldiers are currently searching the thing that you seek."

"Just remember, you must alert me once you find a portal. We must secure those locations so we can send our demons to your dimension. Keep up the good work, Duke Xiang." The face disappeared and the Duke smiled.

After traveling for a while, Alex and his companion Zi reached the Gate of Hope, a place they recognized when they passed through the other way. Much to their displeasure, the same two stone statues approached them.

"They're back." said Alex.

"Yeah, these guys again." Zi replied. "I had trouble getting past them last time."

"Same here, but this time it will be different. We're not going to be dominated."

The statues' eyes glowed angrily, drawing their swords and running at them. The swordsmen ran at them and drew their swords. With their newly found skills, fighting the statues was nothing more than a mere task. Being nothing more than stone, their movements were stiff and rigid.

Alex dodged the swinging blade, and struck the statue ferociously, especially on its head.

The other statue was attacking Zi, hitting the ground viciously while Zi dodged.
Wham

While dodging, Zi noticed there was a gem on its forehead. Then he realized that it must be the statue's weakness. This lifeless artifact could not move by itself without some sorcery, and this gem must be what gives it life.

"Hit the jewel on their foreheads!" Zi yelled.

"Got it!" Alex replied.

Statue A swings its blade, and Alex jumped back to dodge it. Although these stone warriors were slow, one hit from them could be fatal, and must be avoided. But Alex, knowing their weakness, now has a target.

Statue B attacked continuously as Zi dodged left and right, while moving backwards.

"Alright, it's time to put you out of commission." said Alex. Statue A charged forward to strike, Alex jumped up, effectively dodging the hit, and swings his blade down, hitting the gem on the statue's forehead. *Crack*

Once the jewel shattered, the statue became instantly lifeless, and collapsed backwards.

Statue B and Zi were in a power lock, and Zi pushed the statue's arms to the side, and stabbed his sword into its forehead, shattering the gem. *Crack* As expected, this one also lost its animation and fell to the ground.

Alex and Zi gave each other a high five. "Yeah, we did it!" Zi exclaimed.

"Our training at the temple was worth it." Alex replied.

"C'mon. Your sister's waiting for us back at the city."

Alex nodded, and they continued their journey. The statues that once posed a threat were no longer in their way. Now, these two young warriors were more confident than ever to enter the feared Valley of Death. Is the War God merely a story used to scare children, or is he real? They will find out soon...

Sensitivity

Celina was laying on the bed, face up and panting for breath. This was supposed to be her room, her private quarters, but it has become her prison and her hell. One day, she was living the life of nobility, minding her own business, and the next day, she became a prisoner, a mere political tool.

And the worst part of all is that she has nothing to do with this. She was married into the Liu family, but she makes no decisions whatsoever. She was dragged into this mess because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Jiax came to the bed, and she knew it was coming. He grabbed her chin and she shut her eyes to avoid looking at him, and turned to the side. He has already done enough, gave her enough pain to last ten lifetimes, but no, it is not enough for him. Tears drip down her eyes as he turned her to face him.

He knows everything about her...her whole life and identity has been exposed to him, this brute who came out of nowhere. He knows her past and everything that is important. And of course, he knows her physically and sexually. He knows details about her body that no man in the world is supposed to know. Yet she knows nothing about him. As matter of fact, she is just ignorant and has no idea what is going on around her. She is nothing more than an unfortunate soul.

Jiax kissed her cheek and let himself loose, while she winced and turned to the side. It has already begun. It will not end until he is satisfied. He kissed her on the neck,

rubbing his face all over her skin, and she moaned and groaned in pain. He kissed the cleavage on her breasts, and put his face between them and snuggled them.

What a horrible feeling, to have a brute you don't even know touch you all over in ways that you could not even imagine, not even in your worst nightmare. And this has become Celina's worst nightmare, and she is living it everyday.

A woman's breasts are a very sensitive area, and they should be treated with care, but not Jiax, he does not care. She is nothing more than a trophy, a mere piece of meat here for his enjoyment. Whatever gives her more pain, gives him more pleasure.

Jiax and her were now face to face, and she just stared at him with her fearful eyes. "No...please..." she pleaded.

She has pleaded and begged this entire time, but he never listens to her. But what else is she supposed to say to the person who has raped her? What are you supposed to say to the rapist who is staring at you straight in the face, who has only one intention in mind?

Jiax kissed her lips, and she grabbed the bed sheet and suffered more. What a horrid feeling it is, to have his filthy lips pressed against hers.

When he was done with that, he put his hand on her thigh and shoved it into the ribbons, and she groaned painfully. Her thighs, particularly the skin closer to her sacred area, was a very sensitive area. Her entire body is sensitive, and even if a man touches her casually, she will react by withdrawing. Her body is shy, just like her personality is.

But now, this man is touching her body all over, violating her in unimaginable ways, touching her with different body parts without any regards to her well being. Poor Celina has to suffer such a terrible fate at the clutches of this terrible man.

He grabbed her thigh and put it on his shoulder, and kissed her ankle. Then he made successive kisses to her lower thigh, and her knee, and touched her thigh all over, and moved his hand into the ribbons, into her sacred area.

Celina's sacred area is her most sensitive body part, and it is the most painful and uncomfortable when Jiax reaches his hand in there. She screamed and turned her head left and right, and tears dripped down her eyes, but nothing eased her pain. Nothing can possibly ease her pain...

8 - B Title Contents

The students in the temple were all practicing in uniform movements. Master Guan was instructing as usual. Today, however, his mind is distracted, thinking about a certain two people, who are about to enter the most dangerous journey of their lives.

The travelers have finally made it into the area known as the Valley of Death. The forest was densely populated with trees and grass, but the valley's surface is a little different. The grass was shorter and greener than usual, and the area was filled with bamboo trees. Without the thick trees blocking their vision, they can actually see the path ahead.

Alex grew excited as they walked on. Their training from the temple was worth it, since he put his best into it. He walked out of the temple feeling more confident about himself as a fighter and is no longer afraid of being attacked by anybody.

All his life he has been running away because he was falsely accused of being a criminal. His fight with En Lo was life threatening, but he survived thanks to his persistence. Alex, with his companion, Zi, faced many hardships and dangers in the wilderness. He was even attacked by bandits, and fell off the waterfall while injured. He was left to die alone, yet he survived. He even defeated the stone statues that guard the

Gate of Hope. All these experiences only made him a stronger fighter and a stronger man.

Alex was almost certain that there is no such person as the War God, but Zi, on the other hand, has other beliefs.

"Here we are, entering the Valley of Death itself." said Alex.

"This place feels kind of spooky, doesn't it?" Zi commented.

"It only feels that way because you believe the rumors."

"These aren't rumors, Alex. Didn't you hear what Master Guan said? He knew several friends who lost their lives here."

"They were probably killed by common bandits."

As they walked on, a silhouetted figure watched them from the trees. He vanished in an instant. Zi saw something on the corner of his eye, and looked in that direction, but saw nothing unusual.

"What's wrong?" Alex inquired.

"Umm, nothing."

"Oh come on, don't tell me you're scared of the War God?"

"Who me? Scared? Never! We are the best of the best, after all." Zi said, trying to top Alex's confidence.

"That's the spirit." Alex said. "Honestly, I don't believe anyone in this world can be this strong."

"Well, you never know."

Another silhouetted figure jumped through the trees. Zi, being an expert in stealth, can pick up things quicker, and he definitely noticed something unusual. Seconds later, another figure dashed by. Alex also sensed it.

"Do you hear that?" Zi asked.

"Could it be an animal?"

"No, it's definitely not an animal."

"Then...is someone watching us?" asked Alex.

"Listen, Alex. I don't know if the War God exists, but what I do know is if we stay here any longer we are going to die. Let's go!"

They both looked each other in the eyes, and upon the mental count of three, they ran for it.

Suddenly, someone landed in front of him in a crouch position. He was wearing white priest clothes, and there was a sword sheath under his belt. He had a straw hat, and lowered his head such that his face cannot be seen.

Alex and Zi stared at the warrior for a moment, and then stared at each other, and ran the opposite way. Three more warriors dropped from the trees. They too dressed similar to the first one, except that they had mask. Now the heroes found themselves surrounded by four fighters whose faces cannot be seen, and their confidence quickly faded away.

"You couldn't be..." Alex muttered.

"Can it be..." Zi exclaimed.

"Who dares to trespass into the Valley of Death?" said the first straw hat fighter.

"So you do exist. You're the legendary warrior, the War God, correct?" said Alex, summoning the courage he had before. "I've heard many things about you. But unlike others I don't believe the hype."

The War God smirked. "You talk too big for someone of your caliper."

"Just let us pass." Zi said. "We did not come here to fight."

"Then you should have thought twice before entering the Valley of Death. No one who trespasses here lives!"

The three masked warriors drew their swords.

"Fine then. We will fight our way through!" Alex exclaimed, drawing his sword. He attacked the War God head on, but the first masked fighter, Fo Long stood in his way. Alex and him clashed their blades. *Clang*

Zi ran as Sui Long and Shen Long chased him. They threw chains at him, and he jumped away. Sui Long came at him with his sword, and Zi dodged his attack. Shen Long threw his chain forward, and Zi jumped up, but the chain caught his left leg, and dragged him to the ground. *Wham*

Now that Zi was down, Sui Long came at him and stabbed, and Zi rolled away.

Alex ran towards the War God, straight for the leader. The War God vanished with lightning speed, and his attack missed.

"I am your opponent." Fo Long announced.

Alex lowered his body, preparing to strike. Fo Long and Alex charged and went past each other. *clang* A few moments passed by, and realizing that neither landed a hit, both fighters turned around to face each other.

Fo Long turned his sword facing the side. Alex knew he was about to attack head on, but did not know what move the enemy would make. With the straw hat and mask, it was hard to read the opponent's intentions.

Suddenly, Fo Long charged forward, and Alex quickly jumped away to safety. Fo Long did not let up, as he ran forward, then kicked a tree, and switched directions without losing any speed. Alex ran to the side, and Fo Long ended up slashing the bamboo tree, cutting it off completely.

Alex and Fo Long ran through the woods without taking their eyes off each other. The other masked fighters followed them, and their speed was actually faster than that of Alex and Zi. They stopped running and continued to exchange moves. Their blades collided, and they struggled, pushing back and forth, and Fo Long shoved Alex's blade to the side, and struck him in the stomach with the pommel (bottom) of the sword. *Thud* While in pain, Fo Long kicked him in the face, knocking him on the ground.

"Alex!" Zi shouted. He wanted to help his friend, but he was occupied with two other masked men.

"Hmph. Do you have any last words, trespasser?" said the War God.

Alex stood up. "You attacked us by surprise and you outnumber us four to two. You call this a fair fight?"

"No one ever said it was fair. You are in my land, and thus you fall under my rules."

As Fo Long was about to strike, Alex put out his palm. "Hold it. I want to fight you, War God, one on one. Do you accept my challenge?"

"What difference will it make? You are still a dead man regardless."

"Why, are you scared to fight fairly?"

The warrior laughed. "Have it your way. If you want to die honorably, I can grant you your wish. I will assure you that my comrades will not attack. Can you give me the same guarantee of your friend?"

"I can vouch for him with my life."

"Alex, what are you doing?" Zi asked with much worry in his voice. "Do you know who you're up against?"

"I'm not going to die before I find my sister." Alex announced confidently.

Fo Long, upon hearing that phrase, grew curious. It seems that Alex's statement has sparked his attention.

Now, Cheng and the War God held their swords tightly, staring at each other with much intensity. The wind blew hard and leaves flew by. The dust began to settle as the wait continued. The War God kept his head low; his straw hat covered most of

his face, and only his mouth was revealed. It was hard to read him and that made Cheng nervous. The straw hat warrior's right hand was mere inches away from his sword pommel, ready to pull it out at an instant's notice. One can imagine what swift movements he'd make; he'd draw the sword out instantly and slash something. It can all happen at the blink of an eye.

Zi was probably more worried about his friend than the person himself. (Alex, you're challenging one of the strongest martial artists in the world to a one on one duel. I hope you know what you're doing...)

The War God stood there calmly as the wind blew against him. Alex, however, did not have the same confidence, for he was up against an extremely strong opponent. It is the legendary manslayer, after all. He'd hate to admit it, but he was scared and his heart beat rapidly against his chest. Despite his fear, Cheng must focus on the task at hand, otherwise it might end before he can blink.

Without a warning, both warriors charged into each other. *Flash* They exchanged moves. *Cling clong* They jumped away five paces apart. The War God jumped and did an aerial assault, and Alex jumped away, and they went from tree to tree. *Doosh doosh*

They jumped into each other and clashed. When they landed, Alex's sword vibrated from the hit. Now the hero realizes the difference in their strength. He turned around with an angry face, still determined to fight.

(I won't lose here...I've made it this far with the help of the Temple.) Alex ran and screamed, and War God charged and slashed, running past him. Alex turned around, realizing his shoulder was cut.

He was seriously wondering if he made the right decision to come here to the valley. But no matter what, he must fight, for it is too late to turn back. All he sees is the enemy in front of him, the one who stands in the way of finding his sister. Alex Cheng charged into the straw hat warrior and attacked. "Yaaah!"

He could barely keep up with the War God's movements. *Clang Clang* Alex was pushed back, and his sword was vibrating from the hit.

Exposure

Celina crawled backwards on the bed as Jiax approached. Her back was against the wall and there was no more room to run to. He was smiling while she feared for the worst. She just stared at him with her big, innocent eyes, and who knows what this vulgar has in mind.

Jiax grabbed her by the hands and they struggled, and he pushed her down until he was completely on top of her. Even though she knew it would be useless, she still had to struggle, for what else is she supposed to do? Just let him take advantage of her as he pleases?

Her never ending torture continues as he put his face between her breasts. They felt like pork buns. By now, he's already familiar with her body. He knew every bit of it in detail. As he shoved his face between her breasts and kissed them all over, it was a good and familiar feeling. Poor Celina was forced to wear nothing but ribbons this entire time she was captured, and it's the way Jiax likes it. During this time, he has learned many things about her, particularly her physique. He knows details that no man in Shen is supposed to know.

Every inch of her arm he has touched, every part of her neck and her neckline has kissed with his lips and caressed with his face. He has touched her breasts over and over, and he knows their size and contents.

Celina's most sacred secrets are exposed to this vulgar brute. Celina's life is already over but her humiliation continues.

He kissed her chin and her neck, she turned her head to the side while shedding tears. Jiax grabbed her chin, making her face him. She just stared at him with wet, dripping eyes. He kissed her lips. Jiax believes that he owns her entirely. Every part of her body belongs to him and he can do what he pleases.

He lifts up her leg and admires it from top to bottom. He ran his hand along its contents as if it were a work of art. He kissed her ankles all over, then her lower thigh, and her knee and upper thigh. Celina moaned in pain.

8 - C Title Contents

Zi watched the fight with sweat dripping all over his face. To watch his best friend fight someone so dangerous and not be able to do anything was difficult for him.

Sui Long speaks. "Your friend actually dared to challenge the War God to one on one combat. He must have a death wish."

"You don't know him. He is very determined. Alex has advanced training from the Temple of Enlightenment." Zi replied.

"It makes no difference how much training he has received." Sui retorted. "No one has ever beaten our master in combat. You must have heard the rumors about the Valley of Death, have you not?"

"Certainly." said Zi. "It is said that for the past fifty years no one who has entered the Valley of Death left alive."

Sui was surprised. "You know the dangers...yet you two came here anyway?"

"Of course. Going through this valley is the shortest way back to Yi Ling. You don't want us to take the long way, do you?"

"Such foolishness!" Sui exclaimed.

"Say what you want. But Alex still has a chance."

Despite standing next to them, Fo Long did not pay any attention to their conversation, but he was focused on Alex. It is a secret amongst the masked warriors that Fo Long actually had a long lost brother. In addition, Fo Long is actually a girl disguised as a man. And this particular challenger, Alex, seem to resemble her brother in appearance. According to her memory, her brother had silver hair, much like Alex does. Can this Alex be...no, perhaps it is a coincidence?

"Your friend has no chance of winning." said Shen Long. "He may have potential, but he lacks combat experience."

"You were able to defeat other martial artists because you ambush them when they're not ready."

"How naïve. Your companion is inferior in both strength and technique. Our master has mastered the Heaven's Wrath style, a style that is known in the martial arts world as one of the deadliest. Your training from the temple is obsolete against the Heaven's Wrath."

Upon hearing his, Zi grew more worried. (Alex...you have to win!)

"Yaaaah!!" Alex screamed as he fought on.

As their blades clashed, they entered a power lock. Alex pushed with all his might, and managed to shove the War God's blade to the side, then slashed his leg. The War God slashed his shoulder, and they went past each other. *Slsh*

Alex groaned from his wound, now bleeding.

The War God was smiling until he felt a jolt of pain on his leg. (I cannot believe he actually hurt me.) He stared into Alex's eyes, and became slightly discerned. His eyes were very much intense, with much passion and anger, and even hate.

(This person isn't bad...)

Clang! Cling! Dodge! Swipe!

(But it's nothing I haven't seen before.)

Thud! War God hit Alex with the back of his sword. He felt a sudden jolt of pain in his stomach, which paralyzed him. *Thud* War god hit him on the chin with the pommel of the sword, and Alex stuttered backwards. The straw hat warrior jumped and kicked Alex's head several times. He fell to the ground in pain.

"There is no point in continuing." War God said in an authoritative tone. "Just surrender your life to me and I will give you a quick and painless death."

His race all roughed up, Alex tried to get up. He stuck his sword on the ground, using it as a handle to push himself up to his feet. "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's sword began glowing red and eventually, caught up in flames. Zi and the three masked men held their breath as they watched the finale. The wind blew hard yet again, and Alex panted for breath. He knew that his chances of winning are slim, but try he must, for he is a determined one.

The two fighters charged. *Doosh! Clang* Alex's sword flew to the air in a spinning fashion, and Alex fell on his back. *Thud*

"This little game is over." said the War God, approaching his victim.

Zi took a step forward, and the three masked men drew their swords and pointed them at his neck.

"Wait...I'm not here to make any trouble. I'm here because I'm looking for someone."

"You are looking for the devil, and you are about to see him in a second."

"I came here looking for my sister. I didn't mean to cause any trouble. Please let me through."

The War God raised his sword to the air. "Your personal trifles are of no importance to me."

"We've been separated since we were kids! I need to find her...her name is Li Cheng...please...I've been searching for her for 10 years!"

Upon hearing that name, the War God froze in place. Fo Long was shocked beyond belief. Li Cheng is her real name, and that means...that this man with silver hair, this man who stands before her...is truly her long lost brother!

As the little boy cried out for his sister, the girl shed tears of regret as she turned around and walked away. Her mother and father were sad, and they held little Alex tightly, while he tried to escape from their grip and reach for his sister.

"No! Big sister!" screamed the boy.

It was difficult for Li to leave, especially if she is never going to see them again. But this is for their own good, for her disappearance will make her family safe. She did not want them to be involved any further.

"It's him. It's really him!" she muttered quietly to herself. She almost wanted to cry from all the joy. Who can blame her? Her brother who she has not seen in ten years is standing before her very eyes. And Alex announced that he came here specifically to look for his sister. He came all this way and faced so many dangers...just to reunite with her?

Li snapped out of her trance and remembering that she is still disguised as a man, stood between the War God and Alex. "Master, he is not our enemy."

The War God slowly let down his sword. "I did not know that you were Li Cheng's brother. Young man...I'd never thought I'd do this...but your life is spared."

Both Alex and Zi were shocked. "You mean...you're not going to kill me?"

"Consider yourself lucky."

Alex stood up. "I'm sorry about the whole thing, but do you know my sister?"

Fo Long spoke. "She came here a few years ago...and trained under the tutelage of master. But she just left. And unfortunately, I do not know where she is."

Alex's face became disappointed. "I see."

Zi was quite surprised at the twist. "So, we are not enemies anymore?"

Sui Long and Shen Long went to their master. "Sir, what do we do with these two?"

"You are Alex Cheng?"

"Yes..."

The War God smiled. "I heard about you from Master Ho Sai. He told me that you arrive. Do you want to see your sister?"

"Yes I do." Alex replied. "I want to see her very badly."

"The key to finding your sister is through Duke Xiang." said he with the straw hat.

"Duke Xiang?"

"He is a corrupt official who has taken control of the kingdom. You must defeat him, but in order to do so, you must receive my training. Are you ready for what awaits you?"

"I'll do anything to kill that bastard duke." Alex replied confidently.

"The journey ahead will be dangerous. The training you will receive from me is no ordinary training you have experienced from other so-called masters. Are you ready for it?"

"I am ready for anything." he replied passionately.

The War God saw the fire in this young man's eyes. This look reminded him of his sister, Li Cheng, and it made him smile on the inside.

"Are you sure? Because 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!"

Zi sighed in relief and smiled. It looks fate has dealt Alex an interesting card. Instead of facing death, he is now to be trained by the best of the best.

Fo Long was just as surprised and relieved. The mask hid her emotions well, for if there was no mask, everyone would see her smiling. It has been 10 years, and alas, her blood brother stands before her. Fo Long was unable to recognize him at first, but now he does resemble his former child-self. Alex has the same silver hair, the same eyes, and the same face. What a handsome young man he grew up to be.

"Are you sure? Because 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."

As the sun rose up from the skyline, the sky went from pitch black to dark red, to yellow within minutes. Zi loitered about, sitting on a tree branch and eating an apple, not having a care in the world.

Alex was also sitting on a tree branch on the same tree. Zi finished the apple and threw it on the ground. "Isn't it strange how fate works?" Zi commented. "Your greatest enemy has become your master."

"Yea..."

"Not so talkative today. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Alex replied.

"Still thinking about your sister?"

"Kind of."

"We'll find her, man. Don't worry about it."

Alex sighed. "It's just that, every time I come close to finding her, she ends up being not here. It's so hopeless...I just don't understand...where the hell is she? Why is she so hard to find? I think I am missing something here."

"The War God said that the duke is the key to finding her. So that means she is back at Yi Ling."

"But what does it mean? When we get there, she probably won't be there. It is just like how we came to the Temple just to find out that she left a few years ago. We're always a few steps behind. Oh, it is almost time for training." Alex leaped onto the ground.

Zi also leaped and landed next to him. "Don't worry too much, man." said he, tapping on Alex's shoulder. "It's a small world so we'll find her eventually. We'll search every single female in the country 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." Zi replied.

"Well, hold on to it tight, because today you're going to need it."

Master Genzo and his newly appointed student were ready for their first training session. They stood twenty paces from each other and Alex waited patiently for him to speak. "Now, Cheng, before we start your training, I want to warn you again that it is going to be rough."

"I am prepared, War God."

"My real name is **Genzo**. Just call me Master Genzo."

"Yes, Master Genzo."

"Before I start training you, I need to know what skill level you are at first. So come at me and give me everything you have. And do not hold back, just like before."

"Hai." Alex replied obediently.

Both drew their swords and attacked each other. *Cling clang cling*

Suddenly, Genzo stopped. "Very interesting."

"What is it? Am I good enough?"

"You're using the sword as if it's a 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. It is not flexible."

"I see...it must be a habit from the Temple. They are very conservative when it comes to swords. They use mostly bamboo sticks."

"I see. How long were you at the Temple?"

"Honestly...I lost track. The time I spent there felt like a lifetime, yet it was so short. I've been there for roughly three months."

"Well Cheng, 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. Bamboo sticks, knives, daggers, arrows, spears...anything that you can get your hands on. Just in case during combat you lose your sword or it gets shattered. You need to be prepared for everything and anything."

Alex paid careful attention to his master's wise words.

"Let me tell you something, Cheng - you need to be conscious of what weapon you're using at the moment. A bamboo has different applications than a sword. It is longer, so it has more reach - and it is lighter and faster. But one does not use a bamboo stick to kill, but rather its main use is to disable the enemy. A sword, on the other hand, is deadlier. It is designed to kill and make the enemy die of blood loss. But it is heavier and shorter than a bamboo stick. It's much harder to use.

The sword, by far, one of the hardest weapon to use. One does not simply learn to use a sword - a true swordsmen uses a sword **style** - a set of rules and disciplines for using the sword - and styles are passed down from generation to generation. In our kingdoms alone, there are thousands of sword styles - every one of them is different and unique. Some styles are better than others. Some are more commonly used than others. But I personally use the **Heaven's Wrath Style** - it is superior to all the other styles out there, and it is widely known among the populace. And it is this very style that I will teach you."

"Yes, master."

"Let us continue, shall we?"

Alex nodded and they continued fighting.

Zi still loitered about on the tree branch, shaking his leg and humming.

Sui Long walked by the tree. "Hey you, Mr. Lai."

"Hmmm? What's up?"

"Your friend Cheng has just begun training with Master Genzo."

"Yeah I know."

"And what are you doing up there?" inquired the masked man.

"I'm just chillin' here."

"Why don't you come down and train with us? 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. But my fellow students and I can train you."

"Oh...sounds interesting." Zi jumped and landed on the ground. "Great, let's do it then."

"Alright." said Sui Long, "But I'm warning you, we're not going to go easy on you."

Zi smiled. "Hah. That's what I expected to hear from a student of the War God."

Genzo walked along the forest path silently, with Alex right behind him. As their walk was about to go uphill, Alex grew curious. "Where are we going to, master?"

"Come, I want to show you something."

"How long will this take?"

"Do not be so impatient. Trust me." replied he.

Thus, Alex continued to follow Genzo's back without saying any more – until they were at the high end of a cliff. From there they could see the forest from a high perspective.

"Wow..." Alex said.

"It feels different from up here than on the bottom, isn't it?"

"It sure does."

There was a long silence. The breeze hit Alex's face and blew his hair. It felt chilly yet slightly comfortable at the same time.

"So why did you bring me up here, Master Genzo?"

"You want to become like me, do you not?"

"Yes, master. Definitely."

"Hmmp. Being a master swordsman has a price...a very expensive price."

"I don't mind! I can handle anything."

"Fool!" Genzo scolded. "You say that, but you cannot handle it! You are still young, so do you think you are invincible or something! You think that you can take all the burden on your shoulders?"

Alex gasped because there was truth in his words.

"Let me tell you a little about myself...my background."

There were images of himself when he was a younger swordsman. He was running away from town. He was holding a bag of his most prized belongings and held it tightly to his chest. As he walked through the crowds, he kept his head down, and his hat covered much of his face.

"-Many years ago, I was branded a criminal, one of the kingdom'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-"

Within the forest, Genzo was sitting behind a tree, holding a sword. Bounty hunters were searching for him.

"Where is he? Let me at him!" one guy said.

"No, when we find him, he is mine." the other guy said.

"We'll see who gets him first."

Suddenly, Genzo ran for it. The hunters sensed him and chased him. But Genzo was sly and tricky, as he was familiar with the wilderness. Instead of taking them all on at once, he used tricks and diversions to separate them...and slaughtered them one by one. When the fight was over, the ground was filled with corpses, as there were bloodstains on the bamboo trees.

"I had to use my instincts to keep myself alive. But that only infuriated the government even more. The more people that came after me, the more I killed. The more I killed, the higher the bounty became on me. The higher the bounty became, the more who wanted to kill me. It was an endless cycle of death and fear. All I wanted was to be left alone. As the years passed by, my real name was forgotten. People began labeling me as the "Forest Killer," "The Cold-blooded Murderer," and eventually, my name became the "War God." I did not choose this name; it was branded upon me by society."

Genzo trained alone in the woods. He held a bamboo stick, hitting it against the bamboo trees. *Doosh.*

"-As the years passed by my fighting skills improved. I not only could hold 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. The sword became second nature to me. I am the best of the best...but at what price? My life is nothing but emptiness - filled with hate, sorrow, fear, bloodshed and death."

Images of death - the ground was filled with bloody, lifeless bodies. Swords lay all over. The river turned from bright blue to red...

"For these 50-something years, I've been living alone. With the exception of my three apprentices, I have neither friends nor family."

Alex was shocked by his speech.

"So you see, Cheng, being the best swordsman isn't always a good thing. Because when you are at the top, people will instantly get jealous. They'll always try to knock you off, and you'll never have a moment of peace."

"Master..."

"There's an old proverb - everybody wants to be the general, but you better think twice before wanting to be king. To them, I am the 'king' of swordsmen. And all these bounty hunters are jealous 'generals.' I am their target; thus this is the price of being a king."

"I see. By the way, what crime did you commit that made you so hated?"

Genzo tipped his hat up, and Alex saw his eyes for the first time. "Nothing. My comrades betrayed me." And he smiled and walked away.

The wind blew hard as Alex was dumbfounded. Nothing. My comrades betrayed me. Those words were stuck in his head. Genzo shed so much blood...and so many have died...because someone betrayed him?

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As Lord Huong approached the bedroom door, he heard sounds of moaning from the inside. He leaned in close to the door, and the sound amplified. A woman was groaning and screaming in pain, and Huong hesitated to enter. But enter he did, and the sounds grew louder as he approached the curtains.

And there were two silhouetted figures on the bed, the woman was moaning and the man laughing as he was all over her. He was quite disturbed that he was witnessing such a barbarous act, and to top it off, the barbarian did not even see Huong. He pulled the curtain aside, and nearly winced at the sight.

Jiax was on top of the woman, who was semi-conscious from all the torture. Poor Celina could barely open her eyes, as she was exhausted from the ordeal. But she was still conscious enough to feel physical pain.

"Ah-hem."

"Oh, Lord Huong? What brings you here?" said the bandit.

"Do you mind not doing this when it's bright and early?"

He grabbed Celina by the hair, pulling her head up slightly. "Why, is there a proper time of the day for this?"

Clearly, he was being sarcastic. These barbarians have a sick sense of humor, thought the noble.

Jiax grabbed her by the neck, pulling her up, and now she was kneeling on the bed. He violated her from behind, grabbing her breasts and stroking various parts of her exposed body. Wearing nothing but ribbons, she could do nothing but moan painfully as the brute violated her delicate body.

"Is this how you treat your prisoners?" asked Huong in disgust.

"Why not? This is such a fine specimen." he said, pulling her head back, and she groaned with her eyes closed. Then he licked her shoulder and glided his tongue to her neck, and face.

"I told you to keep her alive, but you are going to kill her at this rate."

"Look at her, she's not dead yet." said Jiax, still holding her by the hair. Then he forced his lips into hers, and tears streamed down her face.

"I will never understand you...people."

"You're a eunuch, so you won't understand the pleasures of the female body. You probably can't feel anything down there." said Jiax.

"Anyways...I have new instructions from Duke Xiang. You are to report to training first thing in the morning tomorrow."

"Training? What for?"

"Due to the chaos happening in the court, we need to prepare for a possible rebellion by the other high eunuchs. We need every fighter to be prepared for such an event."

"Oh c'mon. It's so cozy and relaxing in here." He shoved his hand up Celina's thigh, and she moaned.

"If I were you...I wouldn't argue with direct orders. That is all." Huong turned around and left the room.

Jiax's hands were still on her breasts as he gazed upon the eunuch. (That bastard Huong...he thinks he's so mighty because he draws his power from the duke. One day I'll kill them and the kingdom will be mine!) Jiax squeezed both her breasts tightly and she groaned in agony.

Alex Cheng's training continued...and it was as rigorous as Genzo said it would be. But being a fast learner and hard worker – he accelerated quickly, surprising Genzo's three students. Zi showed considerable improvements as well, sparring with the students every day. Today, however, Alex was about to learn something that will change his life...more than he could know.

In their usual training spot stood Alex and his master. "Cheng, today I will teach you a very important move, it a move called the **Phoenix Palm**. It is often dubbed The Move That Saves Lives.

They circled each other as they talk.

"Move that Saves Lives?"

"This technique I will be teaching you is useful in many situations. It is a move that saves lives and takes lives away. Let me explain. Over the centuries, the main source of power for any one man is the sword. It is the symbol of power in our four kingdoms. He who holds it is he who is appreciated and respected. But what goes even further back than the sword is the body itself. The body itself is a weapon. Your fist, your legs, your head, and your palms. Many think the palm is useless, but experts disagree. When there is conflict and combat, there are hostage situations. So what to do in those kinds of scenarios? There is no right answer. But our solution to that is the Phoenix Palm. Observe."

Genzo stared at the two boulders in front of him, one behind the other. He closed his eyes and breathed in and out. Then he did some circular motion with his arms. Then he charged. "Hyaaaah." He slammed his fist against the rock. "Phoenix Palm!!" The rock behind this rock cracked.

Alex was truly surprised. "Amazing! How did you do that?"

"It takes years of practice and discipline to pull that off."

"I see."

"Cheng, I am going to teach you the fundamentals, and it's up to you to learn it on your own."

"Understood, Master Genzo."

Subsequently, Alex trained by himself the next day, and the day after that as well. *Wham* He slammed his open palm against the boulder, expecting it to have the same effect as when Genzo did it. But the boulder in the back did not crack at all, it did not even move. He did manage to crack the boulder in front, but that is not the point of the Phoenix Palm.

Having already spent most of the day practicing this move, he was tired and drained physically. Most people would have given up at this point, but Alex was still determined to make it work. He stepped back, getting into the proper stance, and took deep breaths. When he was ready, he charged and slammed his fist onto the boulder. *Wham*

This time too, Alex expected the move to succeed, but he was faced with disappointment once again. He stared at the boulder in disbelief and despair, not knowing why the move did not work for him. He has practiced hundreds of times, yet he is not even close to mastery. Frustrated and out of breath, he stared at the boulder, and then stared at his own palm. He began to doubt his own abilities, clenching his fist tightly.

"I cannot believe that I will not master this move." he murmured to himself. Once again, he ran to the boulder and slammed his palm against it.

Fo Long watched him from a distance. She was still in disbelief that this man is her brother, despite all the indications that he is. He had the same name – Alex Cheng – and the same silver hair that she remembered stroking when he was a kid. Li wanted to reveal her true identity, yet cannot bring herself to. All she could do now was watch him train, and that alone is satisfying, knowing that he is alive and well.

When Fo Long was by herself, she was standing by the lake and watching the sunset. She took off her straw hat and removed the mask, and took a breath of fresh air with her full exposed face.

"How long are you planning to hide it?"

Fo Long gasped, only to realize it was Sui Long who spoke. He is her comrade and knows her identity, as do all the students, so it was fine.

"It is not your concern." replied Fo Long.

"You have not seen each other in nearly a decade, right?" asked Sui Long. "And Alex is going to leave soon...are you not going to tell your brother who you are?"

"No, not yet. I do not want to distract him from his training." she said. "But one day I will tell him...one day very soon." With that said, she became silent, and so did Sui Long, and they both continued to watch the sunset.

The little girl with long, black hair came home one day with much joy in her heart, and cannot wait to tell the news to her family. As she came home, she immediately opened the scroll. "Mom, dad, guess what happened?"

"What it is, Li?" asked her father.

"I am officially accepted as a servant in the imperial palace!"

"Really?" said her mom. "Congratulations." She went over to hug her, and so did her father.

Li's brother, a little boy, went up to her. "Congratulations, sister!" said Alex.

"Thank you, Alex."

"My little girl is growing up so fast." said the father.

Li smiled and laughed heartily as they continued to praise her as if she was made of gold. In this society, it is a prestige and status is a big deal. To even be able to step foot inside the palace is something that a commoner can only dream of. To be a servant

of the palace, one must already have experience as a servant, must pass a certain test, and must be recommended by someone of high status.

Fortunately, Li Cheng's parents have connections with someone who is a friend of a noble, and they used this connection to have Li take the servant test. The fact that she passed it shows how diligent and obedient she is, two core traits needed of a servant. Even though someone else will own her life, at least Li will be taken care of, and not worry about how to make a living. Perhaps if she is lucky enough, someone with a high status will choose her as a wife.

Li Cheng stood in line with all the other female servants. This truly is an exciting day for her, as it will be her first time entering the imperial palace. The head servant walked about, giving them instructions, preparing them for their jobs. There were twenty servants in line, and this is only for one part of the palace. There must be hundreds and thousands of servants who run about the palace day by day, Li thought. She assured herself that she will give it her best and keep up with everyone.

After working for two months, Li became used to the environment. She is to keep her head low and show proper respect to nobles and lords. And of course, she must kneel in front of a member of royalty, just like everyone else. Because of her personality, she easily made friends with the other servants.

Unfortunately, she was assigned to Duke Xixang, someone who has a reputation for treating others in a condescending manner. He is a man who is full of greed and ambition, and extremely impatient. He is not the type that you'd want to upset. But Li never minded that, for she was taught to mind her own business. So as long as she does her job, no one will treat her badly. That is exactly what she did...until one fateful day.

The Duke was sweating heavily, leaning in front of the mirror. "I am not feeling so well..." he said to the mirror.

Li was assigned to be cleaning the halls that day. She heard the Duke's voice coming from the room. She knew that he was by himself, and grew curious as to who he was speaking to. She leaned sideways against the door, pressing her ear against the thin wood.

"How much longer do I have to live like this?" exclaimed Xiang.

Li poked a hole through the fabric and peeped with one eye. What a strange sight, because Xiang's reflection did not show in the mirror, but rather, it was the image of a shadow.

"You need to absorb more souls." said the shadow.

"But then I will risk revealing my identity. Isn't there another way to remain human? You're supposed to have the answer, aren't you, Demon King?"

Their conversation made Li more curious. As Xiang turned around, Li saw his deformed face, and became horrified. Xiang's skin was seemingly melting off his face, and his eyes and lips were deformed. Li let out a gasp, and walked away from the window. She accidentally kicked over the bucket of water, and Xiang heard it.

Li quickly ran down the hallway as Xiang came outside. Li turned around, and they glanced at each other for a second. "You!" said the duke. "You saw it, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't see anything!"

"C'mon here..."

"No!!" Li screamed, and ran away.

That was ten years ago. Ever since that day, Li Cheng did not look back. She had to abandon her parents and her brother for their own sake...lest they should be killed by the duke's men. As she and Sui Long watched the sunset, Li debated whether or not

that was the best course of action to take. But as her master says, it is not about the past, it is about deciding what to do in the present.

As Master Genzo said, his training is rigorous and rough, and Alex is always exhausted at night. Tonight he is especially exhausted, and fell asleep while lying on a tree branch.

Cheng finds himself in an unfamiliar place. The room is large and spacey, covered by a red carpet, which leads to a set of stairs. Judging by its contents, it is the royal hall of the imperial palace. He has never been here before, yet somehow he knows what it is. The sky is stormy and lightning flares every few seconds.

As he walks on the red carpet, he sees someone sitting on the king's chair, but it is not the king. Upon closer inspection, it is a woman who was barely covered. She had nothing but pink ribbons, tied as loops around her body, and her legs were mostly exposed, as well as her shoulders and neckline. Her head was facing down; she was either unconscious or not looking up.

Despite her appearance, Alex was not alarmed, but rather, curious. As he walks closer, the woman wakes up and stares at him.

"Please...help me." says Celina.

"Who are you?" asks Alex.

"P-Please help me...before he kills me."

"Who's going to kill you?"

Celina sheds tears and ran towards him and grabs his chest. "Save me...get me out of this horrible place!" Her eyes were shaking and tears dripped down her face. Lightning flared again.

A bearded man who was hiding behind the chair reveals himself, and pulls the ribbon on Celina's body, dragging her into his arms.

"Hey!" Alex screams.

Jiax laughed as he violated Celina. "Heh heh. You cannot save her now. She is lost...just as the kingdom is."

Celina reaches her hand for Alex. "P-Please save me..."

"Let her go!" Alex yelled angrily, and draws his sword.

Jiax pushes the girl away and stabs Alex through his stomach. *Schleb* Alex stared at his wound in much dismay, and gazed upon the blood dripping on the sword.

Alex woke up in cold sweat and instinctively put his hand on his stomach. (What was that about?) It was different than his usual dream...could this be an ill omen for him and his upcoming journey?

The three masked warriors stood behind Genzo, who was facing Zi and Alex. Everyone had serious looks on their eyes. Months have passed since Alex first came to the Valley, and today is the day he must leave.

"Cheng", addressed the War God. "Our time is limited because I know you are in a hurry. If you want to kill Duke Xiang, you better make haste. But in these few months, you have learned more under my tutelage than you have learned in your lifetime. You have improved greatly, and I am proud of you. 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, young man. Congratulations, Cheng."

"Thank you sir."

"You two, 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 sword 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 a life saver, and it shall help you in your journey.”

Alex was shocked. “This is the Legendary Fire Sword...”

Zi was equally as shocked. (This...this is the sword mentioned in the legends. How did the War God come into possession of this? Don’t tell me, he’s...)

“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...”

“You can repay me by slaying the Duke. I dislike demons as much as you do. I have my personal grudges against them. One more thing. Shen Long, Feng Long, and Fo Long, you shall accompany these two on their way to Yi Ling. Aid them in their battles.”

Zi overwhelmed by the War God’s kindness. “Wow...sir, you really need not do this. We will be fine.”

“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 sir!”

“Good luck, my warriors.” said the War God.

Alex was so touched that he could cry. He kneeled in front of his master. “Thank you Master Genzo. I owe you! Thank you for everything!”

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 most powerful swords in the world. It is a priceless gift that he will never let his eyes off of...but will he be able to use it effectively?

Name	Role	Personality
Alex Cheng	main character	S
Zi Lai	Alex’s best friend	A
Li Cheng	Alex’s sister	S
Jade Lee	Alex’s childhood friend	R
Liu Bei	King of Shen	T
Liu Celina	King Liu’s wife	S
Master Ho Sai	Wise monk	R
Chan	student of Temple	A
Fu	student of Temple	S
Shang Tsu	student of Temple	R
Guan Du	trainer in Temple	R
War God	legendary feared warrior	T
Shen Long	War God’s henchmen	S
Feng Long	War God’s henchmen	S

Fo Long	War God's henchmen	S
Lord Lee	trusted advisor of King Liu	-
General Chung	King Liu's trusted general	-
Duke Xiang	demon in disguise	A
En Lo	henchmen of Duke	-
Hua	gangster/brute	A
Kiyang	mountain bandit	A
Chirico	forest spirit	?
General Tsu	General Chung's replacement	T
Lord Huong	henchmen of Duke	S
Lord Sima	henchmen of Duke	S
Lord Fei	henchmen of Duke	A
Jiax	henchmen of Duke	A

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