

# LEGEND OF THE FIRE SWORD

*Civil War*

Volume 7  
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Summary

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## 三十七: The 50 Year Grudge: Taishi vs Chu Yen

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Chu Yen walked over to the fallen Li and raised his sword up high. Both of them thought it was over...until he sensed other people nearby. "Tch." he looked at the mountain and saw some Council members coming out of the mountain hole.

Without further ado, he ran towards the forestry area up ahead. Two members helped Li stand up, but right after that, one of them pointed a sword at her neck. "Sorry, Ms. Cheng but these are Master Tze's orders."

"That's enough." said Cho, a Council member and Vincent's close friend.

Chu Yen was in an area with a bunch of trees. Behind him was a thick forest and in front of him were Council members, standing in a half circle. Taishi was standing in the middle and he walked forward.

"I wouldn't have believed it if I didn't see it for myself. You look as young as you did when you were twenty years old. You haven't aged a day." said Taishi.

"And you have gotten...old." replied Chu Yen.

"So this confirms it...you have become a demon. You sacrificed your body for the pursuit of power. You are truly lost...Chu Yen."

"I gave up my mortal body for the ultimate power. I am still as strong as I was in my prime. Look at you, you're old and decrepit and your strength is not what it used to be."

"To live means to die, that is the fate of all humans. You are defying fate and no good will come of it."

"Grrrr there's point in arguing with you, old man." Chu Yen got into fighting stance.

Taishi stood into the stance of the **Walking Crane** and both martial artists waited patiently before making the first move. The wind blew hard and the leaves rustled. All of a sudden, Taishi moved forward, with the sword in his right hand and attacked. A sword is a heavy piece of metal, but in Taishi's hand, it is as light as a feather and he whipped it around like it was nothing. \*Whip whip\*

The Council members watched in awe. "Wow, Master Tze is actually going to fight. We rarely get to see him in action." said one of them.

"Today is indeed our lucky day." Cho replied.

Yen deflected his attacks while moving backwards. Taishi kept advancing relentlessly, giving his opponent no room to counter. \*Whip whip whip\* Yen knows the **Heaven's Wrath Style**, as well as Eagle Style and a little bit of Walking Crane, while Taishi only knows Walking Crane and a little bit of Heaven's Wrath. Not only do their styles differ, but their philosophies differ as well, and soon those differences will become apparent in their battle.

"Heh, you still don't get it, old man. Using a one handed stance halves your power."

"You're the one who doesn't get it. This stance gives me more reach and not all my strikes need to be power strikes. For someone like you, one hand is more than enough."

Taishi stepped forward and began his attack, holding the sword with his right hand and his left hand was kept close to his torso. Chu Yen deflected the attacks but he was unable to get close as Taishi was standing sideways. His longer reach made it quite difficult to get close to his safe zone. No matter how hard he tried, Chu Yen did not get close enough to make a strike. Each time he stepped forward, Taishi would step back, maintaining the distance. When Taishi stepped forward, Chu Yen had to step back.

Taishi's blade kept coming from different angles. \*Whip whip whip\* Chu Yen made a strike and Taishi knocked his blade away, but that was a feint. Chu Yen's follow up strike came immediately after. In slow motion, Taishi bent his back all the way and the blade missed his beard just by an inch. His legs were firmly planted on the ground so he did not lose balance, and after the blade missed him, he stood up straight as if nothing happened.

The Council members watched in awe, surprised that he was quite flexible for an old man. Li was watching intently just the other members as she has never seen Taishi fight before.

Chu Yen attacked aggressively with his circular attacks and Taishi blocked them skillfully. Chu Yen then swings his blade hard and Taishi lowered his body and stood in his **grasshopper stance**. This is a stance where the user's right leg is straight, the left leg is bent. Her sword is parallel to her leg, protecting the entire front.

(Not this annoying stance again.) Indeed, the grasshopper stance is difficult to deal with as he cannot hit his opponent, whereas his opponent's next move is unpredictable. All Ragnarok can do now is to wait patiently.

Without warning, Taishi sprang up like a grasshopper and plunged his sword forward like a spear. Ragnarok stepped back and pushed his opponent's blade slightly but it was too late as Taishi's blade went past his safe zone and scratched him in the shoulder.

Ragnarok jumped back and winced from the pain. It was not a fatal wound but it still hurt. Things were not going according to plan as he was bleeding instead of Taishi, who he underestimated.

Both fighters charge forward and parried their swords. Taishi pushed his opponent's sword to the ground and both their weapons were to the ground. Ragnarok moved backwards, trying to get his sword free as Taishi moved forwards. \*Dasshhhh\*

Finally, Ragnarok was able to move his blade and they exchanged moves as the audience watched without blinking. \*Quong quan quong\*

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After a fighting for a while, Chu Yen gasped for breath. "I've got to admit, you're still as sharp as ever, old man."

Taishi stroked his beard. "I finally understand. It was not you who defeated Masai Genzo."

Chu Yen's eyes widened.

"At your skill level you could not have taken him down. Besides myself, there is Raijun, but he has been missing for a long time and he is not a traitor. The only one in the world who could have done it is...Liu Zhang. He killed Masai Genzo and you claimed that you did, so you can make your new name famous."

"And what if I did? Genzo was an old man whose time is up. He was the War God, a criminal who was hated by all, whereas Ragnarok is a hero to the people!" Chu Yen's sword was glowing and they can see a glaring white color.

Using the Ice Blizzard, his sword created a shockwave and the forest shuddered. Taishi bent his back and the shockwave missed his nose just by an

inch. \*Whoosh\* The Council members can feel the cold air and some of them covered their eyes. "Uuuugh!"

Taishi looked behind him and noticed his members were hit by the shockwave. He forgot how fearsome the power of the Ice Sword was. Chu Yen stood in a stance that signaled he was about to use the **Ice Blizzard** again. Taishi held his sword with both hands in a defensive stance. Chu Yen made the Ice Blizzard shockwave and hit Taishi, pushing him back one pace.

His hands had icicles and so did his sleeves. Upon closer inspection, his knees were frozen as well.

"Master Tze is in trouble, we have to help him." said a Council member.

"No," said Vincent. "Master ordered us to stay put while he fights so we have to trust him."

"But-"

"Chu Yen and Master Tze have a history going back fifty years, a time before any of us were born. He wants to settle this grudge by himself." said Vincent.

Chu Yen let out a triumphant laugh. "Your days are numbered<sup>1</sup>, old man!"

Taishi flicked his sleeves to shake off the icicles. "You haven't bested me yet. Out of the Brotherhood you were always the most arrogant and power hungry. You have sold your soul for immortality."

"And you were the most gullible (容易受騙) out of the four of us." Chu Yen retorted. "That's why I was able to take the Thunder Sword from you." As he spoke, both of them had a **flashback** to that fateful day fifty years ago.

Masai said, "Alright. It is time for me to make the proposal again. Now that the demons are not a problem anymore, our ultimate weapons are too powerful to use. We should put them all in one place for storage." He placed the Fire Sword on the table.

Chu Yen placed the Ice Sword next to the Fire Sword. "I agree."

"Oh. You changed your mind, Chu?" said Taishi.

"It's pointless to argue with Masai. He always gets his way. But this is just temporary. If I need the Ice Sword I will come back to claim it."

Taishi sighed and placed the Thunder Sword on the table. "Very well. I can rest easier knowing that my weapon is being safeguarded."

Raijun put his Wind Sword on the table. "If everyone agrees then I consent."

Genzo was walking peacefully along the road, and suddenly, Red Soldiers appeared in front of him. Behind him, two other troops appeared. Chu Yen revealed himself. "Where are you going, Masai Genzo?"

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<sup>1</sup> Your days are numbered - idiom meaning you will die soon

"Yen, what is the meaning of this?"

"Funny, I should be asking you that question. Where have you taken the other three ultimate swords?"

"Stolen? What are you talking about?"

"You dare betray the Four Brothers. You are a disgrace, Masai."

Genzo suddenly realized what Chu was up to. "You are framing me for stealing them? That is low, even for you, Yen!"

Chu smiled. "Hand over the swords or else..."

The troops pointed their swords at him and stepped forward. Genzo drew the Fire Sword and fought his way through. \*Slash\* He ran away.

"After him!" Chu yelled. "Get that traitor!"

Someone blew the whistle and more soldiers appeared and they chased after the fugitive with the glowing Fire Sword.

Chu Yen and his army of Red Soldiers chased Masai across several cities, giving him no time to rest. He eventually made it into the Valley and hid there. The soldiers were hot on his trail and followed him there but they were all slaughtered. This Valley will later be known as the Valley of Death, a place that no one dares step foot in because whoever enters forfeits their life. And Masai Genzo's name will be forgotten due to the passage of time.

Furin came into the room where Chu was standing before a table with the ultimate swords laid out. "Hoho, well done, Chu Yen. Your plan worked out."

"Heh. Now Masai is out of the way **and** we have the three elemental swords. We are invincible now!" He pulled the Thunder Sword out of its sheath and examined it closely. "Such power...I've always wondered what it would be like to have the power of thunder in my hands." Then he pulled out the Wind Sword and examined it closely. His face grimaced and he became silent.

"What's the matter?" asked Furin Yi. "The Wind Sword is a fake! The design is slightly different and I can sense this one doesn't have any sorcery!"

He tossed it on the table like it was trash. "Damn it Raijun, he tricked us! He never trusted us to begin with."

"Raijun is a crafty one. He must have sensed something was wrong and gave you the fake Wind Sword."

Chu said slammed his palms on the table. "Now we have to hunt down Masai and Raijun, goddamn it."

Furin said, "You focus on hunting down Masai, leave Raijun to me."

With that said, Furin tracked down Raijun and it was unknown what happened to them afterwards. Chu Yen was so focused on Masai that he forgot that Taishi was still in the picture.

There was a lot of activity in the fortress. Taishi snuck around, hiding behind a fence. He was an inch away from an open gate and a soldier exited the gate. Taishi stabbed him just before he could say anything or react. \*schleb\*

Taishi then stealthily ran into the gate and towards the main building. \*Twang\* An arrow hit near his foot. An archer from a tower did it.

Two soldiers appeared and attacked him and Taishi finished them off quickly. Two mediocre soldiers were no match for a man of his caliber.

"Well well well. I thought I smelled a rat." said Chu Yen.

"Chu Yen." Taishi pointed his blade forward. "Return my Thunder Sword now."

He burst into laughter. "Hahahaha! You think you can give me orders, do you even know where you stand? You're a traitor and must be treated as such. Still I can't believe how foolish you are. I have so many bounty hunters looking for you and yet here you are, looking for me."

"Don't you know the most dangerous place is the safest place? I'll have to take my sword back by force!"

The two fighters stood in fighting stance, one in the Walking Crane stance and the other in the Heaven's Wrath stance. When the time was right, they charged into each other...

The **flashback** was over. Chu Yen remembered those incidents as if they happened yesterday. He single handedly destroyed the Brotherhood and plunged the country into chaos for all his own ambitions. And his duel with Taishi was not settled, so they will settle their fifty year grudge today.

Chu Yen spins his body two times and swings his blade horizontally. "Ice Storm!" A shockwave of ice was produced and it was bigger than the Ice Blizzard.

\*Whoosh\* Taishi jumped over it. Chu Yen swings his blade upwards, creating a second shockwave. Taishi was hit by it and it caused him to fall, landing on one knee and one foot. "Uuuuugh!" Many of his body parts were frozen and became icicles.

With this golden chance, Ragnarok faced the other way and ran into the deep forest. Some of the Council members ran after him while others went to check on Master Tze.

"Are you alright?" asked Cho.

"It's fine." said Taishi, panting for breath. "Old age has gotten the better of me."

Another member arrived. "Master, our captive, Li Cheng has escaped."

Taishi stood up with Cho's help and they looked in the direction where Li was supposed to be. Indeed, she was gone and the two men who watched her were unconscious.

Inside the palace, the king and his eunuchs were having a private meeting. One eunuch came forward and bowed. "Sire, it is time for you to marry a concubine. You need have children so the throne is secure."

Another eunuch came forward. "I agree, sire."

"Bah. I don't have time for that," said Liu Cao. "We have a war going on with another kingdom and I'm busy dealing with that crap. The matter of concubines can we discussed later. Captain Tai, what is your report?"

Tai stepped forward. "Hai. The situation over the river is not looking good. Our fleet has twenty ships while the enemy has twenty two ships and they are not going to back down, it looks like. We have sent many messages to General Tsai to implore him to stop, but he refuses every time."

"What a stubborn general he is," said Liu Cao.

Inside the imperial hall of Seiruun, General Tsai bowed before the king. Sitting on the throne was **King Lumeng** of the entire Leinwan Kingdom. Like all other kings of their time, he wore a golden gown worthy of royalty. But Lumeng was more materialistic than the others and his gown was made from the finest silk in the land. The sleeves had designs of flowers and the chest had a symbol of a dragon sewed into it. He had a white beard of a triangular shape as well as a beard, all of his facial hair was finely trimmed. His facial appearance suggests that he was very experienced and also cruel and cold blooded.

"Your highness. King Liu Cao has rejected our offer and sent his ships to stop our ships."

"Is that right?" said King Lumeng. "So he is purposely provoking us. Looks like the peaceful way is not an option, now is it, General Tsai?"

"Hai. Requesting permission to fire at his ships."

"Permission granted. Destroy all of Shen's ships and attack their cities."

After escaping into the **MeiXing Forest**, Li managed to cross the border into the neighboring kingdom of Shu. She was tired and hungry and the only thing keeping her going was pure willpower. She was so tired that she was not walking upright, but rather her feet were dragging her body forward. She was so hungry that her stomach was growling but there was no food in sight so she had no choice but to keep going.

Li Cheng has not felt this much despair in a long time. She lost her duel with Chu Yen and lost the Ice Sword. She always saw herself as a strong fighter, even comparable to Chu Yen's level, but that duel made her realize there was a big gap of strength between them.

Li took out a map that was given to her by the Shadow, and according to it there should be a village nearby.

After more traveling, the forest became less thick and she finally found an outdoor restaurant. There were four rows of tables lined up in front of the stall. Three customers were sitting in one table, and by the way they were dressed, they look like bad news. It's better to avoid them. Behind the stall the owner was

cooking food and she could smell it from where she was. She took out two bronze coins from her pocket but it was not enough and she closed her fist.

"Owner, can I get some noodles and fish balls?" she asked like a hungry kid.

"That'll be five bronze coins."

"I don't have enough." Her stomach growled. \*Guuuguuu\*

"That's too bad."

The three customers came over to Li.

"Hey babe I heard that you're hungry but you don't have the money." said Gangster A. "I can treat you to some food, but in return, you can have some fun with us." Gangster B and C snickered.

"No thanks." she replied. "I don't like your idea of fun. I'd rather starve."

"C'mon now, don't be so cold." Gangster A put his hand on her shoulder and her eyes glared at his hand.

"Touch me and this hand never touches anything again." She snatched his wrist and twisted it.

"Hey...let go!"

She kept twisting it and then used a **wrist lock** (手腕锁), causing him to fall on his knees.

Gangster B grew angry and raised his fists. "Hey cut that out, woman."

Li then kicked Gangster A in the chest and released his wrist. He fell on all fours and coughed from his wound.

Gangster B drew a knife. "You've done it now, bitch!"

He Gangster C drew his sword. "We were gonna offer you food but this is how you repay us? Huh?"

Li snatched Gangster A's sword and pointed it at him.

Gangster C was rather amused. "What're you gonna do with that? Put it down before you get hurt."

Gangster B also looked down on her. "You're a woman so you don't know how to use one of those."

His comment made Li smile. "Wanna bet?"

B charged at her and she slashed both his thighs in one strike. \*schleb\* He fell on his knees. She used the sword's bottom to hit him in the head, knocking him out.

Gangster C charged forward into Li and they parried (招架). Li knocked the sword out of his hand and pointed it at his neck, and he raised his arms up to surrender. "Have mercy! Please don't kill me!"

Li flipped the sword horizontally and hit him in the solar plexus (太陽叢) with the sword's bottom. \*Thud\* Gangster C fell on his knees.

All three gangsters were down on the ground and she was the only one standing, it is a total victory for her. "Never let me see you again."



The three gangsters ran away in a cowardly way and she sighed. Everywhere she goes she meets men like these who underestimate her and look down on women. In the end, they always learn the hardway.

The owner put a bowl in front of her. "Here ya go, noodles with fish balls. It's hot and fresh."

She was a bit surprised. "But I can't pay."

"That's alright. Those bullies have been harassing me everyday and forcing me to give them free food. Thanks you, they're finally out of here and now I can run my business!"

"I see. In that case, thank you for the meal!" Li has been hungry for days so ate everything without holding back. Afterwards, she was finally full and satisfied. She thanked the owner, who thanked her back, and continued her journey with a full stomach. Not only that, but now she has a sword and will be able to defend herself properly in case of a bandit attack.

She took out the map to check the location of her destination. The house she was looking for is close, just beyond the MeiXing Forest. She did not know what happened to her master after the cave incident. "Black Reaper, please be alive..."

### Preview of Next Episode

"Very well then." The king stood up and walked down the stairs. "Draw your sword."

Captain Tai was bewildered. "Excuse me?"

"Draw your sword." Cao drew his sword. Schllling. "I want to test your combat abilities. A military man's ideas mean nothing; anybody can come up with a good idea. But an idea that comes from a man who has combat experience carries more weight<sup>2</sup>. You have survived Duke Xiang's rebellion and the Red Feather Rebellion, now let's see what you're made of."

"You want to spar with me? But...you're the king and..."

"I am the king but before that, I am a warrior just like you. There is only me and you in this room so let's drop the pretenses."

"But still." said Tai.

"This is an order from your king!"

"Hai." The captain drew his sword and both fighters bared their fangs at each other.

Liu Cao's default style was the **Eagle Style**, something he acquired during his stay at the neighboring kingdom. His stance was to hold the sword horizontally, pointing it straight forward, with his hand touching the blade with the index finger and middle finger. Shu Tai's style has no official name, but many call it the **imperial style**, the default style taught to men of the army. However,

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<sup>2</sup> idiom - that person's opinion is worth more

he practiced a lot by himself so his skills were above that of an average soldier. Without uttering a word, the two dashed forward and clashed their blades.

### 三十八: The Civil War: Rise of the Red Feather Army

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[ B ] [ C ] Contents

Jin suddenly sprang up after he awoke from a nightmare. He was sweating heavily and he was topless and covered by bandages. Suddenly, his chest hurt and he groaned.

"You're awake." said Roh. He put the teapot on the table. "You were out for a while."

"It was that blind woman. We underestimated her." said Jin. "So what's my condition?"

"Your organs were damaged by her but worry not, because of your demon blood, you will heal faster than a normal person."

"What's our next move?" asked Jin.

"Our enemies are stronger than we anticipated. We will wait and see."

Li Cheng traveled according to the map that was given to her by her master. It has been several days since she was at the outdoors restaurant. There were times when she'd think the map is inaccurate but travel on she must for this is the only clue she has. Finally, beyond the trees she saw a small village. This village was located on the west of the Shu Kingdom, well hidden by nature. Because it was not close to any of the big cities, this village remains unchanged for the past hundred years.

There was an old abandoned house that looked exactly that - not inhabited for a long time. She sensed someone inside the house and likely, the person inside sensed her as well. She stepped onto the porch and the door immediately opened and her hand instinctively reached for her sword. The door opened and it was the Shadow who appeared. His appearance was the usual - black clothes and a black hat with a veil that covered his entire face from front to back.

Li took a sigh of relief. "It's really you, master. You're alive and well."

"Li, are you smiling? How rare." said the Shadow.

The ninja girl was surprised. "What...I don't know what you're talking about."

"In any case, it's good to see you. Come inside." said the Shadow.

"So this is the house where your grandfather, I mean, **Zho Lai** lived?"

As a reminder, Zho Lai was mentioned in the Zi Lai's flashback when he explained his entire background. Zho Lai was the original demon who was converted and the founder of the Shadow Style. He lived in a small village and

his only desire was to protect his village from demon attacks. Ironically, to obtain this power he himself became a demon, the very thing he despised.

"Most likely it is. I have finally found this house after many years of searching." The Shadow took her to a place in the middle of the living room and bent down. He opened a secret door on the floor and revealed a small secret compartment. Inside was a book. "Take a look at this."

Li picked up the book and blew the dust away. She opened it and flipped through the pages and the pages showed figures of a man doing different poses. "What is this?"

"It is a manual developed by Zho Lai...but it is not about the Shadow Style. It is one of his secret techniques called the **Shadow Puppet**."

"Shadow...Puppet?" Li repeated stupidly. Whenever she is with her master, there is always a new surprise and she often finds herself lost and confused. "I don't understand it."

"I do not understand either. But we can figure out the manuscript and learn the Shadow Puppet together."

"Together? That's okay with you?" Li was a little bit shocked at his proposal.

Being an enemy of both Liu Zhang and the Heaven's Council, these two were now living in this abandoned house as this was the best option to stay hidden. The house was located in the middle of nowhere sitting in between two kingdoms, making it the perfect hiding place.

One particular day, Zi came into the living room. "How's your training going?"

"I'm still working on it." Li put her hands together in front of her and formed a hand sign and closed her eyes to focus. A straw doll appeared and transformed into another Li.

"Pretty good." said Zi, "But you got some details wrong."

"The hair is the wrong color and the sword is missing details."

Li turned to face the puppet and indeed Zi was right. "Damn it." Her clone disappeared and reverted back to its doll form. "I still can't get the hang of it."

"Relax. This is not an easy technique to master. It's not like swinging a sword or throwing a dagger."

The idea of the Shadow Puppet is simple; she'd use a straw doll as the physical object and turn it into a clone of herself. A clone has a physical body but it cannot damage someone, it can only serve as a distraction. In other words, it is an illusion technique used to distract the opponent, while the real body goes in for the killing strike.

The Reaper stood on the rooftop of the house and stared into nothingness. He performed the hand sign and his body seemed to split into two bodies. But

one of them was the **clone**, its appearance indistinguishable from its owner. The Reaper made his clone move in front of him so he can see it clearly. Seeing that it looked exactly like him, he was satisfied with the results.

"Dinner's ready!" yelled Li from downstairs.

Without uttering a word, the Reaper jumped down to ground level and entered the house. In the past, the Reaper would never eat or sleep in the presence of someone else. But now, during dinner, he eats as Zi Lai. He picked up his chopstick and ate the food and looked at Li as she said something to him. Then he said something back and they conversed back and forth.

Ever since his identity as revealed to Li, he has been more relaxed around her and letting his guard down more often, and this fact was unbeknownst to them as their relationship gradually improved.

As expected, Li and Zi continued to practice the Shadow Puppet technique on their own. Li would make a clone and then check her work, and there'd always be a detail or two missing. Much like learning a skill, it was a process of trial and error.

There was a lake nearby the abandoned house with a nice view and occasionally they would row a boat for leisure. Li was rowing the paddles while the Reaper was standing up. The back and forth swaying did not bother him for he has a good balance, being a ninja master and all.

"Take a look at this, Li." He formed a hand signal and two **clones** appeared behind him and moved away a good distance apart. The clones were perfect copies in appearance to their original.

"Wow, that's impressive, master. You have mastered the Shadow Puppet in such a short time. I'm still having trouble with just creating one clone."

"Don't despair, Li. My clothes have less details and my face isn't there so it is much easier for me. And don't forget I have demon's blood so sorcery is not as difficult for me. Keep practicing and you'll get there."

"Yes, master!" she replied with enthusiasm.

## [ B ] Title Contents

There was an urgent meeting happening in the imperial palace and guards and servants were running all over the place. Captain Tai noticed how busy it was and felt the urgency. Tai and two of his men walked down the hall and entered the building, and walked down the hallway at a steady but fast pace and arrived at the final door. They opened the door and entered the meeting room. Two other captains of the army were present as well as Lord Yu and other eunuchs. There was a large table with a map of the Shen Kingdom as well as toy figures that represent soldiers.

"Welcome Captain Tai." said Lord Yu.

"What is our situation?" asked Shu Tai.

"The traitor Liu Zhang has been slowly building up his forces as we speak. We suspect that several eunuchs have defected to his side already." said Captain A.

Captain B said, "We have an estimate on the numbers of the Red Feather Army...Ragnarok has 2000 supporters, Lord Huong's forces has 3000 soldiers, Lord Sima has 1500 and Lord Fei has 2000. They also have the alliance of a northern tribe led by Khan and they have 1500 men. Their total numbers are **10,000.**"

"They have 10,000 already? What do we have?" Tai asked.

Captain A said, "We have 5000 soldiers in our infantry, 2000 in the vanguard, and Lord Yu has 2000 troops...our total is only 9000."

Captain B said, "We also have 2000 soldiers in ships fighting Leinwan."

"So we are outnumbered." said Tai. "If we had those extra 2000 soldiers we'd have 11,000. If only Leinwan didn't start trouble for us...the timing is just bad."

Captain A said, "Leinwan has always been a thorn on our side. We have been at war ever since the two kingdoms were founded."

Lord Yu spoke up. "So the question remains...how do we make up for the deficit in our numbers?"

\*Gallop gallop\* Three horses galloped their way through the impoverished southern district of Yi Ling. Upon arriving at their destination, Captain Tai ordered his men to remain where they were. Lady Ce opened the gate as Tai got off his horse.

"I'm glad you decided to come, old friend." said Celina.

"I'm surprised you have connections to the Council of Heaven. You are full of surprises." he replied.

They walked into a courtyard until they reached a locked wooden gate. She knocked two times and the peep hole opened. The man on the other side of the door said, "There once was a man who dreamt he was a **butterfly.**"

Celina said, "But upon waking up, he wondered if he was a **butterfly** dreaming he's a man."

"That is the right password." The doorman opened the metal door. Creeeek.

Tai was led into another courtyard and this time he was greeted by another beauty. Xiao Ye bowed and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Captain."

"No the pleasure is all mine." he replied. So the two walked through the courtyard slowly so they could chit chat. "I had no idea the Council has pretty girls like you." he commented.

She blushed a little bit. "Oh thank you."

"I heard from Lady Ce that you used to be blind?"

"Yes I have recovered after being blind for eleven years. I used to live in the southern district of Yi Ling."

"Oh the southern district? I was from there too." said Tai.

Xiao glanced at him as they have a common connection. "Oh really?"

"Yeah it's terrible over there. It's poverty stricken and that place produces poverty minded people. I have left home many years ago but it took a long time to get out of that mentality."

"That's why organizations like the Heaven's Council exists, to right the wrongs of society. But the royal family sees us as criminals so we have to operate in secret all this time."

"I know. It is too bad that his highness doesn't view you guys the way I do."

Xiao glanced at him again. His words were music to her ears.<sup>3</sup> Finally, an imperial that understands what she thinks. They reached the door and entered the hallway.

"But his highness is stubborn like the rest of them. No, I should say the current king is the most stubborn one of all. I am meeting with you guys without his knowledge. Lady Ce and Alex Cheng also joined the Council without his consent."

"Do you think you alone can change his majesty's mind?" she inquired.

"Not just me. If every captain were to take the same side, then maybe."

It was rather unfortunate that their chat was over now that they've arrived at the main room. She opened the door and inside was a table with tea prepared. Taishi was sitting down and there was another empty seat reserved for Tai.

Tai put his fist into his palm and lowered his head. "Greetings to Master Tze." This hand posture is a common greeting for those with lower status like a military man to greet those who have a higher status. Taishi Tze is known as Master Tze to his students and in the martial arts world. Even if one is not your master, it is a Chinese tradition to call him master to honor his last name.

"Oh how polite, so imperials do know how to respect their elders. Come, sit down." Taishi stroked his beard.

He sat down and Xiao stood next to Taishi.

"I am happy and also surprised that you agreed to this meeting." said Tai.

"Oho not at all." said Taishi. "Lady Ce and Alex Cheng recommended that I meet up with you and I trust them because they are my valued members."

"Ah of course, I know that those two have joined the Council in secret."

"Oh so you are their trusted friend, Shu Tai. I have heard a great many good things about you." Taishi stroked his beard.

"Oh, you don't say." The Captain was surprised and embarrassed that a famous legend like Master Tze would know the name of a lowly captain like himself. "So, let's discuss the situation at hand, shall we?"

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<sup>3</sup> Idiom - sounds good and agreeable

So the two leaders discuss in great detail the current predicament the Shen Kingdom was facing. Xiao listened to the whole thing with a smile. Although she did not understand everything, she was able to follow along with half the topics. Without the need to go into great detail, here is a summary of what they discussed. The captain explained the Red Feather Rebellion and Liu Zhang's role in it and how he is now a fugitive, secretly building his army in a northern city to plot another rebellion. His forces stand at approximately 10,000, which is a threat to the imperials. If not stopped soon, the two forces will plunge the kingdom into a **civil war**.

So this is where the Heaven's Council comes into the picture. They will form a temporary alliance with the imperial army and destroy the Red Feather Army. In return, the Heaven's Council will be pardoned of their past crimes and will no longer be branded as a criminal organization. It was a big risk for Taishi to take, as a battle will mean losing some of his comrades, but the reward was also attractive enough for him to take the offer. The Heaven's Council can finally work out in the open instead of in the shadows. This will make things much easier especially communication with the Council branches in other kingdoms.

The two leaders drank tea while discussing, and even though the topic was a stressful one, they did not feel stressed out, but rather, they discussed like two friends chatting over a mundane topic.

"It was an honor to meet you sir." Shu Tai hit his fist into his palm and lowered his head. He left the room and closed the door.

Taishi turned to Xiao. "So what do you think of our new friend?"

"My mind's eye tells me he is an honest and trustworthy man. He has no hesitation in his voice and he determined to achieve his goals. I think we can trust him."

Taishi stroked his beard. "So he's just your type, eh?"

Xiao blushed. "What are you saying, master?"

"Hohohoho. I'm just kidding. I agree Captain Tai is trustworthy, but it is not him I am worried about, it is the king I am worried about. I have never met King Cao and I do not know what kind of man he is. But I heard a lot of rumors about him."

"But Lady Ce is friends with the king, or something like that. I'm sure she will talk some sense into him."

Captain Tai walked into the imperial hall while holding his helmet in his hand. He knelt and said "Long live his majesty."

"What business did you have with me? Speak, captain."

Tai stood up. "Yes. As you know all of us captains including Lord Yu had a war meeting and we do not have enough numbers to fight against Liu Zhang's Red Feather Army. We have only 9,000 soldiers so we are still short 1,000."

"In war, it's not the numbers, but how you use them." said Liu Cao.

"Yes your highness. But our soldiers have the same training as the Red Feather soldiers and our deficit is what concerns me. However, if we were to add another 1,000 to our cause..."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I suggest we team up with the Heaven's Council. They have 1,000 swordsmen and they're all proficient at sword craft."

"Absolutely not!" Cao said, pounding his fist on the armrest. \*Thud\*  
"They are criminals on the run from the law."

"But your highness-"

"That's enough! I will not discuss this any further."

Tai bowed solemnly. "Yes."

## [ C ] Title Contents

Celina was standing on the bridge, staring at the pond. After the meeting with the king, Tai came to join her. He faced the same direction as her and sighed.

"I take it it didn't go well?" she said.

"His highness is very stubborn, once he makes up his mind, it is set in stone." said Tai. "Even if all the captains agree with me, it's no use."

"Perhaps I'll talk to him." she replied.

"It's no use." said he.

"I know but it's worth a shot."

Liu Cao was sitting by a table and casually reading a book while drinking tea. A servant stood behind him, ready to take orders at a moment's notice.

Celina arrived and bowed. "Your highness."

Cao put down his book. "Lady Ce? You haven't been around lately."

"Yes, sorry, I've been busy with various things." Of course, she was not going to mention she and Alex joined the Heaven's Council.

"Well, what did you want?"

"Well I just spoke to Captain Tai and I heard briefly about the situation with the rebels."

"Hmph. Did you know some of them are calling Liu Zhang the true king? That's preposterous. How can a demon be a king?"

"Naturally. Your highness, I don't know much about warfare and it's not my place to speak about these things, but everyone is worried about the army. There are just not enough numbers on our side." said she.

"I'm listening."

"If we can somehow boost our numbers up quickly, wouldn't that be an optimal solution?"

"What do you suggest?"



"Hear me out. Do you remember this phrase from the **Art of War**? The enemy of my enemy is my ally."

"Yes of course." Cao became more interested in what she had to say.

"The Heaven's Council has 1,000 skilled swordsmen ready to fight at a moment's notice."

"You too?" he asked, his demeanor changing. "What does everyone insist on allying with them? Is our own army not good enough?"

"You went to Leinwan to study warfare, did you not? You said so in those letters we sent back and forth. When it comes to state affairs, one must be objective and not have biases. This is especially so when it comes to a civil war with lives on the line."

She has a point and Cao frowned. "That doesn't mean we should ally with the Council."

"All I am saying is that you should consider it. I can vouch for Captain Tai's loyalty. He is wholeheartedly dedicated to serving the court and the kingdom."

After their conversation, Tai was summoned to the royal court by the king himself. As usual, the captain entered the hall and kneeled and can only stand when given permission.

"You may stand." said Cao. As a reminder, Cao feels that kneeling is a waste of time and he would rather his subjects not do it. However, he only extends this non-kneeling courtesy to Celina and Alex, and only in a casual setting. In the royal court, he must follow tradition to keep up with appearances.

"Hai." He stood.

"What is your purpose with allying with the Council?"

Tai looked up in surprise, thinking the matter was settled. "Sire, I think they could be of use to us. We are outnumbered by the Red Feather Army so we need to make up for the shortfall. Liu Zhang has allied himself with a northern tribe led by Khan Manchu and I think it's wise to find allies for ourselves."

"And if it doesn't work out? Then what?" asked the king.

Tai knew what he meant by that question, the king was testing his loyalty. "Sire, I am not proud of my past. I came from the southern district of Yi Ling but the army gave me a chance and since then I have spent my while life to serving the army and the court. If the Council turns on us, I will destroy them and then kill myself after that."

That was a good answer, one that Liu Cao liked to hear. "Oh, you'd take your life on this? So if this doesn't work out, I can have you beheaded?"

"Yes, I stake my life on this."

"Very well then." The king stood up and walked down the stairs. "Draw your sword."

Captain Tai was bewildered. "Excuse me?"

"Draw your sword." Cao drew his sword. Schllling. "I want to test your combat abilities. A military man's ideas mean nothing; anybody can come up with a good idea. But an idea that comes from a man who has combat experience carries more weight<sup>4</sup>. You have survived Duke Xiang's rebellion and the Red Feather Rebellion, now let's see what you're made of."

"You want to spar with me? But...you're the king and..."

"I am the king but before that, I am a warrior just like you. There is only me and you in this room so let's drop the pretenses."

"But still." said Tai.

"This is an order from your king!"

"Hai." The captain drew his sword and both fighters bared their fangs at each other.

Liu Cao's default style was the **Eagle Style**, something he acquired during his stay at the neighboring kingdom. His stance was to hold the sword horizontally, pointing it straight forward, with his hand touching the blade with the index finger and middle finger. Shu Tai's style has no official name, but many call it the **imperial style**, the default style taught to men of the army. However, he practiced a lot by himself so his skills were above that of an average soldier.

Without uttering a word, the two dashed forward and clashed their blades. After exchanging a few moves, Liu Cao switched to a two-handed stance, realizing that one handed strikes lack power. Cao went on the offensive struck with fast and light strikes. He would switch from left swings to right swings and high and low swings, hoping to catch Tai off guard, but Tai deflected every single strike as if he can predict what was going to happen. \*Clang\*

\*Cling\* Their blades clashed in the middle and their faces were but inches away from each other's. The looks in their eyes were intense but not one of hatred, but rather opponents to want to prove their strength. Tai no longer felt awkward raising his blade against the king, instead treating him like an equal, at least in this fight. They both pushed each other away and resumed their stances.

The man in the golden armor and red cape with the blue hair was a king but also a warrior and Tai's fighting reflected that. If he held back even a little bit, Liu Cao would be offended. Likewise, Cao did not treat Tai like a subordinate, but rather an equal in the battlefield, at least in this fight.

Tai was in his element<sup>5</sup>; he was at ease as sword play was his career and hobby. But of course, he did not underestimate his opponent. They parried some more and things got more intense. \*Quong quong\* Cao was getting tired but the captain did not show signs of tiring at all. How can this be, thought Liu Cao.

Suddenly, Tai rushed in with a combination he has practiced for a while. He made strike after strike without even thinking about it, it was all from muscle memory, making him look like a machine. \*Cling-clang-clang\* All Cao could do

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<sup>4</sup> idiom - that person's opinion is worth more

<sup>5</sup> Idiom meaning what he does best, what he is known for

was defend while stepping back. Tai rushed in and ducked slightly, and swings his blade hard, knocking Cao's sword away. \*Clack\*

Tai pointed the tip of his blade at Cao's chest area. Both of them remained still for a good three seconds.

Tai's facial expression changed and now they were back to being king and captain again. "I'm sorry, your majesty." he said while bowing.

"What are you apologizing for? I said that for this duel we are equals. Heh. While I've been here doing paperwork and running the kingdom, you were out there training hard, weren't you, Shu Tai? You won because you have experience in real combat. It seems that I've lost my edge."

"Thank you for the compliment, sire."

"Right now our army doesn't have a capable general. You have proven more than capable of handling that kind of position. That is why I am promoting you to **general** of the imperial army."

Tai looked up in surprise. "I'm a...general?"

"That's right, **General Tai**. Has a nice ring to it<sup>6</sup>, doesn't it? Don't disappoint me."

Tai was overwhelmed with emotions and kneeled before his king. "I will not disappoint you and I will do my best to carry my duties. Long live his majesty!" If he was not standing before the king but someone else, he would be crying in joy.

But it is taboo for a man in uniform to shed tears, so he expressed his feelings through gratitude and service.

The newly appointed general walked along a bridge inside the palace and stared at the clear blue lake. He was still in disbelief at how fast things were moving...and that is because the world is moving fast. He could never forget where he came from, a lowly soldier who was caught stealing and was about to be sentenced to death. Yet today he is a general, the highest rank in the entire army of Shen, the highest honor any civilian can hope to achieve. And all this would not be possible if Lady Ce hadn't pardoned him on that very day. His alliance with the Council was not possible without her as well as his promotion.

(It's crazy to think this all happened because of what Lady Ce said to the king. Somehow she is trusted by his majesty and has influence over him. Not only that, but she is with the Demon Slayer, who has influence in the Heaven's Council. She is the most influential woman in the kingdom.)

## Preview of Next Episode

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<sup>6</sup> Idiom meaning it sounds good

Zhang jumped away from her and found himself surrounded by the three women. They all circled him slowly and cautiously on the grassy plains. The autumn breeze blew past them, causing the grass to react, but none of them felt the breeze, only the tension in the air.

Zhang of course was not worried in the least bit. With hundreds of years of combat experience under his belt, as well as knowledge of every single style in the world, to him this was child's play.

### 三十九: Beware! The Vanishing Warrior's True Strength

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\*Clan-clan-clan\* The two swordsmen pushed their blades into each other and jumped back. They both bowed and sheathed their swords.

"Phew, that was a good workout!" said **Pakchu**.

"You're just around my level Pakchu, and that makes you the ideal training partner." said his fellow swordsman.

Both of them went to the well to get water to freshen up. "Hey Tomei, don't you ever wonder if there's enough time to learn swordcraft?" said Pakchu.

"Not enough time?" asked his friend.

"Look at us, we are in our twenties and we have yet to master one style. But in this world, there are hundreds, maybe a thousand sword styles. It is impossible to learn it all in one lifetime. Compared to the knowledge of the world, a human life is too short...like that of an insect."

"Mmmm I get what you're saying Pakchu, but I'd rather focus on one style rather than be a **jack of all trades**<sup>7</sup>. A single person is not meant to master more than one style."

Pakchu was not deterred, but even more enthusiastic. "But there are legendary heroes from the Tin Dynasty who have mastered multiple sword styles! And there's this barbarian from the Chou Dynasty who was a genius and he mastered four styles, surpassing everyone's expectations! There is so much to learn out there. I can never be satisfied with going to one martial arts school my whole life."

Tomei gave a hearty smile. Although they are both around the same skill level, Pakchu's enthusiasm for sword styles is unrivaled, and perhaps one day he will surpass Tomei.

In this martial arts school, Pakchu was known as an eccentric. He would talk about swordcraft to his peers even during breaks. He practiced swordcraft non-stop, more than his peers, even to the brink of exhaustion. He would sleep and dream about swordcraft. But his peers accepted him for who he is, that is what makes him so fun to be around.

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<sup>7</sup> Idiom - know a little bit of everything but good at nothing

Pakchu would read martial arts books from around the world and present new ideas to his master. The master is already used to Pakchu's passion and he would nod and smile as he listened. And that is how this young swordsman lived for the first twenty five years of his life; he eats and breathes swordcraft<sup>8</sup> and feels he never has enough time to learn it all.

One day, a building was set ablaze. Everyone panicked and ran all over the place. A few men, Tomei included, carried buckets of water to put out the flames. One guy shouted, "My son is still in there!"

Pakchu stared at the flames and clenched his fists. "I'll get your son!"  
"Don't do it!" Tomei shouted.

Of course, Pakchu ignored his friend's warning and charged into the burning building.

After running through several rooms, he found a small child cowering in the corner. He grabbed the child in one arm and covered his face with his other arm. \*Froom\* The flames swallowed up everything and pieces of wood were falling from the ceiling. He made a run for it. \*Doosh doosh\* Suddenly, a large plank fell on top of him.

"Run child!" shouted Pakchu.

The child, upon seeing the exit just one room down, ran while screaming. He made it back to his father and cried. But Pakchu was stuck under the plank and unable to move. The flames made their way to the plank and towards him, and set his body ablaze. He screamed in agony. He has never experienced pain like this before in his life...he was being devoured by the flames of hell.

Tomei saw what happened and worked even harder to get the water. The men kept pouring buckets of water on the fire and eventually put out most of the fire. They charged into the building to recover Pakchu...he was alive but unrecognizable...

Pakchu was lying in bed, tucked under a blanket. Nearly his entire body was wrapped in bandages, including his face. His whole body was in dire pain every moment. Even holding a cup hurt his hands.

A doctor came in to examine him. He showed no emotion on his face whatsoever.

"Please, doctor, how is my condition?" he asked in a quivering voice.

"I am sorry to say this but...you have second and third degree burns all over your body. I'm afraid you can never hold a sword again. Not only that, but you will have difficulty taking care of yourself..."

Pakchu's eyes opened wide and his jaw nearly dropped. "No...I am a swordsman. Swordcraft is my life!"

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<sup>8</sup> Idiom - swordcraft is his life

The doctor said, "I am terribly sorry. But there is nothing I can do. Even the best doctors in the empire cannot help you."

Pakchu put his hands in front of him to stare at his wrapped up palms. Even his fingers were wrapped up, with the exception of the tips and the ridges between the fingers. His skin was burned so bad that it was no longer skin that he recognized; it was a darkish brown color. He assumed that his entire body looked the same as his hands - burnt, ugly, and useless.

The doctor left the room so he could reflect in solitude. Because of one incident, his entire life was ruined. Not only does he have no chance to be with a woman, but he cannot even pursue his life's passion anymore. Even worse, in his condition he might not be able to take care of himself.

As he was bedridden, his head turned to the right to stare outside the window. Without swordcraft, his life is meaningless. He felt like the gods that he once worshipped are laughing at him. Right now, he is no different than a corpse...so he might as well become one.

Shortly afterwards, a familiar scholar visited the swordsman. In Pakchu's memory, his face was a blank. He went straight to the window with his back facing Pakchu. "I heard the news. You have my condolences."

"The way I am now, I am no different than a vegetable." said Pakchu.

"I understand perfectly how you feel." said the scholar. "Your freedom was unfairly taken away from you."

"I am a liability to others. I can't even hold a sword." Pakchu started to cry. "There is no doctor that can fix this. Even if they can replace my skin...my hands...are still going to be useless!"

The scholar was still staring out the window. "I suppose that is all modern medicine can do. Conventional methods do not work because your body is damaged too badly. But what about unconventional methods?"

"Unconventional?" he repeated.

"What if I told you that you can still recover without any doctors?"

"Is such a thing possible?" Pakchu was still full of tears, but his sadness was replaced by curiosity.

"There is, but there is a price to pay. That price is your humanity. In return, you will get everything you want...and more."

Pakchu sat up and faced the scholar. "I am willing to give up anything, including my humanity. What's the point of being human if I cannot even wield a sword?"

The scholar smirked. "That's what I thought you'd say. A man in your condition doesn't need convincing." Then he turned towards Pakchu. "You can throw away this old life and start a new life, just as the **phoenix** is reborn from

the ashes!<sup>9</sup> You can become a demon! A few burns will mean nothing to you. You will be stronger and become immortal.”

“Can you really do this for me?”

“Of course. I myself am a demon. I have been alive for several hundred years. To become a demon, all you need is to drink a demon’s blood.” The scholar proceeded to cut his wrist and let his blood drip into a bowl. Once the bowl was half full, he placed it on the desk next to Pakchu’s bed. After that, the scholar left the room.

Pakchu stared at the bowl of red blood. This proposal was too good to be true, yet he must take it. His former life is over, and what is ahead is only a life of misery and despair. But within that bowl is demon’s blood, his new life, his new future.

Liu Zhang’s **flashback** was over and he was back inside his horse carriage. He could hear the sound of the carriage’s wheels turning and hitting the ground as well as the footsteps of a horse. \*clik-clak-clik-clak\* That moment in his memories happened so long ago yet he remembered it so clearly. It was but a weird feeling to remember himself as human since he’s been a demon for so long. After becoming a demon, his body was healed and he continued to learn martial arts to his content without any time restrictions. But he was no longer the martial arts enthusiast Pakchu...after martial arts, he started to lust for power and money...and it became an obsession with no end.

His carriage arrived at its destination and Liu Zhang hopped off and entered the mansion where four high lords would be waiting for him. In this room, Lords Chung, Huong, Sima and Fei were eagerly waiting his arrival.

“Thank you for waiting gentlemen.” said Zhang.

“Get to the point,” said Huong, the most impatient one in the room. But one cannot blame him, for he is the oldest out of them all, well, the oldest human. He badly wanted the secret to immortality. “Can you really make us immortals?”

“But of course.” Zhang clapped and four servants entered the room, each holding a treasure box. They walked up to the lords and opened the boxes, revealing sacred beads. Huong’s eyes lit up at seeing such a beautiful gem. Even though he has no idea of its use, there was no doubt the bead has an allure to it, its sparkle signified something powerful, dark and dangerous.

As a reminder, these **sacred beads** were taken from the treasure room of the imperial palace. Liu Cao wanted to keep these beads away from Liu Zhang so they decided this over a Heaven’s Eye match in **Volume 4**.

“Gentleman, may I present to you the sacred beads. This is the key to immortality...these are given to you in exchange for your armies and your trust in me.”

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<sup>9</sup> Myth - phoenix is reborn from the ashes

Huong picked up the bead. "This little thing is the key to immortality? So we can become like you? Is it true you have been alive for 400 years?"

"Actually, it's 500 years, my lord." Zhang replied. "There is one more ingredient and that is a demon's blood. But just you wait, using your army I will defeat Liu Cao's army and become the king once again. And then I will give the final piece of our promise, which is demon's blood. Support me and we will all prosper."

"Hmph. Fine by me." said Lord Chung. "I have nothing better to do anyways, might as well entertain myself by watching a civil war. No matter what happens, I'm still rich and surrounded by women."

Lord Sima put a fan over his face. "But if you should lose the war...and if we are caught, we will be tried as traitors. And that means death for us all."

"Fear not," said Zhang. "I have been fighting battles for a long time and I will not lose."

## [ B ] Title Contents

Ever since the incident in Game of Death from Volume 6, Alex promised Celina he will spend more time with her, and a man is as good as his promise. So ever since then, he has been spending quality time with her. With so many battles and so many deaths happening lately, these two needed a break. One day they were walking about the marketplace, checking out the various stores. A familiar face appeared before them, a man with red hair and beard.

"It's you, **Khan**." Alex exclaimed.

"I'm glad ya remember me, lad." said Khan in his distinct northern accent

"What do you want? You already lost the duel."

"Heh, I thought we'd have a rematch."

Celina was startled and she was opposed to this match, but before she could say anything, Alex put his hand on his sword's bottom. "Fine by me."

\*Sching\* The Fire Sword came out and Khan drew his sword out.

Just now, everyone sensed a sinister presence nearby and froze like statues. The expression on Khan's face looked like he had seen a ghost. Suddenly, a silhouetted figure dropped down from the roof. \*Plop\* It was none other than the **Black Reaper**. Everyone was surprised and Celina's right hand instinctively reached for her sword.

Alex said, "You're the Black Reaper? What are you doing here?"

"I came for you, Alex Cheng." said he.

"Oi oi what's going on here? Don't ignore me." said Khan.

"This doesn't involve you, so leave." said the Reaper.

"Listen bud, me and Alex Cheng here were just about to duel before ya butted in, so buzz off!" Khan charged and attacked.

\*Clak\* The Reaper defended his attack and countered with his own strikes. He struck aggressively and advanced while Khan stepped back. \*Clak\*



Khan's sword was trembling and so were his hands. He could feel the strength of his opponent just from that and realized that the masked man was out of his league. Nothing good will come out of staying here longer.

"I'm outta here. Consider it your lucky day!" Khan escaped.

Alex's Fire Sword glowed as he approached cautiously.

"Hold it, I did not come to fight you." said the Reaper.

"Then why did you come here?"

"I want to train you as my student."

Both Alex and Celina were shocked by his bombshell<sup>10</sup> declaration. "Say what?"

"It's a trick!" said Celina. "Don't listen to him."

"It's no trick. You have a lot of potential in you, Demon Slayer. But the way you are now, you cannot hope to survive the upcoming battles."

"There's no way in hell we'll listen to you." said Celina.

Suddenly, Li Cheng dropped down from the roof. \*Plop\* "He's not lying. Please believe him."

Celina was concerned about what Alex would do. She knows him well and she knows he always trusts his sister no matter what she does.

"I have no reason to listen to either of you." said Alex. "You guys just leave the Council and then come back and tell me this crap. Why should I do anything you say?"

Celina sighed in relief. For once he's thinking clearly.

The Reaper said, "You don't have to decide now. Come and find me when you've made a decision."

A scout barged into the room where the elder was. "Elder Jong! I have news!"

"What is it?" asked the elder.

"Our men have discovered Liu Zhang's carriage, he is heading up north. There's no doubt it is him."

"Really? And what of Chu Yen?"

"He was not present, sir."

"Liu Zhang is all by himself? This is a once in a lifetime chance. I'm going to assemble all of our best warriors at once."

Li and Celina met up privately, upon Celina's request. "What is the meaning of the Shadow's offer?" she asked, getting straight to the point.

"I'm not entirely sure, this was his idea." Li replied.

"I am not a fan of this idea. Is he trying to kill Alex?"

"He won't!" Li responded.

"How do you know? You guys tried to kill us in that cave."

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<sup>10</sup> Bomb or bombshell means completely unexpected

"That was circumstance...look I don't expect you to believe me. But I know that the Shadow truly wants to make Alex stronger."

Celina sighed, not satisfied with the answers. "I still don't trust you guys." She drew her twin swords.

"Oh, interesting. We've never fought before, Miss Concubine." Li drew her sword. "Should you be holding a sword? Shouldn't you be putting on makeup in front of the mirror?" (I don't have my Ice Sword. I can take her on without it, but it's **that** technique I'm worried about...the final form...)

Celina made the first strike and went on the offensive. As usual, she used strike after strike and occasionally spun her body to increase the attack power. There is a cardinal rule in martial arts, if they keep blocking, you keep attacking. You can only win by being offensive, not defensive.

They both move back one pace away from each other. "Dance of the Sword first form: Dance of the Eagle!" Celina ran two steps forward and leapt into the air.

"Heaven's Wrath Style: Heaven's Light!" Li leapt into the air to meet her half way. Their blades clashed in the air and Li swung her body forward, kicking Celina with both feet. \*Pak\* Li bounced away from her as Celina fell down...and she landed on one foot and one knee. Li landed smoothly on both feet. \*Plop\*

That did not discourage her, but rather made Celina more determined. Li pointed her sword upside down and one clone appeared next to her. Celina's pupils dilate from shock and awe. (Is this an illusion?)

The two Li's approach, standing two paces away from her.

Her eyes darted left and right, keeping track of both of them. (Is this sorcery? Is this what she learned from the Shadow?)

"Dance of the Tiger!" Celina attacked the first Li, striking with her left sword, and Li blocked. Celina slid on her knees and stabbed with her right sword, stabbing Li in the stomach. She thought she was successful, but second later Li transformed into a straw doll. The real Li was the other one and she was about to attack. Celina's quick reflexes allow her to dodge her opponent's blade by bending her back. \*Whoosh whoosh\*

Celina stepped back, her movements so smooth it was like she was ice skating. They were three paces from each other. Celina made both blades horizontal, holding the pommels at her chest level.

(She's going to use it!) Li was preparing for this dreaded moment since the fight began, nay, ever since months ago when she first learned about the Dance of the Sword. It is an assassin's style developed from the Chao Dynasty. Legend has it that a dancer developed this style to defend herself against men, but it was so effective that she used it for assassinations. This style is a trade secret, passed down only to successors and never outsiders.

"Final Form: Dance of the Dragon."

Li pointed her sword upside down and two clones appeared; one on her left and right. The three Li copies ran and kept shuffling left and right to hide the

real one. Celina was confused as to which one was the real Li. She cannot see through her trick, but it matters not, for she will destroy all of them in one fell swoop<sup>11</sup>.

Lady Ce began to spin like a tornado and her twin blades became razors of death. \*Woop woop woop\* The tornado struck the first Li, turning her back into a doll. The tornado changed direction and went for the second Li. She blocked a few times, but was hit and turned into a doll. Celina stopped spinning. Now, only one Li, the real one, remained.

Before, Celina turned clockwise, but this time she will turn counter clockwise to prevent being dizzy. \*Woop woop woop\* Li blocked like hell while stepping back. This tornado of death was not only fast, but the direction of the strikes were unpredictable, and the momentum from the spinning made each strike more powerful than the last one. Even Celina herself did not know where the next strike will come from, she was moving from reflexes alone.

Li countered with the Infinity Circle, a technique with a similar idea, to attack with spinning movements and using the generated momentum to create more power. Just like the dragon's dance, the Infinity Circle can only last as long as the user does. The two forces clashed their blades in an epic showdown. Neither wanted to back down so they gave it all they've got.

Suddenly, both stopped spinning. There was a cut on Li's left forearm and it hurt. She also noticed her right bicep was cut as well.

Celina also felt pain on her right shoulder and she was surprised. (When did she...even against the Dance of the Dragon, she was able to do this? She's the real deal.)

"How many more times can you use the Dance of the Dragon without getting dizzy?" (She should be reaching her limit soon.) She put her sword upside down and the two dolls flew back to her and turned into her clones. Li and her clones kept running and switching sides with each other to hide the real one. All three Li's surround Celina.

Celina's eyes darted back and forth but could not tell them apart. Her vision became blurry. (I'm getting dizzy already...Not good. I can only use Dance of the Dragon one more time.)

Zzzzzzt. A wave of thunder hit Li and she turned into a doll. Zzzzzt. The second Li jumped up and the wave hit her and she turned into a doll. Xiao Ye appeared. "I can easily tell which ones are puppets as they don't make a sound when they move."

Celina relaxed and released her stance.

"Heh. Are you here to fight me too?" asked Li.

"If I have to. Lady Ce is my friend. But you forgot what that word means."

"Don't forget, it was thanks to me that your eyes are healed!"

---

<sup>11</sup> Idiom - all at once, at one time

"Don't forget, I can fight even without my eyes. So, do you think you can beat me?"

Li burst into laughter. "Ha ha ha ha. Very well." She her sword back into its shell.

"More importantly, what is it you have to tell me?" asked Celina.

"Our scouts discovered Liu Zhang's carriage." said Xiao.

Li's eyes grew wide open and before anyone could do anything, she escaped.

"Don't bother chasing her." said Xiao. "I have a feeling we'll see her very soon."

## [ C ]Title Contents

Alex showed up at the place where the Reaper was waiting for him. "Tell me, what is your purpose in training me?" asked Alex.

"We are not enemies, but rather, allies. Our common enemy is Chu Yen and his master, Liu Zhang. The one who must defeat him is you. The wielder of the Fire Sword is the one who must defeat the wielder of the Ice Sword. You are the one who must carry on Masai Genzo's legacy."

"Master Genzo's legacy, huh? He's no longer here...and Master Tze is busy with many things so right now I have no master. It would be nice for someone of your level to train me, but I still don't trust you."

"Do you trust Li?" asked the Reaper.

"Yes...no. I want to but I can longer do that. She told me to not let my emotions cloud my judgment." said Cheng.

"But she still believes in you. Having you as my student was her idea."

Alex was shocked and his whole demeanor changed. "Are you serious?"

"Tell me, Cheng, do you want to get stronger?"

The wind blew hard. \*Whoo\* Alex did not say anything but he has already made up his mind.

Liu Zhang's carriage was accompanied by a group of his personal bodyguards, a small part of his Red Feather Army. One guard said to another, "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" asked another one. "You must be hearing things."

Suddenly, a group of swordsmen slid down the hill and screamed their battle cry.

"Are they bandits?" asked the guard.

"They don't look like bandits!" shouted another guard.

The Council's warriors charged into the guards and it became a group battle. Xiao Ye emerged out of the chaos and slashed her way through the guards, attempting to get close to the carriage. \*Zap\* Her sword touched a guard's shoulder and electrified him, causing him to fall. \*Zap\* She finished off

another one. She dashed and plunged her weapon into the carriage. She did not feel it hit anything inside.

\*Plop\* The roof opened and Liu Zhang jumped out of it, with sword in right hand and his sleeves waving from the wind. \*Whoo\* Li and Celina both noticed him. He landed on the roof. Xiao jumped up to his altitude and slashed but he jumped away just before that. Xiao landed on the carriage and then jumped down to ground level.

\*Slish\* Celina just cut down one guard. Another guard screamed and charged at her and in response, she used Dance of the Tiger, a move where she bends down on one knee and slides forward with both blades. \*Stab\* Both blades went through the guard's torso and he fell backwards as she pulled them out.

A low level guard was the perfect guinea pig for Li's experiment. She held her sword upside down and two clones of her came out of her body. The guard rubbed his eyes, thinking he was seeing things. Li and her **clones** surrounded him and he was bewildered. All three of them attack him and he blocked one of them; and the real Li stabbed him in the chest, killing him quickly. It looks like the Shadow Puppet is a success.

Zhang ran a good a good distance away from the group fight before engaging in combat. They were on grassy plains. Xiao used the Thunder Wave, an electric shockwave. **Zzzzzt**. Zhang jumped to the side. Xiao rushed forward and Zhang rushed towards her, their feet brushing the grass.

They met in the middle and clashed blades. \*Clan clan\* Xiao used her best moves but all were thwarted easily. "I see you're using Walking Crane, the spitting image of Taishi Tze." \*Clin clan\* They jumped away from each other.

Li Cheng charged at him and shouted, "I'll have your head, you demon!" She swings her blade hard \*whoosh\* He jumped over it and landed. Li charged at him and unleashed a furious combination of strikes. \*Clin clan\* "So you use Heaven's Wrath." \*Clin clan\* No matter hard she tried, Li was unable to find an opening or get into her opponent's safe zone. Zhang's defense was impenetrable; it's as if he's a robot who can detect her movements automatically. Their blades locked into each other's and he pushed her away.

It was Celina's turn to attack; she charged and struck with her twin blades. \*Clin-Clin\* Spinning her whole body, she made strike after strike, pushing the eunuch back while she advanced. Li and Xiao followed them closely, moving in parallel with them. Zhang pulled out his second blade and now both of them were using two blades. These two have already exchanged hands at the imperial palace when he was a king. \*Clin-Clin-Clan-Clan\* Their blades clashed non-stop and even Xiao found it hard to keep track of their movements. To the untrained eye, they appeared to be hitting randomly without a purpose.

Zhang jumped away from her and found himself surrounded by the three women. They all circled him slowly and cautiously on the grassy plains. The autumn breeze blew past them, causing the grass to react, but none of them felt the breeze, only the tension in the air.

Zhang of course was not worried in the least bit. With hundreds of years of combat experience under his belt, as well as knowledge of every single style in the world, to him this was child's play.

Li Cheng was the first to attack and they exchanged blows. Xiao charged forward. Zhang twisted Li's sword out of the way just before Xiao performed her strike. Zhang bent his back all the way, as far back as a human can bend, and the electrifying blade missed his beard by an inch. \*whoosh\* Xiao made a second strike and Zhang jumped backwards, his body as light as a feather.

Celina came at him and they traded blows. Xiao came from behind and dashed forward, using her sword like a spear. Zhang evaded it just in time. Celina ran into him and struck at him and he side stepped her as they clashed blades, causing her to go past him.

Li let out an aggressive combination of strikes while he defended and seconds later Celina joined her. One attacked from the right and the other on the left. Zhang had two swords but he had to defend against three swords and he kept moving back using his footwork.

Xiao, who was three paces away, swings her blade down, throwing an electric wave forward. Zzzzzt. All three of them jumped away from it.

The eunuch threw an airbreaker \*froom\* Celina blocked with her blades but she was knocked down, while Li jumped over it. Zhang turned the other way and ran into the trees and hopped away.

Xiao started to run but Li said, "Don't chase him. Last time we fell into his trap." said Li, causing Xiao to stop moving. "You'll never know what he has planned."

"I'm quite surprised." said Celina, "You care about our safety?"

"It's up to you if you want to believe me or not." Li jumped into the trees.

By the time Celina and her friend Xiao returned to the group fight, it was already over, the result was the Council has killed all the guards. Earlier, they have learned about Liu Zhang's terrifying abilities, but to experience it first hand is a different story altogether. The most terrifying part was that he did not possess special powers; he used swordcraft just like anyone else. But his skill surpasses that of Chu Yen **and** Taishi...and in this era, there is no one who can defeat him.

### Preview of Next Episode

"Hold it. I heard that your skills were pretty good. Why don't we have a little spar?"

"I have no reason to fight you."

"C'mon, don't be like that. I just want to see your skills." Zhe-Fai drew his weapon. \*chling\*

Upon hearing the sound of metal, Tai turned around. "You won't take no for an answer, will you?"

"You get it now!" Zhe-Fai was getting excited. He hates meetings and lives for fighting...the mere thought of a fight makes his blood boil. He charged head-on into his opponent and went on the offensive.

Tai went on the defensive and noticed Zhe-Fai's style...it was not a style at all, but random, hard swings. \*Whoop Whoop\* Captain Zhe-Fai screamed each time he took a swing. \*Whoop Whoop\* In contrast to him, Tai was disciplined and his movements were more precise. Their difference in training was apparent in their spar...but was it really a sparring session or a duel to the death?

#### 四十: The Corrupt Captain's Ambition: The Concubine in Peril

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[ B ] [ C ] Contents

All the major players in the army have gathered at the armory. Obviously, the newly appointed General Tai was there, as well as two of his captains and four lieutenants. The two captains have known Tai for a while now and they all used to be the same position. They know of Shu Tai's work ethic and morals and they all support him. However, not everyone approves of Tai's sudden promotion.

The major players were assembled at an outdoors table. A soldier arrived. "General, Captain Zhe-Fai has arrived."

Seconds later, **Zhe-Fai**, the captain of the East Brigade appeared before the group. He was a middle aged man with a black beard and an eye patch over his left eye. Like a soldier, he wears armor but the East Brigade armor is different, it is more lightweight and made for mobility. If you recall from Volume 6, Shun Lai, Zi Lai's father, was killed by an unnamed East Brigade commander. But before Shun uttered his last breath, he took out the commander's eye. And today, that very commander was standing here before General Tai.

"Hoho, everyone has gathered here. What's the occasion? Some kind of party?" said Zhe-Fai. Such is his personality; he dislikes long and boring meetings and likes to make wisecracks (明智之舉) and remarks. Those who are not familiar with him find him to be rude, offensive and uneducated. The one thing that supercedes his personality is his reputation of cruelty, it is well known that the **East Brigade** tortures their prisoners and consequently they don't last long.

"Do you have a status update for us?" asked Tai.

"Heh. I have done as you asked; we have placed every single city in the kingdom under a strict lockdown. However, we've been noticing some suspicious activity in Yi Ting."

All the military men gasped. "Is Liu Zhang hiding in Yi Ting?"

"I wouldn't say hiding." said Zhe-Fai. "He has gathered a sizeable army..."

and unfortunately there is not much my men can do against such a large force. Slowly but surely, he has taken over Yi Ting."

A captain banged his fist on the table. "We were too late. Our worst fears have come true."

Tai was just as bothered as his men, but he was still determined to win. "So he wants to start a civil war. Then we will give him one. With the Heaven's Council on our side, our forces are evenly numbered."

A soldier arrived and said, "Taishi Tze has arrived."

"Speak of the devil." said the general.

Taishi was accompanied by Cho Mei-Ang, a senior member. Outside the armory, several other members were waiting, just in case of an emergency. As the two walked past some of the soldiers, they all stared at him in awe. Even though he was a criminal until recently, he was a celebrity amongst the common populace.

He came to the main table with the two captains and four lieutenants. One lieutenant came up to him. "Master Tze, my daughter is a big fan of yours! Can I get your autograph?"

"Oh, but of course." Taishi signed his name on a piece of paper.

"Wow thanks. My daughter will be so excited!"

"How old is she, by the way?"

"She's fourteen, sir."

"When she turns eighteen, tell her she can join the Council. I have a spot waiting for her."

Cho coughed on purpose.

"Oh where are my manners? I am Taishi Tze and this is Cho Mei-Ang."

"It's an honor to have one of the Four Brothers here. So, let us begin the meeting." said a captain.

And so the group discussed in detail about their battle plans, which lasted several hours. After the meeting, the men decided to have a toast to their newfound alliance.

General Tai, on the other hand, was not in the mood to celebrate, not when there is a civil war looming over the kingdom. Zhe-Fai appeared behind him.

"What is it, captain?"

"I thought I might join you. Tell me something, general, how do you suppose someone like you became a general in such a short time?"

"It's not short at all." said Tai. "I've been serving the army my whole life."

"That's quite the feat, considering you are only thirty years old. Most generals are thirty five to forty years of age. You started out as an orphan in the southern district of Yi Ling."

Upon hearing that, Tai turned to face him. Besides Lady Ce, he never tells his background to anybody, so Zhe-Fai must have done his homework.



"You signed up to the imperial army just to feed yourself. Nothing wrong with that, however...one day you stole something from the royal treasure room, and you should have been executed...yet here you are, alive and well."

Tai's face turned into a frown. "You're too nosy for your own good. The East Brigade is supposed to be the police force of the kingdom. To look into my background...you have a lot of free time on your hands. You should find another hobby." Tai walked away from him.

"Hold it. I heard that your skills were pretty good. Why don't we have a little spar?"

"I have no reason to fight you."

"C'mon, don't be like that. I just want to see your skills." Zhe-Fai drew his weapon. \*chling\*

Upon hearing the sound of metal, Tai turned around. "You won't take no for an answer, will you?"

"You get it now!" Zhe-Fai was getting excited. He hates meetings and lives for fighting...the mere thought of a fight makes his blood boil. He charged head-on into his opponent and went on the offensive.

Tai went on the defensive and noticed Zhe-Fai's style...it was not a style at all, but random, hard swings. \*Whoop Whoop\* Captain Zhe-Fai screamed each time he took a swing. \*Whoop Whoop\* In contrast to him, Tai was disciplined and his movements were more precise. Their difference in training was apparent in their spar...but was it really a sparring session or a duel to the death?

Occasionally their blades clashed ...Zhe-Fai would hit every other swing and miss every other swing. Tai found it painful to block his attacks, they were unpredictable and forceful. Such is the weakness of using an orthodox style; it is too predictable and structured.

\*Clank\* He made a horizontal swing and pushed Tai back two paces. Tai realized it was time to get serious. He dashed forward and they exchanged blows. The metals banged into each other constantly while he waited for the right moment. Tai saw an opening and took a hard swing, knocking Zhe-Fai's sword away. Tai put his sword against his neck while Zhe-Fai's left arm pointed straight and a hidden dagger came out of his sleeve. The dagger was close to Tai's neck and both of them just realized what happened.

Zhe-Fai was not scared, rather entertained by this development. "Well looky here...you ain't so bad, young lad."

The two captains and four lieutenants surrounded the two fighters with their swords. Taishi watched curiously as he stroked his beard. There was a tense moment as everyone remained still.

"Never do this again." warned Tai.

"Wooo what a scary face." said Zhe-Fai sarcastically.

"Are we clear?" he asked seriously.

"Crystal clear." he answered seriously.

\*Thud\* The East Brigade commander pounded his fist on the table.  
“Goddamn that General Tai, he thinks he’s a big shot.”  
An officer was in the room as well. “Sir...”  
“You know, I have a dream of being a general someday.”  
“You do?” asked the officer curiously.  
“Just imagine, having the power to command thousands of men...they will fight for you and die for you. If they win a battle, you will get the credit. It is the ultimate glory.”  
“Indeed, you are quite ambitious, sir. Here.” The officer placed documents on the table. “These are records detailing events that happened in the palace, and here are records from the army. Both of them have a record about Shu Tai’s past crime.”  
Zhe-Fai read the documents carefully and his right eye opened wide. Recall that he has an eye patch so he has only one eye left. “He was pardoned by Lady Ce, Liu Bei’s concubine?”  
“That’s right. And I have asked servants from the palace, and they said Lady Ce is frequently seen with King Cao...they drink tea and converse together.”  
“Ohoho I see the connection now. Shu Tai is friends with Lady Ce, who is friends with his highness. So Lady Ce recommends him for a promotion and suddenly, Shu Tai is a general. I see. So the key to all this is Lady Ce. She’s done well for herself, despite being a widow. Officer.”  
“Yes sir.” he saluted.  
“Have our men capture Lady Ce. Whoever brings her to me gets a handsome reward.”

Meanwhile, Alex was receiving the Shadow’s intense training. \*Quong\* They clashed blades and both stepped back. “What’s the matter? Don’t tell me you’re tired already?” taunted the Shadow.  
Alex panted for breath as he stared at the veiled man. He was already this exhausted and yet the Shadow was showing no signs of tiredness at all. Does he have superman stamina or is he a monster?  
“If you don’t attack, I will.” said the Shadow.  
Alex yelled and charged forward. “Yaaahhhh!” His sword was held diagonally to his side and when he was close enough to his target, he brought it up for a hard swing. The Shadow used Shadow Walk, creating illusionary copies of himself, causing Alex to hit the air. The Shadow kept strafing left and right in this same fashion, confusing Alex’s eyes.  
The Shadow appeared to the left and struck horizontally and Alex blocked it just in time. If he had not blocked it, the blade would have cut deep into his chest. Alex pushed his opponent’s blade away and countered. \*Whoosh\* He hit the air.

Alex grew frustrated and kept swiping and slashing about and missing every time due to the Shadow Walk. (Which one is the real one?) Alex closed his eyes and focused on his other senses. Of course, he was nothing like Xiao Ye, as fighting blind was not his strength. Suddenly, his eyes opened and he made a slash and once again missed.

"You're still hesitating at the last moment." the veiled man said to his pupil. "At this rate you cannot beat Chu Yen."

Celina was watching from the sidelines with a poker face. She still did not agree to this arrangement of having Alex being trained by the Shadow, who she views is their enemy. Not only was his face unknown, but his background and everything else was a mystery. Also on the sidelines was Li, who was staring blankly at nothing. That's what it appeared to be, but Li noticed that they were being watched by spies who were far away, so she had to focus on them.

After standing here for over an hour, Celina grew tired of watching and walked away from the scene. Shortly afterwards, Li followed her.

Alex glanced briefly in Celina's direction. "Pay attention." said the Shadow.

"But we are being watched. They might ambush her." Alex replied.

"Oh, good job noticing that. Is that why you were distracted? Worry not, Li is with her. Have faith in your sister."

## [ B ]Title Contents

As Celina was walking down the street, two officers in East Brigade outfits followed her from behind. The way they were trailing her showed they were not hiding their intentions any longer. Two more officers stood in front of her, startling her. "Lady Ce, please come with us." said one officer.

She recognized them by their outfits. Also, only East Brigade officers were allowed to carry weapons in broad daylight. "What does the East Brigade want with me?"

"Our captain wants to have a word with you."

She noticed the second officer has his hand near the sword's pommel, ready to pull it out at a moment's notice. She too has her hand over her pommel.

"I'm just a widowed concubine so what business could your captain possibly have with me?"

"That's not my business, I am just following orders."

"I cannot go with you." Celina drew her twin swords, causing all four officers to draw theirs.

Celina and the first officer clashed blades. The two behind her began to move towards her. Suddenly, the ninja girl dropped down from above and slashed the third one, causing him to bleed and fall, presumably to his death. This surprised the fourth one, who immediately charged at Li.

Li was fighting him one on one on an empty street...this was the perfect chance to test her **Shadow Puppet** technique. She put her sword upside down and focused and two Li clones appeared. The officer was bewildered as he has never seen anything like this before. The three Li's surrounded in a triangle pattern and he was scared out of his wits. He just picked one to attack. \*Slash\* He stabbed the clone, only to have it turn into a straw doll. The two other Li's stabbed him. \*Schleb\* He bled from the chest and fell down.

The first officer struck only to have his attack blocked by Celina, who countered and slashed him on the chest. He stepped back and fell on one knee, and the second officer attacked. Celina performed a spinning motion, slashing his arm and knee, and he fell down. These East Brigade members were trained swordsmen but they were no match for the **Dance of the Sword**.

"You'll pay for this!" The first officer ran away.

Celina was about to run but Li stopped her. "Don't bother. You don't want to be too far away from us...that'll put you in more danger." said the ninja girl.

Celina sighed and put her twin swords back into their shells. Li's words were correct, given the circumstances; she should not be acting solo. The last time she left on her own, she fell into the Demon Brothers' trap in volume 6.

"Were they East Brigade officers?" asked Li.

"Yes, and I have no idea what they want with me." Celina hopped onto the nearest balcony. Li followed suit, hopping onto the same balcony. After sensing something wrong, Li turned to the right to look across the street. Seeing an empty window, she shrugged it off as nothing. She followed Celina, walking inside the room.

It turns out Li's instincts were right on the mark. Roh Demos was next to the window, flat against the wall. He had moved out of sight just before he was seen. "Li Cheng, you are a formidable opponent indeed. I cannot let my guard down around her. But what I don't get is why the East Brigade is after Lady Ce? With them around I cannot make any moves."

Alex was nearby the scene to see what happened, but far away enough to not be seen. The Shadow was standing with him. "See? She is safe and sound. Li is a reliable one. I trained her myself."

"Yeah, knowing Celina is with Li makes me feel relieved."

"Now, let's get back to training. Let's not waste a single second more."

The first officer who survived the fight went back to the East Brigade headquarters to report the incident to his captain. Zhe-Fai slammed his fist on the table. \*bang\* "You guys failed to capture a woman? Am I surrounded by incompetents?"

"I'm sorry, sir. But our target had help..."

"What kind of help?" yelled Zhe-Fai.

"It was from her friend..." the officer replied nervously.

"And who is her friend? A man?" asked the captain.

The officer looked down. "It was a woman."

"A woman?" He slapped the officer. \*Smack\* "I have given you all rigorous training. And yet two women bested four of my men? Are you all morons?" The captain paced around in the room and sighed. "We will try to capture Lady Ce again and this time, I am coming with you."

Meanwhile, in a remote area, the Shadow and Alex clashed blades. "I don't mind if you use the Fire Sword's powers." he said.

Alex made the Fire Sword glow red and turn into flames. "Hyaaaah!" He charged forward, determined to show his new teacher his true skill, only to be met with the Shadow Walk. \*Whoo-whoosh\* Alex cut illusion of the Shadow. He turned to the right and struck again, only to cut the air again. The Shadow strafed left and right, creating multiple copies of himself to fool Alex.

"Is that all you've got?" taunted the veiled man.

Alex shut his eyes and focused on his other senses. When he was ready, his eyes opened and he struck at where he thought the real Shadow was. \*Clank\* He was right, the real Shadow blocked his blade. Just then, the Shadow did his spinning attack, forcing Alex to step back.

"Are you getting tired?" asked the veiled man.

"Not even close! I'm just getting started!" he retorted.

"Good! That's the spirit!" Both fighters charged into each other and struck.

Inside a secret room in the imperial palace, Liu Cao polished his sword. "Thank you for replying to my selfish request."

"Non-sense. If your highness requests it, I will gladly comply." said Shu Tai.

"Ever since I became the king, I never get to practice." Liu Cao stood in his fighting stance.

Shu Tai stood in his own fighting stance. Both of them waited for the right moment and suddenly, they charged into each other and clashed blades.

Li escorted Celina all the way to the building of the Council's headquarters. When they got to the front door, Celina said, "Thanks for earlier. But just because you helped me doesn't mean I trust you."

"I don't blame you." Li replied. "For a long time I did not trust anybody and I still don't."

Celina turned around to face her. "Do you trust the Shadow?"

"I follow him because I'm his student." replied Li.

"What about Alex, do you trust him?"

Li did not answer but just stared with a face of contemplation. After all, she knew very little about her brother, and he knew little about his sister.

"You truly are cold. Alex has been looking for you for ten years."

"What do you know about me? Were you there ten years ago? I did not exactly have an easy life like you, Miss Concubine. Not everyone gets to be born in wealth."

"Being a concubine was not my choice. Before that, I was an orphan who grew up in a dance theatre."

Li was surprised as this was new information to her, causing her to listen attentively.

"I never met my parents. At least you had a family once. A mom, a dad, and a brother...your parents are not here but you still have Alex."

"I see, so you're an orphan, just like Xiao Ye. You two had similar backgrounds. We've all had our own struggles growing up." Finally, Li started to become agreeable. But the mood changed when she sensed danger. "They're here!"

Suddenly, the two women found themselves surrounded by a team of East Brigade officers, including Captain Zhe-Fai himself. Everybody had their weapons drawn and ready to fight. At one glance it was impossible to count them all, but there were at least thirty officers, possibly more.

"You sure are popular with them." said Li.

"Just what do you people want with me?" asked Celina.

"Just come with us quietly." said an officer. "And no one will get hurt."

"Just to let you know, I hate pushy men." said Li.

## [ C ]Title Contents

One officer screamed and charged ahead of the others and Li blocked his attack. All the other officers moved after him. \*Clang\* Li locked blades with one of them. (We are out numbered. If only I had my Ice Sword, wiping them out would be a piece of cake. But I still have the Shadow Puppet.) Li pushed the other guy away and got into her **Shadow Puppet** stance. She stood up straight and closed her eyes for a brief moment and two clones of her appeared.

The East Brigade officers were bewildered and did not approach. "What kind of sorcery is this?" said one of them. "It's an illusion! It has to be!" said another one. "It's too real to be an illusion." said another one.

With many of them distracted, the real Li fought and slashed the officers.

Celina just slashed a few of them. (There are too many of them. I have to use the Dragon's Dance. It should finish off at least ten of them. But I don't know how long my body will last.) As a reminder, the Dance of the Dragon is one of the most powerful attacks, effective for clearing a large crowd. However, due to the speed of the spinning, it causes the user to be dizzy. And if the user is dizzy,

she will be vulnerable to attacks. It is a double-edged sword<sup>12</sup> that must be used carefully.

\*Slish! Slash\* She just cut down two officers. Zhe-Fai was standing three paces away from her. With a black beard and eye patch, his appearance stood out above the rest so she assumed he must be the leader.

"Are you the Captain of the East Brigade?"

"I'm Captain Zhe-Fai, and you must be Lady Ce, I've heard so much about you."

"But I don't know you. Why do you want me dead?"

"Hohoho. I don't want you dead. I just need you to become my hostage."

That word triggered her and her pupils dilated. It brought up bad memories, very bad memories that she repressed. "Hostage?" Her arm was shaking which caused her swords to shake. Zhe-Fai noticed this but did not know what it meant. "I won't become anyone's hostage!" Celina's fingers gripped the sword tightly and she charged angrily. "Hyaaaa!"

Zhe-Fai assumed she would be easy because she's a woman, but he was not used to her aggressive style and was pushed back with each strike. \*Quon-quon\* There were no openings from her as she struck without wasting a second. \*Quon-quon\*

He bumped into one of his officers. Zhe-Fai grabbed the officer and shoved him forward, and Celina stabbed him through the stomach, and the tip came out of his back. With her sword stuck inside of him, she was not able to move. Zhe-Fai quickly ran forward while drawing his blade back. There was no time to think, she let go of her sword and backed away to avoid his strike.

\*Whoosh\*

Now Celina has only one sword and was unable to use her Dance of the Sword style. Zhe-Fai went on the offensive and his style was sloppy and random but his strikes were hard and unpredictable. She was not used to such a style so she had a hard time defending. She glanced to the side and saw a fallen officer holding a sword. The captain noticed, of course. She and Zhe-Fai ran at the same time towards the fallen officer. He threw a dagger and it knocked the sword further away. Celina then stared at her opponent.

"Heh, you don't need that. A woman shouldn't hold a sword, let alone two."

Zhe-Fai struck first and Celina who has only one sword can only parry and exchange moves with him.

\*Slash\* Li just stabbed another officer, but there were still countless numbers of them. One of the officers stabbed her clone, and it turned into a straw doll. Upon seeing that, another officer stabbed her second clone, turning it into a doll. "It's an illusion, see? Get her!" he shouted. Now the officers' morale has boosted, which spells trouble for Li.

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<sup>12</sup> Idiom meaning a sword that hurts yourself

Inside one of the Council's room, Taishi and Cho Mei-Ang were having a private meeting when a member busted in without knocking. "Sir, there is a fight nearby!"

Taishi and Cho glanced at each other and without uttering a word, ran outside.

\*Slish\* A blade scratched Li's leg and she winced in pain. She was outnumbered by East Brigade men and so was Celina.

"Hold it!" shouted Taishi. He was standing atop the wall. Some of the men saw him but ignored him, as they were focused on the battle.

Cho Mei-Ang appeared and joined the fight, surprising Li. They both glanced at each other without exchanging a word, and returned to fighting. They may not be allies, but in this moment they have a common enemy. Cho will fight these officers because they have no right to do this close to the Council headquarters.

Taishi jumped off the wall and stepped on a man's head. \*Thud\* His body was light as a feather as he hopped onto another man's head. \*Thud\* That man completely did not expect this. \*Thud\* After the third hop, Taishi landed on the floor, with Zhe-Fai only two paces away.

"Aren't you Commander Zhe-Fai?" asked Taishi.

"What's it to you, old man? Wait a minute...that appearance...I recognize you from the meeting! You're Taishi Tze! Good...I've always wanted to know what it's like to fight a legend. Are you as strong as the rumors say?"

"Hmph." Taishi quickly brushed his beard. "At the meeting you picked a fight with General Tai and now you're picking a fight with me. I am going to teach you a lesson, young man."

"Young man? I'm over forty years old, old man!" Zhe-Fai charged and let out his aggressive strikes.

Taishi used his usual one handed style to deflect the attacks. \*Tak-tak-tak\*

The East Brigade Captain screamed during each swing. "Hya! Hya!" But no matter how hard Zhe-Fai tried, he was not able to get past Taishi's solid defenses.

Suddenly, an officer came from the right and attacked and Taishi blocked and kicked him away. Zhe-Fai immediately seized the chance to strike but Taishi's lightning fast reflexes blocked him in time. He moved his sword in a circle so quickly that it looked like multiple swords. \*Whip-whip-whip\* It was impossible for Zhe-Fai to get close.

Zhe-Fai grabbed the nearest officer and shoved him forward. Taishi jumped up and stepped on his shoulder and did a flying kick. \*Thud\* His foot landed on Zhe-Fai's chest, knocking him down.

"Is using dirty tricks all you can do?" Taishi asked with anger.

Two officers struck him from both sides, giving the East Brigade Captain a chance to stand up. After Taishi finished off the two officers, Zhe-Fai threw a



dagger. Taishi used a two handed stance and knocked the dagger away. The two ran into each other and clashed their blades. Taishi saw an opening and stabbed Zhe-Fai's right arm. Suddenly, Zhe-Fai stuck out his left arm and a blade came out of his sleeve. Taishi quickly released his sword and stepped backwards and bent his back. \*Whoosh\*

Zhe-Fai grabbed his right arm, which was bleeding from the bicep.

"You cannot hold a sword anymore. But fear not, the wound isn't that deep, you can still recover with time."

"Screw you!" The arrogant captain swung his left blade recklessly while Taishi dodged. All he had to do was move back while bending his back and tilting his head. Zhe-Fai swung his blade recklessly and missed every time.

With the help of Cho, Li and Celina were able to deal with the massive number of enemies. Celina was able to get a second sword from a fallen foe and used the Dance of the Dragon. The officers did not know how to deal with such a force and in one fell swoop, she took down five guys.

"Do you want to continue?" Taishi taunted.

Zhe-Fai's arm was bleeding and his men were hurting, this situation was not to his favor. He already lost one eye and did not want to lose an arm...or his other eye. "Retreat!" he yelled. He ran away and so did all of his men. Obviously, the ones who died remained where they were.

Taishi just stared in awe as the entire group ran away upon hearing a single word. The East Brigade does not even care about their own comrades. It is not surprising as they follow their leader's example. Taishi cannot fathom how anyone could follow such a corrupt leader.

Captain Zhe-Fai was summoned to the imperial palace by a **royal decree** and he was excited as he read the letter. Without further ado, he headed to the palace, thinking he would get a promotion. He has only been to the palace a few times in his life, and each time it was an honor for him. As soon as he entered the imperial complex, a servant took him to see the king. While walking, he wondered what kind of reward he'd receive and grew excited.

Down the hall, Liu Cao was sitting down, having tea outdoors. But standing beside him was General Tai, and upon seeing him, Zhe-Fai grew nervous. Shu Tai bowed to the king and walked off. The two cast a brief glance at each other as they walked in opposite directions.

Zhe-Fai kneeled before Liu Cao. "May his majesty live a thousand years."

The king began to speak. "You may stand."

"Hai." He stood up.

"So I've been told that Lord Huong is in charge of financing the **East Brigade**, isn't he?"

"Yes your highness. We the East Brigade are the elite police force of the kingdom. Our job is to-"

"I know what your job is." the king interrupted. "You tried to have Lady Ce kidnapped? Why would you do that? Stop doing that immediately! Also you tried to pick a fight with General Tai at a meeting? You have a problem with conduct, captain."

"Sire, that's a misunderstanding!"

"Enough! Normally, I would fire you and imprison you, but in light of your accomplishments, you can keep your position as head of the East Brigade. But we will transfer the division over to a new owner, Lord Yu."

Zhe-Fai's face clearly showed concern and discontent.

"Is that understood?" Cao asked sternly.

"Yes, your highness." Zhe-Fai's voice showed defeat and disappointment. In just one short moment, his entire career was ruined.

### **Preview of Next Episode**

Meanwhile, somewhere in a northern city, the entire Red Feather Army gathered in one place. In the front platform, Ragnarok was standing next Liu Zhang. "General Ragnarok will lead us to victory. He is the one who slain the War God and is the true hero of our kingdom! All hail Ragnarok!"

Chu Yen raised his sword up high. At last, today is the day he can shed his old name and live into his new name, the name of the future. All the soldiers shouted simultaneously, "All hail Ragnarok!"

Somewhere in the capital city, an army roughly the same size as the Red Feather Army gathered together. All the imperial soldiers lined up neatly in square formations. General Tai and a few other high lords stood in the front. He raised his blade up high and all the soldiers cheered. "For justice and glory!" they all shouted.

### 四十一: Train Hard, Heroes! Graduation Day Arrives

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After being summoned to see Master Tze, Xiao went to his room to find him kneeling on the floor while drinking tea. "I'm here, master." She kneeled on the cushion across from him.

"Xiao, why did you not tell me about Li and her link to the Black Reaper?" She looked at him in surprise and then looked down in guilt. "Sorry master. I just...wanted to believe in her." After that, there was an uncomfortable silence in the room.

"It's fine to believe in a comrade. You once mentioned that she aided you in your journey to have your eyes healed. I can understand why you still think of

her as a friend, but she is not your friend any longer. She an enemy of the Heaven's Council and our enemy as well. Please do well to remember that."

"Yes, Master Tze, I understand. If you are free today, I have a request."

"Hmmm?"

"I want to learn how to use the Thunder Sword better." said Xiao.

"I see. Do you remember how we first met?" asked Taishi.

"Of course. That day was the day that changed my life. I'll never forget it as long as I live."

"Originally, you wanted to learn martial arts for self defense. But what is the reason you fight now?" As the two continued to converse, they had a flashback to that very day. Recall from an earlier event when Xiao explained her background when she and Li were in the forest. There was a time when a restaurant owner tried to rip off Xiao because she was blind. However, there was more to that story, as the **flashback** will tell.

He threw a silver coin onto the table. Cling, cling, cling.

"It is a silver one." Xiao announced. All the observers gasped. "Do you still think it is luck?" asked Xiao.

The owner threw some more coins, and sure enough, she named each one correctly.

"Silver! Gold! Gold! Bronze!"

The owner was sweating like a pig. "Why...you..."

Everyone was impressed with her performance and they clapped. With everyone on her side, the owner could not continue his false narrative.

"I hope that convinced you I paid my meal fully."

"Of course!" said he, sweating like a pig. "Actually you did give me a gold coin. I saw it wrong, that's all..."

"Unlike my eyes your eyes are fine, so did you see it wrong? Business is all about honesty. If you don't mind, I have to go now."

As Xiao walked down the empty hallway, she sensed two people stalking her. She turned around to face them. "What do you want?"

"You sure made a fool of our boss, didn't you, lady?" said Waiter A.

"I see, so you work for that rip-off restaurant."

"Now, just cooperate with us and give us your money." said Waiter B.

"That money belongs to me, fair and square!"

"Then you leave us no, choice, lady." Waiter A pulled out a knife.

Xiao's eyebrows furrowed, she sensed he pulled out a small object, most likely a knife. He took a stab at her and she blocked with her walking stick.

\*Clank\* He took another swing and she stepped back and her back hit the wall.

Just now, everyone heard another voice. "Hoho, it takes two men to attack a blind girl? And you need weapons? Today's men are weak aren't they?"

Xiao listened carefully. His voice sounded was that of an old man's, in his fifties to seventies. But the unusual thing was she did not hear his footsteps... what could that mean?

"Mind your own business, old man!" said Waiter B.

Taishi stroked his beard. "Hohoho, I could say the same to you. What do you want with this girl?"

"Grrrr!" The waiter charged at him with the knife but stopped when a sword's tip touched his chin, causing him to panic.

"See this? This is a real weapon called a sword. Your knife is for cutting vegetables. Mine is used for murder." Taishi took a couple of swings. \*Whish whish\* A second later, the waiter's shirt and pants were cut in pieces. He gasped and fell backwards.

Waiter A threw his knife at him and Taishi slipped to dodge it. \*Whip\*

"So you want to play rough, eh, old man?" The waiter drew his own sword.

"Oh you've done it now, raising a sword against the likes of me. You know what that means, right? It's a fight to the death."

"Quit your preaching, old man!" Waiter A attacked.

Needless to say, Taishi made short work of him. He knocked the sword out of the waiter's hands and stabbed him in the stomach. It was deep enough to damage an internal organ but not deep enough to kill him. Waiter A fell to his knees as he covered his wound.

"Now, never appear before me again or this girl again."

The two waiters got up and ran away in a cowardly way. Xiao picked up her stick. "Thank you, mister...ummm."

"You can call me Tze, Taishi Tze."

That name sounded familiar and as she jogged her memory her lips parted. Taishi Tze? He is **that** Taishi?

"You've got to be careful, young lady. There are a lot of scumbags in this town who wouldn't hesitate to bully a blind woman. It's a dog eat dog world<sup>13</sup>."

"My name is Xiao Ye. Ummm, your moves...they were so quick."

"My moves? You can see them?"

"No I cannot see them, but I my own way of seeing things."

"Your senses are quite sharp. Well then..." Taishi was about to walk away.

"Wait. Please teach me martial arts!"

Taishi was taken aback. "What? What's this all of a sudden?"

Xiao got on her knees and put down her stick. "Please take me as your student and teach me martial arts."

"Sorry, but I don't accept students..."

"Please, I'll do anything, Master Tze." She did a kowtow.

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<sup>13</sup> Idiom meaning it's a cruel world

Taishi was embarrassed by her begging and did not know what to do. When he said he did not accept students, that was not true. He selectively accepted students from the Council but has never helped anyone outside of the group. Earlier, Xiao mentioned she could “see” his movements and that piqued his curiosity. Her senses, especially hearing, were keen, so what would happen if she learned martial arts? She could be a prodigy of blind kind...a **blind prodigy**.

He sighed and said, “Alright...”

Xiao lifted her head up. “Thank you Master Tze!”

“But my training will be strict. You will be tired, injured, and might even die.”

“I’m ready for anything. Like you said, this is a dog eat dog world, and being blind in this city means eventually I’ll die.”

Ever since that day, she has been learning martial arts, particularly the Walking Crane from Master Tze. She always wanted to learn martial arts for self defense but could never afford a master. And to have met a famous master under such circumstances was truly her lucky day.

## [ B ]Title Contents

When the **flashback** was over, the two were already in the courtyard for training. Xiao remained perfectly still with her eyes closed.

“Keep your mind calm and clear of thoughts.” said Master Tze. “You must focus on what you want the sword to do. The Thunder Sword will respond to your wishes.”

His words sounded familiar, like the words she heard when she was meditating at the temple. She took a deep breath and let out. Her eyes suddenly opened and she yelled, “**Thunder Wave!**” She brought her blade down. \*whip\* A surge of electricity ran towards the straw doll and zapped it. “It’s still the same, it’s not powerful enough.”

“Hmmm, perhaps you did not have enough focus.”

“I don’t get it, no matter how hard I try, this method does not work for me. Alex Cheng’s Fire Sword responds to his emotions. It activates when he gets angry and emotional.”

“Cheng is a hot blooded young man. His personality is different from yours. Do you really want to live your life based on your emotions?”

“I still want revenge for my brother’s death. Our time was cut short by his untimely death. I still wonder why the heavens can be so cruel.”

“I see. Revenge is always at the back of your mind, that’s what’s blocking your focus. Your desire to get stronger is driven by hatred. Remember this, hatred will make you strong, but it will consume you.” said Taishi.

Afterwards, she went to the graveyard to visit her brother’s grave. His tombstone was labeled Jiang Ye aka Shen long and placed next to Sui Long’s

tombstone. She knelt and placed joss sticks on it and her master's word echoed in her mind. Hatred will make you strong, but it will consume you. That is true and sound... but still, her brother should not have died. In fact, there were many should nots. Thieves broke in her house and blinded her, and Jiang Ye resorted to stealing to get money for her operation. But he became a wanted man and left the city, leaving her by herself. Years later, she can finally open her eyes...only to see him get killed. Can she really let go of her hatred?

Like any martial artist, members of the Council need to stay in shape and would often spar each other. A good sparring partner does not treat practice as a real fight and does not use it to bully someone, and it has to be someone near your own level. It is not an exaggeration to say that finding a sparring partner is harder than finding the perfect lover. Fortunately for Xiao, there were some trustworthy members who were willing to spar with her.

First up was Cho. He was Vincent's regular sparring partner and occasionally be trained by Taishi but his skills were average. Cho and Xiao clashed their blades in the courtyard. It was supposed to be a private matter, but as time passed, they gained spectators who were curious about Xiao's skill.  
\*Clank clank\*

Some members watched from the second floor balcony. "What a treat, we get to see Xiao Ye in action." said one member.

"Is she really the Blind Prodigy? I heard she was blind until recently." said a second.

"That's what makes her so impressive!" said a third.

Xiao knocked Cho's sword to the side in a decisive blow and immediately pointed the tip of the blade at Cho's chin. He was nervous for a moment, but he relaxed after she withdrew her blade. He humbly put his left fist into his right palm and bowed. This is a polite gesture to signify the fight's end and one's defeat. Xiao returned the bow.

The audience applauded, causing Xiao to be embarrassed. She was so focused on the fight she did not notice her audience grew this much.

Vincent volunteered to be next by stepping into the courtyard. "Would you honor me with this spar, Miss Ye?" said he, putting a fan over half his face.

"Of course. Get ready." She stood in the stance of the Walking Crane.

The two exchanged blows as the audience watched without blinking. Amongst them was the headmaster himself, Master Tze. Usually he does not spectate, but given an audience of his size, his curiosity got the better of him.

Who wins the duel is not important, what is important is that they were having fun while sharpening their skills, Xiao with her sword and Vincent with his steel fans. At some point, Xiao put on her blindfold and blocked the fans. This impressed the crowd even more and they went berserk.

After the duel was over with no clear winner, the crowd clapped and cheered. However, some of them realized that Xiao did not use the Thunder Sword's powers. If she had...the duel would've been different.

The name **Blind Prodigy** became famous in all branches of the Council, including those in other kingdoms. In fact, her nickname would spread throughout the martial arts world. The elders promoted her to a senior member. Xiao never thought such a thing was possible...she was doing pretty well for herself, for a former blind girl who makes dolls.

Time flies by quickly when one is working hard. The Shadow continued to train Alex every single day, without skipping a day, no matter how tired they were. Winter was here and it started to snow. In the southern parts of the Shen Kingdom, winters are short and cold, but not as cold as the north.

A light snow storm came across the area and snowflakes slowly fell onto the ground. Alex and the Reaper were exchanging blows and all that were heard were sounds of metal banging against each other.

Standing next to the column was Celina, who watched without blinking. It was a habit she developed from the palace, from the very first time she spied on him during his training. This entire time, she has been watching him.

Li put a jacket on her and Celina turned to face her. "Thank you."

"It's getting cold, let's go back inside."

She turned her head. "Mmm mmm. I want to stay a little longer."

"Suit yourself." Li went into the door and closed it.

She was satisfied just watching her lover train, even if it means staring for hours at a time. Perhaps no one can understand why except for herself.

When training was over, Li would hang out with Zi, the few times he would be unmasked. Since she knew his identity, it was convenient for him to be Zi Lai. They would eat breakfast together and afterwards, he would put on his veil and black clothes to become the Shadow. While he and Alex were training, Li trained the Shadow Puppet by herself.

So the group continued that routine day and day out for next few months. Time flies when one is working hard, and spring time was here. The dead, withered grass was now green and vibrant again.

Alex's skills have been improving day by day. One day, the Shadow made an announcement to everyone. He was finally confident in Alex's skills and it was time he showed everyone the fruits of his labor<sup>14</sup>.

The three women were lined up straight facing Alex. From the side view, Xiao was in the front, behind her was Li, and behind her was Celina. They distanced themselves from him so they were three paces from him, the three of

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<sup>14</sup> Idiom meaning hard work

them forming a triangle with him at the center. One by one, they stood in their respective fighting stances.

The view centered in on Alex, who remained still in his stance, with sword in right hand and left hand extended to the side. His head was slightly down but his face can be seen clearly. He had the usual intense look in his eyes, but today the look was more intense than usual, it was rather more of a calm intensity, the look of someone who was confident in his skills. The three women began to circle him slowly while he continued to be still like a statue.

Despite his motionlessness, Xiao noticed his aura was different before. Li noticed that he had no openings even from behind. She felt like if she attacked without a plan, it would end badly for her. Celina too sensed that he was different today.

The wind blew the **cherry blossoms** away from the tree and fell upon them. The three continued to circle him in that slow manner and several minutes have passed, but as far as they were concerned, it could have been months or years that have passed in this timeless moment.

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Celina was the first to make a move, coming from his right side. he turned to face her and deflected her incoming attacks. Even if she has two swords, he could see her movements clearly and defended himself without an issue. Li dashed at them, coming from his left side. He now had to deal with two, one from the left and one from the right. \*Clin-clin-clin\* Xiao came at him from his back side. He shoved his blade into Celina's blades and pushed her away and stopped Xiao's strike. Li and Xiao took turns striking at him, one after another. They pushed him further back and Alex's footwork made it seem like he was gliding on water.

\*Clin-clin-clin\* Li and him locked blades and he side stepped her while twisting his blade, making her overstep forward. He did that just before Celina got in front of him. Now, he deflected Celina and Xiao's attacks. He did this so he would fight at most two at a time, never three at a time.

Celina and Xiao stopped their assault for a moment, and he was surrounded by the three of them from one pace away. All of them pointed their swords forward and charged. Alex jumped up and back flipped away, jumping so high that his feet were nowhere near her head. All three of their blades clashed in the middle.

The three women moved so fast their body became like blurs, yet Alex can see them perfectly. Celina came from dead center and clashed her blades in his, resulting in a deadlock. Li came from the right and pushed her blade into his, and Xiao came from the left and did the same. The force from all three women caused his back to bend backwards and he grunted in discomfort. But using



sheer force and willpower, he let out a scream and swiped, pushing all of them away, his body returning to an upright position.

The three women once again circled him but this time faster than before. They were all waiting for the right timing and somehow, all three moved at the same time. Alex swung his blade in a combination of moves and performed two full body turns, and suddenly produced a circle of flames. \*Froom!\* This was his technique called the **Firestorm**. All the floating cherry blossoms were burned to ashes. Celina, Li, and Xiao jumped and somersaulted over the flames, avoiding it completely. But had they been hit, they would be pieces of charcoal.

Everyone, including the Shadow, was impressed with his display of skill. No one said a word to each other, but their expressions spoke louder than words.

Nay, no words could even describe this moment.

All the women have their own relationship with Alex and felt a certain way about his transformation. Celina, as his lover, was the least surprised out of the three. She has watched him train everyday without skipping a day. Even from the beginning, she believed in his abilities. One day he will become great, and that day was today.

Xiao was rescued by Alex when she was kidnapped by the Demon Brothers. She had a crush on him but gave up shortly afterwards, but nonetheless, she had a high opinion of Alex from the very start. Moreover, Alex received training from the great Master Tze...and he was Jiang Ye's comrade. To her, Alex was connected to her by fate in so many ways, and perhaps if Celina did not exist, they could be...

Out of the three, Li had the lowest opinion of him and was the most surprised. Besides being siblings, they were both students of Master Genzo. She was truly happy for her younger brother, to be able to master the Fire Sword. Perhaps Alex surpassed her skill level, perhaps...

Last but not least, the Shadow was probably the most proud. He has trained Alex rigorously and that hard work has paid off. Also, he was happy for him as his best friend, Zi Lai.

During these few months, Alex was not the only one that has changed. Liu Cao has married two concubines; both were women from powerful families. But knowing Liu Cao's personality, there was no love between them, they were political marriages done to secure his power over the kingdom. This was especially important as many eunuchs and lords have to choose between the current king and the former king Liu Zhang.

Taishi rarely has free time, considering his duties as the headmaster of the Council, but when he does, he is training one of his students. When Xiao was not present, Cho would be chosen. It is considered a great honor if Taishi selects you personally. Cho was a senior member and his skills were above average, but he was always overshadowed by others with greater skill, such as Xiao or Li Cheng. Taishi wanted to harness Cho's skill and sharpen his abilities.

Meanwhile, somewhere in a northern city, the entire Red Feather Army gathered in one place. In the front platform, Ragnarok was standing next Liu Zhang. "General Ragnarok will lead us to victory. He is the one who slain the War God and is the true hero of our kingdom! All hail Ragnarok!"

Chu Yen raised his sword up high. At last, today is the day he can shed his old name and live into his new name, the name of the future. All the soldiers shouted simultaneously, "All hail Ragnarok!"

Somewhere in the capital city, an army roughly the same size as the Red Feather Army gathered together. All the imperial soldiers lined up neatly in square formations. General Tai and a few other high lords stood in the front. He raised his blade up high and all the soldiers cheered. "For justice and glory!" they all shouted.

### **Preview of Next Episode**

Celina stealthily walked away from the gate. Zi and Li jumped onto the wall and then on the ground. Celina quickly ran away.

"It's you!" shouted Zi, running after her.

"Wait! Don't hurt her!" shouted Li.

Celina realized she cannot out run him and turned around to draw her sword. But before she could draw it, he struck her in the solar plexus with the back of his sword, knocking her unconscious. She fell into him and he caught her and lifted her off her feet.

"What are you planning to do with her?"

"Relax, I won't kill her. I am preparing Alex Cheng's final lesson, and you're going to help me."

### 四十二: The Black Reaper's Last Message

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A scout went to report to Jin. "Sir, nothing has changed. Cheng is still training with the Shadow everyday."

Jin sipped his tea. "And has their location changed?"

"No, it's still the same place." said the scout.

"Interesting. They train day in and day out but are always near the Council of Heaven's headquarters so we can never make a move. They are being cautious...perhaps they know they are being watched? Keep monitoring them closely. The moment they are far enough from the Council, let me know."

"Hai." With that said, the scout left the room.

Now that he was by himself, Jin can reflect on his own thoughts. His boss, Ragnarok, once mentioned that the Shadow's abilities cannot be underestimated, and also, one should avoid a one on one fight with the Shadow at all costs. But Jin, who has not met the Shadow yet, had some doubts. He wondered if the Shadow is really that strong like the rumors say.

Celina was truly impressed by Alex's newfound skills that he demonstrated by the cherry blossom trees, so she wanted to do something nice. She brought a tray of **dim sum** fresh from the bakery and wanted to share with Li. She saw Li walking from a distance and wanted to call out to her, but she did not. She followed Li and eventually turned into stalking.

She still did not trust the Shadow...or Li, for that matter. A shady ninja girl and a faceless man cannot be trusted, after all. Celina stared off being in a good mood but now she became suspicious and curious. Such is a woman's emotions, they can change their minds within seconds.

When Li went back to the house, Celina sneakily followed her. Li opened the gate and closed it behind her, making a creaking noise. Celina hid behind the wall and remained frozen like a statue, as any sudden movements will cause her to be discovered.

"Well, what do you think?" said a man's voice.

"I have sparred with Alex a little bit, his change is like day and night." said a woman's voice, presumably Li.

"What did I tell you? I knew he had potential. But it's thanks to my training, of course." replied the man.

His voice sounded familiar, yet Celina was unable to figure out whose voice it was. She moved her head an inch beyond the wall and took a peek. She can see them but they cannot see her. And she saw something puzzling; the man standing with Li was Zi Lai. Why is he here?

"He doesn't suspect anything, right?" asked Zi.

"No, not at all. He has no idea you're the Black Reaper."

Celina quickly put her head against the wall and covered her own mouth. She just heard something unbelievable...and something she was not supposed to hear. None of this made any sense. How can it be **Zi Lai**, of all people? Zi, the unreliable playboy who only knows how to flirt with women? Zi, the lazy coward whose martial arts was inferior to everyone's? A lot of emotions were raging inside of her and her heart was beating rapidly. \*bump bump\*

It made no sense, yet it made perfect sense. Zi always disappears during critical times and these few months he has not been seen at all. Everyone assumed he was still in the palace, doing his usual thing. \*bump bump\* What now ...Alex...she must tell Alex. She took a step but it was in haste. Both Li and Zi sensed her sound.

Celina stealthily walked away from the gate. Zi and Li jumped onto the wall and then on the ground. Celina quickly ran away.

"It's you!" shouted Zi, running after her.

"Wait! Don't hurt her!" shouted Li.

Celina realized she cannot out run him and turned around to draw her sword. But before she could draw it, he struck her in the solar plexus with the back of his sword, knocking her unconscious. She fell into him and he caught her and lifted her off her feet.

"What are you planning to do with her?"

"Relax, I won't kill her. I am preparing Alex Cheng's final lesson, and you're going to help me."

After receiving a puzzling message from the Shadow, Alex arrived at the park, curious as to what it was about. He looked around and saw a bunch of cherry blossom trees. The Shadow arrived and Alex said, "I got your message. What is this about?"

"Cheng, you have improved a lot since I have started to train you, but there is one final training you must go through."

"One final training?" he repeated curiously.

"You still hesitate at the last moment to deliver the killing blow. As long as you have this weakness of yours, you are not fit to fight Chu Yen!"

"Does it matter? You said my level is already pretty good."

"Observe!" said the Shadow, pointing to the west. There was a large bag hanging from a tree branch. He threw dagger at it, cutting the rope, and the bag opened, revealing Celina inside. She was tied up and gagged at the mouth. Judging by how her head was facing down and her eyes were shut, she was unconscious.

Alex's eyes grew wide open in surprise. "Celina?! What is the meaning of this?"

"If you want to save your precious woman, then defeat me." announced the Shadow.

"This is going too far for a prank! Release her now!"

"There's only one way to save her and that is to defeat me!"

Alex's Fire Sword began to glow red. Even his face became visibly angry. "You're going to pay for coming up with this stupid idea!" Flames appeared on his blade.

The Shadow used Shadow Walk, creating a series of mirages of himself.

"Not this crap again." exclaimed Alex. His eyeballs darted left and right but could not tell them apart. He closed his eyes and everything became dark. His hearing became clearer and he can focus on the Shadow's footsteps. Then his eyes opened and blocked an incoming attack. \*Clank\* He continued the Shadow Walk, appearing left and right and striking randomly. \*Clank\*

Alex jumped back to gain some distance. He was fed up with this illusion so he decided to use his new technique, the **Firestorm**. Alex swung his blade hard, creating a circle of flames. The Shadow ran in a circle but could not escape

its reach. \*Froom\* He blocked the flames but some of it touched his veil, burning off a piece of it. Fortunately, only his chin and cheek were revealed.

They charged into each other and clashed blades. \*Clang\* They released the lock and Alex swung his sword and the Shadow dodged it. The flames from the sword flew and knocked the Shadow's hat and veil away. In slow motion, the hat and veil fell to the ground and Alex saw the man's identity.

Alex's expression became one of absolute shock. "No way, why is it you?"

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Standing before him was not the Shadow any longer, but Zi Lai. The Fire Sword's flames vanished and the sword became a regular sword again. "This has to be a prank, right? Did you dress up like this for fun? Where's the real Black Reaper?"

"This is no prank, Alex. This is who I am; this is who I've always been. "Sorry that you had to find out this way, pal." said Zi. "If I could help it, I wanted to keep my identity from you forever."

"This makes no sense whatsoever!"

"Let's continue where we left off." Zi took up a fighting stance.

"I am not fighting you!" Alex exclaimed.

"Fight me!" Zi dashed forward and attacked.

All Alex did was defend while stepping back. \*Quong quong\* Realizing he was getting nowhere, Zi stopped parrying.

"Fight me, it's the only way to save Celina!"

"No!" Alex retorted. "Not until you explain to me what's going on."

Zi sighed. "Then you leave me no choice." Near where he stood, there were arrows stationed on a wooden device. All of them were tied up by a long piece of rope that would cause the arrows to launch if cut. Zi dashed towards the arrow launcher, while Alex watched in a stupor.

Zi cut the rope and the arrows flew at Celina. \*twan-twan-twan\* They hit her from all directions.

Alex's eyes grew wide open and his jaw dropped from the shock.

"Nooooo! Celina!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Well, feel like fighting me now?" asked Zi.

"What...what have you done?" Alex pointed his sword forward. "How could you?!" Usually, he was a calm natured person, but right now, he lost all his reason and logic. Before he met Celina, he has never felt such strong emotions of romance and love before. Their journey was a roller coaster ride, but that made them appreciate each other more. But now that she's dead, he experienced grief and heartache that no words could describe. And that grief turned instantly into anger and hatred as the person who stands before him is not his best friend, but rather his most hated enemy.

"You should avenge her."

His Fire Sword was burning brightly just like before. "You want me to kill you so badly? You asked for it!" Tears dripped down his eyes but he was so enraged that he did not realize he was crying. All he could feel was the pounding in his chest.

In slow motion, Zi and Alex dashed towards each other at full speed and screamed at the top of their lungs. They both plan to put their all into the next strike. When they were within striking range, Zi swung his sword with all his might. \*Whoosh\* Alex took an extra step forward with his left foot and swung his sword. \*Whoosh\* Zi's blade struck Alex's shoulder, causing it to bleed, but Alex did not feel it due to the adrenaline rush and his overwhelming anger. Alex's blade cut Zi's chest, going from the bottom to the top. Not only did he feel the blade pierce his skin, but also received the burn from the flames. \*Slaaaash\*

Zi grunted in pain as his chest was bleeding. "Uuuugh!" He fell down on one knee with a hand covering his wound. He groaned in pain and panted for breath. "Unnnnggg...well done Alex. You have finally overcome your weakness...you can strike at the decisive moment without hesitation."

"I still don't get it." said Alex. Zi looked up and noticed tears streaming down his face. "Why does it have to be you?"

"Sorry, Alex. You're the last person I wanted to find out about me."

"Why did you train me?" asked Alex.

"So you can be strong enough to take on Chu Yen." Zi replied.

"Why did you kill Celina?" Alex's grip tightened on his sword.

"She's not dead." said Li Cheng, coming out of no where.

Alex turned around to face her. "Is that true?"

Li threw a dagger at the rope, causing Celina to fall into her arms. After putting her on the ground, Li reached inside her dress and took out a pillow with holes in it.

Alex's heart skipped a beat. "You mean...the arrows didn't hit her?"

"She was stuffed with pillows so none of the arrows hit her. You were far away so you couldn't see it clearly."

Alex fell on his knees and his face lit up in joy as he stared at the unconscious Celina's face. After he calmed down, he looked at his sister and asked, "Did you know the Shadow's identity?"

"I've known for a while. Sorry for hiding it from you. I'll explain everything later." Li turned to look at Zi, who was now resting his back against a tree. Li walked over to him and bent down. "Master, are you alright? Your wound looks serious."

Zi was visibly in pain and breathing hard, but he had to put on a brave face for his student. "It hurts like a bitch but don't worry, I have demon's blood and I'll heal in no time at all."

Alex lifted up Celina's back so he can embrace her. Only a few minutes ago he thought she was dead and his heart sank, but now he was so relieved she's alive. No words could describe the joy he felt in his heart to his woman,

who is everything to him, alive and breathing. The unconscious woman was ignorant of everything that happened and will find out later on, but she has no idea that her fake death was used to trigger Alex's emotions.

When he calmed down a bit, he put her down and wiped away his tears. Then he walked over to Zi. Alex said, "Did you have to go that far as to make me think Celina was killed?"

"Heh, that was the only thing I could think of, pal." Zi replied.

"Alright," said Li, "Don't talk anymore. We need to bandage your wound." Suddenly, she stood up and looked to the west side. "They're coming..."

"Who is?" asked Alex.

"I don't know, but there's at least fifty of them."

A few miles away, an entire army, led by Jin Demos in the front, was marching towards the heroes. Li's estimate was fifty, but the actual number was twice that. There were **one hundred men** clad in armor with a red feather stuck on their helmets.

Alex pounded his fist on his palm. "We're too far away from the Council Headquarters so they are taking this chance to finish us off!"

"Alex, get Celina out of here." said his sister.

Alex went over and put Celina on his back by holding her thighs. "Are you going to fight them alone?"

"I have to so you and Celina can escape." said Li.

Zi suddenly stood next to them. "Let me handle this. You guys go."

Li said, "What? Are you crazy? You can't possibly fight them all in your condition."

Zi replied, "Alex can't fight while carrying her, so you have to protect him, Li."

"No, we can't leave you behind to die." said Alex.

"Listen, protecting Celina is your number one priority, isn't it? You don't want her to die for real, do you? I can buy you some time."

"But master! There has to be another way!"

"If you still consider me your master, then listen to me. This is my final order to you, Li Cheng. Go with Alex."

Unable to contain her emotions, **tears** drip down Li's eyes. She turned her back to her master and placed her hand on Alex's arm, signaling him to turn around as well. "Let's go."

"But Li..." Just now Alex noticed her head was down and she was crying silently. He too became silent as he just now understood her feelings. Being a student of the Shadow himself, he felt the exact same way as Li...they have to leave him, even if they don't want to. He cared about everyone especially Celina, so he has to make her safety his priority.

Without further ado, Li and Alex, carrying the unconscious Celina, ran into the woods and hopped onto the branches.

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Zi was tired and injured and his chest was aching heavily, so he forced himself to stand up. His keen senses told him the army was drawing closer. For some reason, as he waited for the upcoming battle, he longer felt tired. His senses were sharper than ever before, his vision was clearer and his hearing was crisper. Is this the calm before the storm, the peace one feels before his death?

In a matter of minutes, Jin Demos and the army appeared before Zi. Everyone remained still.

"There's only one of you?" said Jin.

"One of me is enough to take on the likes of you."

"Hmph, what a bunch of crap! Men, kill him!"

Soldiers began circle around Zi, cutting off any means of escape, not that he intends to escape. One soldier was the first to charge forward. Zi blocked his attack and slashed him in the chest, killing him on the spot. A second soldier charged, followed by a third and fourth. After Zi killed the second soldier, he closed his eyes for a second to focus. Suddenly, two **clones** of him appeared, causing the nearby soldiers to be scared.

Even Jin was surprised, but he had to remain strong to lead the men. "It's just sorcery! Don't be fooled!"

The fake Zi's kept swinging their swords randomly, causing the soldiers to step back. The real Zi charged into a horde of soldiers and assaulted them. He used the Shadow Walk to confuse them. \*Slish slash\* He just cut down two men.

(More sorcery? How many tricks does this guy have?) Jin thought.

\*Slash slish\* The men's eyes were unable to keep up with Zi's movements and more of them were cut down.

Suddenly, Zi's chest hurt and he winced. But the pain was not just from the injury, as using his powerful techniques causes strain on his body. It was difficult to fight in his condition against this many enemies. The odds were stacked against him. But he still has one advantage, this demon's blood. But it is a double edged sword as using **demon's blood** causes stress on his blood vessels and organs and will shorten his life. But if he doesn't use his techniques now, he will surely die, so he might as well go all out.

One soldier charged recklessly and screamed. "Hyaaaah!" Zi ducked, avoiding his blade, and stabbed him in the stomach.

One man cut down his clone, turning it into a **straw doll**. "It's fake!" Upon seeing the results, another man cut the second clone, and sure enough, it turned into a straw doll. With nothing in their way, those men charged at Zi.



Not wanting to be surrounded, Zi had only one choice. He used his spinning tornado technique, and anyone that got near him was cut and knocked away. \*Clink-clink-clink\*

Jin grunted in frustration. "Grrrr, how hard is it to kill just one man?" The ground was filled with the blood of dead and injured soldiers. At least twelve were dead and six were injured.

By now, Zi's body was reaching its limit and he was slowing down. \*Slish\* He just cut down another soldier.

Suddenly, he felt a sharp object stab his back. A soldier from behind stabbed him with a spear. He groaned in agony. "Uuuuuugh!" A second soldier stabbed him in the back with a spear. \*Schleb\* He groaned. "Uuuuuugh!"

The two soldiers were smiling, knowing they have him for sure. They pushed forward, plunging the spear deeper into his back, causing Zi to step forward.

"Looks like you're just about finished." said Jin.

Blood dripped from Zi's mouth, his head was facing down and he was panting for breath. He looked up and his eyes did not show any signs of defeat. "Not yet..."

Zi dropped his sword on the ground. A soldier wielding a spear approached him from the front. Zi took out a dagger and threw it at his **eye**. \*Schleb\* The soldier screamed in agony as his eye was bleeding. Another dagger flew at his throat, and he fell down. Zi took out more daggers from inside his shirt and threw them, lodging them into the throats of two more men. \*Schleb schleb\*

The spear wielding men from behind pushed their spears forward, causing Zi more pain. He threw the daggers backwards. \*Whoosh\* The daggers hit the men in the shoulders. The two soldiers were unable to push him further and they were shocked. Zi's hands reached behind to grab the spears and screamed out loud. He stepped backwards, causing the soldiers to step back as well. To them, it defied all logic...how could an injured man be this strong? Zi kept moving backwards and the two soldiers crashed into the bigger group of soldiers. \*Crash\*

Zi ripped the spears out of his back and grunted in pain. Blood was dripping from his wounds. His internal organs and blood vessels were already stressed but he did not care. He shut his eyes and used the Shadow Puppet again. The two straw dolls lying on the ground floated back to Zi and transformed into clones.

"It's an illusion, don't let it fool you!" Jin charged ahead of his group and stabbed the clone. His sword became lodged inside of the straw doll. Then he cut the doll into pieces. "Now you can't use your trick anymore."

Zi was parrying a soldier as Jin dashed at him. Zi pushed the soldier away and used the **Shadow Walk** to dodge Jin's strike. Zi kept moving in a circular

path around Jin, hoping to fool his eyes. Jin's eyeballs darted left and right, having a hard time keeping track of the Shadow's movements.

Suddenly, Zi struck him and Jin was quick enough to block it. \*Clank\* Their blades were locked into each other's and they pushed with all their might. Zi grunted heavily and used his demon's blood again and had the upper hand. He pushed Jin back a few steps.

Jin smiled for some reason, as his back bent backwards. Not only that, but Jin fell down to the ground, revealing two soldiers. One plunged his spear into Zi's stomach, causing him to groan. The second soldier plunged his spear into his chest. Zi's condition was critical now as he was bleeding from the front and back.

As he was closer to death, Zi **reflected** on his life back to the beginning. He saw his house burned down by the authorities and with it his mother and father's life. Little did he know, his father Shun Lai died the same way he was about to die, stabbed by spears while outnumbered by the enemy. Ah yes, the death of his parents caused him to go on a journey to discover who he really is, on a journey to power and bloodshed. He called himself the Black Reaper, but soon he will meet the real Grim Reaper.

The soldiers think they won, that is, until Zi used his sword to cut the spears. \*Crack\*

In slow motion, Jin charged and plunged his sword into Zi's chest. \*Schleb\* His mouth grew wide open as he coughed blood into the air. The blade came out of his back. His body was in so much pain that he felt numb and weak and could barely move on its own.

Jin smiled, thinking he was triumphant. Then Zi chuckled. "Heh...hehehe." He knew was about to die, so he might as well have one last laugh.

"What's so funny?" asked Jin.

"Your face." Using only sheer will, his left arm stabbed a dagger into Jin's eye.

Jin screamed like hell and took a step back. "Aaaaaaagh! You bastard!"

No longer having the strength to stand up, Zi fell down sideways, with the sword still lodged inside of him. Hearing Jin's frantic scream was music to ears, he was able to do one final good thing before he goes. Knowing that his loved ones Alex, Li, and Celina were safe, he can finally leave this world with no regrets...and his eyes closed.

"Aaaaaaaghh!" Jin screamed. "Kill him! Kill him!"

"Sir, he is already dead." said a man.

\*Whoosh whoosh\* Alex and Li jumped from branch to branch and by now they were far enough to be safe. Suddenly, both of them felt a sensation like a lightning bolt striking their chest. It was the same sensation they felt when Master Genzo left this world. They both turned around to face the direction of

the battle. From this distance, the people looked like dots so they could not make out anything, but they knew that Zi Lai has left this world.

Both of them had tears dripping down their faces. They both had a moment of silence for their fallen friend. Li said, "Alex, go on ahead. We're being followed."

"What? No, I can't leave you behind too!"

"I'll stay behind and buy you time. I'll be fine."

"But Li!" he objected.

"Listen to your sister, damn it! Don't let Zi's sacrifice be in vain!" she shouted, which shocked him.

This was the first time Li admitted that she was his sister and used her authority as an older sibling to order him. "Alright. I'll see you later." Alex hopped away to the next tree.

Somewhere nearby, Roh Demos was hopping from branch to branch to catch up to the heroes. But little did he know Li has stayed behind to fight. Eventually, the two will encounter each other and fight in the thick forest. Alex and Celina did not know what happened to the fight. Roh is a fearsome adversary, but Li is a survivor.

Inside of a cemetery, there were three **gravestones** lined up in a row. The first one was Jiang Ye, aka Shen Long, and to the right was Sui Long, and to his right was Master Genzo, aka the War God. And now, there was a new addition next to Master Genzo's gravestone for Zi Lai, aka the Black Reaper aka the Shadow. As the battles continue, the number of tombstones keeps increasing.

Flowers and incense candles were already placed in front of the tombstone. Alex, Li, and Celina were kneeling before the tombstone. Only Li knew what had happened in the fight in the forest, but it was obvious that she survived without any injuries.

Out of the three, Celina's connection to Zi was the weakest, but it was still sad for her. She has always known him as a playboy and slacker, but he did save her life during the battle in the imperial palace, so he was a good person overall.

Li also related to him as a playboy and coward and couldn't stand him, but that was before she discovered his true identity. She and the Black Reaper go back many years. Although they were master and student and nothing else, he helped her get stronger. Also, recently, they have become closer and have learned to trust each other. Li has never liked a man before, but if she did like one, it would be Zi.

Alex Cheng was the most affected out of the three as he and Zi go way back to their childhood. They have always been together through thick and thin. Zi was there when they traveled to the Temple of Enlightenment, received training from Master Genzo, and fought during Duke Xiang's rebellion. He was a background character yet he was always there, ready to give Alex a helping hand when needed.

Tears streamed down his eyes as Alex reminisced the good times they had together. Zi has been by his side longer than anyone, longer than his sister and Celina. But now that he left this world, Alex felt like a piece of his soul was ripped out of him. In his heart, Alex never thought of him as the Black Reaper, but always as Zi Lai, his one and only best friend...

To be continued...

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Finished 02/2022

Characters		
Name	Role	Personality
Alex Cheng		
Li Cheng		S-A
Zi Lai		
Celina Ce aka Lady Ce		
Xiao Ye		
Captain Zhe-Fai		
General Shu Tai		
King Liu Cao		
Taishi Tze		
Vincent Chan		
Cho Mei-Ang		
Chu Yen aka Ragnarok		
Liu Zhang		