

LEGEND OF THE FIRE SWORD

The Valley of Death

Volume 3
Contents

一 二 三 四 五 六 七 八 九 十

- ☯ 一： The Celebration. Trouble in the Valley. [A] [B] [C]
- ☯ 二： Sadness in the Valley: Their Vow to Revenge [A] [B] [C]
- ☯ 三： The Traveler from Afar. Discovery of the Spice. [A] [B] [C]
- ☯ 四： The Purple Dragon. The Spice that is Worse than Death. [A] [B] [C]
- ☯ 五： The Council of Heaven. Violent History of the Kingdom. [A] [B] [C]
- ☯ 六： Graceful. Deadly! Unexpected! Dance of the Sword Style. [A] [B] [C]
- ☯ 七： Mysterious Plot. Truth Behind the Slaying. [A] [B] [C]
- ☯ 八： The Exile. An Unforgiveable Mistake. [A] [B] [C]

Summary

一： The Celebration. Trouble in the Valley.

Next Chapter >>

[\[B \]](#) [\[C \]](#) Contents

The sun rose above the horizon over the peaceful Kingdom of Shen. After a long battle that took place in the imperial palace, this is as peaceful as it gets. A certain young man with silver hair was walking about the gardens of the palace. He watched the sunrise as he walked over the small bridge. **Alex Cheng** is the man in the robe with the yin-yang symbol and a sword tucked at his waist side. Only several days ago there was a bloodbath that took place on the very place he stood on. But that is in the past, for he is the one who ended the bloodbath and returned things to normal.

A servant with long sleeves came to the bridge. "Greetings, Demon Slayer."

"Please, Alex is fine. Or Cheng. Whichever you prefer."

"Your breakfast is ready in your room."

"Thank you." replied Alex.

The servant bowed and walked away. Alex was not hungry and he wanted to stay here and daydream a bit longer.

He had a flashback of his fight with the demon known as Duke Xiang. Holding his trusty Fire Sword, burning red and in flames, he took a leap forward and slashed the devil on his chest. Sliiish! Xiang screamed in agony. "ROAR!"

Alex continued to slash him, and ultimately, swings the blade on Xiang's head, effectively beheading him. His head rolled on the floor and his body collapsed.

Alas¹, that was the moment that made him what he is today. Looking at his accomplishments, one can say he has done well for someone who was mere commoner.

¹ Alas – old English for thus, or indeed

Before the battle, he was nobody, but now he is known to all as the **Demon Slayer**. He himself slain Duke Xiang, and by doing so he practically saved the entire kingdom from certain doom. Not to mention saving the concubine's life and the king himself.

Being wealthy and famous is not something that he even imagined could be possibly, yet that is what he is today. However, despite his fame and grand reputation, something was missing in his life. Or rather, **someone**. His missing sister has been on his mind everyday. (Li Cheng, where are you? Why did you run away again?)

Li Cheng, the girl in the ninja suit was walking limply down the alley. Even though Yi Ling is a prosperous and clean city, there are certain areas that are overlooked and uninhabited. Yi Ling is a big city, and even the authorities cannot be everywhere at once.

As she walked, she grabbed her stomach. "Blast it...my stomach still hurts. I am still injured. It looks like Alex's Phoenix Palm has not been perfected."

Alex Cheng prepared himself mentally for the attack. All of a sudden, his eyes opened and he charged. "Huyaaaah!" His palm struck Li's stomach. Everyone was shocked.

The demon coughed blood, and let go of Li, giving Alex the chance to attack him directly. *Slish! Slash!*

"His training is far from complete." She suddenly sensed someone from above. It was not one, but many. (I am being followed. They are still after me!) She drew her sword.

The ninjas approached and drew their swords.

"Great...unexpected guests. Who invited you guys?" Li was ready for them, but her instincts told her to look to the side. *Whoosh!* Three daggers flew at her. She ducked, and one dagger cut off a piece of her hair.

The ninjas silently approached her. They fought. *Slash! Slash!* She killed one of them, and the second one ran at her, and their blades collided. *Clang!*

She pushed him away using sheer² force. Schling! "Sorry guys, there's no party here. Go crash somewhere else."

The ninja yelled and ran towards her, and she dodged his attack and stabbed him in the stomach. Schleb! One of the ninjas behind her jumped. Li quickly ducked his swing and she stabbed his stomach. Schleb! He remained still for a few seconds, and eventually collapsed once she pulled her sword out.

One more enemy remained. They ran into each other and Li lowered herself just before they collided into one another. When they ran past each other, she broke his sword, and slashed his stomach as well. The ninja remained still for two seconds before he collapsed.

"You are no match for the **Heaven's Wrath Style**." Li put her sword back into its sheath and walked away from the bloody bodies.

Alex stood in the front yard of his quarters³ that was kindly given to him by the king himself. He was standing there like a statue, staring at the sky. **Zi Lai** showed up and decided to surprise him. He silently crept up behind Alex and tapped on him on the shoulder, startling him.

"What's up, Demon Slayer!"

"Oh hey, what's up Zi?"

"Why are you standing there doing nothing?" Zi asked.

² Sheer – another word for pure, nothing else is present

³ Quarters – old English for room

"Oh, no reason." Alex replied.

"So, how's life being the Demon Slayer? It must be hard getting used to being rich and famous, huh?" Zi fixed Alex's collar. "Look at you, Alex Cheng, the hero. You are looking better and better."

"It certainly is a new experience for me. I never even dreamed that this can happen."

"Well, this is your life now, so you might as well enjoy it. So, have you met any high class ladies lately?"

"Zi, you know I'm a gentleman. I am still waiting for the right one."

"Oh, come on man!" Zi put his arm around Alex's shoulder. "Dude, you're rich and famous now, and that means every chick⁴ in the land wants you. This is your golden chance, Alex. You have to enjoy yourself while you're still young."

Three palace ladies walked by. "Here ladies, the famous Demon Slayer is this way." said the first.

"I hear that he is handsome and he has silver hair." said the second one.

"And brave and courageous." added the third.

"I heard he single handedly slain a demon twice his size. He must be really strong." said the second. They continued to walk and laugh while chattering amongst themselves.

"Oh no!" said Alex, "The palace ladies are here. They are very annoying."

"What palace ladies?" Zi asked.

"I don't feel like seeing them right now. Zi, can you do me a favor?" asked Alex.

"Distract them for me. I am going back inside."

"Distract them?" Zi replied.

"I gotta go. Later!" said Alex, and he waved as he ran off.

"Sigh...bastard." Zi sighed. "Oh well, more for me. I'll just have to take them all for myself."

The three ladies entered the courtyard, with fans over their faces. "Excuse me," asked the first one, "Do you know where Sir Cheng is?"

"Well, you came to the right person." Zi said. "Sir Cheng is busy right now. However, I can spend time with you."

"Darn, and I thought he'd be available." said one of the ladies.

"I am his best friend since childhood." said Zi.

"Really?" said the second lady.

"Oh yes. C'mon girls." Zi walked and put his hands on their backs. "Let's do lunch⁵ and I will tell you in detail what kind of girl Cheng likes."

Alex watched them from the window of his house. Zi turned around and did a thumbs up. Alex smiled. "This guy never changes." He sat there, leaning his head on the wall. He is the type of person who prefers to be alone to have some quiet time to reflect on things, rather than being in a crowd and going to loud places. That has been his personality since he was a child. Zi, on the other hand, is the complete opposite. He always seeks to be the center of attention especially with the ladies.

Despite their differences, they are able to remain friends. With his new reputation as the Demon Slayer's best friend, he could not be happier. When Alex does not want to go to a certain social event, Zi goes in his place, and things work out for them both.

⁴ Slang for young girl, babe

⁵ Do lunch – spoken slang for have lunch, eat lunch

Celina was sound asleep in bed, but she was tossing and turning from having a nightmare.

The evil man stared at the poor woman, all tied up and helpless. Celina was stripped completely naked, and the only thing between her and the pervert was a long pink ribbon tied around her body. She was tied up from her breasts all the way down to her ankles. There were enough loops to cover her body, but there were less loops on her legs, so it was practically exposed. Her hands were tied up behind her back, and because her legs were wrapped together, her motions were limited. Her panties were stuffed into her mouth, and she could not speak a word.

Jiax laughed and grinned evilly as he watched his victim suffer. Celina squirmed and moaned and prayed for mercy, but she was not going to get any mercy. She was completely helpless and she was practically his sex toy. He drew a knife and pointed it at her neck, and Celina turned her head to the side and moaned with tears streaming down her face.

"We're going to have fun tonight, baby." he said.

He pointed the tip of the blade at her forehead, and then tantalizingly moved the blade down to her nose, just between her eyes. Her eyes were shaking with fear, and they were wet and flowing with tears. He put the blade on her face and she turned to the side, wincing and moaning fearfully.

"Should I leave a scar on your pretty face?" he taunted.

Then he pointed the blade at her chin, and poked her. She moaned. Then he put the knife on her neck. Jiax could see her breathing hard. She must be scared out of her mind. He kept on poking her chin and enjoyed her suffering.

Jiax held the knife up and stabbed at her, and she quickly turned her head to the left side to dodge it. The knife hit the pillow. Plop! Then he took it out and stabbed on the left, and she turned to the right. Plop! She moaned and groaned. "MMMF! MMF!"

Jiax kept on stabbing left and right, while she dodged for her dear life.

He laughed maniacally as he did so. "Ha ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha!" Plop! Plop!

Tucked under a white blanket, Celina was sweating heavily in her sleep. That horrible image of the man stabbing her made her toss and turn in bed. Her head turned left and right, and she moaned, just like in her dream. "Uhhh, uhhh..."

He moved the blade down to her breasts, and she kept on moaning and pleading. "Mmmfff!!" The blade went between her breasts, and then down to her stomach. Then down to her legs. He poked the tip of the knife at her thigh, almost piercing her skin. "Mmmfff!"

Jiax moved the knife between her legs, and slowly moved into her sacred area. This could be the most painful and humiliating moment of her life. Just the suspense itself was bad enough, as he was about to destroy her womanhood. He laughed as the knife slowly made its way up the ribbons, getting closer and closer to her sacred area. "Mmff! Mmmffff!"

Suddenly, Celina sat up and she was wide awake. She was sweating heavily and panting for breath. But it was a dream based on a real event. The kidnapping has never left her mind, and this nightmare haunts her night after night. That nightmare made her feel vulnerable, and she clutched the blanket closely to her chest as if someone is going to pull it off her.

A man's voice from outside the bed called out to her. "Celina?"

"Huh?" She gasped, but upon realizing that it was the king's voice, she felt at ease. "Oh, good morning, your highness. What is it?"

There was a curtain on the bed, and he could only see her silhouetted figure. "Today is the Demon Slaying Ceremony, remember?" said the king.

"Oh of course." She just remembered it just now.

"I will have the servants be ready for you. You need to look your best today."

"There is no need. I will dress myself."

"Very well then. I shall be waiting outside." Liu Bei replied and promptly walked out of the room.

Celina Ce, addressed as Lady Ce by others, went to sit at her desk in front of the mirror. She usually wears a white qipao⁶ made of silk. It is short sleeved with a round neckline. The dress went down to her shins and has incisions at the thighs. It is simple, yet elegant. She prefers not to wear the fancy clothing that other high class women wear, because they are complicated and they have so many layers. She is very different from the average palace lady, but different isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Out of all the noble ladies available, the king chose her to be his concubine. Take one look at her face and one can see why. She had smooth, pale skin and a youthful face. Her eyes were big and brown colored, and her eyelashes bring out the innocent look in her. She has a small nose and thin pink lips. Her hair is tied into a ponytail with two strands of hair hanging in front of her ears.

Her body type was also one of an ideal wife. Her arms were long and skinny and her skin color was uniform⁷ throughout her body. She had curves in all the right places and the right proportions. One can tell her breast size from her dress. It was the right size, not too small to be unnoticed, but not too big to be a distraction. She was chosen not just for her appearance, however, but for her dancing skills. Nearly all the nobles and highborn⁸ do not know this part about her. Her dancing is passionate and expressive, something that caught the king's eye.

Celina took a comb and brushed her hair. Looking at her own reflection made her self conscious. She was still thinking about the nightmare she had moments ago. No matter how hard she tried, the kidnapping could not escape her thoughts, and she started to have self doubts and became sad. At some point she stopped combing and just froze and stared at herself. Today is supposed to be a joyous occasion, yet she cannot bring herself to be happy. But at the very least, she can put on a smile to please others.

Alex was still sitting in the same spot, holding the sword case against his chest. He stared at the sky in boredom. Things are just not the same without Li being here. He sometimes thought to himself that he could find her if he became the sky. The sky is everywhere at once and sees everything. Alex suddenly snapped out of it when someone called his name from the ground.

"Sir Cheng!" yelled the servant. "Sir Cheng!"

"What is it?" he yelled back.

"The king is about to come see you. Please get down from there."

"Right away." Alex replied. He grabbed his sword and jumped onto the platform, and performed a second jump onto the ground. Doosh. He landed right in front of the servant, which almost gave him a heart attack.

"Agh...please don't do that. We have doors for a reason." said the servant.

"Don't worry. I am a trained warrior, and I able to jump these kinds of distances with ease."

They turned to face the entrance when they heard a bell. "The king arrives!" said one of the servants.

⁶ Qipao – English word for china dress

⁷ Uniform – the meaning in this context means the same

⁸ Highborn – old English for noble, high class, privileged

King Liu Bei and Lady Ce showed up gracefully. Their presence is strong and could be felt without the servant's announcement. In ancient China, one must show respect to the king and concubine by bowing down, sometimes kneeling. The king is the single most important person in the monarchy (君主制), and thus he has all the power. He has the final say on the laws and political matters, and he alone controls the fate of the kingdom.

In such a society, kings are usually spoiled and corrupt (贪污), whereas a good king will be viewed as a savior, because they are extremely rare. King Liu, the third king of the Liu dynasty, with his pacifist (和平主義者) views, can be said to be one of those kings.

Liu Bei made a hand signal and the servants walked away. Alex bowed and his companion servant bowed.

"You may stand," he said. "The ceremony is about to begin in a few hours. Today is your big today, Demon Slayer, for it is a celebration that will be in honor of your name. Are you ready?"

"Yes, your majesty. I thank you for everything you have done for me," Alex replied.

"It is your reward and you have earned it. Right, Celina?"

"Yes, that is correct," she replied.

"I shall see you later," Liu said, and he walked away. The servants followed him. The servant bowing next to Alex stood up and went with the group.

Celina made eye contact with Alex and she quickly looked away. She is usually a shy woman, and hardly talks to anybody with the exception of the king. But today she felt that she must say something to Alex, since he is the one who saved her life before. The least she could do is to give him her gratitude.

"Ummm...Alex Cheng?"

"Yes, your highness?"

She made eye contact with him and said, "Thank you for all you've done." Then she walked away.

When Alex was alone, two warriors in straw hats came out from hiding.

"What are you two doing here? I thought your mission has already been accomplished?"

"Negative," Shen Long replied. "We have specific instructions from the War God to stay by your side."

"Duke Xiang is dead and his men are prosecuted (檢控). There is no more danger here."

"That is not necessarily true," Sui Long replied. "Though Xiang is dead, it is a known fact that some of his subordinates survived the palace rebellion. The second that you leave the premises, you are in danger."

"Fine, you two do what you want," Alex said with a careless attitude.

"Should you not be preparing for the ceremony?" asked Shen Long.

"I know what I should be doing," Alex said. "Is there anything else?"

"Nothing, that is all. We will be watching you from a distance."

The masked warriors jumped away. Doosh. They have served Alex well as comrades, but there is no more fighting, and he does not see them as a necessity. While he truly does appreciate what they do for him, he does not need two bodyguards watching him all the time. But like he said, he will let them do what they want for the time being.

Meanwhile, in another part of the imperial complex...

Knock knock. "Lord Liu Zhang? Lord Liu Zhang?" cried the servants. There was no answer, and the two slowly opened the door and peeped inside. They saw an empty room.

"Lord Zhang is not here." said the first.

"But he knows today is the grand ceremony for the Demon Slayer. Why would he be missing?" asked the second.

"What shall we do now?" asked the first.

"Forget about it. There are going to be a lot of people there, and no one will notice if one lord is missing."

A couple of servants were fixing up Alex's appearance, as per⁹ instructions of the king. They were putting makeup on him. "Okay guys, let's hurry up. Chop Chop!¹⁰ We need to make Sir Cheng look his best today." He saw the Fire Sword on the table and proceeded to take it.

Alex held onto it. "What are you doing?"

"We will give you another sword for the ceremony. It is beautiful and elegantly designed, and it is perfect for an occasion like this."

"No thank you." Alex replied. "I prefer this one."

"But..."

"I never went anywhere without this sword. It is an irreplaceable gift I received from my master, and as a matter of fact, this the very sword with which I used to slay the demon."

"Very well." replied the servant. "We shall use yours."

Jade took her grandmother's hand and hurried along the street. "Hurry up grandma. Today is the ceremony. We're going to see Alex get recognized."

"I know, I know. I am ready to go as you are."

As they got closer to **Lianzi Street**, it became increasingly crowded, as all these people are here to see the ceremony, and more importantly, to witness the famous Demon Slayer they have heard so much about.

Li sat on the roof of a building. Sitting on a high place lets her see a good, unblocked view of the sky. Feeling the breeze makes her feel comfortable and at peace.

[B] Title Contents

In the forestry area of the **Valley of Death**, a group of bounty hunters gathered together to listen to their leader. "Alright men." said the leader, "Here we are, the Valley of Death. Today is our destiny for we are going to slay the God of War."

"**Yeah!**" they cried in unison.

"Many have come hoping to do the same," said the leader, "but none of them survived. But we are the best bounty hunters in Shen. We will **not** fail."

All the hunters screamed their battle cry and raised their weapons to the air.

Someone's footstep was heard, and he was not part of the group. "You guys...slay the God of War? What a joke."

Everyone paid attention to the stranger.

"Who the hell are you?" asked the leader.

⁹ As per – another way to say "according to"

¹⁰ Spoken English as a way to hurry people. Hurry up, chop chop!

The mysterious swordsman was in his late twenties to early thirties. He had the eyes of a cunning fox and the spirit as fierce as that of a dragon. He had black, shiny hair, and wore a band with the yin-yang symbol on his forehead. He wore a black vest and black pants.

"My name is **Ragnarok**. And I shall be one to slay the legendary War God." He smiled. "You guys are too optimistic. Given your level of skill, do you actually think you can defeat him?"

The leader grew annoyed. "Grrr, you have a lot of nerve, boy."

Ragnarok's eyes squinted. "Boy? Don't call me that...when I'm older than you!"

"He's mocking us." said a swordsman. "This guy is asking for it. Let's get him!!" said another swordsman.

Ragnarok smiled. "What a bunch of fools." His eyes widened as he pulled his sword out. The bounty hunters yelled angrily. "Yaaaah!!" "Get him!!"

As Ragnarok pulled his sword out, it seemed to glow white. Its design was peculiar, and the leader recognized it. "That sword...isn't that the Legendary Ice Sword?"

Slash! Slish! Slash! "Ugh!" "Aaagh!" "Ugh!"

Ragnarok ran through the crowd and hit three men at once. He landed in a crouch, and the hunters collapsed.

"No way!" "He's good!"

Ragnarok swings his sword forward, producing some sort of shockwave with a cold breeze. "**Ice Blizzard!**"

Everyone in the group was knocked down and they screamed in agony before they died.

The leader trembled. All his men lay on the floor, murdered by one man. "W-Wait, can't we talk about this? Please?"

"My sword does the talking for me." Ragnarok approached and cut him on the neck. The leader collapsed. "Piece of cake. They weren't even worth my time."

Something moved amongst the pile of bodies. The man's fingers twitched and he woke up. "Ugh..."

"What's this?" wondered Ragnarok. "One is still alive?"

"Don't kill me, please!" pleaded the hunter.

Ragnarok lifted him up by the collar. "What do we have here?"

"Please spare my life! I'm powerless!"

"Today is your lucky day, my friend. I am not going to kill you. You are going to be my witness to the slaying of the War God." said Ragnarok.

"You're going to fight him all by yourself? Are you insane?"

"Heh. Just observe. Soon all of Shen will know my name...as the hero who will slay the War God."

It is time for the long awaited ceremony. Alex was riding a gallant (英勇) horse, and he traveled from one end of the city to the other. The people waited by the street, forming two long lines, and Alex walked in between them. He was accompanied by several soldiers. People on higher floors threw out pieces of confetti paper (五彩紙屑). The crowd cheered and hollered at the sight of the hero. Everybody seemed to be waving at him. He had the children's admiration, the men's respect, and the women's adoration. The ladies looked at him and giggled to each other. There can be no greater feeling than this, and it is not something Alex was used to. But like his friend says, enjoy the moment. He waved to the crowd and gave them a big smile.

Jade held her grandma's wrist as they ran. "Hurry grandma! Or we will miss Alex! Hurry!"

"Alright, slow down young lady!"

Shen Long and Sui Long were amongst the crowd as well. They watched Alex and his horse walk by.

"He seems happy." said Shen Long.

"I would be too if I was him. He is the hero of the kingdom." Sui Long replied.

"The crowd sure loves him."

"I wonder where Li is."

"Knowing her, she could be anywhere." Shen Long replied.

To which Sui said, "I bet you fifty gold coins she is watching this event, and I wouldn't be surprised if she is somewhere up high."

"Your intuition is sharp as always." said Shen Long. He pointed at the rooftop where there was a small figure sitting on the roof. They could not see the face of the figure, but they know it is Li.

Along the street, men came holding carriages. The first carriage was the one with the king and concubine inside. It took four men to lift the whole thing up, and four other men to guard it. Liu Bei pulled the curtain aside so he could take a look outside. "Wow, Celina, I cannot believe how many people came to see the ceremony. Practically everyone in Yi Ling is here."

Celina was spaced out and she did not hear him.

"What's the matter, Celina?" Liu asked.

"Oh nothing." she replied, not wanting to get into the subject. She was still depressed about the recent turn of events, and she did not feel like speaking her mind. Today is supposed to be a day of happiness, but she just cannot feel what the king feels, and she did not want to ruin the happy mood.

Li was still sitting on the roof and all of a sudden Shen Long and Sui Long appeared. "Li, why aren't you celebrating like everyone else?"

"Like everyone else? Hmmp. What a meaningless celebration. Just because Alex killed one demon, they are having a party. These people are ignorant. They are more demons out there, hiding and disguised as humans."

"Like the old saying goes, ignorance is bliss¹¹." said Shen Long. Perhaps you should try to be like them, Li. At least for a little while."

"Be like them? Pretend that there is nothing wrong when there is?"

"You might enjoy your life more that way." said Sui Long.

"There is nothing to enjoy about this. I cannot pretend...not after all I have seen. If you don't mind, I'd like you to stop following me."

"We are concerned about you, and so is your brother concerned about you." said Shen Long.

"I can take care of myself. I have a weapon and I do not need bodyguards."

"You haven't seen your brother in such a long time. Why not spend more time with him?" said Shen Long.

"That is none of your concern." Li replied.

"That is cold." said Shen. "You are distancing everyone from you. Your brother has been searching for you for all these years, yet you avoid him. I know what it is like to have a sibling, and being separated from her is a very painful thing. Li, learn my lesson and do not repeat my mistakes."

¹¹ Ignorance is bliss is a proverb – the less you know the happier you are

"What mistakes do you speak of?" she said. "I am happy for Alex. He is the Demon Slayer and he has fame and wealth and everything he can possibly want. But right now I have to focus on survival. I can't afford to think about my emotions and sentiments."

Sui Long sighed, knowing this argument is going no where. "Are you always going to watch him from a distance?"

"If that is what I must do to keep him safe, then yes." Li replied.

"He is in as much danger as you are. It would make sense to cooperate and work together." said Shen Long.

"Think about it, Shen Long. He is the Demon Slayer. He is well protected and getting to him will be difficult. Duke Xiang may be dead, but his allies are all over the place. And worse yet, they are disguised as people, possibly even royal officials. They are angry, but they cannot get to Alex that easily."

"And that is why you are using yourself as bait to lure the enemy out? You are putting yourself in a lot of danger, Li." said Shen Long.

"I've been worse." she replied. Then she grabbed her sword. "We are being watched."

The two masked men looked around. Suddenly, ninjas showed up and jumped to the roof. Everyone drew their weapons and fought. *Clang! Cling!*

[C] Title Contents

King Liu was impressed by the large crowd. They were cheering for him even though they could not see him from inside the carriage. He smiled.

Celina, on the other hand, did not feel happy like he does. She just stared at the crowd while being spaced out.

The kidnappers laughed maliciously as they watched their victim whimpering and cowering in fear. The woman's ankles were tied together. She was wearing white toeless shoes. She was wearing a white qipao that went as low as the middle of the shins. The incision revealed some of her thighs. Her arms were behind the chair, tied up tightly to the chair's back. Her mouth was gagged by a cloth and she could not utter a word. She could only moan and make muffled noises. Her eyes were shaking as she sat there and watched in fear as these men decided her fate. Celina, without knowing why, became the hostage of these bandits, and she was scared for her life.

One of the kidnappers was Lord Huong, one of the elder high lords. "Now that we have the king's concubine captive, King Liu Bei is under the Duke's control."

"We should just keep her in the dungeon." said one of the bandits.

"No, let's keep her here where we can see her." replied Jiax, the leader of the bandits. "What should we do with her?"

"The Duke's orders are to keep her alive. As long as she is alive, you may do anything you please." said Lord Huong.

"Anything, you say?" Jiax asked while leering at Celina's body.

"Anything. The Duke does not care." With that said, he left the room.

Then Jiax turned to the tied up victim and smiled. All the bandits were staring at her and smiling. These men were bandits, made up of thieves and murderers, the lowest forms of criminals. And judging by the greedy, perverted looks in their eyes, Celina knew what they were thinking, and she struggled and squirmed in the chair, and moaned and moaned, pleading them not to come closer. Tears of fear drip down her eyes.

Jiax took out a knife and pointed it at her face. She moaned. "MMFFF!"

"Well, it looks like fate brought the concubine herself under our disposal. Maybe I should cut your pretty face."

Her eyes stared at the knife's blade in fear and she turned to the side.

"Hmmm, which side of your face should I cut first? This side?" he said tauntingly, and then moved the knife to the other side of her face. "Or this side?"

Celina turned her head the other way and moaned. "MMFF! MMFFF!"

A bandit grabbed Celina's hair from behind and tilted her head up. "C'mon boss, let's just strip her and take everything off at once and have our way with her!"

"Patience." Jiax replied. "We are going to take it slowly...that is the more enjoyable way." And he stared at the woman's frightened eyes and pointed the knife at her chin, and moved it down to her neck. "And we're going to take her...piece by piece..."

"What a fine capital we have, don't you think? Celina, are you alright? You don't look so good." the king said.

"I'm fine." she replied, as if just waking up from a trance.

"You should be happy. Today is a joyous occasion."

"Yes, indeed it is." she replied, forcing a smile.

Li and the two masked warriors drew their swords immediately. They were barricaded by seven ninjas.

"These guys are getting faster and faster." said Li.

"Then we have to be faster then they are." said Shen.

Suddenly, the heroes dispersed. *Whoosh Clang! Cling! Clang!* They attacked whoever came at them, and the swordfight was over within minutes.

"These are trained professionals. I can't even rest for a second." said Li.

"Someone must hate you deeply." said Shen.

"No shit." she replied. "I will have to keep fighting until I find out who is behind this. For the time being they are not going to go after Alex. Because if they kill him, that will surely cause a ruckus amongst the populace, and the demons don't want that. They like to hide like shadows. But you two should protect him just in case."

"Indeed, that **is** what Master Genzo ordered us to do." said Sui Long.

"Very well then. Li, be careful." said Shen Long.

Li smiled. "I always am." She jumped away.

Meanwhile, a man wearing a straw hat and battle suit showed up to the previous fight scene. The War God saw many dead bodies of bounty hunters. Perplexed (困惑) by this discovery, he said, "What in the world happened? Who could have possibly done this?"

"Who else?" said Ragnarok.

War God turned around and he was shocked. "It's you..."

Alex finally arrived at the town square. He got off his horse and walked towards the stage.

Jade and her grandmother were amongst the crowd. They can barely see over people's heads. By chance, she saw Zi. "It's Zi!" she said. She waved and jumped up and down, but he did not see her. She took her grandmother by the hand and pushed through the crowd. "Zi!"

Zi was surprised. "Jade? You came to see Alex?"

"Of course. I was screaming your name from over there."

"Sorry." Zi replied. "It's so noisy I can't hear anything."

"So anyway," Jade said, "Do you know what is going to happen next?"

"The Demon Slayer is going to burn the demon's dead body."

The headless body of the demon was placed on the platform for everyone to see. It was tied to a vertical piece of wood, and on the body's feet was a pile of wood.

Jade saw the body and she suddenly had a sick feeling in her stomach. Maybe this is not the type of celebration she was hoping for.

The War God was startled to see who it was. "It is you...**Chu Yen.**"

"Chu Yen is a name of the past." said he. "My name is Ragnarok. I am glad you still recognize me. I thought you would've forgotten about me after all these years."

"I can never forget scum like you."

"Oh, such harsh words." Ragnarok said sarcastically. "Were we not 'brothers' at one point in time?"

"That was a lifetime ago. You chose to abandon us and seek your own path. And now look where it has taken you. Is this your work?" Genzo said, referring to the dead bodies.

Ragnarok chuckled. "These insects thought they could come here and kill you. But I did you a favor and disposed (處置) of them for you."

"I don't need you to do me any favors!" Genzo replied.

"Oh, but I am not doing it for you. As far as the public is concerned, you killed them...this is the doing of the Legendary War God. What a title you have inherited. Everyone despises that name...and he who kills the War God shall become a hero. And Ragnarok will be hailed as the Hero of the Ages."

"Hero? Don't kid me! You work for the devil!"

"A powerful devil!" Ragnarok drew his sword and War God drew his. "This duel between us is inevitable, so let us settle it today, War God...or should I say, Master Genzo?"

Genzo grunted and they charged into each other and exchanged some moves.
Clang

"So it's true..." said Ragnarok. They pushed their blades into each other and jumped away. "You gave your Fire Sword away to Alex Cheng."

"Why does that concern you? That sword is mine to give away."

"You fool! You gave your precious Fire Sword to an amateur like Cheng? Have you lost your mind, old man? Do you realize how valuable that Fire Sword is? You just gave it to one of your students?"

"I can still beat you without my Fire Sword."

"What wishful thinking!" said Ragnarok. "I will defeat you with my Ice Sword!"

Amongst the audience, three of them stared maliciously (惡意) at the Demon Slayer. They were all swordsmen with evil intentions (邪惡嘅意圖). The first swordsman, **Tao**, was an experienced veteran in marital arts. He can not only use a sword, but all various kinds of weapons and he is known for his trickery. The second swordsman, Rubble, was tall and fat, and he is famous for his strength – he is the ice cold killer who ambushes warriors in the snow and leaves without a trace. The last swordsman is a tall and silver-haired warrior who kills without mercy, and his origin is a mystery.

Tao spoke first, "So this is our target, the famous Demon Slayer."

"He does not look that strong." said Rubble.

"We should not underestimate him. He did slay a demon twice his size." replied Ekin.

"Duke Xiang was not careful. He thought he was invincible in his demon form. The second he let his guard down he gets killed." Rubble replied.

"This is the student of the War God?"

"Correct. The proof is his Fire Sword. The War God gave it to him."

"Leave this up to me. Let's see if he is as good a swordsman as they say he is." Tao smiled.

The king and concubine came out of their carriages and walked to the stage. The guards, led by Captain Tai, accompanied them to the staircase and they remained at the bottom. King Liu faced the audience and raised his arms.

"Ladies and gentlemen, fellow citizens of the Shen Kingdom. We are all gathered here today in celebration of the death of a traitor and the birth of a new hero. We are here to acknowledge this man not only for his skills as a swordsman, but also for his courage and bravery. He is known as the Demon Slayer." *Applause from the crowd*

"This title is befitting for him, for he has slain a demon who tried to betray me and cause trouble in the kingdom. And thus, I, King Liu Bei of Shen, officially bestow (賜給) Alex Cheng the title of Demon Slayer. No one else shall have this unique title so long as time continues."

Alex looked at the crowd and then at Celina, who smiled at him.

"And now," the king continued, "the Demon Slayer will perform the burning of the demon's body."

A guard handed Alex a burning stick. Alex walked over to the demon's body, placed on top of a pile of wood. He took a deep breath and stared at the dead demon body before setting it on fire.

Clang! Genzo and Ragnarok hit in the air and went past each other. The War God's straw hat fell off, revealing his face completely.

Ragnarok smiled. "It is just as I thought. You are nothing without your precious Fire Sword. You will regret it for giving it away!"

"Shut up you demon!"

They exchanged some moves and jumped away.

It is apparent that these two have a deep and complicated history. They were once the heroes of the land, but unfortunately, things did not remain that way. Ragnarok, formerly known as Chu Yen, betrayed the **Brotherhood** because of his greed and desire for power. Each of the brothers possessed a unique legendary sword, such as Genzo's Fire Sword. Chu Yen had his Ice Sword, but he wanted Genzo's Fire Sword and tried to steal it but failed. He joined the side of the demons and when the Liu army came and conquered the land, Ragnarok disappeared just as Genzo did. That was fifty years ago. And today, these two former comrades will settle their fifty year grudge.

Ragnarok swings his sword hard, producing the Ice Blizzard. Genzo swings his sword, and the resulting air pressure, known as an air breaker, collided against his opponent's.

But the Ice Blizzard overpowered Genzo's air breaker. Froom! When the shockwave was about to hit Genzo, he vanished. Ragnarok was surprised. Flash! Genzo appeared directly in front of him and attacked. *Clang!* Ragnarok blocked but he was not on time, and he skidded backwards on the ground. Scrrrrch. "Damn you, old man."

"I do not need something like the Fire Sword to beat the likes of you. The day you decided to work for the demons is the day you lost your humanity. I have nothing more to say to you."

Ragnarok grunted. "Grrrrr. Son of a bitch."

All of a sudden, Genzo sensed something...or rather, someone. A silhouetted figure was hiding somewhere in the trees, and Genzo knew this person. While he was

distracted, Ragnarok slid his sword from the ground, slicing the dirt, and some of the dirt hit Genzo's eye.

"Argh!"

Ragnarok attacked with a furious combination. *Clang! Slash!* Genzo jumped in the air and Ragnarok jumped. *Slash!* Genzo was hit in the chest and he landed in a crouch.

"Ugh!" He touched his wound.

Ragnarok laughed. "Ha ha ha ha ha! Die, old man!"

They charged. *Slash!*

The crowd was silent as Alex walked closer to the demon's body with his torch.

He was feeling nervous for he never had an audience of this size watching him. He looked at the crowd and then at the king and concubine. When he was ready, he threw the torch onto the pile of wood. Froom! The flames grew rapidly and spread to the legs of the giant body, and it went to its stomach, and eventually the entire body caught fire.

The crowd was astonished (驚訝). They all yelled and clapped as the demon burned. Liu smiled and touched his beard. Celina was a little worried, but Liu touched her hand to make her feel better, and they looked at each other and smiled.

Lord Huong drank tea in a nearby restaurant. He was watching the event as well. "Do not worry, Duke Xiang. We will avenge you." Sluuurp.

Genzo's eyes were still covered with dirt and his vision was unclear. It will be difficult to fight, especially with the wound on his chest. "Ugh...don't you ever play fair?"

"There is no such thing as fair in the world. We do what we must to win!"

"You've sold your soul, now you will sell your life!"

"I will rid you of your misery, War God!"

They charged and put all their anger in the next attack. *SLASH.* They went past each other and did not move for a moment.

Suddenly, someone's blood dripped on the ground. Genzo coughed blood and his eyes were wide open with disbelief. He collapsed on the ground in slow motion. *Thud*

"The War God...is dead!" Ragnarok, holding his bloody sword, looked up at the sky and laughed. "AHAHAHAHA! HA HA HA HA!"¹²

As he watched the giant body burn up, something knocked the wind out¹³ of Alex. His heart felt like it was about to explode, and his head was hurting badly. Even though the War God was far away, he can feel his disappearance from this world. Alex's eyes were wide open with shock.

Li and the two masked men felt it as well from where they were.

(Impossible...the God of War...has been killed?!) thought Alex. Can it be true? One of the greatest swordsmen of all time...has just been slain?

二: Sadness in the Valley: Their Vow to Revenge

¹² Scene was updated in 2021

¹³ Knocked the wind out – hit really hard that he can't breathe

As Duke Xiang's body burned, everyone can smell the foulness (汚穢) in the air. It was joyous celebration for everyone, but for our hero, it was no longer a celebration. (Impossible...the God of War...has been killed?!) Alex thought to himself. (No, it cannot be. I must be mistaken. But what is this uneasy feeling I have?)

The crowd cheered. Some of them were close to the fire and they covered their noses from the smell.

Alex stared dumbfounded at the burning body, still drowning in his own thoughts.

Captain Tai walked up to Cheng and tapped him on the shoulder, Cheng nearly jumped. "Huh?"

"Congratulations, Sir Cheng, the Demon Slayer. You are now an official hero of the kingdom."

"Uhhh, thank you."

"No, thank **you** for everything you've done." Tai replied. He and Alex bowed to each other.

The other lords came to Alex one by one and bowed to him. Some of them included Lord Yu, Sima, and Fei. Alex smiled and bowed gracefully, but his smile was a mask to cover up his anger. He was boiling on the inside. What happened to Master Genzo? What does this feeling mean? He must find out. This ceremony in his honor has become an inconvenience. Alex wanted it to end soon and find the truth.

Li, while on the rooftop, felt a similar chill in the air. Like Alex, she was had this uneasy feeling in her chest, as if a lightning bolt struck her heart. Did someone kill Master Genzo? But that is impossible...The War God is the strongest swordsman alive. She too wanted to find out the truth and headed for the Valley.

As the demon's body continued to burn, the people continued to cheer. Amongst the crowd were Jade and her grandmother, Mrs. Lee. In another part of the crowd, Zi was there. Liu Bei touched Celina's hand. "This certainly is wonderful, isn't it?"

"Yes it is." she replied. "Cheng has done a lot for sure, and we owe him much more. This is a small fraction of what we can do to repay him."

"Definitely. A man of his virtue (美德) deserves a title befitting (適合) of him. Cheng deserves a life full of riches and wealth, as well as lots of women!"

Celina blushed. "Lots of women? I wonder if he is that type of man."

"He will! I will introduce him to women with the biggest breasts that no man can resist!"

Celina laughed for the first time in the whole day. "Yes, I agree."

Lord Sima, with a fan covering his face, said: "Sir Cheng does not seem pleased."

Captain Tai said, "That is what his facial expression is saying. But who knows, maybe he is so happy that he does not know how to express it."

However, Zi and Jade did not think so. Apparently, they can tell something is wrong, judging by Alex's face. Is it possible that they too, can sense Master Genzo's untimely death?

Eventually, the Demon Slayer Ceremony ended. Alex rode on his horse back to the palace, while the king and concubine rode their carriage.

When they entered the palace, Alex bowed to King Liu. "That was splendid celebration, was it not?"

"Yes sire." Alex replied.

"The populace got to know your face. The celebration dinner will come in about four hours. I shall see you later."

"Yes sire." Alex bowed as the king walked away.

Going back to his quarters, Alex shut the door and sat in the empty room. His brain was boiling. Suddenly, he heard a sound. "Who's there?"

The straw hat warriors jumped down from the ceiling.

"Shen Long? Sui Long? Do you guys always have to surprise me? Why can't you enter like a normal person?"

"We ninja do not like to be revealed." said Shen Long.

"In any case, Cheng, did you feel something back at the ceremony?" Sui Long asked.

"Does this have to do with Master Genzo? Did something happen to him?" asked Alex.

"We are not sure, but there is a possibility that he might be dead." said Sui Long.

"Dead?" Alex exclaimed. "What are you babbling about? The War God can't be dead!"

Shen Long put up his palms. "Please, calm down. We cannot be sure until we confirm this."

Alex bit his thumb. "Grrr, I cannot wait any longer. I have to see him right away."

"I agree." said Shen Long. "We should head to the Valley of Death right away."

"But what about the banquet tonight?" asked Sui Long.

"I am going to have to cancel." said Alex.

Sui clearly did not agree with that decision. "That is a rude gesture to decline a king's invitation especially if the banquet is held in your honor."

"I am sure his highness will understand if I postpone it. After all, a banquet can't be held without the guest of honor right?"

Nighttime falls on the Shen Kingdom. Alex and a palace servant were conversing. "I am going to have to cancel tonight's banquet. I have an emergency."

"But Sir Cheng—" said the servant with a concerned look on his face.

"Please, just give him the message. I am ready for whatever consequences I shall receive for this."

The servant bowed. "Very well."

Alex went to the courtyard to join Shen and Sui. They were waiting for him on horses, and Alex hopped onto his horse. He pulled the reins, and his horse whined, and they exited through the back gate.

Things were happening too fast for Cheng to keep up with. He only saw his long lost sister recently. Somehow, he managed to become a hero of the kingdom and all of a sudden, something happened to his master. His mind was confused and he had a **flashback** of how it all began...on that fateful day when his sister left him ten years ago.

The Cheng family has always been poor, but they were the model family of ancient times, they were happy together despite their struggles. The mom and dad work on a daily basis and Li Cheng started working as a servant as soon as she can pick up a broom. Fortune smiled on the little girl, for the lord she served recommended her to work at the Imperial Palace.

"Mom, dad, Alex, I did it!" shouted the excited girl. "I will work at the Imperial Palace!"

Alex was a year younger than Li and he was a few inches shorter than her. His eyes **glittered** when she made the announcement. He's always looked up to his older sister, as all younger siblings do. She's pretty, kind and hard working. The parents were proud of their little girl, and they patted on her on the head and complimented her all night. She was laughing and smiling the whole time. She finally made her parents proud by finding a secure job, which for a teenage girl, is a pretty blissful feeling.

Being selected to work at the palace means Li must live at the palace, so she will be away from home for an unknown amount of time. Alex was sad about that, but the parents support this notion, as if giving their daughter away to marriage.

One day Li came home unannounced, surprising her entire family. "The Duke is not a human! He is a demon! I saw it with my own eyes!"

"Li, what are you saying?" exclaimed Mr. Cheng, the father.

"Li you're not making sense." said Mrs. Cheng, the mother.

"You all have to run away or they'll come after you. I have to leave now!" Right after that, Li took her belongings and ran away from home. She went to the next town to hide. Mr. Cheng went after her, leaving Mrs. Cheng and Alex behind.

Alex has never seen his sister act like that before and did not know what to make of it. But he was certain of one thing: he had this ominous feeling (不祥嘅感覺) that his life will never be the same again.

Unable to decipher (破譯) Li's cryptic (神秘) message and fearing for their safety, Mrs. Cheng took Alex to an inn. They stayed there for two days straight with Alex restricted from leaving the inn. He was bored so he sat by the window and stared blankly at the sky. This is the beginning of this habit that he would carry him until his adulthood.

One day, Alex's mother headed out to see the magistrate that arrested Mr. Cheng. "Listen Alex, no matter what, do not leave this room until I come back, okay?" she said.

"Okay, I got it." replied the boy.

Little did he know, that was the last time he saw his mother. At this time, Alex grew very uneasy; he sat by the window all day, waiting for his family members to come back. But they never did, and the anxiety became too great. He disobeyed orders and left the inn and went back to see his neighbor and friend Zi Lai.

Alex told Zi everything, but did not explain it well due to his emotional state. Zi did not quite understand everything, but he knew how bad the situation was.

That night, the boys decided to go find Alex's sister on their own. It was a cold night with dark clouds looming over. Alex and Zi ran through the street, now littered with puddles of water. *Sploosh sploosh*

Suddenly, a man with a sword appeared before Alex. He was from the **East Brigade**, an elite police unit under the control of eunuchs. Alex held a kodachi, a miniature (微型) sword that is perfect for a child his size. *Clang* Alex's kodachi was knocked away. The officer then slashed him in the right arm, causing him to bleed profusely (大汗). Alex fell down face flat on the water filled street. *Splash* Lightning flared and the rain poured even harder. His blood mixed with the rain.

"Oh no! Alex!" Zi screamed. Seeing his friend injured and near dead, he snapped and became angry beyond logic. He also carried a kodachi and he jumped up like a mantis and stabbed the officer in the chest, killing him quickly. *Stab*

A second officer attacked Zi. *Clang* Zi blocked the attack from above, stabbed the officer's leg, causing him to scream. Zi jumped up and slashed him in the neck, giving him three seconds before he died.

The remaining officer was bewildered that a kid like him has such power. He panicked and ran away, disappearing into the heavy rain.

Zi went to check up on his fallen friend. "Alex, wake up! Alex, speak to me! Alex!"

Alex woke up and he found himself in a stranger's bed. It is most likely a doctor's office or hospital. He sat up and looked at his right arm, it had two layers of bandages stained with a circle of blood. Curious, he touched his arm and grunted from the pain.

"Do not touch the wound, young man." The doctor brushed the curtains aside to come into the room. Zi was behind him.

"Zi...you brought me here?"

"Yeah. You're gonna be alright. Isn't that right, doctor?"

The doctor stroked his beard. "The critical period is over so your life is not in danger." The boys sighed in relief.

"However I have bad news for you. Best prepare yourself."

Alex stared at the doctor with big bright eyes. "Please tell me."

"I did what I could to stitch up your injury, but it is too deep. You can never use a sword for the rest of your life." The doctor paused so the boys can reflect on his words. "I suggest studying to become a merchant or politician, or a doctor like myself."

Zi was sad for his friend. "Alex..."

"It's fine." said Alex, looking down. "I didn't plan on becoming a swordsman. I only pick up a weapon so I can find my sister and my parents."

"I have to check up on my parents. I'm worried about them." said Zi.

"You're leaving me?"

"I'll be back soon. I promise."

Alex nodded. "Mmm."

After Zi left the room, a nurse walked in. The doctor took a hold of his injured arm. "Alright my boy, it's time to change these bandages."

On the way back to the doctor's office, Zi walked like a zombie, with dried up tears on his face. After walking for hours, he finally reached the office by muscle memory.

Alex was overjoyed to see his friend. "Zi, you're back! How are your parents?"

Zi was silent, which made his friend uncomfortable.

"Zi? What happened? Zi?"

Just when he thought his tears were dried up, fresh tears dripped down his cheek. "They killed my parents!" He sobbed with his mouth wide open.

Alex was shocked and did not know how to respond. Suddenly, Alex received this feeling that he too will never see his parents again. Like Zi, he cried out loud. The room became full of their crying and sobbing. "Waaaaah! Waaaaah!"

In the next room, the nurse overheard them. "Those poor boys. Can't we do something for them?"

"Perhaps...perhaps not. They are fugitives." replied the doctor.

The nurse's name is Mrs. Lee, who is Jade's grandmother. She is a kind hearted old woman who cannot stand by while these innocent boys were suffering. She instructed the boys on what to do once they leave town. They are to go to the next town immediately because the East Brigade are professionals and will find them eventually. They need to go from town to town and stay at inns and motels, always staying on the move. The best bet is to cross the border to the **Shu Kingdom**, where the East Brigade

has no power. Mrs. Lee even gave them some money for food and rent so they can at least survive a few weeks.

Alex and Zi bowed to the nurse. "Thank you for every thing, Mrs. Lee." said Zi.

"I promise I will repay the favor one day!" said Alex. "I won't let this be the end of my life. I will make it big one day, you'll see!"

The nurse's eyes were small so when she smiled her eyes became a line. "I'm sure you will, young man."

Zi and Alex, still injured, left the office and left the town.

East Brigade officers knocked on the doctor's door. *Knock knock* The doctor answered. "Can I help you?"

The officer pulled up a wanted poster. "We are looking for two boys about nine to ten years old, one of them has silver hair and his right arm is wounded."

"I have not seen anybody like that." said the doctor.

"If you do, notify us immediately." The officers left them alone.

The boys did exactly as the kind old woman instructed, they went from town to town, never staying more than one night, until they reached the border. Once they were in Shu they were ninety percent safe. Just to make sure, they still traveled until they reached the city at the very east of Shu, near the border of Chiri.

They lost their parents but they have no time to grieve as they had to survive to put food in their stomachs. Alex and Zi took on odd jobs here and there to make money. Alex was unable to wield a sword, but Zi can and he would take on dangerous jobs. Despite his mediocre skills, he managed to complete every job he was given. Alex never gave up on his sister - on his free time he'd search for clues on her whereabouts (下落).

Eventually, they both became teenagers and unrecognizable from their former selves. They traveled by horse back to Shen and settled in Yi Ling, the capital city. If there is any place where there is information, it is here. This is also the city that Mrs. Lee moved to.

Alex and Zi reunited with Mrs. Lee and befriended her granddaughter Jade, a jewelry saleswoman who owns a store at the marketplace. Alex worked diligently (努力) to look for clues to his sister's whereabouts. One day he found the clue that he was looking for: an eyewitness saw Li Cheng and Mr. Cheng talking on the outskirts of town before she disappeared. Apparently she went into the Xizang Forest and deeper into the jungle, where supposedly there is an ancient temple full of monks. With just this one clue, Alex and Zi set forth on their journey to the forest. This is the beginning of the story in Legend of the Fire Sword Volume 1.

Deep within the confines (範圍) of the palace, a shadow jumped through the darkness. His stealthy speed allowed him to maneuver through the maze-like structure undetected. *Whoosh whoosh.* He went into a certain building, where a certain lord was waiting for him.

"There you are." said the figure sitting in the dark. "I've been expecting you, Ragnarok."

"Forgive me, master, but the security here is tight." Ragnarok replied.

"Congratulations on your most recent victory...the God of War is no longer." said Liu Zhang.

Ragnarok looked at him with a surprised expression on his face for a second.

"Yes, I could not have done it without your tutelage (修養)."

"We left one bounty hunter alive as a witness. Is he doing his job?" asked Zhang.

"Yes my lord. He has some credibility (可信度) in the martial arts world. Soon the entire community will know the name Ragnarok, the swordsman who slain the God of War."

"The God of War is dead, but his three students are still alive and well, and they are somewhere Yi Ling."

"Oh?" said Ragnarok curiously.

"One of them is right under our noses...he is the Demon Slayer."

"The Demon Slayer...so it is true. He has the Fire Sword, the sword that I have been seeking all these years. The king reveres (尊敬) him as a hero but he is no hero, he is a second-rate (二流) swordsman. If I had a duel with him--"

"Enough!" Zhang interrupted. "I told you not to let your emotions get to you. Your assignment is to spread the rumors of the War God's death, and make known the name Ragnarok. For Ragnarok shall be the true Savior of Shen! As for the Demon Slayer, I have a plan to deal with him."

Chu Yen smiled. "Of course." He left the room.

Now alone, Zhang took a sip of tea and sighed in pleasure. Chu Yen is one of the best swordsmen in the kingdom, but he is impulsive and quick to prove himself. Zhang dislikes impulsive hot blooded men. Indeed, for he is a cautious mastermind who only makes moves when it benefits him.

[B] Title Contents

Several months ago, Liu Zhang was invited to have tea with the late Duke Xiang, who wanted to share his brilliant idea. "This will definitely work!" the duke exclaimed, unable to contain his excitement. "Have you ever wondered why Liu Bei only has one concubine?"

Zhang rubbed his beard. "Hmmm. A few possibilities come to mind. One is he does not have time for a second concubine or two is he likes this one a lot."

"It's definitely the second possibility. He loves this woman more than anything. If I could hold her hostage, he'd be willing to do anything to get his precious concubine back. Then he will be my puppet!"

"It won't be that easy. There are several nobles that you are at odds with. They will side with the king."

"Worry not, for I have a full proof plan¹⁴ to deal with them." replied Duke Xiang.

"There is no such thing as a full proof plan." Zhang sipped his tea calmly.

"Says you!" the duke said, pointing his index finger. "If you don't want to help me, fine. Don't get in my way! If I succeed, I won't share the glory with you!"

And those were the last words these two lords have exchanged. What happened after that was history. Duke Xiang ignored his fellow lord's warning of caution and impulsively went ahead with his "full proof" plan. He took the concubine Lady Ce hostage and killed a few nobles, which enraged the other nobles. Consequently, the nobles planned Operation Dragonfly, of which Alex Cheng was a part of.

Liu Zhang took another sip of tea. Duke Xiang was a fool. His plan got him killed, therefore, Zhang's strategy is better.

Jiax just finished his activity, and now it is time to sit back and relax. In his hand was the jewel necklace that belonged to the concubine.

"Hmmm, very nice. I wonder how much this is worth?"

¹⁴ Idiom meaning a perfect plan with no flaws

Celina, still naked and wrapped in ribbons, was lying on the floor. She crawled towards him. "P-Please...give it back..." she pleaded. She crawled until she reached him and grabbed his ankle. "P-Please...give it back..."

"Oh, is it that important to you? That worthless scum of a king gave it to you, didn't he? Heh." He dangled it in front of her. She tried to grab it, and he withdrew. Then he dangled it, and she tried to get it, and he withdrew. "C'mon, what's the matter? Don't you want it?" He kept on teasing her and playing with her, while she hopelessly tried to grab it.

Celina's life as the concubine is pretty much over, as she is now a prisoner of these bandits. She has already been violated and harassed, and pretty much lost everything that is important to a woman. But that necklace was very important to her, it's almost as important as life itself. It was a present from the king, a very special present received on a special occasion. It was something that she always wore and never let it stray from her sight.

And she did not want to lose this irreplaceable necklace to this bandit. It is the only thing she has left...the one thing that she has to keep her going on.

Jiax kept on teasing her, dangling the necklace in front of her, but with just enough distance so she could not reach it. Poor Celina kept on trying to grab it. But she was too weak to do any more and she passed out on the floor. "Uhhh..."

"Awwww, What's the matter? I thought it was important to you." He tossed the necklace a few feet away. "What's the matter? Why don't you get it?"

Celina opened her eyes to look at it. Celina crawled over to the necklace. She tired and beaten up from the torture, but she still crawled, using whatever energy she had left.

The necklace was so close, and she was getting closer and closer, and her heart was beating rapidly. Almost there...she reached for it with all her might, and she grabbed it. Suddenly, Jiax put his foot on her hand.

"Aaaah!" she groaned, and her hand let go of it.

In addition to stepping on her hand, he smooshed his foot on it, making it extra painful.

"Aaaah!"

Then he proceeded to kick her in the stomach. "King Liu was betrayed by his own people! He is worthless, and so are you!" Thud!

Celina groaned. "Aaah! Aaah!"

Jiax kept on kicking her, and she shed tears of pain. A gentle woman like her wasn't meant to take this kind of punishment, especially from a brute. He has no regard for human life, and he's nothing but a woman abuser. Thud. Thud.

First, she was raped, and now, she is facing this hell. Celina thought that it was over, but it is far from over. As if being raped wasn't bad enough, she is being beaten for no reason at all. This was only the beginning of her never ending suffering.

Before, she cried and cried, and thought that she had no more tears left. But there was still more tears to be shed, tears of pure pain. Thud! "Aaah!! Ahhh!!"

Celina had no power to fight back. She was so weak she couldn't even stand up. She just groaned and groaned and her eyes became flooded with tears.

Celina woke up in cold sweat. Finding herself on her desk, she must have fallen asleep while writing a letter to someone. As she stared at her own reflection in the mirror, she did not like what she was seeing. The woman in the mirror is someone who is generally timid and scared of any interaction with men. This part about her did not change, even after she became the king's concubine. At times, she needs to force herself to open up, as she has no choice but to serve him. It is her duty after all.

For the past few days, she had the same nightmare over and over. These bad memories will not go away...and Celina, wanting to put her mind at ease, asked her servants to draw her a bath.

In ancient times, people did not have the luxury of running water, thus they have to draw water from a well and pour it into a barrel. The process of drawing water into a bucket, and bringing it to a barrel, and doing it over and over is tedious work. The highborn have the servants fetch the water for them.

There were rose petals on the water, providing a fragrance. After undressing herself, Celina went into the barrel and sat down. She raised her left arm, took a mini cup and poured water over left arm.

One of her servants, Lei, came into the room. There was a divider between the bathing room and the living room, and all Lei saw was a silhouetted figure of the person bathing.

"My lady. I put your clothes on the bench." said she.

"Oh, thank you." Celina replied.

"Is there anything else you need?"

"No, thank you."

"Is there something troubling you?"

"No. I'm fine."

Lei could tell that her lady was sad about something, and she wanted to ask what is wrong, but decided not to. It is not her place to ask, not now, anyways. Perhaps she will ask another time, she thought, and walked out of the room with uneasy thoughts.

As Celina washed her arm she stared at it blankly for a while. Many depressing thoughts circled her mind. She has always felt uneasy with other people around, and only feels comfortable when she is alone. Yet right now, she does not feel comfortable with herself. She felt very dirty...and wanted to cleanse herself.

She moaned and groaned, and she was too weak to even offer resistance. His mouth and beard felt disgusting to her. No words could describe the suffering and torment she is going through, and she doesn't deserve any of this.

Jiax's hands locked her wrists to the floor. He put his face into hers, and she just stared at him with pure fear. "No...please..." she pleaded with tears.

"Who's going to save you now?" As he spoke, she could feel his breath. "That worthless king isn't going to save you!" With that said, he forced his lips onto hers. Her fingers grabbed the carpet tightly while his hands were locking her wrists.

It was truly a horrible feeling indeed as he tasted her lips, and the inside of her mouth fully. Celina was completely and utterly helpless, and she tears of sadness streamed down her face. This situation was never fair to begin with...she happens to be at the wrong place at the wrong time...for she is the king's concubine. She was minding her own business and one night, she was captured and brought here to be this pervert's sex slave.

Her feet kicked and thrashed about, while her fingers grabbed the carpet tightly while the lip lock continued. Poor Celina could do nothing in her situation, as she is physically overwhelmed. Every single moment was revolting and unbearable, as she felt his tongue inside her mouth. Each second felt like ten years.

The mere thought of that horrible event made her shudder in discomfort. Celina grabbed her shoulders tightly, crossing her arms over her chest. She felt very dirty, and not even the bath will be able to clean her of this dirtiness.

Being once a prisoner, she experienced unspeakable (說不得) horrors...and it was only not long ago when she was released, after Duke Xiang's army fell. He is dead and everything is resolved...right? On the outside everything is, but not for Celina...who still has to live with herself after what she's been through. Her whole body was shaking, and she held her shoulders so tight that her fingers scraped her skin, and yet that pain is nothing compared to the mental pain she is feeling now.

Tears start to swell up in her eyes and her vision became watery. How could such a thing happen to her? Why does it have to be her? Why did she have to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and captured by the wrong people? Celina tried to forget about the defiling kiss, but the more she tried to forget, the more she thought about it. The fact that horrible man's lips touched hers, and that he had his way with her, and his filthy tongue inside her mouth...the mere thought made her sick.

Drip Her tears dripped into the water.

She felt extremely sad and even wished that she did not exist. That thought circled her mind over and over again...if only she did not exist, then she would no longer have to deal with the pain, the humiliation and shame. And it'll all be over.

Title Contents

Alex, Shen, and Sui, riding on horses, galloped away. Their destination is none other than the Valley of Death. Even knowing the exact path, it will still take them twelve hours to get to their destination, no matter how fast the horses run. Alex was thinking back to a time when he first met the legendary swordsman.

As they walked on, a shadow figure observed them from the trees above. He vanished in an instant. Zi saw something from the corner of his eye, and he looked in the suspected direction, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"What is wrong?" Alex asked.

"It's nothing."

Suddenly, a figure dropped in front of them. He landed in a crouching position. His face was covered completely by a straw hat.

"Damn it..." Zi exclaimed. The heroes ran the opposite way.

More warriors in straw hats dropped down from the trees. There were four of them in total. The heroes were surrounded. Alex began to sweat.

"Who dares to trespass into the Valley of Death?"

"So, you are the legendary warrior the God of War, right?" said Alex with an arrogant tone. "Rumors of your name have spread far. But honestly, I do not see why they make such a big deal about you."

The War God smirked. "You sure talk big for someone of your caliber. Prepare for your end."

"We'll see!" Alex drew his sword and attacked head on. Sui Long, the first masked warrior, jumped and landed in front of War God. He drew his sword and attacked. Alex and Sui Long clashed their blades. *Clang! Cling!*

Alas, Alex Cheng can never forget the day he met the War God. They fought to the death, but after that he became Cheng's master. Only lately did he understand why. Li Cheng happened to be Master Genzo's student, so naturally she wants her brother's life spared.

Dawn approached as they traveled on they smelled something burning. "What is that smell?" Sui Long asked.

"Something is burning. But what?" Alex said.

As they approached the source of the fire, they saw a woman kneeling on the ground. Without seeing her face, they could recognize Li by her black ninja suit.

She was kneeling in front of a wooden platform. There was a body wrapped in white cloth and it was burning. Black smoke was coming out of it.

Alex gasped and ran over to his sister. "Li, what are you doing here?"

She did not even hear his voice. She was kneeling and crying and her fingers grabbed the dirt.

"Who is that?" asked Alex.

Shen walked forward. "Can that be...Master Genzo?"

"He's dead!" Li said, gritting her teeth.

"What happened to him?"

"I don't know! *sob* Earlier today, I felt something was wrong. I came immediately afterwards. When I arrived, master was dead already. He was murdered by someone!"

Alex's eyes grew wide open. "Someone murdered him? That is impossible! I cannot believe it."

"Master Genzo is one of the finest martial artists and swordsmen in all of China! I also find that hard to swallow." said Shen Long.

"He must have been outnumbered." said Sui Long.

"Who did it?" Alex said angrily. "Who could've done such a thing?" He held his fists.

"I do not know." said Li. "But when I do find out who did it, I swear to the heavens I will kill that bastard."

Everyone grew silent, for they have nothing more to say but to grieve. Alex stared at the burning body that was once his teacher and tears swell up in his eyes.

While the students were grieving, a bounty hunter was sneaking behind a tree, spying on them. Li sensed him right away and shouted: "Who is there? Show yourself!"

The spy, knowing he's been discovered, ran for his life. Shen and Sui landed in front of him and he gasped.

"Who are you, and why were you spying on us?" asked Shen Long.

"Don't tell me you're the one who killed the War God?" said Alex.

"It can't be...he doesn't look that strong." said Li.

"It w-wasn't me." said the man fearfully. "I'm a bounty hunter who kills people for money. My boss and his crew set his sights on defeating the God of War. He was so confident too because we have numbers in our favor. But something unexpected happened. Someone just came out of nowhere and killed my master and his entire crew. I'm the only survivor. This very same person defeated the God of War...by himself."

"Who did it?" asked Li, grabbing him by the collar. "Tell me!"

"His name is...Ragnarok."

Everyone was shocked. Li grabbed the man by the collar. "Ragnarok? Who the hell is he?"

"I've never heard of him." Shen said.

"You're joking, aren't you?" said Li. "No swordsman on the face of this planet can match the War God in one on one combat. He is the best of the best."

"Actually, there is someone who is Master Genzo's equal in the battlefield. Actually, there are three." said Sui Long.

Alex was surprised. "Three?"

"Do you mean...those three? Those who make up the Four Brothers?" Shen replied.

"Master was one of the famed Four Brothers of China. The other three are equals with Master in terms of skill. They were the best swordsmen in all of China. The only problem is that...they are all dead...or at least the rumors say so."

"Are you saying that one of those brothers is still alive?" Li asked.

"It is very possible. If what this man says is true...if master is defeated by one person, then this person has to be one of the brothers." said Sui Long.

"It's true!" said the bounty hunter, trying to convince them he's not lying. "I swear on my mother's grave it's true! I saw it with my own eyes."

"So this Ragnarok person...it must be the nickname of one of the brothers." said Shen Long.

Alex was shocked to hear all this. Why would a fellow brother betray Master Genzo? Who is Ragnarok? None of this makes any sense. He was really upset just like the others. The party of four¹⁵ continued to watch the body burn as they grieved in silence.

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

"-As the years passed by my fighting skills improved. I not only could hold a sword, but a variety of other weapons as well. Since I had nothing else to do, I trained day and night, day and night. The sword became second nature to me. I am the best of the best...but at what price? My life is nothing but emptiness - filled with hate, sorrow, fear, bloodshed and death."

Alex Cheng will never forget his master's training. Those few months he spent in the valley were the toughest yet most rewarding times of his life. He learned more in those few months about the art of the sword than his whole life.

Alex, lying on the ground, had a time getting up. He was dirty and roughed up all over and pretty much out of energy.

Genzo pointed his sword at him. "Come on young man, is that all you have? Don't tell me you can't continue?"

"Ugh..." Alex tried to stand up, using his sword as leverage to stand up.

"If that is the best you can do, then you will never succeed!"

"I'm not done yet! Don't underestimate me!" Alex got into fighting stance and charged. "Yaaaah!"

Their blades hit in the air. *Clang!*

Eventually, the body burned to ashes. "Whoever did this to you, Master Genzo, I swear I will find him and kill him." Alex said, clenching his fist. "I swear to the heavens I will avenge you."

It truly is a tragic day, but life must go on. Li rode on her horse and Alex was right behind her, and he made his horse go faster to catch up with her. "Li..."

"Alex. I'm sorry we had to meet under such circumstances."

There was a lot that he wanted to say to her, but when she is actually here, he forgot everything. "Li, I was thinking that we join forces and fight together."

"Sorry, but I fight on my own."

"But Li..." he responded.

"Listen." she said, interrupting him, "I am their primary target right now. If I stick with you, things will be inconvenient for you. Stick with Shen Long and Sui Long. They were ordered to be your bodyguards. It is their last order from Master Genzo, and now that master is dead, they will carry their orders to the very end." With that said, she pulled the reins and her horse galloped ahead. "Hiyah!"

¹⁵ Idiom meaning group

The War God has slain many over the decades, and ironically, he is the one who is slain. The Valley of Death has truly become what its name is. An outcast of society, the War God has lived a life of loneliness and solitude (孤獨), with the exception of his three, no, four students. Only they know of the War God's true name, but as far as the rest of the world is concerned, he is known only by one name...the name that brings fear to even the strongest of men, the name that scares children at night, the name that brings fear to villages even if whispered...for that is the name which will live on forever, the spirit of the warrior called the War God...

三: The Traveler from Afar. Discovery of the Spice.

<< Prev Chapter Next Chapter >>

[\[B\]](#) [\[C\]](#) Contents

The man climbed the mountain desperately. He has been here for days, climbing and searching...for the ultimate herb known as the spice. So far, he has only heard about it in rumors and folklore (民俗學), but he is going to find the real thing. No one in the village would go with him, for they called him insane, they said this would be a waste of a trip. But the traveler has determination, and he will prove all the naysayers (反對者) wrong.

Finally, he found it, a group of plants that look like the one in his drawings. This is it, he thought. The purple plants that hold a special ingredient that if put into food, will be the most delicious food ever tasted by any man. The traveler quickly snatched a bunch of the plants and shoved them into his bag.

A servant presented King Liu with a bowl of wine on a tray. Standing next to him was Lord Zhang. "Your royal highness, here I present you the spice."

The king became curious. "Hmm? What is this?"

"Please taste it. I guarantee you will like it."

The servant walked up to the king and handed him the bowl. Liu proceeded to take a sip of it, and it tasted really good. In fact, his taste buds nearly jumped out of his tongue. "My...it is simply delicious! What is this called?"

"Ah, your highness, I am happy that you liked it." Zhang said. "This is called the spice, a herb used to make tea, wine, and other beverages. But this herb is special as it can only be found in a certain place...the **Tairanian Mountains**."

Liu drank the entire bowl in one gulp and sighed with pleasure. "Ahhh." He wiped his mouth with his sleeve without realizing it. The taste of it was so good that he can't even describe in words. "It was marvelous (奇妙). I simply must have more."

"I am glad you like it, sire. And now I present to you the traveler who found the spice."

A man dressed like a scholar came into the royal hall and kneeled accordingly. "Long live the King of Shen."

"Stand young man. What is your name?"

"My name is **Chou**, and it is an honor to meet you in person, sire."

Liu rubbed his beard. "Mr. Chou, you are not from around here, are you?"

"I am not from Yi Ling, but I am a citizen of Shen. I am a traveler who has been traveling for quite some time now. During my trip to the Tairanian Mountains I came across the purple plants that carry the spice, and I took some of it with me."

"Astounding," said Liu Bei. "The spice was good...too good. It left a taste in my mouth and I must have more of it. You remember the location of the herbs, do you not?"

"Yes, sire." Chou replied happily.

"Excellent." Liu snapped his fingers and two servants brought a treasure box to the center of the room, placing it in front of Chou. Zhang opened the box, and Chou's eyes shined as he stared at the gold coins. He has never seen this much money in his life. "This will be your compensation if you find me more of the herbs. This spice...is fitting for the meal of kings. I will send my men to help you bring the spice. If this compensation is not enough, let me know. Do you accept the offer?"

Chou folded his hands. "I humbly accept, sire. This reward is more than enough. Thank you!"

And thus, several men were assigned to aid Chou in his journey to the mountains. This young man was in luck, because he has landed a once in a lifetime opportunity.

The heroes have finally returned from their tiring trip from the **Valley of Death**. They were still angry and bitter, and have not said a word during the remainder of their trip. Shen and Sui walked Alex back to his quarters.

"You two have been living with master for many years now." said Alex. "Has he ever mentioned the person named Ragnarok?"

"No, not even once. He rarely speaks of his past." said Shen Long.

Cheng said, "Ragnarok's identity is still a mystery." said Cheng.

Shen Long said, "The bounty hunter said master was taken down by one man. Master's swordcraft is the best of the best, and whoever defeated him must be either one of his Brothers or possibly a demon. That is the only theory I can accept."

"Why would one of his fellow brothers betray him? What happened fifty years ago?" asked Cheng.

Sui Long explained, "That is a long story, something way before your time or our time, for that matter. Fifty years ago our master was at his prime in terms of skill and age. He was one of the best, and only three others could even come close to having a fair fight with him. Those four swordsmen were the Four Brothers of China."

"The Four Brothers?" Cheng repeated.

A servant came into the backyard, and before they could be seen, the masked men disappeared. "Sir Cheng."

"What is it?" asked Alex.

"His highness has requested that you go to the royal dining hall for the banquet. All the imperial officials are going to be there, and you are the guest of honor." said the servant.

"Very well, I will be there shortly." replied he. After canceling the original banquet, Alex must attend this one.

The dining room was extremely noisy. All the important people were there, as Alex noticed. Sitting at the head of the room was King Liu, with his wife Celina, next to him. Sitting on the side were many officials, notably, Lord Sima, Lord Fei, Lord Yu, Lord Chung, Lord Huong, and of course, Lord Zhang. Alex himself was sitting at the other end of the room, opposite of the king, as he is the guest of honor.

Alex was not used to such a noisy party, as he prefers a quiet setting with a few people, rather than a room full of loud and obnoxious men. But they were celebrating and cheering for their victory, and it was a joyous occasion for all.

"How is the food, Demon Slayer?" asked Sima.

"It's great," he replied. "It is the best. And please, call me Cheng."

"Sure thing, Cheng!" yelled Sima, holding up a cup of wine. He was not the only one who was drunk. Is this how the most important men in the kingdom celebrate?

Then the king spoke, "Drink up, men! Drink like there is no tomorrow! You have all done well to serve my kingdom. Lord Yu and Lord Zhang, you were the ones who led the attack on the palace while I was still a hostage. Sima and Fei, you gathered an army to rebel against the duke. And Cheng, you personally led the attack and killed the demon. You are a fine swordsman indeed."

"Thank you, sire," Alex replied.

"This one is in honor of the Demon Slayer!" said Yu, and he raised his cup in the air, spilling some of it, and drank it all in one gulp. All the guys yelled and drank at the same time.

Everyone was loud and happy but not Celina. She was drowning in her own thoughts, and the men's voices were loud and annoying. She did not even want to be part of this banquet, but her king requested that she come, and who is to refuse the wishes of the king? Celina felt like leaving the room, but doing so would be rude, so she just sat there and paid no attention to anything else.

Then she glanced in Alex's direction and noticed that he too did not touch his drink or food. He was staring down at his bowl but it was clear his mind was somewhere else, somewhere far away. Seeing him like this puts her somewhat at ease, as she finally found someone who is similar to her. Despite being popular, Cheng is unlike these other lords and nobles. At some point she stopped staring at his face and took one bite of food on her plate.

Even though this dinner was in his honor, Cheng was filled with many troubles - mainly the death of his master. Who exactly is Master Genzo? Who are the Four Brothers and where are they now? Which one of the brothers killed him? What exactly is the Fire Sword?

Cheng glanced around the room, seeing only drunk lords and nobles, all laughing and boasting their status. He felt like the only one who is sad and that made him anxious. But then he saw Celina with her head down and her plate was still full. Seeing someone who has similar habits made him at ease...at least he's not alone with how he feels. She must have troubles of her own.

Liu Bei stood up. "To complement (補語) our meal, I had my chefs make one of the finest wines in the world." He clapped. "Come. Cheng, since you are the guest of honor, you will have the privilege to experience it first."

Two servants came in, holding a tray with a bowl on it. They lowered themselves and put the bowl on the king's table. They poured a bowl of wine for Liu Bei and Celina. Two other servants came over to Cheng's table and poured wine into his bowl from a bottle.

"This is called **the spice**; it is one of the best tasting wines in the entire world. Try it, Cheng. Your taste buds will be delighted!" Liu Bei held up the bowl and drank it thirstily.

Cheng stared deeply into the beverage, wondering if what the king claims is true. The spice looked plain and ordinary, but something about it compelled him to drink it. There was a strange **allure** about it, and just looking at the liquid made him thirsty. He held up the bowl and took a sip, and it was surprisingly good and addictive.

"Well, how is it?" asked Liu.

"It's...it's great!" Cheng kept on drinking it, taking big gulps. He usually drinks politely, but not right now, because it is too good to be left alone. Before he knew it, his bowl was empty. "You are right, sire, it is the best wine I have ever drank in my life!"

Liu put his bowl down. "See? My judgment is never wrong." Then he noticed Celina hasn't touched any of her food or drinks. "My dear, you have not even touched your food. Is something the matter?"

"I am not hungry." she replied in a monotonous tone.

"Don't you at least want to try the spice? It is very good."

"I am not thirsty. I just don't have the appetite. Don't worry about me."

The king turned his attention back to the crowd. "The spice was so good that I want some more."

"Me too!" Cheng exclaimed. He showed the most emotion now than he did before.

"Chef, bring in seconds." the king ordered.

"Yes sire." The servants hurried back to the kitchen.

Liu Zhang took a sip of tea and he smiled as everyone was enjoying themselves. He had much evil intentions in mind, and he secretly pitied these poor fools, who have no idea what is about to fall upon them.

After the dinner was over, Cheng walked the premises by himself. He was still a little drunk and he was walking tipsy. He was still thinking about the spice because it left such a good taste in his mouth. He had seconds, thirds, fourths, and eventually he lost count, and surprisingly, he still wanted more. It is still not enough. He cannot quite put his finger on it, but there is something addictive about the spice.

A woman in a white dress was standing on the edge of the tower. She stared blankly at the scenery ahead and she let the night breeze blow against her pony tail and her dress.

The king was frantic. "Please, calm down, Celina!"

"No!" she said.

"Whatever problem there is, we can talk it out! Nothing is worth committing suicide over!"

"It is not something you would understand!" she yelled. "Just let me be!" Indeed, what would a man like him know about a woman's feelings...let alone hers? He has no idea what happened while she was being taken hostage. She has suffered so much, and is still suffering mentally, but he is celebrating and being drunk with his buddies.

"Please, darling, don't do anything drastic!" said Liu, while walking cautiously forward.

"Stay back!" she warned.

No matter what, she could not stop thinking about the mistreatment and harassment she went through during the takeover.

Jiax's hands locked her wrists to the floor. He put his face into hers, and she just stared at him with pure fear. "No...please..." she pleaded with tears.

"Who's going to save you now?" As he spoke, she could feel his breath. "That worthless king isn't going to save you!" With that said, he forced his lips onto hers. Her fingers grabbed the carpet tightly while his hands were locking her wrists.

It was truly a horrible feeling indeed as he tasted her lips, and the inside of her mouth fully. Celina was completely and utterly helpless, and she tears of sadness streamed down her face. This situation was never fair to begin with...she happens to be at the wrong place at the wrong time...for she is the king's concubine. She was minding her own business and one night, she was captured and brought here to be this pervert's sex slave.

That image haunted her mind and it felt so real as if it just happened a few seconds ago. No matter how hard she tried, she could not shake these thoughts away. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw another miserable memory. Just like that time when she was bound to a chair and the bandits laughed as they watched her suffer. The

bandit pointed a knife to her face, and various parts of her body, and all she could do was watch. Their loud laughter echoed throughout the room and so did her screams.

She shut her eyes and tears streamed down her face thinking of the horrible memories. The bandits' laughter still echoed in her mind, their voices were so loud and terrifying. Since that day she has cleansed herself constantly, but no matter how many times she cleaned herself, she still felt dirty. These emotions were too much for her to handle and for her there is no more point in living. It is better if she just disappeared from the world.

[B] Title Contents

Cheng was walking down the path while leaning against the wall. He kept on picturing a bowl of wine with the spice in his mind. The thought continued to haunt him as he drunkenly walked forward.

He looked up and saw a woman in a white dress standing on the edge. What is she doing? It is dangerous to stand that close to the edge. Then the lady just let herself fall forward.

Cheng was shocked. (Oh no! She's going to die!)

Liu Bei ran to the edge and reached his arm. "Noooooooo!"

As Celina was falling face forward, she closed her eyes and prepared for the end. Tears dripped from her eyes and sparkled in the night. No matter what she did, she could not forget the mistreatment she faced. No words could describe her torment and suffering, but all that is about to end in a few moments.

Cheng quickly ran to the spot where she'd fall to, and he caught her in his arms, and he fell to his knees from the weight. *Plop!* It hurt a lot to catch a falling person and he groaned. "Ugggh!" He stood up while carrying her, and he realized that she is the concubine. She opened her eyes and she thought she this was an illusion. She was surprised that she was still alive and in the arms of the Demon Slayer. They were both shocked and they just stared without saying a word. They both had a flashback of the last time he saved her life.

Celina grabbed onto the ribbon tightly, the same ribbon that was wrapped around her body. Holding the other end was Jiax, on the roof, and she dangling by the ribbon. Once he lets go, she will fall to her doom. She was at his complete mercy.

Jiax laughed. "What are you going to do now, baby?" He kept on pulling and letting of the ribbon, dangling her up and down.

"No!! Please!!"

Then Jiax counted to three and let go, despite her pleas of mercy. While falling, Celina thought that her life was over for good. Her whole life flashed before her eyes in those few seconds...She closed her eyes and shed her tears, and they sparkled in the sky.

Alex came to the area and after deciding that it's safe, he relaxed for a bit. But then he saw a woman falling from above. He ran to the spot and spread his arms, getting ready. Plop! He caught her and prevented her from hitting the concrete. Celina opened her eyes, thinking she was dead, and she was shocked that she's still alive.

Both stared into each other's eyes in disbelief. Celina thought she was gone for good, but then this man saved her life. He came out of nowhere and caught her, and she was speechless. And Alex was speechless as well, because it isn't everyday that a beautiful and naked woman falls into his arms. She had only pink ribbons to cover herself. He thought it was a dream of some sort, she was real and in the flesh.

Cheng quickly snapped out of it. "Are you okay, your highness?"

"Yes...I'm fine." she replied while still in shock.

He put her down so she can stand on her feet.

"Thank you." she said shyly.

"What happened? Why did you jump?" Alex asked.

"Celina!" shouted a voice from a distance. King Liu was running towards them.

"Celina!" He hugged her tightly. "Oh, thank heavens you are still alive! You scared me!"

"I'm sorry, your highness." she replied. "I wasn't thinking right."

Then Liu looked at Cheng. "You've saved her life."

"I just happened to be on the way..."

"I do not know how to thank you. You have done so much for us already. But rest assured, you will be handsomely compensated¹⁶ for your service." Then he put his arm around Celina's shoulder. "You must be tired. Come on, let us forget what happened and get some rest."

Alex just watched stupidly as they walked away. What the hell just happened? Why did she try to commit suicide?

That night was a long night for Celina Liu. She did not get any sleep. She pretended to fall asleep and when she knew Liu Bei was asleep, she got up and went to the window. Thoughts of suicide occurred again, but this time, thankfully, it's not as strong. Celina kept on thinking about a certain man who saved her life. It's strange how he just appeared out of nowhere both times and caught her to prevent her falling to death. What could this mean? She had a sudden urge to go visit him. But she will have to wait until tomorrow.

The very next morning, the king was sitting in his throne, talking with his advisors about political and military matters. But the whole time, Liu Bei was thinking about what he consumed last night. It was so delicious that he could taste it in his sleep. How can anyone resist such a delicious beverage? In fact, he could not imagine drinking anything else but the spice. Nothing even comes close to it.

"Your highness?" Shu Tai inquired.

"Huh? Oh yes." said Liu, snapping out of his dream-like trance. "Can you repeat the question?"

The advisors gave each other a quick glance.

"Like I was saying, we need to take affirmative action to take out the demons." Tai said. "Even though Duke Xiang is dead, his followers are well alive, and they could be anywhere in the kingdom."

"Yes...demons are crafty creatures...they can take the shape of a human." said Liu Bei. "They're twisted and vile (卑鄙) creatures."

"And here lies the problem. How can we tell if someone is human or demon?" asked Lord Yu.

"There must be a way to distinguish them." said another eunuch.

"Not everyone will be as out coming as the duke. They like to stay hidden." said Lord Yu.

"We should put Sir Cheng in charge of the demon extermination campaign." Tai suggested.

"Indeed, that is why we gave him the title Demon Slayer." said another old advisor.

Everyone had their own suggestions, and Liu pretended to pay attention as he continued to think about the spice.

¹⁶ Idiom meaning well compensated or well rewarded

Celina was excited and nervous as she walked over to Alex's building. She did not know why she was nervous. Logically she should not be nervous, and she hated this feeling. Part of her wants to turn back and leave but her feet continued to move forward, walking and walking.

There was some rustling in the trees and she turned around. "Who's there? I know you're watching me. Show yourself!"

Shen and Sui jumped out of the trees and landed in a crouch.

"Who are you?" she asked in a hostile tone.

"Please accept our apologies, your highness." The masked men stood up. "We did were not spying on you. We are here to watch over Alex Cheng."

"Mister Cheng?" said Celina. "Who are you and how did you get into this place?" she demanded.

Shen and Sui gave each other a quick glance. Sui proceeded to take out the imperial seal. "We are not the bad guys. I am Sui Long, and this is Shen Long. We are Sir Cheng's bodyguards."

"Oh, you are the Demon Slayer's friends."

"We do not like to reveal ourselves. We keep our master safe from a distance, so please forgive us if we scared you."

Now that Celina thought about it, she recognized them from the battle. "You two joined forces with Shu Tai and helped him raid the palace, correct? Any friend of the Demon Slayer is a friend of mine. I am sorry for the misunderstanding."

"See you later." The masked men jumped into the trees.

Setting that little interruption aside, Celina continued to enter the premises. The courtyard was merely an open space with walls. Pots of plants lined up against the decorated walls. To train with a weapon requires an open space, and this is perfect for Cheng. Instead of wearing his usual Demon Slayer attire, he was wearing plain training clothes – a short sleeved shirt and sweat pants.

Celina wanted to speak to him, about what she knew not. But as she watched him train, she decided to hide behind the wall and observe. She felt guilty spying on him, but she could not bring herself to greet him for an illogical reason. It just did not feel right.

Whoosh! Alex swings his blade against the air, doing a maneuver taught by his master. *Whoosh, whoosh.* Master Genzo once said that one must use circular movements to be effective. Straight and rigid motions will not do. The world itself is a **circle**, and circles are the natural shape of life. Circular motions are fluid and repetitive. *Whoosh.* Alex was sweating in the heat of the sun, but he did not mind, for he actually enjoyed this training.

Amazing, Celina thought. Is this what he does on his free time? He must be a dedicated swordsman. Thinking about what happened last night, she wanted to thank him, but she remained motionless. While distracted by his visual impressiveness, Celina accidentally knocked a pot over and she gasped. Alex immediately turned around. Celina panicked and ran away, and Alex did not see her face. He ran to the entrance to see who it was, but she was already gone.

He only caught a glimpse of the spy. It was a woman in a white dress. He had an idea of who it was...could it be the concubine? No, he justified to himself. Why would she be spying on him? It must have been a servant or palace lady.

The king was having his meal. It was very rich food prepared by the best chefs in the land. The seafood was steaming and smelled really good. The dim sum was one of a

kind. Any man would kill himself ten times over to even have a chance to become a king and have meals like this everyday. But Liu Bei did not appreciate any of this food.

He took a bite of a bun and spit it out. "Disgusting!" In frustration, he swept a bunch of dishes off the table. Crash!

The servants, standing on the side, shivered (顫抖) nervously.

"That was bad!" said Liu. "Absolutely disgusting. Isn't there anything worth eating in this kingdom?"

The chef bowed nervously. "But sire, we did our best. We even tested the taste of the food."

"I do not care if you think it is good. It does not taste good to my tongue!"

"H-Hai...Please forgive us. We will make some more."

"There is no need." said Liu, giving up. "I am not hungry." He walked away.

Frustrated with his meal, he decided to go up the tower to see his concubine. Ever since he tasted the spice, nothing comes even close to it. In fact, his taste buds cannot handle anything but the spice.

On the roof of the tower, Celina was having tea by herself.

"What are you doing here by yourself?" Liu inquired.

"I was just enjoying the beautiful night sky." she replied.

"You have **no appetite**? I cannot eat either. Ever since I had the spice, I-

"You've been talking about the spice over and over again. I am tired of hearing about it."

"But you don't understand, it is extremely good!"

"Yes, I know." she said, frustrated. "The spice is important. More important than I am. You spend more time talking about the spice than you do talking to me."

"Celina, darling, I'm sorry. It's just that I've been busy lately." He touched her hand, and she withdrew. "You've been avoiding me lately. Is there something on your mind?"

There was a long silence.

"You are my concubine for mercy's sake. I gave you the best lifestyle any woman can ever want. You have the best food, the best clothing, and more gold than you can ever spend in your lifetime. Yet you are not happy. What am I doing wrong?"

Celina stood up and walked to the edge. "It's nothing you would understand! You don't know how I feel!"

"Darling." he said. He did not want to raise his voice, lest she should repeat her suicide act from the other day.

"I am not in the mood to talk. I just want to be left alone."

King Liu sighed. Just now Alex came in and bowed. "Sire...oh, I am sorry. I will call you when you are ready."

"No, Cheng, stay." said Liu. "Do you have something to report to me?"

"Ummm, yes. Chou has reported that he and his group are on their way to the Tairanian Mountains. Their journey will take a week at most."

"Very well. At last, I can have more of the spice."

"See?" said Celina, turning around to face them. "The spice is all you ever care about!"

"But darling, I care about you the most." Liu even extended his arms as he spoke.

"Why don't you just marry the spice?" she said.

Alex sensed some tension between the two, and he did not want to stay around. "Well, I better go."

"Hold on Cheng," said Liu. "I just don't understand her anymore. I tried so hard, yet she will not listen. You try to talk some sense into her. Maybe she will listen to someone who is not me." With that said, he stood up and left.

This certainly is an awkward moment, for Alex knew not what to say. "Uhhh, forgive my nosiness, but are you two having a fight?"

There was no answer coming from her, she was still looking at the sky with her back facing him. Alex just sat down and poured himself tea. "Do you want some tea?"

"No thank you. Why are you still here?" she asked. He was quite surprised by her cold attitude because she usually isn't like this.

"Because the king ordered me to," he responded.

"In that case, I order you to leave. We have nothing to discuss."

"Nothing to discuss?" Alex repeated. "Then why did you come to my quarters to spy on me this morning?"

A look of surprise came over her face and she glanced at him briefly and then turned away to face the window again. Not wanting to admit it, she did not respond.

And as the old saying goes, silence means consent¹⁷. "Was there something you wanted to say to me, but you did not?"

"No..."

"If there is something bothering you, it is better if you let it out. Liu Bei is your husband..."

"It is not something you would understand, Cheng."

"Why don't you try? Sometimes it is better to let it out."

She turned around. "How can you understand how I feel!? When Duke Xiang took control of the palace, I was used as a human negotiating tool! I was treated worst than a slave! How could you understand my humiliation!?" Realizing she acted on a whim, she blushed. "Sorry."

Cheng stood up without even tasting his tea. "Maybe I do not know. But I had a tough life. I did not grow up in a rich place like this. My sister left me when I was little. Shortly afterwards, I was separated from my parents...when I was still a child...a swordsman tried to assassinate me. He slashed my arm, and that scar was on me for the next ten years, and every time I lifted something heavy, I felt pain. I could never forget that night..." he said, having a flashback. "It was stormy night. The assassin injured me and left me to die. Nobody was there for me when I needed them."

You're the concubine of the Shen Kingdom. Any woman would die ten times over just to be in your place. Your lifestyle is one that is desired by everybody. If you really want to commit suicide, I won't stop you. But before you think that life is not worth living, just think about how there are people who are much, much worse off than you." With that said, Alex left the tower.

Celina pretended not to listen, but she heard every word of wisdom loud and clear. His little speech made her look at things differently.

Chou and his appointed team of wilderness experts set off to the Tairanian Mountains in the north. They carried large bags of supplies and equipment, and although they were heavy, they were necessary if they were to survive in the wilderness.

The pig-tailed man with the hat knelt in front of Liu Zhang and his companion Ragnarok.

¹⁷ Silence means consent - proverb - silence means you admit that what the other person says is true

"Tao, you are a man of excellent skill, particularly with the sword. That is why I am assigning you the task of eliminating Alex Cheng, the Demon Slayer." said Ragnarok.

"As you wish." Tao replied.

"That is not necessary." said Zhang. "I already have something in store for him. He drank the spice, just like the king did. The spice is not only addictive, but it is poisonous. But they do not know that. The spice will be the only thing he will be thinking about. Soon, he will be driven mad by the mere desire to have the spice. And I will be the only to have it."

Ragnarok was impressed. "Does that mean..."

"Yes." Zhang replied. "The Demon Slayer will want the spice so badly that he will do anything just to obtain it. That is how it works. And I will be able to control him and the king. My plan is already set in motion."

"Very well." said Ragnarok.

"I have some urgent business to do." Zhang left the room.

"I want you to kill Cheng as soon as possible." said Ragnarok.

Tao looked up in surprise. "But Lord Zhang just said-"

"I am the one who hired you and I am the one who pays you." Ragnarok said, interrupting him. "I serve Lord Zhang, but you serve me, and that means you follow only my orders, understood?"

"Yes, my lord." Tao replied. "Do not worry, I will do a thorough job and clean up the body after I eliminate him."

"Good. The Demon Slayer is a threat to our plans. Lord Zhang wants to control him, but I see no reason to keep him alive."

Whoosh! Alex swings the Fire Sword around. He was able to swing it naturally as if it weighted nothing. He noticed that his sword craft is becoming better, but today he is distracted. Each time he swings his blade, he was thinking about the spice. He was sweating, tired, and thirsty, too thirsty to concentrate on his training. But it is not water that he desires...his tongue longs for only one thing...

四: The Purple Dragon. The Spice that is Worse than Death

<< Prev Chapter Next Chapter >>

[\[B\]](#) [\[C\]](#) Contents

The expedition group (探險隊), led by Chou, traveled through the forest in hopes of finding the spice again. Chou was just an ordinary traveler who wanted to see what life was like outside of town. But what he discovered on his journey can change his life forever. In pursuit of a rare herb that grows only on the Tairanian Mountains, he traveled for days alone, in hopes of finding this herb. At first he thought it was merely a fabled myth (傳說中嘅神話), but the hope that it is real kept him going, and at last, he found what he was looking for.

"Astounding." said Liu Bei. "The spice was good...too good. It left a taste in my mouth and I must have more of it. You remember the location of the herbs, do you not?"

"Yes, sire."

"Excellent." Liu snapped his fingers and two servants brought a treasure box to the center of the room, placing it in front of Chou. Zhang opened the box, and Chou's eyes shined as he stared at the gold coins. He has never seen this much money in his

life. "This will be your compensation if you find me more of the herbs. This spice...is fitting for the meal of kings. I will send my men to help you bring the spice. If this compensation is not enough, let me know. Do you accept the offer?"

Chou folded his hands. "I humbly accept, sire. This reward is more than enough. Thank you!"

That was just days ago, and since then, he has been in the forest, looking for the same path he took last time to the mountain. This time, however, he has ten men with me, all whom are experts of the wild. Chou had better not make any blunders (失誤); otherwise he will have to deal with ten angry men and a really angry king. Luckily for him, he had the path written in his book and in his memory as well.

"How much longer until we get to the herbs?" asked one of the impatient men.

"We are almost there." Chou said confidently. "Please have some patience. You have no idea how long it took me to find the path the first time. But I am sure we are on the right path."

"I hope so." replied the guard. "We have been here for six days straight."

Chou took a moment to admire the scenery. Indeed, looking at the land from above is a different perspective altogether. The trees and rocks below seem so small and insignificant...just like the problems of the world. There was a bird on his shoulder the entire time. He put his finger next to the bird, and it proceeded to step on his finger. Chou wrapped a piece of paper around the bird's leg. "Now, fly back to Yi Ling and deliver this message to the king."

The bird understood its command and flew away.

Watching the group from far away was Ekin and Rubble, the other two out of three assassins hired by Ragnarok. "Those fools, they are leading us straight to the herbs."

Chou and his group have to walk uphill, one of the biggest challenges of the journey. They have to take it slowly and carefully, lest they should fall down and risk getting hurt.

"Man, I can't believe I was assigned to this job. It just isn't my day." said one of the guards, wiping his sweaty forehead. He stared at the sweltering (悶熱的) sun. Being in the sun is bad enough, but it is especially rough for these men who have to carry heavy weapons and wearing armor. It only added to their hardship.

Chou did not mind the hardships, because all these struggles are just the stepping stones for his reward at the end of the journey. The king promised him all the money he ever wanted, and that equates to fame, fortune, and women. Indeed, he could picture it clearly in his mind. He shall be known as the man who discovered the most delicious spice in the world. People will be talking about him and women will be more than willing to sleep with him. His life will be all set once he brings the herbs back.

"Man you're lucky, Chou." said the same guard. "You're getting compensated for this, whereas we soldiers do not get a single tael extra."

"Sure you do." replied Chou. "You palace guards are paid well, are you not?"

"We get paid to fight, but this is hell. What is the big deal about this herb anyway? I understand it is rare, but is it worth sending ten men to a trip...and vast amounts of gold?"

"This is no ordinary herb. It is extremely rare...in fact, it is the rarest one in the world. I have read books on this kind of plant. When you extract its contents and turn it into an ingredient...the spice can add flavor to any kind of food or beverage, and make it taste so good that the human taste buds desire more of it. All this time I thought it was just a legend. One day, I decided to find out if this herb really exists. And indeed it does, and I immediately presented this to the king."

"Tell me about it!" said the guard. "The king looked like he was obsessed with the spice. He couldn't have enough of it."

"Yes, it is very addictive." said Chou. "Legend has it that a long, long time ago, during the early Han Dynasty, a traveler discovered the herb and extracted a spice that enhanced the taste of food. When he tasted it he thought it was the most delicious thing he ever tasted, too good to keep to himself. He immediately presented it to the king. The king, after tasting it, became obsessed with it. He wanted more and more of the spice. In fact, he liked it so much that he could eat or drink anything else. He brought the best chefs in the world to cook for him, but he could not eat anything they made him. The traveler disappeared, and the location of the herb was unknown. The king tried to find the traveler but failed to do so. He became mad from not having the spice and shunned everyone around him and eventually committed suicide."

"Wow..." said another guard, "doesn't that make the spice dangerous...like a drug?"

"Non-sense." Chou replied. "It is just a silly old legend. Even though it is addictive, it is no drug...it is purely natural."

Alex Cheng was in his courtyard, ready to train. He held his sword horizontally at his imaginary enemy...but his hand was shaking and so did his sword. He had not eaten anything the night before, or the entire day for that matter, because he did not want anything to enter his mouth other than the spice. Alex had never wanted something so badly before in his life. He wanted the spice more badly than he wanted to see his sister. Thoughts of the spice consumed his mind, and he could not focus on his training, and he let himself fall down on his knees.

His sword fell to the floor. *Pling!* Alex breathed hard and took a moment to gather his thoughts. (Why must I need the spice? I am just fine without it...no I must have it. Only one cup, one cup is all I need and I will be fine.)

Before long, Chou and the group found the herbs on the mountain plains. He was delighted to see the fields of plants again. "Could this be it?" he asked himself, and ran to them. He bent down to examine them. "Yes, this is it! We made it!"

"Well, it's about time." said Guard A. "Let's collect them and go home."

The men proceeded to take out their swords to cut the plants, and bags to contain them.

Suddenly, they heard laughter from the top of the hill. "Ha ha ha ha ha!" Two silhouetted figures were standing at the top of the cliff. Rubble, the white-bearded old man, is known as the **Ice Hunter**. His nickname stems from his reputation of being an unmatched rival during the war between the two kingdoms. Much fighting was fought during the winter time, and the Ice Hunter killed many and vanished without a trace, leaving a trail of red snow. Wearing a thick coat, black pants, boots, and a wolf's skin as a scarf, he is a true hunter of the snow. Perhaps the only thing that isn't cold about him is his hot-blooded desire to kill.

Ekin, on the other hand, dresses casually, and his distinguishable (區分) features include his spiky, silver hair and fierce eyes that can intimidate any opponent. Unlike Rubble, he is calm and calculated, and only speaks when necessary, the combinations of what makes a deadly assassin.

"Who are they?!" asked Guard B.

"Troublemakers." said Guard A.

All ten guards drew their swords. "Who the hell are you? Identify yourself!"

"Heh. We don't identify ourselves to the dead!" said Rubble.

"What did you say?" said Guard A.

The soldiers charged forward recklessly, thinking they have an advantage in numbers. Ekin and Rubble ran down the hill and drew their weapons. *Schling! Slash!* Swipe. Slish. Three guards were already killed.

Chou panicked and ran for it. Rubble saw him and jumped down to chase him. Doosh.

Ekin faced the other guards. He was outnumbered, but it is not a scenario he is unfamiliar with. *Slash!* His movements were swift and efficient, and they could hardly be seen by an ordinary eye. *Slash!* Soldiers fell in an instant.

Chou ran for his life and he tripped over a rock. He crawled backwards as Rubble approached. "No, no, wait! I am just an ordinary peasant! Please spare me!"

"That does not matter. We were ordered to kill every single one in the expedition." said Rubble. "Oh, I like your little story about the spice."

Chou was shocked. How long has he been watched? And from where? He was able to hear his story?

"The Han king eventually went mad and committed suicide, and his kingdom fell apart. And do you know what happened to the traveler who found the spice? He was murdered by assassins." said Rubble.

"No!! No!" Chou cried for his dear life.

"Do not blame me, but blame fate." **Slash!**

Blood splattered all over the purple plants.

Li once again finds herself sitting on a random rooftop, staring into blankness. She is the type of girl who cannot settle down and stay in one place too long. It is a habit developed because she has been on the run her whole life. The only true home she had was with Alex and her parents, but that was a lifetime ago. The only other home she had was the Temple of Enlightenment. But that is all in the past, and even though she was thinking about them, she brushed her memories aside. No matter where I am, I am alone in the world.

Shen Long showed up, and she sensed him before he was even close to her. "What are you doing here?" Li asked.

"Is it a sin to be worried about you?" Shen asked.

"I said I will be fine. I am not some kid who needs babysitting." said Li. "My brother, on the other hand, needs bodyguards. He isn't as experienced as we are."

"So you **do** care about him. I'm relieved." said Shen.

"I told you, this is between me and him. It is none of your business."

"You are still stubborn as ever, Fo Long." Shen Long replied. "Take my advice, treasure your family because they are irreplaceable. I myself have a sister, and I know what it is like to be separated from her. Siblings were meant to be together."

"I have already heard that story before." Li replied. "I just want to be left alone, if you don't mind."

"Very well. I will not disturb you any further." Shen Long said, and he jumped away.

[B] Title Contents

The other masked man, Sui Long, was hiding somewhere near Alex. He heard some loud sounds, and curious, he went inside to see what was happening. Upon entering the house, he was surprised to see the place was a mess. Chairs and tables were flipped over, and pages were ripped from books. Did a thief break in?

Sui entered the bedroom and once again found it to be a mess. "Cheng?"

He heard a sound from another room and he entered the kitchen and saw Alex rummaging through pots and pans, throwing them away. "Cheng? What is the matter?"

"I must find it...I must find it..." Cheng said like a madman. His eyes were different today. He was no longer the calm, logical person Sui knew him as, but rather, as someone who lost his mind.

"Find what? What are you searching for?" Sui asked.

"Isn't that obvious?" Alex yelled. "I need the spice! You have it, don't you?"

"The spice?"

"You have it...give it to me!" Alex approached him in a threatening manner. He seemed like he had not slept or eaten in days.

"I don't know what you're talking about.

Alex grabbed him by the collar. "Stop lying!" He pushed Sui against the wall. "I know you're hiding it from me. Give me the spice now!"

"Calm down!" Sui Long pushed him away and stepped away from the kitchen. Alex ran at him and grabbed him, and they both fell. Sui kicked him off and got up. Alex groaned and charged at him. Sui jabbed him in the stomach, paralyzing him and leaving him unconscious.

Shen came in. "Why did you do that?"

"I had no choice." Sui replied. "He attacked me...for reasons unknown."

Shen was shocked to hear this, and he just stared at the unconscious person. Can this be true?

They settled Alex on his bed and tucked him under the blanket. He moaned in his sleep. Sui put a wet cloth over his forehead. "He is sweating heavily."

"Why is he acting as such?" asked Shen. "Explain what happened back there."

"I am not clear myself. He was looking for something in the kitchen, and when he saw me, he said that I have it, and then he attacked me." said Sui.

"What was he looking for?" asked Shen.

"He said he needed the spice." Sui replied.

"The spice?" Shen repeated.

"Do you know of it?" Sui asked.

"Several days ago a traveler presented King Liu with something called the spice. It must be the cause of Alex's strange behavior. I know he does not go mad and attack his friends for no reason." said Shen Long. "We must get to the bottom of this."

Today, Celina was feeling extra lively for some reason. She was no longer depressed. Carrying a basket of food, she walked along the complex happily like a ray of sunshine. She did not have this feeling for a long time, and she is going to visit a certain someone to say thank you.

"...Any woman would die ten times over just to be in your place. Your lifestyle is one that is desired by everybody. If you really want to commit suicide, I won't stop you. But before you think that life is not worth living, just think about how there are people who are much, much worse off than you."

His words are indeed full of wisdom, and it made her think in a different way. Even though she did not want to listen, she heard everything. In any case, she hopes that Alex is hungry.

Knock knock. The masked men became alert. Shen was getting ready to pull out his sword. Sui went to the door cautiously. "Who is it?"

"It is I, Lady Celina."

"Lady Celina?"

"Yes. May I come in?" she inquired.

The masked men gave each other a look. "Sorry, your highness, but this is an inconvenient time. Cheng is uhh, not feeling well."

"He is sick?" Celina repeated, a little disappointed. "But he was healthy and training vigorously a few days ago."

"Umm, he caught a rare disease. It is not convenient for him to have visitors." replied Sui Long.

"Very well, I shall try another time." She turned around and left. But then something crossed her mind. Rare disease? How can he catch a rare disease in the imperial complex? It is the cleanest and healthiest place in the entire kingdom. How can he be sick when the day before he was just fine? Something was not right. Celina turned back and knocked again.

"I do not mean to bother you, but I used to study medicine. I can help you with Cheng's disease. All I need is a bit of time, I promise I will not be a burden."

Sui spoke through the door. "We appreciate your kindness, your highness. But it is not something that is worthy of your concern. We have it handled."

She frowned. "What disease can he possibly have that will keep him in bed? I order you to let me in."

"If you insist..." said Sui. Even they cannot refuse orders from the imperial concubine. He opened the door and let her in. They led her into the bedroom.

Celina put down the basket and went to see the unconscious Alex. She touched his forehead. Indeed, he does not look well. "His temperature seems fine. I don't see any swelling or other signs of sickness. What kind of disease does he have?"

"Honestly, we do not know." said Shen.

Celina took his hand and checked his pulse. "There are signs of exhaustion. He has not eaten or drank anything. There are no signs of a disease or fever. What exactly happened to him?"

Alex moaned in his sleep. "Ugh..."

"Cheng? Do you hear me? Cheng?" Celina said.

"Ugh..." He opened his eyes.

"He's awake!" said Celina. "Are you okay?"

"I must have it..." he whispered weakly.

"What did you say? I don't understand." She put her ear close to his mouth.

"I must have...the spice..." He suddenly sprang up and grabbed her neck, to everyone's surprise. They fell off the bed onto the floor, and he was strangling her. She tried to get his hands off but it was no use. Shen and Sui tried to pull him off, but he was too strong. Inhumanely strong.

"Aaaaaagh..." Celina groaned as her neck was being crushed.

Whack! Shen did a karate chop on Alex's neck, and that finally made him fall unconscious again.

Celina coughed and grabbed her neck in pain. Sui helped her stand up and he bowed. Kuff kuff kuff!

"Please forgive him, your highness. He did not mean to do it..."

Kuff kuff. "Why did he do that?"

"We have no idea. He tried to attack me earlier. Somehow he has become illogical and violent."

"We have no choice but to restrain him." Shen added.

The masked men proceeded to put Alex on a chair and tie him up. Celina Ce was still shocked over the whole ordeal. Here she was, hoping to thank him for saving her life, yet just now, he tried to strangle her to death. That look he had in his eyes, they were not the eyes of Alex Cheng. They were the eyes of an insane man. She feels bad

that he has to be tied up like a criminal, but it is all for the best. "What are we going to do with him?" she asked.

"Our first step is to find out what is wrong with him and find a cure."

"He mentioned the spice." said Sui.

"The spice. Yes of course." Celina was recalling the night of the banquet. "A peasant named Chou presented the spice to the king. It is the very same spice which Alex drank."

"Indeed, the spice is the cause of all this. I have heard about it before, and it is known by a different name. It is called the Purple Dragon." said Shen Long.

"Purple Dragon?" Celina repeated stupidly.

"Please, explain." Sui Long implored (懇求).

"The spice is a herb that exists only in the **Tairanian Mountains**. Rumor has it that the spice that is extracted from the herb can make any food in the world taste good. But no one knows if it exists and no one has ever found it until recently. According to the legend, an old king drank the spice and he became instantly infatuated with it, and he could eat nothing but the spice. He wanted more and more, and when he did not have it, he was thinking of it. He gave up everything to obtain the spice, his wealth, fortune, and power. He became corrupt and eventually became mad and killed himself."

"What a tragic tale. Could it be affecting Cheng the same way?" asked Celina.

"When I first found him, he was in the kitchen frantically looking for something. He said 'I must have it.' He even accused me of having it and attacked me. This must be the work of the Purple Dragon."

"Now that I think about it, the king has been acting the same way. He would talk about the spice non-stop and let no one speak ill of it." said Celina.

"So our king is infected as well." said Shen. "If we leave these two alone, then they will surely go mad and hurt themselves and other people. It is named the **Purple Dragon** because of its deadliness. The victim does not realize the fact that he is addicted to it until it is too late. All it takes is one sip, one bite and it is over. The poison will spread throughout his body and make him weak and weary. At the same time, he will be mentally consumed by the thought of the spice, and he will want more and more. It will never be enough."

"This is more serious than I thought. We need to find a cure as soon as possible."

Celina suddenly thought of something. "I have access to the royal library. You may be able to find your answer there."

"We will go immediately. Forgive us for asking but can you stay here and watch over our foolish friend?" Sui asked.

"You can count on me." She had nothing to do all day and this was her chance to help Cheng out.

"This will be difficult for you but never release him and do not give him the spice. Otherwise it will all be for nothing. No matter how much he threatens you or begs you, ignore him at all costs."

Celina nodded and the two masked men went on their way to the library.

Title Contents

The masked men immediately went to the library, which was bigger than they thought. The Liu family indeed had a wealth of knowledge which they kept to themselves. They went through hundreds of books but none of them had any reference to the Purple Dragon. They are weary and tired after hours of searching, but search on they must for the sake of Cheng's sanity.

Back in the house, Celina put a wet cloth on Cheng's head. He moaned slightly. He was still unconscious and unaware of what he has done so far. But one thing was for sure on his mind...the spice.

Flip flip flip. Shen searched the medical section frantically (瘋狂) for an answer.

"Anything yet?" Sui asked.

"Nothing." replied Shen.

"To search the entire library will take four days...that is if we do not eat or sleep."

"There has to be something in here. The Liu people have so much knowledge, I am sure they have something on the Purple Dragon." He went on to pick up a dusty old book. He patted the dust of it and opened it to the first page, revealing a picture of a plant. "What is this? Can this be it?"

Indeed it was. They read page after page carefully, not leaving out a single detail.

Alex was sitting on a chair, his wrists bound by ropes behind the chair's back.

His head was facing down and one could not tell if he was conscious or not.

Celina was the only one watching him. She put a wet cloth in a bowl of water and wiped his forehead, and he made a faint noise. She started to wipe the sweat off his cheek and neck. He was clearly awake, although not completely. He was making noises of pain and panting for breath.

Watching him suffer like this, Celina truly felt bad for him. Women have a motherly nature to them and she is no different. She felt a certain way about Alex whenever she is around him...although still unsure of her feelings, she knows she wants to help Alex and she cares about his well being. As she wiped his sweat she had a flashback.

"Don't worry." Cheng said. "I'll take care of that scoundrel. I won't let anything happen to you."

She was dumbfounded and did not say anything. But his words were strong and confident and she believed him. She may have doubted him earlier, but now Celina is certain that he is on her side. And also, he came out of nowhere and saved her from certain doom, it must be fate for them to have met.

Suddenly, he pulled her into him and kissed her lips. This move caught her by complete surprise. Although Celina did not like being touched by men, she could not bring herself to fight back. Something about him was different...she could feel all his emotions through his lips, full of passion, full of youth, and also, provides a sense of safety and security.

No matter how brief it was, that was the only time she has ever felt loved and the only time she felt safe in another man's arms. While staring at his face, she wondered if he held her like he did that time, would she feel safe? She could not help but stare at his lips and wonder...then she brushed that thought aside. She put down the wet cloth and walked towards the door.

"Lady Ce." he called out.

Celina turned around.

"I just need another sip of it. Just one more. I know you have access to it. The king has plenty of it, you can ask him."

She turned her head. "Shen Long and Sui Long will be here with an antidote, I know it. Just be patient."

"I can't wait any longer! Just give me one more taste, please!" He sounded pretty desperate.

"If you have one more taste you'll never recover. Just listen to me--"

"Please! Just one drop!"

"Alex..."

"Have you ever wanted something so badly...that you'd be willing to do anything for it? You know it's wrong but you must have it anyways. You want it so bad that your body aches... and you're willing to sacrifice everything...just for one more chance..."

Celina was staring at the floor and her eyes started to shake. His words hit her deeply and she was dumbfounded, as if the words themselves pierced her soul. All Lady Ce ever wanted was freedom, the freedom to love and be loved, something she wanted so bad that her body aches. It's as if Alex understands exactly what she was feeling.

However, Alex's bodyguards warned her it will not be easy and she might become weak hearted. She must resist his words, no matter how hard it is to watch him suffer. "Yes, I do. More than you think. But you have to trust me, we are doing this for your own good." She left the room, shutting the door behind her. ¹⁸

The door slammed again and they surprised Celina for a second. "Do you have it?"

"Yes!" Sui announced proudly, as he was holding a bowl with a cover in it. "He medicine is made of natural ingredients that are designed to counter the effects of the spice. All he has to do is drink it."

Cheng just woke up. "Huh? What happened? Why am I strapped to this chair?"

"Cheng? Are you feeling alright?" Celina asked.

"Set me free at once. Why are you doing this to me?"

"Please calm down." Said Celina.

"Shut up you woman! Let me out now! I must have the spice!"

"We have no choice." Shen grabbed his head and pulled down his chin.

"Hey what are you doing? Stop this! Stop it!"

Sui shoved the bowl into his mouth, forcing him to drink it. No matter how much he resisted, it did not matter. The liquid went into his mouth and down his throat Celina was shocked as she watched them force the medicine into him.

Gulp gulp gulp Alex coughed out some of the medicine, but most of it went down his throat. "Aagh! Disgusting! You are feeding me poison! You blasted idiots!" He felt a sudden pain in his stomach, and soon the pain spread all over his body. "Aaagh! What have you done to me?"

Celina asked, "What is happening to him?"

Shen said, "This is all part of the process to clean out the poison in his body. He will experience great pain. It is unfortunate, but he will have to endure it."

"AAAAH! AAAAH!"

Sui said, "It will take twelve hours for the antidote to completely remove the poison. Until then we can do nothing."

"Is it okay to leave him tied up like this?" asked Celina.

"Would you rather set him free so he can kill us?" Shen replied.

"AAAAAH! AAAAAH!" Alex struggled, turned his head left and right, up and down. He forced his arms up, hoping to break the ropes, but it was impossible.

"AAAAAAAH!"

The three left the room and they continue to hear Alex's sounds of agony and pain. Celina was still unsure of this process. "Will he really be alright?"

"We have followed the instructions precisely according to the book. The pain is part of the healing process. We have no choice but to wait until tomorrow." said Shen.

¹⁸ New scene added in 2020

Sui handed a bottle to Celina. "Please, take this to his highness. The sooner he gets the antidote the better."

"Thank you, Shen Long and Sui Long. Your kind deeds will be repaid, rest assured."

五: The Council of Heaven. Violent History of the Kingdom.

<< Prev Chapter Next Chapter >>

[\[B \]](#) [\[C \]](#) [Contents](#)

Celina presented the bowl of soup to her husband. Days ago, she would not speak to him nor eat anything, acting as if she is dead on the inside. But today she decided to make a difference and cure him. "Your highness...do you want soup? I made it myself." she said smiling.

"Soup? I want no soup unless if it has the spice." replied Liu Bei.

"But this is good for you. You must try it."

"No, I only want the spice. Chou and his men should be back from their expedition any time now. I must wait for their return."

"Please listen to me." said Celina desperately. "The spice is no good for you. You are young and healthy, yet you look ill and depressed. The spice is poisoning your body."

"Poison?" repeated Liu. "Don't be ridiculous, my dear wife. It was the most delicious thing I have ever tasted in my life. After the first taste, I cannot taste anything else but that."

"Please, just have one taste of this. Do it for me."

He just looked at her and said nothing. Silence means consent, and she dipped the spoon into the soup and put it into his mouth. The second the soup touched his tongue he spat it out and smacked the bowl off her hand, and she gasped. The bowl cracked and the liquid spilled.

"Disgusting! How dare you feed me such garbage!"

The startled Celina took a step back. "But sire!"

"But nothing!" the king said angrily. "I do not want to be disturbed." He walked out of the room.

The concubine, deeply hurt and in despair, went back to her room and cried on her desk. Their relationship is getting worse. If only he would drink the soup, it will all be better. Looking out the window, she wondered how Alex was doing.

Alex continued screaming in agony in his kitchen. "AAAAAAH!! AHHHHHHH!" No matter how much he struggled, the ropes would not budge.

When morning came, the birds were already awake, singing as the sun came across the horizon. Sui Long was sitting on the wall, waiting for the night to pass. "It will take twelve hours for the antidote to completely remove the poison. Until then we can do nothing."

Alex was screaming all night and eventually he grew tired and fell unconscious. He woke up just as the sun rose to the skyline. Strangely, he felt weak as if he was laboring (勞動) all night. Yet, even stranger is the fact that he is bound to a chair. His wrists and ankles legs were tied up to prevent him from moving. How did this happen? Is he being kidnapped in his own home?

No, that cannot be. He had to calm down and recollect his thoughts. Within seconds, he remembered most of what happened yesterday. The spice...he wanted the spice so badly that he did not remember ever wanting one thing so badly to lose control of himself and attack his friends. His mind grew weary and agitated (激動) from the lack of it. Worst yet, he tried to strangle the concubine. That act alone is punishable by death. But right now, he no longer desired the spice. One can say he is "sober" from the spice. And he will never, ever touch it again.

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

"Who are you? How did you get in here?" Alex demanded to know. These are questions anyone would have asked if they were in his shoes¹⁹.

"I have been sent here to assassinate you." Tao replied. "I thought it was going to be hard...but this is easier than taking candy from a baby²⁰." He pointed his sword at Alex's forehead.

There was nothing the hero could do, and as he waited for his doom, the door burst open and a man in a straw hat charged forward. Tao jumped away. Sui Long slashed and Tao blocked. *Clang! Cling!* They fought in the confined space they were in.

Meanwhile, Alex saw a knife at the table, and this was his chance to be set free. But the table was a few meters away, and it would be difficult for him to move in his position. Using his whole body, he moved himself and the chair by nudging forward. *Clang! Clang!* He moved quickly and desperately, for the killer could come back any second. Finally, he made it to the table and grabbed the knife and cut himself free. He untied the ropes on his legs.

Sui kicked a table forward, and Tao cut it in half with his sword. *Crack!* Sui charged forward and made an aggressive attack, knocking Tao's sword away. Sui then slashed, and a sword appeared from Tao's sleeve, and he blocked the attack. *Clang!* Sui was surprised by this, and Tao kicked him, knocking him onto a table, breaking it in the process.

Tao then stared at Alex, who was looking at the Fire Sword on the other table. Tao saw his eyes and knew what he was thinking. Both of them ran to the discarded sword, Alex grabbed it and was about to pull it out, but Tao grabbed it and struck Alex's chest with his palm. Wham!

Alex defended himself with one hand, holding onto the Fire Sword with the other. Wham! Wham! His quick opponent gave him no chance to draw his weapon. Whack!

Alex was knocked through the door, and ended up outside of his house. He stood up and Tao kicked him in the chest, knocking him down. Tao's hidden sword appeared from the bottom of his sleeve and he pointed it at the fallen Alex. Suddenly, a dagger came at him and Tao broke it. Whish!

Shen Long leaped down and charged at him. Alex quickly got up and ran away as Tao blocked Shen's attack. *Clang!*

After recovering from his fall, Sui Long came out of the building to join the fight.

Cling! Clang Tao jumped back to a safe distance. Alex was standing behind the two masked men, clutching his sword to his chest. (Could these two be the War God's

¹⁹ In his shoes - idiom meaning in his situation

²⁰ Taking candy from a baby - idiom meaning extremely easy

other students?) Whoever they are, they are obstacles to his plan, and he decided that he cannot fight two skilled fighters at once.

"Identify yourself! Why are you after the Demon Slayer?" Sui Long demanded.

"That is for me to know and you to find out!" Tao took out a smoke bomb from his inside his vest and threw it on the floor. Poof! Everyone winced.

Sui coughed like hell. "Damn him! I will go after him." He jumped after Tao.

Shen went to check Alex. "Are you alright?"

"I would have been dead if you showed up one second later. Even though you tied me up...I guess I owe you one."

Doosh doosh. Tao ran along the rooftops of the imperial complex. Sui was not far behind, his speed is not lacking in any way, for he is used to running through trees in the forest. Doosh doosh.

Tao jumped off and landed on the ground. He saw some people up ahead and ran to them. Two guys holding fans were talking, and Tao ran between them, pushing them.

"Ugh! How rude!" said one to the other. "Where does he learn his manners?"

Immediately afterwards Sui Long came and pushed them as he ran past them. This area was more populated than other areas. There were ladies and servants walking about. Tao went to the exit where there would be less people. A servant was walking by and Tao grabbed him and covered his mouth, dragged him into the bushes, and knocked him out. When Tao was done with him, he was the one dressed like a servant and he walked about, keeping his head low. Sui Long came to the area and saw no sign of his target. Tao went past him while keeping his head down, and smiled as he escaped.

King Liu and Lady Ce were sitting on the table next to the pond, having their breakfast. Alex came and kneeled. Celina was glad that he is back to normal. She was worried all night, for he was screaming in agony, but now he looks fine. She wanted to say something, but kept it to herself.

"Sire. Sorry to disturb your meal, but this is an urgent matter."

"What is the matter, Cheng?" asked Liu.

"I believe there is an intruder in the palace, sire."

"An intruder? Why, that is impossible. This is the most heavily guarded structure in the Kingdom of Shen." Liu replied proudly.

Alex did not agree. "Nonetheless, he was able to get in. He made an attempt on my life."

Celina grew concerned. "He tried to kill you? Are you okay?"

"I am fine, as you can see. My bodyguards protected me. But I'm afraid there is a loophole somewhere in the security. I ask that you investigate this matter as soon as possible, your highness." said Alex.

"Very well. I will send my men to find this intruder. Leave this matter to me." said the king.

Alex said his thanks and stood up and left. Like the concubine, he wanted to say something about yesterday, but bringing it up in front of the king is inappropriate. He suppressed the urge to speak and decided to save his thanks for another day.

Li Cheng the ninja girl walked about in some random street. Yi Ling is divided into five districts, as are most of the cities of the Shen Kingdom. The southern district is the poorest district out of the five, and it is commonly referred to as the ghettos. Most commoners stay away from the ghettos, but Li does not fear these places because she is armed and fearless.

She noticed that someone was following her. At times like these she is glad she is a master of stealth. To be a master stealth means to detect the enemy while avoiding being detected yourself. Li walked into an entrance and hid behind the wall. The man followed her slowly. Once he entered, a sword was pointed at his neck.

"Who are you and why are you following me?" asked Li. She gets to the point and wastes no time.

"Relax, it's me, **Vincent Chan.**"

"Vincent?" She sighed and put her sword away. "Why are you following me? You know I don't like being followed."

Vincent is a man who wears a white robe with sleeves going all the way to the ankles. The sleeves on the arms were extra large as is customary of the clothes during this era. He uses the sleeves to his advantage by concealing weapons. Unlike other swordsmen, he uses **two metal fans** as his primary weapon of choice and he is a user of the rare style called **Dance of the Fans**.

"I apologize. But there is something I must discuss with you, Miss Cheng."

"I have already told you that I do not want to join the Council of Heaven."

"But why not?" inquired Vincent. "You and I have the same enemy, which are the demons. The goal of the Council of Heaven is to exterminate the demons from this world. If you join us we will surely be one step closer to our goals."

"I don't need any help. I can survive with my own sword." Li replied.

"Well, I know you are good with the sword, Miss Cheng, but you are better off having comrades rather than fighting on your own. Your chances of winning will be higher."

"Sorry, I work alone." she said.

Suddenly, a gang of ten brutes appeared.

"Did you bring them here?" Li asked.

"No. Did you?" replied Vincent.

Hua, the boss of the brutes put one leg over a box. "Listen up you worms!" Everyone in the vicinity paid attention to him. This is the southern district, a ghetto area with a high population of homeless people. Everyone was lying on the ground; they were a mix of old people, men women and children. "I am the local warlord Hua and from now on this is my territory! All of ya'll now are my property and that includes what you have in your pockets!"

Li's eyes narrowed. ([Warlord my foot. He's just a local bully.](#))

Naturally, the people were not happy about this. But Hua's men had **broadwords** and they were all scary looking, so the people had to obey out of fear.

One of the brutes came over to Li. "Whew, we have a real beauty over here."

"Piss off!" Li snapped at him.

"Oh a feisty (活躍) one eh. Let's have some fun with this one." The brute touched her chin. Li grabbed his hand and bent it against his wrist in a way that was painful. "Ugh! Stop it!" Then she punched him in the face, knocking him out.

The other five brutes stared at Li and Vincent. "Ah, you've done it now." Vincent remarked.

"This is your chance to show off your skills." Li replied cleverly.

Vincent drew his fans out of his sleeves and threw one of them like a spinning disc. It hit a guy on the neck, killing him instantly. *Slish!*

Li hopped around and slashed two guys on the neck. It matters not if she is numbered; she has been trained for scenarios like these. The Heaven's Wrath Style taught to her by her master is something to be feared. Two more guys rushed at Vincent, he threw two fans and slashed their necks and like a boomerang the fans came back to his hands.

Hua was scared out of his mind. "No this can't be happening!" He dropped his sword and ran away. "Help me! Aaaaah!"

"Your skill is not bad." Li commented to her fan wielding comrade. "But you still need some work." And she jumped away in her usual fashion.

Vincent was glad she said what she said, and he will take it as a compliment.²¹

Standing on the bridge, Alex stared at the pond blankly. It was full of lily pads and flowers. Goldfish swam about, not having a care in the world. Looking at the scenery makes one feel at ease.

Lady Celina came to the garden with two of her female servants. She signaled them to stay put while she walked towards Alex. "Sir Cheng?"

He stopped daydreaming and bowed. "Your highness."

"Are you feeling better?" she asked.

"Yes I am." Alex replied smiling.

"I'm relieved. You had me worried."

"I want to talk to you about what happened yesterday. I know I tried to attack you." Alex said guiltily. "I was obsessed with the spice that I lost control of myself and became a different person. But now I am cured...I do not need the spice anymore. I can only ask for your forgiveness."

"You did not mean to do what you did, correct? It was not you...it was the spice that possessed you. Considering everything you have done for us, Demon Slayer, what happened yesterday I will overlook. So you need not worry about it." Celina handed him a basket of food. "And here...this should help you restore your appetite."

"Oh? For me?" he said. "Your kindness is appreciated. Thank you."

"I hope you enjoy it. Bye!" She waved happily and went back to her servants.

[B] Title Contents

Vincent came to a certain neighborhood in the ghettos where a secret meeting was taking place. They change their locations every so often and their members must remain informed. He went into an alley and walked to the metallic door. He knocked.

"Do you know that birds cannot fly up to heaven?" asked the man behind the door.

"Only Angels can fly that high." said Vincent.

"That is the right password. You may enter." The door opened. Creeeek.

Vincent went down the dark staircase which leads to the basement. There was a big room with a lot of people sitting down. **Cho** went to his friend. "Oy, Vincent, what took you so long? The meeting is about to start."

"Sorry, I had some errands to run." Both of them sat down.

Cho and Vincent were members of the Council of Heaven (天地會議), an organization of swordsmen that spans across all four kingdoms. There was chatter amongst the crowd and then everyone became silent when an old man walked to the front of the room.

"It's **Taishi Tze**." said someone in the crowd.

The old man had a beard, white and long that it reached his chest. In Chinese culture, a beard represents wisdom and strength. People respect those with a beard, particularly the long ones, and if one has a white beard, he is seasoned and to be respected as an elder.

²¹ Original: They were attacked by ninjas. Updated: 04/16/2020: They are attacked by the local bully Hua

He was also wearing a uniform with the symbol 天 (Heaven) on it, which is the symbol for the organization he runs. He cleared his throat and began. "Welcome fellow members of the Council of Heaven. I have not seen you in a while. We have called you here for a reason. As you know, recent events have caught our attention, namely the slaying of Duke Xiang. It turned out that he is a demon. He may be dead, but there are more demons out there."

"Man, we have been fighting these devils for centuries. Don't they ever die?" said someone from the crowd.

"Relax, young man." said Taishi. "We clearly have a problem on our hands. Demons have many abilities, including the ability to transform into humans. This makes them hard to find and extremely dangerous. Who knows, perhaps there is one hiding amongst us as we speak."

The crowd gasped and gave each other accusing looks.

"Relax!" said Taishi. "I am only joking. We are too careful to let one slip among us. But there are demons hidden in the Liu family and their high officials and they want to take over the kingdom. Our job is to prevent them from doing so. We are the Council of Heaven and our duty is to protect mankind."

Everyone shouted and raised their weapons to the air.

"Each of you will be assigned missions based on your abilities. In order to beat the demons, we need to work together as a team. That is all I have to say. Adjourn." The old man left.

The speech is over and the members are chatting amongst each other.

"Once again we are needed in battle." said Vincent, putting a fan over his face.

"Demons are the primary reason the Council of Heaven was formed in the first place. Whenever there are demons, we are needed." said Cho.

"It is such a shame we do not have the support of the law. If only the imperials would cooperate with us."

"King Liu is a pacifist at heart." Cho replied. "He does not think that organizations like ours are necessary. Naturally, he outlawed us. But we continue to meet in secret and fight the demons on our own. We are fortunate to have Taishi Tze as our leader, since he is one of the Four Brothers of China."

"Indeed." Vincent said. "I'm amazed that the old man has not retired yet."

"Master Tze cannot rest knowing that demons still exist, lurking in darkness, waiting to kill their prey...which is us humans. Being one of the Four Brothers, he probably feels that he cannot rest until all demons are destroyed. At one point, his swordsmanship was at its peak. This was during the **Demon-Human War**. Fifty years ago, demons revealed themselves by the thousands and rampaged through our towns and cities, killing innocent people."

An arbitrary town was in flames. The sky was red with hate and the ground red with blood. Houses burned and villagers ran for their lives. Hordes of demons rampaged through the town and killed on sight – be it men, women, children, the elderly – no one was spared. A certain swordsman was running by himself. A red demon stood in his path. Its eyes were deep red and its claws were itching for human blood. *Slash!* He killed the man and devoured his body.

In the town square, a group of villagers were holding weapons and defending their homes. The demons charged at them and fought. Needless to say, the villagers with their pitch forks and shovels did not last long. The village leader was bleeding and crawling for his life. He was actually crawling on a ground of dead bodies. "No...is this the fate of humanity?"

"...All hope was not lost, for the Four Brothers of China showed up. They led the humans to their victory."

The victim crawled with his bloody hands. He thought it was the end of his life and the end of mankind as well. But then there was a light in the sky. It turned from red to clear blue. The clouds dispersed and the sun shined on four people. They are the Four Brothers of China. They leaped down from the hill and attacked the demons with all their might. *Slish, slash, slish.*

Cho continued, "The humans were losing because it was the end of the Han Dynasty. There was disorganization in the ranks and the military was divided and weakened. The Four Brothers united our race and created a new military force, one that consisted of both soldiers and civilians. Before long, all the demons were vanquished and peace was restored to the land."

Vincent said, "And it was during that time the four kingdoms were formed."

Cho said, "Correct. Soon after the end of the Demon-Human War, the Four Brothers disappeared without a trace. Feudal lords fought for land and power. It was a lawless society until a leader was established. China itself was divided into four kingdoms, each with their own leader and army. Shen is only one of the four. Demons are hidden within our kingdom...one of them under the name of Duke Xiang. Years after the war, he tried to destroy the Liu family from the inside."

"To think that a demon had so much power. How frightening," said Vincent.

"That is why the Council of Heaven is necessarily," said Cho, concluding his story.

"I heard that the God of War has been slain. Is it really true?" said another member.

Cho and Vincent listened in to their conversation.

"Rumor has it that the War God used to be Taishi Tze's ally!"

"Impossible! Why would Taishi ally himself with a ruthless killer?"

"Some say it is because he was one of the Four Brothers..."

Cho walked over to them. "Non-sense...the Four Brothers died a long time ago. Master Tze is the only one who remains. He is the strongest out of the four...in skill and in principle!"

But the only one who knows the truth is Taishi Tze himself. He took a sip of tea in his room. His companion poured him more. "We are going to have to fight again, is that right, master?" asked the companion.

"This is inevitable. We did not prevent Duke Xiang's plan from unfolding...we found out too late. But we must take precaution now before something like this ever happens again," said Taishi, rubbing his beard. "I have already lost a good friend. May you rest in peace, Genzo."

Taishi then stared at the sky, presumably at heaven, where the soul of his old friend now lives. At the time of Masai Genzo's death, Alex, Li, Shen Long and Sui Long all felt it. At that time, Taishi was training alone and he too felt Genzo leaving this world.

Title Contents

Celina came into the room and saw her husband sleeping on the desk. Last time, she tried to convince him to drink the antidote, but he rejected it completely. This time, however, she will use force. It was against her principles, but it is for his own good. She has everything already prepared and approached him ever so cautiously as to not wake him up. She took out rope and tied him up.

When Liu Bei woke up he found himself bound to the chair. "Huh? What...what is this?"

"Sorry, your highness." said Celina.

"Celina? You did this? What is the meaning of this?"

"This is the only solution I can think of." she said in a regretful tone. But she will carry out her plan nonetheless. "You must drink the antidote."

"What antidote? I am not poisoned! Release me at once!"

"No, I cannot. Not until you drink this." She brought the bowl closer to his face.

"That poisonous garbage? Absolutely not!" He panicked and turned his head to the side.

"Just drink it!" she said.

A knife came out of his sleeve and he cut the ropes free and Celina gasped. He pushed her away, knocking the bowl of soup on the floor. Seeing other bowls on the table, he pushed them all to the floor in a fit of rage and Celina watched in horror while standing by the wall.

"You wretched (壞蛋) woman. You are the person I trust the most, yet...you would betray me."

"No, it's not what you think. I am trying to cure you of the spice."

He slapped her. Smack! She screamed in pain. She just looked at him with a wounded look on her face.

"To think that you would betray me...guards!"

Two men came into the room. "Yes, sire?"

"Seize her!" shouted Liu, pointing at none other than the concubine.

The two guards hesitated and glanced at each other.

"I said seize her now. This is a direct order."

Not wanting to be beheaded, the guards grabbed Celina's arms.

"She tried to poison me. Even though she is my concubine, she will be adequately punished. Give her fifty spankings!"

"Hai!" The guards dragged her away, and she was speechless.

In ancient China, criminals prosecuted by a judge are given punishments, and oftentimes they are spankings. Light crimes result in less spankings, while heavier crimes result in more. They were done with hard, wooden paddles, and it is anything but pleasant.

Celina was forced to lie face down on the floor as the guards hit her bottom with their paddles. Whack! Whack! After ten or so, it was already excruciating...especially for a gentle person like her. Whack! Whack! Celina wondered how she ended up like this. She had good intention, but they were misunderstood...he cares about the spice more than her...and the part that hurt the most was that the sentence was given by her own husband. He did not trust her and her body was not the only thing that was hurting.

Cheng was sitting on an outdoor table, watching the shimmering pond. He was thinking about his sister, as usual, until Celina showed up.

"Your highness? Have a seat."

"Uhhh, no thank you." she replied, a little embarrassed. Her buttocks hurt too much to even sit down and she did not want to tell him about the spankings.

"Were you able to get the king to take the antidote?" Cheng inquired.

At this point, she had two options - to tell the truth or conceal it. For some reason, she decided to lie. "Yes...you need not worry about it."

Cheng sighed in relief. "Good. Now both of us are free of the horrible poison. What is the matter? You do not look well."

"Oh, it's nothing." she replied.

"I must go and congratulate him."

"No..." said Celina.

"Huh?"

"I mean...he is still in recovery. It is better not to disturb him."

"That is true." Cheng replied. "I will wait until he recovers."

"That is all I have to say for now. I must go." said Celina, and she walked away. Cheng wondered why was in such a hurry, and if the king is being cured, why is she in a bad mood? Is she perhaps hiding something she does not want him to know?

Cheng wandered about in his courtyard, thinking about the horrors of the spice. He is usually a calm and well-mannered person, but the spice's poison made him act irrationally, turning him into a violent, reckless person. Hopefully, the king will recover as he did, and no one else will drink the spice.

His bodyguards leaped down from the wall and kneeled.

"Don't you two ever use the door?" Cheng said without turning around.

The masked men stood up. "Cheng, we have made a new discovery that we thought you should know." said Sui.

"Discovery?"

"It is regarding the person who hired the assassin to kill you. I suspect that Liu Zhang is behind this."

Cheng was shocked and he turned around. "Liu Zhang? Are you sure about this?"

"He is the biggest suspect." Shen Long replied. "He is the one who was closest to Duke Xiang."

"But he aided us in the raid of the palace." said Cheng.

"I know." said Sui Long, "But remember, demons are masters of trickery and deception. Zhang is the biggest suspect because he is a very secretive person. He did not show up to your celebration for reasons unknown. While spying on him, we see unknown people coming in and out of his mansion. We are not one hundred percent certain of this, but just in case, be weary of Zhang. Do not let your guard down."

Shen continued, "We will not disturb you further. Our investigations continue, but in the meantime, do not leave the palace." Flash! Both masked men jumped away.

Many things went through Cheng's mind, and a feeling of paranoia (偏執狂) took over him. Could his enemy be right here under his nose?

As fate would have it, as Cheng was walking through the courtyard, Zhang was passing by from the opposite gate. It was an awkward moment for Cheng, for he knew not how to act in front of this lord. Perhaps he should walk by and say nothing at all.

Once they were face to face, Zhang spoke up. "Ah, Sir Cheng, how is your new life as the Demon Slayer?"

"Uhhh, it's great. I could not have asked for more." he replied.

"Good. To be a 'hero' is a very prestigious title. Hopefully, it will not get to your head."

"Certainly." Cheng replied, and they walked past each other.

That little encounter caused Cheng to be deeply disturbed. The palace is supposedly the safest place for our hero, but it has already been proven that it is not so. The safest place has become the most dangerous place. Are Sui Long and Shen Long's suspicions correct?

It has been a while since Alex Cheng visited the marketplace, one of his favorite places to visit in the city. When he was a commoner, he came here nearly every day. From morning to evening, the place is busy and prosperous, but at night the streets are empty. With the exception of him going to the Valley, this is his first time going outside of the palace.

Ever since becoming the Demon Slayer, Cheng thought that his life was all set, but nothing could be further from the truth. The celebration was only the beginning of his many problems. The death of Master Genzo, the poisoning of the spice, and being attacked by an assassin in his own home...all these events were like a tidal wave, starting off small, but growing bigger through time. All these scenarios are possibly related, but right now he does not see evidence of their correlation (相關).

According to Sui and Shen, the biggest suspect right now is Lord Zhang. With that thought in mind, he could not be at peace and he needed to take a walk outside, even if it is against their advice.

Walking down the street, he had no destination in mind. He just wanted to get out of the palace and have some time alone to think. A strong gust of wind hit him. He sensed something wrong and indeed there was. Ninjas came out of hiding. There were five of them, but more appeared from the buildings.

Their leader, standing on the roof, was none other than Tao. Alex recognized him immediately. "It's you!"

"I thought the Demon Slayer would be smarter than to walk around unaccompanied. I will surely take your life this time." said Tao. The ninjas drew their swords.

"Just who the hell are you?" Alex demanded.

"It is meaningless to give my name to the dead. Men, kill him!" said Tao.

It is the first time in a while that Alex has to fight alone, but fight he must. He will put all this training to test. *Clang!* With the trusty Fire Sword, he blocked the incoming attacks and retaliated when he saw an opening. *Slash! Slish!* One ninja screamed as he raised his sword and brought it down. Cheng made a horizontal thrust and stabbed the ninja through his stomach just before the ninja's sword touched his shoulder. *Schleb!* Alex pulled the blade out and the ninja collapsed.

More ninjas charged at him. Alex swings his blade. *Clang! Clang!* He slashed him in the stomach and he fell to his death. Two ninjas came to the front and attacked him at the same time. *Cling! Clang!* They both pushed Alex with their force, and he struggled to keep his balance. "Ughhh..."

But he found the strength to push both their blades away. *Schling!* The Fire Sword turned red, and it caught fire. The ninjas were frightened by such a display, but the attacked nonetheless. *Slash!* Alex stabbed a guy, and he felt the metal stabbing his chest, along with the burning sensation of the fire, making it extra painful.

Doosh doosh. Sui Long was running on a rooftop. (I sense that Cheng is in danger. I must get to him.) Doosh doosh. He suddenly stopped, seeing a silhouetted figure in his way. Upon closer inspection, it was a bearded man with a wolf's skin around his neck. Sui gasped, recognizing his identity. "You are...Rubble the Ice Hunter?"

"Oh, my reputation exists in this kingdom as well." replied Rubble.

"Your reputation means nothing. Do not stand in my way." Both warriors drew their weapons and charged into each other. Wham!

They went past each other and waited to see what happened. Pieces of fur fell off Rubble's scarf. Sui Long's hat fell off his head and was cut in half. Only his mask remains. From that one hit, they can judge each other's strength.

The fight continued. *Clang!* Alex defended himself well, but the numbers were overwhelming. A ninja from behind kicked him. *Whack!* He almost fell, but regained his balance and blocked the next attack. *Clang!*

Tao was becoming impatient. "Finish him. Tonight he must not get away."

The ninjas charged and Alex fought them off. Tao became frustrated and he jumped off the roof and somersaulted to the ground. *Thud.* He charged straight into Alex and attacked. *Clang! Cling!* They stepped back. Alex realized that a piece of his sleeve was cut, and pieces of Tao's hair were cut.

Tao attacked with swift and fast movements. *Quong!* Alex blocked his aggressive attack. Tao's slashing was quick and unpredictable and left no openings, and Alex had to step back during the hits. *Quong!* They were in a sword deadlock, and Alex pushed him back to show his dominance. Tao was forced to move back, but he pushed forward, making Alex lose his balance, and Tao kicked him in the chest. *Thud!* Alex fell and landed in a crouch.

Tao smiled and pointed his left arm forward. He pulled needles from his sleeve, putting them between his fingers and threw them, Alex quickly jumped away. The needles hit the ground. *Twang!* (Poison needles?)

Tao threw his sword forward, and Alex blocked it. The sword was tied by a chain, and the chain came out of Tao's sleeve. When Alex blocked the sword, it bounced back to Tao's arm. Alex did not expect this, and he was surprised for a second. Tao charged and swings his sword. Whoop. Alex blocked, tilting his head to avoid getting hit. *Clang!* Tao swings the blade low, and Alex jumped over it. *Whoop!* It was difficult to defend himself against a long ranged fighter, as he has never fought someone with this type of style before. 0

Tao swings his blade forward and slashed Alex's leg. "Ugh!"

Now was his chance. He took out the needles and threw them, and Alex lost his footing and he blocked the needles by spinning his sword. *Cling cling cling.* Two of them hit his leg. "Ugh!" He fell on his knees.

"Just stay out of my way!" Sui Long warned. He and his enemy stood on the roof and stared at the eyes. Sui and Rubble leaped to the air and hit. *Clang!*

Whack! Tao kicked Alex in the face, and he rolled on the floor a few times before regaining control of himself. Tao raised his sword. "What a shame...you are not as good as they say you are, Demon Slayer. I guess you are only good at slaying demons, but not people."

Alex panted for breath, as he is just moments away from meeting the Grim Reaper (死神). A ninja on the roof walked to the edge. "Sir Tao..." were the last words he mumbled before falling forward to his death.

Everyone was surprised. A silhouetted woman was standing on the roof, and it was obvious that she killed the underling. "Stop what you are doing now!" she yelled with authority. It was a woman in a white dress holding a sword.

Alex gasped as he recognized her voice. Could it be who he thinks it is? **Celina** jumped off and landed in a crouch.

Tao was irritated. "A meddler? Who are you?"

"You better stop this now, swordsman!" she said. "I will not allow such crimes to be committed here."

Tao smirked. "Heh, you're just a woman. What can you possibly do? Boys, finish her off!"

A ninja came at her, and she blocked his attack and stabbed him. *Schleb!* Then she disappeared and reappeared in front of another guy and stabbed him as well. He did not even have time to react.

Tao was shocked, as was Alex. More ninjas charged at her. There a was sword next to her foot from the guy she killed. She kicked the sword up and caught it with her left hand, and she now wields two blades. Celina got into fighting position and her eyes were filled with the intensity of a fighter. "**Dance of the Sword Style.**" She charged into the group and swings her blades, swiping them with circular movements. *Slash. Slish!* No one could get near her as she was spinning and hitting. *Slash!*

One of them came at her with full force. She bent down and stabbed both swords forward, one piercing his stomach, and other piercing his chest. "Dance of the Tiger!" He died as she pulled the metal out of his body.

As Tao was distracted, Alex attacked. *Clang.* Tao pushed him back, and he threw his blade forward. Alex knocked the blade up and then cut the chain. *Whick!* Now Tao was left with a broken chain. "Damn you."

Alex charged forward. But it seems that the assassin still has a trick up his sleeve...in the literal sense. A kodachi came out of his sleeve and blocked Alex's sword. They were in a deadlock, and another kodachi came out of his other sleeve. As he tried to stab him, Alex quickly grabbed Tao's wrist. They struggled with each other and grunted. Tao overpowered him, and pushed him a few steps back, and kicked Alex in the stomach. Whack! Alex fell on his knee and he plunged his sword into the ground to stay still.

Celina's movements were too quick for the eye to see, as she blurred and appeared in an unpredictable fashion. *Slash!* Her movements of the feet and body were just like those of a dancer, and as a matter of fact, her fight itself is a dance, hence her fighting style. One guy from behind leaped at her, she jumped backwards and did a somersault, going over him and slashed his neck. They both landed, and the ninja fell. "Dance of the Eagle." He never saw that coming, and no one knew what she would do next. This style, when used by the right user, can be the most unpredictable and underrated style in the kingdom.

Tao was really frustrated by now. "Kill her now!"

All the ninjas came rushing to her.

"Watch out!" Alex shouted.

Celina crossed her arms over her chest, holding her swords sideways, and performed a spinning motion like a tornado. "Dance of the Sword Style final attack: **Dance of the Dragon!**" *Whoosh whoosh!* She was spinning so fast that she appeared like a tornado with two razors...and one can imagine a dragon clawing its victims with its fangs.

Slash! Slish! "Aaagh!" "Aaah!" "Ugh!"

None of them could withstand the speed and the force of the "dragon" flying at them. Celina headed for her next target, Tao. He threw the needles but they bounced away. He jumped away as she came at him. *Whoosh whoosh.* He landed away from her.

Celina went to Alex and stopped spinning. She stood in front of him in fighting stance.

(Damn that woman. Who is she?) Thanks to her appearance, Tao's chances of victory have been drastically reduced, as his allies have fallen.

By now, Sui is dirty all over, with cuts on his arm. Rubble, on the other hand, has barely been scratched. Sui fell on his knee from lack of strength. Rubble approached him and he was ready for the kill. Suddenly, a dagger came at him and he stepped back. Twang!

Shen Long jumped down and grabbed his comrade and they fled. Rubble did not chase them. "They escaped. No matter. Tao should have finished off his target by now."

Tao threw a bunch of needles with both hands, and Celina spun her swords like fans to block the needles. Tao jumped away to the rooftop.

The hero is now safe, thanks to these unexpected turn of events. He bowed to her. "Your highness."

She touched his shoulder. "No, do not call me that here."

He looked at her stupidly.

"You need not be so formal, Cheng." said Celina. "Not when we are outside of the palace. I must keep my identity a secret."

"You saved my life...I don't know how to thank you." he replied.

She looked at his bleeding leg. "You are poisoned?"

"Oh? It is minor, don't worry about it."

"No, it could be serious. We must hurry and get you the antidote."

They went into a random uninhabited house and shut the doors. He sat down on the floor and groaned at the pain on his leg. Celina grabbed a bucket of water from the other room and placed it next to him, and she examined his wound.

"No, it is alright." said Alex. "Someone of your status does not need to treat my wounds, I can handle it."

"Non-sense." she said. "Let me see it." She ripped off part of his pants and saw the hole that the needle made. "The needle went in pretty deep. We must prevent it from spreading throughout your blood. I have to suck it out."

"No...you don't have to"

Celina did it irregardless (不管) of what he said. She sucked the blood out of his leg and spit it out and continued to do so as he watched in awe. Why is she helping him so? To repay him for saving her life last time? Still, it felt awkward for someone of her status to be sucking on his leg like this. Alex just waited in silence, hoping that the awkward feeling will pass. No one has taken care of him like this since his mother and father...and his sister, of course.

When Celina was done sucking out the blood, she applied bandages to his leg. "There. You are all set. All you need to do is rest and you will be fine." said Celina. Then she looked at him strangely. "Why are you staring me like that?"

He turned away shyly. "Oh, it's nothing."

"You are probably wondering how I know about removing poison...well, I used to read a lot of books when I was bored. The palace is big but I did not have many friends. I spent my time reading medical books...and I have almost read enough to become a real doctor. But women are not allowed to become doctors."

"Well then, perhaps you can prove them wrong." Alex replied. "You have the authority, and people will listen to you because you have heart."

"You really think so?"

"Absolutely." Alex replied.

Suddenly, the masked men came into the room. "Cheng, are you alright?"

Cheng stood up and groaned at the pain of his right leg. Celina helped him stand still. "Careful, you are still in bad condition to walk."

"Shen Long, Sui Long, please wait for me outside." Then he turned to Celina. "Don't worry, your secret is safe with me." With that said, he left the building.

Morning came and Alex Cheng, standing over the same bridge, was thinking about what happened last night. He could not help but ponder about Celina Ce's sword style, a style which he heard of, but never actually seen in action. In this kind of society, it is rare for a female to be a swordsman, and she is an exceptional one. Indeed, she is one of a kind. Her dancing motions were graceful and deadly, and her defense was impeccable.

As he walked into the garden, he saw the very person he was thinking about. "Your highness."

"Cheng?"

"Where are your servants?" Alex inquired.

"I like to walk alone. There is no need for them to be with me all day." Celina said.

"That is true. I cannot stand being followed by people at all the time." Alex was speaking from personal experience, as he has two masked men following him all the time.

As they walked, they walked over to the bridge. A certain fish jumped out of the water, making a splash. The fish here are lively, for they live in fresh water free of pollution.

"About last night, I want to say thank you." Alex said.

"I told you...you need not thank me. I do not want it to be a big deal. Let us keep a secret between us, okay?"

"Uhhh, sure thing. As you wish, my lady."

"Why must everybody be so formal?" she asked. "It is always your highness this, my lady, this...nobody ever calls me by my real name anymore."

Alex did not know where she was going with this, but he replied with his opinion, "It is because they respect you, my lady. You are a very important person."

"Important? I am just a regular person." she said. "I laugh and cry just like everyone else."

Alex knew not how to reply so he changed the subject. "The style you use is the Dance of the Sword, correct? Your swordsmanship is worthy of praise."

She was surprised to hear a compliment coming from Cheng. "Thank you. I learned the style from my master when I was still a child. Back in the day, before I was a concubine, I was a dancer at a high class theater. I was a commoner back then. Being an orphan, my master adopted me and raised me as her own. But I had to constantly compete with the other dancers to gain attention. Fortunately, I was my master's favorite pupil and she taught me more than just how to dance. She taught me that as a girl, I need to defend myself.

Thanks to my master, I have been able to master the Dance of the Sword Style. But ever since I became the concubine, I have no need for fighting. Nor did I tell anyone about my abilities, for it will complicate matters. Fighting is a field dominated by men, and they frown upon²² women wielding a weapon."

"I see." Alex replied. "No one truly understands you...but his majesty knows, correct? Of course, what a silly question. He knows everything about you."

"Indeed he does." she replied monotonously.

"How is his health, by the way?" asked Alex.

"Uhhh...he is getting better." Celina replied, hoping he will not inquire further. Lying is not her strong point, and her conscience aches. King Liu is her problem, and she will solve it on her own. "You need not worry about it."

²² Frown upon - idiom for look down on, not accepted by society

"I see. He received the antidote thanks to you. He must be lucky to have a wife like you."

"Lucky..." she replied monotonously. "Cheng, have you ever fallen in love?"

Alex looked at her strangely, since it is a personal question. An embarrassing one, in fact.

"Uhhh, well...not really." Cheng replied, scratching his face. "I have been focused on searching for my sister all these years I never found time for a girlfriend. Love is not my expertise...but I am sure you have more experience than I do."

"It would be nice...to fall in love." she muttered.

"Huh?" Alex said with a blank look.

"The other day you said that I am lucky to be the king's concubine. You said that all women envy what I have." Celina seemed to be in the mood to talk. "But what if my lifestyle and my happiness is all an illusion?"

"Illusion?" Alex repeated. "I do not understand, my lady."

"What if love is just an illusion? The king is a kind person, and he does care for me very much. But the feeling that I have for him is not the thing you call love. I first met Liu Bei when I was working at the theater. At the time, the theater was becoming famous and the dancers were attracting all kinds of rich men and nobles. One day, the king himself heard about it and wanted to make an appearance himself."

"Remember," said **Fa Kay**, "Perform your best today. The king himself is coming to see our performance. Do not mess it up."

"Hai, master!" replied the girls.

"Especially you, Celina." said Fa Kay. "You are our star dancer. Give it your best tonight. Who knows, you might get lucky and get the king's attention."

"Yes, master." replied Celina.

All the dancers dispersed and prepared for the main event.

[B] Title Contents

King Liu and his servants came into the **Mu Fa Theater** and they were greeted by Fa Kay and her girls. "Welcome, your majesty. My name is Fa Kay, and I am the director of this theater. I am humbled at your presence.

"You are Miss Kay? I heard about you from my cousin Lord Sima. He said the performance here was one of a kind, so I came to check it out."

"Well, I am glad you picked us. It shows you have good taste, sire. Please, have a seat." She is an expert at sucking up, and she is no fool. She knows how to do business.

Liu Bei sat himself down on a table and Fa Kay poured tea for him. "I hope what Lord Sima says is true."

"Certainly." replied Fa. "All my dancers are the best of the best and personally trained by me. You will not be disappointed."

Soon after, the show began. A group of dancers wearing exotic dresses came from the side and met up in the center, dancing gracefully to the music. Their sleeves were extra long and they were flowing in the air as they were spinning.

The king and his men were impressed, and if they are happy, Fa is happy. The six dancers were holding umbrellas and opening and closing it according to their routine. Their movements were exact and coordinated (協調). They practiced very hard for their shows. They have done this routine hundreds of times and it looked like they were born to dance.

"Hmmm, not too bad." said Liu, rubbing his beard.

"There is more." Fa announced proudly.

The six dancers moved back to the side exits. Then the lights focused on the middle of the stage. There was moment of silence, and then three dancers came to the stage. The one in the middle was Celina. Her appearance caught the king's eye immediately. He was watching it with much more interest now. Holding a sword, Celina was spinning like an ice skater, swinging the blade as if it weighted nothing. Fa Kay was happy noticing the men's reactions.

Her dancing movements were graceful, smooth, and fierce at the same time. The dancers' clothes had extra long sleeves, and a motion of the arms makes the sleeves fly in the air like paper.

The king was completely hooked. His attention was entirely on the show, and he didn't even drink or eat anything. "That dancer, who is she?" he asked Fa.

She thought he'd never ask. "Her name is Celina Ce. She is my top dancer. She's good, isn't she?"

"She is magnificent...simply astounding (驚人)." replied the king. "All your dancers are unmarried, correct?"

"Correct. They are all maidens²³." Fa replied.

Once the show was over, the king clapped loudly, and when he clapped, everybody clapped and showed their appreciation. Everybody gave the show a standing ovation.

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

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

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

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

The king said, "Yes, your hard work shows in your performance. Say, Miss Ce, would you like to come to the palace? The lords and officials would love to see you perform...and you may raise the standards for our dancers. Celina was staring at the floor uneasily. "Uhhh...well...it is such a gracious offer...I don't know...it is too prestigious for me."

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

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

"Celina!" yelled Fa Kay. "Come back. I am sorry about this, your highness. She is just overwhelmed by your presence...you are the most important person in the kingdom. But I will talk some sense into her." She ran after Celina and Liu just stood there like a deer in headlights²⁴. Why would any dancer refuse such an offer? Now he is even more curious about Miss Ce.

Knock knock. Fa Kay came into the room. "What is the matter with you, Celina? Has your brain gotten rotten?"

Celina was combing her hair. "How can I accept such a prestigious offer? I am sorry, master. To perform at the palace...is too much responsibility for me. Tonight I was really nervous. I don't think I can handle the pressure."

"What? Do you know what you're saying?"

"I am just no good with people, master."

²³ Maiden - a woman that is a virgin

²⁴ Idiom meaning frozen in shock

Fa sighed and put her hands on her shoulder. "Celina, think about it carefully. Every woman's goal is to find and marry a rich man who will take care of her for life. And you caught the attention of the richest man in Shen! The king himself has his eye on you. This is a chance of a lifetime. You may live ten lives and not have a chance like this again."

Fa grabbed Celina's face and made her look at the mirror. "Look at you...you are Celina Ce...the top dancer at the Mu Fa Theater. When I found you, you were just an orphan who only knew how to cry and eat and sleep. But through time and training, you became the best student I ever had. Thanks to you the Mu Fa's reputation has skyrocketed. But to keep you here is to hold you back. You are meant for so much more! Your beauty and grace can melt the hearts of men and make them fight over you."

"Well..." Celina was still hesitant.

"You do plan on getting married someday, right, Celina?"

"Yes, but...not so soon. I want to fall in love and do all that other stuff."

"I understand. But what isn't there to love about him? He's the richest and most powerful man in Shen. Don't let this chance pass you by. This is the one of the most important lesson I can ever teach you. Opportunities don't wait for you." With that said, she left her student alone.

Celina now sat there alone, thinking deeply about her master's words. This is a chance of a lifetime. You may live ten lives and not have a chance like this again. Indeed, master is right. But she still has her fears. She doesn't even know what marriage with a regular man is like, but marriage with the King of Shen? The thought really scared her. But if she accepts his offer, then she will be set for life. There will be no such thing as hard work or money problems. She can have a life of luxury and relaxation until the day she dies. What should she do?

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

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

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

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

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

Celina could never forget the first time she got on a carriage. To be carried by people she did not know and to not have to walk great distances...it was like a dream. The first time she saw the palace...the decorated walls, the neatly trimmed plants, and the crystal clear lake stuck in her mind. The lake was so clear one can see the fish swimming and the rocks beneath. The food she was given is like none she had ever tasted. Is this what a life of nobility is like?

Her first performance in the palace was astounding. Everyone was impressed, especially the men. She had the men's envy and the women's jealousy.

Liu clapped. "Marvelous, simply marvelous!"

"Thank you." she replied, bowing politely.

From that day on, she worked as a palace dancer and lived in the palace. Servants were around here all the time and at first she was not used to it, but later on she learned to enjoy being taken care of. Fa Kay must be happy indeed for her student.

One day, Celina was alone by the pond, practicing with her sword. King Liu was free and he was walking unaccompanied. By chance, he saw her training, and she was so focused on it she did not notice him. He sneaked behind the bushes.

Whoosh! Whish! She hit the air. "Hyah! Hyah!"

Liu felt guilty spying on her like this, but he couldn't help it. She is such a diligent worker. Her eyes showed determination and strength, and at the same time, the innocence of a maiden. *Whoosh* Her sweat sparkled in the air. Liu did not even blink once. It is rare to find a female swordsman nowadays, and she is indeed exceptional. Her figure is one that no straight man can resist, and he kept on trying to picture what she is wearing under that white dress.

She suddenly sensed his presence. "Who's there?"

Liu had no choice but to reveal himself.

Celina was surprised. "Oh...it's you sire."

"I am sorry about the secrecy. I did not mean to spy on you."

"No..." she replied looking down. "I am the one who should apologize...it is frowned upon for women to wield a sword...I was just about to finish..."

"The style that you use is the Dance of the Sword, correct? Your master Fa Kay told me about it briefly. But the description is completely different than seeing the real thing. You have a wonderful talent, Miss Ce."

"Thank you sire..."

"I would like to experience this style first hand..."

She looked up. "Do you mean a duel?"

"I want to see what you are made of."

"No sire...I prefer not to."

"Are you refusing to obey an order?"

She looked shocked. "No...I...that's not what I mean. You are the king...and I am a dancer...and..."

"You will assume no responsibility if I get hurt. No one is watching, it is just the two of us. What are you afraid of?" Liu said.

"Very well, then, I accept." She pointed her sword at him and he drew his.
Schling.

They did the pre-battle stare and neither of them moved a muscle. Liu attacked first and he hit aggressively, pushing her back. *Clang! Cling!* Celina thought this was practice match, that they were supposed to "go easy" on each other, but apparently she thought wrong. Liu wanted to go full out to see what she can do.

Quang! Her back hit the fence. Wham. He attacked and she dodged to the side. He turned around and attacked with a quick thrust, and she blocked it and stepped back. They rested for two seconds and resumed. Liu continued to advance, leaving no room for openings. *Clang! Clang!* Celina's sword was knocked away into the water and she gasped as he pointed the blade at her neck.

"Hmmm. Looks like you lose, Miss Ce."

Celina raised her arms up and she just stared at him with fearful eyes, not knowing what his intentions are.

Liu smiled. "If this was a real fight, you'd be dead already." He tapped the tip of blade at her chin, and she turned to the side and winced. He moved the blade to her neck and Celina breathed hard, scared of what he might do. There was no one around, and he is the king, and he can do whatever he wants.

"You certainly are a fine young woman...Miss Ce. It is rare to find someone who is both a dancer and swordsman." The blade moved down to her neckline, and he made an incision on her dress, cutting it between her breasts. She gasped and swallowed hard. All she could do was stare at the threatening blade.

Liu moved the sword down to her leg and slightly tapped her with it. "But...for a female to wield a sword is against the law...I'm afraid I will have to punish you for it." Then he moved it up her thigh and into the dress. Celina gasped. She was praying that he wasn't going to do what she thinks he's going to do. He used the blade to flip up her dress, and played around with it while she suffered as his hostage.

She has never even been with a man before, and now, she is being toyed with by this man..."No! Please!!"

Liu pointed the sword at her chin.

"And now, for your punishment."

He did a few quick slashes. *Slash! Slice!*

Suddenly, her dress fell off, revealing her red undergarment. Most of her skin was revealed in that moment, and the king just stared at her gorgeous body. Celina was exposed and embarrassed. Her face was completely red and she covered herself. She screamed and ran away. Liu just watched her leave. Now he's more attracted to her than ever.

Celina hid in the bushes, hoping someone doesn't see her. Meanwhile, Tai was walking around, and he heard a rustling sound in the bushes. He walked over there, brushed the leaves aside, and pointed his sword at her, and she gasped. "Aaaah!"

"I'm sorry, ma'am." he replied. He put away his weapon. "What are you doing here by yourself?"

"It is a long story...can you do me a favor and bring me something to cover myself?"

"Uhhh, certainly." Tai replied.

[C] Title Contents

Splash Celina was taking a bath in a barrel of water. The servant lady brought in some clothes and took her old clothes. "I'll bring them outside and wash them for you, my lady."

"Thank you, Miss Lei." *Splash*

Lei walked outside to hang the clothes on the clothes liner. The king walked by the building which was designated for his favorite dancer. He decided to go in and greet her. Upon coming to the window, he saw curtains covering the middle of the room. A woman was in a barrel washing herself. It must be Celina, he thought. He could not see anything and he wanted a closer look. He saw the servant drying the clothes. "Ah-hem, servant."

She bowed. "Greetings, your highness."

"We have a shortage of people in the outhouse, and we need your help."

"But I am drying Miss Celina's clothes."

"Don't worry about it, I will send someone else to do it."

"Yes, highness." she said and walked away.

Liu smiled wickedly, knowing this is his chance. He was excited as he opened the door. Creeeeek. He went in and he heard sounds of splashing water in the next room. He felt like a peeping tom, but he felt he was entitled to come in, because, after all, this is his palace. He is the king and he can do whatever he wants in his territory.

Celina heard footsteps. "Ms. Lei?" She gasped when she saw a man, but not just any man, it was Liu. Immediately she covered her chest with her arms and screamed.

"Hello darling, did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Aaah! What are you doing here?!"

"Ms. Lei is busy with some errands. Mind if I scrub your back for you?"

"No...don't come any closer!" Celina shrieked, and her face became red with embarrassment. She's naked in the barrel and she's helpless in this situation. "No!!"

"Oh, you don't want me here?" Liu went to grab her towel. "I guess you won't be needing this." he said in a playful tone. He put it in front of her and when she tried to grab it he pulled it away. "Uh uh." He put it in front of her again, and she reached for it. He was enjoying torturing and playing with her.

"Give it to me...please..."

"Oh, you want it? Promise me you'll marry me, and I will give it to you."

Celina was speechless. Here she is, naked in the barrel, and helpless to do anything. The only way to cover herself is with the towel, but it is in the hands of the king. He is pretty much not giving her a choice. This is not her idea of a proposal.

"No...I can't..." she replied.

"Oh, refusing the king, are you? Well, you can't stay in that barrel forever. You will have to come out eventually." He dangled the towel within her reach, and she tried to grab it, but he withdrew. "Ah ah ah, not until you promise me that you'll be my bride."

Celina, with her arms over her bare chest, hands on shoulders, stared at the floor. "Fine...I promise."

"Good, that's more like it. Now step out of the barrel and get your towel." He said.

Celina froze with fear. To step out means he will see her naked.

"What's the matter?" he taunted. "Why don't you come and get it. It's now or never."

She reluctantly came out of the barrel, stepping out naked and soaking wet. Liu was shocked as he saw her complete natural form. She was more beautiful than any flower he had ever seen, and his eyes lit up as he stared at her with much impure intentions.

With both hands covering her privates, she walked over and reached for the towel but he took it away.

"Not yet." He grabbed her arm that was on her chest and she gasped. She pushed him off and snatched the towel and quickly wrapped it around herself. She quickly ran away from the bathroom as the king watched amusingly. There is no need to rush, he thought, because she will become his eventually. ²⁵

After officially becoming his concubine, King Liu and Lady were taking a stroll through the imperial garden. Flower petals fell off trees as they walked by elegantly. The servants bowed as they walked by, and they felt as if the king and concubine's presence was enchanting them.

One servant whispered to another, "Lady Celina is absolutely beautiful! How, I envy her." said female servant.

"She has married the king and wow that she is the concubine, she no longer has to worry about money...she can buy anything she wishes." said another.

"I can see why the king has chosen her. She is a beauty amongst beauties. Like a rose in a bush of thorns²⁶." replied the female servant. "Our kingdom will surely prosper."

Back to the present. "And after that, I officially became the concubine." said Celina, wrapping up the story. It is true that I have a life that every woman in Shen

²⁵ Updated this scene in 2021

²⁶ Rose in a bush of thorns - idiom meaning she stands out amongst the crowd

would die for. I have the respect and envy of the richest and most noble women. No one dares show me disrespect. I have military and political power...but despite all this...one thing is still missing."

Then there was a silence. "What is it?" Cheng asked.

"From other's point of view, my life may seem perfect. But I am missing that one thing, that one piece of the puzzle that is most important. Liu Bei is more of a king than a husband. He does not have the time for me. Yes, he showers me with gold and diamonds, but there isn't love between us."

"Oh...I am sorry." Alex replied, not knowing what else to say to comfort her.

"The king could have any woman in the kingdom, but he chose me. I was given the illusion of having a choice, but in reality I had no choice. Who can refuse a request from the king? It is unthinkable. I would have been happy with a simple life. Sure, I have more gold than I can ever spend in my life, but what is a life without love? Before I was married, I was a dancer, and being a dancer was my choice. At least I was able to choose how I wanted to live."

"But he gave you a chance to excel in your career, did he not?" asked Cheng. "Thanks to him you were able to perform in front of an audience of a higher class."

"After being married, I was no longer allowed to perform...because I should not be performing for any man besides my husband. And I could no longer hold a sword...I was to do what a wife should do...to take care of my husband. That is my one responsibility."

Then there was a longer silence. Both of them just stared at the fish swimming. Splash. It is strange that they find themselves envying the fish. They were not human and did not have human problems. They don't need to worry about marriage and love. They are free to do as they please and swam by happily without a worry. Splash.

"I have to go back now." Celina said, breaking the silence. "I am sorry you had to listen to my problems."

"Uhh, no problem." Alex replied.

She suddenly stepped forward and **hugged** him, a move that surprised him. He dared not hug her back. Then she let go. "Thank you...Cheng." Then she walked away, feeling a little better.

Alex stood there like a deer in headlights. The concubine just embraced him, a move which is quite unusual. Many thoughts were going through his mind, but he decided to take it as it is...it is nothing more than a thank you.

Alex was lying around in bed, bored and daydreaming like he usually does. Lately, there is much on his mind, and he cannot concentrate on his training. He lost his focus when there was a knock on the door. He answered it and to his surprise it was the concubine.

"Your highness...greetings." said Alex. "Where are your servants?"

"I came alone." Celina replied. "I hope that this is a good time."

"Uhhh?" He noticed that she was holding a basket. "Well, what did you have in mind?"

"I brought food straight from the kitchen. It is still fresh." she said.

"Oh, you shouldn't have. You could have asked a servant to do it."

"It wouldn't be the same if a servant brought it to you than if I brought it myself. May I come in?"

"Oh, of course." Alex replied, feeling a bit guilty.

"So this is where you live?" She put the basket on the table and took the dishes out.

"No, there is no need for you to do that, your highness." said Alex.

"Why not? Is it not a woman's job to set up the meal?"

"Well, but you're the concubine. You're not just any woman. You brought this much?" Alex asked. "I cannot possibly eat it all."

"It is not just for you." Celina replied.

Alex then realized her intentions. "You are going to eat here? With me?"

She froze for a moment. "Is there a problem?"

"Uhhh, no, not at all. Please, make yourself at home." Alex answered.

"Cheng, I want you to know that there is no need for such formality between us. Status is not important."

"But your highness, status is of the utmost importance in society. What would happen if someone were to see you have a meal with someone of lower status than yourself?"

"Then who am I to eat with? Only the king? And what if he is away on urgent business?" she asked. "Am I to eat by myself all the time because of who I am? Titles are merely titles, they do not tell you one's worth in society."

"No, you are right." said Cheng. "People should be able to choose what they want to do. Thank you for the meal."

They proceeded to sit down and eat.

"How is it?" Celina asked.

"It's delicious."

"I'm glad you like it." Celina replied. "I told the chef to put extra effort into this. I want to make sure you do not eat something like the spice again." But the truth is, she made them herself. Ever since she attained her status, she was no longer needed in the kitchen, for she always had servants doing the cooking. She always wanted to know what it is like to make a meal for someone, but never had a reason to. And now she had a good reason to do so.

They continued to eat and talk about many things. They did not bring up yesterday's conversation. Alex did not open up to anyone besides his childhood friends Jade and Zi, and he is secretive even to them. But for some reason, he was able to open up to her, laughing and enjoying himself, as did his companion. Alex told her stories of how he went about to fight Duke Xiang's forces and Celina was impressed with everything he said. When he told her about Zi's misdemeanors and pranks, she laughed while covering her mouth.

After breakfast was over, they walked over to the balcony where they had a nice view of Alex's courtyard.

"I had a wonderful time today." Celina commented.

"Me too. I never realized that you know so much about the world."

"And I have learned a lot of things about you, Demon Slayer." she replied.

"Whenever I'm around you, I feel at ease. I feel comfortable talking to you...and it is not like when I talk as a concubine or a politician...but like a regular person. I know this may sound strange, but we get along well, as if there is a special connection between us."

Alex looked at her as she was talking and staring at the scenery. Her words are very true indeed, and there is not a hint of doubt about it. He noticed that she looks beautiful as the wind blew against her hair. Celina Ce is not just beautiful on the outside, but on the inside as well. She is a rare flower indeed.

She continued, "My relationship with the king has never been like that of a husband and wife. I do not even know what a normal wife is supposed to do. I find it hard to talk to anybody...all these noblemen are stuck up and self-centered." Then she looked at Alex. "I am sorry that you have to listen to all this. I must sound selfish."

"No, you are anything but that, your highness." Alex replied. "Don't say that, especially after everything you've done for me. You were the one who aided me when I was under the influence of the spice...you sucked out the poison from my leg...and you even brought me food. I cannot possibly repay you for your kindness."

"No, that is nothing compared to what you did for me." She flashed back to the time when the palace was being raided by Tai and Zhang's forces.

While falling, Celina thought that her life was over for good. Her whole life flashed before her eyes in those few seconds. Unfortunately, the last few moments of her life were not happy memories. She was young and wanted to do many things, but now she can't do any of them. Her life was taken away by a brute, tortured and raped day and night for no reason. And this is the end of her sad pathetic life.

She closed her eyes and shed her tears, and they sparkled in the sky.

Alex came to the area and after deciding that it's safe, he relaxed for a bit. But then he saw a woman falling from above. He ran to the spot and spread his arms, getting ready. Plop! He caught her and prevented her from hitting the concrete. Celina opened her eyes, thinking she was dead, and she was shocked that she's still alive.

Both stared into each other's eyes in disbelief. Celina thought she was gone for good, but then this man saved her life. He came out of nowhere and caught her, and she was speechless. And Alex was speechless as well, because it isn't everyday that a beautiful and naked woman falls into his arms. She had only pink ribbons to cover herself. He thought it was a dream of some sort, she was real and in the flesh.

At this point, Celina was blushing and she quickly looked away. For some reason, she no longer felt comfortable here and needed to leave. "It was nice chatting with you, but I have to go now."

"Oh, so soon? Very well. Farewell." said Alex.

She walked away from him, having an uneasy feeling in her gut. She really hated this feeling. Why should she be feeling this way? Why walk away in the middle of a conversation? Is it because she is fond of him? That thought scared her because a married woman is not supposed to have these thoughts. It is impure and sinful and blasphemous (褻瀆) to even think about cheating on one's husband.

While walking along the bushes, she heard a rustling sound. Celina grew curious and stood still to listen to it carefully. The leaves were moving and there was something moving. A snake came out and she screamed.

Alex, hearing her scream, came immediately with his weapon already drawn. "What is it?"

"That..." she said, pointing nervously at the hissing creature.

"Don't worry I'll get it." Alex ran to the snake, but he tripped over a rock and fell on top of her. *Crash.* He was on top of her and they were face to face, and they just stared at each other in shock. Alex was never this close to her...except for that one other time.

Alex realized that his hand was on her breast and he snapped out of it and stood up. "My apologies, your highness." He kneeled. "Forgive me. It was an accident."

Celina stood up, feeling a little dazed. She forgot about the snake entirely. "It's alright, I'm fine. Forget what happened."

"I'm really sorry. I should have been more careful."

"No, forget it." Celina replied, and she walked away from him, feeling worse than ever.

Alex was relieved that he was not going to be punished. In a way, he lucked out. At the same time, he felt guilty for what happened.

Alex and Zi met at the courtyard. With all the insanity that has been happening, he barely has enough time to see his best friend. "How are you, Demon Slayer? Getting used to being rich and famous?" said Zi. He always has a carefree attitude and to see him now is a cup of fresh air for Alex.

"In a way, I should be happy, but I have much on my mind lately." Alex replied.

"I know." Zi replied, as if he knew everything. "But you have to relax and enjoy yourself. Life is short, Alex. You should learn to enjoy your fortune while you can."

"That certainly is true. You are always a free spirit, Zi. I need some time alone to think. I cannot stay here with all these distractions."

"Where are you going to?" Zi asked.

"A place where I can train alone."

"I don't think you should leave the palace, Alex, especially after what happened last time. Shen Long and Sui Long can't always stay by your side."

"Do not worry." Alex replied. "I will not leave the palace, but I will be at a place where it will be difficult to find me. Not even they know where it is. If anyone asks for me tell them I am on a business trip."

"You got it." said Zi.

"By the way, do you have any word yet on the War God's killer?" Alex asked in a quieter tone.

"Rumors of the War God's death are spreading in the martial arts world like wildfire. But all I have to go on is the name 'Ragnarok.' With just a name I cannot do much. I will do what I can."

"One more thing...when you can, I need you to find out about Liu Zhang...I suspect that he is somehow behind all this."

"You mean, he is involved with the War God's slaying?"

Alex looked to the side. "I am not sure. It is only speculation, but I need to make certain of it. And be careful, do not get caught spying on him."

"No problemo. Go and train hard, Demon Slayer."

With that said, Alex walked away from him, feeling a new sense of relief.

The impatient king walked back and forth, wondering when the spice is coming. He cannot sit still and wait because he has only one thing on his mind.

Celina was standing by the fence, staring at the lake. The last time she tried to help her husband, he ended up punishing her severely...and it was all a misunderstanding. Ever since then they have not spoken a word to each other.

Tai came and kneeled. "Your highness. Are you still expecting the spice?"

"Of course I am!" Liu Bei shouted impatiently. "I sent Chou to the mountains seven days ago. He has yet to send me a message. What is keeping him?"

"Maybe he got lost, sire?"

"Lost? How can he be lost?!" the king yelled.

Celina started to feel queasy (反胃) as she was hearing the argument between the two men. She had a headache and her vision became blurry. This is quite unusual, because usually she is healthy.

"I paid Chou much money, so where is he? He promised me he'd bring me in the spice."

Tai did not want to disrespect him, and kept his head low during the conversation. "Please, be patient. The Tairanian Mountains have a rough terrain, and they are said to be the most dangerous mountains in all of China."

"That does not matter! He went there once, so he should be able to find it with no problem. He had better not betray me...or else I will have his head."

The loud voices of these two men made Celina's headache worse, and at this point, it was unbearable. Her body grew weak and her legs were losing strength. She was looking at Tai and Liu Bei, but their figures became blurry and she can no longer tell who they were.

"Send ten more men to find them at the mountains." said the king.

"Sir, that is not advisable. We have already sent ten men to accompany Chou. He has sent a message back-"

"That message was from a week ago! He should be back by now with the spice, but he is not."

Suddenly, they heard a splat sound. They looked at Celina, and she was unconscious on the floor. Liu Bei hurried over to her. "Celina? Are you alright? Celina?" Liu Bei looked at Tai. "Don't just stand there! Get the imperial doctor right now!"

"Yes sire." Tai bowed and ran off.

Lei came by and she was shocked. "My lady!"

"We need to get her to her room immediately." said Liu Bei.

"Yes my lord."

Liu Bei walked back and forth impatiently while the doctor was examining the unconscious Celina indoors.

"Sire," asked Lei, "Will she be alright?"

"How would I know? That is the doctor's job." Liu Bei replied. "Look, I cannot stay here. I have some urgent business to take care of. It is your responsibility to look after her, understand?"

Lei bowed. "Understood, sire."

With that said, he left. Lei opened the doors and walked into the room.

The doctor was checking Celina's pulse. Her face grew pale, and her lips lost their pink color, and she was sweating heavily. It is obvious from her appearance that she is ill.

"Doctor," asked Lei. "Is she going to be okay?"

"Quite frankly, she is in bad condition." replied the doctor. He was a man with a long, gray beard and scholar's clothing. In this country, a doctor is one of the most respected professions in the land. Besides being a judge, a doctor is quite possibly the most wanted title, because doctors are the miracle healers who save people's lives. Children tell their parents that one day they will become doctors. But it is not easy to be one, for it takes years of study and tutelage to obtain a license. And the title of imperial doctor is the most prestigious of all doctors.

"Is she sick? Does she have a disease?" asked Lei worriedly. "But it is impossible to catch a disease here. The palace is perfectly clean."

"No, it is not a disease. She is **poisoned**."

"What?" Lei asked, putting her hand over her face. "But who would do such a thing? Who would dare poison the imperial concubine?"

"Perhaps someone who wants to assassinate the king?" the doctor said. "How she got poisoned is not important. What is important is that I need to remove the poison. Judging by her paleness and the flow of her blood, it has been in her system for a few days and now it has become so serious that she lost consciousness."

"Then we must remove the poison." Lei said.

"I cannot do that." said the bearded man.

"Why not?" Lei asked, as if it's the most ridiculous thing she has ever heard.

"You are the doctor, why can you not do it?"

"People are poisoned by two methods – through eating or drinking poison, or by injection through needles. In this case, she has been injected by a needle somewhere.

I must first find the incision on her body where the poison entered in the first place. To do so would mean to disrobe her. I cannot do that without his majesty's permission."

"But the king left the palace, and I do not know where to find him. Time is of the essence." said Lei.

The doctor touched his beard. "I cannot do this. To disrobe her would be sinful, and it could get me beheaded."

"But my lady's life is on the line. I am sure the king would want her to live too!"

"But--"

"I will take all responsibility." said Lei. "Please, save her life first. I will go find the king."

"Very well." the doctor replied.

Ragnarok and his master were having tea in a private room. Usually, they discuss things that cannot be heard by anyone else, thus Zhang is a secretive person in nature.

Tao knelt in front of them. "Forgive me, Lord Ragnarok. I have failed."

Ragnarok is not such a forgiving person. "Failed? You had the perfect opportunity. I gave you a band of trained assassins...and what is the result? Nothing! What is your excuse?"

Tao did not want to mention that a random female swordsman intervened and caused his plan to fail. Bringing up such a disgraceful truth will only make his position worst. "I have no excuse...I was careless. Give me another chance. All I need is an opportunity...once Cheng leaves the palace, I will have him for sure."

"You already blew that chance!" Ragnarok said angrily.

"If that is what you request." said Zhang, drinking his tea. "I shall create that opportunity for you. You may go."

Tao bowed and he was relieved. "Thank you Lord Zhang." He stood up and left.

"Why are you so lenient on him?" asked a disgruntled Ragnarok. He never disobeys his master, but he does question his actions often.

"In order to get your subordinates to obey you, they must first trust you. Once you have them thinking that you are looking out for their best interests, they will do just about anything for you."

"That is very clever. I wonder if you used that skill on me, master."

"Non-sense." Liu Zhang replied. "You follow me purely by choice. It takes time to earn trust. And time is the one advantage I have over others."

Ragnarok walked over to the balcony. "Master, recently I have this uneasy feeling...I am having nightmares about that event."

Zhang sipped the rest of his tea. "This uneasiness is caused by uncertainty."

"I am afraid that the truth may be exposed."

"Non-sense!" said Zhang. "Our plan is foolproof. Nobody knew what really happened in the Valley of Death. No one was there except for that one witness that you kept alive. He saw nothing; when he woke up from unconsciousness, the War God was already dead. He should be telling everyone about how a warrior named Ragnarok has

slain the War God. The name Ragnarok will be the new sensation in the martial arts world; people will think of that name as a hero. Think of nothing else."

With that said, Liu Zhang walked away from the room, leaving Ragnarok by himself. He walked over to the balcony and had a flashback.

Clang! Ragnarok and Genzo clashed their blades and exchanged some moves and then jumped away from each other.

"You're nothing without your Fire Sword! Take this, Ice Blizzard!" Ragnarok took a mighty swing of his blade, producing a shockwave of snow and cold air.

Whoosh Genzo jumped over it as smooth as a bird and landed on a tree branch. Ragnarok hopped onto another tree branch.

They waited for the right moment to attack and jumped to the air. Clin Clan Clin. They hit while bouncing off the trees. Both of them landed on the ground. Both of these masters use the same style, the **Heaven's Wrath**, an ancient style that has existed since history was written. But over the years, these two have trained differently so their Heaven's Wrath became of a different variety. And today will be the day that will decide whose variation is better.

As the fight happened, there was man holding a sword in the woods. The man was wearing a gown that lords wear and walked slowly as if taking a leisurely walk, his blade brushing against the grass.

They charged and went past each other. Genzo's straw hat was cut in half and fell off his head and a few pieces of his hair was cut. Ragnarok's right shoulder was cut on the side and he grunted a little bit.

"I do not need something like the Fire Sword to beat the likes of you." said Genzo. "The day you decided to work for the demons is the day you lost your humanity. I have nothing more to say to you."

Ragnarok grabbed his wound "Son of a bitch!" Still determined to win, he dashed forward in a reckless manner and let out a barrage of attacks.

The lord in the woods continued to walk and came upon the battlefield and saw a pile of dead bodies of bounty hunters.

Genzo sensed a threatening presence nearby and while distracted, Ragnarok flicked his sword from the ground, launching dirt into his opponent's eyes.

"Argh!" His instinct was to cover his eyes with his hand but he held onto his sword instead.

"I got you now old man!" Ragnarok charged at him and attacked aggressively.

Genzo defended himself well for someone who lost part of his vision. *Clang Clang* He jumped to a safer distance. Some of the dirt was still in his eye and his vision was blurry. He saw the lord in the gown and the lord's hat. As his vision became better, the lord's face was seen and it was a face that's familiar to him. "Just as I thought...it is you..."

The lord was standing beside Ragnarok was **Liu Zhang**. He was wearing a lord's hat; he had a mustache and a beard, a normal look for eunuchs of high rank. His face was one of a refined politician and yet there was something unsettling about his face, particularly his eyes.

"I can finish him on my own, master." Ragnarok.

"Non-sense." Zhang replied. "If you could you would have done so already."

"I never thought you'd show your face here, you demon." said Genzo with much disdain. Just like Chu Yen, it is apparently that Liu Zhang and Masai Genzo have a fifty year grudge to settle. "You turned Chu Yen against us and forced me to hide in this valley."

"Chu Yen betrayed you on his own." said Zhang. "I wanted to see for myself the power of the Mighty War God. But what a shame that our encounter today will be short...for you will have to die as part of my plan."

Him and Genzo exchanged moves and his speed was unreal, unlike any others he has seen. Not only that, but Zhang used techniques from several different martial arts styles.

"Let me tell you something!" Zhang said as he was fighting, "Even if you still have the Fire Sword, you still cannot do a thing against me!"

"We'll see about that!" Genzo dashed forward and plunged his blade straight out, but Zhang moved in a way he's never seen before. Using a technique known as Zanzoken, he created after-images of himself, leaving Genzo to cut the air. The real Zhang appeared a foot away from his original spot and the War God was startled. He continued to attack and Liu Zhang used the Zanzoken with each of his movements, confusing the War God's eyes, leaving him to hit the air each time. *Whish whoosh*

"Let me finish him!" Ragnarok ran forward and Zhang stuck out his blade horizontally, blocking his path.

"Do not interfere." said Zhang.

Genzo dashed forward and let out his battle cry as he did. Zhang used the Zanzoken and dodged the blade, going past his safe zone, and plunged his sword into Genzo's stomach. *Schleb* The War God took a step back and grabbed his wound in surprise. It was a deep wound and he fell to his knees and stuck his sword into the ground.

"This can't be..." he said in disbelief.

Ragnarok walked over to him.

Genzo looked at him one last time with his bloodshot eyes. "You'll never find the glory that you seek."

Ragnarok stabbed his sword into Genzo's chest, and he fell down, lying in a pool of his own blood. "I did it...I killed the War God! Ahahahahaha! HAHHAHAHAHA!"

The surviving bounty hunter was hiding behind a tree and witnessed much of the fight. As Ragnarok continued to laugh maniacally, Zhang walked over to the frightened bounty hunter.

Zhang pointed his sword at the man's neck. "Listen up. You are the witness to the death of the War God. You shall tell everyone in town that one man, and only man killed him, by the name of Ragnarok. You shall spread the name Ragnarok throughout Shen. If you speak otherwise, I will find you and kill you."

The guy was shaking nervously. "Yes...I understand!"

Ragnarok was still having a fit. "I killed him...yes...he's dead at last. We did it..."

"No." said Zhang, "You did it. You killed the traitor. He will no longer threaten innocent people, and those whom he killed can rest in peace. You are a hero worthy of leading a country!" ²⁷

[B] Title Contents

When the flashback was over, Ragnarok felt guilty. Guilty that he needed help to kill his former comrade. Grief and anger came over him because he always assumed that between him and Genzo, he was the stronger swordsman. He was angry at Genzo for many years because Genzo always tried to discipline him and tried to make him change his ways. Ragnarok always thought that if they fought one on one, he would

²⁷ Fight was updated in 2021

win. But the last fight they had proved otherwise. Liu Zhang helped him, and without him, he would not have defeated Genzo. And now that Genzo is dead...Ragnarok will never find out who truly is the better swordsman.

Lei has been Celina's servant from the very beginning, since her early days of being a concubine. Unlike other servants, she is the concubine's personal servant, and her one duty is to serve the concubine. She has made it clear that she will give the concubine her complete loyalty and will dedicate her life to Lady Celina. Now that her lady is in a pinch, it is up to Lei to make things right.

She has been asking around for the king for an hour already, and no one seems to know where he is. She grew more and more desperate after each passing minute, and it became apparent that the king is purposely hiding himself. None of the other lords knew where he was.

"Lord Yu." she said, bowing. "Have you seen his majesty?"

"No, I have not." Yu replied. "You look awfully tired. Is something the matter?"

"Uh, no. I need to find him. When you see him please tell him to come back to his chambers." Lei bowed once again and ran off.

Another quarter of an hour passed by, and Lei knew not what to do. She went back to Celina's chambers. "I could not find the king." Lei said. "But I am sure that he would have approved of your actions, doctor, as long as you are doing it to keep her alive. He might even reward you for saving her."

"Indeed, that is a risk worth taking." replied the bearded man. He was sitting by the bed, checking the unconscious woman's pulse.

Celina was naked and tucked under the blanket, and her features were safely concealed. She was sweating heavily and her eyes were twitching.

"I found where the incision was on her, and I was able to extract most of the poison from her body." said the doctor. "But I'm afraid we waited too long. The poison has spread to her nervous system and in order to clean it up I need to make the antidote."

"The antidote?" Lei replied stupidly. "In that case, let's not waste any time. We must make it immediately!"

"It is not that simple. The antidote requires certain ingredients and it will take time for me to make it. I must go back to the infirmary (醫務室) and make the antidote."

"Fine, I will watch over her. Please hurry up." said Lei impatiently.

The doctor got up and bowed. "I swear on my life I will get the cure for her. Please, I leave her in your hands." Without further ado, he left the room.

Now Lei is alone with Celina, and she cannot help but feel sympathy for her master. When one is a servant she is expected to behave and act courteous to her master. Servants basically have no rights, and they are not equals to their master. They are very much like slaves, with the exception that some people willingly choose to become servants because of lack of money.

Yet, Celina has never treated her like a servant in the traditional way. Lords and their wives beat their servants when they do not do their duties properly. Sometimes they are beaten purely because their masters are angry and stressed out. Many times Lei has offered to help Celina get dressed in the morning, which is the way royal members live. Their servants do everything for them. But Celina refuses, saying that she must do it on her own, because at one point, she was not the concubine, but just an ordinary peasant.

Celina treated her more like a friend than a servant, and Lei felt at ease whenever she is around her master. She is obligated to pay her back someday, somehow.

Just now, she heard moaning. "My lady? Are you alright?"

Celina could barely open her eyes. "Why am I here?"

"You were poisoned." Lei replied. "But do not worry, for the imperial doctor is going to make an antidote for you. You must persevere until then."

"Poisoned? I was poisoned?" she mumbled weakly. Suddenly, her eyes became wide open. She remembered fighting with Tao and the fact that he was throwing needles at her. One of those needles happened to scrape her thigh without her knowing it, and she was walking around with the poison in her body ignorantly. "Cheng was poisoned too! He did not receive the antidote!"

"Mister Cheng is infected too?" Lei repeated.

"He does not know that he is still infected...we must find him."

"No, my lady. You must stay here and rest."

"Lei, you must go and find him."

"But my lady, I must stay here and take care of you. No one else knows of your condition besides the doctor and the king. If I leave you here you will be left alone."

"Listen...Cheng's life is on the line." Celina said, not listening to Lei's words. "You must find him..."

"My loyalty is with you my lady. I cannot leave you here while you could be dying."

"Lei, we have known each other for a long time." said Celina, staring at her companion. "I have never forced you to do anything against your will. But now I am asking you this favor..."

"But..."

"If you truly are loyal to me then you will fulfill my request." She touched Lei's arm. "I will be fine...I promise you."

"If that is what you wish, my lady." said Lei, bowing. "I will be back shortly, so get some rest." Lei walked over to the door and turned around one last time. When she finally was ready, she faced forward and closed the door behind her.

Lei's heart is yet again touched by her lady's kindness. Even when she is ill and can barely speak, she is still thinking of the well-being of others. Celina truly is a rare gem. But now is not the time to for admiration, she must find Cheng right away.

Lei went through the palace, keeping her hopes up. Perhaps Cheng will be easier to find than the king. The first obvious place she checked was Alex's quarters. She knocked on the door and there was no answer. "Hello, Sir Cheng? Are you there?" There was silence and Lei decided to open the door and peep in. "Hello?"

The house was vacant (空置). Lei walked into the living room and continued to search, hoping that she finds Cheng sleeping somewhere. Unfortunately, no one was here, and she stepped out of the house. By chance Zi was outside.

"Lei? What're you doing here? Aren't you the concubine's servant?"

"Zi, I am glad to see you. Have you seen Sir Cheng?"

"Alex said he is going to do an errand. I'm afraid he won't be back in a while."

"We need to find him right away." said Lei.

"Is it urgent?" Zi asked.

"It is nothing." she replied.

"Nothing? It doesn't look like nothing. Why can't you tell me?" Zi asked.

Lei reluctantly asked him, "Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course. You can trust me." he said.

Lei's eyes darted left and right, wondering if she should tell him. If she reveals the truth she could be punished, but she decided to tell him regardless. "The concubine has been poisoned...and we need to find the ingredients for the antidote."

"Poisoned?" Zi said in surprise.

"Shhhh! Not so loud." said Lei, putting a finger over her lips. "We do not want others to know about this. We did not tell the other servants about this...we must find Sir Cheng right away...otherwise he could be dead by tomorrow."

"Dead?" Zi replied. "Unfortunately he did not tell me where he was. Plus, I do not know this palace well."

"My lady is unattended right now. Oh, time is running out." said Lei, panicking.

"Alright, take me to see her." said Zi. "You know this complicated place better than I do, so you will have better luck finding Cheng. And in the meanwhile I will guard Lady Celina."

"Fine, come with me." said Lei.

They came into the room quietly. Lei put her hand on Celina's forehead. "She is burning up. Her condition grows worse."

"Who could have done this?"

"I do not know. Whoever did it is a sinner and he must be punished."

"Does the king know about this?" Zi asked.

"Yes...but he has vanished. I tried to find him but I cannot." Lei replied. "She also mentioned that Cheng is infected with the same poison. I must go find him. Please, watch over her and do not tell anyone about this."

"No problem, you can count on me." said Zi. He walked over to the unconscious Celina and felt her pulse. Judging by her heart rate, and the paleness on her face, it must be that type of poison. ([Can it be...](#))

The king was still miserable physically, still waiting for the spice to show up. It is unfortunate that he does not know Chou and his men were murdered on the mountain site. He came into the room, where Liu Zhang greeted him. "Your highness."

"You better have called me here for a good reason, Zhang." said Liu Bei. "I have many important things to do!"

"I know your time is extremely valuable." Zhang replied. "But what I have may interest you."

"What is it?" he asked impatiently.

"Your servant Chou failed to retrieve the spice. He has never returned. He probably convinced the other men in his group to abandon the mission."

"What? Why would he do that?" shouted Liu Bei. "After I promised him all the gold and riches he could have ever wanted?"

"He probably sold the spice to another kingdom, most likely Leinwan."

"What...that wretched little..."

Zhang smirked. "Do not worry sire, for I have taken precautions. I took the liberty of going one step ahead and sent my men to find the spice, in case Chou should fail."

Liu Bei's expression changed completely. "You have the spice?" he asked desperately.

"Indeed. I have them in my basement. Do you care to come with me?"

"Fine, as long as you have the spice."

Zi Watches Over Her 1Contents

Celina was moaning lightly in her sleep. Zi took the wet cloth off her forehead and dipped into a bucket of water and rinsed it. Then he put it back on her forehead. Her lips have lost their color and her skin was pale, and she was grimacing the whole time, it looked like she was having tough time with the poison.

Zi was wondering who could have done such a thing, or who would dare do such a thing. She is the king's favorite concubine, and the offender will surely face the death sentence...or perhaps something worse than that. But the bigger question is how did the perpetrator sneak the poison in? Is it in the food? Is the perpetrator somewhere in the palace, or has he bribed someone in the palace to poison the food?

She continued to moan unconsciously, as if she was feeling the pain even while unconscious. Moments later, she opened her eyes.

"You're awake. Good. The doctor is on his way back from finding the antidote. He should be here shortly."

"Antidote?"

"You've been poisoned." Zi said.

Suddenly, she sat up and the wet cloth on her head fell off. "The poison..." she said, clutching the blanket to her naked chest. "Cheng is also poisoned. He does not know."

"So it was the food?"

"I must find him and inform him."

"There is no way you can find him now." said Zi.

"You do not understand; his life is in danger!" she exclaimed. She wrapped the blanket around her chest and began to move.

"No, your highness, you can't go in your condition, you need to rest." said Zi, touching her shoulder.

"There is no time." she replied, pushing his hand away. "I must warn him."

Celina was stubborn and did not care what he had to say. She got off the bed with the **white blanket** wrapped around her body. Zi grew impatient and frustrated. "Listen to me..."

As she tried to walk away, Zi grabbed her by the shoulders and made her turn around. "Listen your highness, you can't go anywhere in your condition."

"Let go of me!" she exclaimed. She knocked his arms away and shoved his chest, making him stutter backwards. Then she walked away from him and towards the bookshelf.

Despite her physical resistance, Zi was still determined to stop her. He grabbed her left shoulder and turned her around violently. "I promised Lei to watch over you. What can you possibly do in your condition?"

"Let go!" she shrieked. Zi kept trying to restrain her while she resisted. But in her condition, she was not able to do much.

Zi tripped on something on floor and fell into her, pushing her against the bookshelf. *Thud* They both lost balance and Celina fell down backwards, dragging Zi with her. *Thud* His body was on top of hers and they were staring face to face. It was an extremely awkward moment...they just stared at each other in shock for a few seconds. Zi did not blink or even breathe as he stared at her mesmerizing (迷人) eyes.

Celina eventually came to her senses and screamed. A book from the bookshelf fell down and landed on Zi's head. *Thud* Consequently, it made him land his lips on top of hers. Her eyes grew wide open from the shock. "Mmmmmfff!!"

Celina shoved his face away and slapped him. *Smack* He fell down next to her. She was desperate to get away from, so she sat up quickly, then got back on her feet and limped away.

"No, wait!" Zi crawled towards her and grabbed the blanket near her legs and pulled it while she was moving forward. She was spinning away like a top as the blanket was pulled off her and dropped to the floor. Celina's naked form was completely exposed, much to his shock and awe. He stared with his jaw wide open.

She glanced down at her own exposed body and then screamed. "Aaaaah!!" Celina was in complete disbelief that this was happening and covered her privates.

Zi covered his own eyes. "I didn't see anything!"

While covering her privates, she ran towards the window and hid behind the curtain. She stared at him like a scared little kid who was about to be grounded²⁸.

"Can you pass me the blanket please?"

Zi picked up the blanket while covering his own eyes and walked over to her slowly. "I'm sorry. It was an accident."

Finally the blanket was within reach, and she snatched it from him and covered her body with it.

"It is not good for you to walk around in your condition. If you must go find Alex, I will go for you. You just rest here."

Zi Watches Over Her 2

Celina was wrapped in a white blanket. She took deep breaths, still flustered with what happened earlier. Her blanket dropped and this man saw everything.

"I'm sorry..." Zi said. "I didn't see anything...after all, it's a crime to see the naked body of the concubine."

"Forget it." she said. "I need to see Alex."

She started to walk and Zi grabbed her by the shoulders. "Please, you need to rest."

"Let me go!" She brushed his hands off but he would not let her.

"Listen to me, you need to rest!" They kept grabbing each other's hands.

"Let go!" she shrieked, annoyed. Celina tried to pry his hands off her arms and they struggled. Her legs hit the bed and she lost balance. They both fell on the bed, with Zi on top of her. *Plop*

They were face to face and she shrieked in surprise. She was wrapped in a sheet and she's lying on the bed...with a man on top of her.

Zi grabbed her wrists and pinned them down.

"Let me go!!" She thrashed about.

"This is for your own good." Suddenly, he leaned in and kissed her lips.

"Mmmmmmmmmmmfffff!!!" Celina's eyes grew wide open with surprise.

Her fingers grabbed the bed sheet tightly. Her legs thrashed about between his legs.

But she was too weak and tired to offer any resistance. Her thrashing stopped. Her fingers let go. And her eyes started to close...as she's losing consciousness. She can no longer stay awake...and her eyelids closed for good.

Title Contents

Whoosh Alex swings his blade like it weighted nothing. Swords are made of metal and are heavy by nature, but true swordsman make swords become part of them. *Whoosh* Whoosh. Alex found himself sweating heavily under the sun. But today he cannot concentrate on his fighting.

Alex, hearing her scream, came immediately with his weapon already drawn. "What is it?"

"That..." she said, pointing nervously at the hissing creature.

²⁸ When parents punish their kids they say they are grounded

"Don't worry I'll get it." Alex ran to the snake, but he tripped over a rock and fell on top of her. Crash. He was on top of her and they were face to face, and they just stared at each other in shock.

That image was stuck in his mind and distracted him from his training.

"Sir Cheng!" yelled a woman's voice.

Alex looked at the entrance and saw Lei. "Aren't you Lei, Lady Celina's attendant?"

"Sir Cheng," she said, trying to catch her breath, "There is an emergency!"

"Emergency? What is it?"

"Please, my lady is poisoned and ill. You must come with me."

Alex was shocked.

Celina Wakes Up

The doctor was checking Celina's pulse while Zi was walking back and forth, worrying. He was worried not only about the concubine, but Alex's welfare as well. Hopefully, Lei will find him in time. "How is she, doctor?"

"I just gave her the antidote. It will take a few hours for it to spread throughout her body and fight the poison."

Just then she woke up. "I have to see Alex now."

"But your highness...I strongly advise you to rest." said the doctor.

"I've already told you, he cannot be found right now." said Zi.

"But time is running out." She dragged herself out of bed, wrapping the blanket around her body.

"But wait!" exclaimed the doctor.

Zi put his hand on his shoulder. "I already tried stopping her. It's no use."

She went to the door and just now Alex came in. She was shocked to see him and gasped. The blanket slid off her body and he saw everything. The doctor and Zi also saw everything, and their mouths were wide open with shock.

Celina screamed and Alex turned away and Celina quickly grabbed the blanket to cover herself.

Alex said, "I...didn't see anything..."

Lei responded, "Yes you did. Your eyes were open."

"It wasn't my fault!" Alex exclaimed.

"You saw my lady in her natural form. You've committed a sin! All of you did!"

"You can't blame him. You saw it too, Lei." said Zi.

"That's different. I'm a woman!" said Lei.

"That's not the point. It's not our fault!" Zi replied.

While they argued, Celina felt weak and fell to the floor. Everybody stopped arguing and went over to her.

Alex has been by the concubine's side for almost half a day. He was determined to watch over her even if it means to stay here the entire day. Eventually, she woke up and it was delightful surprise for her to see Alex. She sat up. "Alex?"

"Oh, you are fine now. You look much better than you did before." Alex replied.

"I did not expect to see you here." she said. And she knew not what to say, because she was embarrassed. Whenever he is here, she has this strange feeling like her heart is beating rapidly.

"The antidote has already taken effect. You should be fine in about half a day. And do not worry about me; I have already taken the antidote. It is thanks to you that I received the message on time."

"You have been watching over me...I do not know what to say."

"It is no problem. It is my duty to help you."

While embarrassed, the blanket slipped off and exposed her top, and she became even more embarrassed. Alex turned to the side. Her face was completely red, and clutched the blanket closely to her bosom.

Neither of them said anything for a moment, as they usually do when something awkward happens.

But Celina broke the silence. "Cheng...thank you for your help."

"No, I should be thanking you. Get well rested and tomorrow you will back to normal." Then he stood up and left the room.

When she was alone, Celina once again went into her own thoughts. With the poison out of her system, she felt much better, only a little tired. Celina was glad that Alex's health is no longer in danger. Still, she was surprised that Alex stayed with him the entire time. She felt that a thank you was simply not enough, and desired to speak to him some more, feeling incomplete with this. Perhaps she should visit him tomorrow?

In some training ground, Tao is practicing his sword craft. He just beat up three skilled swordsmen. "Hmph. What a bunch of useless fools." he commented as they're lying there coughing and moaning in pain. "You guys aren't even worth a challenge." He put his sword away and walked away from his training partners.

Celina and Alex met up again today. She had to do so without letting the king know, and it was not that hard, since he is never around lately. She also instructed Lei not to follow her, even though Lei is the person she trusts the most. She does not want this to become complicated.

"Good morning." Alex said.

"Good morning." Celina replied. Usually, she does a more polite greeting, but today she is extra quiet. Neither of them said anything for a while. Alex then spoke up: "About yesterday...I want to say thank you for being concerned about me. Back at the barn, you went through the trouble of sucking most of the poison out of my body. It is thanks to you that I am still walking and breathing. I am overwhelmed by your kindness."

"You need not bring up that night." she replied. "I never leave the palace without my guards. Actually, I should say that I am not allowed to leave with the king's permission."

"You cannot do anything without the king's supervision?"

"No." Celina replied. "Everything I do must go through him. I am not allowed to hold a sword, or dance, or leave the palace. During meetings, Liu Bei makes all the political decisions, while I am not allowed to do so. My title as concubine is exactly that, just a title."

"I am beginning to see how you feel, your highness." said Alex. "I thought your life was perfect. But you must feel like a bird trapped in a cage. But it is not that bad here."

Again, there was a moment of silence. Celina did not respond and Alex did not know what to add. "Cheng," Celina said, breaking the silence. "Have you ever been in love?"

That was a strange question coming from her. "No, I'm afraid not. I've been searching for my sister for most of my life so I never had the time to fall in love."

"Really? Not even once?" she asked, looking at him.

"It just never crossed my mind."

"At least you are still unmarried and young. You can find one whenever you want...when you are ready. You still have your choices. As for me, it is already too late. I am bound for life. The king and I hardly have any romance between us."

"You make it sound worse than it seems, your highness. At least you still have friends like Lei."

"Lei does not understand...she is just like everyone else, she keeps telling me how fortunate I am and I should just accept the way things are. It's just that...the feeling is not there."

"Then, are you saying that you'd give up the life you have for a feeling?"

"But what if that feeling is worth it?" she replied enthusiastically. "A life of love is better than a life of riches without love, isn't it?"

Alex had no answer for her. He was once a poor fugitive but now he is a wealthy hero, so he has lived both lives, but the feeling of love is foreign to him.

"Can I ask you another question?" Celina asked. "What do you think of me?"

It is one question after another, and Alex felt obligated to answer, even though he did not know where this conversation was going. "Well, uhhh...you are a very kind person and a capable swordsman."

"Really?" she said, as if she's relieved. "Is that the truth?"

"It is the truth. His highness could not have asked for a better concubine. You are beautiful, smart, and talented. You even know how to wield a sword. Female swordsmen are rare, but a gifted female swordsman is even rarer."

"Cheng, this may sound strange, but somehow whenever I talk to you my spirits are lifted up. Whenever I am unhappy you can make me feel better. Whenever I am around you, I have this feeling, and I cannot explain what it is."

"I do not understand." Alex replied stupidly.

"It is just this feeling I have..."

"A feeling?" Alex repeated.

The conversation became uncomfortable for her, but she must say it, otherwise she will never feel right. Her face began to blush and she did not realize it. Alex noticed it, and even though he is clueless in the arena of love, he is not ignorant to what is happening. But still, he will deny it.

Celina continued, "I cannot explain it. It is just this feeling I have...I do not know how to describe it. Do you not feel the same when you are with me?"

"Your highness," he said, not answering her question, "I do not know what you mean. I do not know where you are going with this."

"Surely you feel the same way I do, don't you? I mean, we have been through a lot together, and..."

"Please, your highness. You are married...you're a member of royalty...a representative of the kingdom. Think of nothing else."

For some reason, those words set off her trigger. It is probably because he sounds like every other shallow person she has met so far. All the nobles and their wives say the same thing to her: just do your best as the concubine and think of nothing else. So she is not supposed to think at all and live her role?

Alex began to walk away, and she was clenching her fist and looking at the floor. "So, is that it?" she asked. "You are just going to brush away everything that has happened?"

"Sorry, I do not know what you are talking about."

"You idiot! I am trying to say...I am in love with you!"

Alex gasped and turned around. Celina gasped and covered her mouth, realizing what she just said. Now she was embarrassed and her face was blushing.

"What did you say?" Alex asked in disbelief.

八: The Exile. An Unforgiveable Mistake.

[<< Prev Chapter](#)

[\[B \]](#) [\[C \]](#) [Contents](#)

"You idiot! I am trying to say I am in love with you!"

Alex gasped, and Celina gasped and covered her mouth, realizing what she just said. A strong gust of wind hit them. Somehow, all the roller coaster emotions that she had experienced beforehand led up to this intense moment. She tried to suppress her feelings, but when she did so her feelings only grow more and became out of control.

"What...did you say?" Alex asked in disbelief.

"I..." Celina was at a loss of words. She had to speak carefully at a very delicate situation like this. It is too late to take back those words. What is said is said, and now, they are chartering (租船) unfamiliar territory.

"Your highness...stop joking around." said Alex.

"Joking?" she repeated stupidly. "Joking around? Yes...I suppose I was. I am sorry for the misunderstanding." She started to walk away, and Alex grabbed her arm.

"You weren't serious, were you?"

"Just forget it." she said, not looking at him.

"There are things that you should not joke about...your highness."

At this point Celina turned around and shook his hand off. "I **did** say it! What of it?" she yelled angrily. Alex has never seen her this angry before, and he felt guilty because she is angry at him. As far as he knows, he did nothing wrong. She continues to yell, "It is not my fault I have these feelings! Cheng..."

"Your highness...I appreciate your sentiments...but I do not know what to say. You are married...not just to any man, but the king of our kingdom!"

"Why does that matter? You feel the same way about me, don't you?" she asked with bright, hopeful eyes.

"I...I'm afraid not. I'm sorry." he said, turning away.

"You lie!" she yelled. "I know you are. If you were not fond of me, why did you kiss me that day?!"

Alex gasped as he remembered that day.

Cheng grew impatient and angry, and his Fire Sword reflected his emotions. It became bright red and engulfed in flames. He charged forward and was determined to rescue the woman. Jiax pushed Celina him and ran away.

Cheng grabbed her with both hands and dropped the sword. This was the first time they had ever stared so closely into each other's eyes, and they remained silent while staring dumbfounded.

Cheng was mesmerized as he stared at her bright and innocent eyes. This woman, in his arms, was beautiful and completely different than other beautiful he had seen. Her body was flawless, her skin was smooth and perfect. And her eyes were so bright and lively, and warm and welcoming. Celina was too scared to say anything, and just stared at him dumbfounded.

He could not resist it and kissed her lips.

Alex, now embarrassed, did not know how to answer her. "I...I don't know what came over me. It just happened in the moment. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? That's all you have to say?" Celina yelled.

"Let's just forget about that. Pretend that it never happened."

"Pretend that it never happened?" she said. "You are not going to take responsibility for what you did?"

"At the time I did not know you were the king's concubine!"

"What difference does it make?"

"It makes all the difference!" Alex said, yelling as loudly as she is. "You are the imperial concubine! You should not be having these thoughts! How can you even think about being with another man? We can both lose our heads for even having this conversation!"

"What are you going to do then?" she said, "Just pretend that we never discussed this? Are you going to live the rest of your life repressing your feelings? Are you are going to live a lie?"

"What are you telling me to do? Commit adultery? That is treason. Is this something worth risking both our lives for? I am sorry...but I want to keep my head off the silver platter²⁹."

Tears streamed from Celina's eyes. "Fine! Alex Cheng, I didn't know you were such a coward!" She ran away.

Alex instantly regretted what he said and he ran after her.

"Wait!" he yelled.

Celina ran through the garden with tears streaming from her eyes. She never expected it to end this way, but this is the reality of it. She was not ready to listen to anything else other than her own thoughts. She could not believe that she said those three words to him unintentionally, and she became vulnerable and opened herself up to him, and he just flat out rejected her and hurt her feelings. At times like these, she just wants to go to the library and cry alone. Oh, how badly she yearns to go there right now, the one place where she can be alone without anyone looking, her one place of solitude.

Alex caught up to her and grabbed her arm.

"Let go!" she yelled.

"Listen to me!"

They struggled and he lost his grip on her and they both lost their balance. Alex fell on his knees while Celina fell into the pond. Splash!

"Your highness?"

Celina came back up to the surface and took a deep breath.

"Please accept my apologies." He offered his hand and she took it, and came back to land. "Are you alright?"

Being soaked with water made her calm and tame. "I'm fine." she replied.

"You're completely wet. You can't go back like this. You can get a fresh change of clothes in my quarters."

She nodded silently.

Alex waited in the living room while Celina was changing in his bedroom. Leaning against the door, she was still thinking about what she said earlier. She was still depressed about the turn of events that led up to this moment. Celina opened herself to Alex, and even confessed to him, something that she has never done before, and he downright rejected her.

Celina has her beliefs and so does Alex. Are you saying that you'd give up the life you have for a feeling? Perhaps he is right. It would be foolish to jump into something that you are not sure of. Having an affair would mean death for the both of them. At this point, she did not feel as strongly as she did before.

²⁹ Idiom - cut off your head and put it on a silver platter for a reward

She is wet and needs a change of clothes. She begins to unzip her white dress, and let it drop on the floor.

Alex sat by himself on the dinner table and sighed. Holding the Fire Sword in his hand, he examined its details carefully. What happened today is certainly not something that he is prepared for. It is awkward enough to have a woman in his home, but she is changing in his room. When she comes out, what should he say to her? Or perhaps say nothing at all and take her back to her quarters? If only Master Genzo were here, he'd know what to do because he always had an answer.

Celina's dress dropped to her feet and she stepped out of them. Underneath, she was wearing a thin, **red undergarment** made of silk. It had a string tied around her neck, and if this string were to be untied, her garment would fall off. Celina grabbed the new dress and held it onto her chest and examined the room.

It was strange, since she did not feel comfortable in here. She always felt safe with Cheng around, but being in his room gives her a different feeling. Ever since Cheng came into her life, she has experienced many firsts. For example, the first time she realized that her marriage with Liu Bei was strictly by obligation, and there is no love between them, the first time she fell in love with another man. And this is the first time she is changing in a man's room other than the king.

For some reason, she felt unsafe, and stepped backwards. She felt something behind her, and she assumed it was the wall, but when she turned around, she saw the face of Duke Xiang in his demon form. "AAAAAAH!!!"

Alex dropped his cup of tea to the floor and ran to his chambers. He slammed the door open. "Your highness?" She was unconscious, lying on the floor. He lifted her back up and slightly tapped her face. "Are you alright, your highness? Say something."

Celina moaned in pain and her eyes twitched. "Uhhh...uhhh..." Her eyes opened a little and her vision was blurry. Once she fully regained consciousness, the first thing she saw was Alex's face. Once again, they were up close and staring each other in the eyes. "Cheng?"

"Are you alright?"

Celina saw the demon's face again and screamed and buried her face into his chest. "There's a m-m-monster in here!"

"Monster?" Alex turned around. "Oh that's not a monster. That's Duke Xiang's head."

After the Demon Slaying Ceremony, Alex Cheng had the privilege of keeping the demon's head as a trophy. Cheng put it up on his wall as to remind himself of his accomplishments. But one cannot blame Celina for being scared of it, for the face itself is twisted and grotesque (怪诞的). It had sharp barbaric teeth and evil, lifeless eyes. Even if it is dead, its eyes seem to be staring right at you.

"I'm scared..."

"Do not worry...it is just a head. The demon is dead already."

At this point, she removed her face from his chest.

"It is okay." Alex said, trying to comfort her. "I will protect you."

Celina's arm was clutching onto Alex's shoulder, and she did not even realize how tightly she was holding onto him. They stared into each other's eyes and it was the same stare as the other day when she accidentally fell on top of her. But this one was much longer and more intense. All these encounters they have had left an incomplete feeling in their hearts, feelings that need to be acknowledged and fulfilled.

Celina's eyes were shaking with fear, and she stared at him uneasily. She was wearing only a night gown, and most of her skin was exposed. Of course, Alex noticed it. Most of her legs were exposed, and their skin was flawless. She was scared and helpless in his arms, and even though she can hold a sword, she is merely an innocent and helpless woman.

This time, however, the staring did not end, for they were communicating to each other nonverbally. They moved their lips closely and closer to each other's until they almost touched. But when they were this close, there was a knock at the door.

Knock knock. Alex broke out of his trance and went to answer the door. Now by herself, Celina was still shocked by what just happened. Mesmerized by Alex's strength and reassuring words, they almost did the unthinkable. But does that mean he finally admits his feelings and accepts hers as well? All these questions were running through her mind as she clutched the dress tightly to her breasts.

The servant bowed. "Sir Cheng."

"What is it?" Alex asked.

"His highness requests the presence of Lady Celina, but she is nowhere to be found. Do you happen to know where she is?"

"Uhhh..." To tell him that Celina is changing in his room will cause misunderstandings, so in this case the best thing to do is to lie. "No. I have not seen her all day."

"Very well, Sir Cheng, sorry to bother you." The servant walked away.

"Was that one of the king's servants?" Celina asked, now fully dressed.

"Yes, he was searching for you. You should go back to him...he is your husband."

Celina went past him and walked to the exit, and stopped at the door and turned around. There was a lot she wanted to say, and likewise for Alex, but they both decided to say nothing, and she left without even a farewell. Creeeeek. The door closed and once again, Alex is still in turmoil (動盪) with himself. He is just a confused young man with many feelings and no answers.

A certain ninja girl was sitting on the quiet rooftops of Yi Ling. Sui Long was on the adjacent rooftop, and he was about to go greet her. He noticed something similar about her and her brother – they like to sit around and do nothing. Both Li and Alex like to stare at the sky as if some reward would drop down from the heavens.

"What is it now?" Li asked when Sui landed on her roof.

"Can't you ever greet me like a normal person?"

"Is this an urgent matter or do you just want to bother me?" Li replied. "If you have nothing better to do, then perhaps you should do your job and guard Cheng."

"Chen is safe in the palace. I only came here after I have confirmed this."

"Safe? No place is safe for him. He was attacked in the palace." said Li.

"After that last attempt, our perpetrator is taking precautions. He will not strike so early after a failed attempt." said Sui Long. "If you care about your brother, why not visit him? He misses you very much."

"I will see him when I feel like it."

"When you feel like it? What are you waiting for, Li?" Sui asked. "When you first came to the War God, your brother was the person that you speak of the most. He was the one person that you missed and wanted to see so badly. And now, he wants is the one who wants to see you, yet you are hesitating."

"Don't even remind me of the past!" Li said angrily. "Back then I was weak and I did not know how to fight."

"I see. You do not want to see Alex because he reminds you of the past?" Sui asked. "Because he reminds you of your past self when you were weaker?"

"Enough." Li replied. "I do not want to talk about this any further."

"At least you have someone who cares about you." said Sui. "How I wish I had a family. My life would have been completely different if I had parents who took care of me and forced me to go to school and find a job like everyone else. But here I am, cursed to wear this mask for more than half of my life...a warrior with no face seeking revenge. Li, you are not the only one who has a sibling who you have not visited in a while."

"Do you mean..."

"Yes, Shen Long has a sister in Yi Ling."

"He mentioned it briefly once." said Li.

Sui was surprised. "So you do know? He rarely mentions her, but I can tell he cares about her deeply. He is going to visit her now as we speak, and it will not be easy for him because he has not seen her in years..."

[B] Title Contents

Somewhere out there, a young girl was at home, sitting on a rocking chair, doing her work. She was a doll maker, and she was particularly good at it. Holding a knife, she carved the block of wood in her hand. Her eyes were closed as she was working, and as a matter of fact, her eyes are always closed because she is blind. But that fact did not stop her from pursuing this profession. Even though she cannot see, she can feel the contents of the wooden block, feeling the details with her fingers.

Her skills cannot be ignored, as proven by the popular demand of her dolls. On the shelves were other wooden sculptures she had carved with much attention and passion.

Outside, it was **pouring** and thunder roared. On **rainy** days like these, the girl thought about someone she cares about very much. But alas, that person is long gone, and she lives alone in this quiet house.

Shen Long was standing on the rooftop, watching his sister. He was soaked in the rain yet he remained still the entire time. He had a strong desire to go inside and greet the girl, but he could not. Something inside of him was holding him back. Perhaps guilt or remorse, but nobody really knows what is in his heart.

When Shen grew tired of watching, he left. The girl thought she heard something. Because of her blindness, her keen sense of hearing is exceptionally sharp. She can hear footsteps from far away, and she can tell by those footsteps if the person is skinny or fat, whether or not he is running or walking, and even the which direction he is going to. But the heavy rain distorted her sense of hearing. She thought that a particular person was coming to visit her, perhaps watch her from afar...but she brushed that thought aside and continued her work.

"He has not seen her since he left Yi Ling." Sui continued. "At the time, he was a fugitive on the run from the law. I do not know the exact reason why he resorted to stealing, but I am sure he has his reasons. One day, he stole from the wrong person and became a fugitive. Shen realized he could no longer stay in society so he sought refuge in the Valley of Death, knowing no one will follow him there."

"I see, but my situation is different."

"You think so, Li? We are warriors of the sword, and we are prepared to die at any time. Shen realizes that this might be his last chance to see his sister, the sister he grew up with and loves dearly. How long are you going to wait to see Cheng?"

"I do not know." Li replied. Somehow, Sui Long's little story compelled her to reveal her true thoughts. "I am not strong enough to defeat the demons...not enough even to defend myself. I abandoned Alex when he was a kid...I have no right to call him my brother. He is better off without a selfish sister like me." With that said, Li stood up and jumped away.

Sui Long was not able to convince her to change her mind, but in the very least, she was honest for a brief moment. His efforts were not in vain.

Celina came into the royal hall and Liu Zhang was in front of her. He bowed and greeted her properly. "Your highness."

"Lord Zhang."

"His highness the king has requested your presence. Farewell." Zhang walked away.

Liu Bei was sitting on the throne chair as usual. "Ah, Celina, it is good that you are here."

Celina bowed. "Is there something you need, your majesty?"

"A few days ago, we recruited a group of top dancers from the city so they can perform for us. I want you to see their performance and train them. I know you used to be a dancer, so this is your area of expertise."

Somehow, she was not surprised that he is asking her to do a task like this. Here she was hoping that he would be happy to see her. But still, Celina must remain formal. "As you wish, my king."

The dancers came into the hall and began their performance. Watching these dancers wave their sleeves around, Celina felt a bit of jealousy, because they reminded her of how she used to be. She used to be just like them, young, carefree, and independent.

Celina was once like them, but now she is bound by rules and traditions, and cannot see the person she loves without hiding it. Emotions and feelings were not meant to be suppressed, and if she abandons them now, she will live a life of regret and what ifs. This is her one chance at true happiness, and she decided that she must see him again, no matter what the cost.

Alex and Celina were standing at the same bridge that they always go to. "Your highness..."

"Since you are here, that means the message Lei delivered my message to you."

"Yes." Alex replied.

"Do not worry, Lei does not know the specifics of our meeting. Nobody knows except for us."

"It is you that I am worried about, your highness."

"You do not have to be so formal in front of me. Call me by my real name."

"Yes, Celina."

She smiled. "It has been a while since anyone has called me by my maiden name. It is as if my name has been forgotten."

"Celina, if we are ever to be caught, we could be executed. We can lose everything, including our lives." said Alex.

"It is a risk I am willing to take. I am tired of this life I am living."

"We cannot hide this for the rest of our lives. How can we continue to hide this from other people, especially the king?"

"I do not know." she replied. "I just want to be happy now. Is that too much to ask for?"

"If we are going to do this, we need a plan. We cannot afford any mistakes." said Alex. "I do not want anything to happen to you."

"Cheng..."

They embraced each other under the sunlight. They felt wrong for doing this, yet at the same time, it felt right. Wrong that it is against the law, yet right because they remain true to each other in a world full of lies.

"We will meet tomorrow at dawn at the same place." said Alex after their long embrace.

A henchmen was spying on them, and he cannot believe what he just heard. He immediately went to Liu Zhang's quarters to report this to him. As the henchmen whispered his shocking discovery, Zhang had a wicked smile on his lips.

Gulp, gulp, gulp. The king drank the bowls of soup like he was a beggar who had not had a drink in days. Liu Zhang came into the room. "How is the spice, sire?"

"It's good!" he said as he poured the liquid into his mouth, spilling it onto his clothes. "Good!"

"I am sorry to interrupt you during your meal, but I have some urgent news."

"It can wait, can't it!?"

"Sire, it is in your best interest to hear this now." Zhang replied.

"Is this more important than the spice?"

"Sire, is Lady Ce more important than the spice?"

"The concubine?" Liu Bei replied. "What about her?" He put the bowl down and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"Have you not noticed anything strange about her behavior lately?"

"Her behavior?"

"Like the fact that she is not around as much, and she is doing things without your consent?"

"What are you getting at, Lord Zhang?" Liu Bei asked impatiently. "Get to the point."

"Have you not noticed that Lady Ce is visiting someone frequently, and she is not telling you about it? Someone such as the Demon Slayer?"

"And what of it?" Liu Bei asked. "She is free to do as she wishes. The imperial palace is her home."

"Oh, she is free to do as she pleases?" Zhang replied with a smirk. "My, you sure are careless, letting her wander freely like that. You would not even know if she is having an affair..."

"An affair? Are you saying that Celina is having an affair? You should watch your tongue, Zhang. I will not have my men insulting my concubine!"

Zhang bowed and folded his hands in front of him. "Oh, but I speak the truth, sire."

The king grabbed his sword and pointed it at Zhang's shoulder. "This is a serious accusation, Lord Zhang. You should be more careful with your words."

"My servant has been following them, and he is certain that they are having an affair. Why would the concubine sneak out in the morning to meet up with Cheng and not tell you about it? Are those behaviors normal?"

The king's eyes widened and Zhang noticed his reaction. Then he raised his head a little. "Remember the time she tried to feed you poison?"

Liu Bei grunted and withdrew his sword.

"I know you will not believe me without evidence, so why not find out for yourself, sire?"

"You better be right about this, Zhang. Your life depends on it." No matter how much Liu Bei tried to deny it, Zhang speaks the truth. Even at this moment, Celina is not here to have dinner with him, like they usually do. She has been missing a lot lately, and they hardly communicate with each other. An affair...with Cheng? That is ridiculous...or is it? Does she dare to cheat on him?

In ancient times, men and women had different roles as part of the family. These traditions placed restrictions on what women can and cannot do. They are to find a good man and take care of him for the rest of his life, that is what they are supposed to do. A woman's sole responsibility is to her husband and their children, and if she cannot do that, then she is a disgrace.

In addition, a woman's duty is to entertain men. Dancers and songstresses perform at parties and social events so that the men can be entertained. Some of them play musical instruments. If a certain woman can play a string instrument called a bow, she is considered to be talented and desirable.

Celina would be considered to be such a woman. She was the best dancer at her theatre and the king picked her before anyone else did. Since she was not allowed to dance any longer, she learned to play the bow when she is bored.

Drrring. Dring. Dring. She struck the string with her fingers. Each movement must be coordinated exactly to produce the right sound, and it is not an easy skill to learn. Lei poured her a cup of tea. "This musical is soothing to my ears." said Lei, always giving her a compliment. "You are getting better and better everyday."

"Music is not my best talent, but it serves as a replacement for my dancing."

"I am sure King Liu will be pleased with your progress."

"Yes...I am sure..." Celina replied blankly.

"You are quite fortunate, my lady." said Lei. "You are the king's wife and you can ask for anything you want. You are pretty and talented...if only I had what you had."

"Fortunate..." Celina repeated while staring outside. Lei is her good and loyal friend, but unfortunately, they do not share the same views on life. Lei is just a typical woman who wants what other women want. Their goal in life is to find a good husband and after that their life is set. It is such a shame that Lei is as shallow as the other servants, who value money and status above all else.

Money and status does not make one a good husband. A good husband must have certain qualities about him and he must give his wife a certain feeling. Celina only receives this feeling when she is with Cheng, and as a matter of fact, he is the one thing in her mind. When they are together, she is happy, and when they are not together, she can only think of him and wait patiently until their next meeting time. **She has read many novels** and love poems and only wondered what it would be like to be the main heroine in those stories. To read about it is one thing, but to experience it is another. Is this what it feels like to be in love?

Alex walked by the balcony of an arbitrary (任意) building. The scenery certainly looks different from the top floor. The imperial complex is like a maze, one can easily get lost if he is not familiar with the specifics. When Alex is up here, he can see most of the complex, and it is a different perspective to be able to see the maze and all the people below. Perhaps this perspective can help him solve his dilemma.

Zi came by and tapped his friend on the shoulder. "What's up, Demon Slayer? Why so blue³⁰?"

³⁰ Idiom - feeling blue means feeling sad

"I am just going through something...you will not understand."

"What are you talking about, Alex? I can solve any problem, especially if it is related to romance. Does your problem involve a woman?" Zi asked.

"The nature of the problem is not important." Alex answered, purposely hiding his real problem. "Zi...let me ask you something. Have you ever done anything that is said to be wrong, yet you know in your heart is right, and something is holding you back?"

"Many times." Zi replied. "My whole life is a dilemma." Those words hold a much deeper meaning to Zi, and he has secrets that even his best friend does not know. "Everything that we have today is based on our choices in the past. Choices lead to either rewards or consequences...or both. You just have to make one choice and stick with it, and live a life with no regrets."

"Thank you Zi. I think I have my answer now."

"Non-sense. What are friends for?"

Indeed, those words of wisdom helped Alex make his decision. This is not something that only Celina wants; it is something that they both want. If they are to meet in secrecy, then he might as well make the best of it.

[C] Title Contents

Celina walked through the garden cautiously, making absolutely sure that nobody sees her. Adultery is a serious crime in this kingdom, and adultery against the king is unimaginable. But now is not the time for regrets. They promised to meet each other at the same bridge at dawn. For a few moments, Celina's heart was racing, thinking about the mere possibility that he might not show up. But to her relief, he kept his promise.

Cheng turned around. "Your highness..."

"I told you not to call me that." she replied.

"There is nothing wrong with formal titles...we are in the palace, and you are the concubine and I am just a lord."

"Our titles do not matter as long as we have each other, right? I could not sleep last night...I had a nightmare that you were caught and imprisoned...and tortured." Celina turned to face the pond as she spoke. "My heart was in pain just thinking about that nightmare."

Alex put his hand on Celina's face, and she gasped. "Celina...I am more worried about you than myself. You could lose everything."

"I don't care." she replied, touching his hand. "I just want things to stay like this. I wish time would stand still."

"I still have an uneasy feeling about this." said Cheng. "I still have an assassin who is after me. If you are with me you will be in danger. Is it really worth it?"

"Then let us run away."

"Run away? To where?" Cheng asked.

"As far away from Yi Ling as possible."

"You are just going to throw everything behind you?"

"This life is just a lie..." said Celina. "I have been married into nobility, but when it comes down to it, I am nothing more than a political tool. This place is a prison disguised by gold and meaningless titles."

"What about the king?"

Celina's eyes moved to the side. "He is ignorant and does not know about us. He is so focused on his other duties that he will not notice we are gone until it is too late."

Alex was about to say something, but something was bubbling in the water. They stared at it curiously, wondering what it could be. A person's head popped up, and they gasped. To their surprise, it was King Liu.

"It's you...your majesty..." said Celina like a deer in headlights. "What are you doing here?"

"I am ignorant, aren't I?" replied the king with a grimace (鬼臉). No words could describe the king's anger. He pointed at her. "You...you wretch. You are having an affair with Cheng!"

Alex tried to explain: "Your majesty, it's not what you think-"

"Silence, traitor! You shall receive your divine punishment!"

Suddenly, soldiers appeared and barricaded the two in question.

"Men, arrest them!" ordered the angry king.

Celina and Alex were kneeling on the floor, their heads facing down in shame. Alas, it has come to this unthinkable moment, the moment they hoped will never happen. They have gambled with their fate, and now it is time to face the consequences. Before them is not the kind and forgiving King Liu, but an angry king who will determine their fate.

"I cannot even fathom that this would happen." said Liu Bei. His anger is seething through his voice. "The man I trust the most is having an affair with my wife!"

"Sire!" said Alex, "It is a misunderstanding."

"Silence!" shouted the king, slamming the piece of wood on his table. Bang.

"Demon Slayer...I never thought you'd stoop so low has to do such a shameful thing!"

Celina was crying silently, and she never looked away from the floor. The tears streamed her eyes and now she is no longer a woman who is full of hope and spirit, but rather, someone who has already given up. She was guilty and unlike Cheng, she had no intention of defending her case. After all, what can she possibly say to the king to change his mind?

"Alex Cheng...you are supposed to be one of my most trusted men. I gave you everything you could have possibly wanted - wealth, fame, power, and the honorary title of the Demon Slayer. Yet you repay me by betraying me!"

"Sire, it is not what it seems like." said Alex, still trying to prove his innocence. "We have done no wrong! We had no intentions of betraying you!"

"Then what **are** your intentions?" asked Liu Bei. "Why is she sneaking out to meet you without letting me know? If you are not having an affair, then why do you meet in secret?"

Alex knew not how to reply to that question, and he just stared at the floor in shame. He looked at Celina, whose head was facing downwards the entire time, a sign that she has already accepted defeat. She has already accepted her fate and does not care what comes afterwards. It is already the end of her life as far as she is concerned.

"You are the Demon Slayer, yet you shame your name with such a disgraceful act! With your status, you could have had any woman you wanted, yet you went after the one woman you are forbidden to be with. My only concubine!"

"It is not his fault." said Celina. "I am to blame for it."

"Silence!" shouted the king angrily. "You are in no place to speak. I will get to you soon." Then he sighed. "Cheng, I do not know what else to say. I expected better of you. I should have you beheaded. But considering that you joined the resistance and saved my life from the demons...I will not take your life. But you will lose everything you currently have. Your wealth, status, and your title as the Demon Slayer. You will become a commoner once again, and you are forbidden to enter the palace ever again."

Those words were harsh indeed, but what else can one expect from Liu Bei, whose name is shamed because his concubine is having an affair with another man? Alex should be grateful that he gets to keep his head. A life of a commoner is better than no life at all. He **was** a commoner before he was the Demon Slayer. He essentially had everything he could have wanted, yet he ruined it all with his own actions. "Yes, sire." Cheng replied.

"And as for you," he said, facing Celina, "You have no excuses for your actions. To think that my concubine would do such a thing...to have an affair with another man. I gave you everything...and this is how you repay me?! Did you really think you can get away with this? Do you think I'm a fool?"

She did not reply nor look at him, but continued her silent grieving.

Liu Bei continued: "To think that you did such a **disgraceful act**. How can I face anyone if others were to find out about this?! You will not be beheaded, but you shall be sent to the dungeons and live like a criminal, just like the other vile insects of society!" Two men came and snatched her by the arms.

"Take her to the dungeon."

Alex stood up. "No, please reconsider!"

"Silence!" Liu shouted.

"Let me take her place in the dungeon, please!" shouted Alex.

"Leave before I change my mind." the king shouted.

Two soldiers grabbed Alex by the arms and dragged him away. "No! No! I beg of you!! Reconsider!" The troops dragged him to the exit and closed the doors. Bam!

With Cheng out of the way, Liu Bei had one more thing left to say to his concubine. "What did I do wrong, Celina? I gave you everything you wanted...everything any woman could ever want! You have more than enough money to last you ten lifetimes. Even though you came from a commoner's background, I chose you to be my concubine and gave you a better life than what you had before. I treated you like how a concubine is supposed to be treated, yet you still betrayed me."

And this was her reply: "You treated me well. I was well fed and lived in luxury. I've never thought such a life was possible. But you never understood how I felt." Liu Bei frowned upon hearing this. "When I was held captive during Duke Xiang's rebellion, I had no idea what was going on. But they...they have defiled me...I am no longer eligible to be your concubine."

Liu Bei's eyes opened wide and for the first time he truly listened to her. There was a long uncomfortable silence in the room. "I am sorry, Celina. I have failed you as your king. No one should have to go through that. But that does not justify you having an affair. Men, take her away."

The gates to the imperial palace slammed shut. Creeeeek. Bam. Alex took one last look at the imperial complex. The life of luxury that was handed to him is now gone, taken away in an instant. All he has with him were his belongings. This is the price that he paid for being true to his feelings. Although Alex was already prepared for a scenario like this, he never thought it'd be this hard to deal with.

He slowly walked away into the darkness of the night. Wealth was never a priority for Alex, but when he had it, it made his life better. And now he is back to having nothing. But the worst part is that he can never see his loved one again. His biggest regret is that Celina is now in prison, a place that is not befitting for a gentle person like her. How can she live like the other scum that are in the dungeon?

Alex and Celina took a risk for love and they lost the gamble. Their affair would not last long, and they both knew it, yet they did it anyway. Like the expression goes, love is blind and illogical.

Zi was loitering about the palace halls as usual. There is nothing to do at night, so he figured he might as well explore the place, and possibly meet some ladies. Just now, he saw Lei in front of him, and she seemed depressed. He thought that this would be a good time to make his move and impress her. "Hey Lei. Is something the matter?"

"Zi...I just received bad news..."

"What's the matter? Is it something that I can help you with?"

"I do not know how to explain it." she replied.

"You can tell me anything. I won't tell anyone, I promise."

"It's about my lady...and the Demon Slayer." Lei's eyeballs moved left and right, and obviously she is uncomfortable talking about this. But the truth must come out.

"My lady has been sent to the dungeons..."

"What? Lady Ce?"

"It is his majesty's imperial decree. I have already been assigned to serve someone else."

"But why!?" Zi asked.

"Because she was having an affair with Sir Cheng."

Zi was shocked beyond belief. "What?! Are you serious?"

Lei put her hand over his mouth. "Shhh! Not so loud!" She dragged him to a darker place, where there is a smaller likely hood of a human passing by.

"I know it may be hard to believe." said Lei, "But this is what I heard..."

Liu Bei was talking to his soldiers, who were neatly lined up. "Listen, you are not to mention anything that happened tonight ever again!" said the king. "As for the concubine's whereabouts, I will make up a story that she is sick and cannot see anyone. If you ever speak a word of this, I will sew your lips together. Understood?"

"Yes sire!" said the troops simultaneously.

Lei happened to have overheard the conversation by leaning against the door and putting her ear to it. She was scared and quickly ran away.

"And about Alex?" Zi asked worriedly. "What happened to him?"

"He is banished from the palace and is to never set foot here again."

Alex is now at the front yard of his old home, the one he has lived at for most of his life. This place is poor and broken-down, and can never compare to his house at the palace, but this place has sentimental value (情感價值). As he opened the door he felt nostalgic, for he has not been here since En Lo and the ninjas attacked him that night.

He is now walking into his room not as the Demon Slayer, but just regular Alex Cheng. The room was dusty and empty. All he had was a worn out table and a closet to put his clothes in. Alex lit the candles and let himself drown in sorrow and despair.

Shen Long and Sui Long returned from their trip and they happened to run into their old comrade. "Zi?"

"Oh, hey Shen Long and Sui Long." said Zi. "If you guys are looking for Alex, it is too late. He is not in the palace."

The masked men glanced at each other. "What do you mean?"

"Rumor has it that he has been exiled." Zi replied.

"Exiled?!"

"I do not know where he is."

"If he is outside, then he is in danger. We must find him!"

Sitting in the darkness of her cell, Celina did not move for many hours. She wondered how her life could sink so low. One day she is a concubine, now she is a

prisoner. A mere criminal in the eyes of the king. She committed an unforgivable mistake.

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

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

"Captain Tai?"

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

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

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

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

Tai smiled. "I know."

To get the key to her cell and free her was the easy part, and the hard part is to escape without being caught. Tai and Celina have to be extra careful sneaking around in the complex at night. Like stealthy ninjas, they snuck past guards and headed towards the underground water tunnel, a secret known to only the most important people. This was the same tunnel used during the raid of the palace to exterminate Duke Xiang.

Splash splash. They ran quickly even though no one was chasing them. The mere thought of being caught is enough motivation to keep running. Finally, they saw the light at the end of the tunnel. "Here we are." said Tai. "Where will you go now?"

"I do not know." she replied honestly. "But thank you for all your help."

"Now we're even." he replied with a hearty smile, and they part ways. She went to the exit while Tai went the opposite way.

Eventually, Alex fell asleep on the floor. He had a blanket wrapped around him, and he was sleeping with the Fire Sword in his hand. He decided that being depressed will not help his situation, and sleep might help him feel better in the morning.

Knock knock Alex woke up and he walked over to the door. He was dumbfounded when he saw Celina standing in front of him, soaked from the pouring rain. Her hair covered the top half of her face and her head was lowered so her eyes were not seen. But she had the look of a woman who lost everything and needs someone right now.

"Your highness..."

They had everything taken away from them, but for these two, their life is just starting. Celina is no longer the concubine, and she has given up all the privileges associated with that title. Now she stands at Alex's doorstep, for she knew not where to go. She has been living in the palace for a long time, and she has no other home. They are finally free from rules and restrictions, but their life may be cut short with two assassins on Alex's trail. Will they survive long enough to make their relationship work?

To be continued...

Next chapter: 九: Celina's Decision. Tao's Last Chance

Summary
Contents

Finished 08/09/2007

Edited 10/20/2007

Edited 11/2008

Edited 12/2021

Characters		
Name	Role	Personality
Alex Cheng	Demon Slayer, fourth student of War God, wielder of the Fire Sword	S
Zi Lai	Alex's best friend	A
Master Genzo	The War God	S
Li Cheng (Fo Long)	Third student of War God	S
Shen Long	Second student of War God	S
Sui Long	First student of War God	S
Jade Lee	Alex's childhood friend	R
Mrs. Lee	Jade's grandmother	R
King Liu Bei	King of Shen	R
Celina aka "Lady Ce"	The king's concubine	R
Captain Tai	the King's trusted official	T
Ragnarok	Demon warrior	A

Nobles		
Lord Liu Zhang	A eunuch with mysterious intentions	T
Lord Yu	Lord, supporter of Liu Bei	S
Lord Sima	Lord who owns land in the kingdom	T
Lord Fei	Lord who owns land in the kingdom	T
Lord Huong	Lord who owns land in the kingdom	T

Minor Characters		
Tao	A multi-talented mercenary	A
Ekin	A ruthless assassin of Zhang	T
Taishi Tze	Headmaster of Council of Heaven	R
Rubble	Known as the Ice Hunter	A
Chou	A traveler who discovers the spice	S
Cho	Member of Council	S
Vincent Chan	Member of Council	R

