

DEMON SLAYER

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Summary

二十八: History of the Four Brothers

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Sui Long continued to polish his sword in the empty house. By now, everyone has left and he is alone. He continued to polish the sword with a certain look in his eyes, the look of silent rage and revenge. It is unfortunate that no one was here to see the look on his face, for it is the look of someone who was about to do something very irrational (無理數). He continued to clean the blade with a hand cloth, a redundant task he has been doing for the past few hours, as his mind was bent on revenge.

He went to Jiang Ye's tombstone and took off his straw hat and mask and stared at the inscription for a long time. It is true what they say, you do not treasure someone until they are gone. Staring at the tombstone, Sui Long had a flash back of his first meeting with the War God.

Sui was on the run from the law. The East Brigade, a unit of law enforcers who work under the high eunuchs, was after him and chased him all the way to the Valley of Death. They were hot on his trail and he went into the valley, thinking that no one will go there because they would be afraid of the rumors. He was right; none of the soldiers would chase him beyond that territory. However, this put him in grave danger.

As Sui walked down the mountainous area, he felt someone following him. "Who's there?" he asked, looking around cautiously.

"You dare to trespass into the Valley of Death?" said a distant voice. Suddenly, a man jumped down and landed behind him.

Sui turned around and saw the War God for the first time – he was wearing battle armor and a straw hat that covered most of his facial features. Sui Long was startled, but he did not panic like most would. "You are the Legendary War God?"

"Knowing that you still came here? You sure have guts." said he.

"I did not come here to fight you." Sui said. "I was on the run from the imperials. All I want to do is survive."

"Enough of these stories!" Genzo drew his sword and charged forward at lightning speed.

Sui Long quickly dodged. *Whoosh* If he had reacted a second too late, it could have been fatal. Obviously, the War God is in no mood to listen, so he had no choice but to fight.

Genzo charged at him and slashed. *Clang Cling* They jumped away from each other.

Sui panted for breath. He could not keep up with someone of his opponent's caliber. "You truly are as good as the legends say. It must be my unlucky day."

"Just because you said that doesn't mean I am going to go easy on you." said Genzo. His Fire Sword began to glow and flames grew out of it.

Sui was shocked. "That's the legendary artifact (人工製品), the Fire Sword! The fact that you possess it means...that you're Masai Genzo, one of the Four Brothers of China!"

Genzo lowered his head. "Since you know my identity, you must die today." He charged and slashed.

Sui dodged, but was hit in the stomach. *Slash* He fell on one knee and stuck his blade to the ground. "Ugh..."

As the War God approached, ready to make a move, Sui put his palm up. "I apologize for intruding into your territory...you truly are as good as the rumors say. I want you to be my master!"

Genzo was startled. "What was that?"

Sui bowed down with his forehead on the ground. "I want you to take me in as your student! You are the best swordsman I have ever come across!"

"Grrr. Is this some sort of joke?"

"Please, take me as your disciple...or finish me off. Either way it is fine."

Suddenly, Genzo was no longer in a killing mood. The Fire Sword lost its glow and he put it back into its sheath. "I do not take students. Now leave." The War God walked away.

At nightfall, everyone was tired and Alex rented out rooms at a local inn. Xiao was exhausted mentally as well as physically, with a wound on her thigh from an arrow. Li had a wound on her shoulder, also from an arrow. Those two fell asleep immediately. But Alex cannot sleep and decided to get out of bed. He searched for Sui Long and expected him to be in his bedroom, but he was not there. He checked the living room, and he also was not there. Apparently he left a note on a table.

Alex read it with wide open eyes. He crumbled it. "No...Sui Long!" He ran out of the house.

Gallop gallop Sui was now seen riding a horse. He pulled the reins hard, making his horse run at full speed, for he was in a hurry. His heart was aching for revenge, and to him there is no room for hesitation.

The War God came to the mountainous cave and saw the same swordsman he ran into the other day. "You again?" he muttered out loud.

Sui Long kneeled. "I am asking you to accept me as your disciple, Master Genzo!"

"That is not how you address me." replied he.

"But you are Master Genzo, the renowned swordsman. You have the Fire Sword in your possession, which means you are Genzo."

"Genzo is already dead. He died a long time ago. The person you see before you is a wanted murderer."

"So am I!" Sui Long replied. "I have no place to go, so please, take me as your student!"

"You sure are a persistent one, aren't you?"

Sui Long's eyes lit up, as it was a compliment coming from the great one himself. "Yes. I will do whatever you say if you accept me. I don't mind the hardships. Just teach me sword craft and I will be completely obedient to you."

Genzo realized that this person is going to do whatever it takes and will not give up. His continuous refusal will only make him more determined. What a bother, he thought to himself.

Genzo turned around. "I do not take students. Leave before I change my mind and add you to my death count."

"I know you are not that kind of person, master!" Sui Long shouted.

The War God froze for a moment, for those words struck him somehow. Those words have some truth to them...no, it is not true at all. What would this youngster know about my struggles, he thought to himself. He doesn't understand a thing at all.

Afterwards, Sui Long was persistent and kept asking the same thing over and over until the War God reluctantly agreed to take him on as his first student. Then, he became known as Sui Long, and the rest is history.

Sui Long walked into the courtyard, very well knowing that he could die today. He will either spill the blood of his enemy, or die trying, and that is his resolve. The notorious duo, Jin and Roh, were waiting for him.

"Brother, look, he actually came." said Jin.

"He thinks he can take us alone? I did not think a student of the War God would be so foolish." said Roh.

"He's underestimating us. I will teach him a lesson." said Jin.

Roh put his arm forward. "No. I will do it." said he, walking forward to face his foe.

Sui Long and Roh Demos stared at each other without saying a word. The wind blew hard and the tension of these two forces can be felt right away.

"You killed Jiang Ye. And today I must avenge him." said the masked man in the straw hat, Sui Long.

"You should've stayed in the palace where it's safe. Coming here to challenge us directly is a foolish mistake...and your last."

"Your days are numbered!" Sui drew his sword and charged forward. Roh drew his blade as well and they clashed into each other. *Clang* They exchanged a few moves and jumped back.

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While they were fighting, Alex was hurrying to the scene, panting for breath. He ran a long way, but he must to run without stopping, for he must make it in time to save his friend.

Clang Roh blocked Sui's attack. "Ohh, not bad. You are worthy of being the number one student of the War God."

Sui grunted as they were in a power lock, and he pushed and Roh stepped back, dodging the swing.

"Quite violent, aren't we? I will send you to see your master in hell!"

Sui Long screamed and charged forward as his enemy charged at him. *Clan* They went past each other and stood there for a moment. Sui thought he inflicted a wound on Roh, but in fact, it is him who was wounded. His straw hat was cut in half, and his mask fell off.

"Impossible..." His coughed blood and fell to the ground.

Sui now realized that he had a lost, and victory is not possible at this point. His life is now over, for he had thrown it away. But he had no regrets, for it was his choice to come here. To kill or be killed, that was his motto from day one, and his meeting with Master Genzo were woven by the hands of fate.

"Young man, I must say, I have never met anyone as persistent as you. I shall teach you sword craft."

"Master Genzo..." he murmured.

Roh walked over to the bleeding man and stabbed him one last time, ending his life instantly.

Alex ran to the scene and saw the fallen Sui Long, lying on a pool of his own blood. Then he glared at the Demon Brothers. "You...you did this to him!"

Roh and his brother Jin jumped over the wall, escaping in their ninja like fashion. Alex, still in shock, walked over to Sui Long. He touched the man's pulse, and thus confirming what he already knew.

"Sui Long...SUI LONG!" Alex screamed at the top of his lungs. His legs grew weak, and he fell on his knees, and continued to scream the name of his friend.

Li arrived, but she was too late. Standing by the entrance, she felt awkward being there, and hid behind the wall, and cried silently.

Tears spilled out of his eyes and rolled down his face as he sobbed. Never did he imagine he'd cry this hard; nor did he remember crying this much for anybody before. During Duke Xiang's reign, Shen Long and Sui Long were assigned to be Alex's bodyguards, and the remained as such after Xiang's death. Though they wore masks all the time, Alex trusted them completely. He never thought of them as bodyguards, but allies; no, as friends.

They were there for him when he was attacked by the mercenary Tao, when he raided the palace to save King Liu, and countless other occasions on his journey.

These tears were tears of sadness, anger, and regret; sad that both his friends are gone, anger at the ones who killed Sui Long, and regret that he did not come sooner. Would it have made a difference if he arrived earlier? He will never find out.

The heroes now grieve over two deaths instead of one. It is unfortunate that things turned out this way. If they had stayed in the palace, could their deaths have been prevented? Yet, if Shen Long did not go to rescue his sister, would Xiao Ye and Li Cheng have died instead?

Shen Long wanted to see his sister so badly, he'd go to any length to keep her safe, and as a result, shielded her from the rain of arrows. They fell into the devious trap of the Demon Brothers. Sui Long, who always acts with a clear head, upon losing his long time friend, acted out of anger, and lost his life in a duel with Roh Demos. One thing led to another, and there are many possible outcomes that could have occurred, but alas, it is too late to discuss them, for the story must move on.

Everyone is restless from the fighting and grieving. A lot has happened lately and they need some quiet time, but there is no time to rest, for they must plan their next step.

Xiao was sitting by herself in the corner, holding onto her weapon while everyone was discussing the next right step.

"Sui Long ran off by himself to take revenge? What was he thinking?" Zi said.

Alex was standing by the window, looking at the sky. "Sui Long and Shen Long are gone now. There is nothing we can do to bring them back. We need to save our anger for the battlefield." It was hard for him to say this, but in this situation, he must say this because everyone was depressed and gloomy.

"This is all Liu Zhang's doing. The Demon Brothers are in alliance with him. He is the source of all our troubles...that traitor eunuch." said Li.

"The problem is that we cannot find him since the rebellion." said Zi.

"Shu Tai reported to me that his forces broke down a fort in the border of the city." said Alex. "They managed to escape Yi Ling. This is bad because once they are outside the city, we have less control because of the distance."

Li took out a map. "Yi Ling has roads that connect to three other cities, one of them being Yi Ting, called the Commoner's Paradise (樂園). It is the biggest province of the kingdom. This is where he would most likely hide to avoid being found. Yi Ting, however, connects to two other cities. They could be anywhere within this area." She made a circle on the map.

"That is too big of an area to search." Celina commented. "We cannot freeze every suspect city. Each one of them has their own magistrates who set their own rules."

"This cannot be..." Zi said. "How could we have lost track of an entire group of rebels?"

"This goes to show you how clever Zhang is." Li replied. "He is not to be underestimated."

"Heh." Zi said, "I bet he's hiding in some cave like a coward."

"Don't be stupid. Knowing the type of person Zhang is, he always plans ahead. If I were him, I'd figure out how to regroup my army and stage my comeback." Li replied.

"To search the entire area that Li mentioned would take too much time." Alex said. "Also, how do we know if the magistrate hasn't been bribed by Liu Zhang? There are so many things we need to consider."

"I know someone who can find them." Xiao said, gaining everyone's attention. She has been silent the whole time, so they assumed that she was still grieving over her brother's death. "If we cannot rely on the authorities or the imperials, then there is one organization that can do the job."

Li knew the answer. "You mean-"

Xiao said: "The Council of Heaven."

"Of course!" Alex said, hitting his own palm. "They are an information network made up of swordsmen and they have hideouts in all the major provinces. Although they are considered criminals by law, they claim they deliver justice for the good of the country. If anyone can find Liu Zhang, they can."

"But the problem is how do we get into the Council?" Celina asked.

"Leave that to me." said Li. "I have connections there." Xiao glanced at Li with much curiosity. She and Li bonded during their trip to and from the temple, so she thought she knew Li well. But it turns out, Li has some surprises up her sleeve¹. A ninja master, a student of the War God, a member of the temple, and a connection to the Council? Who exactly is Li Cheng?²

Li took her group to see Vincent Chan. "Ah Ms. Cheng, I am glad you decided to seek our help."

"We need the resources of the Council of Heaven to find the traitor lord, Liu Zhang." said Li.

"I assure you that you will not regret your decision." said he, putting a fan over his face. "Ah, this must be the famous Demon Slayer." He eagerly shook Alex's hand. "It is an honor to meet you."

"The honor is all mine." Alex replied.

"Yes, let me introduce you to everybody." said Li. "This is of course, my brother, Alex Cheng. This is Xiao Ye."

Xiao waved. "Hi!"

"This is Lady Ce."

Celina bowed. "Nice to meet you."

"And this is Zi Lai, Alex's servant."

Zi was displeased. (I'm a servant now?)

"It is a pleasure to meet you all, and I hope to become better acquainted with you. I will take you to our secret headquarters. No one followed you here, correct?"

"We've taken precautions, so rest assured. Please take us to the meeting." said Li.

Vincent took them to a backdoor alley, a place in the slums of the province where no one would want to step into. This is the perfect place to have a hideout for an organization of this size. Vincent opened a trap door on the ground which revealed a staircase, thus, they walked down the staircase, only to be met by a steel door. He knocked on the door twice.

"Do you know that birds cannot fly up to heaven?" said a male's voice on the other side.

"Only angels can fly that high." Vincent replied.

"That is the right password." **Cho** opened the door. "Welcome Vincent. Oh, you have company today. Please come in."

Vincent Chan took the group into a room where there was a golden Buddha statue in the front.

"Everyone, please remember that now you have been exposed to the Council, you must keep our secrets to yourselves and tell no one. Do not tell

¹ Up her sleeve – an idiom meaning a hidden talent or trick

² 04/22/2020: New line added to add more mystery around Li's character, causing Xiao to become more curious about her

outsiders of our activities, especially the authorities. Our bases are located all over the kingdom; this is our headquarters in Yi Ling. In order for our members to recognize one another, we have a password phrase that we use. **The first person says 'Birds cannot fly up to heaven.'** **The second person will respond with 'Only angels can fly that high.'** The pass phrase changes periodically (周期性地) and you will be notified only if you are a regular attendee of our meetings."

Alex was impressed with all the security that this organization has. The organization works with the utmost secrecy, and that is why they have never been caught by the East Brigade. "Thank you for showing us all this."

"Naturally, because we consider you our comrades." Vincent replied. "Even though you're an imperial, Demon Slayer, you are considered a hero amongst our organization. Your name has been mentioned countless times ever since you became famous. However, should you betray us, you will become enemies of the Council, and you will never be forgiven."

"Understood." Alex replied.

"Our headmaster, Taishi Tze, only speaks to members of the Council of Heaven. Before you meet him, you must agree to be members and abide by our oath (誓言)."

Zi had a look of hesitancy on his face, and he glanced at Alex, who glanced at Celina. Xiao, however, stood up. "I trust the Council of Heaven, and I have no problem abiding by the oath. Your secrets are safe with us, Mr. Chan."

After Xiao's declaration, Zi, Alex, Li, and Celina also agree to it.

"Good." Vincent said, fanning himself. "I know you are in a hurry, so we will do the initiations (提升) another time."

Celina raised her hand. "Did you say that the headmaster's name is **Taishi Tze**, the legendary swordsman and one of the Four Brothers?"

"That is precisely him." Cho replied.

"Wow, I get to meet someone as famous as him?" Celina replied.

"He is one of the Four Brothers, just like Master Genzo." said Alex.

Speaking of the devil, the old man they spoke of entered the room, and his magnificence (輝煌) can be felt instantly. His long, white beard reached all the way down to his chest. Tradition says that the longer the beard, the wiser that person is, particularly if the beard is white. His eyebrows were long enough to reach his cheekbones, and the hair on his head was long as well. Nearly everything about his appearance is a picturesque (風景如畫) example of a powerful and wise man.

His first words were: "Greetings, comrades. Vincent told me that you would be coming."

Everyone in the group bowed and saluted him. The salute is when one puts his right fist upside down at eye level, and opens his left palm so the two hands meet in the middle. This is a customary salute used to greet someone of higher status or importance.

"Master Taishi...I get to finally meet the legendary person himself." Alex said. "You are just as the rumors say, wise and powerful like a **dragon**."

It is a custom to call someone master if they are famous martial artists of a high caliber, even if they are not your master. It shows respect and humility.

"I have many books written about you, and heard stories of your heroic exploits." said Celina. "But reading is one thing, and to meet you in person is a completely different thing. It is an honor to meet you, sir."

Taishi rubbed his beard and smiled. "Oh ho ho ho. You youngsters do know how to respect your elders."

Xiao said: "Master Tze...it really is you. It has been a while, hasn't it? Master!" She knelt before him. "Xiao Ye pays respects to Master Tze." Another martial arts custom is to kneel before him and speak in third person ³to greet one's own master.

The others watched in awe. "Does she know him?" Zi asked.

Taishi was awed. "Xiao Ye...is that really you? Your eyes are open?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "I can see your face at last."

"Oh, you are no longer blind. How splendid." said he.

"I assume you know each other?" Zi asked.

"Master Taishi taught me how to use the Walking Crane Style. I happened to run into him one day when I was attacked by a scoundrel. He saved my life and offered to teach me martial arts."

"Now it makes sense." Li said. "He taught you how to fight when you could not see. You could not have taught yourself the Walking Crane."

"Who would have known?" said Celina. "This is a small world after all. Since you are Xiao Ye's master, this means we are all on the same side."

Taishi stroked his beard. "Well said. Please, come with me so we discuss what you are here for." Taishi took the guests into another room.

There are no chairs in this one, except for some mats, so they kneel down. Taishi sat with his legs crossed. A man came in to pour tea for them and promptly left the room.

The old man touched his beard and began. "Is that..." he asked, looking at Alex's sheath.

Alex handed the sword to him, and Taishi took it out of its sheath. After careful examination, he said: "This is indeed the Fire Sword, the weapon used by Master Genzo. It has been over fifty years since I have seen this sword. He entrusted it to you, so you are the owner of it."

"Yes, this was the last thing he gave me. I never got the chance to repay him...and now he's..."

"Did he leave any last words?" inquired Taishi.

"No, I was not there when he was murdered." Alex replied.

"I am sorry about the death of your master. He was my comrade for many decades." Taishi handed the sheath back to Alex. "Genzo was my most trusted comrade. He was extremely reliable and skillful on the battlefield. His skills far

³ Speak in third person – means to say your own name in the beginning of the sentence

surpass that of mine. He is a true legend, and that is why he was dubbed the War God. Unfortunately no one knew who he truly was."

"I have something to show you." said Li. She gave him the Ice Sword.

Taishi examined it just as he examined the Fire Sword, with a nostalgic look in his eyes. "The Legendary Ice Sword...how did you come into possession of this? Did you steal it from Chu Yen?"

"No, I took it from Rubble, the Ice Hunter. He was given the Ice Sword from Chu Yen."

Xiao also had something to show him. "Master Tze, please look at this." She handed him her shell.

The old man's eyes lit up. "Ho...can it be?" He took the sword and pulled it out of its shell. "This is the Thunder Sword...I have not seen it in decades. And how did you come into possession of this?"

"Chu Yen gave it to an assassin named Ekin, who I defeated." said Xiao. "And now I will return it to its rightful owner."

Taishi retracted the blade into its shell and handed it back to Xiao. "You are the rightful owner now."

"Me? But..."

"Those who lost a legendary weapon do not have the right to keep it. You defeated Ekin and earned the rights to the Thunder Sword." ⁴

Not knowing what to say, Xiao grew silent.

Taishi stroked his beard. "To think that the Fire Sword, Ice Sword and Thunder Sword are all in the same room. You lot may be young, but you are all exceptional swordsmen brought together by fate." ⁵

"Master Taishi," said Alex, "Vincent told us that you have all the answers that we seek. We have many things to ask you today. We have already lost many of our comrades, and we do not wish to lose more."

Taishi said: "Rumors have it that a swordsman by the name of Ragnarok has slain the War God. It is said that he is a true hero and one who represents justice and benevolence. But this Ragnarok person is most likely Chu Yen."

Li banged her fist on the table. "I knew it! My suspicions were correct. He is the one who killed my master."

"He attacked Genzo hoping to take the Fire Sword, however, he had already given it to you, Cheng. Thus, Chu Yen grew upset and killed Genzo. He is a traitor to the Brotherhood. How could this have happened to the Four Brothers...Genzo, Chu Yen, **Raijun**, and myself...it was fifty years ago yet I remember it like it was yesterday."

The Four Brothers stood on a cliff and they raised their swords together. "All for one and one for all!"

⁴ 04/22/2020: Xiao shows him the Thunder Sword, which she took from Ekin. That fight was also new.

⁵ 04/22/2020: New line from Taishi

"We made an oath of brotherhood under heaven after we found the legendary swords. These swords were forged by the **legendary blacksmith Cho'Ann**. His background is unknown and nothing is known about him, except that he is exceptionally good; no, he was the best at forging swords. However, before his death, he dispersed (分散) the legendary swords to different locations. Each one of us had to go through much hardship to acquire them. I, with the Thunder Sword, Raijun with the Wind Sword, Chu Yen, wielding his Ice Sword, and Genzo holding his Fire Sword – we were invincible.

After we formed the pact of brotherhood, we drove the demons out of our land. The land that you live in now...is no longer infested by demons thanks to the work we did. We were at the height of our careers, and back then I was young and at the peak of my physical abilities. But things only went downhill from there."

"How did the Brotherhood fall apart? Was it because of Chu Yen?" Li asked.

"It is precisely as you said. Every tragedy that occurred was because of him. Being the youngest one of the four, he was physically strong but mentally immature. His power hungry nature made him arrogant and he turned against us before we knew what happened." ⁶

[C] Title Contents

One day, in the old city of **Seiruun**, a soldier was harassing a girl on the street. He was holding her arm while she tried to get away. "Come on baby, let's go on a date."

"Let me go, you jerk!" she pushed him away, and made a run for it.

He grabbed her hand. "You refuse me? It's a privilege you won't get in ten lifetimes."

Suddenly, a tomato was thrown at the soldier's face. "Who dares?"

The man who did it was a friend of the girl, and the girl ran to him and hid behind him.

"Don't go around and harass whoever you feel like." yelled the young man.

The soldier approaches him. "How dare you...do you know who I am? I am a Red Soldier!"

"Tch. Just because you're a Red Soldier doesn't mean you can do as you please. The Red Army is supposed to protect the citizens." said the young man.

The soldier became more displeased. "You insolent..." He drew a sword and pointed it at that man's neck. "Assaulting an officer like me is a crime."

The girl shrieked and the man grew nervous. "If you're going to arrest me, do it. But leave her out of this."

"Huh? You have no say in the matter." Suddenly, a hand touched the troop's shoulder. "What is it?" He turned around and saw a man in a straw hat.

⁶ Old sentence: Being the youngest one of the four, he was physically strong but mentally unstable. He turned against us before we knew what happened."

Upon seeing one of the Four Brothers, his attitude quickly changed. "Oh it's you Master Genzo."

"Let them go. A Red Soldier like you can be forgiving, can't you?" said the straw hat man.

"B-But he assaulted me." the soldier exclaimed.

"A tomato in the face can hardly be called an assault. Maybe he wanted to give you free food? These people are my friends. Give me face and let them go." said Genzo.

"Yes, my lord." The troop turned to the girl and the young man. "You're in luck today." With that, he walked away.

The girl and her protector thanked Genzo a dozen times. Genzo, however, remained modest and insisted they do not need to pay him back.

Later on, Genzo confronted Chu Yen regarding the matter. "Chu, you are getting too arrogant. Your soldiers are becoming like you."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Chu replied. "We have agreed to split the country into four provinces, and each one of us will rule our own section. I am governing the **Red Province** and I know what I'm doing."

"And you have done a poor job, Chu. Your soldiers are spoiled and arrogant, and they show no regard for the well being of the people. Your leadership is lacking and it is being revealed in the morale of the Red Soldiers."

Chu turned around. "Tch, listen Genzo, you have no right to tell me how to govern my territory. You worry about running your territory. I do not need you to teach me how it is done." He walked away, leaving a bitter feeling between them.

That was merely one incident in which those bitter feelings were revealed. Chu Yen and Genzo have often argued in front of Raijun and Taishi. Genzo usually has the final say because he is the senior and he is wiser than Chu is, which makes Chu frustrated.

Chu sat by the window in the dark, looking out the tower. He was extremely displeased with Genzo, who happens to be the leader of the Brotherhood. He feels superior to the other three, and feels that Genzo is holding him back. (How dare he...trespass into my territory? I have had it with Genzo.) Over that night, he thought long and hard, and came up with a solution.

Taishi and Raijun burst into the room, upon hearing the urgent news. "Chu, what happened?"

"Genzo took the Fire Sword, and he stole the other three legendary swords as well."

"What did you say?" Raijun asked.

"That's impossible!" Taishi said. "Why would he do such a thing."

"It had to be him!" Chu replied. "Only we have access to the swords. Genzo has been planning this from the beginning. He wants all the power for himself. I

have already put a search party for him, and once they see him, he is to be arrested!"

Taishi put his hand on Chu's shoulder. "Hold on, we do not have all the facts yet."

Chu shook his hand off. "Tch. If not Genzo, then who did it? Do you think it was me? Or perhaps it is one of you two?"

Taishi and Raijun remained silent.

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

"Yen, what is the meaning of this?"

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

"Stolen? What are you talking about?"

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

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

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

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

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

Taishi continued his lengthy explanation. "Ever since that day, Masai Genzo became a fugitive. He was no longer our leader, but a criminal, and he could no longer stay in his own territory, and escaped to the wilderness. He reached a place called the Deep Valley, but later it became known as the Valley of Death. I have not see Master Genzo since that day. Over time, his real name was forgotten, and he became the War God.

Unfortunately, we were too late to catch on to Chu Yen's plot. By the time we figured it out, he framed us for treason as well. It is a good thing that Raijun escaped with the Wind Sword, and Genzo took the Fire Sword with him. I lost my Thunder Sword and was expelled from my own territory. I too, became a fugitive, but I fought back my own way."

"So that is what happened on that day." said Li. "It is all starting to add up now."

"What happened to Raijun?" Alex asked.

"His whereabouts (下落) are still unknown to this very day." Taishi said. "My information network covers all four kingdoms, yet I am still unable to find him. He is the type of person who can never be found if he wishes not to be."

"Could it be possible that he killed Master Genzo?" Alex inquired.

"No." Taishi said. "He is the least likely one to do so, he was always on Genzo's side, and he is not the traitor type. It had to be Chu Yen...who has now

renamed himself to Ragnarok. His name is now famous in the martial arts world. This is probably what he planned...to spread the name of Ragnarok to gain support of the martial arts world."

"It was him...I saw him in the palace." Li said, clenching a fist. "I am sure of it. He is Liu Zhang's student."

Alex suddenly recalled fighting someone during the Red Feather Rebellion with exceptional skill. His opponent, however, never introduced himself, but his face resembles that of Taishi's description - a young, arrogant fighter who wears a yin-yang headband.

"The eunuch called Liu Zhang is the one who turned Chu Yen against us...at least that is what he calls himself today."

"What do you mean?" asked Celina. "Did Lord Zhang have a name prior to that one?"

"The demon's original name was Ko-Rashm. He renamed himself Liu Zhang so he can hide himself within the royal family." Taishi explained. "This crafty demon changes his appearance and identity every few decades."

"But in the Liu family, there is someone named Liu Zhang who is a distant relative of Liu Bei." Celina said.

"The real Liu Zhang was killed by Ko-Rashm a long time ago. I suspect the same thing happened to Duke Xiang. The demon killed the duke and changed its appearance to that of the duke, and waited for the right time to strike."

"According to what you said, Master Tze, there could be more demons lurking in the palace?" said Li.

"That is quite possible." Taishi replied, rubbing his beard. "We have not confirmed if there are any more demons being disguised as eunuchs or high-ranking nobles, but do not be surprised if there are. Liu Zhang is a clever one and always has elaborate (精巧) schemes. You must take caution when dealing with him, for he is a formidable foe in skill and intelligence. This demon has been alive for five hundred years."

Xiao nearly spit out her tea. "Five hundred years?"

"Ko-Rashm, or Liu Zhang, as he is known, has mastered virtually every sword style and martial arts style in the world during his five hundred years of existence. He is familiar with all of your fighting styles and every stance and combination in association with it. This demon, who has defeated countless masters, is called the **Vanishing Warrior**." (消失的战士)

"The Vanishing Warrior? I've heard of it somewhere." said Li.

"As the name suggests, he shows up, kills everyone in sight and vanishes without a trace. Over the centuries, countless deaths of martial arts experts have remained unsolved...these deaths have been spread all over the country. It is believed to be done by the same demon, and in folklore he is called the Vanishing Warrior. He is probably the single deadliest swordsman in the world."

Everyone was too shocked for words. Alex suddenly remembered something that Liu Cao told him: Take caution when dealing with Liu Zhang, he is

stronger than you think he is. Alex felt extremely uncomfortable and he spoke up. "So this is the enemy that we've been dealing with...someone who has five hundred years of combat experience...and to top it off, he has Chu Yen under his wing. Our enemy is this strong?"

"Even if he is unbeatable, he is only one man." Li said, being her usual arrogant self.

"He is one man with one of the Four Brothers as his disciple, and an entire army of rebels who are willing to follow his orders." said Zi, nullifying Li's statement. "He single handedly caused the death of the former king, started a rebellion and injured our current king. Also, the Demon Brothers are somehow under his command. Duke Xiang was probably one of his subordinates. This is someone we cannot take lightly..."

"He also has financial backing from three of the high eunuchs who served under Liu Bei – Lord Huong, Lord Sima and Lord Fei. I am afraid that this one may be too big for us." said Celina, clenching her fists on her lap.

"Our foe may be powerful, but it is not impossible to defeat him." said Taishi, making everyone feel a little at ease. "This is what the Council of Heaven is designed for, to deal with situations like these. Our purpose is to protect mankind from being corrupted by evil, whether the evil are demons or humans. We shall further discuss this at another time. You are now members of the Council, so please do not act without consulting with me first. It is getting late, why not take a rest? I will have my men prepare your quarters⁷."

"Thank you, Master Tze. That information was extremely valuable." said Alex. He and everyone else stood up and left the room.

After hearing something so unsettling (令人不安), Alex had to find out the truth for himself. Celina suggested they do research in the imperial library, the biggest source of knowledge in the kingdom. They went alone since they were the only ones who had access to the imperial palace.

"Wow." Alex exclaimed. This is his first time in the library and he was awed at how big it was. Celina's description of "big" is an understatement (輕描淡寫). There were countless shelves with spacious aisles in between. Each shelf stacked up as tall as the ceiling and the books on the top required a ladder to reach them.

Unlike Alex, Celina remained unfazed (無所畏懼) she spent much time here as a concubine.⁸ In her free time she'd come here to write letters to Liu Cao, her only pen pal.⁹ Captain Tai was her trusted friend but he was always busy with duties and they never had time to chat. When she's not writing letters, she'd read books in her areas of interest - the history of sword styles, the art of doctoring, and politics. "Let's begin, shall we?"

⁷ Quarter – old English word for room

⁸ Original: Celina's reaction was the complete opposite since she spent much time here as a concubine.

⁹ Pen pal - A friend that you write letters to

"Uhhh you're familiar with this place, right? I may need some guidance."
Celina smiled. "Mmm. Of course."

After hours of searching, Celina found a book of relevance. "Look!" She flipped the pages. "I found the records of the Liu family's history. Liu Zhang's record is on page 300. And here's a picture of him." The picture of Liu Zhang was done in black ink, it was rough but detailed. The man had a pointy black beard with a mustache to compliment it, and wearing a lord's hat. They have seen Liu Zhang in person and the picture is nearly a perfect representation of him.

"Celina, look at this." Alex put down a book and flipped the pages. "Here is a record of the eunuchs and warlords during the Han Dynasty. This is the crazy part." There were portraits of all the warlords...and one of them was named **A'Chang** and his face was the same as Liu Zhang's. "It's the same person."

"But that record was over 100 years ago!"

"The artists who drew this were the best of their time. There is no mistake about it. I'm sure if I look up prior records of the Han Dynasty, more portraits of him will show up. Taishi is right about him being the Vanishing Warrior...he's over **500 years old**."

After the meeting, Taishi sat by himself in the empty room. He was no longer in the mood to drink tea. The information he gave out was confidential, yet he felt it was right time to tell the youngsters...because he has a feeling that these ambitious individuals can change the future of the Council.

There are still many uncertain things, however. Was the War God's death part of Liu Zhang's ploy, or was it Chu Yen acting on his own? Taishi has been trying to catch the Vanishing Warrior for fifty years. Not only is the enemy 500 years old, but he has mastered every sword style that has ever existed, is fluent of politics and a mastermind who can control armies. Can he really defeat this ancient and powerful foe?

二十九: The Calm Before the Storm: Taishi's Training

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[B] [C] Contents

After Jiang Ye's tragic and untimely death, his old friend Sui Long goes to challenge Roh to avenge him, but he failed and became a casualty himself. After losing two valuable friends, the heroes went into lamentation (悲叹) and seek a new answer in their quest. It was Xiao Ye who then suggested they visit the Council of Heaven, where the famous Taishi Tze awaits them. Being one of the former Four Brothers, as well as headmaster of the most impressive information network in the kingdom, Taishi tells them of many things that are related to the past and present. Their enemy is no ordinary foe, for he is the 500 year old

Vanishing Warrior. After hearing such disturbing news, the heroes now realize they have a long way to go before they can fight such a powerful enemy...

As instructed by Alex, Zi is to return to the palace to help finish the reparations. Tai happened to see him and approached him to talk. "Zi. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you, Captain Tai." replied he.

"The reparations are almost complete, as I can see. You have done well."

"Please don't say that. This is not a job that I'm cutout for." said Zi.

"Oh, why is that?" asked Tai.

"Managing something like this just isn't for me. All this fighting and killing isn't for me either."

"But you are Alex's servant, aren't you. I'm sorry, I meant his friend." said Tai. "You have been with him since the beginning."

"I know. But with Sui Long and Shen Long's death, I have a feeling that things are only going to get worse...Alex is not going to stop here. I just want to live a peaceful life, like that of a wealthy man, to eat well and have fun with lots of women. I don't know about anything else."

"I understand." replied Tai. "But you are choosing to stay here, no? You can flee any time you want."

"I guess you're right." Zi replied. "I guess this stuff is too interesting to leave behind. Being with Alex never gets boring. He's always running into trouble..."

Xiao and Taishi, drawing their swords, were ready for combat. "Ready?" her master asked.

"Yes." she replied.

Without uttering another word, the two engaged in swordplay, exchanging moves at the caliber of experts. *Cling cling* Their sparring is friendly, yet serious at the same time.

They both use the Walking Crane style, for it is Taishi who taught Xiao how to fight, starting from that day many moons ago.¹⁰ Although she was not a Council member back then, he decided to make an exception and teach her swordcraft because he thought Xiao had potential for someone who was blind.

The Walking Crane draws its origins from that of a grasshopper. It is an insect that is silent yet deadly at the same time. It strikes suddenly, and its claws are sharp and fatal. The grasshopper can blend itself into the grass easily, as it hides and stalks its prey, and it can jump rather high, going from each strand of grass with ease. Such is the essence of the Walking Crane – to strike where one is not expected, and making each strike count, with variations of slow and quick movements to throw the enemy off. The attacks range from high strikes to very low strikes, as a way to fool the opponent.

¹⁰ Many moons ago – idiom meaning a long time ago

Over the decades, many forms of Walking Crane have developed; however, the original, pure form of the Walking Crane Style was founded by none other than Master Taishi himself. He states that the other styles are mere imitations, only he uses the true Walking Crane, and in this instance, both student and master are using the true style.

Clang Taishi was on the offensive, using thrusts of the sword while he advances using footwork. The purpose of this spar is not to train, but to see how much Xiao has improved over the years.

Unfortunately, two minutes into the fight, her stamina runs low, and her defense weakens as Taishi advances. At some point, they both give the eye signal and stopped fighting.

"You've improved, Xiao Ye." said the master. "But not as much as I expected."

"It's not the same." she said, sweating heavily.

"What do you mean?"

"Fighting while not seeing, and fighting while seeing are two different things."

"Hmmm. I see. When did your eyes heal?"

"Only recently, master." she said. "That is why I am not used to it. There are so many things about this world that I do not understand, such as why the sun hurts my eyes whenever I look at it."

Suddenly, Taishi thought of something and threw her a blindfold. "Here, put this on."

"Put this on? But what is the purpose of that?"

"Let us see if you fight any different in darkness."

Xiao was confused, but she decided to trust her master and do as he suggests. She proceeded to blindfold herself, tying the knot on the back of her head, and stood there motionlessly.

"Now, I want you to attack me head on." said Taishi.

Xiao held the sword with a tight grip and stood in fighting position. Once again, she is in the world of darkness, and must use her ears and other senses to retrieve information. Since the courtyard is silent, with the exception of the wind, she can hear every little sound that is not natural. Indeed, now she can "see" the whole courtyard, starting from the ground she was standing on. The wind blew against the tree, and from that, she can determine the tree's shape and size, and everything about it, including every single branch and leaf that falls off.

As Taishi makes his first step, she can determine his exact location, based on the vibration of his foot against the concrete. She also knew his exact height and body shape. Although she is not able to see his face, she can clearly see his limbs, both arms and legs, and their movements. She can see the length of his sword as it brushes the air. *Whoosh*

In her mind's eye, Taishi is now a figure with outlines. The details are blank, such as his face and his clothes, but each movement he makes is clear and concise.

Each of his footsteps creates a wave-like vibration against the ground, much like how a pebble is thrown in water.

Before the blindfold came on, she knew the distance between them. This, added to all the information she has now, is more than enough for her to fight with. Xiao screamed and charged forward. *Froom* Each of her footsteps also creates a vibration, the harder the step, the bigger the vibration.

Now at attacking distance, she strikes. *Clang* Taishi blocked it and continued to move back as Xiao advanced. *Clang*

After blocking three more of her attacks, Taishi retaliated. They continued to clash blades, moving back and forth, at almost the same speed. Their movements were quick and swift, deadly and unforeseen, except to each other.

Xiao's movements began to flow more easily, the sounds of metal banging each other became music to her ears, and the wind became a warm breeze upon her cheeks. To be able to do and feel all these things is no easy task, and is something she does not take for granted.

At this close distance, she can smell the scent of a male. Normally, she can smell fear and hesitation, but since it is Taishi, she senses no such feelings from him.

When practice was over, Xiao removed the blindfold. "You are right, master. This is completely different. My movements felt so natural...and I can see you clearly."

"You were using your mind's eye." said he. "When your eyes are open, you hesitate to attack, and thus you became crippled. This is because you are not used to seeing."

Xiao began to understand her master's wisdom. "I see...somehow I fight better when I choose not to use my vision."

"Not necessarily." Taishi retorted. "It applies in only certain situations. The advantage of fighting blind is that you will not be distracted by the sun's bright rays, nor other things related to nature. Such as that of rain, or mist, things that may block your vision. The other fighter's disability is your advantage. But, fighting without using your eyes can be detrimental (有害) at times, Xiao. For example, if you were fighting where there is noise, then you'd not be able to concentrate on your enemy. You cannot see him, nor can you hear him due to the distractions. In that situation, you'd lose two of your senses, and that will be your demise."

Xiao listened carefully to what Taishi said. His words become truer and truer by the moment, and she realized that her trip to the Temple had not been a waste.

"Xiao, you once told me that you can tell someone's emotions using your mind's eye, correct?"

"Yes." she replied.

"Yet without vision, you cannot see one's face. How would you tell a foe from friend during a battle? As a matter of fact, you will not be able to see what is not moving, such as a pebble on the ground. An inanimate (無生命) object like that creates no vibrations, and you can trip over it and be at the mercy of your enemy."

How true indeed, for that scenario actually happened back at the Temple.

Xiao listened hard for those footsteps, but all she heard were the noises that the students were making. By the time she heard the footsteps, he was already two paces away. Whoosh. She jumped away and avoided a fatal hit.

Guan continued to push her further with his circular attacks. Xiao stepped back while defending, and her foot stepped on a pebble and she almost tripped. Guan took this chance and swings his blade as to knock the sword out of her hand. He pointed the sword at her chin.

"You lose, Miss Ye."

"You have proven your point." Xiao walked over to her sword to pick it up.

Taishi continued to explain: "In essence, there are two worlds - that of darkness and of light. One has information that the other has not. You can think of your senses as filters...each sense filters out information that the other senses do not. You have the unique ability to fight with or without your eyes. I cannot even name a single warrior who can perform a feat such as you...You are a true prodigy and I truly believe that if you were provided enough time and training, you can defeat any swordsman in single combat.

"Anyone? Even you, master?"

Taishi laughed. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

[B] Title Contents

Xiao was not the only one who was practicing hard. *Whoosh* Alex stabs his sword against the air, maneuvering it according to the stances that he was taught. Many swordsmen's moves were rigid and mechanical, but unlike them, Alex's movements were circular and fluid.

Standing behind one of the columns was Celina. She was not hiding, yet not revealing herself completely, as she watched curiously. Ever since that time she spied on him in the palace, she had this habit of watching Alex when he practiced. For Alex, this is just a routine, but his training is somehow enchanting (迷人) for her, as if she was watching a show. Through his routine, she gets to discover the real Alex; the dedicated hard worker, the passionate and loving one, the one who is not afraid to sweat to get what he wants.

At first, she'd hide herself completely, not wanting to interrupt him. She has always been shy like that, particularly around men, but with Alex it is different. Since their relationship has changed, she can openly talk to him even when he is training.

When Alex stopped the movements to take a break, Celina went to the courtyard. "Are you tired?" she asked. "Why not take a break and drink some water with me?"

"I appreciate you caring for me, Celina, but I do not want to rest." Alex replied.

"But you have been training all morning. Even a swordsman like you needs to rest."

"I just cannot settle down right now...especially after knowing Zhang's true identity. I feel like I am falling so far behind. You heard Taishi, right? He has been fighting for hundreds of years. Damn it...our enemy is too far-fetched (牽強附會) to comprehend. I am not even confident if I can fight Chu Yen on even ground...how will I avenge my master?"

"Alex..." Celina murmured. It pains her to see him so frustrated and lost. It is clear that he wants to be stronger, and this desire has caused him to work very hard at his swordcraft. But he feels like he is making no progress. If only he had a master, or training partner...and the thought suddenly occurred to her. "If you want, I can be your training partner."

Her eyes told him she meant it. He just had flashbacks of her Dance of the Sword Style - she used those fluid, graceful movements to defeat many foes at once. "Very well then. I'd love to have you spar with me."

Without further ado, the two barred their weapons at each other and stood in their respective fighting stances. Celina, as usual, held two swords, both facing forward, one low and one high, below the stomach and over her head. In this society, a couple is not supposed to spar with each other because it is not befitting the image of the perfect woman. Female swordsmen are rare, and female swordsmen in a relationship are even rarer, an archetype (原型) that is unheard of. It is shameful because the man let the woman hold a sword, so to speak. Yet for these two, it is completely natural for them, and the thought of shame never even occurred once.

"Are you ready?" Alex asked.

"I am." she replied.

Given the nature of their relationship, they just want to feel each other out. Obviously they do not want to injure each other. In martial arts schools or soldier's training camps, sometimes men take sparring too seriously and act as if it's a real fight. A good sparring partner is as rare as a precious diamond.

They stood in fighting stance and waited for the right moment to attack...the wind blew hard. Suddenly, both of them charged at the same time and they clashed blades. The Dance of the Sword was taught to her by Master Fa, who learned it from her master long ago. It is a sword style used by dancers of the Mu Fa Theatre. Although it is not illegal, it is frowned upon¹¹ for women to learn martial arts.

¹¹ Frowned upon – idiom meaning not accepted by society

According to legend, one day, a certain dancer found a way to hide her martial art in the form of dance. The dance moves were the same as the attack moves. It was a brilliant way to hide her skill. She would dance by day and use swordcraft by night when no one was watching. Over the years she kept refining her skills and it became the Dance of the Sword known today.

Clang clang Alex had difficulty keeping up with Celina's footwork. One second she's to his left, the next second she's to his right. *Clang clang* Her movements are graceful like a swan but deadly like a tiger. He has seen her fight only one time, but memorized all her moves.

Alex was able to defend against all of her attacks thus far, and he went on the offensive using his Heaven's Wrath Style. He always thought of Master Genzo as the founder of this style, but no, it is actually as ancient as Dance of the Sword. A straightforward style, it uses explosive attacks using brute force, sometimes from the air.

When the time felt right, Celina used the Dance of the Eagle. She held her twin blades crossed over each other like a scissor and charged forward. Usually this attack would cut her victims twice, cutting deep into their bodies. Alex blocked it by holding his blade vertically and stopping her blades at the crossover. *Schhhling* She continued her relentless attack while Alex defended. At this point they forgot about the fact that this is sparring session and fought as if they were in a real match.

Alex felt it was time to use Heaven's Retribution. He dashed forward and unleashed a combination of attacks. *Swipe swipe swipe* One attack came from overhead and she blocked it. The last attack was a slash at point blank¹², and Celina blocked with both blades stacked together. With one hand holding each sword, her power was halved, so she has to make it up with speed.

Both of them were at a safe distance and stared for a moment. Celina placed her swords horizontally, one pointing left and the other pointing right. Alex grew cautious as he knew what was coming. "Final form: Dance of the Dragon!" She started spinning towards him and the blades came at him different angles. He defended himself while retreating. *Cling cling* It became difficult to track where the next attack will come from. Actually, it was more than difficult; it became a desperate situation for him. (Ugh! Is this what it's like to fight someone like her? This is the power of the dragon's dance!)

Just defending took all of his energy. Suddenly, his foot took a wrong step and he stuttered. Celina's blade scraped his shoulder, causing him to drop his sword and fall on one knee. He placed his hand over his bleeding wound. Celina gasped and dropped both swords. "Are you alright?" She helped him stand up and took him back to his quarters.

Celina came into the room with bandages and sat on the bed next to Alex. "I'm sorry, I got carried away." She said as she wrapped his wound.

¹² Point blank – at zero distance

"It's fine. I wasn't able to defend against your last attack."

"I've hurt you. I am not a good training partner."

He placed his hand on top of her hand. "Accidents happen during sparring."

There was a moment of silence between them. "I want tell you about the secret of the Dance of the Dragon."

"Wait, you don't have to--"

"The Dance of the Dragon is the final attack of the Dance of the Sword. You have seen dance moves where the user spins a lot, right? The idea is to use those spinning motions to build momentum, so that each attack becomes stronger. This is offensive and defensive as well. And sometimes we reverse directions so we don't get dizzy. But this technique has a weakness; it is the **dragon's tail**." (龙的尾巴)

Alex pictured a green dragon and focused on its tail. "The dragon's tail? You mean the feet?"

"Yes, but more precisely the ankles."

"During Dance of the Dragon, the user is spending all of her energy into her attacks, leaving the ankles open. The footwork required to use this powerful technique requires us to put our feet together during the moves. If you were to hit the feet or ankles, the user will trip and fall."

Alex's eyes grew wider. He flashed back to moment when Celina used the Dance of the Dragon. He did not pay attention to the lower part of her legs, but now that he thought about it, her feet were close together during the spinning motions. "I see. That makes sense." He turned to face her and smiled. "Thanks Celina."

She blushed a little bit. "Well I better let you rest so I should get going." She went towards the door but stopped for a second. She looked like she was about to say something, but decided not to, and opened the door.

"Don't feel bad for what happened to today." said Alex.

Celina left the room without a reply. Alex placed his hand over his wound. He did not want Celina to feel guilty about it, but knowing her personality, she will definitely feel guilt.

[C] Title Contents

When night time fell, Zi was drinking alone on a roof top. He has done much work during the day and feels like he needs to relax. Working isn't his favorite thing to do, but drinking and having a good time is. As he gulped down half his wine, he saw Li walking on the ground.

He leaped down from the roof and landed in front of her. "Hey there, beautiful. Where are you going to on this lovely night?"

"Zi Lai? Aren't you supposed to be at the palace?"

"I'm done with my duties for the day. Things are finally calming down over there. I'm not needed anymore." he replied.

"So you can join us now? Have you officially become a member of the Council like us?" asked Li.

"Ha ha ha. I can become a member of anything I want, Li."

"Whatever," she replied nonchalantly. "If you don't mind I have business to attend to."

"Business? Ehhh fuhget about business. Hang out with me for the night, won'tcha?" He proceeded to put his arm around her shoulders.

She pushed his hand off. "Get off me you idiot!"

"How cold," he said. "Alex and I have been searching for you for so many years...you don't even know how hard we looked. You should show some appreciation, ya know? How are you going to repay me for my kindness?"

Li drew the **Ice Sword** and pointed it at his neck. "I can repay you by turning your head into a popsicle."

Zi was surprised and snake bitten¹³. Even though only the tip was touching his skin, he can feel the sword's coldness. He opened his palms to show he is not a threat. "Okay okay...I get it. I was only joking."

"Frankly, you're annoying. And your attitude towards women is deplorable (可悲). I don't know how you ever became friends with Alex." Li withdrew her sword and walked away irritated.

Zi continued to stare at her curiously, as if what happened was just a game.

Tai was summoned to the royal hall and upon entering; he saw just Liu Cao and two eunuchs standing by his side. He kneeled and saluted. "Long live the king." Then he stood up. "Sire, shouldn't you be resting in your condition?"

"My wounds are nothing but scratches," replied the king. In truth, he still had bandages under his golden armor and it was still painful, but Liu Cao is a proud man who values his image above all else. Even if he is near death he will be stubborn until the end. "I am unable to find Lady Ce. Do you know where she went?"

"I believe she is with Cheng right now. They are not in the palace but somewhere in the capital."

"We just had a rebellion and the imperial palace is a mess. Lady Ce is one of the few people that I trust. Where have they gone at a critical time like this?"

"I don't know, sire. But Cheng is a man of duty. I am sure he is looking for the traitor Liu Zhang as we speak and Lady Ce is helping him." Tai was staring at the floor as he spoke. He honestly did not know where Celina was, but he made up a lie to make her look good.

"I am certain you know how to find them. Search for them and summon them to the palace. With the traitor out there, no where is safe anymore."

"As you wish, sire." Tai turned around and left the hall.

¹³ Snake bitten – idiom that means frozen from shock

(Alex and Celina, whatever you need to do, please do it fast and come back. The king is not in a good mood.)

At nighttime, it was deathly silent with the exception of crickets chirping. A Council swordsman was doing his night patrol, holding a lantern. He yawned as he walked under the bridge. Suddenly, a figure of a man in black appeared before him. He was dressed completely in black, with black boots and gloves, as well as a veil that covered his face.

"Who are you?" asked the swordsman. "You are definitely suspicious." He dropped the lantern and drew his sword. "Yaaaah!"

The **Black Reaper** dashed forward and drew his sword. *Schling* He blocked the swordsman's attack and slashed him in the torso. Blood squirted out from his wound and he collapsed.

The Black Reaper ran away from the shadow of the bridge and became a black blur. He ran towards the wall and jumped onto the wall, landed on the awning, and jumped into the window, breaking it. *Crash* He went to the safe and began to break it.

Alex was taking a leisurely stroll at night and yawned. He and several Council members had a few drinks and he needed time to sober up. As he walked towards the arc under the bridge, he saw a fallen man and became alert. He ran to the corpse to check out. The swordsman had a gash (傷口) on his torso that ran from his shoulder down to his abdomen and it was a clean cut. He was killed just moments ago and Alex figured the killer must be nearby. He ran away from the bridge's arc and towards the nearest building. Upon entering the courtyard, Alex looked up and saw a blur at the window.

He drew the Fire Sword and jumped onto the awning and jumped into the window. "Who are you? Why did you kill one of our men?" He noticed the Black Reaper holding a scroll. "What is that?"

The Reaper jumped out the window. Alex jumped out of the window closest to him. They both landed in the courtyard. The Reaper drew his sword and attacked. Him and Alex exchanged a few moves. *Kling-kling* Not wanting to be discovered by others, the Reaper threw a smoke bomb on the floor. Alex coughed and ran away from the smoke. He lost sight of his target.

Li was still annoyed by Zi's approach and she was mumbling something to herself. Suddenly, she sensed unusual movements from the nearby building. She jumped onto the roof in a ninja-like fashion, becoming a blur in the eyes of a normal person.

From the roof's view, she saw the Black Reaper running along the rooftops of the city, running away at high speed. Her eyes grew wide open as if she has soon a ghost, or perhaps the Grim Reaper (死神) himself. (That appearance, those movements, there is no doubt that is him...the Black Reaper.)

Suddenly, those old memories of hers came rushing back again. The tragic event happened long ago, but to her, the vision was so real it felt like it happened

yesterday. There was a **burning building** and many dead bodies on the ground. They were innocent people, some women and old men. Standing before her was the one responsible for this, the Black Reaper.

Preview of Next Episode

Long ago, Li took a vow that she would only focus on getting stronger and that means removing all unnecessary distractions. The closer you get to someone, the more painful it will be to say goodbye. She learned that lesson from saying goodbye to her friends at the temple. The only thing she cares about is her swordcraft.

Her thoughts were broken when she sensed a threatening presence nearby and she gasped. "It's you!"

The leaves floated up from the wind and the Black Reaper appeared. Celina was surprised.

"It's been a while, Li Cheng, or was it Fo Long?"

"How did you know I was at the Council?"

Despite the veil, his voice was clearly audible. "It's not hard to track you down...everywhere you go you leave a trail of blood behind."

Li drew her Ice Sword.

"You're not seriously going to fight me, are you?"

"Since I have never seen your face, I have to make sure it's you and not some imposter."

"As you wish." The Reaper drew his blade.

三十: Mysterious! Who is Under the Shadow's Mask?

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[B] [C] Contents

Alex was called to the courtyard early in the morning to meet Taishi. Xiao was standing on the side as a curious bystander.

"Good morning, Master Taishi." said Alex. "What can I do for you?"

"Ever since I saw your Fire Sword, I have been curious about something. I want to see if you are truly the student of Masai Genzo and the successor of the Fire Sword. I want you to show me your skills, Cheng."

Alex was surprised. "You mean, you want me to fight you, sir? But I am no match for someone of your caliber."

Taishi stroked his beard. "Hohoho. I am not asking you to defeat me. Just show me your skills. Think of it as a request from an old man."

Alex, still unsure, glanced briefly at Xiao. She smiled and nodded. Taking a deep breath, Alex took a few steps forward and took out his sword from his belt. He put it in front of him and pulled out the blade. *Schhhhhling*

Taishi whipped out his sword and struck the air several times. He made the sword look as light as a stick. Then he stood in traditional Walking Crane stance - right sword pointed forward, left foot standing, right leg bent and the heel touching the left shin. His left hand was extended, so that both his arms were perpendicular to each other. Alex stood in his fighting stance and the two did the stare for a while. Taishi's stance is exactly the same as Xiao's. But the feeling is the not the same...he already felt the pressure of one of the Four Brothers. The pressure was strong enough to paralyze him, but he had to start somewhere. It is better to be in motion than be stagnant. (停滯)

Suddenly, Alex charged forward and used basic strikes. Taishi moved back while defending using only one arm. *Schling schling schling* Just after five moves, Alex can see the difference in their skills - Taishi's footwork was so graceful he was as light as a feather. Those movements remind him of Celina. If she moves like a swan, then Taishi moves like a crane. Alex's blade never came close to hitting any of his body parts.

The Fire Sword began to glow red and set a flame. Taishi's eyes opened wide. (Ho...that glow. Those flames. I have not seen it in fifty years.)

Alex swings his blade at different angles, hoping to let the flames touch their target. Taishi knocked his blade out of the way every time. Alex took a swing and nearly hit him, Taishi bent his back and the flame sparks nearly touched his beard. *Froom* Several times the Fire Sword nearly touched his body, but for an old man, he was quite flexible. He kept bending and twisting his torso in different ways to avoid the flame sparks. *froom froom*

Xiao was having an eyeful as she watched in suspense. On the one hand she was marveled at her master's movements, on the other hand, she was shocked by the Fire Sword's abilities. This is the first time she has seen it in action since her eyes have healed.

"Take this! Heat Wave!" Alex took a hard swing forward, creating a wave of flames. Taishi jumped onto the roof behind him, and the flames burned the wall.

"Ho ho. That's a nice attack." Taishi jumped down. "But such a one dimensional attack won't phase me."

Alex's heart nearly skipped a beat as he stood in fighting stance. (He called my strongest attack a one dimensional attack. He is a fearsome guy, as expected of Master Genzo's comrade. Simple attacks won't work on him. I have to rely on the Heaven's Wrath Style.)

He charged forward and attacked like before, waiting for the right moment to use his techniques. Taishi kept defending with one hand, while retreating and side-stepping him. Suddenly, Alex released the Infinity Circle, a combination attack using circular movements. Each attack builds on the previous one, becoming stronger and faster with each spin. *Clin-clan-clin-clan*

As expected, Taishi blocked every single strike. “Not too shabby. Too bad I have seen that move from Masai Genzo.”

The Demon Slayer panted for breath. (Does Taishi know all of Heaven’s Wrath? But that’s the only style I know. There’s still one more thing I can try.) He charged forward and attacked in his usual manner, starting off slow and gradually increasing the pace. First he struck from the front, then used circular attacks while side-stepping, hoping to find an opening.

He struck his blade forward as a faint. Taishi knocked it away and realized immediately that was a light strike. (Now it’s Heaven’s Retribution?) He anticipated the next strike will be the real one. Alex took a step forward and was about to deal the blow...but suddenly he jumped to the air, surprising Taishi.

Whoosh (It’s not Heaven’s Retribution? It’s a combination with Heaven’s Light!)

Clang Taishi deflected the incoming attack, and both fighters stepped back from the impact.

“Not too bad.” said Taishi. “But I have also seen that from Genzo. Now, it’s my turn to attack.”

Alex’s eyes opened wide as he realized that Taishi was defending all this time. What will he be like when he is on the offensive?

(Alex, don’t be intimidated by Master Taishi’s skill. Just stay calm and do your best.) Xiao thought.

Taishi dashed forward and went on the offensive. Both their swords were the same length, yet it felt like Taishi had a longer reach. *Whoosh whoosh* Alex defended while side-stepping in circles. But merely blocking the enemy’s blade was not enough, he must tilt his head to avoid the incoming blade...It took everything he had just to defend.

Occasionally, Taishi switched arms to prevent shoulder fatigue. (疲勞) He tossed his sword from the right hand to the left hand and switched his stance so his left foot was forward. To Alex, it did not change a thing, for it took everything he had just to avoid Taishi’s deadly blade. *Whoosh whoosh*

(At this rate I’ll be defeated before I can do anything to him. I can still try that.) *Whoosh* Alex tilted his body to the side as Taishi’s blade cut off a few pieces of his silver hair. “Take this!”

Xiao’s eyes opened wide in anticipation as did Taishi.

“Heaven’s Wrath Style: **Melody of the Celestial Maidens!**” 天女の旋律 This attack was a series of forward strikes combined with jumping attacks. Alex’s moves were fast and furious, but also graceful and light, much like a dance. Taishi blocked while moving backwards. *Clin-clin-clin* Sparks of flame flew to the air after Alex’s strikes, and he kept pushing forward relentlessly.

Taishi blocked the final strike and jumped backwards. Sweat was dripping down his face as he was struggling for the first time. Alex was in even worse shape, as he spent much of his energy to no avail. Taishi Tze saw his chance and dashed forward and attacked. *Whoosh whoosh* His moves were swift and fast and much

like the Zanzoken, he seemed to be in two places at once. *Clang* He knocked Alex's sword off his hand and pointed his blade at Alex's sternum.

"And that is that." said Tze. "You did well, as expected of a student of Master Genzo." He withdrew his sword and Alex took a breath of relief.

"I couldn't do a thing to you, as expected of Master Tze."

"Oh dear, don't compare yourself to me. I've been doing this my whole life. Ho ho ho."

Alex picked up his Fire Sword and Xiao went up to him. "You did well, Alex. Those were some amazing moves."

"Oh, ya think so?" he said, rubbing the back of his head.

Vincent was walking on the balcony when he saw Celina at the other end. "Greetings Lady Ce."

"Oh hey Vincent." Her gaze was focused on Alex but she snapped out of her trance.

"Have you seen Li around?"

"No I have not seen her all morning, but knowing her, she is always nearby. Perhaps hiding somewhere or in disguise."

"I see." Vincent noticed her belt which carried two swords. "Are you a two handed sword user?"

"Uh yes, is something the matter?"

"There are not many two handed sword users nowadays. Since you are a one I am curious about your style. Are you up for a friendly spar?"

Celina smiled and nodded. "Mmm."

The two stood in the center of the courtyard and Celina drew her two blades. "Where are your weapons?" she asked.

"They are right here." said Vincent, wielding his fans.

"You fight with fans?" she asked curiously.

"They are fans made of metal." Vincent flapped them around to show how heavy they were.

"I have never seen someone fight with fans before. This should be interesting."

(I wonder if her style is that...) Being a refined gentlemen, Vincent let the lady attack first. His intention was to get a grasp of her style before he went on the offensive. Celina took his invitation and struck first, using her superb footwork and spinning attacks to make use of her double blades. *Clan-clan* Vincent defended all of her strike with his fans. Celina was surprised that his fans were so useful. *Clan-clan* Their range is shorter than her swords, but the fans were more flexible and faster. He can put the two fans together to form a bigger shield before him.

Celina was truly trying to land a strike but was unable to do so, as the fans blocked her attacks at every angle. She could tell Vincent has practiced with fans for a long time.

(So it is Dance of the Sword after all. A rare style used exclusively by females. Today is my lucky day, that I get to see such a style personally.) *Clan-clan* He just blocked another one of her combination attacks.

"Dance of the Tiger!" She charged forward and ended up sliding on one knee, thrusting both blades forward, the blades being the fangs of the tiger. Vincent put the fans in the exact spot where the tips of the blades were.

Celina gasped and then she quickly sprang up. "Dance of the Lion!" Her spinning speed increased, which increases the power of her attacks. To do this motion, one must have excellent footwork. Her feet must keep spinning and not bump into each other, and one misstep will make the entire combination fail. Her blades attacked high and low. *clin-clan-clin* Vincent defended against all attacks no matter how fast or hard they were.

"Next form: Dance of the Eagle!" She put her blades forward and opened them at the front like a pair of scissors. Vincent put his fans together, aiming at the center of the opening of the blades, and then pushed them apart. *Whoop* Her face was within range and he swiped at her face. She dashed away just in time.

"Very good." he said. "You have shown me a lot. Now, allow me to return the favor."

Celina's eyes squinted and her eyebrows narrowed. Vincent went on the offensive. Because of their shorter range, he must swing his arms more to generate sufficient power, which would leave gaps between attacks. But Vincent's speed leaves no gap whatsoever between his strikes. Occasionally, he uses spinning attacks, but not as much as Celina does. This sort of fighting is much more suited for him than a regular sword. He had these fans custom made after many experiments. It is a style he developed for himself and something he refined over the years, and it showed in his moves.

Vincent threw his fan at her sword, and it bounced back to his hand. He threw it again, only to bounce back. He threw both fans, one at a time, relentlessly, pushing Celina back. It may seem like a simple attack, but she was unable to advance or stand her ground, so she had to retreat. *Clunk-clunk-clunk*

Suddenly, he dashed forward and attacked like before, swinging both fans furiously (憤怒地). Celina blocked methodically and carefully while waiting for a chance to counter. At this point, both fighters exchanged blows, not focused on either defense or offense, but doing whatever they felt was right.

Unbeknownst (不為人知的) to them, Li was watching the fight from the rooftop. She has only seen Lady Ce fight one other time, but that time she was watching from far away. But now, she gets to see her fight up close. (Dance of the Sword is a style for assassins. The concubine's moves...I cannot believe she is a concubine...I underestimated her.) Like most people, when they first see Lady Ce's demeanor (風度), they assume she is not much of a fighter. Li has a habit of judging others' skill and she vastly underestimated Lady Ce.

After exchanging several blows, Celina's movements suddenly became fiercer. Her feet moved faster, causing Vincent to be on guard. "Dance of the Sword

hidden form: **Dance of the Phoenix!**" She used her spinning momentum to increase the power of her attacks, striking the same spot over and over. Vincent blocked by alternative his fans, using one after another. *Clan-clan-clan*

Her strikes were so fast that all he could do was react to them. She changed direction of the spin to prevent getting dizzy. *Clan-clan-clan* Vincent was sweating as he dealt with the immense (巨大) pressure. This friendly spar as become a fight for survival, at least on his end.

Suddenly, his fan cracked. Both of them stopped moving to see what the other would do. "Unbelievable." Vincent exclaimed, staring at his broken fan. "You were able to do this much damage."

Celina bowed. "I'm sorry for breaking your precious weapons. It must be expensive to make them."

"No, it's fine. You are too polite. These things happen during sparing, you know?"

"I should have been more careful." Celina put her swords back into their shells.

"The Council covers the cost of these fans. I have backups available in my room, so don't worry about it. But still, what an eye opener that was. The Dance of the Phoenix was pretty impressive."

"Thank you." Celina replied, smiling.

"I am honored to be able to see your final attack."

"Actually, that was not the final attack."

"Oh?" Vincent said, putting his fan over his face. "You mean there's another attack even stronger than that? I am not good enough to see the final form of the Dance of the Sword."

"Oh I would not put it that way. Maybe one day you will see it."

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(So the Dance of the Phoenix isn't even her final move? Tch. She's another person I need to watch out for.)

Li was still standing at the rooftop, staring at the bright blue sky. However, the brightness will soon be covered by a giant shadow and nobody can escape its grasp.

In a town located in Shen, a mansion was burning, and most of the household members were dead. An old man, a servant of the house, crawled backwards. "No...don't do this!" he pleaded. Li approached him, with a dark look in her eyes, and a sword in hand. "Why? Why do you do this?" Her left leg stepped forward and bent at the knee, and slashed his neck. *Slash* The old man fell down completely, with a blank look on his face.

Li panted for breath. She was ordered to kill an innocent old man and she went through with it. Nay, she murdered the entire family and the servants, even though they were innocent. In the background, the fires burned brightly. She stared

at the Black Reaper and many things went through her mind. He slaughtered everyone just to gain a few measly documents...was killing the servants necessary? She is not allowed to question him, for that is the promise she made. And now she may have chosen the wrong person to follow.

The mansion they burned belonged to the Lee family, a prominent family who holds land in the north. With the entire family dead, the land now belongs to the lord whose territory is closest to this town, which is Lord Huong. One of the witnesses survived the slaughter and caught a glimpse of Li's face. The next morning, wanted posters of Li were posted all over the kingdom. This is the reason why there are always assassins after her life and she is always on the run.

That night, Li was unable to sleep, so she snuck out of the building through the window. Celina was also awake and noticed Li's strange behavior.

Li came to the graveyard where three graves were before her - one for Master Genzo, one for Shen Long and one for Sui Long. The night was quiet except for crickets and the occasional hoot from an owl. She stood there gazing at the graves with a blank expression on her face, but of course, on the inside, many emotions are going through her at this moment.

Suddenly, she sensed some movements. "I know you're hiding. Show yourself."

Celina was hiding in a tree from afar. She gasped when Li said those words to her. She was sure to be extra careful and silent with her movements, so how can Li possibly detect her?

Then Vincent revealed himself from behind the trees. Celina sighed in relief and remained where she was.

"You have sharp ears, Li Cheng." said Vincent.

"Hmph. I am trained in the art of ninjutsu (忍術) so I can sense you no matter how sneaky you are."

"I did not mean to stalk you, Ms. Cheng. I was just checking up on you."

"I'm fine, there is no need for your concern." Then Li turned around to face him. "Thank you for everything, Vincent. I do not want to lead you astray, or give you false hope. I am not interested in starting a relationship with anyone. I am not looking for friends either. I walk the path of a lone wolf,¹⁴ that is something I decided for myself."

"Very well then." Vincent walked away with a fan over his face, feeling disappointed.

It was difficult for Li to reject him like that, but it must be done. There is so much she needs to do that she does not need distractions. At this point she had a flash back of the first time she met Vincent Chan.

¹⁴ Lone wolf – idiom for people who like to do things alone, like a wolf that hunts by itself

After traversing the entire width of the forest, Fo Long reached the edge of the hill, where there was a great view of the city below and the sky above. She took off her straw hat and mask, freeing her face so she can feel the breeze against her skin. Her feelings of joy and excitement were indescribable. Years ago, Li would fear going back to the city, but today, she returns with a renewed sense of hope. Staring at the city below, she felt like a monarch about to take over everything, now that she is invincible.

When she left, she was a child fugitive. But now she is an adult, and no one will recognize her, thus the mask is not needed.

The first city on her travel itinerary was Yi Ting, whose magistrate arrested her parents. At night time, there was a horse carriage riding across town, protected by three bodyguards on horses. Li was standing in the middle of the street, clearly in the path of the carriage.

"Who's that?" said Bodyguard-A.

"What the hell are you doing, woman?" shouted the Bodyguard-B.

Li was not fazed by them at all. "I need to see Lord Dumai now."

Bodyguard-B got off his horse and drew his sword. "Move it or we'll move you as a dead body."

Li smiled. "Now we're talking." She drew her sword and charged forward. Bodyguard-B thrust his sword at her, but she dodged, went past his safe zone, and stabbed him. He fell on the ground and bled to death. Bodyguard-A and Bodyguard-C hopped off their horses and attacked her. *Slisn Slash* She finished them off with no problems. This helped her confirm that the Heaven's Wrath Style is invincible.

Magistrate Dumai exited the carriage. "What the hell is the ruckus?" Then he gasped upon seeing his fallen bodyguards. "Aaagh! Who did this? Did you kill them?"

Li approached Dumai and kicked him in the chest, causing him to fall against the nearby wall.

"Ugh! Wait, why are you doing this?" said the frantic magistrate.

"Answer my question or this sword will be inside your throat. Ten years ago you arrested a man and woman with the surname Cheng. Where are they?"

"I don't remember." said Dumai.

Li's eyes opened wide. "Don't remember? Don't fuck with me!" The tip of the blade touched his cheek.

"Listen miss, I don't know who you are. But over the years I have arrested countless people. There's no way I can remember a particular one."

"You have to remember! It was one man and one woman! There's also a small boy with the surname Cheng and he has silver hair! Tell me where that boy is!"

"I don't remember. Do you know how many boys with silver hair we have in this big city? And the name Cheng is very common."

Li was extremely pissed off, her blade was shaking from the anger.
“You...you...!”

A man named Vincent just arrived and he rushed over to the scene. He threw a fan at Li. *Whoop whoop* She saw it before it hit her, and knocked it away with her blade, and the fan flew back to Vincent.

“Who the hell are you?” Li asked.

Dumai recognized him. “You’re Vincent, the swordsman I’m supposed to meet tonight! Help me! I’ll give you any amount of money you want!” He crawled towards Vincent and grabbed his pants. “I don’t want to die, help me!”

Li said, “Look at his true face, he’s just a coward who only cares about his lowly life. This is the kind of man you’re protecting.”

Vincent pushed Dumai off his leg. “I already knew the type of man he is. But we of the Heaven’s Council do not shed blood needlessly. I was here as a representative to talk to him about the stability of Yi Ting.”

Li pointed her sword forward. “There is no stability with this kind of man running the show! He has done something unforgivable! Don’t get in my way!”

Vincent drew two fans from his sleeves. The ninja girl charged at him and attacked aggressively. Vincent’s steel fans deflected her attacks. *Cling cling* Their range is small, but he had more control over their range of motion, and Li was unable to get close to him.

“Grrrrr. What kind of man uses fans? That’s a woman’s weapon.”

“Oh? I did not realize fans had a gender assigned to them. What about you? A sword is a man’s weapon, yet a woman is holding one.”

“That’s because I want to show the world a woman is as good as any man.”

Vincent threw her fans at her, she blocked, and they would boomerang back to his hands every time. Only able to defend, the ninja girl was getting frustrated.

“I think the same. I want to prove to people that fans are as good as swords.”

Li jumped back. “This is a waste of time. I’m not here to debate with you.” She threw smoke bomb on the ground and disappeared.

Vincent and Dumai coughed from the smoke. By the time the smoke cleared, Li was long gone. Vincent had never met a female fighter like that, and he wondered who she was.

After that incident, Magistrate Dumai put up wanted flyers with Li Cheng’s face all over the city, as well as neighboring cities. In just one night, Li became a fugitive again.

Long ago, Li took a vow that she would only focus on getting stronger and that means removing all unnecessary distractions. The closer you get to someone, the more painful it will be to say goodbye. She learned that lesson from saying

goodbye to her friends at the temple. The only thing she cares about is her swordcraft.

Her thoughts were broken when she sensed a threatening presence nearby and she gasped. "It's you!"

The leaves floated up from the wind and the Black Reaper appeared. Celina was surprised.

"It's been a while, Li Cheng, or was it Fo Long?"

"How did you know I was at the Council?"

Despite the veil, his voice was clearly audible. "It's not hard to track you down...everywhere you go you leave a trail of blood behind."

Li drew her Ice Sword.

"You're not seriously going to fight me, are you?"

"Since I have never seen your face, I have to make sure it's you and not some imposter."

"As you wish." The Reaper drew his blade.

The two smashed their swords into each other and exchanged some moves. Then the two of them clashed their blades in a power lock. Li's blade was glowing white with smoke coming out of it. The Reaper's blade started to become icicles.

Li jumped backwards. "It is you after all." She withdrew her Ice Sword.

"In our time apart you have acquired the Ice Sword. You have become even more useful." said he.

"Why have you come back after all this time?" she asked.

"I need to finish what I started those many years ago. Do you remember your promise, Li?" the Reaper asked.

Li hesitated for a moment as she stared the ground. "Yes I remember."

"Let's not waste any time. I have a mission for you tonight."

"We have to go right now?"

"Is there another place you'd rather be?" asked the Reaper. "I thought you don't belong in a group? Yet here you are, playing a Heaven's Council member? Don't tell me you actually care about these people?"

"Of course not." she replied. "I am just using them for information. I am ready whenever you are."

The Black Reaper turned around, whipping his cape against the wind. Li followed directly behind him. Suddenly, both of them became black blurs and jumped into the trees, vanishing out of sight. Celina took a sigh of relief that she was not discovered.

Li Cheng and the Shadow jumped from rooftop to rooftop as ninjas do. *doosh doosh* "Where are you taking me?" Li asked. "Since I'm on this mission I have a right to know."

"We are going to the Chung household." said the Shadow. "They have a certain map that I want. The map contains the location of a cave that holds the secret to the Shadow Style."

“The secret to the Shadow Style?”

In the middle of their running, Li has a flashback from a few years ago, a time before Duke Xiang’s rebellion. The Shadow was sitting on a table, examining some documents he stole. Li poured him some tea. “What is it that you’re looking for? Oh wait, I’m not supposed to ask, right?”

“It’s fine.” replied the Shadow. “Now is the right time to tell you about the Shadow Style.”

“The Shadow Style?” she asked.

“It is the style that I use and also the style that I am teaching you. Did you know that the Shadow Style was founded by a man that was a half-demon?”

“Half demon?” she repeated dumbly. “Is such an existence possible?”

“This half demon was the natural born child of a demon father and a human mother.” said the Black Reaper.

“Eh? Demons and humans can make a child? I never thought such a thing was possible!”

“No one thought it was possible, until the half-demon was born. But demons are the enemy of mankind and his existence is an abomination. (厭惡) He was shunned by society, hunted down no matter where he went. So he developed the Shadow Style so he could defend himself. But he refined into an assassin’s style.”

“Is this is the same style that you use, master?”

“I use the Shadow Style but what I know about it is incomplete. This half-demon has written down his knowledge in some cave in this kingdom. And the location of this cave is written on a map, which is in the hands of a lord or magistrate. I don’t know which one has it, so we are going to narrow down the list. It may be a long shot ¹⁵but it is the only clue we have.”

“**Lord Chung**, your tea is ready.” the servant announced as he brought the tray onto the table. He began to pour the tea into the cups.

“It’s about time, servant. We are dying of thirst over here.” said Chung. He was sitting down next to two women, one on his left and one on his right.

One woman was fanning him. “Make sure you stay cool, my lord.”

The other woman fed him a grape. “Have some tasty grapes, my lord.”

He opened his mouth so she could insert the grape into his mouth.

“Mmmm, delicious. Ahh, this is the life. Living in my own mansion, surrounded by beautiful women.” The two women giggled. “Who needs the imperial palace when I have everything I need right here? To stay in the safety of my own territory is the more logical choice, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said the servant bowing. “You are very wise, my lord.”

¹⁵ Long shot – idiom for hope to lucky

"The king and other lords keep asking me to go to the palace to have meetings with them. Who wants to discuss politics with crusty old men?¹⁶ It's so boring. And don't forget, my relative General Chung who was killed during a rebellion. The palace is too dangerous and everyone is out to get you so there is no reason for me to be there."

The servant said, "Yes, my lord. That is an outrage that we cannot forget."

Lord Tsuma Chung is one of the high lords of the Shen Kingdom. Due to the amount of territories and armies he holds, his power is comparable to that of Lords Huang, Fei, Sima and Yu. Unlike the others, he takes no interest in politics and has been ignoring summons to the palace all this time. But because of his status, no one was able to do a thing to him.

Doosh doosh Li and the Black Reaper arrived after dashing through rooftops. "We are here, at Lord Chung's mansion." said the Shadow. "Somewhere inside is the map to the cave."

Li silently stared at the contents of the mansion. Last time she infiltrated a mansion, many lives were lost, and she wondered if history will repeat itself. Her fists clenched tightly.

Preview of Next Episode

The Reaper saw an opening and he thrusts his sword forward. While stepping back, Xiao pushed his blade slightly to the right, and her head tilted to the left, so his blade missed her face by a little. She kept retreating to avoid the blade until she was up against the wall.

(What was that technique of his? It's so confusing to the eyes. In that case I won't use my eyes.) Subsequently, Xiao closed her eyes and entered back into the world of darkness. She stood in fighting stance.

"So this is the famous blind style of fighting I've heard about? But even if can track my movements doesn't mean you can keep up with me."

Everyone in the battlefield waited in suspense to see what would happen. Her energy flowed into the Thunder Sword and electric sparks appeared. "Even with the Thunder Sword, you cannot keep up with me."

三十一: Secret of the Map. Can Li Cheng Be Trusted?

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[B] [C] Contents

¹⁶ Crusty old men – White hair, wrinkled, long winded, boring old men

The **female ninja** and the **Shadow's** plan to infiltrate (滲透) the mansion was simple - the Shadow will distract the bodyguards while Li sneaks into the treasure room unnoticed. Li was wearing a black face mask. They separate, running in opposite directions. The Shadow ran along the top of the wall and immediately a bodyguard noticed him. He blew his whistle and everyone heard it and lit up their lanterns.

The Shadow landed on the ground and charged at the bodyguard with the whistle and they clashed blades. *Clang* The Shadow pushed the man's blade up, leaving his torso open and he slashed the man's stomach, causing blood to squirt out of his wound and he fell down.

The head bodyguard along with five other bodyguards arrived. The Reaper did not seem concerned. "Is that all of you?"

"Who are you?" asked the head bodyguard.

"I am just a shadow but there is no point in telling my name to those who are about to die."

The head bodyguard grunted and then yelled: "Get him!"

The body guards drew their swords and charged at their target. *Clang* *Slash* The Reaper killed one of them. *Slash* He killed another one of them.

The Reaper hopped into the air and started spinning as he glided diagonally, causing his blade to spin, becoming a human needle. He stabbed a third bodyguard while landing. The head bodyguard was in awe by this mystery man's skills.

A fourth bodyguard attacked and the Reaper blocked his strike. A bodyguard from behind slashed and cut the Reaper's cape. The Reaper unhooked his cape and it let fly into the rear bodyguard's line of sight, getting caught in his sword. Then the Reaper **blurred** and appeared behind the front bodyguard...and the bodyguard's blade broke and he fell down.

The rear bodyguard threw the cape away. All of a sudden, besides the head bodyguard, only he remained. The lone swordsman took a step back and started to sweat. The Reaper dashed forward and attacked and he blocked. *Cling* The Reaper made a follow up strike and hit the swordsman in the chest, killing him before he hit the ground.

The head bodyguard started to panic. "No way..." He turned around and ran away.

The Reaper tilted his arm back and threw the sword forward. *Whoosh* It went into the head bodyguard's back and he fell down with blood dripping over his clothes.

Dash dash The female ninja reached the building's window with impeccable (完美) footwork. She pushed the window open and hopped inside. In one second she quickly scanned the entire room and saw a safe. She bent down and cut the lock open with a pocket knife and stuck her hand inside. She found a scroll and opened it and revealed a map. She folded the scroll back up and stuck it inside her shirt.

Just now the door opened and Li turned around to see Lord Chung with a surprised look on his face. It took only a quick second to understand what was going on. Li's right hand reached for the pommel of her sword and Chung ran forward. As she drew the blade out Chung pushed her hand which pushed the blade back into its sheath.

Li threw palm strikes at him and he blocked while returning some strikes of his own. *thud thud* At this close distance she must defend herself and did not have a second to even draw her sword. *thud thud* Chung's attacks forced her to move backwards until she was against the wall. She threw a palm strike at the same time as him, and their palms hit. *Smack* She threw a front kick into his stomach, making him step back a few steps.

She tried to draw her sword again. *schling* Chung leaned forward and pushed her hand into the pommel, pushing the sword back into its case. Li used her free hand and struck him in the shoulder. *thud* She was aiming for the heart, but missed slightly. This was no ordinary palm strike, for she used the **Phoenix Palm**. 鳳凰手掌 Chung stepped back until he hit the wall and grabbed his wound.

Given this chance, she hopped onto the window and jumped out onto the roof. Chung ran out the hallway and screamed: "Men! We have intruders!" The Phoenix Palm does not injure a person's outside, but rather the inside, causing internal blood clots (血栓) and organ damage. Chung did not know what technique it was, but based on how hurt he was, he knew it was not an ordinary technique.

Li Cheng and the Shadow met up at an arbitrary rooftop. "Do you have it?"

"Yes, it's right here." Li replied, pointing at her scroll.

"Excellent. You hold onto it. Return to the Council and when the time is right, we will go to the cave. I will come and get you."

Li nodded, and the two became blurs and vanished out of sight. As instructed, Li returned to the Council, hoping to sneak in as if nothing happened. Because the Heaven's Council is just a building with meeting rooms, the members sleep in hotel rooms near the meeting rooms. Li's hotel room happens to be next to Celina's room.

When Li returned to her room, she was tired from all those activities. She put the scroll and her belongings on the table. Then she walked over to the bathroom and placed her sword on the floor, directly next to the bathtub. She unzipped her black suit. *Zwip* She let it drop on the floor and then removed her pants. Once she removed all her clothes, she hopped into the **bathtub** and began to wash herself. *Splash*

The door to her room opened and Celina snuck in quietly. *Creeek* She crouched and walked on the balls of her feet¹⁷ to reduce the noise of her steps to a minimum. From the screen, she could see Li's silhouette (剪影) washing her arm. Celina made her way to the table and opened the scroll, which revealed a map. Her

¹⁷ Balls of the feet – the bottom part of the feet, the front half that includes the toes

eyes darted left and right to memorize the contents of the map. She glanced to the left to look at Li's silhouette just to make sure she was bathing, and then she continued to stare at the map. When she was done, she snuck out of the room as quietly as she came in.

As soon as Celina returned to her room, she took out a blank piece of paper and redrew the map she saw moments ago.

[B] Title Contents

"It looks like a treasure map. Is this Li's copy of the map?" Xiao asked.

"No," said Celina. "This is my copy that I redrew from memory."

"From memory? You can draw a whole map even though you stared at it for a few seconds? That's impressive!"

"Well..." Celina replied bashfully, "When I was a concubine, I spent a lot of time in the library. And I looked at a lot of maps because I was interested in the geography of the world."

"Ehh? But still, you have a keen talent for memorization. I bet you use this talent to memorize dance routines, right?"

"Hmmm. I've actually never thought about that. I've always thought my memory is the same as everyone else's."

"I see. The map may lead to something else other than treasure. The location is a cave located at the end of a river. It is north of the city next to our city. I wonder where Li got this map from?"

"I don't know." Celina replied. "But I saw her sneaking out somewhere with the Shadow."

"You're telling the truth. Li's activity is definitely suspicious. Have you brought this up to Alex yet?"

"No. He believes in his sister, so I thought I'd tell you first."

"That's a good point. But we should tell him anyways."

Moments later, Alex was in the same room as Celina and Xiao, and they presented the map to him. Celina also explained what she saw in the cemetery. After examining the map, Alex put it back on the table and walked over to the window.

"I know this is hard to accept." said Celina. "But this is the map I found in her room. I don't know what her relationship to the Shadow is, but I saw them leave together."

"I can confirm she is telling the truth." Xiao added.

"This map doesn't prove anything." Alex said without turning around. "Even if she went with the Shadow, I'm sure she has her reasons."

"What reason does she have for allying with our enemy?" asked Celina.

"I don't know. Maybe he is blackmailing her?" he said. "Li always does things for a reason. But she is not our enemy."

Xiao stood up. "Alex, the Shadow has attacked the Council and killed several members. He is our enemy but I am not sure why Li is involved in all this."

"Li is a shady character. She is always keeping secrets from us. For example, she knew Vincent as a contact from the Council and she withheld that information from us." said Celina.

"Even if so, Li must have a reason for it! She's lived a hard life."

Celina stood up. "But Alex-"

"I've heard enough. Let's stop this." Alex was visibly upset and he left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Xiao sighed. "It's just as you predicted, Alex is completely blinded by his own emotions. It looks like we have one option left. I can use my mind's eye so we can get the truth from Li herself."

The servant came into the living room. "My lord, Sir Ragnarok is here to see you." He bowed and opened the door, letting Ragnarok walk inside.

"Have a seat." said Tsuma Chung.

Ragnarok sat down and the servant proceeded to pour tea for both of them. "I am here to speak on behalf of my master, Lord Zhang, the true king. But right now he is treated as a fugitive so he cannot make it personally, so hopefully you understand his predicament."

"Of course. I heard about what happened from my friends at the palace. I too support Lord Zhang as the true King of Shen."

Ragnarok took a sip of tea. "That is most excellent. Now, let's get to the matter at hand. I believe you have a certain map that is of interest to my master."

Lord Chung took a scroll and placed it on the table. "This is what you are looking for. The map leads to a secret tunnel that leads to a cave. The cave has the secrets of the Shadow Style, a sword style that no one has ever seen before."

"Yes, my master would most certainly be interested."

"The location of the cave is a secret that my father passed down to me. But I am not a swordsman so these secrets are of no use to me. I have no problem giving it to you. However, in return...will Lord Zhang give me what is **promised** to me?"

"Of course, my master always keeps his word. You give us the map and he will give you immortality." said Ragnarok.

"That is most excellent. We will get along, I can tell." Lord Chung handed him the map. "I have one more question for you. Are you really Chu Yen?"

"Chu Yen is a name of the past. Ragnarok is name of the future."

"As one of the Four Brothers, Chu Yen should be over seventy years old today. But you look not a day older than twenty years old."

A smile came across Ragnarok's face. "That is one of the benefits of being immortal - you get to stay young forever. I am living proof of my master's words. Help us in our cause and you will receive immortality, that I promise you."

Shortly after Alex left the room, Li entered the room. Xiao thought it was better than having to look for her. "Li?" said Celina.

"I know what you did, Miss Concubine."

"I don't quite follow you?"

"I know you took a look at my map. I'm a ninja and I can sense when you come into my room. Even when I'm bathing."

Celina stood up. "No wait--"

Li slammed her palm on the table. "I don't know what you stole from me but if you don't trust me, that's fine by me. We are not a team." She exited the room.

Xiao and Celina went after her and their conversation continued in the hallway. "Wait, Li! Alex believes in you but I am not Alex. I have my doubts about you and it would be nice if you explained yourself. What were you doing with the Black Reaper?"

Li turned around. "How did you know about that? Tch. Looks like I'm not the only stealthy one around here."

"Why were you with someone as dangerous as the Reaper?" asked Celina.

"It's none of your business!" Li snapped at her.

"Lady Ce is telling the truth." said Xiao. "Li, you're a member of the Council just like us so we need to be transparent with each other."

"Ugh, not you too Xiao. Are you taking Miss Concubine's side?"

Xiao took a step forward. "Remember the time we went to the Temple and the forest after that? I saw a side of you I never saw before. Please, Li, I want to believe in you. But you have to tell me the truth."

Li glanced to the side. "Don't try your mind's eye on me. Here's a word of advice. Stop spying on people. And don't go near the Reaper because you don't know what you're dealing with." Li walked away.

[C] Title Contents

The very next day, Alex was being trained in the courtyard by Master Taishi. Alex was topless, wearing only shoes and pants. Over time his body has developed quite nicely, he had visible muscles and even a six pack. Taishi took a stick and poked at his bare shoulders. "Hmmm."

"Can you stick out your arms?" the old bearded man asked.

Alex straightened his arms to the side. Taishi poked his shoulder with his stick.

"Hmmm. Hmmm."

"What is it?" asked Cheng.

"We need to work on your shoulder muscles. They need improvement."

Cheng was confused and had no clue what the old man was thinking.

"Huh? Why?"

"The shoulders consist of three major muscles called the front deltoids, rear deltoids, and side deltoids. All of them must be strong to hold a sword properly. In addition, each sword swing activates 27 muscles at a time. We are going to work on your core muscles and you will see an improvement in speed and reflexes."

Cheng was overwhelmed by his technical knowledge. "As expected of Master Taishi, you know your stuff."

As for the training, Alex was ordered to carry two large buckets of water held together by a stick. He would carry the stick over his shoulders and balance the stick with his arms. He'd carry water from the well and into the nearest building, and do it back and forth. After three times, he panted for breath. "Uhhh, uhhh, this is difficult!"

"No complaining, young man!" said Taishi. "Keep moving!"

After several hours of grueling training, it was finally over. Alex, now with his clothes back, walked about the hallway. "Oh man...Taishi's training drained me." He was massaging his shoulder with his own fist. As he passed by the window, he sensed something and looked outside.

To his surprise, he saw the Black Reaper running around in the courtyard. (It's him!) Without thinking twice, Alex jumped out the window and ran along the roof and hopped onto ground level. "It's you, the one from the other day...there's no doubt about it. What are you doing here?"

"Looks like a troublesome one has appeared. I am here for your sister, Li Cheng, not you." said the Reaper.

Alex drew his Fire Sword. "How do you know she's my sister?" There was no reply from his opponent. "You're not going anywhere near her!"

Both Alex and the Reaper clashed their blades. *schling* Alex went on the offensive. After all, offense is the best defense¹⁸. He used his circular movements and struck aggressively, while the Reaper defended himself perfectly. He left no openings for Alex to exploit (利用). All they did was clash blades, and Alex grew increasingly frustrated. They stepped back a few paces. His Fire Sword was set a flame.

"Ohhh. This is the power of the Fire Sword. I've always wanted to see it first hand."

"Tell me what you want from Li or I'll burn your mask off."

"At your level you can't do a thing to me." replied the Shadow.

This triggered Alex and he dashed forward and swings his blade left and right. *Froom* The flames touched the Shadow's mask and burned off the corner of it. Then Alex attacked with a forward swing, the Shadow blocked and kicked him in the chest. *Thud* Alex fell on one knee. That did not feel like an ordinary kick, but rather a kick from a statue. How can a person be this strong?

¹⁸ Offense is the best defense - An expression from the Art of War

The Demon Slayer is not one to give up, so after taking a few breaths, he stood back up. Perhaps the only thing burning brighter than the Fire Sword was his eyes.

"I'm going to show you why they call me the Reaper...you'll soon meet the Grim Reaper (死神) himself."

Alex and his opponent charged into each other. "Yaaahhh!" The Reaper used Shadow Walk, where multiple shadows of himself appeared behind him. This sight confused Alex's eyes. Their blades clashed, and the Reaper's blade shoved Alex's blade slightly off, allowing him to slash the Demon Slayer's left arm.

schleb The Demon Slayer stepped back and winced from his wound.

Meanwhile, Celina was on the second floor, and upon hearing a noise outside, looked out the window. She immediately jumped out without thinking. She ran along the wall and jumped onto ground level.

"Celina? Stay back!" cried the Demon Slayer.

Celina did not listen and drew two swords out of their shells.

The Reaper turned around to face her. "Everyone who gets in my way must be eliminated."

They charged into each other. Celina attacked with circular swings with her double blades, but the Reaper managed to defend well even with a single blade. While exchanging blows, she noticed his movements were unusual...she has never seen this style of fighting before.

Li just hopped onto the roof of a nearby building. (What is that noise?) She just noticed the man dressed in black fighting a woman. (It's him! He's here! But why now?)

"Dance of the Lion!" Celina used this attack and the Reaper used Shadow Walk to avoid it. This surprised her quite a bit.

The Reaper was spinning like a top, slashing at every opportunity. She blocked with both swords. It was hard to keep track of his amazing speed and she was forced to step back. If having two swords was this difficult, imagine blocking with only one... The Reaper swings his blade hard, causing an air breaker to fly at her. ***Froom*** She blocked with both swords but she was knocked down.

Alex stood before Celina. "Not a step closer. I won't let you harm her."

Xiao Ye looked out the same window and quickly jumped out, ran along the roof, and landed on the ground.

"Not another one." said the Reaper, noticeably annoyed. "You keep coming like flies."

Xiao can sense how dangerous her enemy is and proceeded cautiously. She stood in fighting stance and did not advance for at least twenty seconds. If she won't attack, then the Black Reaper will. He dashed forward and used aggressive strikes. The two clashed blades for a while. The Reaper used his Shadow Walk and confused Xiao's eyes. He'd strike from the left, and suddenly he'd strike from the right. Keeping up with his movements was a hardship.

The Reaper saw an opening and he thrusts his sword forward. While stepping back, Xiao pushed his blade slightly to the right, and her head tilted to the left, so his blade missed her face by a little. She kept retreating to avoid the blade until she was up against the wall.

(What was that technique of his? It's so confusing to the eyes. In that case I won't use my eyes.) Subsequently (隨後), Xiao closed her eyes and entered back into the world of darkness. She stood in her fighting stance.

"So this is the famous blind style of fighting I've heard about? But even if can track my movements doesn't mean you can keep up with me."

Everyone in the battlefield waited in suspense to see what would happen. Her energy flowed into the Thunder Sword and electric sparks appeared. "Even with the Thunder Sword, you cannot keep up with me." he said.

When Xiao was ready, she went on the offensive with her calculated strikes of the Walking Crane Style. *Zzzzt zzzt* With the Thunder Sword activated, her strikes became more dangerous. The Reaper used Shadow Walk yet again. Celina and Alex gasped and watched with wide open eyes as they were victims of the same technique.

Xiao listened to his footsteps and knew exactly where he was at any time. The Reaper attacked from the left, then right, and kept switching over and over. Xiao blocked all of his attacks despite his speed. *Clang clang* They clashed their blades and the Thunder Sword's electricity flared. The Reaper felt the electricity enter his sword and pushed her away and jumped back.

"You have some skill. But this game is over." The Shadow dashed forward at full speed. His veil flapped against the wind and there a small slit between the veils and from a close angle, his eye was partially seen. He threw a few strikes and Xiao deflected them all. Then he started spinning like a top and struck with the force of a tornado.

(What is up with his movements? It's not normal, it's almost demonic!) Xiao did her best to defend herself, but even if she can see him, his attack was too much. *Cling clang cling* There was an opening and he struck her in the chest. *thud* Luckily, she stepped back to reduce damage and did not receive a cut. Xiao panted for breath.

Alex stepped towards the fighters. "We can get him if we work together."

Plop Li landed on one knee like a typical ninja. "Stop it! You guys are no match for the Reaper."

"Li? Just what exactly is your relation to this guy?" asked Xiao.

"It's a long story." replied she. "Master, don't hurt them. They are not involved in all this."

The Reaper spoke up. "Li. Don't forget your promise. If you come with me, I will spare their lives."

"Fine. I'll go with you." replied she.

Alex has no idea what's going on. "Did you call him master? And what is this promise you speak of?"

Li and the masked shadow began to walk towards the exit. The ninja girl turned around to face her brother. "I'm sorry, Alex. But I have to go with him."

"I don't get this at all!" he exclaimed. "Is he forcing you to do this?"

Celina was holding onto his arm and shoulder to stop him from moving.

"Please, don't worry about me anymore." Li then faced forward and walked with the Reaper through the exit. Like true shadows, they blurred out of sight and completely disappeared.

"No Li, don't leave!" Alex shouted. His hand reached forward but his body cannot move, as he was being restrained by Celina. Somehow, this pain felt familiar to him...the exact same thing happened ten years ago. His sister reluctantly walked out of his life with nothing but a vague explanation. Alex wanted to reach her with his hand, but his parents restrained him. And right now, he was reaching out but someone was restraining him.

History is repeating itself right before his very eyes. After he finally found his older sister, but she was still out of reach. She was no longer the sister he knew... she was from another world...a world that he cannot be a part of.

Preview of Next Episode

"I was hoping it wouldn't be you, Xiao." said Li.

"Who were you hoping for? Your brother Alex? Or your friend Celina? Why did you betray us, Li?"

"I have my reasons..." Li replied vaguely.

"I want to believe in you. Remember when you left the Temple you cried?"

"Don't-" she interrupted.

"It means you care about your friends." she continued.

"Don't go there!" Li shouted.

"I thought that Masai Genzo was your master. Since when did you become a student of the Shadow?"

"It's a long story. I'm afraid I cannot allow you to pass." Li stood in fighting stance.

"I see that words won't get through to you. Fine by me." Xiao stood in the stance of the Walking Crane.

三十二: The Shadow's Secret: Duel in the Cave

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[B] [C] Contents

In the halls of the imperial palace, a servant brought a scroll to a eunuch. "This matter is of utmost urgency, it must reach his majesty as soon as possible." said the servant.

"Understood." said the eunuch. He asked for an audience with the king. Shortly afterwards, the eunuch was in a meeting with Liu Cao and other eunuchs. "Your highness. We just received a message with King Lumeng of the Leinwan Kingdom."

Liu Cao was resting his cheek on his fist, with his elbow on the table, with a bored look on this face. "A message from the king? What does it say?"

"Hai." The eunuch opened the scroll. "The Demon Brothers Jin and Roh were originally fugitives (逃犯) of Leinwan but they have escaped into the Shen Kingdom. They are extremely dangerous fugitives that cannot be left alone, that is why we request you let our troops into your borders."

Liu Cao was fully awake now. "What did you say? Give me the scroll!" The eunuch handed the scroll over to the irate (憤怒) king. He read the letter one more time to make sure. "This kind of language was not written by the king, it was written by their top general, Tsai. I can recognize his crafty language from anywhere." He slammed his fist on the table, startling all the officials. "Blast him! I'm going to return a message to him. Carefully write down every word that I say."

Afterwards, in a building in Seiruun, the capital of Leinwan, the general just received a message. He opened the scroll and read it and then he ripped it in half. "Aaaaargh!" grunted **General Tsai**. "That arrogant king! This kind of language...it can only be written by Liu Cao." At this point, he had a flashback of meeting a younger Liu Cao many years ago.

Liu Cao was a member of the royal family of Liu, yet for some reason, he ran away from home and entered into its neighboring kingdom. He reached the capital city of Seiruun, rumored to be a city that is rich in martial arts. It was in that very city where he met General Tsai, a five star general of the Leinwan army. For some reason, Tsai agreed to take on this teenager as his student.

"Is that all you've got?" asked Tsai. He was wielding a wooden sword.

The teenage Liu Cao was also wielding a wooden sword and he was short of breath. "Not yet!" He charged and attacked, only to be countered by Tsai, and knocked to the ground. Still determined, he stood back up. "I have to get strong as soon as possible..."

"You've got guts, kid, I'll give you that." said Tsai.

The kid charged head on and attacked yet again. They continued sparring like this for hours at a time.

Fate is a funny thing, Tsai trained his student for many years knowing he was from a different kingdom. And now Liu Cao is the king of his rival kingdom and his enemy in combat.

The Shen fleet of ships, led by the admiral, crossed the large river until they reached the middle of the river. Between Shen and Leinwan was a **large river** that stretched from the middle of the land all the way to the bottom of the land. These

waters did not belong to either kingdom and is considered neutral territory. This territory has been a cause for dispute ever since the two kingdoms were founded.

The Leinwan fleet of ships, led by General Tsai, traveled until they saw the Shen fleet. Both sides could not advance and they remained still. Amongst General Tsai's soldiers were archers who were on standby, ready to launch arrows at any time. The same goes for the Shen fleet, they also had archers ready.

Alex was in the courtyard and looked up at the sky. Li Cheng just left him again and there was a lot on his mind. Xiao and Lady Ce arrived. "We know where Li is going," said Celina.

"How do you know?" he asked.

Xiao smiled and pulled out a map to the secret cave. "We have to hurry. We'll explain on the way there."

Alex nodded and the three comrades left the courtyard.

Vincent saw them from the window. "What a bunch of busy bees."

A boat was rowing along a narrow river, carrying two people. The cave's passage was small and dark, illuminated (照亮) only by a torch that the Shadow was carrying. Li was sitting and rowing the paddles.

"Master, we are already inside the cave. I know I'm not supposed to ask questions but isn't it about time you tell me what this mission is about?"

"A long time ago, there was an exceptional warrior whose abilities surpassed even the strongest fighters of his time. He was way ahead of his time and he kept training and training and founded the **Shadow Style**."

"The Shadow Style, the same style that you use?" Li asked.

"Precisely. But the founder was not a man...but a **half demon**."

"Half demon? Can such a person exist?"

"It's inconceivable (不可思議), but he did exist. You could say he was neither human nor demon...an abomination (厭惡) that did not belong in this world. Legend says that a demon man and a human woman became a couple and got married and gave birth to this half-breed. Because of his demon blood, his body was like that of a superhuman. He trained in this very cave and developed the Shadow Style. He was not allowed to practice this forbidden style anywhere else. The secrets should be somewhere in this cave."

"I see...but why would the location of this cave be found in Lord Chung's mansion? This cave belongs to land owned by the powerful Chung family. Chung's ancestor and the half-demon made a deal...He gave the half-demon permission to use this cave so he can have access to the Shadow Style."

"I see..." That was a lot of information to absorb all at once for her.

Just then, both of them sensed danger. "We have followers," said the Shadow. "How could they know of this place?"

Li suddenly thought about how Celina snuck into her room... "It's Celina! She snuck into my room and took a peek at my map. She's here and that means Alex and Xiao are here too."

"Then we have to get off." Both him and Li hopped off the boat onto land. "Stop them from advancing further." The Shadow ran down the hallway and vanished into the darkness.

Meanwhile, in another part of the cave, Liu Zhang and Chu Yen were on their own boat. "Do you sense that?" asked Zhang.

"Yes, master, at least two of them. Who do you think they are?"

"The ones who stole the map from the lord's mansion. We are about to meet our thieves." The boat reached the end of the river, and they got off.

Suddenly, a blue arm came out of the water and startled them both. A water demon's head came out. Chu Yen stabbed it in the face, and kicked it back into the water. "There are water demons here, master. We should hurry."

Before them were two tunnels. "It's best if we separate. I will head left and you head right." said Liu Zhang.

"Hai, master." replied Chu Yen.

Swoosh On another boat, Alex and Xiao were paddling and Celina was at the front. She was holding a torch and she's the only one who could see. "Do you see anything?" asked Xiao.

"The river ends just up ahead." Celina replied.

A claw came out from the water and grabbed the boat's tail. Alex paddled harder but the boat did not progress much. He looked behind and noticed the hand. "Demons!" he shouted, alerting his other two comrades. He shoved the paddle into the demon's face, and it fell into the water.

More hands came out and grabbed the boat, making it rock back and forth. Celina hopped off the front and landed on rock. There was a group of rocks in front of her, and she hopped on each one to get to land. Xiao followed her path. *Doosh doosh* Alex was the last. *Doosh doosh*

The watery creatures crawled onto the land. Alex cut them with his sword and kicked them back into the river. "Now Xiao!"

Xiao nodded. She plunged the Thunder Sword upside down and released its power. The **electricity** spread throughout the entire body of water, shocking every single demon inside. They can hear the cries of all the underwater demons. Uuuuuuaagghh! It was a cry of terror and despair, followed by silence.

Alex put his hand on Xiao's shoulder. "Well done. You're getting better with the Thunder Sword."

"Mmmm." Xiao nodded. She was happy to hear his compliment.

Celina sensed the mood between them and started to wonder. "Ehh hem. We have to keep going." She did not know why she interrupted them, but she acted without thinking.

Without further ado, the three comrades continued to walk down the dark path before them.

[B] Title Contents

"How do you know about this place?" asked the Reaper.

"Same way that you did." replied Chu Yen. "I am friends with Lord Chung and he was happy to provide me a copy of his map. He wanted me to find out the cave's secret. So, I wonder what the secret is?"

"You won't live to find out." The Reaper stood in fighting stance.

"Hehehehe. You really think a man who can't show his face can defeat someone of my caliber? I defeated the War God, after all."

"Everybody knows you're a traitor, Chu Yen."

"Chu Yen is a name of the past! My name is Ragnarok!" He charged recklessly forward for his assault. "Yaaaaahhh!"

Alex turned to the left and sensed a sinister force in that direction. "You guys go ahead, I will catch up later." He dashed into the hallway.

"Wait!" Celina exclaimed.

Xiao grabbed her arm. "Let him go, he will catch up to us."

Alex dashed down the hallway and he saw a glimpse of the man in black. He entered the main room and noticed Chu Yen standing in front of the Reaper, both baring their blades at each other. Both Chu Yen and the Reaper pointed their blades at Alex, who in turn, pointed his Fire Sword at them. Both of them were Cheng's enemies, so he did not know who to focus on. But the same goes for all three of them...this was quite the predicament as they were in a three way **deadlock**. All three warriors circled each other slowly, none of them wanting to make the first move.

The Reaper was as cautious as ever, pointing his blade at Cheng, then immediately at Chu Yen, and kept switching back and forth. Cheng was sweating heavily as he was in the most danger. On the one hand, there is Chu Yen, one of the Four Brothers, and on the other hand is the Black Reaper, an assassin whose abilities were shrouded in mystery. Either one would be a tough opponent but there were two of them, so Cheng was unable to make a move.

Celina stopped running. "Sorry, but I'm worried about Alex. You have to go without me." Without waiting for a reply, she ran in the opposite direction.

Xiao did not have time to say anything and she just continued to move forward.

The three continued to circle to each other. Chu Yen did not see Cheng as a threat so his main focus was the Reaper. He was the most impatient one and wanted to fight the most. The deadlock continued and all of them grew impatient.

Every second felt like ten years and it was not a matter of if, but when¹⁹ the deadlock will be broken.

Chu Yen charged at the Reaper and collided their blades. While their blades were locked, Alex charged at them. Chu Yen jumped back and right after that, the Reaper attacked Alex. *Clang* They exchanged a few moves but there was no time to use their techniques. Chu Yen jumped in, and all of them backed away. All three pointed their blades at the middle. Their situation has not changed at all.

Celina was seen running down the hallway and she drew her twin swords. This was the perfect distraction the Reaper needed - he threw a smoke bomb on the ground and ran away. *Doosh doosh*

"Trying to escape?" Chu Yen chased after him. *Doosh doosh*

Celina just caught up to Alex.

"After them!" Alex ran after Chu Yen down the dark hallway.

The Reaper's speed was unparalleled (无与伦比) and even Chu Yen at full speed was not able to catch up. Alex was just behind them both, but he was falling behind. His Fire Sword glowed and he threw a shockwave of flames forward. *Froom* Chu Yen sensed the heat behind him and turned around to block. The Reaper disappeared into the darkness.

"Tch." Ragnarok was annoyed. "I guess I'll have to deal with this annoying fly."

Alex stopped running. "You are Chu Yen...the one who betrayed the Four Brothers and plunged the country into chaos."

"I just don't get it. I defeated Masai Genzo so I can take his Fire Sword, but he did not have it. Instead he gave it to a no-name nobody like you."

"I don't get it either. Why did my master give me the Fire Sword? But it's better with me than with you!"

Alex and Chu Yen ran forward and exchanged moves. As he expected, Chu Yen was a tough opponent with almost no openings. Alex used circular attacks, spinning his entire body to increase the power, but his opponent dodged them swiftly. Chu Yen was fast on his feet and light as a feather. Now it was Ragnarok's turn to be on the offensive. First he'd attack from the left, and a second later, he'd attack from the right. Alex's eyeballs had a hard time keeping up with his movements.

Clang Alex jumped back to a safer distance. Going head to head with his opponent is a bad idea. He used the **Heat Wave** technique and the flames spread to the entire room. Chu Yen jumped over the flames and somersaulted backwards and landed on his feet. Alex was surprised at how flexible and light he was. He got frustrated and used Heat Wave. Chu Yen evaded to the right. He threw the Heat Wave to the right, and Chu Yen evaded to the left.

"Hmph. Such simple moves won't work on me. The Fire Sword is wasted on the likes of you." said Ragnarok. "The fact that you're called a hero is laughable."

¹⁹ Not a matter of if, but when – describes something that will happen eventually, it's a matter of time

He bent his back and dashed forward and let out a combination attack. *Cling clang cling* Alex blocked while being pushed back. He attacked high and Alex blocked high, then Chu Yen went low and slashed his thigh.

"Uuugh!" Alex grunted as blood appeared on his pants.

Both of them heard footsteps and Celina appeared.

"Well well if it isn't his majesty's concubine? Here you are, a leftover woman²⁰ that nobody wants."

"I'm a former concubine. And there's one person who wants me." She glanced at Alex. "That's enough for me."

Chu Yen continued his taunts and laughed out loud. "Oh that's right. You two had your little affair which caused you to get banished from the palace forever! What a tragic romance! Hahahaha!"

Celina grew angry at his personal attacks. "Better than someone who betrayed his own brothers."

The three of them stared at each other for a while. Alex charged and screamed as he attacked. "Hyyyah!"

Chu Yen blocked a few moves of his and then Celina appeared from the side. He blocked her attack and jumped backwards. Alex appeared directly in front of him and attacked. Chu Yen dodged and jumped away. Celina appeared and attacked, his sword pushed into her swords and shoved her back.

(Damn it. Even though they are weaker than me, they have some skill and I cannot fight them both together.) Just now, he noticed a torch of fire on the ground. "Not bad, I must say. When insects gather together they can accomplish something." He pointed his sword at the torch and flicked it, tossing the torch at them. Alex blocked with his sword and Chu Yen turned around and ran away.

[C] Title Contents

"I was hoping it wouldn't be you, Xiao." said Li.

"Who were you hoping for? Your brother Alex? Or your friend Celina? Why did you betray us, Li?"

"I have my reasons..." Li replied vaguely.

"I want to believe in you. Remember when you left the Temple you cried?"

"Don't-" she interrupted.

"It means you care about your friends." she continued.

"Don't go there!" Li shouted.

"I thought that Masai Genzo was your master. Since when did you become a student of the Shadow?"

"It's a long story. I'm afraid I cannot allow you to pass." Li stood in fighting stance.

²⁰ Leftover woman – a cultural term used to describe a type of woman nobody wants, usually old women or single moms. In this context, she is a widowed concubine of a king.

"I see that words won't get through to you. Fine by me." Xiao stood in the stance of the Walking Crane.

(Xiao's normal fighting style is average but when she closes her eyes she is a fearsome opponent. The thing that will determine the winner is our Legendary Swords...my Ice Sword against her Thunder Sword...I still have the advantage.)

Xiao put on her blindfold. (The cave is dark so being blind is better for me.)

Li dashed forward and struck using quick and precise attacks. Xiao was facing down and listening carefully. She was now in the world of darkness and Li's footsteps made waves.

She was fast on her feet but Xiao's reflexes were just as fast and she blocked them all without breaking a sweat. Li dashed and let out the first strike, Xiao knocked her blade away. But the first strike was a feint so Li pushed the blade forward for the second strike, the real strike. Xiao evaded it by bending her legs and she was in a lower stance. This was the grasshopper stance of the Walking Crane Style where the user's right leg is straight, the left leg is bent. Her sword is parallel to her leg, protecting the entire front.

Li was not familiar with this stance, as Xiao did not use it during their previous fight. How can she attack someone this low? This is called the grasshopper stance because it can hop up at anytime and strike with its fangs. Xiao suddenly stood up and plunged her blade forward. As she's using a one handed stance, she has a longer reach. She kept advancing and forced Li to retreat until she hit a wall. Their blades entered a deadlock. As her right hand held the sword's bottom, Xiao's left hand pushed the blade's blunt side.

They grunted angrily until Li pushed her away.

(I have no choice, I have to use it!) Li's Ice Sword started glowing, and Xiao noticed. She removed the blindfold to open her eyes. Her Thunder Sword started to glow as well.

Li used the **Ice Wave** and Xiao used the **Thunder Wave** and the two forces collided in the middle. *Kabam* Their power was equal and exploded. Both of them winced from the sparks of energy flying everywhere.

As Liu Zhang walked about in the dark tunnel, he sensed a man coming from the front. The Black Reaper was wearing all black so his body was camouflaged (偽装) by the darkness until he came closer.

"So you're the one I've heard so much about, the man with no face." said the eunuch.

"You don't belong here, Liu Zhang."

A wicked smile came upon Liu Zhang's face and he drew a sword. Both swordsmen charged into each other and struck head on. After exchanging just three moves, they can judge each other's strength. It is no regular fight but a fight between two masters. Liu Zhang and the Reaper jumped up and clashed their blades in the air. *Clank* They both landed from the same spot they jumped from.

Liu Zhang jumped onto the wall and bounced off it and attacked downwards. The Reaper used Shadow Walk and avoided his attack.

"That technique...where did you learn that?" asked a bewildered Liu Zhang.

"That is my specialty, the Shadow Walk." The Reaper went on the offensive.

Liu Zhang evaded to the side while creating after-images of himself. Now it was the Reaper's turn to be bewildered. "How do you know the Shadow Walk?"

"I developed this technique a long time ago, I call it the **Zanzoken**."

"That is unbelievable!" The Reaper and the eunuch used their own illusion techniques while attacking. *Clank*

"How interesting. I've studied every martial arts style known to mankind and yet I have not come across your style. I wonder if this cave contains the secret to your style."

"You won't live to see it, eunuch." The Reaper got into fighting stance.

Not so far away, Li was running down a tunnel in their direction.

The Reaper charged and used his tornado spinning attack. *whip whip whip* Liu Zhang defended against it but realized immediately it was too powerful and he jumped back. He pulled out a second sword from his belt, and now he wields two swords.

The Reaper recognized this style. "A two blade style? Don't tell me it's Dance of the Sword?" He charged and yet again used the tornado spinning attack. Using both swords, Liu Zhang blocked every single attack coming his way. "Since when does a eunuch use a woman's sword style?"

"I'm just a demon, so why do I care about men and women's styles? Besides, based on your movements, I'd say you're not exactly human either."

Li has finally arrived and Liu Zhang hopped onto a boulder, and like a ninja, bounced off the walls and disappeared.

"Was that Liu Zhang?" asked a bewildered Li. "What was he doing here?"

"It doesn't matter anymore..." replied the Reaper.

The masked man took her to a room with a large flat wall before them. It was filled with **drawings** all over, from left to right and top to bottom. They were stick figures out of a man doing different poses with a sword.

"Just what is this?" Li asked in bewilderment.

"These pictures depict the various techniques of the Shadow Style. The half demon, the founder of this style, came here to develop this deadly style. He wrote down the secrets on this wall...along with the secret of the Shadow Walk."

"Oh I get it. You came here to learn the secrets of the Shadow Style." said Li.

"No, I have already mastered the Shadow Style. And I have to make sure no one else learns of our secret. What if someone dangerous like Chu Yen or Liu Zhang were to learn this style? That must not happen. It dies here today. Li, destroy the drawings."

"Hai." She took a deep breath and slashed the wall all over. She made a cut every single picture on the wall to the point that it's unrecognizable. (面目全非)

"Our job here is done. Let's go." The Reaper whipped his cape and walked away, and Li followed him.

She finally learned something about her master...he has a clan and this cave once belonged to his clan. Does that mean there are more people with awesome abilities like the Reaper? She knew so little about him and now he has become more mysterious.

Preview of Next Episode

Alex and Celina did not know how they were thrown into this situation, and there was no time to think about it, for their lives were at stake. Celina was kneeling on the ground, head facing down. She was panting for breath and her white dress was dirty and her skin was filled with scratches and bruises. Her twin swords were lying besides her. Standing before her was Alex, wielding the Fire Sword in his right hand.

They were surrounded by archers, with arrows already loaded and pointing at them.

"What are you waiting for?" she said while looking up. "Finish me off."

"I can't..." Cheng replied.

"Do it...or we'll both die." Celina replied. Her eyes showed that she was ready for death.

Cheng brought his blade up and remained frozen in that position. He can bring his sword down and strike at any moment, but he was hesitating. Who knows what was going through his mind, he who has to slay his beloved woman? Cheng's arms were trembling. His eyes were shaking, and he just stared at Celina, who was ready to receive her death. But can he do such a thing? Can he kill the woman that he loves?

三十三: A Game of Death: Alex's Decision

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[B] [C] Contents

At the Council's headquarters, Xiao was assigned to send a message to Cheng. She was in a good mood as she walked down the hallway, as she wanted to talk to Cheng alone. Since she was blind for half her life, a man's looks are not important. What's important is his voice. A man's voice must be soothing and manly and honest as well. Xiao can tell from his voice that he's an honest man who can be trusted. Not only that, but her brother Jiang Ye trusted Alex, so that's just more proof that Cheng is a man of character.

Knock knock. "Come in." said Alex.

Xiao opened the door and closed it, or at least she thinks she closed it. It was left slightly ajar.

"Oh Xiao Ye, what's up?"

"The elders of the group have decided to change the location of our headquarters."

"Oh, that's right." said Alex. "I almost forgot, the Council changes locations every once in a while to avoid detection."

"It's unfortunate but it must be done, or the East Brigade will find us. The Council of Heaven is still treated like a criminal organization, but everything they've done is for the good of the people. The law is unfair."

"I agree." he replied, and she was pleased by his answer. "I'm a member just like you and I've met Master Tze himself, so I know about what you guys do. The law was written by a bunch of corrupt politicians who just care about their deep pockets. Even the king thinks this way, but his way of thinking is wrong."

"I'm glad you see it my way! I wish the king wouldn't be so quick to judge. Alex. Can I ask you something?" Xiao asked bashfully.

"Sure, what is it?"

At this time, Celina was outside his room and she was about to touch the door when she noticed it was slightly ajar. Then she heard a woman and a man's voice inside.

"You've known my brother for a while. What was he like?"

"Hmmm I've known him for only a short while. And most of the time he was wearing a mask. But I can tell he's a good man. He mentions his sister quite often and it's clear that he cares about you a lot. He even became a wanted criminal to get money to take care of you."

"My brother trusted you and I can see why." said she. "My mind's eye can determine a person's character and I can tell you are an honest man, Alex. I'm glad that my brother became friends with you."

Alex blushed. "Uhhh thank you."

"I think a woman would be lucky to be with you."

He did not expect to hear that and just stared at her. "You know Xiao, your brother always said you had the prettiest eyes. After your journey from the forest, I was not able say it before, but you do have pretty eyes. I'm so glad I get to see them."

Xiao did not expect to hear that and just stared at the floor.

Celina was developing a big misunderstanding. She has never felt jealousy before so she did not know what this feeling was. Her chest felt **tight** and it felt like her heart was being ripped in two.

"Say, are you free today? Do you want to train with me?" asked Xiao.

"Sure. Your Thunder Sword vs my Fire Sword, it should be interesting."

Just before the two came to the door, Celina ran down the hall and made a turn at the corner. Alex heard the faint sound of a footstep and wondered if someone was nearby.

She held onto the fence and stared at nothing and was deep in her own thoughts.

She plunged the Thunder Sword upside down and released its power. The **electricity** spread throughout the entire body of water, shocking every single demon inside. They can hear the cries of all the underwater demons. Uuuuuuaagghhh! It was a cry of terror and despair, followed by silence.

Alex put his hand on Xiao's shoulder. "Well done. You're getting better with the Thunder Sword."

"Mmmm." Xiao nodded. She was happy to hear his compliment.

Celina sensed the mood between them and started to wonder. "Ehh hem. We have to keep going." She did not know why she interrupted them, but she acted without thinking.

A woman's intuition is rarely wrong...She acted from her instincts because at that time, she knew something was going on between them. There were other instances when those two showed interest in each other, like a casual remark (備註) or a glance here and there.

From the second floor, she walked down to street level, still full of her own thoughts. A messenger entered the courtyard. "Are you Lady Ce?"

"Yes and who are you?" she asked.

"I am a messenger sent from the imperial palace. The king wants has been searching for you and wants to see you right away."

"I see. Very well then."

Lady Ce and the messenger both climbed onto their own horses and galloped away.

Vincent happened to be in the courtyard and saw them leave. Alex and Xiao came down to the courtyard. "Have you seen Celina?" he asked Vincent.

"As a matter of fact, she just left. A messenger from the palace came by and they both took a horse and left the building."

Alex was shocked. "She left without telling me? Sorry Xiao, but our training will have to wait. I have a bad feeling about this." Without further ado, he grabbed his own horse and they galloped away. Gallop gallop.

Little did he know, he was being watched by a group of stalkers from far away. As soon as Jin saw Alex's horse leave the building, him and his men chased after him on horses. So in the front was Lady Ce and the messenger, and Alex was a little bit further away from them, and further behind was Jin and his ten men.

The messenger led Lady Ce to a mountainous area away from town. She sensed a murderous intent in the air and stopped her horse. "Something's not right." she said.

A group of archers appeared from above the cliff. The top half of their bodies were seen, and they were all holding bows and carrying a bag of arrows in their back. On the left arm was a red feather tied by a band. Amongst them was Roh, one of the two Demon Brothers.

The countless archers fired their arrows and hit the messenger's horse, causing him to fall onto the ground. Arrows hit Celina's horse, and it whined and stood on its hind legs, causing her to fall down. Thud.

"Please don't kill me!" pleaded the messenger. "I'm just a servant!"

Roh raised his right arm, and three **archers** launched their arrows and hit the messenger. One arrow hit him in the neck, killing him instantly.

Celina drew her double swords and used them to block the arrows.

Suddenly, Alex arrived, he pulled the reins on his horse and it whined before coming to a full stop. There was a lot going on in one glance - the two dead horses, the dead guy next to the horse, as well as the archers on the top of the cliff.

"Behind you!" Celina shouted.

Alex looked behind and saw a group of ten horses coming his way. Now the two were completely and utterly surrounded.

Jin stopped his horse. "You two fell into our trap at last. You had no idea how long we waited while you were in the safety of the Council headquarters. And now you finally came out."

Alex's Fire Sword glowed and turned into flames and his horse charged forward. Jin's archers fired arrows at his horse, and it whined and fell on its front legs, and Alex fell off its back and rolled onto the ground. Celina ran to Alex to stand next to him, with her twin swords ready.

"Heh, escape is impossible for you two." Jin announced. "Now we can just kill you right now, but what fun would that be? Instead, let's play a little game. You two lovers will fight to the death, and the winner gets to live."

"Why should we listen to you?" said an angry Alex.

"If you don't participate then both of you will die."

"I'm not gonna play your sick little game!" he shouted back.

"How boring. Think about it, would you rather just die here or fight for a chance to live? We're offering you a once in a lifetime deal!"

Alex glanced at Celina and saw the side of her face, so he was unable to see her expression. (This looks hopeless, there are too many archers so escape is impossible. We have to stall for time. Maybe if we pretend to fight, that'll buy us some time...)

Celina then glanced at him. "Alex, let's do it." Her eyes showed that she was serious.

"What are you saying?" he said in disbelief.

"We don't have a choice, do we?" She stood in fighting stance.

"Also, we can tell if your moves are fake. If you pretend to fight, we'll kill you instantly." said Jin.

"Having one of us die is better than both of us dying, it's basic math." she said.

Alex was in shock that she was willing to go along with their sick game. She actually sounded eager to fight. He looked up at the cliff, and the archers lifted their bows to their face and pulled the arrows back. He had no choice but to

comply with their demands. He stood in the default fighting stance of the Heaven's Wrath Style, where his sword's bottom is next to his face, holding it with both hands, his right arm bent backwards, and his left arm covering the neck.

The wind blew hard as the lovers stared at each other. Neither of them wanted to make a move...but who can blame them? Who in this situation would be willing to fight? But they cannot wait too long, or else Jin will grow impatient.

Celina dashed forward and began the **assault**. Alex was unwilling to attack and just defended. *Cling clang cling*

"Look at that." Jin said to his soldiers. "They really are going at it seriously!"

His men snickered. "Hehehehehe."

One of the men said: "But the man isn't willing to hit her back."

"Just you wait." Jin replied. "It doesn't matter how much they love each other, everyone values their own life more than anything. He'll start fighting back anytime now."

[B] Title Contents

So far, all Cheng has done was dodged and deflect her attacks. After ten more strikes, they both stood back at a safer distance and stared again. This time, both of them ran forward at the same time. Their silent exchange continued for some time. Cling cling clang. Both of them were seriously attacking to kill the other person. Cling clang clang.

They were thrown in a situation that neither of them expected, and there was no time to think about it, for their lives were at stake. Their collisions of the blade were deliberate and clearly audible for their observers.

Roh was enjoying the show as much as Jin was. This is their idea of entertainment, to make close friends and lovers kill each other. Even if one survives, he will live with that guilt for the rest of his life. "I wonder who's going to live...and who's going to die?" Roh asked himself. "Or perhaps they will both kill each other in the process?"

Clang! Cling! Their arms were restless as they continued hitting with the intention to kill. Alex, using his swift techniques he learned from his masters, thrusts the blade forward. Celina blocked it with both of her swords, and she pushed his sword away and attacked with her right sword. Whoosh. Alex dodged it just in time.

Such is the style of the Dance of the Sword. This style was designed primarily for women, particularly the ones who needed to defend themselves. Since the early days of the Chao Dynasty, women were mistreated in a male dominated world. Female dancers devised a style that they could use to defend themselves in case they were attacked. And the result was the Dance of the Sword. The fighting style looks like a dance, for their movements are graceful and beautiful and deadly at the same time.

Against the Dance of the Sword, Alex Cheng was using the Heaven's Wrath Style, a style of combat used since ancient times. It was an art first founded by the powerful Chao royal family, the ones who chased the demons out of the country.

Celina stood in a different stance than usual and Cheng recognized it. "Dance of the Dragon!" She started spinning her entire body and became like a tornado...a tornado with two swords. Those were the fangs of the dragon. Alex defended while moving back with his fast feet. Her attacks were high, medium and low, making them unpredictable. It was so fast that not even the user knows which attack will come next.

Jin's eyes lit up as he watched. "Ohhh so this is the Dance of the Sword's final form. I have only heard rumors about it but today I get to see this ultimate technique."

Her blades came one after another, clashing against Cheng's blade. Chin-chin-chin-chin. After a few more seconds, she stopped to prevent getting dizzy. Cheng remembered her telling him about the weakness of the Dance of the Dragon.

"...The idea is to use those spinning motions to build momentum, so that each attack becomes stronger. This is offensive and defensive as well. And sometimes we reverse directions so we don't get dizzy. But this technique has a weakness, it is the **dragon's tail**." (龙的尾巴)

Alex pictured a green dragon and focused on its tail. "The dragon's tail? You mean the feet?"

"Yes, but more precisely the ankles."

She told him the weakness...so why would she use this technique? Then Cheng's pupils dilated as he realized her intentions. (No way...Celina..do you really want to die here?)

He looked up and saw a woman with a pony tail 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.

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 himself fell down from the weight. Plop! "Ugh!" He stood up, 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 the arms of the Demon Slayer, the one who saved her life last time as well. They were both shocked and they just stared without saying a word.

(So from back then...you were ready to die. You want to die so I'll live...do you think I can accept that?!) What a predicament this is for the hero. He can no longer stall for time. If she continues to use the Dance of the Dragon, eventually he will be defeated...unless if he exploits (利用) its weakness.

As expected, Celina continued using the final form, this time spinning the opposite way to prevent dizziness.

Alex charged into the deadly tornado and dropped to his knees, and he was sliding on his knees as he slashed her ankles. *Schleb* She tripped over herself and fell to the ground and dropped her weapons. He walked over to the fallen woman and pointed his sword at her.

Alex and Celina did not know how they were thrown into this situation, and there was no time to think about it, for their lives were at stake. Celina was kneeling on the ground, head facing down. She was panting for breath and her white dress was dirty and her skin was filled with scratches and bruises. Her twin swords were lying besides her. Standing before her was Alex, wielding the **Fire Sword** in his right hand.

They were surrounded by archers, with arrows already loaded and pointing at them.

"What are you waiting for?" she said while looking up. "Finish me off."

"I can't..." Cheng replied.

"Do it...or we'll both die." Celina replied. Her eyes showed that she was ready for death.

Cheng brought his blade up and remained frozen in that position. He can bring his sword down and strike at any moment, but he was hesitating. Who knows what was going through his mind, he who has to slay his beloved woman? Cheng's arms were trembling. His eyes were shaking, and he just stared at Celina, who was ready to receive her death. But can he do such a thing? Can he kill the woman that he loves?

Suddenly, a loud roar was heard from the sky. A cannon ball appeared and smashed the ground. *Kaboom* This got everyone's attention. Nearby, there was a group of people standing next to a cannon. They were Xiao, Vincent and other Council members.

A miracle has arrived and Alex and Celina were saved. A second cannon ball was fired and hit the ground, creating a cloud of dust. Kaboom! Jin and Roh coughed from the dust.

"Damn it, what timing for them to show up!" said Roh.

Jin coughed. "It's the Heaven's Council. Men, get them!"

"Celina!" yelled Alex, running towards her. A bunch of arrows flew in between, forcing him to stand still. Twang twang. More arrows were coming and the two ran in opposite directions. Twang twang.

Alex Cheng was extremely frustrated as he badly wanted to see his woman, but the archers will not let him. He ran towards the line of archers and started slashing them.

The cloud of dust blurred everyone's vision and the battlefield became a mess. Council members and Red Feather soldiers were fighting each other. All over, there were sounds of fighting and screaming. In this kind of situation, it was every man and woman for themselves.

While searching for archers, Alex escaped from the cloud of dust and saw a man standing by himself. It was none other than Roh. All other men were fighting each other, so this was the perfect chance to get Roh...it's as if their duel was decided by fate.

"That was a dirty scheme you pulled." said an angry Alex. "You have no idea how pissed off I am right now."

"Heh. Human lives are just a game to us."

Alex grunted and his eyes squinted and his eyebrows furrowed. "You're going to pay for Shen Long and Sui Long's death...and for the sin of making me fight Celina...you're going to pay the ultimate price!" The Fire Sword was burning so brightly that even Alex felt hot. He charged forward with his back bent, fast and swift like a ninja.

He let out a combination of attacks...he was not thinking but acting on pure instinct. Roh dodged and blocked with confidence. However, that confidence slowly withered (枯萎) away as Alex's attacks became more aggressive and harder to predict. Alex made a swing horizontally. *Froom* Roh dodged it but the flames hit his left arm and burned off a piece of his sleeve. That part his arm was smoking. Ssssssss.

(He actually landed a hit on me? That was just a fluke!)

Alex used **Infinity Circle**, a technique where he uses spinning strikes to build up momentum and the attacks can come from above or below. Depending on the user's stamina, the combinations can last forever. All Roh can do was block while moving back. *Clang* He blocked a strike from above. Alex pushed his opponent's sword up, leaving him open for a second. He made a swing at Roh's legs, and the flames cut his clothes and burned his skin.

Roh jumped back and looked at his legs. (How can this punk be giving me such a hard time? He couldn't even fight Rubble the Ice Hunter! How can he improve so much in such a short time?)

Indeed Alex was not the same as before. He has been training all the time and also, with Master Tze's help, his skill has increased exponentially.

Roh was getting frustrated as he was losing to someone he thought was inferior to him. He went on the offensive with his best moves. Alex dodged using his superb footwork.

When he felt the time was right, he used his special technique. "**Melody of the Celestial Maidens!**" Alex charged forward with the strength of a bull and pushed Roh back, feet scraping the dirt. Scrrrrrr. Then Alex did a jump attack. *Cling* Without stopping, he pushed Roh back. Alex's movements were just like that of a celestial maiden, fast and light, yet powerful. He kept repeating the pattern of jumping strikes and pushing strikes until Roh was near the edge of the cliff.

Alex plunged his sword into his enemy's stomach, piercing it completely that his sword came out of his back. Roh coughed blood and he was in complete

shock. Alex then put his foot on Roh's stomach and pulled his sword out. *schelb* Roh fell backwards off the cliff and disappeared from sight.

The Demon Slayer put his sword back into its shell and walked away from the cliff. Suddenly, a claw appeared on the edge. Then another claw appeared. Alex sensed something wrong and turned around. The demon jumped up and landed on the ground on all fours.

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slish slash Inside the dust cloud, Celina just cut an archer, and he fell to the ground in a pool of his own blood. An arrow flew at her. *twang* She dodged it and it flew past her head. She charged forward and struck. The archer used his bow to block, but it was cut into pieces and she stabbed him in the stomach. Although archers carry swords, their swordcraft is weaker than the average soldier. That is why in close range combat, they are nearly useless.

She cannot see much but the same goes for her enemies. Suddenly, some of the dust cleared up and revealed a man in front of her, who happened to be Jin. Of course, he noticed her as well.

"That was despicable...you made me and my lover kill each other. You're going to pay for that." Celina was very angry as one can tell by her voice.

"Heh. I already have seen the weakness of your strongest attack, the Dance of the Dragon. How are you going to make me pay?"

Celina charged head on and assaulted him aggressively. Jin went on the defense, still confident this will be an easy win for him. He would defend until he sees an opening and go for the kill. When the time was right, she used **Dance of the Tiger**...she dashed and slid on her knees and pointed both blades forward. Jin could only block one of them, and the other one stabbed his chest.

Jin was caught by complete surprise. (What's this? I've never seen this move before!)

Celina continued her assault. *Cling clang cling* Her moves may look wild and sloppy, but every move was calculated. Next, she used **Dance of the Eagle**, where she crossed her blades, making a scissor shape. Jin put his sword in a vertical position and blocked it in the middle, stopping both blades from coming closer. Celina released the blades and hit with the left one. Jin blocked that one, and the right blade cut his abdomen. "Uuugh!" Jin jumped backwards.

(I have not seen this move. Why did she not use it against Cheng?) Then his eyes widened. (I know why!)

"Dance of the Phoenix!" Her entire body did a full spin for every attack, using the spinning momentum to increase the power of her attacks, striking the same spot over and over. All Jin could do was defending and stepping back. Eventually, she had to stop because spinning too much will make her dizzy. Jin's blade cracked and he was shocked.

"Heh...I get it now. You were hiding these moves until now. You didn't use them on Cheng because you were holding back. You wanted him to kill you, didn't you?"

"So what if I was? What's it to you?"

Jin let out a hysterical laughter.

Celina grew impatient. "What's so funny?"

"So you were going to give up your life for your lover boy! What a romantic story. Too bad Cheng didn't feel the same way. He would have killed you so he could live. Hyahahahaha!"

Celina clutched her sword tightly and her eyes grew angrier. "That's what you think. You don't know him."

"Let me tell you something. No matter who won the duel, we would have killed you both anyways! Hyahahahaha!" He laughed while tilting his head back.

"Shut up!" She attacked and the two clashed their blades.

Xiao just arrived to see these two fighting. Upon seeing Jin, she grew angry and she frowned. "He's the one who's responsible for my brother's death!" She ran forward as her Thunder Sword became charged with **electricity**. She threw the Thunder Wave at him. Jin pushed Celina out of the way and blocked the attack...but it was no use, the electricity zapped his sword and his arms, as well as his entire body.

He fell backwards and his clothes were smoking. Hsssss. And he was paralyzed in his semi-conscious state.

Alex was shocked at what stood before him. This beast took the form of a wolf but it was the size of a horse. It has fur all over its body but it was no ordinary fur, they were hard and sharp like metal. Electric sparks appeared randomly.

It was a demon called **Raikou**. 闪电兽

"What the hell are you?" asked a bewildered Alex.

"Heh. Obviously I am a demon." said Roh. "You're the Demon Slayer so are you able to kill me?"

Alex used Heat Wave and Raikou jumped over the flames...its jump was high and it landed elsewhere. It charged at Alex, who jumped out of its path. Raikou then ran away from him. Its speed was much faster than that of a horse.

Xiao slowly walked over to the fallen Jin, her gaze full of intense emotions. One can tell by her facial expression that she wanted to kill this man to avenge her brother. Without a doubt, he deserves to die. But she wanted to savor the moment, to kill him quickly would be the easy way out. He must suffer for his crimes...she was deciding on how to kill him.

"Watch out!" shouted Celina.

Xiao looked behind and saw the demon coming at her and quickly rolled out of the way. Her reaction to seeing the demon was the same as Alex. Raikou raised its back by lifting its hind legs and threw an electric wave on the ground.

Zzzzzztttt. Xiao countered with the Thunder Wave and the two forces cancelled

each other out. Zap. Electric sparks were all over the place. Raikou grabbed the fallen Jin and ran away.

"No!" shouted Xiao. She ran after the demon, leaving Celina behind. This was her golden chance to get revenge so she cannot let Jin escape this place.

Moments later, Alex showed up and he and Celina exchanged awkward glances without uttering a word. They walked silently towards the cliff and stood at the edge.

"Did you really want me to kill you?" asked Alex.

"It's fine if it's you." she replied without any emotion.

"Fool! You think that will make me happy?" he snapped at her.

"My life has no meaning...until I met you. I don't mind dying so you can live."

Alex grabbed her by the shoulders. "No...if you're gone then what am I going to do? What meaning will I have?"

She was surprised by his sudden outburst. "You're not like me, you still have so much to accomplish."

"I don't care about any of that! I don't want you to leave me behind! **If you go, then I will go...we will go together.**"

They stared at each other in the eyes, both their eyes were shaking as they were full of bottled up emotions. She can see her reflection in his eyes and he can see his reflection on her eyes. Then their eyes closed and they leaned closer and closer and kissed. This was no ordinary kiss, but one of extreme passion, of two lovers who went through life and death and now are reunited.

They both will always remember the first time they met.

"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.

Alex's arms squeezed her back tighter while her hands grabbed his silver hair. They have been through thick and thin. There were so many obstacles that prevented them from being together, and yet, as fate would have it, those obstacles were removed one by one. But whether their meeting was an accident or written by fate, the important thing is that they are still together.

Xiao came back to the battleground, disappointed that Jin and Roh escaped. She saw Alex and Celina from a distance and waved to them. "Hey guys!" Then

she looked down and noticed that they were **holding hands**. In that one moment, Xiao realized the truth and a flood of emotions came rushing down.

Even though she has her mind's eye, she could not read these two's relationship correctly. Looking back, it was so obvious they were together, by the way Cheng looks at her and talks to her. But Xiao did not see those signs because she was clouded by her own feelings for Cheng. She felt stupid for liking him and having false hope and decided in that moment to give up.

"Were you able to catch the Demon Brothers?" asked Cheng.

"Unfortunately that demon was too fast and we did not catch up." said Xiao.

Xiao noticed Vincent standing by the cliff. She stood beside him, staring at the sky without uttering a word.

"What's wrong? Something bothering you?" asked Vincent.

"Is it that obvious?" said Xiao.

"You're not the only who can read people, you know? I can tell something is bothering you, it's written all over your face."

"Let's just say that I liked someone but it turns out it's impossible for us."

"I know exactly how that feels." Vincent was speaking from experience. He has tried to get Li's attention for a while, but it was all in vain. "When we get home, let's have toast to the heartbroken."

Preview of Next Episode

Li Cheng was busy every second, killing demons coming from everywhere. One red vampire was behind her and clawed at her shoulder. *Schleb* Her blood dripped on the ground. "Uhhh..."

"Li!" The Reaper plunged his sword into the red vampire's stomach and the tip came out of its back. *Schleb* Being stuck inside of the demon, he was unable to pull the sword out. The demon clawed at his head, and he tilted his head slightly, and his hat and veil fell off. *Slash* The Reaper's face was completely exposed and his forehead was bleeding. He kicked the demon and pulled out his sword at the same time.

Li just finished off another demon and turned around to look at him...and when she saw his face, she became frozen with shock. Her eyes were wide open and her jaw dropped. "No way...why is it you?"

三十四: Liu Zhang's Trap: The Mask Falls

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Right now, the ninja girl Cheng was lying flat on the rooftop of an abandoned house. It is one of her habits she's had for a long time, since her days at the Temple. She would stare at the sky and her mind would drift away just like the clouds. Right now, there was a lot on her mind. For the sake of her promise to the Shadow, she abandoned her brother and her friends, as well as the Heaven's Council. It was all because of a promise she made to him on that day. She admits to herself that she is afraid of the Shadow and his powers, but at the same time, she respects him as her master. Li started to have a **flashback** of how they first met...

After traversing the entire width of the forest, Fo Long reached the edge of the hill, where there was a great view of the city below and the sky above. She took off her straw hat and mask, freeing her face so she can feel the breeze against her skin. Her feelings of joy and excitement were indescribable (不可名狀). Years ago, Li would fear going back to the city, but today, she returns with a renewed sense of hope. Staring at the city below, she felt like a monarch about to take over everything, now that she thinks she is invincible.

When she left the city, she was a child fugitive. But now she is an adult, and no one will recognize her, thus the mask is not needed.

The first city on her travel itinerary (行程) was Yi Ting, whose magistrate arrested her parents. At night time, there was a horse carriage riding across town, protected by three bodyguards on horses. Li was standing in the middle of the street, clearly in the path of the carriage.

"Who's that?" said Bodyguard-A.

"What the hell are you doing, woman?" shouted the Bodyguard-B.

Li was not fazed by them at all. "I need to see Lord Dumai now."

Bodyguard-B got off his horse and drew his sword. "Move it or we'll move you as a dead body."

Li smiled. "Now we're talking." She drew her sword and charged forward. Bodyguard-B thrust his sword at her, but she dodged, went past his safe zone, and stabbed him. He fell on the ground and bled to death. Bodyguard-A and Bodyguard-C hopped off their horses and attacked her. *Slisn Slash* She finished them off with no problems. This helped her confirm that the Heaven's Wrath Style is invincible.

Magistrate Dumai exited the carriage. "What the hell is the ruckus? (騷動)" Then he gasped upon seeing his fallen bodyguards. "Aaagh! Who did this? Did you kill them?"

Li approached Dumai and kicked him in the chest, causing him to fall against the nearby wall.

"Ugh! Wait, why are you doing this?" said the frantic magistrate.

"Answer my question or this sword will be inside your throat. Ten years ago you arrested a man and woman with the surname Cheng. Where are they?"

"I don't remember." said Dumai.

Li's eyes opened wide. "Don't remember? Don't fuck with me!" The tip of the blade touched his cheek.

"Listen miss, I don't know who you are. But over the years I have arrested countless people. There's no way I can remember a particular one."

"You have to remember! It was one man and one woman! There's also a small boy with the surname Cheng and he has silver hair! Tell me where that boy is!"

"I don't remember. Do you know how many boys with silver hair we have in this big city? And the name Cheng is very common."

Li was extremely pissed off, her blade was shaking from the anger. "You...you...!"

A man named Vincent just arrived and he rushed over to the scene. He threw a fan at Li. *Whoop whoop* She saw it before it hit her, and knocked it away with her blade, and the fan flew back to Vincent.

"Who the hell are you?" Li asked.

Dumai recognized him. "You're Vincent, the swordsman I'm supposed to meet tonight! Help me! I'll give you any amount of money you want!" He crawled towards Vincent and grabbed his pants. "I don't want to die, help me!"

Li said, "Look at his true face, he's just a coward who only cares about his lowly life. This is the kind of man you're protecting."

Vincent pushed Dumai off his leg. "I already knew the type of man he is. But we of the Heaven's Council do not shed blood needlessly. I was here as a representative to talk to him about the stability of Yi Ting."

Li pointed her sword forward. "There is no stability with this kind of man running the show! He has done something unforgivable! Don't get in my way!"

Vincent drew two fans from his sleeves. The ninja girl charged at him and attacked aggressively. Vincent's steel fans deflected her attacks. *Cling cling* Their range was small, but he had more control over their range of motion, and Li was unable to get close to him.

"Grrrrr. What kind of man uses fans? That's a woman's weapon."

"Oh? I did not realize fans had a gender assigned to them. What about you? A sword is a man's weapon, yet a woman is holding one."

"That's because I want to show the world a woman is as good as any man."

Vincent threw her fans at her, she blocked, and they would boomerang back to his hands every time. Only able to defend, the ninja girl was getting frustrated.

"I think the same. I want to prove to people that fans are as good as swords."

Li jumped back. "This is a waste of time. I'm not here to debate with you." She threw a smoke bomb on the ground and disappeared.

Vincent and Dumai coughed from the smoke. By the time the smoke cleared, Li was long gone. Vincent had never met a female fighter like that, and he wondered who she was.

After that incident, Magistrate Dumai put up wanted flyers with Li Cheng's face all over the city, as well as neighboring cities. In just one night, Li became a fugitive again.

Li sat on an arbitrary(任意) rooftop, this is one of her habits. In ancient times, rooftops in large cities were triangular shaped, made of tiles. It was not meant for people to walk on top of them, but often times, ninjas would use the rooftops to take shortcuts or hide from people.

(The Heaven's Wrath Style is supposed to be invincible. How can I have trouble with a guy with fans? I wasn't expecting to meet a guy like that. Unless...if my training is not complete?)

Suddenly, she had a flashback of her master's words. "Invincible? Is that what you think? That's a dangerous way of thinking. When you go back to the city, you face all kinds of scenarios that you are not trained for. You must be prepared for anything."

At the time, Li brushed off his words as old-man talk, but his words ring true right now. Realizing this, she grew annoyed, knowing that with her current strength, she cannot kill a magistrate, let alone Duke Xiang.

Suddenly, she saw a **burning fire** a few blocks down. Unable to contain her curiosity (好奇心), she headed over there, jumping from roof to roof.

Li landed atop the roof adjacent to the burning building. She saw two men on the ground. One was a regular bodyguard fighting off a man dressed in black clothes. His face was covered by a veil. His movements were peculiar, not any she has seen before. Each step he took left after-images of himself, creating an illusion of multiple copies of him. His swift movements allow him to strike the bodyguard using fast and precise strikes. The Black Reaper then ran to the next area.

Li hopped off the roof and landed next to the corpse to examine it. She was shocked to see that the cuts were so deep and clean, as if he was a piece of meat on a dish. Those illusory movements...these deep cuts...who is the man in black?

The Black Reaper just killed another guard. Li appeared with her sword. "Who are you?" asked he.

"My name is Fo Long and I want to see your true skill."

"You have a death wish, woman!" The Black Reaper dashed at her and she swings her blade at him. He side-stepped to avoid it, creating after-images of himself. Li's eyes were confused and she struck the air. She kept striking, only to hit the air, while the Reaper stayed within her range. This is his specialty - the **Shadow Walk**.

The Black Reaper felt it was his turn to retaliate - he swings his blade with circular swipes and Li defended, but it was difficult to predict where he would strike with his tricky footwork. It was very painful to defend his attacks, maybe downright impossible (完全不可能). She kept retreating until her back was near the wall. The Black Reaper knocked her sword out of her hand, and then pointed his blade's tip near her neck.

"Now you get to meet the real Grim Reaper (死神)."

"Your strength is nothing I have ever seen. You're completely different than my current master." Li suddenly knelt and saluted, which surprised him.

"Please teach me swordcraft!"

The Black Reaper startled, took a step back. "What kind of trick is this?"

"It is no trick. I want to be your student. I'll do anything if you're willing to teach me."

The Reaper put his sword back into its shell. "What a waste of my time. You're not even worth killing. I will spare you if you leave and never appear before me." He began to walk away.

Li stood up. "Hold it!"

"Oi, don't test my patience, kiddo²¹. I said I will spare you and I will not say it twice."

"Teach me swordcraft or kill me, but don't ignore me!"

The Reaper turned to face her, astounded at her audacity (大膽). "Do you know what position you're in, woman?" He saw the fire in her eyes...those eyes tell that she is serious...those eyes cannot tell a lie. "Who is your master?"

"He is none other than Master Genzo."

If the Reaper's face was shown, his face would be one who is impressed. "Masai Genzo...the Legendary War God. Interesting. That explains how you were not killed by me instantly. But I work alone. I do not need a student, you'll only get in my way." (Wait. If she's mastered the Heaven's Wrath Style she could be useful to me. It will save me a lot of time if I had an underling. She's a woman and a pretty good looking one so she can seduce men of high status.) "Just so you know, I am nothing like Master Genzo. I will kill innocent people if they are in my way."

"I don't care." Li replied. "I want to learn what you know no matter what the cost."

"I have one condition. You will do exactly as I say and never question my orders. You might die several times over if you follow me."

"Yes, I agree!" She knelt before him. "I look forward to your instructions, master...uhhh..."

"I have no name but if you must call me something, call me the Black Reaper."

"Master Black Reaper!"

"Those words don't go together. Just Black Reaper is fine."

Li stood up with much excitement on her face. "Yes master!"

Shortly afterwards, Li came to regret her decision. In a small town located in the Shen Kingdom, a mansion was burning, and most of the household members were dead. An old man, a servant of the house, crawled backwards. "No...don't do this!" he pleaded. Li approached him, with a dark look in her eyes, sword in right

²¹ Kiddo – another word for kid

hand. "Why? Why do you do this?" Her left leg stepped forward and bent at the knee, and slashed his neck. *Slish* The old man fell down completely, with a blank look on his face.

Li panted for breath. She was ordered to kill an innocent old man and she went through with it. Nay, she murdered the entire family and the servants, even though they were innocent. In the background, the fires burned brightly. She stared at the Black Reaper and many things went through her mind. He slaughtered everyone just to gain a few measly documents...was killing the servants necessary? She is not allowed to question him, for that is the promise she made. And now she may have chosen the wrong person to follow.

The mansion they burned belonged to the Lee family, a prominent family who holds land in the north. With the entire family dead, the land now belongs to the lord whose territory is closest to this town, which is Lord Huong. One of the witnesses survived the slaughter and caught a glimpse of Li's face.

The next morning, wanted posters of Li were posted all over the kingdom. She was already wanted because she tried to murder Lord Dumai, but now she is more wanted than ever.

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Despite her being hunted down by multiple politicians, Li still refused to wear a mask. A ninja's asset is her stamina, and the key to stamina is oxygen. Wearing a mask will reduce her breathing by half, which will make it uncomfortable to wear and ineffective as well.

The Reaper and Li went on a journey of several cities with them ending up in the middle of the **Shu Kingdom**. In the larger cities, customs and cultures can be seen across different kingdoms, but in rural towns, there is not much difference. Everyone is doing what they can to put food on the table.

One day, the Reaper had a bombshell announcement for his student. "Li Cheng, this is where we part ways."

Li was stunned as this came out of no where. "What? Are you serious? Why?"

"I will continue the rest of my journey alone." said he.

"Are you tossing me aside? I've done everything you asked me to! I even killed innocent people."

"I have no complaints about your loyalty." replied the Black Reaper. "The journey from here on will be ten times more dangerous. Li, you have already inherited my Shadow Style. You have your own goals, right? Such as slaying Duke Xiang."

"I guess so. But..." Li was doubtful if he actually says what he means. Without a visible face, it was hard to decipher (破譯) his true intentions. That's how it's always been between her and the Reaper.

"If you do not feel ready, you can go back to the Valley and train under Master Genzo some more." The Black Reaper began to walk away.

"I guess this is farewell. Will we meet again?" she asked.

"We definitely will, when I have achieved my goal. It could be six months or a year, or even longer. But I **will** come back for you. Be my student again in the future." The man in black walked away using his Shadow Walk - he vanished, then appeared further down, then vanished again, only to appear further away. After a few more repetitions, he was completely out of sight.

Li leaned against the wall with her arms crossed. (I bet he doesn't want me go with him because he doesn't want me learn the secret of the Shadow Puppet.)

Later on, Li went to an outdoors restaurant. The waiter brought her a bowl of noodles, the smoke simmering before her face, but she paid no attention to it. (Why should I go back to the War God? Is my training not complete? Am I ready to kill Duke Xiang? Breaking into the Imperial Palace is out of the question. I will wait for him to leave the palace but he'll be surrounded by bodyguards. But he's a demon...do I know how to kill a demon? If I had allies it would be so much easier.) Suddenly, a revelation came to her. (There's Shen Long and Sui Long! They're also fugitives. They are sure to join me! I have to go back.)

Li was traversing a thick forest in the Valley when she sensed something. "I know you're watching me. Come out." She threw a dagger at the tree above. A hand caught the dagger between his fingers. Then the War God's camouflage vanished and his body appeared. He jumped and landed on the ground. *Thud* "You have improved, Li." said he.

The ninja girl smiled. "Master, I have returned to be under your tutelage once again." She knelt and saluted.

"I'm surprised. I thought you'd come back in five to ten years. This is much sooner than I thought."

"Master Genzo. I know you have killed countless bounty hunters, enough bodies to make a mountain. I also know you've slain countless demons. Please teach me how to kill a demon."

"I see. I take it you are ready to become Fo Long again?"

At this time, the Shadow appeared on the rooftop, ending Li's **flashback**. She became alert and stood up. "We have our next mission. The target is a scroll from Lord Fei's mansion."

"Hai." she replied. Deep in her mind, she was wondering what is the purpose of all these missions? There was no doubt that the Shadow is a cold blooded killer and nothing like Masai Genzo, but she was the one who begged him to be her master. She gave up everything for power and she has to live with that decision...even if it means abandoning everything.

Li and the Shadow broke into Lord Fei's mansion in broad daylight. She jumped out of the window, holding a scroll in her hand. They were standing atop a rooftop. "I have it, master!"

"Good work." said the Shadow.

Then both of them noticed a man dressed as a eunuch from the other wall. Standing atop the wall was none other than Liu Zhang, who was also staring at them. Three seconds later, Zhang jumped down and disappeared.

"After him!" shouted the Shadow and they quickly ran in that direction. They ran towards the wall where Zhang was standing before, and jumped onto the ground level.

Zhang was faraway but still visible, and Li and the Shadow chased him at top speed. *Doosh doosh doosh*

"Liu Zhang is alone, a chance like this doesn't come by often!" said the Shadow. Moments later, their difference in speed was apparent as the Shadow was faster than Li, and went ahead of her.

Zhang was dashing at top speed, with his arms extended backwards, just like how a ninja runs. Occasionally he'd look behind to make sure his pursuers were still hot on his trail. *Doosh doosh* They chased him all the way into the **Ninjiang Forest**. Eventually, the Shadow caught up to him, and Zhang turned around to face him.

Without wasting a second, the Shadow attacked him head on and they clashed blades. *Clunk* They exchanged three more moves and they jumped back. Liu Zhang used the Zanzoken and the Shadow used his Shadow Walk. They clashed blades yet again. *Clunk*

Suddenly, Li arrived and dashed straight towards her target. Liu Zhang jumped back to avoid her attack. The eunuch turned around and jumped up high and landed on a tree branch. He jumped onto another tree branch. Li Cheng and the Shadow also jumped onto the tree branches and chased him. For the next few minutes, the three of them hopped from one branch to another.

The eunuch eventually hopped onto the last tree in the forest, which was near the edge of a cliff. The eunuch jumped off the edge and vanished out of sight. He slid down the hill, dirtying his shoes and pants. *ssccccrrrrrr* Li and her master slid down as well, being careful not to hit any rocks or trees on the way down. *ssccccrrrrrr*

Zhang reached the bottom and continued to run and then jumped a top a wooden fence. Li and her master made it to the bottom and noticed three wooden fences in the front, left side and right side. They were in the middle of a forest so the fences looked out of place. Zhang cut the ropes while running. *twang* The fence fell down. Zhang ran along the second fence and cut the ropes. *twang* The second fence fell down.

It was what they feared - they fell into a trap. "We fell into Liu Zhang's trap." Li said, stating the obvious.

twang The third fence fell down. Zhang hopped onto a tree branch. Behind the fences were hordes and hordes of demons of different varieties. There were red and blue vampires, water demons, as well as werewolves...and all of them looked angry and hungry for human flesh.

Li was bewildered, as she's never seen this many demons in one place. The Shadow's face was not seen, but it was clear he was panicking too. "There must be hundreds and hundreds of them!" said Li. "We can't fight them all!"

Some of the creatures growled and hissed at them. They have not had human flesh in a long time and now that their prey is in front of them, they will do anything to get their prey.

"Damn that eunuch! There's only one way out of this. We have to focus on one area and fight our way through the crowd. If we get surrounded it's over!"

The demons inched their way closer and closer to the duo. "Let's go!" said the Shadow, and dashed forward and started to cut the demons. Li's Ice Sword glowed and she started to cut them down.

"Heh, this is the end for you." said the eunuch. He heard a hissing sound, and noticed a blue vampire below trying to crawl up the tree. "Tch, it's not safe even for me. Too bad I can't stay for the show." Zhang jumped away and disappeared from the scene.

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The female ninja used the **Ice Blizzard**, creating a gust of wind with icicles in it, and hit the demons. *frooom* Some of them were partially frozen while most of them were knocked down. The frozen ones moved slower. The Reaper used Shadow Walk and cut the frozen ones down. *slash*

Li used another Ice Blizzard, freezing the demons before her. One of blue vampires broke free of its ice cage and charged at her. She aimed the sword at its neck. *Slish* Its head rolled on the ground. A werewolf broke free of its icicles and jumped at her. "Heaven's Light!" Li jumped up and slashed the demon in midair. The werewolf fell and it was already dead.

So far only 20 demons were slain, and they keep on coming. The masked man used Shadow Walk and cut a demon to the left and another to the right. By now they have killed another 20 demons, totaling 40 but it was nothing compared to how many remained.

Li and the Reaper stood back to back. They were surrounded by demons on all sides and it became more and more desperate by the second. Li was panting for breath. "There's no end to them!"

"Listen, we have to fight while moving forward in one direction, otherwise it's the end. I'll pick a direction, you watch my back. Follow my lead."

"Hai!" Li followed the Reaper and they cut their way into the crowd. *Slish slash slish* The ground became full of demon corpses flooded with their blood.

Li was slashing desperately, killing only the ones closest to her. From this close distance, she was unable to use the Ice Blizzard, for it is a long range attack. Her Ice Sword was glowing the whole time. A red vampire lunged at her and growled. She stabbed its chest, while giving it the sensation of cold. Its chest became partially frozen...and it fell backwards.

The Reaper swiped his blade non-stop at the front, killing countless demons within a minute. He has already lost count of how many he killed. Using the **Shadow Walk** all the time made him drained, and he was starting to feel it now. (Ugh...not now. Hold on a bit longer!) There was no time to be in pain, for every second counts. *Slish slash slish* He stepped on a corpse and lost balance. A water demon slashed his cape and ripped off a piece of it. The Reaper performed a spin like a tornado and cut the demon in several places. *Slish*

This has to be the toughest fight they've ever had in their lives. No matter how hard he tried, the Reaper was unable to keep them at a distance. Their sheer numbers overwhelmed the masked man. A blue vampire slashed at his veil, ripping off a piece of it. One of his eyes was exposed.

They have cut down a total of 60 demons, but still hundreds of them remain. Li Cheng was busy every second, killing demons coming from everywhere. One red vampire was behind her and clawed at her shoulder. *Schleb* Her **blood** dripped on the ground. "Uhhh..."

"Li!" The Reaper plunged his sword into the red vampire's stomach and the tip came out of its back. *Schleb* Being stuck inside of the demon, he was unable to pull the sword out. The demon clawed at his head, and he tilted his head slightly, and his hat and veil fell off. *Slash* The Reaper's face was completely exposed and his forehead was bleeding. He kicked the demon and pulled out his sword at the same time.

Li just finished off another demon and turned around to look at him...and when she saw his face, she became frozen with shock. Her eyes were wide open and her jaw dropped. "No way...why is it you?"

It was the face of Zi Lai. He also stared at her in bewilderment. There was no doubt the man in black standing before her was Zi Lai. His forehead was scratched and bleeding a little bit. Suddenly, he shouted: "Behind you!"

Li ducked as a red vampire clawed at her. *Swipe* She rolled away from it, turned around, and while crouching, stabbed the red vampire.

Zi dashed towards the horde of demons and continued to cut his way through to make an opening. With his Shadow Walk and Li's Ice Sword, they cut their way through the lines of monsters and escaped the entrapment. (壓迫)

They ran as fast as humanly possible, knowing that the demons were just behind them. Luckily for them, most demons move slowly, and unable to catch up to the duo. Zi pointed his blade at Li's neck. "You know my identity." said Zi. "That means you must die."

She stepped back until she was against a tree. There was a small gap of several inches between her neck and the blade's tip, thus so could still use her sword to fight back if she wanted to.

Zi frowned. "With your skill level you can escape if you wanted to. Although against someone like me, I'd say your chances are 20% at best."

"If you have to kill me, then do it. But before that, you have to tell me...why does it have to be you?"

Zi sighed. "You're too useful to me to. Continue to serve me and take my identity with you to the grave."

"I've already sworn my life to you, master. I won't tell a soul." She said with a hand over her chest. Her eyes showed that she told the truth - those are the eyes of someone who's fiercely loyal. Alex has the same eyes, whether its genetics or sibling similarities, those two are the same. Zi did not know whether to be annoyed or impressed.

Suddenly, they heard a growl from nearby demon and realize they were still in the danger zone. Zi's body was aching and he grabbed his chest. "Uuuhhhh..."

"What's wrong?" Li asked.

"Nothing...keep moving." he replied.

Li and her master retreated into the deep forest, deep enough to not be found by anyone.

They sat on top of logs and surrounded a bonfire. There was an uncomfortable silence between them for the whole trip.

Li broke the silence. "I know I should not ask. But I have to know. Why of all people, it has to be you? I just don't get it?"

Zi sighed. "Fine. I didn't think this would happen. This might be the time to tell you everything." Li paid full attention without blinking. "Why am I the **Black Reaper**? Why do I commit all those crimes? Why do I know the Shadow Style? That is because I am not human or demon, I am a half demon."

Li's eyes grew wide opened and her jaw dropped. "Half demon?"

"Or more precisely, a part demon. My grandfather was a demon and my grandmother was a human. It is thought that humans and demons can't make offspring, but my existence proves them wrong. Inside of me is demon blood flowing through my veins...the blood of my grandfather. I'm an **abomination** (厭惡) that should not exist in this world, and thus I am hated by humans and demons."

"I cannot believe what I'm hearing." Li exclaimed.

"But unlike other demons, I do not transform since I am not a complete demon. It is this reason why I can perform superhuman abilities and fight on a master level. I suppose I should explain from the very beginning..."

Zi's grandfather was a demon who was originally a man named **Zho Lai**, a farmer but also a fighter from a poor village from an unknown province. Sometimes demons wander into the village, endangering everyone in it, so it is up to Zho and the fighters of the village to kill these demons. One day, a group of ten fighters went into the wilderness to search for wandering demons. They found two and killed them swiftly, but two of the fighters were wounded.

"Good job today Zho!" said a comrade of his.

"It was nothing." Zho replied with a hand on the back of his head. "I just do what I usually do."

"I'm just glad someone like you is defending our village." said the comrade.

"But our situation is getting worse. I wish I was stronger so I can protect my village."

The group of fighters returned to their home to report the good news to the village elders. Zho would often think to himself he wants to be stronger. Day after day he would train in his backyard non-stop, but he was still a human doing battle with demons. The human body has limitations and Zho would try to constantly overcome those limitations.

The village elders congratulated Zho on today's success, and Zho would reply how he usually does. "I'm just doing my job, that's all. But I wish I was stronger. It's quite difficult for us to fight demons even if we outnumber them. I worry about the day there are too many demons to handle."

"You worry too much, young man." said the elder. "Your group of fighters is doing just fine protecting our village. We all appreciate what you do."

One of the elders had his gaze intently on Zho Lai, unbeknownst (未知) to him. It was the gaze of someone cooking up a scheme.

Zho went home and was greeted by a woman named Dae. "Welcome home dear." She was a skinny woman with a long, brown hair, pale skin and small eyes.

"I'm back Dae!" Zho and her gave each other a good embrace. "How is my fiancé doing?"

"Today was really productive. Some of the village women attended a sewing class and I learned many things about sewing."

"That's great. You can make me a sweater sometime."

"I will before winter comes. Dinner is almost ready."

How this couple has dinner is the same as the entire village - they put a pot over a burning fire, and put the water into the pot with ingredients to make soup. The meat is placed on dishes and they use chopsticks to put the meat into the pot to cook it. After about an hour of eating, they were both full and Dae cleaned up. Zho usually over eats.

"Man that hit the spot!" he said, rubbing his stomach. Knock knock. Zho answered the door and he was surprised to one of the village elders at his doorstep. "En Ko? What's going on?"

En Ko was a man in a straw hat, wearing plain clothes and sandals. "I have something I'd like to discuss with you. Please come to my house."

"Uh, sure." Not knowing what this was about, Zho put on his sandals and followed En Ko into his house. As soon as Zho closed the door, his life was about to change forever. "So Mr. Ko, can you tell me what this is about?"

En Ko put down his straw hat. "Before I do that, do you mind if I read your mind?"

"Read my mind? As in sorcery? Naw, such a thing doesn't exist."

"I'm going to show you right now..." En Ko put his palm on Zho's forehead. Flashes of images entered Ko's mind and it was an intense experience for both of them. Zho stuttered backwards and hit the wall.

"Ugh! I have a headache. What did you do?"

En Ko was sweating and panting for breath. "I read all of your memories since the day you were born. Hmmm, I see. You want more strength to protect your fiancé and protect the villagers. What a noble spirit you are."

"That doesn't prove you read my mind!"

"Alright. Let me tell you something that only you know. You and your fiancé Dae have sex on a regular basis, and your favorite position is--"

"Aaaah! That's enough!" Zho exclaimed. "Okay I believe you!"

"Zho Lai, what if I told you - you can get the power you wanted for a small price. But you will no longer be yourself."

"Huh? I dunno what you mean. But I am willing to do anything to protect my village! I grew up here!"

"Anything?"

"Yes anything! I'll gladly sacrifice my own life if it comes down to it!"

"Even if it means losing your humanity?"

"I dunno what you mean?"

"Are you willing to become a demon to gain the ultimate strength?"

"A demon? Hell no! Those are the enemies we're trying to fight. Why would I become one of those things?!"

"There are different kinds of demons. Someone like you will never become like those mindless zombies. You can become a demon but still be yourself. You'll look the same as you are now."

"Really?"

"You will become stronger, faster, more durable, and less likely to die from blood loss. You'll be physically superior to your former self in every way! And best of all, you won't change physically. Transforming is completely optional. If you want you can stay in your human form your whole life."

Zho gave it a lot of thought. "That does sound pretty good. Are you saying that you can make me like that?"

"Of course. As you've guessed, I am a demon myself."

"No way! I couldn't tell all this time."

"See? No one can tell the difference. You'll be able to protect your precious village and no one will know your secret."

"Hmmm...But there has to be drawbacks, right? Can demons still...do that?"

"Do what?"

"You know...that thing...with a woman."

"Oh ha ha ha ha. Don't worry. You can do that all you want. You and your woman can make healthy babies. Healthy human babies. They'll have some demon blood, but they won't transform. Your sons and daughters will be half demons. Your grandchildren will be quarter demons. Your great grand children will have half of that...and your great great--"

"You're going too far ahead! Anyways, I get what you mean." Then his face grew serious. "Mr. Ko, please turn me into a demon."

"Once the process begins there's no turning back."

Zho nodded. Once he makes up his mind, he will go through with it no matter what.

Once the **turning** process began, Zho Lai felt the effects immediately. During the group's next hunt, Zho was at his physical peak. He killed two demons all by himself and he was still not tired. The rest of his group of nine men killed two other demons collectively. A comrade of Zho's put his hand on his shoulder. "Wow you are on a roll today, Zho! Have you been taking energy drinks?"

"Ha ha ha. It's not energy drinks. I been training a lot. See?" Zho flexed his biceps. Him and his hunting group laughed the rest of the way back to the village.

He felt like he was on top of the world. He was stronger than he was before the turning, he can protect his village, and his fiancé loves him as she normally does. But like a drug, his happiness did not last long.

One night, Zho was unable to sleep and went out to his backyard because he did not want to wake up Dae.

His arm was reacting strangely, it started to change color and it was painful. He grabbed his demonic arm and fell on his knees, groaning in pain.

"Ugh...uuughhh. What is happening? En Ko did not tell me about this! That bastard."

Unfortunately, Dae saw what happened. Zho turned around and saw Dae, and he was startled.

"What is wrong with your arm?" Dae asked, with a hand over her mouth.

Zho stood up. "Dae, listen to me calmly. There's a good reason for this."

"How could you?" she responded. "Was this the only way?"

"You know...? That I am becoming a demon?"

"What else could this be? I thought we discussed everything together?"

"I'm sorry, Dae. I decided this impulsively. I wanted to protect the village, to protect you. This looks ugly, doesn't it?"

Dae walked over to him and touched his demonic arm. "I don't care about that. You always carry the burden by yourself. You put everything on your shoulders but you don't know that others worry about you."

Zho stared at her eyes and they were serious eyes. She was a lot more understanding than he originally thought. He thought she might freak out after seeing his arm and abandon him. This woman truly is a keeper and he is fortunate to have chosen her.

A child of the village was spying on them from behind the fence. She was so scared she covered her mouth with both hands and tear drops appeared in the corner of her eyes.

One day, Zho was summoned to see the village elders. He showed up to find half the village waiting for him. "Village elder? What is this about?"

"Is it true?" asked the elder. "You've been hiding it from us?"

"Wait...what is this about?" asked Zho.

"Are you a demon?" the elder asked with his eyes narrowed.

All the villagers waited anxiously for his answer. Zho, being a straight arrow, can never lie to his fellow villagers. "I did it to protect the village."

The villagers chatted amongst themselves.

"Unbelievable!" exclaimed the elder. "To think that a demon was living amongst us. This is a village for humans, not for the likes of your kind!"

"What are you trying to say, elder?"

"You can no longer live here. Please leave."

Zho was shocked beyond belief. "You can't be serious?!"

Suddenly, Dae showed up and she stood by Zho. "Wait! You're all being unreasonable. Listen to me. Zho only became a demon recently. But he looks human, doesn't he? He's no different than before!"

An elder said, "But he is still a demon and he has demon blood flowing through his veins! Demons have ruined our peaceful village!" The other folks shouted in agreement.

Dae would not back down. "Think about why Zho did it? He did it to get strength to protect the village, to protect all of us! He did it for you! And now you're going to shun him just because it's different? You're all being paranoid over nothing!"

Zho was pleasantly surprised. "Dae..."

Nine of the fighters walked over from the crowd's side to Zho's side. "It's true. Zho has done nothing wrong. He has fought for his village day after day, risking his life selflessly."

Another fighter said, "He saved our lives many times! Each one of you are still alive because of him!"

Yet another fighter said, "It's an undeniable fact that he's the best fighter out of all of us."

Zho was so touched he could cry, but he held it in.

The elder stood forward. "Every thing you said is true. Zho Lai has done a lot for us and this is his home as much as it is ours. However...the people no longer trust you. You're no longer human and that is a fact."

Zho focused on the looks on the villagers' faces. Many of them had a look of distrust, some were disgusted, and the small children were scared. He tapped Dae on the shoulder. "It's fine...I volunteer to leave."

"Why?!" Dae exclaimed.

"Elder is right. Most of the village does not trust me anymore. Imagine this Dae, every day you visit the market, people will give you glances. You go to sewing class and people avoid talking to you. And I'm pretty sure our kids will get bullied. It's not something I want to put you through. This place is no longer my home." Zho held his woman by the shoulder and the two walked away from the crowd. The fighters watched helplessly as the two walked away.

Zho and Dae went back to their house and packed all their belongings into two bags. Both of them were carrying a large backpack containing everything they can fit inside. When they stepped out the door, the nine hunters were waiting for them.

Fighter-A said, "Zho Lai, we want to wish you well on your new journey."

Fighter-B said, "You've done a lot for us, and we'll never forget you. It's not much but here's some money for you."

Fighter-C said, "Here's some food in case you get hungry."

All the fighters bowed. "**Thank you for everything!**" they said in unison. The couple was touched by their words and actions. They literally did not know how to respond other than to receive their gifts of generosity. Even if the village no longer trusts him, Zho knows that his comrades appreciate everything he did for them, and they will always remain his comrades.

[B] Title Contents

Zho and Dae traveled to a farming village not far away from their original home. Fortunately one of the houses was abandoned so they had no issues finding a home. One summer night, Dae was making dinner for them. The door was open, revealing nearly the entire living room. Zho sat by the wall, with a stick in his mouth, spacing out from boredom.

A man in blue clothes and a straw hat arrived at the front yard. Zho became alert and drew his sword. The man lifted up his straw hat. "Calm down, it's me, En Ko."

"I know." said Zho with an angry face. "How dare you hide information from me! You tricked me!"

En Ko put up his palms. "Whoa, calm down. I did not come here to fight you. I came because I was concerned about you two."

"Hmph." Zho put his sword back into its shell.

"Can we talk somewhere privately?"

"Dae is my wife. If you have something to say to me, say it in front of her. I decided not to keep secrets from her anymore."

Thus, En Ko entered the living room and sat down by the bonfire. When he was ready he began to speak. "Zho, what is happening to your body is perfectly normal. Your arm starts acting up because that part of your body is becoming a demon's arm. Once you become a full demon, these inconvenient panic attacks will stop."

Zho had his arms crossed and his eyes closed. "Hmph. It's pretty inconvenient to get kicked out of my own village."

"How does someone become a demon?" Dae asked.

"By drinking blood from another demon. Zho, you have to keep drinking my blood until you become complete. Until then, don't stay far away from me."

Zho replied, "Hmph. Like hell I'm gonna do that. Your blood tastes bad."

En Ko continued. "There is another thing. You have start absorbing human souls. Souls of people who are near dead or just died."

"Are you asking me to become a murderer?" asked Zho.

"It's for your own good. Well, that's all I came to tell you." En Ko picked up his things and left.

Zho sighed and turned to his wife. "You heard him. Looks like I'm gonna havta switch jobs."

"What will you do?" asked Dae.

"I'm going to become a bounty hunter." said her husband. "My body is different than before, I can do things I normally couldn't. As a bounty hunter I can make money and take people's souls, kill two birds with one stone. But I will only kill bad guys, of course."

En Ko offered to train Zho in swordcraft. He is a fast learner, so that combined with his physical abilities allowed him to accelerate at an alarming rate. Even En Ko was surprised by how fast he mastered swordcraft. Zho developed the Shadow Style in secret, something that even En Ko could not conjure up. He wanted to focus on deception and illusions, so he developed the Shadow Walk, a move that creates after-images of himself while he moves. The second technique he developed is the Shadow Puppet, whereby he creates an exact copy of himself.

"Dae, watch this!" He proceeded to show her the Shadow Walk as he strafed left and right.

Dae clapped. "Wow, that's amazing! My eyes can't keep up at all."

Being a simple minded man, Zho felt pleased that he impressed his wife.

"Heh, that's nothing. I have even more secret techniques."

Dae clapped some more as he performed.

Later on, Zho Lai felt confident enough to enlist in the Assassin Lodge. He was accepted because of his unique abilities. But he did not reveal the Shadow Puppet to them, of course. This is his secret that not even En Ko knows about.

Zho spent the next few years taking on assassination jobs and he succeeded every time thanks to his ability and wits. The Assassin Lodge pays well, so him and Dae never worried about money. Because of his missions, they have to live in different places in the kingdom. After Zho made enough money, he quit being an assassin and began to take up labor intensive jobs so they can live in one place permanently.

A few years later, they had a son named **Shun Lai**. As a kid, he showed superhuman strength and speed. He would jump onto the edges of walls and run along the wall. Dae had to constantly tell him not to do that and it made her worry much. Both parents told Shun not to show off his powers others because it is too dangerous. However, things never work out the way they should.

When Shun was old enough, he went to school in the village they lived at. One day, he was bullied in the schoolyard. As expected, the bully is a bigger, fatter kid. He kept making fun of Shun's parents and shoving him constantly. Shun forgot about his promise to his parents and beat up the bully. All the students witnessed what happened and they were so scared they could not say a thing.

The teacher was told of what happened and she was certain that Shun has demon's blood...which makes him a demon's child. Because of that incident, Shun could no longer go to school, and the entire Lai family once again has to move somewhere else.

En Ko followed the family's trail and met up with Zho.

Zho was cutting an apple as he listened to En Ko's explanation. "Your son is a half demon, his father is a demon but his mother is a human. He will not transform, but he still has demon's blood. Unlike you, he should not use his powers because it drains his life."

Zho stopped cutting the apple. "It drains his life?"

En Ko continued, "Because he has human's body. He has your powers but demon blood and human blood is not compatible. If he keeps using his powers, it will shorten his life by a wide margin. Only use it if it's absolutely necessary."

As long as he did not use his powers, Shun was able to live a normal life. Years later, he became eighteen years old and married a woman named Mei-Lei. One year later, they had a son named Zi. Just like Shun, he is partially a demon but ages like a human. He discovered his powers early on in his childhood. Mei-Lei and Shun instructed Zi not to use his powers because of two reasons: one is if Zi is discovered then the whole family will have to run away as fugitives. Two is the demonic blood will shorten his life.

The Lai family lived next to the Cheng's and they had a son named Alex who is one year younger than Zi. Because Alex's older sister and his parents were

always working, he was often home alone. Alex would often come over to play with Zi.

Mei-Lei was conflicted, on one hand she is glad her son made a friend, but on the other hand, it is dangerous for him to get too close to someone. "Zi, do not get too attached to the neighbor's boy. You do not want to spend all your time with him."

"It's fine." said Shun. "As long as you don't use your powers you can play with other kids."

Zi nodded and went to his room.

Mei-Lei said, "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

Shun replied, "It's healthy for a boy his age to have friends. I don't want my son to live my childhood...I did not have any friends."

Occasionally Zi would see Li Cheng, but that was a rare event. Most of the time, it was just Zi and Alex, playing in the backyard, having fun and causing mischief. They got along well and they did not officially announce it, but these two boys were best friends. Several years passed without much incident.

However, something happened with Alex's sister that would change both their family's fates forever.

One day Li Cheng came back home, scared to death and muttered something that did not make sense. Right after that she ran away from home, and so did the rest of the Cheng's. Alex went over to Zi to tell him that he's going on a vacation, but not where or how long. Not knowing how to decipher such a cryptic message, Zi waited patiently for his best friend to come home.

Several days later, Alex ran into Zi on the street. Both Mr. Cheng and Mrs. Cheng were arrested by Magistrate Dumai and Alex was waiting in vain for his parents' return. Alex pleaded for Zi to help him. They went back to Alex's house to grab some weapons, swords were too heavy for the boys so they both carried kodachis.

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, an East Brigade officer with a sword appeared before Alex. Alex held his kodachi and pointed it at his enemy. *Clang* His kodachi was knocked away. The officer then slashed him in the right arm, causing him to bleed profusely. 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 thick rain.

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

His friend had fallen unconscious from the shock as Zi continued to scream his name in the heavy rain. There is no choice, Zi carried Alex, bringing his arm over his shoulders, and walked along the empty street. The ground was completely wet and the rain was hitting him all over. He memorized the nearest doctor's office, which is not far away.

With pure determination, Zi brought his fallen friend to the doctor's. *Knock knock* A doctor and his nurse answered the door.

"Please help my friend!" Zi implored.

The doctor, upon seeing Alex's condition, quickly brought him to a bed and began treating his arm.

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."

Zi ran home faster than he ever did in his life. (Mom, dad, please be alright!)

Inside the Lai household...Mei-Lei Lai was lying on the floor with bloodstains on her clothes and there was a pool of blood around her body. Her face was on the floor and not seen and she was not moving.

Crash An officer was thrown against the wooden wall, destroying half the wall. Shun was holding a sword and he panted for breath...with **bloodstained** eyes. An officer was on his right and attacked, Shun slashed him in the stomach, causing him to fall. Then Shun stepped on his stomach and stabbed his neck, and the officer coughed blood before dying instantly.

"You bastards, you killed her! Why..." Shun slashed another officer. "Did you..." He slashed another officer, making him crash into the half destroyed wall. Now the wall was completely gone. "...Kill her?"

An East Brigade captain stood at the end of the room, surrounded by many of his officers. "Your son has demon's blood, and that means you, his parents are demons. Your kind must be exterminated!"

Shun was in a power lock with an officer. "We never did anything to you!" He kicked the officer away. "We never broke the law!"

Feeling safe behind his bodyguards, the captain spoke with his chin tilted up. "Demons like you should not be living amongst us humans!"

"Fuck you! I'm going to kill you!" shouted Shun in anger.

An officer from behind stabbed him with his spear. *Schleb* It hurt his back, but due to the adrenaline pumping through his veins and his mental state of pure rage, Shun still moved as if it did not happen. He turned around to slash the officer.

An officer charged at him, and Shun stabbed him in the stomach. Suddenly, a spear plunged into Shun's stomach. *Schleb* The officer pushed him back, forcing him to move back. Shun cut the spear and slashed the officer. Despite the adrenaline, he felt the injuries pile up, and he was slowing down with each injury. He charged forward, aiming for the captain himself.

An officer stabbed him with the spear. "Ugh!" With his sword in right hand, his left hand grabbed the spear to stop it from going deeper. Another officer stabbed him in the stomach, and both of them pushed him back, his feet scraping the floor. Shun used up all the strength he had to push, stopping himself from being pushed back. An officer stabbed him from the back. *Schleb*

With spears in the front and the back, he was trapped like a **shish-kebob**. Blood was dripping on the spears and he was losing consciousness.

The captain burst into laughter. "Hahahaha! What's the matter? That all you got?"

Shun dropped his sword. "My son, you must live on for our sake." His vision was blurry but he focused really hard on the captain. "Mei-Lei, I'm sorry I couldn't save you. But I can at least avenge you." Shun used the last of his strength

to throw his knife. *Whoop-whoop-whoop* It stabbed the captain's eye, causing blood to squirt out like a sprinkler.

"AAAAAAH! My eye! How dare you?!" the captain cried frantically. One of the officers came to check up on him, but the captain shoved him away. He pulled the knife out of his eye. "Aaaaaaah! You goddamned demon! You'll pay for this! You'll pay!"

Seeing his goal accomplished, Shun laughed triumphantly. An officer from behind stabbed Shun, causing him even more pain. He has reached his limit and can no longer move or think. All the officers removed their spears at once. *Schleb*

The East Brigade splattered oil all over the house. One officer took a torch and threw it on the oil. *Froom*

Having an ominous feeling, Zi hurried home, running until he was out of breath. From a distance, he saw smoke and his heart nearly skipped a beat. Figuring that it's not his house, he ran down the street. His eyes grew wide open and his eyeballs became dark when he saw his house up in flames. It was the worst case scenario and Zi fell on his knees, tears streamed down his cheeks. Every fiber of his being wanted this to be a bad dream...but the smell of smoke and the heat was too real...his parents are in the house and burnt to a crisp along with his house.

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.

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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.

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.

In the back yard, Alex was topless and sweating all over. He was swinging his sword. *Whoop whoop* He stopped practicing out of frustration. (I can move it fine, but there's no power in the swings. My injury is still affecting me to this very day.)

Meanwhile Zi Lai was somewhere else, kneeling in front of a trunk. He opened the trunk and inside were folded clothes, including black boots and a veil.

In an arbitrary restaurant, two East Brigade Officers were eating noodles. There were several other customers, all minding their business. The Black Reaper appeared, causing people to stare at him.

Officer-A said, "Hey check out this guy."

Officer-B said, "Isn't it too early for Halloween?"

"Do you work for the East Brigade?" asked the Reaper.

Both officers stood up and walked over to the man in black. "That's right. And it's rude to cover up your face in front of an East Brigade member." said Officer-A.

Officer-B followed up with, "You can take off that veil or I cant cut it off for you."

The Black Reaper began to pull his sword out of its shell.

Officer-A: "Watch where you put your hand! Do you know the consequences of what you're about to do?"

Officer-B: "Disrespecting us East Brigade members means the death penalty."

"Death penalty? Interesting. You will receive the death penalty." The Reaper drew his sword and fought the two officers. *Clang clang* Using the Shadow Walk, he confused them and attacked them. His cuts were so precise that one slash killed them while standing up. They never stood a chance, falling to the ground with blood gushing out of their wounds.

All the customers panicked and ran away, all except one, hiding under his table. "This swordsman just took care of those two guys from the East Brigade. He moved so fast my eyes couldn't keep up...this man is the grim reaper in black! **The Black Reaper!**"

"Black Reaper huh?" replied he, "Has a nice ring to it." Then he disappeared just as he came, sudden and without a trace.

Doosh doosh Zi jumped onto a tree branch using his ninja like reflexes. Alex was sitting atop a wall, leaning against a tree that grew around the wall. His attention was focused on the book in front of him until his friend appeared. "Zi, where have you been?"

"Uhhh, I had some things to care of." he replied.

Alex closed his book. "Lemme guess, chasing girls at the red light district?"

"Ahahaha...good guess." Zi said, rubbing the back of his head.

"Geez, if only you put in effort into your swordcraft you could be a decent swordsman. You know some people can't even hold a sword but they try harder than you."

"You're right about that, Master Cheng." Zi said playfully. "Well, want to see the doctor today?"

Alex sighed. "I told you, there's no doctor that can heal my arm."

"You're giving up already? And you're the one who mentioned hard work?"

"You're right." Alex tossed the book away. "Let's go. We might even find a clue about my sister." He hopped off the wall.

So off went the duo to another doctor's appointment. Zi has been keeping his identity a secret from his best friend his whole life, and he intends to continue. His friend already has enough problems and he needs not any more right now. Zi often pretends to be a slacker for two reasons: one, to make Alex not feel bad about his injury, and two, to hide his true strength...his demon's blood. After all, he is half demon, the product of a grandfather who is demon and a grandmother who is human, an **abomination** that should not exist in this world.

Preview of Next Episode

"Men, I apologize for the short notice," Taishi began "...but Li Cheng was seen working with the Shadow, one of our enemies. Li Cheng is a traitor the the Council and we must hunt her down immediately. She has the Ice Sword and both of them are considered extremely dangerous. Show no mercy."

三十六: The Council Arrives: Hunt the Traitor Down!

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Zi Lai and Li were at the campfire. He just finished his long story, but for him, it was more than just long. He just explained his entire life, as well as his father's and grandfather's. Li listened the whole time without blinking and a tear drop ran down her eye. "I had no idea Alex went through all that. He's been searching for me for so long, and here I am, avoiding him coldly like a stranger. I've failed as an older sister."

Zi was somewhat surprised by her reaction. "Oh. You're not as cold blooded as you act."

Li wiped the tears with her sleeve. "Look who's talking? Your playboy act is just a ploy to make people think your swordcraft is weak."

"Heh. I make myself appear as unreliable as possible so no one depends on me, which takes the attention away from me."

"You sure had me fooled." said Li.

Suddenly, Zi felt a throbbing pain in his chest and he groaned.

"Master, what's wrong?"

Zi showed his palm to her. "I'm fine. I just...need to rest." He had shortness of breath but after a few moments, his body returned to normal. "I am able perform superhuman feats because of my **demon blood**. (惡魔之血) Demon blood is not compatible with human blood. Each time I use my powers, my internal organs receives more and more damage. Even though I could fight at the level of the Four Brothers, I cannot fight for more than a few minutes."

"So you need to rest between fights?"

"I need time for my body to recover. But this is only a temporary solution. My body will not last long...I am just a ticking time bomb."

"No way!" Li exclaimed. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

"No doctor in the world can fix my problem. No medicine, no science or sorcery. Both my grandfather and father lived short lives. But perhaps...there is something in my grandfather's house that can help." Zi was panting for breath, but he was getting better by the second.

"Your grandfather...Zho Lai's house?" Li replied blankly.

"Ah. But Zho Lai lived in a small village whose name was forgotten. My father did not know the name either." he said. His face was no longer pale and he was recovering. "That's why it's such a big task. My grandfather first became a demon sixty years ago. At that time, the four kingdoms were not founded yet. The village is older than the current dynasty. So it is pointless to look for government documents."

Li was shocked. "But that village is still out there, isn't it? Villages don't just move."

"It gets more complicated when you realize that over the course of decades, wars happen between kingdoms. Borders are drawn; some villages are destroyed while others are renamed. The only thing that remains constant is the warlord families that have stayed in power throughout the centuries. They might have documents pertaining (有關) to my grandfather's village. I've been searching for this village my whole life...based on this small hope."

"It all makes sense now. That's why you keep breaking into rich guy's mansions and stealing their scrolls." said Li.

"The good news is that I am getting closer. After seeing the cave's artwork, I have gotten a clue on the village's location." said Zi.

"I thought the purpose of going to the cave was to destroy its secrets. But there was a second purpose, I guess. So our next step is to get to this village?"

"Uh huh. It's a small village in the **Shu Kingdom**."

A few hours ago, before Li and the Reaper fell into Liu Zhang's devious trap...Lord Chung made a visit to the Heaven's Council.

"Are you sure about that?" Taishi Tze asked.

"I am certain of it, headmaster. My scouts have seen the Shadow and Li Cheng in the Ninjiang Forest. They stole a scroll from my mansion and I had scouts follow them." said Lord Chung.

Taishi rubbed his beard while the four elders deliberated (審議). "Let's not waste anytime."

"Wait, it's too risky." said one of the elders.

"Li Cheng is one of our members and she knows our secrets. Not only that, but she is the owner of the Ice Sword. We cannot just let her go. If we wait they will escape." Without further ado, Taishi took twenty of his men to hunt down the traitor Li Cheng.

Right after the meeting, Lord Chung wrote a message and rolled up the piece of paper and attached it to a crow's leg. The crow flew to the sky and carried the message all the way to its receiver, Chu Yen. He opened the scroll and read it and smiled wickedly. Everything is going according to plan.

Inside another room in the Council headquarters, Taishi had a quick meeting with his men, amongst them were Vincent and Cho.

"Men, I apologize for the short notice," Taishi began "...but Li Cheng was seen working with the Shadow, who is one of our enemies. Li Cheng is a traitor to

the Council and we must hunt her down immediately. She has the Ice Sword and both of them are considered extremely dangerous. Show no mercy."

Li and Zi were eating by the bonfire but their meal was interrupted when they both sensed footsteps from afar. They stopped biting their food and looked in the direction of the danger. "How many?" Zi asked.

"At least ten," she said.

"I counted fifteen," he added.

"Are they Liu Zhang's troops?"

Zi put on his hat and veil, becoming the Shadow once again. "Most likely. We have to hurry."

So the two of them ran through the forest until they came upon a mountain. It was a dead end, or so that's what they thought at first glance. They looked up and saw a hole about twenty feet up. Using their ninja skills, they jumped onto the wall to reach the hole. At this height, Li could see the forest much easier. She noticed their followers inside the thick trees. "They're not Liu Zhang's men, they are the Council's men!" she announced.

"Tch. How did they find us?" The Shadow entered the cave, followed by Li.

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The two entered a big hollow room where there were multiple tunnels facing different directions. "Which way?" asked Li.

"Our pursuers are too many in number...and not only that, but Master Tze himself is here. We can whittle down (縮減) their numbers if we separate here."

"Yes, master."

"Also, do your best to survive."

Li glanced at the masked man in awe as this was the first time he's shown concern for her since they've met. Usually, he'd treat her life as something insignificant and value the mission above her own life. But it turns out the Shadow isn't as cold blooded as she thinks. So the two went into separate tunnels, hoping to escape their pursuers.

When Taishi's group arrived at the hollow room, they also did not know what to do. "Let us separate into three groups," said Taishi. "Remember, be careful. Both of our targets are dangerous."

"**Hai!**" shouted his men.

The Shadow sensed he was being trailed by a group of men, and realizing that he cannot escape his pursuers, decided to stay behind and fight.

Two of the Council members appeared. "I heard footsteps over here."

The Shadow attacked them and they screamed in agony. Taishi heard screaming from down the tunnel and hurried over there. He arrived to find two of his men down and the Shadow standing before him. "So we meet at last, the man with no face. I have many questions for you."

"And I have no answers for you, old man." replied the Shadow.

Taishi rubbed his beard. "Hmmm. I guess I have to do it the hard way."

The two charged into each other and exchanged moves. After three moves, they have determined each other's strength. Both of them became cautious and waited patiently for their opponent to attack.

Taishi thrusts his sword forward and because of his one handed stance, has a longer reach. The Shadow used Shadow Walk, which made Taishi surprised. His movements confused the eyes and became unpredictable.

Suddenly, two steel fans flew at them, and the Shadow knocked them away. The fans flew back to their owner, Vincent Chan. The Shadow suddenly felt pain in his chest, it must be the demon's blood acting up again. Fighting someone as powerful as Taishi forced him to use his powers, which is not a good idea.

The Shadow threw a smoke bomb into the ground. *Poof* Smoke was everywhere and they coughed. Taishi and Vincent ran into the smoke to chase the Shadow but he already vanished.

Li saw an opening and ran to it. The exit was the same as the entrance, she was twenty feet above ground level. She jumped down and landed. *Whoosh* Nearby, there was man waiting for her. Li looked up and recognized him as none other than Chu Yen.

"Well, well, if it isn't Li Cheng, sister of Alex Cheng and member of the Heaven's Council. Or should I say former member?"

"You're Chu Yen...one of the Four Brothers and the one who betrayed Master Genzo."

"Chu Yen is a name of the past. I am now Ragnarok, the true hero of the kingdom. And you have something that belongs to me. The Ice Sword..."

"I defeated Rubble the Ice Hunter so I got it fair and square."

"Rubble was my best student, but he was defeated by trash like you. That makes him trash too."

"Did you call me trash? You'll regret it!" Li charged forward like the ninja that she is and let out an aggressive combination of attacks.

Yen deflected her attacks like they were nothing. In just three moves, their difference in skill became apparent. In Li's point of view, Yen was moving as light as a feather without much effort.

She charged into him for a low strike, making him block it, and then jumped up, and struck on the way down. This is known as **Heaven's Light**, a technique that uses gravity to make the strike twice as strong. The victim would see the light of the blade reflected in the sun just before his demise. Chu Yen evaded as Li landed on one knee. *Whoosh* He appeared to her side, much to her surprise.

"Heh, I'm more than familiar with the Heaven's Wrath Style." Said Chu Yen. "I have practiced it longer than you have."

Li grew frustrated and charged at him and attacked recklessly. "Hyaaaah!"

"It's pointless, I know all your moves!" he said as their blades clashed.

If regular techniques won't work, then she can try something else. Her Ice Sword glowed a vibrant white color and Chu Yen was a bit surprised. This time, she used a combination of straight attacks and spinning attacks, they come one after another. This is known as **Infinity Circle**, as the combination can last forever, depending on the user's stamina.

Chu Yen blocked the last strike and stepped back. He looked at his left sleeve and saw icicles on it. "Hmmm so you can use the Ice Sword to this extent. (程度)"

"How about this? **Ice Blizzard!**" With one mighty swing of the sword, a shockwave of cold air appeared.

Chu Yen did a backwards jump and somersaulted in the air, completely avoiding the shockwave. He landed smoothly. *plop*

"So that's about all you can do with my sword? The Ice Sword is wasted on trash like you."

"Don't underestimate me!" Li swings her blade vertically, creating a vertical shockwave. Chu Yen dodged to the right side. She throws the shockwave to the right side, and he dodged to the left side. Despite her doing her best, her opponent was clearly of a different level...so this is the caliber of one of the Four Brothers?

Chu Yen has been defending this whole time, and now it was his turn to go on the offensive. *clin clan clin clan* His movements seem light yet his strikes felt heavy. He was moving at an incredible speed, a speed that she is not used to, and defending became a hardship. It was clear he has mastered the Heaven's Wrath Style as well as a few other styles.

Slash He cut her left forearm, ripping her sleeve and it started to bleed. She jumped back and they both waited. Li was out of breath and sweating heavily. She is clearly out matched in terms of skill, and she tried hard to think of a winning strategy. In her situation, even escape is a possibility.

Chu Yen charged at her and let out another relentless assault, not giving her a moment to think. Her Ice Sword was glowing, but it was useless if she cannot use it to hit her opponent. *clin clan clin clan* She used **Ice Blizzard**, and Chu Yen ran forward and slid down on his knees, avoiding the ice attack, and his blade was about to cut her shins. Li hopped over his blade and rolled onto the ground. But this was a trap he set up, right after she rolled, he stood up and turned around and ran at her. Li got up but was not quick enough. He swings his blade hard, knocking the Ice Sword off her hands and into the ground. Then he threw a side kick into her stomach, knocking her to the ground. *thud*

He then went over to pick up the **Ice Sword** and took a few swings in the air. *whoop whoop* "The Ice Sword now belongs to its original master. That's how it should be."

Li was injured and unable to get up so all she could do was watch. "You're a traitor! You betrayed Master Genzo and you will face divine retribution for your crimes!"

"Is that right?" he said, walking over to her. "Didn't you betray the Heaven's Council to ally with the Black Reaper? You did it to seek more power, didn't you? So how are you different than me?"

"Don't compare me to you, you swine!" Li said angrily.

"Hahahahaha! Since I'm here I might as well tell you what happened...on that day fifty years ago..." And so begins the **flashback** from a time before the four kingdoms were founded, a time of turmoil and chaos...a time known as the Demon-Human War.

Genzo said, "Did you forge the swords that we asked for?"

"I always keep my promises." said Cho'Ann, the legendary blacksmith. "I have created one sword with the ultimate power for each of you. The first sword was forged (偽造) in the coldest place on earth, where there is a blizzard every second, temperatures reach subzero and not suitable for human habitation. That one became the **Ice Sword**. The second sword was forged from the magma pits of the hottest volcano in the mountains of Hawaii, and out of that came the **Fire Sword**. I climbed the tallest mountain in the world and placed the third sword there. Thunderstorms happen daily and thunder would strike the sword constantly, creating the **Thunder Sword**. As for the last one, I placed it in the windiest place on earth, the tunnels of Lagrange Canyon. The cold winds move at over 100 miles per hour and tornados happen often...out of that came the **Wind Sword**."

The Four Brothers glanced at each other with pleased looks.

"The four swords are placed in the four corners of the world. Each one of you will go to the designated location to claim your ultimate weapon. I have here four maps." Cho'Ann gave each warrior a map.

Taishi said, "You have no idea how grateful we are."

Raijun said, "We can never repay you for this."

"It's fine." Cho'Ann replied humbly. "Promise me to make this world safe from the demons."

"So, gentlemen, I guess this is farewell." said Masai Genzo. "Let us meet back here when we all have our ultimate weapons."

"Mmm agreed." said Taishi. "I will definitely come back with the Thunder Sword, even if it takes years."

"I only need six months to claim mine." said Chu Yen.

The Four Brothers put their fists in the center and did a cheer, and wasting no time, set off on their individual journeys.

Chu Yen's claim was correct; he only took six months to get the Ice Sword and bring it back to China. In fact, all of them brought their designated weapons back within six months.

The Four Brothers met up at the mountain top where they left and sworn an oath (誓言) of brotherhood. The four of them placed their newly found swords in

the middle. “**All for one and one for all!**” Then they all raised their blades to the air.

Masai, Chu Yen, Taishi and Rajiun were fighting a horde of demons in the forest. Amongst them was a group of twenty swordsmen who volunteered to join them in the cause. Despite being outnumbered, they have the legendary swords at their disposal.

Froom A group of vampire demons just got burned to a crisp. “This Fire Sword is amazing! Cho’ Ann is a man who lives up to his reputation!”

“True!” said Chu Yen. “But my Ice Sword is better!” He took a mighty swing, creating the Ice Blizzard, destroying a group of vampires. “You only killed thirty demons. But I killed thirty one.”

“So it’s a contest you want, eh?” replied Masai.

“There they go again.” said Taishi.

“Whatever keeps them motivated.” replied Rajiun.

The volunteer swordsmen ended up not doing much fighting, but rather witnessing the awesome power of the Four Brothers. “Wow, their power is unrivaled!” “I’ve never seen anything like it!” “Look at Taishi’s Thunder Wave!” “I prefer Genzo’s Heat Wave!” “Yeah but nothing beats Chu Yen’s Ice Blizzard!”

In half a day’s time, they wiped out an entire horde of demons. The swordsmen praised the Four Brothers non-stop, marveling at their abilities. Soon, the word spread to all the major cities, then spilling over to the towns and smaller villages, and eventually reaching the ears of warlords.

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The fall of the **Han Dynasty** changed nearly everything in the country, affecting the poorest peasants and the richest warlords. There was no unified army any longer, and that means no law and order. Demons from the wilderness started attacking villages at the border, causing a need for bounty hunters and martial artists to defend them. Power went to individual warlords who controlled provinces with their private armies. Warlords would fight each other for control over territories. During the **Demon-Human War**, at any given time there were at least twenty provinces.

This system was fragile, however, and will not last. A warlord’s income is primarily from taxes. Citizens who are attacked by demons received no protection and refused to pay taxes. Other citizens refused to pay out of spite. Nobles received no respect nor did armies, the ones who received the most respect were martial arts schools and the martial artists they produced. During this chaotic time, people romanticized heroes. Stories were written about them, songs were sung, and plays were shown. Out of all the heroes, four of them stood out above the rest...the Four Brothers of China.

There is not a soul who has not heard of Masai Genzo with the Fire Sword, Chu Yen with the Ice Demon, Taishi Tze with the Thunder Sword, and Raijun Ruong with the Wind Sword. Just a mention of their name demands respect from martial artists, other swordsmen admire them, and women gasp at their very presence. Only Taishi enjoys being popular with women, however. Masai Genzo is focused on doing what is right, while Chu Yen is obsessed on surpassing Masai. No one knows what Raijun's preference is, as he never talks about himself.

The warlords recognize this, and begin to capitalize on it. If they force their citizens to pay taxes, there will be rebellions, which is not good for the citizens nor the warlords. So they formed alliances with the members of the Four Brothers. Four such nobles whose provinces were next to each other agreed to have Chu Yen as their leader. The people were willing to listen to Chu Yen, as his name garnered (獲得) respect amongst the populace. This became a win-win situation; Chu Yen gets a high position equal to a king, while the nobles kept their land and taxes. Thus, this is how the land became divided: Chu Yen runs the Red Province, Masai Genzo rules the Blue Province, Taishi rules the White Province and Raijun oversees the Purple Province.

One day, in the old city of **Seiruun**, a soldier was harassing a girl on the street. He was holding her arm while she tried to get away. "Come on baby, let's go on a date."

"Let me go, you jerk!" she pushed him away, and made a run for it.

He grabbed her hand. "You refuse me? It's a privilege you won't get in ten lifetimes."

Suddenly, a tomato was thrown at the soldier's face. "Who dares?"

The man who did it was a friend of the girl, and the girl ran to him and hid behind him.

"Don't go around and harass whoever you feel like." yelled the young man.

The soldier approaches him. "How dare you...do you know who I am? I am a Red Soldier!"

"Tch. Just because you're a Red Soldier doesn't mean you can do as you please. The Red Army is supposed to protect the citizens."

The soldier became more displeased. "Why you insolent (张狂) little..." He drew a sword and pointed it at that man's neck. "Assaulting an officer like me is a crime."

The girl shrieked and the man grew nervous. "If you're going to arrest me, do it. Leave her out of this."

"You have no say in the matter." A hand touched the troop's shoulder.

"What is it?" Upon seeing one of the Four Brothers, his attitude quickly changed.

"Master Genzo?"

"Let them go. A Red Soldier like you can be forgiving, can't you?" said Genzo.

"B-But he assaulted me."

"A tomato in the face can hardly be called an assault. Maybe he wanted to give you free food? These people are my friends. Give me face and let them go." said Genzo.

"Yes, my lord." The troop turned to the girl and the young man. "You're in luck today." With that, he walked away.

The girl and her protector thanked Genzo a dozen times. Genzo, however, remained modest and insisted they do not need to pay him back.

Later on, Genzo confronted Chu Yen regarding the matter. "Yen, you are getting too arrogant. Your soldiers are becoming like you."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Chu replied. "We have agreed to split the country into four sections, and each one of us will rule our own section. I know how to govern my section, the Red Province."

"And you have done a poor job, Yen. Your soldiers are spoiled and arrogant, and they show no regard for the well being of the people. Your leadership is lacking and it is being revealed in the morale of the Red Soldiers."

Chu turned around. "Tch, listen Genzo, you have no right to tell me how to govern my territory. You worry about running your territory. I do not need you to teach me how it is done." He walked away, leaving a bitter feeling between them.

That was merely one incident in which those bitter feelings were revealed. Chu Yen and Genzo have often argued in front of Rajun and Taishi. Genzo usually has the final say because he is the senior and he is wiser than Chu is, which makes Chu frustrated.

Chu sat by the window in the dark, looking out the tower. He was extremely displeased with Genzo, who happens to be the leader of the Brotherhood. He feels superior to the other three and feels that Genzo is holding him back. (How dare he...trespass into my territory? I have had it with Genzo.)

One day, Chu Yen received an invite to drink tea with a noble from the Red Province. They both sat down while a servant brought them tea. "To what do I owe the pleasure, Lord Furin Yi?"

But **Furin Yi** is actually a demon named Ko-Rashm disguised as a member of the Yi Household, his future self will become **Liu Zhang**. "Please, don't be so formal. Call me Furin, Sir Chu Yen."

"Very well, Furin. You have something to propose to me?" Chu Yen is a swordsman at heart and is not good at small talk.

Furin smiled. "Straight to the point, I see, just as the rumors say. Are you satisfied with playing governor for the Red Province? No wait, should I say magistrate? Or..."

"I don't have an official title. I am just here to run this region and keep the peace and the Red Province is just a temporary name, I know that much."

"Don't you want something bigger? Like being the general of **all** four provinces, or even a king?" asked Furin.

Chu Yen raised an eyebrow. "What are you getting at?"

Furin said, "I heard that Masai Genzo is doing pretty well with his Blue Province. Some say he's doing better than you."

He banged his fist on the table, and Furin knew he was on the mark. "I'm going to cut the tongues off whoever is spreading these rumors. I am stronger than smarter than Master Genzo."

Furin said, "You certainly are. If we team up you will get a chance to prove yourself. I am allies with many warlords near and far. I have the power to change the political map of our kingdom...but not without your name. After all, you are a hero of the ages."

"I'll consider it." The swordsman finished his tea.

"I knew I came to the right man. Here." He handed Chu Yen a map. "Meet me here and we'll discuss further."

"What the hell is this?" said Chu Yen. "How do I know this isn't a trap?"

"Even if it is, is someone of your caliber (測徑器) afraid of a measly trap set up by a lord like me? You wouldn't pass up an opportunity to surpass Genzo." With that said, Furin left the room.

Chu Yen crushed the map in his hand. Furin read him like a book...he is clearly being led on...yet it is as Furin said, he will not pass up this chance.

Chu covered his eyes from the fierce sand hitting his face. He was in a desert with a sandstorm looming (迫在眉睫) in the background. As if that is not dangerous enough, there was a horde of sand and vampire demons in front of him. These creatures walked slowly, with their mouths ajar and saliva drooling. Chu took a mighty swing of his Ice Sword. "Ice Storm!" In an instant, all the demons were either killed or frozen. "Is Furin Yi really at a place like this?" He walked into the sand dust.

"Wait, do not go too far ahead!" said Taishi. Alas, it was too late, Chu has already disappeared from visible sight.

Chu covered his eyes as he moved, each step was difficult due to sand and the strong winds. "Ugh..." Suddenly, the sand dust cleared and he could see again. Before him stood a man in a yellow gown with a lord's hat. "Furin Yi...or Ko-Rashm. Whatever your name is. You are still alive in the middle of a sand storm and an army of demons. Who exactly are you?"

Furin replied, "The answer is easy. I am a demon." He drew his sword. "Now, let me see your skills that you boast about."

Chu snickered. "Alright but don't regret it, old man." He drew his Ice Sword, stood in fighting stance, and his sword glowed white.

Taishi just finished off another demon. *Slash* "Where is Chu Yen? We must find him!" But his soldiers had enough to deal with - the sand storm and the demons. They were not able to move forward to look for their ally.

The Ice Sword was on the ground as well as Chu, who had a look of shock on his face. His eyes were shaking as everything he ever believed in was shattered. "No...I lost? How? How is this possible?"

"Hmmm. Do not blame yourself. I have much more experience than you."

"How many styles did you just use? Three? Four?"

"I used four styles. But I actually know one hundred sword styles!"

Chu was more shocked. "One hundred!? Unbelievable."

"I said I will help you surpass Masai Genzo. If you want to find out how, follow me." Furin turned around and walked away using the Zanzoken. Seconds later, he vanished into the sand.

Chu got off his behind and ended up on his knees, his hand reaching out. "Wait..." He snatched the Ice Sword and stuck it back into its sheath. He ran after Furin.

The **flashback** was over...The day he met Furin Yi aka Liu Zhang was the day that changed his destiny forever. Today, he got his Ice Sword back and is about to eliminate another obstacle to his glory.

Li Cheng was injured and lying down and unable to stand up. He walked over to her and it was clear by his expression that he wants to end her life. Her heart was beating rapidly and her life flashed before her eyes as she is seconds away from meeting the Grim Reaper. Chu Yen raised his sword up...

Summary Contents

Next episode: 三十六: The 50 Year Grudge: Taishi vs Chu Yen

Finished 12/17/2021

Updated 12/25/2021

Name	Role	Personality
Alex Cheng aka Sir Cheng	Member of Council, wielder of Fire Sword	S
Zi Lai	Alex's best friend	A
Li Cheng	Student of the Black Reaper, wielder of Ice Sword	S - A
Shen Long aka Jiang Ye	Second student of War God, Xiao's older brother	S

Sui Long	First student of War God	S – T
Xiao Ye	Member of Council, Jiang's little sister, wielder of Thunder Sword	S
Celina Ce aka Lady Ce	Member of Council, widowed concubine	S
Taishi Tze aka Master Tze	Headmaster of the Heaven's Council	S
Vincent Chan	Senior member of Council	R
Cho Mei-Ang	Senior member of Council	R
King Liu Cao	The current king, half brother of Liu Bei	A
Lord Zhang	Commander of Red Feather Army, Vanishing Warrior	S
Ragnarok aka Chu Yen	General of Red Feather Army, traitor to the Four Brothers	S
Roh Demos	The elder Demon Brother	A
Jin Demos	The younger Demon Brother	A
Khan Manchu	Leader of Manchu tribe	A

Flashback Characters		
Name	Role	Personality
Zho Lai	Founder of the Shadow Style, father to Shun	S
Dae Lai	Wife of Zho Lai and mother to Shun	A
Shun Lai	Son of Zho and Dae and father to Zi Lai	A
Mei-lei Lai	Wife of Shun and mother to Zi Lai	S
En Ko	An ancient demon who turned Zho Lao	S
Furin Yi	Another identity of the Vanishing Warrior	S