

DEMON SLAYER

Volume 5 Contents

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Summary

十九: Xiao Ye's True Ability! The Walking Crane!

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[B] [C] Contents

After rescuing Xiao Ye from certain doom, the heroes can finally get a breath of relief. The whereabouts of the Demon Brothers are still unknown, but it will not be for long. Liu Cao has taken a special interest in catching these criminals. Perhaps he has heard much about them from being in Leinwan for several years. The leaders of the imperial army, in cooperation with Lord Yu, put up wanted posters of the Demos siblings in every city and town.

After his fight with Jin Demos, Jiang was seriously injured and resting in bed. There were bandages on his upper body with dried blood on it.

“Hang in there, Shen Long. You will be fine.” said Alex.

“Of course I will. I am the first student of the invincible Master Genzo.”

Alex smiled and nodded in agreement.

"Listen, Cheng. The person who did this to me is **no** amateur. He is Jin, the younger of the Demos brothers. Roh is the teacher, and Jin is the student, and even the student was able to do this much damage to me. Do not underestimate them because it is a fatal mistake to do so. They are given the name Demon Brothers because of their inhuman strength. No one has ever defeated them in combat because of their strong sword craft. There is not a soul in the Shen Kingdom who does not know them. Try to avoid a one on one fight with them."

The infamous Demon Brothers are dressed in their usual black attire. They are laughing and standing on a ground filled with corpses...corpses of highly skilled swordsmen they just killed.

"Very well. I will take your advice to heart¹. In the meantime, get some rest." replied Alex. He helped Jiang lie down in bed.

"Oh, can you do me a favor?" inquired Jiang.

"What is it?" Alex put a blanket over the injured bodyguard.

"Can you please take care of my sister in my absence? I am unable to attend to her needs, not like this."

"Sure thing. You have done much for me, so I owe you, Shen Long."

Jiang put his forearm over his eyes. "Look at me...I am supposed to be your bodyguard, yet I cannot protect you in this condition. I cannot even defend myself."

"No." said Alex. "You were always watching over me. Sometimes I wonder if you even sleep. But I am in good company now."

"But Liu Zhang is living in the same palace as us." said Jiang.

"He will not do anything stupid under the watchful eye of the king." Alex replied calmly. "He will be caught and put on trial eventually."

Li came into the room and leaned against the wall with her arms crossed. "So, how's he doing?"

"Shen Long lost a lot of blood, but it is nothing life threatening. He will recover soon."

"Well, that's a given." Li replied. "If Shen Long can't even handle a few minor scratches, then he has no right to the title of the first student of the War God. He has been through worse before...I've seen it. He will be fine."

"Sister, perhaps you should be nicer with your words?"

"I am telling it like it is." Li rebutted. "And I treat everyone equally." With that said, she walked away in her usual arrogant manner.

Meanwhile, Zi was up to his usual antics (滑稽動作) as he was giving the blind girl a tour. "Ah, yes, this is the training ground." There is where highly skilled swordsmen like myself come to train daily."

"Really?" Xiao asked. "If the training ground is this luxurious, then the rest of the palace must be even better. Life must be really good in the imperial palace."

¹ I will take your advice seriously

"But of course," replied Zi, always trying to sound intelligent to impress a young lady. "Only the most important and influential people may even glimpse at this palace. The army accepts only the best fighters to represent the kingdom. And in my case, I am both skilled and high class, so that is why I am here, able to take you on a tour of this place."

Xiao put a hand over her mouth and chuckled. "You sure like to brag, Mr. Lai."

"Oh heavens no. I am but a humble man. I don't really like those high class women. They're too stuck up. I like normal girls who have exceptional beauty...like yourself." He took her hand. "It is too bad you cannot see. If you had a mirror you'd be impressed with your marvelous beauty."

Xiao laughed. "Really? Are you just saying that to make me feel better?"

"To call you a beauty is an understatement. You put the prettiest flower to shame."

Li coughed on purpose, and Zi and Xiao turned their attention to her. "Having fun on your little 'tour'?"

"Mr. Lai was just showing me around the palace."

"What's the point if you can't see it?" said Li.

"C'mon Li, be nice. Miss Ye is our special guest." said Zi.

Xiao's head turned left and right. "Mmm mmm. She is right. True beauty cannot be fully appreciated if it cannot be seen. That is why it makes no difference where I live. I think it is more troublesome to live in a large place since it is harder to find things."

Alex and Sui Long showed up.

"Who is there?" Xiao asked.

"Your senses sure are keen, Miss Xiao."

"Oh, it is you, Mr. Cheng."

"Mr. Cheng huh? That is too formal. You may call me Alex. I have an update on the whereabouts of the Demon Brothers. Some of the civilians have been reported to see them in the western district. We are tightening our security in that area."

"But they are hard to catch...as a matter of fact, they have never been caught."

"Never been caught in **Leinwan**. But we have Liu Cao as our king, and he is extremely strict. I am sure that no criminal will be able to escape from our well trained troops." said Alex.

"If they are hired by Lord Zhang, then he can just give them the imperial seal and they will come into the palace...and that means we're screwed." said Zi.

"I doubt that. The Demon Brothers are famous and everyone knows what they look like. Ekin is a different story, though. He might still be lurking around." said Li.

Xiao grew curious. "What kind of person is Ekin?"

"Someone you need to avoid at all costs. He is an assassin hired by Lord Zhang and he has the Thunder Sword." said Li.

"The...the Thunder Sword, you say? The Legendary Thunder Sword?" Xiao continued to be impressed by these people, who can say this stuff nonchalantly (恬然). For a poor blind girl who makes dolls for a living, this is a whole new world for her.

Meanwhile, Celina visited the king when he was drinking tea outdoors. Cao was once again in his thinking position, with his chin resting against his hand, and one leg crossing the other. Celina kneeled. "Long live his highness."

"Don't bother with that." said the king. "Kneeling is a waste of time. We're friends so you can skip the formalities."

"Yes, um, thank you." Celina stood up.

"I am pleased to hear that your friend has been rescued from the clutches of the kidnappers. How is she doing? What was her name again?"

"She is Xiao Ye and she is doing well."

"It must be tough being blind. I cannot imagine how she can live by herself."

"Not to worry." said Celina. "She is capable of taking care of herself."

"I see, I'd love to eventually meet her, but right now I am busy with many things. We need to do something about Liu Zhang. That bastard is probably planning something else as we speak. I know it. All I need is an excuse to arrest him."

"Yes, I know. He is quite popular with the other lords, and arresting him will cause much turmoil (動盪) in the court. He also controls a lot of land and has small army at his disposal. Finding an excuse to arrest him will be...quite difficult, that's how I would put it."

"Lady Ce, you are one of the few people I can trust here. The palace is full of sycophants (巴兒狗), schemers and liars. Take caution in every thing that you do."

"Thank you for your concern." She bowed and left the table.

Liu Cao picked up his cup to stare at his tea. (This is Lord Zhang's strategy he used on Liu Bei. First he tried using his concubine as a hostage. That failed so then he used the spice on him. After Liu Bei lived up to his use, he had him killed. In my case, Lord Zhang tried using the spice on me, but thanks to Lady Ce's warning, I did not fall for it. He did not use a hostage because I am not close to anyone except for Lady Ce, someone he failed to capture. And he did not try to assassinate me because I am too careful. So what is his next move? I have to figure it out. Can I outsmart this sly fox?)

[B] Title Contents

"Miss Ye, we are happy to have you with us." said Alex.+

"Thank you, it is an honor to work with the Demon Slayer." said Xiao.

"Never in my life did I think I would have the privilege to be able to take a step

inside the imperial palace. Cheng, not only did you save my life, but you are helping my brother with his recovery, and you are letting me stay here. I cannot possibly repay you." She bowed. It is customary for someone to bow to a non-authority figure if that person feels gratitude. Bowing shows appreciation and humbleness.

Alex was uncomfortable with such a compliment. He waved his hands in front of him. "No, it's no problem at all. Don't be so modest, Miss Ye. You are Shen Long's brother. He did me many favors, so I am merely repaying him."

"You are the one who is modest, Mister Cheng," said Xiao.

"Please, call me Alex, Miss Ye."

"Please, call me Xiao."

"So umm, how is your stay here? Did Zi take you on a tour?"

"Of course I did." Zi replied.

Xiao smiled. "Indeed, and I enjoyed it very much."

"Umm yeah, I heard from your brother that you are skilled in sword craft. I find that quite impressive. I simply must see it for myself." said Alex.

Li said: "A blind person who can fight? What an oxymoron."

No one paid attention to her comments. Xiao was bothered by her, but she held it in. "Indeed. I learned my sword craft from my master. He is one of the best in the kingdom."

Li continued to berate her. "Was your master blind too? I guess he must have low expectations...if his students are blind. I wonder if he knows what he's doing."

Xiao's eyebrows furrowed. "Miss Cheng, I do not mind your rude comments, but please do not insult my master."

"Tch, talking tough all of a sudden? Can you really hold a sword? Can you really be of benefit to our group?"

"Li, stop it." said Sui Long.

"I'll have you know, my master has trained some of the best martial artists in the nation!"

"His standards must have been low for him to pick you. I bet you've never even send a sword before."

(She is provoking me on purpose. Does she want to have a duel with me?)

"For your information, a sword was the very last thing I saw before I became blind. Your words are strong and confident, so I am assuming you can back it up with your sword craft?"

(Li why are you provoking her?) Sui Long wondered.

"Of course. I mastered the Heaven's Wrath style thanks to my training from the Legendary Master Genzo, one of the Four Brothers of China."

Zi stood in between them. "Alright, ladies, enough. Stop it already."

"You stay out of this. Now, Miss. Xiao, I suppose that **you** can back your words with your sword?"

"Is that a challenge?"

"Did I stutter?"

"Li, be nice to her. It's her first day here." said Zi.

Xiao extended her arm. This action signified him to be quiet, and that she can stand up for herself. She pulled the sword a little bit out of the shell, revealing the middle of the blade. "Words mean nothing. If you want to duel, let our swords do the talking."

Li smiled because she was thinking the same thing. "Hmph. Fine by me. Just for you, I will not use my Ice Sword. I will use a regular sword."

"As you wish."

Sui Long and Zi clearly do not want to see this match happen, but they cannot stop it. And to say that men have big egos is only half the truth. Alex, however, did not stop their arguing as he is curious about how Xiao fights.

The two fighters were about ten paces away, standing on solid, concrete ground, the type of environment that Xiao prefers. Everything was silent as no one uttered a sound. The wind was clearly audible.

Li was the first to draw her weapon. *Schling* Xiao's head was facing sideways. She relies on her ears rather than her eyes, so it matters not which face she faces; she will be fine as long as she can hear her opponent.

(This will be a piece of cake.²) She charged forward and slashed, and Xiao blocked it. *Cling* Li stepped back. (What? That must've been a fluke. She just got lucky.) Li waited a few seconds to strike again.

Xiao did not move at all and waited for her opponent to come. Li is a true ninja indeed, for her footsteps were stealthy and quick. But as long as they make a sound, Xiao can pinpoint her location. Thump thump thump.

In the world of darkness, Xiao can "see" the footsteps. Each time her foot hits the ground, a vibration is produced in the form of a wave.

Li slashed left and right. *Cling* Xiao was able to block every single attack. Li grew impatient and struck harder. *Cling* Xiao stepped back as Li advanced.

Xiao took a risk and attacked. Li jumped to the air, somersaulted and landed.

"Do you still think blind people are worthless?"

Li charged and thrust her sword forward, and Xiao dodged to the side. Whoosh. Whoosh. Her moves were swift and tricky. Li was having a hard time predicting her movements.

The ninja girl jumped and slashed, but she only hit the ground. Xiao appeared a few paces away and got into fighting stand. She stood on her right foot while her left leg was bent at an angle. Her sword is pointing forward and her free arm is extended to the side.

"That style..." commented Sui Long.

"Is it..." Alex said.

² Piece of cake - idiom - very easy, like eating cake

“Yes. It is a famous style developed by martial artists from the east...the **Walking Crane.**”

Li also knew the style’s name, but she did not care. Her pride was blocking her judgment. (Walking Crane? Big deal! I will show you that my Heaven’s Wrath is superior!)

The ninja girl charged forward, and Xiao took a step forward and struck with her sword. Li had to step back. What was that? Li could not get near her. She tried again, and Xiao blocked and attacked in the same motion. Li has to step back a few more paces. Now she was worried she may not be able to back up her words.

At this point, Celina showed up. “What is going on?”

“They are having a duel.” Alex answered.

“A duel?” exclaimed Celina, ever the pacifist. “But Miss Ye is blind. We must call it off.”

“No. I want to see what she is capable of...”

Clang! Xiao went on the offensive. Li, now growing cautious, took a defensive stance. Xiao was moving forward, keeping her body low and her sword high so that it was hard to hit her.

Li was tired of backing up, so she jumped over her. Both of them were now standing still. (How can this be? Is she reading my moves?) Li was extremely worried...will she lose to a blind person?

While Li Cheng fights for pride, Xiao fights for a different reason. She may be blind, but she is tired of hearing that word and being insulted for it. She adopted the Walking Crane to prove to others that she is just as capable as they are, perhaps even better than the average swordsman. But she only fights if it is absolutely necessary, for she is wise enough to know that fighting is not always the answer.

Xiao continued her offensive. They jumped around and exchange moves while the observers watch in awe. It is unanimously agreed that Xiao’s sword craft is nothing short of miraculous. But Li’s speed and reflexes are not to be ignored either.

Clang! Cling! Xiao made a strike, immediately following another strike. Clang! Her blade missed Li’s hair by a few inches. Li jumped away to a safer distance.

This fight is not what the ninja expected. Li was tired and panting for breath. Not only is Xiao keeping up with her, but she is actually a worthy opponent.

Li decided that it is time to stop fooling around and end this match. She got into her offensive position, and Xiao can sense that something dangerous is about to happen.

Li charged forward, Xiao slashed. Li jumped up. “Heaven’s Wrath Style – Heaven’s Light!”

Xiao quickly jumped away from the point of impact. Li’s strike missed, but in a continuous motion, she ran forward and knocked Xiao’s blade from her hand. *Clang* She pointed her blade at Xiao’s head.

It was over in the blink of an eye, so to speak.

Alex: "That was...absolutely astounding!"

Sui: "I agree. Her sword craft surprised even me."

Zi: "I'm speechless. You can search all of the Shen Kingdom but not find a girl like her. She is a rare gem indeed."

Li picked up Xiao's sword and handed it to her. "You win. You were able to back up your words with your sword craft after all. You are an exceptional swordsman."

Li turned her head. "No, **you** are the exceptional one. I actually did not expect you to put up such a resilient fight. If I made even one mistake, you would have won." For once, she was being humble. "I had to admit you surprised me. For you to have mastered the Walking Crane Style, you truly opened my eyes, so to say."

"I'm glad you finally understand." Xiao replied. "Ever since I lost my vision, I had to rely on my other senses. During the first few days I was blind, I was scared out of my mind. I could not see a thing or find anything. I was...just blind. Slowly but surely I got used to it. I walked around with a stick to make I don't bump into objects on my way out of the house. I may have lost my vision, but as a result my other senses grew stronger. Much stronger. My hearing allows me to determine exactly where you are in relation to me. I hear your footsteps and from that I am able to determine at what speed you are running towards me."

Xiao did not move at all and waited for her opponent to come. Li is a true ninja indeed, for her footsteps are stealthy and quick. But as long as they make a sound, Xiao can pinpoint her location. Thump thump thump.

"I hear the sound of the sword hitting the air clearly. I can tell exactly where the sword is and its length just from the sound alone."

Li attacked from the left and right. Each time she moves the sword, the sound of the blade hitting the wind is clearly audible, and Xiao can determine where the blade is, and its length as well. Whooooosh!

"So you see, based on all these pieces of information, I make a mental picture of what is happening," said Xiao. "I used to live in a world of darkness, but I do realize that even blind people can still live without their sight. You can say it is both a blessing and a curse."

Everyone listened to her explanation with all ears.

"I can use my nose to smell people...you see, high class people have a distinct smell to them. They smell different than peasants. Because of the clothes they wear and the fragrances they spray on themselves. I use my sense of taste to determine what food I am eating or drinking. I am also trained to sniff out poison. Even with wine, by the way it smells and by the way it tastes, I can tell you the name of the wine. And most importantly of all, I rely on my hearing. See on the roof? There are two birds."

Alex and Li looked up. Sure enough, there were two doves squawking at each other.

"There is also a barrel of water behind me and it is dripping water."

They looked over there, and sure enough, water was dripping from a barrel.
"That's simply amazing! You can hear such small things from so far away?"
Li asked.

"I tend to hear better when things are quiet. When I first met all of you, I use my hands to feel out your faces. This is how I "see" your faces...and how you feel on the inside. And I see that you, Miss Cheng, value your strength above all else. You must have lived a hard life."

Her mental read was once again accurate. Li smiled for the first time in a long time. "It seems that I've misjudged you, Miss Ye." She offered a handshake, and Xiao shook it.

Everyone smiled and they were happy that the conflict between these two has turned into a friendship. It is all because they are fellow swordsmen.

[C] Title Contents

In the sunny afternoon, Xiao was in the backyard sweeping with a rake. She cannot see the dust but she felt like doing something to avoid boredom.

Li and Sui Long were conversing in the same room that Jiang was resting in. "I am glad that my sister gave you a challenge." said Jiang. "She's stronger than I thought. After I left her by herself she had to take care of herself."

"She must have trained hard to acquire her sword craft." said Li. "I wonder who she learned it from?"

"That is impossible." Li replied. "No one can master the Walking Crane by oneself. Her master must be someone decent."

"I see that you are starting to respect her. This is a healthy attitude." said Sui Long.

"Yeah, whatever." Li replied. "I just wonder...how much better she could be if she can see...isn't there something we can do?"

"Hmmm. Maybe there is something we can do." said Sui.

Xiao threw some bread crumbs on the floor to feed the pigeons. They flocked to the crumbs and fought each other to eat. Even though she cannot see them she was having fun picturing what they look like.

Ekin entered the courtyard wearing a mask. Xiao, of course sensed him before he even entered. "Are you alone? Wait, aren't you the blind girl that Roh kidnapped?"

"Oh my. You know Roh the assassin? Are you two friends perhaps?"

"Heh. I guess I will start the bloodshed with you." Ekin drew his sword. "The others will see your corpse and be enraged and then come after me for revenge."

"Tsk tsksk." Zi was leaning against the wall while waving his index finger. "A grown man like you trying to pick on a helpless blind girl? Have you no shame?"

Ekin turned around. "I guess you'll be my first victim instead."

Zi drew his sword. "I'm warning you, I'm a highly trained expert as I am a student of the War God."

"Ha...ha ha ha ha. You got beat up by the Ice Hunter! Some expert you are!"

"Shut up!" Zi dashed forward and took the offensive.

Ekin blocked all his attacks and jumped back. Zi dashed again. Ekin threw a beam of electricity forward and Zi blocked it with his blade. Zzzzt. Zi was unable to advance and he grunted. Ekin used the Thunder Wave attack, throwing a wave of electricity in the form of an airbreaker. Zi was hit and knocked against the wall. *Wham* He fell on his knees. "Damn. Why does this always happen to me?"

Alex suddenly appeared atop the wall and jumped down. "So you're back." He ran in front of Xiao.

"And my second victim has appeared." announced the assassin.

Alex put his sword in front of him. "I believe we have a score to settle from our duel." He began to draw the Fire Sword out of its shell.

Xiao stood in front of him and put her arm out. "Let me handle this. You have saved my life and done much for me and I am eternally grateful. But I do not want to be always protected."

Alex was startled. "But-"

"You are a strong fighter, Alex. I heard about how he cheated in the duel. In my mind there is doubt you would have won had he not cheated."

Ekin was skeptical. "You've got to be kidding me. A blind woman is my opponent?"

"Skepticism, arrogance, and then despair and defeat. You'll soon share the same fate as all those who underestimate me." said Xiao.

Ekin grunted and charged forward and unleashed a combination attack. Xiao blocked his attacks without breaking a sweat. *clin-clan-clin-clan* Holding her sword with one hand, she struck forward, slashing his mask. He stepped back to avoid it but it was done too late. The mask fell off, revealing his face, but not that it mattered to her.

Xiao then stood in her proper fighting stance - sword in right hand pointed forward, left arm extended to the side, and her left leg bent sideways like a yoga stance. Ekin's eyes expanded. "The Walking Crane?"

Alex watched without blinking. Today he got to see Xiao's sword craft not once but twice.

Xiao began her assault - using methodical attacks from different angles to find openings. Ekin defended himself well and counterattacked. Xiao blocked with both hands on the pommel. Then the Thunder Sword electrified her sword and her hands as well. Zzzzt. Xiao stepped back, her hands trembling. "I see...that sneaky attack is the same one you used on Alex during your duel, correct? You fight with no honor."

"What use is honor to an assassin?! I get paid to kill, that's all there is to it!" He swings his sword downwards, throwing an electric attack. Xiao jumped away

from it. Zzzt. Zzzt. She dashed around in a circle. Zzzt Zzzt. Even though he was missing, he continued to use this attack because it made him feel powerful.

They dashed around in circles. Xiao can sense the electric currents...they were fast but she was faster. Zzzt. Zzzt.

Xiao kept dashing until her target within range. She ducked and swings her blade up. *Whoosh* Ekin dodged by a hair's breath. The benefit of Walking Crane is the user is sideways, making her a small target, and crouched down, making her an even smaller target.

The two exchanged moves and ended up clashing blades again. Ekin used the same move he did before, sending electric sparks to her arms. Xiao screamed in pain as she was knocked against the wall. Ekin pointed his blade at her, the tip being two inches away from her chin.

Alex ran towards them, but stopped when Xiao said: "Don't. I can handle this."

Ekin snickered. "What was that? Did you hit your head too hard?"

"I can still fight." There was not a hint of hesitation in her voice.

"What can you possibly do in your situation?" From Ekin's point of view, he has already won, but who can blame him for thinking that?

Everything happened in slow motion. Xiao's fingers opened, dropping her sword on the ground. *Clin-clan*. Ekin's eyes was focused on the sword, and in that one second window, Xiao dropped to the floor. Her palms planted on the ground, she opened her legs in a scissor like motion to grab his legs below the knee. Then she did a twist with her whole body, making him fall sideways. *Thud* Then she picked up her sword from the ground and plunged it into his abdomen. *Schleb*

Ekin screamed with his jaw wide open. "Uuuuuugh!" It was the most painful thing he's ever experience before, to have the blade go through his insides and out of his back. He was losing consciousness but he was too stubborn to give up. His trembling arm held the Thunder Sword and used it to electrify her. They were both electrified. Zzzzzzzt. Suddenly, Alex knocked his Thunder Sword away. This pretty much sealed his fate. Xiao stuck the sword deeper into his stomach and turned it at an angle, causing him agonizing pain. Mere seconds later, he shut his eyes forever.

Alex took Xiao by the hand to help her stand up. "You ended up helping me again." said Xiao.

"It's not such a bad thing to receive help from someone else." Alex walked over to the Thunder Sword, picked it up and placed it in Xiao's hands.

She had a confused look on her face. "What is the meaning of this?"

"You defeated Ekin so this is yours now. You are now the owner of the Thunder Sword. I'd rather it be you. I don't want this powerful weapon to fall into the wrong hands."

She was still in shock, but a minute later, she accepted it. "Thank you, Mr. Cheng, I mean Alex." ³

Zi stood up, putting an arm over his injured ribs. "So now we have three of the ultimate weapons, huh? Our team is becoming incredible."

Just now, Li and Celina arrived with the imperial doctor. The natural thing to say is to ask what happened, but Li already knew within seconds. Ekin was dead, and Xiao has the Thunder Sword, thus what happened was obvious. In her mind, Xiao is a terrifying opponent despite her polite personality.

Celina summoned **Dr. Taifu** to check out Xiao Ye's eyes. As the imperial doctor, he is the best in the kingdom, possibly one of the top doctors in the known world. Being a doctor takes years of study of medicine, which includes intensive schooling and a degree after graduation? Needless to say, the imperial doctor is a prestigious title that is the envy of all doctors. Dr. Taifu is the son of a wealthy family that has a lot of power in the northern provinces, and he was recommended by Lord Huong years ago. He was also the same doctor who looked after Celina when she was poisoned, so he was already trusted by her. ⁴

Xiao was sitting in bed and Dr. Taifu just finished examining her eyes. Alex walked up to him. "Doctor, how is her condition?"

The doctor rubbed his beard and thought long and hard. "Hmmm, her injury is too old. I'm afraid there is nothing I can do with my current ability."

"Can't you do anything? Is she going to be blind her whole life?" asked Alex.

"I am sorry, sir. I cannot create miracles." Dr. Tofu said this with much regret in his voice. He is over sixty years old and has saved many lives, but modern science has its limitations.

Alex was not about to give up. "Then I will summon the best doctors from the land and have them all examine her."

Xiao pulled on Alex's sleeve. "Alex...it is alright. I appreciate everything you and Lady Ce are doing for me. I do not need a doctor. I have already accepted my fate a long time ago."

"But your sight was unfairly taken away from you." said Alex.

"No, it is okay. I am used to it. To be honest, I did not expect even the best doctor in the world to be able to help me."

Alex came outside with a depressed mood. "The doctor cannot do anything. He said that he cannot create miracles."

Li said "Hmmm, this sure seems hopeless. There must be a way we can help Miss. Ye. Hmmm..." Suddenly, the word **miracle** gave her an idea, and she pounded her own hand. "I got it! Alex, we can bring her to the temple!"

³ 04/17/2020: Xiao defeats Ekin and takes his Thunder Sword. Original: Ekin was killed the Black Reaper, which causes problems in the future plot

⁴ 04/17/2020: Imperial doctor is named Dr. Taifu

"The temple?" He gasped. "You mean..."

"The Temple of Enlightenment." they said in unison.

"Of course!" Alex exclaimed. "With their holy healing powers, they can heal any injury."

"No matter how old it is." Li added.

"The Temple of Enlightenment?" Xiao said with her hand over her mouth.

"The legendary temple that is mentioned in the stories and rumors?" Once again, she was impressed by these people.

"Yes." replied Li. "The monks there can heal any bodily injury."

"But isn't that place just a rumor?" Xiao asked.

"Not at all. My sister and I have been there. But the path there will be dangerous. I remember Zi and I going there and we were almost killed by bandits...alligators... killer bees, and many other things."

"That's because you're both inexperienced." said Li. "I've been there before and I remember the path there. It is worth a try, is it not?"

"Thank you, but I kindly decline."

"Huh? What?" Li asked dumbfounded.

Xiao said, "I am used to living the way I am. You and the others have done much for me already. I have done nothing for you and I can't accept any more favors."

"But..." Li was not expecting her to decline her help. After all, Li rarely does anything selflessly. To have her offer rejected so quickly was not something she was prepared for.

"It is safer to remain inside the palace, is it not?"

"If I go with you it will be fine. With your skills and my skills combined we are untouchable."

"Li, I have already accepted my fate long ago...that I will not be able to see...not with my eyes at least. There are certain things that one has to accept."

"Don't tell me you prefer to stay blind?" said Li.

"I do not consider myself to be blind. I am perfectly capable of doing things you normal people can do. But after our fight, you already knew that, didn't you? I would rather not risk our lives for something that may or may not happen. But thank you for thinking of me, Li."

Li was at a loss of words. Alex came over. "I'll talk to her." His sister nodded and walked away.

Xiao asked "Are you going to convince me to go there too?"

"Miss Ye, I will not force you to do something you do not want. My sister and I thought you might want to have your eyes cured...and return you to the way you were eleven years ago."

Standing on the rooftop, they were both facing south, where the summer breeze went past them.

"The truth is..." Xiao pulled out her sword slightly. "Whether I see or not makes no difference. Perhaps it is better to stay this way. I have seen many ugly

and grotesque things in this world. When I lost my vision I saw nothing but dark, red blood for a few days. My hometown is the Yi Ling southern district. Many crimes happen due to poverty over there."

"That certainly is true. You may not want to see again," said Alex. "But do you think your life was so bad before? At least you had a brother who cared for you. He even resorted to crime just to get money to get you a doctor. What Jiang did was certainly not right, but the point is that he did it for you."

Xiao listened to him attentively. He's speaking in the same wise way that he spoke to Celina when she was about to commit suicide. Alex does not even know he has this natural skill of making people see things from a different perspective (透視). It is a rare leadership quality indeed.

Alex continued: "It is true that the world is an ugly place. I have been some horrible childhood experiences myself. I used to have a scar on my right arm that prohibited me from using a sword properly. But thanks to the monks at the temple, that old scar is gone. If it wasn't for them, I would not be who I am today. The world is filled with ugliness, death and despair, but on the flip side, it is full of beauty, life and light. Perhaps you were too focused on the bad things to remember the good things. Sight is one of God's greatest gifts to us humans. It is better to see than to not see. At least in my opinion. But ultimately, the choice is yours." He walked away.

Xiao was seriously considering his words. They certainly have some truth to them. She's always been able to read other people, but now she is the one being read. And she had to be honest to herself. Is she really happy with the way she is?

Xiao went to visit Jiang in his room. "I am going now, brother," she said.

"Xiao, I've always pictured what you would look like when your eyes are open. I remember them clearly...they were the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen."

Not knowing how to respond to his comment, she changed the subject.

"How are your wounds?"

"I'm fine," Jiang replied, but his voice indicated otherwise.

"You're lying again, brother." She touched his shoulder and he groaned in pain.

"Ughhh..."

"You should come with us. The monks can heal your wounds."

"No, you go ahead," said Jiang. "In my condition, I will only slow you down. This journey is for you. Besides, your brother is the first student of the War God. All I need is some rest and I will be good as new."

Xiao smiled and became at ease because this time he is telling the truth.

Li and Xiao stood at the front gate of the imperial complex. Two guards pull the gigantic doors open.

Celina bowed to them. "Good luck, you two. Take care."

"We will. I will take good care of Xiao," said Li.

Xiao bowed. "Thank you all for your care. I am indebted to you."
"Sister, wait." He handed them the imperial seal. "Just in case you run into trouble."
Li took it and smiled. "Thank you, Alex."
Just as they walk out, Jiang came with the aid of his friend Sui Long.
"Xiao..."
"Brother..."
"Be careful out there." said Jiang.
"Thank you, brother." Xiao hugged him. "I will come back and see your face with my own eyes."
"I'll be waiting for that day." Jiang replied and grunted in pain.
"C'mon now, let's get you back to bed." said Sui Long.
The two women leave the front gate and the guards closed the door. Creeek.
The last thing they saw was Xiao and Li waving happily.

Nighttime came shortly afterwards. Li suggests they go to a stable to buy horses. The owner is an old man with a short beard. He came to greet his customers. "Ho ho, what can I do for you two young ladies?"
"We'd like two horses, the fastest ones you got."
"Sure thing." replied the owner. He led them to a certain part of the stable. A horse was locked up in a wooden stall. "These will do."
"Thank you. How much will it cost?" asked Li.
"I see that you two are in a hurry. Just two silver coins will do."
"Wow, so cheap?" said Li. "Thank you so much."
The old man replied by laughing.

As Li and Xiao were on their way out, they say thank you once more and went on their way. They pulled horse's reigns to make the horses move with them. They will ride the horses once they leave the city.

The old man went back to the stable. A man was waiting for him in the darkness. He jumped off the ceiling and revealed himself.

"Ah. You startled me." said the owner.
"Did you do it?" asked Roh.
"Yes, I did as you instructed. I gave them the diseased horses. They are guaranteed to fail on their journey."
"Good. You did well." Slash! Roh stabbed him.

For Xiao Ye, her journey is just beginning. She who has lived in the southern district her whole life and now will journey to the wilderness...and this journey will be a spectacular one unlike any other, for it is the journey to restore her sight.

二十: A New Rival: The Red Haired Swordsman

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Our young heroes Li Cheng and Xiao Ye were traversing the dangerous Xizang Forest after leaving the safety of the palace. They have no bodyguards to protect them and thus in the wilderness they are on their own. But these two were not worried, given their exceptional swordcraft.

Li has a map of the path to the temple, drawn based purely on her memory. But as a ninja, her memory is just as good as her sword craft. Due to Xiao's blindness, she has never left the city before, especially not to travel to a forestry area such as this. By doing so she is putting her complete trust in Li.

The horses were tired from running and now they were walking at their own pace.

"Wow...there are so many trees here." Xiao commented.

"Yes...and I suppose you can count them all?" Li asked.

"There are too many to count. But I am able to see its shape based on the wind blowing its branches. I have never been outside of Yi Ling my whole life. I have never seen a forest, so all these surroundings are new to me. The sound of leaves rustling, the unstable ground, and the smell of nature. Since you know the way, I shall put my complete trust into you."

Li smiled. "Do not worry, you are putting your trust in the right person. If we follow the map then we are guaranteed to get to the temple." Li still did not understand why she was helping Xiao. It is not like her to help other people, because usually she only cares about herself. But for someone like Xiao Ye, she was making an exception.

Li and Alex were looking at a map of the Shen Kingdom. Li took a brush and put a circle on it. "This is the area where the Temple of Enlightenment is located." she announced.

"Hmmm. Are you sure about this?" Alex inquired. "Maybe it is more to the west. I went there more recently than you did."

"Even if so, my memory is still better than yours. It has to be within this area north of the Valley of Death. We both found it once and we can find it again."

Indeed, why is she putting all this effort in helping Xiao? Perhaps she wants to see what Xiao's true potential is...if she can fight well without her sight, what will she be like **with** her sight?

Liu Zhang bowed in front of the king while was reading a book. "Long live his majesty."

"What do you want, Zhang?" asked Liu Cao. There was always tension between these two and this time it was no different.

"This is an urgent matter, sire. It is regarding Liu Bei's murderer?"

"Oh? And what of it?" he asked in a bored tone.

"As you know, Lady Ce, the former concubine, was captured as a prisoner and used as bait to use Liu Bei to give up his power. This was part of Duke Xiang's plan to control the kingdom."

"Why are you bringing up past events?" Cao asked impatiently. "I am not interested in a history lesson."

"Please, let me explain. During the siege of the palace, Alex Cheng joined our forces...and he joined the group that was to attack the palace troops from the inside. And it was during that battle that he rescued Lady Ce...and ever since then, they have been seeing each other in secret."

"And what of it?" Cao still seemed indifferent.

"Does that not disturb you? Liu Bei's concubine was sneaking around to see another man...the man she is having an affair with...the Demon Slayer! He is the murderer!"

Cao was shocked and he banged his fist on the chair. "Preposterous (荒謬)! If you continue this ridiculous talk I shall cut off your tongue!"

Zhang lowered his head and faced the floor. "But it is the truth, sire. These are things you would not know because you were not here. But I was here...when Liu Bei discovered his Lady Ce's activities, he imprisoned her. So she and Cheng secretly planned to assassinate him. It is the perfect motivation."

"Do you have proof of this, Zhang?" asked Cao.

"Sire, I saw it with my own eyes. They were planning to assassinate Liu Bei."

Liu Cao was not pleased. "What kind of proof is that?"

"Sire, the lords are still angry over the previous king's death. They want an answer...a resolution."

"I do not recall putting you in charge of finding Liu Bei's assassin, Zhang. I said I will be in charge of that."

"Sire--"

"Enough! I have heard enough of these accusations. Find some evidence to back up your words, otherwise I may accuse of you being the assassin. Now, get out of my sight."

"Please accept my apologies, sire." Zhang stood up and walked away from the room.

Liu Cao watched him with a hateful glance, his eyes narrowed as he was deep in thought. (So this was his next move? Too bad it didn't work. Knowing how Lady Ce is the only person I trust in this place, Lord Zhang made a weak move. Better luck next time.)

Zhang took a sip of tea and banged his fist on the table. "King Cao always has to antagonize me. I am beginning to regret losing my Heaven's Eye match to him."

"I told you, master, you should have remained king." said Ragnarok. "If you had done so, you can do things with much ease."

"Yes, but then there will be no challenge."

"Are you still going to stick with the original story, master?"

"No, there is going to be a change of plans." Zhang replied. "I have the support of the high lords, but the Demon Slayer is quite popular with them. They would not want to believe he is the assassin. However, King Cao is quite the unpopular one...ever since he became king, he has passed all these strict laws...the training program for our troops are rigorous, and they do not like it. Perhaps we should accelerate the rebellion and overthrow him?"

"Master, do you mean...the **Red Feather Rebellion**? Isn't too soon for that?"

"King Cao is watching my activities and guarding me like a hawk. It will be increasingly hard to do what we need to do. But perhaps there is one more thing I can try..."

As the two women continued to travel, Li saw a path she recognized. It was the same path she took when she was a child. "I recognize this path. We are on the right track." She pulled the reins. "Hiyah!" The horse whined weakly. "Hey, what's wrong?" The horse continued to whine and she got off.

Xiao got off. "My horse is acting strangely too." She touched it on the face. "Huh?"

"What is it?" asked Li.

"This one is sick. No wonder he cannot run."

"What? Does that mean mine is sick too? Why would the stable owner give us diseased horses? He's supposed to be trustworthy."

"Whether he is trustworthy or not does not change the fact that both our horses are sick."

"Damn it...no wonder he sold it to us for such a cheap price. It was a rip off! What should we do with them?"

"They are useless." said Xiao. "Bringing them with us will slow us down."

"Okay then. Let's go."

Li has to hold Xiao's hand as they traversed. Even though she was capable of walking on her own, the ground was unfamiliar to her. Although she hates receiving help, she has no choice in this situation. And Li was unfamiliar with the idea of helping someone other than herself, so this was a new experience for both of them.

"The ground is so unpredictable." Xiao commented. "There is so much dirt and the shape is varying...there are so much rocks on the ground."

"You really haven't been outside of civilization, have you?"

"No, this is my first time."

"There's a first time to everything. Hopefully on our way **back** from the temple, you will be able to **see** your path."

"Shh. Listen." Xiao's keen hearing sensed something unnatural. "Do you hear that?"

Li focused on her senses. "Someone's following us."

A ninja was jumping from tree branch to tree branch stealthily. But no matter how stealthy he was, he still made a sound and that sound can be detected by them both. Little did the ninja know that he was dealing with two experts in detection.

Both fighters stood back to back and drew their swords. They waited patiently and continued to rely on their senses. The only sounds relative to the wild were the birds chirping and the trees leaves rustling.

"How many do you think there are?" Li asked.

Xiao focused carefully and her ear perked up. "At least two. No, three."

"Three in a group. There are two groups of them."

"That makes six of them, including one scout." said Xiao.

"Not bad."

"You are not bad yourself."

The ninjas showed up and surrounded them. The heroes must stay on their guard and take precaution, for they are not in a favorable situation.

One of them jumped up. Li jumped up and went past him. Once they landed, the ninja realized he was hit with a fatal wound and he collapsed.

One ninja charged at Xiao, and she blocked his attack, and counter-attacked using the Walking Crane Style. Schleb!

A ninja walked carefully towards Xiao's left side. She was listening carefully for clues. The ninja took a hard step forward and raised his blade. Xiao turned to him and blocked his attack, then in a quick motion, stabbed him in the stomach. Schleb!

"But...you're b-blind!" Those were the ninja's last words before he fell.

Slish! Li slashed two guys at once. One of the ninjas came from behind and kicked her and she rolled on the ground a few times. She was in a crouching position and noticed that enemies were in the front and back.

"Tch. Damn it." What she needed now was power, the power to defend herself, and in her time of need, the Ice Sword answered her prayers. It began to glow, and this time, she knew how to use it. She swings it hard and created a shockwave. "**Ice Blizzard!!**" The shockwave knocked down all the ninjas in its path. Wham!!

Xiao finished off the last ninja. They stood back to back once again. "I do not sense them anymore. Do you?" Li asked.

"No, they are all gone." Xiao replied.

With that decided, Li let out a sigh of relief. "We swordsmen always have to be on our guard. Particularly me."

After much traveling, Li suggested they take a break. Xiao agreed, and their feet were sore, although neither of them wanted to admit it. Li's palms had blisters on them from holding a sword. It is not uncommon for a dedicated swordsman to have blisters. Such is the price of perfecting one's sword craft.

Li sat down against a tree and Xiao sat down on the other side of the same tree. Its leaves provided shade from the sun's burning rays.

Li took a sip of water from her water bag. "Aahhh, that's good. You want some?"

"No thank you."

This is an awkward moment for them both. It is just like the time when Li traveled with Alex and they were resting against the tree, but it is not Alex sitting opposite of her, it is Xiao, a person she does not know well.

Since it was boring, Xiao decided to have a conversation. "Before, you mentioned that you always have to be on your guard. You must have had a tough life."

"Yes. But I'm sure what I've been through was nothing compared to you."

That statement opened the opportunity for Xiao to talk more about herself. "People call me blind, but I do not consider myself blind. You would not believe how many people try to pick on me because of my so called disability."

"I can imagine it must be hard for you. But you are strong person, Xiao Ye. I mean, to be able to wield a sword like you did requires much perseverance. People probably tell you all the time that you cannot be a swordsman."

"It is never easy being me. A lot of people in this world are not honest." Xiao begins to tell a story of one particular day in her life...

[B] Title Contents

Xiao was eating in some restaurant. Usually, she orders the first thing that comes to mind, and obviously, she does not require a menu.

One of the waiters was talking to the owner quietly. "Look at that girl over there, she's blind and can't see a thing." he whispered.

"And she is unaccompanied by anyone." said the owner. He was a typical bully type of person, overweight, had a big beard, and he generally is not nice to anyone. "Now's our chance to take advantage of her."

Xiao just finished her food and went to the counter to pay the bill.

"That'll be one gold coin please." said the owner.

"Here." she replied, handing him a gold coin from her bag.

He dropped it into the tray of coins. "Ma'am, I said it is one gold coin. You gave me a silver coin."

"I am sure I gave you a gold coin."

"No, I'm afraid not." said the owner, smiling greedily. You can't see, so I am doing you a favor and telling you that you gave me a silver one. You still owe me four more silver coins."

Xiao's expert reading ability made her understood what he was up to. The tone of his voice gave her indication that he is tricking her. "No, sir. I am sure I gave you a gold coin."

"Oh really? Do you have any proof of that?"

Xiao became speechless. The owner's motive is apparent by now.

The waiter came over. "Lady you better pay the bill. You know those who don't pay in full will have to be punished."

A man and a woman were having their meal, and they saw what was going on. "I feel bad for that poor lady," the woman whispered to her husband, "They're picking on her because she can't see."

The owner continued his false narrative: "It's a fact. How can you determine what kind of coin is it? That is why I am telling you what you gave me."

"Oh?" She took a silver coin out of her bag. "What if I can prove to you I can determine what coin I am holding without having to see it? Bronze coins are easy to tell apart because of their rough texture. Silver and gold differ in their weight. Gold is denser and thus it weighs more than silver coins. What I am holding is a silver coin, correct?"

The waiter and owner were surprised. "Yes, you're very talented, I see. But you gave me only a silver one. Perhaps you misjudged it? Everyone makes mistakes."

"Where did you put it?" asked Xiao.

"I put it in the tray with the other coins already. It's my word against yours. I am trying to be nice here. If you don't pay we will notify the police."

"When you dropped it into the tray, I can tell what kind of coin it was just by the sound alone," said Xiao.

"Huh? That's ridiculous," exclaimed the owner.

"Would you like me to prove it?" Xiao remained unfazed by his taunts, which made him more worried.

The other customers grew curious and some of them went over here to see what the commotion is about.

"Go ahead, throw any coin onto the table and I will tell you what it is."

The owner threw a bronze one onto the table. It bounced and made several cling noises.

"It is a bronze coin," she announced.

"Bah, you're just lucky. Anyone can do that."

"Then do it again."

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

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

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

"Silver! Gold! Gold! Bronze!"

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

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

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

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

"Unlike my eyes your eyes are fine, so did you see it wrong? Business is all about honesty. If you don't mind, I have to go now." ⁵

End of the flashback. Li was impressed by her story. "So you see..." Xiao continued, "I had to train myself in order to protect myself. Yes I cannot see, but I overcompensate (過度補償) for my weakness with several other strengths. I studied the textures of the coins for three days straight. I memorized in my mind the exact texture and size of a bronze, silver, and gold coin. I threw them against the table to listen to what kind of sound they made. I had to learn all these things in order to survive. That is why I mastered the Walking Crane Style." She paused. "But enough about me, my life is not significant to talk about all day. What about you, Li? I'm sure you have many adventures in your past."

"My past..."

Li Cheng just plunged her sword into someone's neck, killing him instantly. He was on the ground, crawling away from her. Killing is not a problem for her, but this is not the same. Just seconds ago, the man was begging for his life. He was not a fighter, but just a regular guy who was caught at the wrong place at the wrong time. The entire house was burning, there is nothing but the smell of burnt bodies in the foul air.

Amidst the burning flames, stood a man dressed completely in black, with a black hat and veil over his face. Li doesn't kill innocent people, but she was ordered to by the Black Reaper. What a terrifying man...she stared at him with fear in her eyes.

"There is nothing worth mentioning about my past. You are better off not knowing."

There was a five second silence. "I understand." said Xiao. "If you do not wish to talk about the past, then I will not inquire further. But you should spend more time with your brother."

"I already spend enough time with him." Li replied.

"I notice that you two do not speak much. I sense some separation between you two."

"What are you, a psychic?" On this journey Li was opening up to her friend, but now she was reverting to her usual self.

"I am only giving you a suggestion. I did not get to see my brother for many years. You should value your sibling and do not take him for granted."

Li pretended that she did not want to listen, but she did. Xiao has a lot of wisdom for her age.

⁵ Original: Xiao: "I hope that convinced you I paid my meal fully. Business is all about honesty. If you don't mind, I have to go now."

Liu Cao was enjoying his tea, sitting by the outdoor table. The table had a roof over it to provide shade. Liu Zhang came over and bowed. "Long live his majesty."

"What do you want?" asked Cao.

"Sire, I want to apologize for my rudeness earlier. It was wrong of me to speak ill of your people. Please accept my humble apologies."

Cao raised one of his eyebrows. An apology from Zhang? What no good deed is he up to now? "Everyone makes mistakes," said he. "Make sure it does not happen again. You are relieved of your duty to find Liu Bei's assassin. Just remember that."

"Yes, of course. As a token of my apology, please accept this offering." Zhang held a teapot and poured into Cao's empty cup. After it was full, Zhang stepped back and waited.

Cao stared at the tea and held it up. Zhang smiled, waiting for him to take a sip. Cao poured the tea on the floor and Zhang became surprised.

"Nice try. You want to poison me with the spice? I am not stupid."

"Sire...what do you mean?" said Zhang, looking down.

"You should know I am well informed by now. You think by sucking up to me I'd let my guard down?"

"What poison do you speak of? I would never do such a thing!"

"The spice is not classified as poison, but you used it on Liu Bei, did you not? Attempting to poison the king is a serious crime."

"Sire, stop joking around."

"Men!" shouted the king. Two soldiers appeared and secured Liu Zhang by his arms. "You certainly are not serious about this, are you?"

"I am the king. I can do whatever I please."

"You are going to put someone like me, who has done nothing but good for the royal family, in the dungeon?"

Liu Cao smiled. "No, not the dungeon. Why would I put you in a place where I cannot observe you?⁶ I am putting you under house arrest. This way, I can monitor you and you cannot plan whatever you are planning. Men, take him away."

"The other lords will not be pleased to hear this!!" Zhang shouted as the troops dragged him away. "You will regret this!!"

The secret order has been carried out and orders from the king are to be followed no matter what, because his word is absolute. Soldiers were stationed all over Zhang's residence (住宅) with two guarding every exit.

Ragnarok, wearing servant's clothes, came into the room. Liu Zhang was sitting on the table, drinking some tea. "How can you be so calm after what just happened, master?"

⁶ Original: I am sure you have a way of escaping that place.

"Relax, Ragnarok." Zhang replied. "I did not survive four hundred and ninety eight years by losing my cool."

"I do not understand why he imprisoned you here in your own home instead of a dungeon?" asked Ragnarok.

"Because Cao is not as stupid as he looks. If he puts me in the dungeon, he will not be able to monitor me. He knows I have a way to communicate with my comrades no matter where I am."

"Tchhh damn it. With you here, how can we carry out the rebellion?"

"I will not be the one to lead it. You shall be the one, Ragnarok."

"You want me to do it, master?"

"Yes...I think the time is about right. This is your chance to lead. I am counting on you, my star pupil. But before that, we need to eliminate those eyesores..."

Alex decided to go eat outside today, for he missed the life of a commoner. Although he wore the clothes always wears, a high class robe with the yin yang symbol on it, he wanted to be a commoner today.

"House arrest?" repeated Alex.

"It is a new law that I just created." Cao said. "Liu Zhang will no longer be allowed to leave his quarters at any given time. No one will be allowed to leave or enter the premises. This should keep him at bay."

"But I worry that the other lords will not be pleased." said Alex.

"My word is the law, and that is that. If they have a problem, then they can address this to me."

That certainly is a relief, but that does not mean they are completely safe. Jiang Ye assured him that was okay to step outside today; leaving the palace once in a while will not hurt.

Alex came to his favorite restaurant and ordered. He likes to quietly eat his meal without any disturbances. Usually, he tunes out the conversations that go on around him, but a certain conversation struck his curiosity.

Two men were sitting two tables away, talking quietly amongst each other. "Man, what's up with the tax increases lately? The imperials are robbing us blind."

"Ever since they coronate (冠状动脉) the new king, Liu Cao, the tax rates have gone sky high. It is his new policy." said the other.

"I barely make enough on my salary. Liu Cao is such a tyrant. I bet a lot of people don't even like him. Liu Bei would never do this."

What they said really disturbed Alex, for he knows Liu Cao personally. Liu Cao helped him by putting Zhang under house arrest. These taxes are for the good of the kingdom. But it cannot be helped that some people will dislike it.

Just then, a tall, rotund (圓形) man came to their table and joined in. He was an overweight man with red hair and a red beard. "Aye lad, Liu Cao is making things much more difficult for us. Regular people cannot even buy or sell weapons without having to pay a hefty price." said Khan, the red bearded man.

"He just comes up with one regulation after the next." said the first companion.

"As far as I am concerned, he is a corrupt king. Who knows, maybe he's Liu Bei's killer!" Khan was talking loud enough for the entire restaurant to hear.

Alex does not like loud people because usually they are the arrogant ones. Khan and his friends continued to drink and talk bad of the king. Alex could not handle it anymore and stood up, left his coins on the table, and walked out. Khan seemed to notice Alex leaving and watched him carefully.

After he finished his meal, Alex Cheng went to the market place, one of his favorite places to visit. He likes to see what is new and hot on the market. Jade's jewelry store is nearby, and he decided to go there. He was excited as he approached the store, but the shop was empty. It was no surprise since she was kidnapped by the Ice Hunter. She has been exposed to the enemy and she and her grandmother fled to another city to protect their own lives.

Alex already knew that, but somehow, he still thought Jade would be here. He cannot help but feel it was his fault they were hiding. Jade has done much for him, yet he did nothing for her. He could picture it now, the nostalgic memory of Jade standing behind the counter and waving to him, and he would walk over to check out any new items she may have. And Jade would tell him all these made up stories about the items she was selling, he would say it is false, and they would both laugh.

Feeling depressed, Alex walked away from the store and continued his search. Nearby, he heard some commotion, and the sound of what seemed like a jar breaking. Without thinking, he went to the store to see what was happening.

A bunch of men were harassing the store owner and a young girl. The owner, a middle aged man, was on his knees. "Please, give me three more days...I will have the money by then."

The boss of the group, **Po**, was not about to let him off the hook. "You had a whole month to pay us, and we let you off for long enough."

"B-But...you must understand...business is bad lately..."

"Enough!" Po shouted. "Search the place for any valuables."

One of the men was holding the girl by the arms. "Hey boss, what should we do with her?"

Po went over to her and grabbed her chin, and she winced. "Perhaps we should use her as payment?"

"No!!" said the owner. "Not her!"

Two of the bandits grabbed the owner to restrain him.

"Hold it!" Alex shouted, alarming everyone. "Let them go."

Po stared at him with much intensity. "Who the hell are you?"

"You are breaking the law by doing this."

Po went over to Alex. "Listen, this is none of your business."

"It is my business." replied Alex, taking out the imperial seal. All the bandits gasped at the bright golden badge he was holding.

"Oh, an imperial, I see." said Po. "They owe us protection fees. When you don't pay, there will be consequences."

"Protection fees?" Alex repeated. "This land does not belong to you. It is property of the Kingdom of Shen."

"Tch. Why don't we step outside to discuss this, imperial?" said Po.

Alex agreed non-verbally, and off they walked to a quieter street.

[C] Title Contents

Alex and Po stood facing each other, while the bandits were standing on the side. "You know," said Po, "We don't like imperials."

Alex made a grimace. It is obvious that these people have no intention of following the law.

Po continued, "Ever since the new king took the throne, we have had nothing but taxes and new laws that restrict our activities. All of us hate imperials...each one of us were arrested at one point or another."

"That has nothing to do with me." said Alex, sensing the hostility. "I cannot just stand by and watch you pick on an old man and an innocent girl."

"Oh, you speak of honor? Why not back up your honor with your sword?" He drew his weapon, and consequently, Alex drew his.

Po was the first to attack, and Alex blocked. *Clang* Po continued to strike as Alex defended. One of the bandits threw a dagger at him, and Alex knocked it away with his sword. Then Po came at him, and he quickly ducked the blade.

Whoosh

The bandit took out a second dagger and prepared to throw it. Suddenly, something hit him from the back and he collapsed. Standing behind him was the red bearded man, and Alex recognized him – he was the one from the restaurant.

"Another interference?"

Khan said, "You lads sure have a lot of guts...to be fighting with the renowned Demon Slayer."

All the bandits were surprised. "He's the Demon Slayer? The hero of the kingdom?" "They say that he's an expert in sword craft!"

"Bah, cowards!" yelled Po. "What does it matter? He is outnumbered. We can capture him...and imagine the ransom that we can ask for when we have the Demon Slayer."

Alex sighed and said, "You still are consumed by your greed. You have no hope."

"Get him!!"

The bandits drew their swords and charged at Alex, screaming like barbarians. *Slish* *Slash* *Slish*

Some of the bandits attacked Khan, who joined the fight. He slashed them and they did not have a chance.

Po charged at Alex, making a head on attack. Alex ducked and stabbed him in the stomach, and then slashed him, making him fall.

By now all the enemies have fallen.

"Whoever you are, I want to thank you for your help." said Alex.

"You're not bad at all, lad." said Khan. "Just like the rumors say."

"Why did you help me?"

"I just cannot stand by and watch people gang up on someone. That is just intolerable." Khan replied.

But Alex remembered that Khan was the one talking bad about Liu Cao. He pointed his sword at Khan. "You work for Liu Zhang, don't you?"

"Quick to jump to conclusions, aren't ya? My work is done here, so if you don't mind, I have to go." He walked away.

"Wait!"

Suddenly, Po got up and screamed. Alex turned around and ducked Po's attack and stabbed him in the stomach. Schleb! This time, the blade went through Po's body, sticking out from the back. "They just never learn."

Alex then went to chase the red haired fighter. Khan walked to the crowded street, where there were people.

Alex grabbed Khan's shoulder. "Hold it."

Khan turned around and grabbed his hand, and Alex could feel his strength. He let go and Alex stepped back.

"Who are you?" demanded Alex.

"Is this the thanks I get for helping ya?"

"I want some answers!"

"You will have them in time, Demon Slayer." When he said that name, people who heard it grew curious and stared at him.

Before he knew it, Alex became surrounded by fervent (熱切) fans.

"You're the one I saw in the extermination ceremony. You're the real Demon Slayer!" "I'm a big fan of yours!" "Is it true you have the Fire Sword?"

The crowd was in his way, and Khan was able to walk out of sight.

After much traveling and dealing with their share of dangers, our heroes have made it to the place known as the **Gate of Hope**. It can be referenced as the checkpoint of their journey.

When Li saw the giant moss-filled wall, she recognized it. It was the same wall she saw when she was a child. "This is it!" she said happily. "This is the Gate of Hope. I remember it clearly."

"The Gate of Hope?" inquired Xiao.

"Coming here means we have come a long way. We are almost at the temple."

The gate consists of the two gigantic doors in the middle of the stone wall, surrounded by tall rock structures. Rumors suggests that this gate used to be an ancient trading passage used by the Chao's to keep thieves and enemies out. It is

believed that the Temple of Enlightenment and this gate has existed since the Chao Dynasty, the first ever established dynasty of China.

They walked past two statues made of stone. They were statues of demons with horns, designed as the “guardians” of the gate to scare away trespassers. As Li and Xiao went past them, one of the statue’s eyes glowed.

Li walked up to the doors and touched it. It’s old and mossy and filled with roots growing on it. “It is closed.” she said. She took out her sword and started slashing, hoping to cut through the wood.

The two statues slowly became animated and stood up. Xiao was standing by as Li continued to cut the wood slowly. She was hoping to get it deep enough to the point where she can kick a hole on it. But it will take a while. The stone demons slowly walked towards the girls, who have no idea what they were about to face. What fate awaits our heroes?

After that ordeal of dealing with fans, Alex Cheng went back to the imperial palace. He walked by and heard chatter and clapping, and he went to see what the commotion was about. To his surprise, Khan was fighting some other swordsman, and the audience was composed of male and female servants.

The swordsman was being attacked constantly, and he had little chance to fight back, and thus was forced to go on the defensive. Their difference in skill was clear, as Khan leaves no room for error. *Whoosh*

(It’s him. What is he doing here?)

Clong The swordsman dropped his sword and fell on his bottom. Khan pointed the sword at the swordsman’s chest. “Good match, lad.”

The servants clapped and cheered. But Alex was not impressed. “Servants, get back to work.” said Alex with a commanding voice.

All the servants grew nervous and ran back to their posts.

The red headed brute walked up to Alex. “Hey lad, you’re pretty strict, aren’t ya?”

Alex grunted angrily. “Servants are here to work, not here to see you show off.”

“Even servants need to have a little fun, don’t they?”

“How did you get in here?”

Khan took out the imperial seal. “Ta-da. Does this satisfy you?”

Alex was surprised. “How did you get that?” he demanded to know.

“Why, Lord Sima gave it to me.” replied Khan.

“Lord Sima?”

“Oh by the way, the name is **Khan of the Manchu**. Pleased to meet ya.”

“Why would Lord Sima invite someone like you into the palace?”

“Why, I am one of the performers for the upcoming holiday festival.”

“What? It was decided that I shall be the main performer.”

“Awww, I guess they didn’t tell ya. Two swordsmen is always better than one. Can’t let ya have all the glory, now can I?”

"Let me ask you something. Do you work for Liu Zhang?"

"Nope, got no idea what you're talking about. Now, if you don't mind, I have some practicing' to do." Khan walked away.

Now alone, our hero was deeply disturbed. This brute appeared out of nowhere and helped him fight the bandits, yet he is the one in the restaurant who slandered Liu Cao. Why would he help an imperial if he hates them? Who exactly is Khan Manchu, but more importantly, is he a friend or foe?

二十一. Reunion at the Temple. The Brute's Challenge.

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Liu Zhang, staring at the mirror image of himself, put his jewel close to the mirror. The glass turned fickle and wavy, as if it turned to water, and the face of a silhouetted figure appeared.

"Demon King, it is I, Ko-Rashm."

"Ko-Rashm, I have not heard from you in a while. What took you?" asked the face in the mirror.

"I apologize, sire, but I was occupied by many things. My plans have been altered, but I assure you, I will still accomplish our original goal."

"You had better not fail me, Ko-Rashm. We demons have waited long and given much patience to the success of your plans."

"The rebellion shall be at hand. My star pupil, Ko-Ragnarok, shall be the one to carry it out. And on the day of the rebellion, I will slay Liu Cao...he will join Liu Bei in hell!"

"I wish you success." And the face disappeared.

Even though Zhang was under house arrest, he can still carry out his plans. House arrest? What a joke. The king has no idea what is coming upon him.

Khan Manchu came to visit Ragnarok in a secret place. He bowed accordingly. "Ah," said Ragnarok, "So you were the one hired by Lord Sima. Is your sword craft any good?"

"I am the best in my city, m'lord. There isn't a single person in Yi Ting who has not heard of me."

"And you used to be one of Liu Zhang's students?" he asked.

"Yes, he taught me a great deal." said Khan.

"Your job is to eliminate the Demon Slayer before the rebellion starts. Understood?"

"I got it." Khan walked away.

After he left, the person hiding in the dark revealed himself. He was **Jiax**, a rotund man with a black beard. "So, that is him? It's too bad you cannot use the Demon Brothers."

"He will do just fine. The Demon Brothers stand out too much. Plus, they are currently on the run. They provide a good distraction for our king." said Ragnarok.

"Indeed. The king is from Leinwan...and he is putting much effort into capturing them. It certainly is interesting. It's too bad cuz I can take the Demon Slayer by myself."

"Your job is to finish off his friends. That is your one and only goal. Do not forget it."

"Hyah!" Li slashed the doors hard. Her marks were making incisions into the wood. They have been shut tight for a long time and it was too high to climb over it, so this is the only logical choice. Li was hoping to get it deep enough to the point where she can kick a hole on it.

The statues approached them and their footsteps cannot escape Xiao's sensitive ears. "Li?"

"What is it? I'm busy." Li replied as she was slashing about.

"Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Someone is here...there are two of them."

Li turned around and gasped as she saw the statues. She quickly ran to Xiao's side and took an offensive stance.

"Who are they?"

"They're not people...they're statues."

"Statues? Are you joking?"

"Would I joke at a time like this?"

Each gargoyle (石像鬼) had the face of something that resembled a bull with horns. It had a gem that glowed on its forehead. They drew their swords.

"I have fought many people before, but never statues. This is a twist of nature!"

"Well, get ready, cuz I've seen much worse." She charged forward with her ninja speed and attacked.

Statue A blocked her assault. Their movements were slow, but precise and strong. Li slashed its stomach, but it had no effect whatsoever. "Huh?" Statue A was about to slash her, and she jumped away. *Whoosh*

Xiao waited anxiously, listening to the battle sounds. Statue B approached her. Li thought she could handle them both, but she was occupied with statue A. They were in a power lock and pushed like hell. Li grunted and exerted much strength, but it was no use.

Statue B approached and Xiao was on alert, ready to strike a moment's notice. Statue B attacked and she blocked. *Quang*

Li pushed and jumped away to avoid the power lock. Although she was faster than the statues, her attacks were proven ineffective. She charged and slashed its arm, and the statue swiped. Li ducked to avoid a fatal hit. That swing could have easily beheaded her. Statue A raised its sword up and brought it down and Li jumped away. The sword hit the concrete on the ground. *Smash*

Meanwhile, Xiao was struggling as she was in a deadlock with Statue B. Her strength was no match for that of the statue, and she was losing her foothold. She fell on one knee as B continued to push down, while she pushed up. "Li, I need help!!" Xiao shouted.

"I'm doing what I can!" Li replied.

Statue A slashed about, and Li dodged from side to side. *Whoosh* She jumped back to keep the distance. As the stone gargoyle approached her, Li wondered what she should do to get out of this predicament. And the answer came to her. Something was shining on its forehead, a crystal of some sort.

Now she knew what to do. Li got into offensive fighting stance and charged forward. *Froom* The stone gargoyle slashed, Li ducked, and stabbed the statue's forehead, shattering the crystal into shards. *crack*

Consequently, the gargoyle's eyes stopped glowing and it fell down as if it has lost its soul. Indeed that is their weakness.

Xiao was still struggling with the other statue, and she was exerting all her strength to defend herself.

"I'm coming, Xiao!" Li did a jump kick, knocking Statue B away. She threw daggers at it, aiming primarily for its crystal.

The statue covered its head, letting the other daggers hit its body. This one was smarter, as it seems. It approached Li and attacked and she blocked. The statue punched her, knocking her on the ground.

Suddenly, Xiao ran at it and slid down in front of the statue, tripping its legs and making it fall face forward. This is similar to the technique she used on Ekin. Li took the chance and stabbed its forehead, shattering the crystal.

"Are you okay, Xiao?"

"Yes, what about yourself?" Xiao replied while patting dust off herself.

"I'm fine, don't worry about me." said Li.

"It seems that there are many things I have not seen."

"This forest is filled with mysteries and wonders. But we can talk about them later. Right now we need to open the gate and find the temple."

Li has been a loner for most of her life, yet this journey will prove to be a breakthrough for her, and not just in sword craft. Ever since their talk under the tree, Li and Xiao got to know each other a little bit more, and whether she knew it or not, a bond was slowly forming between them. Li, who has always done things by herself, is learning to be unselfish, and Xiao, who never accepts help, is learning to receive help from another person.

Ragnarok entered the room, brushing aside the shades that blocked the door. He sat down and greeted his companions. "Ah, Lord Sima and Lord Fei, it is good to see you."

Lord Sima had a fan over his face. It is a habit of his to cover his face partially, because he thinks that he is handsome. He is one of the most conceited and greedy out of all the high lords. "Ragnarok, please tell me that you are making progress towards your objective. We are investing a lot of money into this rebellion."

"Not only that," Lord Fei added, "But if it fails, then will we might be caught and tried as traitors! We are risking our lives for this."

"Rest assured," said Ragnarok, "Everything is going underway as planned. This is a fool proof plan⁷. About half of the soldiers in the imperial palace are Liu Zhang's soldiers. They all carry a **red feather** on them so that they can identify themselves to each other. Upon the day of the festival, they will kill all those who do not have a red feather. It is a fool proof strategy developed by Zhang."

"Speaking of Zhang, he is under house arrest, is he not?" said Fei.

"I heard that he is the main suspect of Liu Bei's murder," said Sima.

"He is going to be put on trial eventually. Right now the king is trying to find evidence, but he cannot find anything, because Master Zhang is always careful when it comes to things like these. One of the goals of the rebellion is to free him during the confusion and have him replace Liu Cao as the King of Shen. Ever since Liu Cao received the crown, he has caused quite a disturbance in the populace. All these laws and taxes are unfavorable, even to the lords. This is the perfect motivation for our soldiers to rebel...think of it not as an agenda to kill, but to right a wrong of the royal family."

"What about the Demon Slayer?" asked Fei.

Ragnarok grunted at the name. "He has no role in this...he is just a pawn. We need not worry about him...I have already taken care of that. Do not worry, my lords, once Liu Zhang is king, he will deliver what is promised to you...Especially after our kingdom takes over the other three kingdoms."

[B] Title Contents

Alex was training in his usual place, the place where he cannot be disturbed. In front of him were three figures made of straw and wood, his practice targets. Alex closed his eyes to focus on his breathing and remained still for several seconds. One of the important teachings of the temple is to focus on your breathing and be aware of it at all times. One's breath is the essence of life.

Alex opened his eyes when he felt he was ready, and ran at the wooden figures. He drew his sword and slashed. In three quick motions, he cut the wooden figures in half.

⁷ Idiom meaning a plan without flaws, even a fool can't mess it up

Just now, he heard clapping. Alex turned around and saw Khan watching him. "You! How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to see how good you are. So the rumors are true, Demon Slayer." said Khan.

"How did you find this place?"

"It is not hard, if you think about it."

Alex pointed his finger at him. "Listen, I don't know what you are up to, but when I find out I will have you arrested."

"Oh, is that so?" Khan replied.

"You may have the seal, but you cannot walk around here and do as you please. Any ally of Zhang is an enemy of mine." said Alex.

"Ohhh, acting so tough all of a sudden? And I heard you were a nice guy."

"Don't patronize me!"

"I wonder who the better swordsman is. Aren't you curious?"

"If you are that eager to find out, why not find out during the festival? We can have match on stage if you'd like." replied Alex.

"Oh, but I simply cannot wait this long. Why don't we have it right here, right now?"

"No thank you. I do not fight to show off. I only fight for honor. Now if you will excuse me, I need to get going."

"You sure are in a hurry. Who are you going to see? Your lover...what was her name? Was it Lady Ce?"

Alex was startled. "What did you say?"

Khan smiled, knowing he took the bait. "You are not exactly a gentlemen, now are you? You have been acting naughty when nobody's looking..."

"How do you know this?"

"You had an affair with her while she was still the king's concubine and Liu Bei was still alive. That is a crime worth beheading...but what is even worse is that you could be Liu Bei's killer."

Alex was extremely pissed off and he drew his sword and pointed it at him. "How dare you! Do you want to be silenced?"

"Oh, so who's the one eager to fight?" says Khan. "Why don't we have a duel to settle this? If you defeat me, I will keep my mouth shut. We don't want the whole world to know about your shameful acts, do you?"

"Shameful? What would you know about shameful...you, who work for Liu Zhang, the king's murderer!"

"The only one capable of such an act is you...so you can have his woman! Or perhaps it was the concubine who poisoned him to death?"

"Enough!" Alex shouted. "I will not let you insult her further. I will defend my honor and Lady Ce's honor with my sword. One more word and I shall fight you to the death right here, right now!"

"So, you are willing to risk your life for honor, are you not? Why not wager our lives? The loser of the duel loses his life to the winner. What do you say?"

By this point, Alex was not going to back down. He will show this brute that he is not to be toyed around with. "Gladly...a life for a life."

"It is settled then. We shall fight the day before the festival. I assume you will not go back on your word."

"Of course not. The same goes for you."

"Of course. See you there, Demon Slayer. Best of luck." said Khan sarcastically. As he walked out of sight, Alex realized what he just did.

He was driven by his anger and rage, and he agreed to a fight to the death without knowing how skilled the enemy was. He already gave his word and it was too late to back out now.

The heroes have been through many hardships and at long last they were almost at their ultimate destination. After passing the Gate of Hope, Li recognized the path. The trees, the shape of the land, the color of the grass – everything was familiar to her.

"This is it! I remember this place." said Li. A strange, nostalgic feeling came over her as she realized that nothing has changed at all. This was exactly as she remembered it when she came here as a child.

"That is a good sign." Xiao replied.

Li took Xiao's hand and they ran through the fields. Xiao was reluctant to run, but she let Li take the lead. Li was actually smiling as she ran through the fields, something she did not do for a long time. Xiao did not notice the smile and Li herself did not notice it. Her heart was beating rapidly as she ran closer and closer to the staircase. And lo and behold, there was the staircase directly in front of them.

"We're here." she announced. **"The Temple of Enlightenment."**

Li helped Xiao walk up the stairs. The sign of the temple was there as well, just like how Li remembered it.

Once they reached the top of the stairs, they walked under the sign and saw three students training in the empty yard. Li recognized them immediately. They were her friends during her stay here ten years ago.

The first one is a teenage girl by the name of Shang. She is always energetic and keeps everybody's spirits up, and one of the few female students in the temple. Fu is a diligent, hard working monk. Although he is shorter than his peers, he does not let it stop him from achieving his best. Chan is an overweight monk who is taller than others. He is a strong adversary but sometimes he is blinded by his pride.

Li walked over to them. "Excuse me..."

The three students stared at her strangely. They rarely get any visitors, and this particular one was dressed in a black ninja suit which was suspicious. She was carrying a sword patch on her waist, so she must be skilled in combat. Her companion, who was blind, also had a sword patch.

"Who are you stranger?" Shang asked.

"Don't be rude, Shang." said Fu, always the polite one. "These guests made it all the way here to our temple. Not many people are able to find us."

"How do you do?" said Chan. "Welcome to our temple. What is your name?"

Li said, "You guys really don't recognize me, do you? I'm not surprised though."

"Have you been here before?" Shang asked.

"Yes. A long, long time ago when I was still a child."

Shang's eyes widened as she realized who it was. "Li Cheng?! Is that you?"

"You do remember...I have returned, Shang."

Fu and Chan looked at each other. "You're Li Cheng? No way!"

"It's r-really you!" Shan was so happy she ran to Li and embraced her. She realized that she was full of tears and wiped herself.

Fu came over and joined the hug, and Chan came over and gave them a big, tight hug and they all gasped for air.

Happy for their friendship reunion, Xiao smiled.

Indeed, it has been many years since they have seen their old friend Li. She was once the little girl who joined the temple and befriended them. She fit in easily with the group and they got along well. As a matter of fact, Li was one of the hardest workers here.

"It's been over ten years, hasn't it?" said Shang.

"Yes. Ten long years." Li replied.

"You're all grown up now." said Fu.

"Yeah. So are you guys. Especially you, Chan."

Everybody laughed and Chan became embarrassed.

"Guys, I want you to meet my friend, Xiao Ye."

Chan bowed politely. "How do you, Miss Ye?"

Xiao, like usual, touched his face.

"Uhhh..."

"Please do not be alarmed. I am touching your face because I cannot see you with my eyes. This is how I know what you look like."

"Ohhh. Got it." said Chan.

Xiao proceeded to touch Fu, who was embarrassed since he was not used to being around girls. Finally, Xiao went to feel Shang's face. Unlike the boys, she was not embarrassed and gladly went along with it.

"My name is Shang. I was born and raised in the temple, so I know this place inside and out."

"Yes, I can tell you are a very nice person, Shang." said Xiao. "I can tell genuinely care about people."

"What is all the commotion about?" said another voice. All the students were alarmed at the appearance of their teacher, a monk with six dots on his forehead.

"Master **Guan Du**, you will never guess who showed up today."

Li spoke. "Master Guan, we are travelers who have come a long way from the city of Yi Ling. This is my friend, Xiao Ye...and I am Li Cheng."

That name struck a chord in Guan's memory. "Li? You are **that** Li?"

"Yes, master. She returned after all these years." said Shang.

Guan had a mental picture of the younger Li in his mind...the little girl with the long, black hair. He could never forget any one of his students, especially not that Li. The girl standing before him was an adult and her hairstyle was different and her face as changed, but her eyes were the same. Indeed, it was the same person.

"I see...welcome back Li Cheng. It has been a while, has it not?"

Li bowed. "Master Guan. You were one of my first teachers."

"And you were one of my best students. Oh, where are my manners.

Welcome, Miss Ye, to the Temple of Enlightenment."

Xiao held up her sword patch and bowed. "It is an honor to meet you, mister..."

"My name is Guan Du. Everyone here calls me Master Guan."

"Thank you, Master Guan." She felt his face, and Guan, unlike others, was not surprised or alarmed at this act. He was probably the only one besides Shang who was okay with it.

Guan Du took them to the see the leader of the temple, **Master Ho Sai**. As the leader of all the monks, he is the wisest one, and he is skilled in sword craft, although he never fights. He is said to be able to predict the future, a psychic, if you will, and even a prophet. Many things have been said about him, but one thing is for certain, he is truly a man of mystery.

Guan and Xiao and Li kneeled. "Sorry to interrupt your meditation, Master Sai. I have brought two guests with me today."

Sai opened his eyes and touched his beard. "Ohhh, if it isn't Li Cheng and Xiao Ye."

"Sir, how did you know? Oh never mind, you have your ways." said Guan.

"I have returned after ten years, Master Ho Sai."

"Indeed, welcome back. You went through perilous dangers and many hardships to reach this place. Every person who comes here must go through that process. Now tell me, what is your purpose in coming here?"

"My friend Xiao is blind. Her sight was unfairly taken away from her when she was still a child. I'd like to use the temple's healing miracles to make her see again."

Ho Sai rubbed his beard. "I see. We shall do just that, but like all wounds, it will take time. You two must be tired. Master Du, please prepare the quarters for these two ladies."

Guan bowed. "Hai, right away."

Zi made a visit to the injured Jiang. "Umm, Shen Long, I brought you your food." Zi placed the tray on the table next to the bed.

"You can call me Jiang Ye. Since my identity is revealed, I no longer need my code name."

"You seem to be doing much better." said Zi. "You are no longer pale and your wounds are closing up."

"Zi Lai, you are Cheng's best friend, correct?"

"Yes, what of it?" Zi replied.

"What is your real purpose?" Jiang asked. "I sense that you are not really with us...perhaps you are hiding something."

"To be honest...I don't care much for this whole demon fighting thing. I just want to have an easy life without any worries. I just want to take it easy. I am here to help because I am Alex's best friend. I am here for him as he has been here for me."

"You are on our side, correct?" asked Jiang.

"You can say that." said Zi. "But once things get too dangerous, I am out of here."

"I understand. No one can force you to risk your life...after all, life is precious."

"Enjoy your meal." Zi said, and walked out of the room.

Xiao's first treatment begins today. Master Guan and his assistant, Chie Du, were making the medicine for her. Guan brought the bowl of medicine and placed it next to her. He put his finger into it and put some of it on her eyes.

"What are you putting on me?" asked Xiao.

"These are natural herbs mixed with some healing ointments. These herbs are rare but we have a whole garden of them. They will ease up your wound and begin the healing process."

The assistant monk spoke. "Over the centuries, several people have been able to find our temple. This includes you and Li Cheng. Even Alex Cheng made it here with his companion, Zi Lai. They are all youngsters with a bright future. There are others whom you do not know who come here to seek to be healed. We have been able to heal them in every single scenario. No matter how big or small the wound is, be it a deep cut, a disabled limb, or even blindness. Heck, the only thing we cannot cure is death."

Those are reassuring words, words which made Xiao feel at ease. Guan was about to put a blindfold over her when she stopped him. Then he realized his mistake. "Oh, sorry. I forgot about that. Miss Ye, do you know how to meditate?"

"Not exactly." Xiao shook her head.

"We will teach you how to meditate our way. Meditation will keep your mind clear and your thoughts pure. A pure mind leads to a pure body."

Since she was now living in the temple, Li was wearing the attire of the students. It is a plain gray karate uniform that includes baggy pants and plain shoes. She was leaning against the wall while polishing her sword.

Shang came over. "Li, there you are. Why aren't you in class?"

"Class isn't suitable for me. I did not come here for the purpose of training. I only came for my friend's eye problem."

"Ohhh, I see." said Shang. "Say, we haven't seen you in a long time. I betcha your sword craft has improved tremendously."

"Of course. I did not waste my time when I left the temple grounds."

"I would like to see those skills of yours. Say, do you want to be my sparring partner?"

"I decline." Li replied.

"C'mon Li. It will be fun." said Shang.

"It will not be fun for you...because I take all fights seriously. I do not think you can handle it."

"Oh really, can you back up these words?" Shang said playfully.

"Are you suggesting we have a match?" Li likes to fight and show her superiority, so this is not something she can say no to. "Very well. I shall show you my Heaven's Wrath Style."

"Yay!" exclaimed Shang. "I get to see Li fight!"

The duelers prepared themselves mentally with Shang thinking it was a friendly spar, but Li, on the other hand, fought to show her superior skills.

"Don't hold back on me, okay?" said Shang.

"Sure thing." Li got into fighting position, holding her wooden sword with both hands, pointing the blade horizontally. It is a rule of the temple to use wooden swords because the monks do not advocate violence.

Shang charged and attacked and Li blocked and counter attacked. *Pak* They waved their swords and hit each other. *Plak Plak* Shang continued to attack while Li strafed from side to side. She has a slim and versatile body which allows her to move quickly. Whoosh!

Shang's moves were methodical, using the moves she was taught in class. *Clak*

Others from the class heard the sound of sticks banging and came to see the fight. Amongst the nosy ones were Chan and Fu. A minute later, more students showed up. Before they knew it, Shang and Li were surrounded by an audience.

Clank They continued their fight, not caring about the observers. Li was showing her dominance with her heavy strikes. Shang panted for breath while holding her stance. (It's just as I thought. She has improved greatly.)

But rather than being scared, Shang was excited. She ran forward and attacked. Li stepped to the side and knocked her stick away. *Whack* Shang lost her balance and fell on her bottom. All the observers were amazed.

Shang was shocked. "Wow Li...I didn't know you improved that much. Your sword craft is on a whole new level! It's like you're a different person."

Li offered her a hand. "It is no big deal. I practice a lot."

Shang patted the dust off herself.

Chan came to the center. "I want to duel her next."

Li shrugged. "Fine with me."

Those on the sidelines continued to compliment her. "Wow, she's good. Her name is Li Cheng and she just came in yesterday!" "I heard that she used to train in this temple." "Her master must be extraordinary."

Many of them wanted to fight her next. Some were even fighting amongst themselves to see who will fight her next.

Chan was the biggest monk in the temple so the students assumed he'd be the strongest. He attacked using aggressively using his reach as that was his only style.

"Hyah!" "Hyu!" Hyah!"

Li dodged in circles, causing him to exert most of his strength. *Clak Clak* Li saw an opening and went for it. Whoosh! She pointed the wooden blade at Chan's neck.

Guan Du arrived and his was displeased. "Students, what are you doing?"

All the students froze in fear. Whenever their teacher yells something, it means they are in trouble.

"All of you should be training, not watching some show! Get back to training!"

"Yes master!" said the students.

"And you Chan, you know the rules." said Guan.

"Sorry, master." He ran off to training.

Li said, "Master Guan, I apologize. They came to me and asked me to show them my sword craft."

"Li, I know you came to help your friend out. But since you are staying here you will follow the temple rules. I know your sword craft has surpassed any of my students'. But please do not let that get to your head."

"Of course not." she replied. Little did she know, **it was** getting to her head.

"You should join the others in class." said Guan.

"Sorry, master. The only reason I came here is for Xiao. I am not a monk, and I did not come to train with fake weapons."

"Strange, you did not say that the last time you came here."

"That was over ten years ago. Things have changed. Now, if you'll excuse me." Li walked away.

Guan watched as she left. It is simply rude to turn one's back to his master. Guan definitely senses arrogance from her. She used to be a cheerful little girl who follows orders. But as an adult, she is a completely different person. What happened in these ten years that caused her to change so much?

二十二: Li's Heaven's Wrath Style...The Ninja's Path

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It is once again time for class to begin. Master Guan holds lessons every day at exactly six o'clock the morning. The monks are to wake up early, perform their duties, and get to training class on time. First, Guan starts off with a lecture about philosophy and the world, and then they get to the synchronized (同步) training.

This is the part where the teacher does one motion and the students follow. They all let out their yells at the same time and it sounds very uniform. After the synchronized training, the students get into pairs and spar. Then the teacher gives another lecture and the class ends. Afterwards, the students can go and do what they wish. This is how the temple has run for the last one hundred years.

Li was watching the synchronized training from the balcony and she was disinterested. The training has been going on for half an hour now and she yawned from the boredom.

"Hyah! Hyah!" yelled the students. That was all she has been hearing. She grew tired of seeing the same thing everyday and pitied those poor souls down there whom she feels are not learning anything valuable. That is the fundamental problem with this training...there is little individuality. Everyone is the same, which makes them insignificant.

Guan Du poked his stick on the ground. "Students, let's take a break."

"Hai!" The students dispersed.

Guan noticed Li sitting on the balcony. Since the class was dispersed, she walked away. Guan Du's eyes narrowed as he followed Li's movements. Monks welcome guests to the temple, but having her lounging around might affect the students' morale (士氣).

Meanwhile, Guan's assistant, Chie Du, was helping Xiao with her meditation. Chie is a hearty old man who has seen much in his life, and he is rarely ever surprised. He came to the temple when he was young, just like Li did. But he decided to stay here and he grew old here. He has a white beard and long, hairy eyebrows that covered his eyes.

When one is in a state of meditation, he is to stay there for at least two hours before waking up. The important thing is to keep one's mind clear and pure. However, Xiao's mind was filled with troubles from the past.

Many years ago, in the southern district of Yi Ling, there lived two siblings. Their names are Jiang and Xiao. The Ye siblings were orphans growing up in a tough neighborhood. They cannot afford to rent anywhere else so they have to live in the southern district. This is the worst part of the city as the crime rate is highest

here. The Ye siblings did not resort to crime, however. They remained good people and made an honest living.

Xiao does pottery and Jiang is a merchant who buys and sells weapons. It is a good profession to have since weapons are in high demand, and they can keep some of the weapons for themselves to use, just in case. The two siblings lived happily, despite the tough times, and they smiled all the time.

One day a group of thieves broke into their house to rob them. Crack! The thief smashed the pot on the ground. Guys were opening their drawings and searching through their stuff.

Xiao was scared and hid behind her brother. She was shaking in fear.

"We have nothing of value!" Jiang shouted. "Leave us alone!"

One of the thieves came up to them. "What do you have in your pockets?"

Jiang and Xiao backed up. "We don't have anything of value! Just let us be."

The thief grabbed Jiang by the collar and punched him in the face, knocking him down.

"Brother!!!" shouted Xiao. She could not just stand by and watch her brother being attacked by a stranger. Her brother has always been there for her, for he is the person she grew up with. Xiao took a risk and ran to the thief and grabbed his arms. He pushed her on the floor. Wham!

Jiang: "Leave her alone!"

The thief kicked Jiang violently, and Jiang, on the floor, could do nothing about it. Thud! Thud!

Xiao grew scared, and she took out a knife from her pocket and ran to the thief and stabbed him in the arm.

"Aaaagh!!" screamed he. "You bitch!" He slapped her and she fell.

He took out a sword and walked to Xiao. She crawled backwards as the thief approached with his sword. "No...no!"

Slash!! The last thing she saw was the shine of the blade, and then everything became red. And seconds later, everything was black...nothing but pitch darkness. She heard her brother scream in the background, and sounds of fighting. But Xiao did not know what was happening...

Xiao woke up in cold sweat. "Mister Chie Du?"

Chie Du woke up from his meditation.

"Sorry, but this is not working. I am just not feeling it."

"In order to stay in a state of meditation, you must keep your mind clear. Do not let the past cloud your mind."

Li was watching behind the wall and she revealed herself. "Xiao, how is your healing?"

"It is going fine, thank you." Xiao replied.

Guan usually does not put his nose into other people's business, but Li is an exception. He was spying on her as she was talking to Xiao. The blind girl of course knew that someone was watching them, but she did not say anything.

"Are you sure?" asked Li. "You look distressed."

"Perhaps I am not used to meditating. But eventually I will get used to it. I feel tired and I must rest."

"Fine, see ya." said Li.

As she walked out of the room, Guan appeared in front of her. "Li Cheng...you really should join the class. Otherwise you're just wandering around the temple."

"Master, like I said before, I do not feel I am fit for your class. I came here for the sole purpose of Xiao's healing, and I do not intend to train here."

"Is it because you think you are better than your fellow peers?" Guan asked.

"It is not that I think I am better. **I know** I am better." Li replied, much to Guan's dismay (沮喪). "No offense...but I do not enjoy boring routines and doing the same thing over and over. Moreover, you do not even teach sword craft. The only real swords are the ones locked up somewhere. I have no interest in learning how to use a piece of wood or a bamboo stick."

"Li, you know the temple's principles. We do not advocate violence."

"Tch, then how do you expect to defend yourselves? Master, if you are using a bamboo stick, and the opponent has a sword...you are at a disadvantage. You have no intent to kill but the enemy does."

"That is the way of our people, Li, you know that. You once believed in our principles."

"That was ten years ago, master. Back then I was just like those students of yours. I came here not knowing anything. You and your students have never left the temple, so what would you know about the outside world? The world is not perfect as you see it! I develop my sword craft through my experiences." said Li.

Guan Du's eyes narrowed. "I heard that you studied under the War God? Did he teach you this?"

"He taught me a great many things. The Heaven's Wrath Style that he passed onto me has helped me survive countless battles. If your precious students saw half of what I saw, they'd be traumatized (創傷)." Li said.

"You sound like someone who only seeks power. I have known others like you. You're walking a dangerous path, Li."

"No offense, but you have nothing more to teach me, Mr. Guan Du." Li began to walk away.

"Hold it! You talk so arrogantly. Do you really believe in your sword craft? Are you willing to back it up?"

"Back it up?" Li was actually excited that he wanted to challenge her. She pulled her sword out of its shell.

Guan was shocked. The blade's shine was vibrant and bright. "Why...that is the...the Ice Sword! One of the four legendary swords! How did you come into possession of it?"

"I defeated someone who was using the Ice Sword...it is thanks to my skills as a swordsman. Indeed, it is one of the most powerful swords in China, but if you are intimidated, I guess I'll settle for a match using wooden swords."

"No. We will use real swords." Guan replied.

[B] Title Contents

Guan and Li now faced each other on the training grounds. As he promised, he was holding a real, metallic sword, and Li wielded her Ice Sword. Somehow, this scene looked familiar to her. Master Guan and Li as a child were facing each other. Li requested that they have a friendly match to see where she stands as a swordsman.

Yes, that was a memory from long ago. However, the bond they had long ago means nothing today. This is a real, serious match, for she always takes her sword craft seriously. There is no such thing as holding back because only the weak hold back.

Guan, on the other hand, wanted to teach Li a lesson. Her presence in the temple was a negative, destructive force that could ruin the harmony of what they teach. Or perhaps he wants to bring the old Li back.

In a moment's notice they charged into each other and the sound of their blades hitting echoed throughout the area. Master Ho Sai came to the balcony to witness the fight. It certainly has caught his interest.

Xiao and Chie Du were also watching. "Who is fighting who?" asked she.

"Your friend and Master Guan. You probably do not know what is happening."

"Oh I have an idea." Xiao replied slyly.

Clang clang Guan did a jumping attack and Li blocked. Guan continued his assault while Li dodged the blade. Whoosh!

Shang was watching behind the wall. She knows that she should not be watching, and may even be punished for seeing this, but her curiosity got the better of her. It is unreal to see her old friend Li fight her teacher...this should not be happening.

After several more hits, Guan was sweating. He was certain of Li's skill and he was not happy about it. They charged into each other and attacked.

Xiao was listening in carefully to the fight. For some reason, she found herself wanting to know Li's movements, perhaps thinking that she may have a rematch with Li one day. *Clang!* The only thing she could hear were their footsteps and sword movements. She determined that Li was able to push Guan back with her aggressive style. *Whoosh whoosh*

"This is your last chance." said Guan, even though he was losing. "You must change your ways."

"I have heard enough from you. You are no longer my teacher."

Guan charged forward and slashed and Li jumped over him and landed behind him. Guan turned around and continued his high slashes. *Whish whoosh*

Li jumped away from him and landed to keep the distance. She got into fighting stance.

Chie Du recognized this stance. Usually, he keeps his eyes closed, but now, they were wide open. "This stance...can it be?"

Guan suspected the same thing, but he will not let that stop him teaching her a lesson. The two fighters screamed and ran into each other.

Chie gasped. "She is going to use it...the Heaven's Light!"

Guan swings his blade forward, Li swings it forward in a swift motion, breaking Guan's blade, and she put her blade on the tip of his forehead. He gasped in shock and a drop of sweat went down his neck. If she had continued that motion at full strength, the blade could have cut his head in half.

Chie said, "It was too fast for me to see it...but she was able to break his defenses and attack him directly..."⁸

"I saw every bit of it in detail." said Xiao.

Chie glanced her in shock. "Oh you don't say."

Xiao did not care that Chie was impressed by her for she was too focused on Li. (This Heaven's Light is a signature move of the Heaven's Wrath Style. She did not use it on me when we fought. She's deadlier than I thought.)

"You lose. Are you satisfied?" Li put the Ice Sword back into its shell and walked away."

"Li! You're walking on the wrong path! You have to change before it's too late!"

Master Guan pats little Li on the head, and she giggles. "You did well today, Li. Keep it up and you'll be a great fighter."

"I wanna be a great fighter just like you, Master Guan!"

"Heh. It will take practice and patience."

"Mmm! Of course!" she yells enthusiastically.

On her way to the exit, Li bumped into Shang. "Li...I saw you fighting Master Guan. Your sword craft has gotten so good that you can even beat Master Guan..."

"Shang..."

"Li, you've changed. You were not like this...it's like you're a completely different person."

"Experience changes people." said Li.

"You're not the same Li I used to know...I have to go." Shang ran away.

For some reason, Li felt something uncomfortable in her heart. Is this the feeling of loneliness? Of being rejected? Or something else? Whatever this feeling may be, it is unnecessary, and she needs to get rid of it.

⁸ Deleted this line: Xiao missed the move, since she cannot see it. "What happened..."

Yes, at one point, Shang was her best friend. They always got along and they shared everything with each other. But that was ten years ago and this is today. If Shang cannot accept her for the way she is, then she is not needed. None of them are needed. This is the choice that Li has made, to put her sword craft above all other things. Things like relationships and friendships are unnecessary. Such is the lonely path of the ninja.

It is once again time for Xiao to meditate. Like always, this room is quiet and undisturbed. One requires a quiet and peaceful place in order to meditate. Meditation gives the user a very serene (寧靜) and peaceful feeling. It is indescribable to those who have never experienced it before.

Xiao felt like a free spirit floating around in the sky. She saw the big, puffy clouds and she was flying through them slowly. Her body was not even there, just her spirit, wandering about wherever it wishes. Next, she became a body of water. Everything was peaceful and calm.

Here there are no people or animals, just nature itself. There was no hate, no weapons, and no bloodshed. There were no worries at all. Alas, her mind wandered off to the bad times in her life.

Xiao and Roh went past each other, hitting on the blades. *Cling!* It is said that experts can judge their opponent's strength just from one hit. Xiao realizes that he is no ordinary opponent, perhaps someone of exceptional talent.

They both turned around and continued to hit. *Quong! Quong!* Roh was fighting aggressively while she remained defensive. She had no other choice for she has the disadvantage of sight.

Shen Long saw Xiao fighting on the roof. "Xiao!!"

When Xiao heard that voice, she was surprised. It sounds familiar...can it be...her brother? While she was distracted, Roh blurred and appeared behind her and whacked her on the back. She fell and he caught her and put her on his shoulder.

All of a sudden, Xiao woke up. Chie was sitting across from her and sensed that she woke up. "I sense much disturbance in your heart. In order to meditate you must keep your mind clear."

"I know, Mr. Du, you told me this already. I will end the meditation for today." Xiao picked up her sword and walked away. Xiao claimed that the meditation has helped her, but in fact, not a single meditation session made her feel at ease. What is it that is bothering her in her inner conscience?

[C] Title Contents

Alex was training in his own backyard, and today he could not focus.

Alex was extremely pissed off and he drew his sword and pointed it at him. "How dare you! Do you want to be silenced?"

"Oh, so who's the one eager to fight?" says Khan. "Why don't we have a duel to settle this? If you defeat me, I will keep my mouth shut. We don't want the whole world to know about your shameful acts, do you?"

"Shameful? What would you know about shameful...you, who work for Liu Zhang, the king's murderer!"

"The only one capable of such an act is you...so you can have his woman! Or perhaps it was the concubine who poisoned him to death?"

"Enough!" Alex shouted. "I will not let you insult her further. I will defend my honor and Lady Ce's honor with my sword. One more word and I shall fight you to the death right here, right now!"

"So, you are willing to risk your life for honor, are you not? Why not wager our lives. The loser of the duel loses his life to the winner. What do you say?"

By this point, Alex is not going to back down. He will show this brute that he is not to be toyed around with. "Gladly...a life for a life."

Khan: "It is settled then. We shall fight the day before the festival. I assume you will not go back on your word."

"Of course not. The same goes for you."

"Of course. See you there, Demon Slayer. Best of luck." said Khan

That was what got him into this predicament. Alas, it is not an option to back out now, for he has given his word, and there is nothing more important than honor to a swordsman. His only choice is to win the duel. But the question circling his mind is...can he win?

Alex did not have much success with one on one duels in the past, and he hastily accepted a duel where his life was on the line.

Celina came to see him. "Alex, there you are. I've been looking all over for you. None of the servants can find you."

"I am busy training." he simply replied.

"You have been training non-stop for the past two days. Is something the matter?" inquired Celina.

He glanced to the side. "No, it's nothing..."

"Alex...I know when you are hiding something from me. You can talk to me about anything. When I was troubled you came to help me. I sense that you are troubled. You once said that we are in this together, right? Your problems are my problems."

"Celina...I made a grave mistake..."

"Huh?" She was confused with his wording.

"The other day I ran into Khan of the Manchu, he is one of the performers for the festival. But he is a mercenary hired by Lord Zhang. He challenged me to a duel."

"Ask Sui Long to help you."

"No, I accepted a one on one duel...with our lives on the line."

Celina's eyes opened wide and she gasped. "Why would you do that?"

"He knew of our affair! And he insulted you. I cannot let that pass."

Celina became surprised. "Alex...you don't have to do this. Isn't life more important than honor?"

"Still...I cannot let a barbarian like that or any one else speak ill of you."

"Liu Zhang surely is going to spread the rumors of our affair. I am a suspect in Liu Bei's murder. People will talk ill of us. It is something inevitable." Celina took him by the hand. "Alex...come inside. You need a break." ⁹

Slash! Khan just knocked down three guys in one quick motion. They were injured and groaning in pain. "Piece of cake." said Khan, putting his sword away.

Ragnarok witnessed the fight. "Excellent work, Khan. It seems that you were able to bruise the Demon Slayer's ego. Are you sure you can defeat him?"

Khan put his sword back into its shell. "Just leave it up to me, mate. This is a guaranteed win for me."

The temple is strict on rules and curfews are no exception. By ten o'clock at night, all inhabitants are to be sleeping in their designated quarters. But Li never follows the rules. She was sitting on the wall, polishing her treasured weapon, the Ice Sword, while reflecting on the past.

The little girl known as Li traveled through the forest. She was lost and ran desperate through the bushes. There can be no worse feeling than to be scared and alone, especially in the Valley of Death. A man in a straw hat jumped down from a tree and landed directly in front of her. He came with two companions with masks.

Li was shocked. She had a sword, but she has no idea how to use it.

"Who dares trespass into the Valley of Death?"

"You...you are...the legend is true!" said Li nervously. "You are th-the War God!"

"You come here knowing this?" said the man, drawing his sword. "Have you any last words?"

"D-Don't kill me!" said Li. "I...I'm not an enemy."

"That is what they all say."

Li got on he knees and cried. "Please...I have lost my home and everything I ever valued. I have no where else to go. Please, teach me the way of the sword, master."

The War God was in disbelief. "What did you say? I cannot believe what I am hearing."

Li bowed with her forehead touching the ground. There can be no greater dedication for making a request than to do this. "Please, teach me, War God. I am willing to learn."

⁹ 04/19/2020: Updated dialogue

"I do not take students. Go home, little girl." The War God turned around and walked away.

Li stood up. "That's a lie! What about those two masked men?"

"They are different." replied he in the straw hat.

"How are they different? You are willing to train them but not me? Is it because I am a girl?"

"It is none of your business."

"I will not leave the valley until you accept me." said Li.

"I only accepted Shen Long and Sui Long only because they are exceptional."

"I can be exceptional too!" said Li.

At this point, the War God turned around to look her in the eyes. They were filled with fire and dedication. He has not seen such intense eyes in a long time. Only one other showed such fire, and he was part of the Brotherhood.

"Little girl, why did you come here? Why did you run away from home?"

"Because...I saw something I should not have seen." she replied. "I was a servant working in the imperial palace...and I saw Duke Xiang turn into a demon. And he saw me...and he is after me, I know it. I cannot stay in Yi Ling anymore."

The man was shocked. "Duke Xiang?"

"I have no home to go back to." Li continued. "If you are not going to train me, then kill me. Don't ignore me! I want to learn the way of the sword. I can repay you...I can wash your clothes and cook your food...anything that is in my ability."

Shen Long and Sui Long glanced at each other and they looked at the War God to see what his decision would be.

"If I train you, do you promise me you will kill Duke Xiang?"

"Absolutely."

"But let me warn you, my training will be rough. I will not go easy on you because you are a girl."

Li stood up and wiped the tears. "Thank you, master."

Within only two years of training, Li Cheng proved that she is indeed exceptional. Her skill set, a combination of hard work, dedication, and talent, has risen to the level of Shen Long and Sui Long, and they even acknowledged her for it.

One day, in the forest, Li and Shen Long were having a friendly spar, but they take their spars seriously. *Clang* They went past each other. A scar was left on the metallic blade of Shen's sword.

"Very impressive..." Shen commented. "You truly are talented, Li."

"It is thanks to Master Genzo's training." she replied.

"The master is only half the equation in creating a great swordsman. The other half is up to the student."

Li smiled. "But there is another factor in the equation, having good peers to practice with."

Shang, Fu, and Chan were Li's good peers. Not only that, but they were close friends, and Shang could even be her best friend. Yet Li alienated (疏遠) them because she judges they are weak. This is what her teacher, Guan, was trying to tell her. Li understood his meaning but she did not listen.

No, they do not understand what she went through. All the rigorous training, the life and death battles...and the horrors she has seen...they do not understand anything. As far as Li is concerned, the temple people are naïve and foolish. No, she cannot go back to the person she **used** to be...

Xiao was in her room, sitting by the window, facing the sky. Although she could not see the moon, she knew it was there. It has been a long time since she has seen the moon and the glow of the stars. Yet she is able to see the moon and the stars in her mind. How beautiful and mysterious they are, and she misses them.

Much like Li, Xiao was not sure what she wanted. Part of her wants to see, but part of her would rather stay blind and continue to live in the darkness. Because she became used to the darkness and it is what she was comfortable with. This inner conflict was hurting her meditation and if she cannot master this process, then her eyes can never heal.

二十三: The Eye Opener: The Temple's Final Lesson

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Chie gasped. "She is going to use it...the Heaven's Light!"

Guan swings his blade forward, Li swings it forward in a swift motion, breaking Guan's blade, and she put her blade on the tip of his forehead. He gasped in shock and a drop of sweat went down his neck. If she had continued that motion at full strength, the blade could have cut his head in half.

"You lose. Are you satisfied?" She put the Ice Sword back into its shell and walked away."

"Li!" shouted Guan, "You're walking on the wrong path! You have to change before it's too late!"

She continued to walk away, ignoring his warnings. It is already too late for her to walk on the right path, or at least that is what she believed.

Ho Sai happened to see the ending of the fight. He stroked his beard as he contemplated something.

As Li walked by the balcony, she saw the master of the temple on the other side.

"Oh, Master Ho Sai, greetings."

"Li Cheng, I have been monitoring your progress since the day you came in."

"..." She did not know how to reply.

"I sense much darkness inside of you." said the old man. "You have been through much pain and sorrow...these ten years must have been hard, no?"

Finally, someone in this temple speaks some sense. "You have no idea."

"Tough times make tough people...but with you, you have this combination of toughness and arrogance. I saw you defeat Master Guan. Li, do you feel you are better than other people?"

She did not expect that question from him. "Are you going to lecture me as well? Or perhaps tell me to go to class like Master Guan?"

"We do not force people what they do not wish to do, but the temple has its rules. A long time ago, some bandits found our temple, and they wish to find out our secrets. All travelers who made it here deserve to learn our secrets, but these bandits were hostile and violent, and they wanted shortcuts instead of doing things the right way. We at the temple always advocate peace...but in certain situations, we make exceptions. The bandits attacked some of our students, so I had them killed. The people in the Temple of Enlightenment are peaceful, but we have our limitations."

"Well, at least you make more sense than that stick in the mud¹⁰ Guan Du."

"Li, you already know that I can predict the future. Yesterday, when I was meditating, I saw flashes of your future...and it does not look too bright. You must learn to change your ways, otherwise your fate will be sealed."

"Tch, I dunno what you're talking about. Seeing the future? Don't be absurd. We are humans and we determine our own futures...through our abilities."

"Abilities?" Ho Sai replied, touching his beard. "So you value your sword craft above all else. Do you think you are better than your teacher?"

Li looked at Ho Sai straight in the eye. "Master Guan was defeated because I am better. That is all there is to it."

"Oh, you still think so? Guan was your teacher, and I am Guan's teacher, so technically you are my grand pupil. You mastered your craft at such a young age. Normally, I should be proud of you. Perhaps you can show me your sword craft?"

"You want to fight me?" Li asked. "You are joking, right? I am worried you will break your back, old man."

"Since when you do worry about your opponent's well being?" asked Ho Sai. "If you truly feel confident in your skills, then come find me."

Li wondered what he was up to. She followed him up the stairs into his private quarters. It is a large spacious room that has a square platform for him to sit on and meditate for most of the day. The students are fortunate if they even get to glance at Ho Sai once a week.

¹⁰ Idiom meaning slow, old fashioned, unprogressive

Ho Sai took the sword that was placed on the wall and held it close to his face so he could examine it. He proceeded to do some practice moves as Li watched. He certainly is flexible and athletic for an old man, but Li was not impressed at all.

"Are you going to waste my time?" said she.

"If you are this eager to lose, then let us begin." Ho Sai got into fighting form. The sword was in his right hand, and he put his right hand behind his back, and he extended his left hand, and made a gesture to "come here."

Li took the invitation and charged forward. *Clang clang*

Ho Sai blocked and moved his body back. His movements were precise and methodical, as Li observed while he blocked and stepped back. Ho Sai was standing sideways, which reduced the chances of him having an opening.

Quong She jumped back. "I will show you firsthand of the power of the Heaven's Wrath Style!"

Li attacked more aggressively as she grew impatient. Ho Sai was able to intercept (攔截) her every move. Both fighters jumped back. Now Ho Sai was on the offensive and his attacks were solid and fast. Li had a hard time keeping up with his movements. He was light on his feet, yet his attacks felt like a ton of bricks. He was so agile and flexible...his moves were graceful and nothing short of magnificent.

Clang Li was pushed back and she almost lost her balance. Ho Sai leaped forward and slashed, and Li got out of the way. His sword cracked the column behind her.

Li realized what a bind she was in, for her opponent was a formidable one...One who is comparable to the level of Chu Yen...even Masai Genzo. Indeed, Ho Sai is not all talk, as he clearly dominates the fight. But how is he this strong? Isn't he an old man with a long white beard that sits around all day with his eyes closed? Could this be the power of enlightenment?

In desperation, Li pleaded for a way to defeat him. The Ice Sword, as if responding to her plea, began to glow. Ho Sai of course noticed this and took that into consideration as he pondered his next move.

Li Cheng yelled out loud as she charged forward and slashed. *Clang!* Ho Sai blocked with all his might. They ended up in a power lock and his blade began to freeze. Ho Sai twisted the blades to the side, and with his free hand, struck her chest with his palm. *Wham* Li stepped back to regain her balance.

By now, the Ice Sword's glow has faded away. She still has one more thing up her sleeve - the **Heaven's Retribution** attack, one of the signature moves of the Heaven's Wrath Style, as taught to her by Master Genzo.

She and Ho Sai ran to the side and hit each other. *Clang clang* After ten moves, Li slashed, and Ho Sai jumped over her and landed behind her. Li turned around and charged. Ho Sai blocked it, and pushed her, forcing her to move back ten paces.

This is it, Li thought. She held her sword tight and charged forward. Ho Sai's instincts allowed him to predict what she was doing. "Heaven's Retribution!!"

Li did a high slash, and Ho Sai blocked. Immediately after the block, Li lowered the sword below his, and attempted to stab his stomach. Ho Sai dodged to the side, a move that surprised Li. He was supposed to be hit, yet he was not.

Now she left herself wide open. Ho Sai knocked her sword into the air and kicked her down. *Whack*

As she tried to stand up, Ho Sai pointed the blade at her chin. It took a full three seconds for reality to sink in for Li. She has not lost a fight in a long time, and more so, she did not expect to be beaten by an old man.

"If I was your enemy, you'd be dead by now." Ho Sai doesn't speak so bluntly, but this is the only way to get through to her.¹¹

"I lost? ...How can this be?" Li was staring at the ground, her eyes shaking as if her whole world just shattered.

"Do you know why you lost, Li Cheng? It is not because I am better than you. I am also familiar with the Heaven's Wrath Style. The attack you used...it is the Heaven's Retribution. It consists of a two-pronged attack to finish off your opponent. The first strike will be blocked, and it is to throw off your opponent, because the second strike comes immediately afterwards. He will not be expecting it...however, the mistake you made was that your moves were slower than usual during your first strike. I have seen you when you were training at the temple ten years ago...whenever you attacked continuously; your first strike is always slower. It is a habit that you developed from long ago...you are still sticking to your old ways."

Li's eyes were focused on the ground, and then they focused on him.

Ho Sai continued. "I watch and monitor the progress of all my students. The old habits that you developed ten years ago are still evident today. Your second mistake is that you expected to achieve victory from that one move, and when it failed, you left yourself wide open. What a narrow minded view that is...to risk everything into one move. Li Cheng, if you still feel that your way of the sword is correct, then by all means, continue living the way you do."

Everything he said was true. Li was overwhelmed by his shocking words. She went over to pick up the Ice Sword and stared at the floor in anger. There is no one to be angry at but herself, and in frustration, she slammed the blade on a concrete block. *Crash*

[B] Title Contents

In the meditation room, Chie Du and Xiao once again went into meditation. today, however, Xiao felt more troubled than usual.

¹¹ 04/19/2020: Updated fight details

"Now, relax your mind." Chie instructed. "Think of nothing but an empty void...a void with water. Hear the serene sound of the water waves."

"Sorry, Mr. Du, but I do not feel this is helping."

"My dear," said Chie, "Meditation is an essential element in healing the body."

"I just do not see the point." Xiao replied. "We have been doing this every day and I have not seen any results."

"This sort of thing takes time. We are applying the herbs on your eyes daily, and meditation helps speed up the healing process. Please understand, this is not an overnight thing."

"I know that. Perhaps it is not essential to have my eyes healed."

Guan Du walked by and he overheard Xiao's words.

Chie Du said, "Why not? Do you intend to stay blind forever?"

"Maybe I am better off that way. I came here full of hope, just to realize that being able to see may be more of a curse than a blessing. I am fully capable of surviving the way I am. My blindness caused my hearing to be extra sensitive, and I am able to pick up things that I normally cannot. In essence, I lost one sense, but my other senses became stronger."

"But in reality, you are still disabled." said Chie.

"I do not particularly care for seeing. I have trained myself to be able to detect lies from a person's speaking pattern...I can feel someone's heart and tell what emotions he is feeling, I can touch a person's face and tell what kind of life he lives. Without sight, I can see the truth. When my eyes worked, all I saw were lies, corruption and bloodshed. There are too many grotesque things in this world, so perhaps I am better off not seeing those things."

Guan revealed himself. "Ms. Ye...sorry, I was just passing by. I want to ask you...do you really feel this way?"

"You were not just passing by. You were here for a good few minutes. My ears pick up your footsteps no matter how quiet you think you are. And even if you are completely silent, my nose would have picked up your scent."

Guan became surprised but then he smiled. "Your senses are pretty sharp. Would you like to come with me outside?"

"Why?" she asked.

"Come and you will see."

As Xiao stood up, Chie said: "Here, let me help you."

"No, don't. Clearly Ms. Ye wants to be treated like everyone else...as if she is not blind. She should be able to walk down the stairs on her own, right?"

After going down the stairs, she met Guan in the courtyard.

Xiao said, "What, may I ask, is the meaning of this?"

Guan said, "I'd like you to fight me."

"Fight you? For what purpose?"

"To see if you are fully capable of fighting without your vision."

"Fine. I do not know your purpose in doing this, but I will do it."

Xiao took out her sword and got into the Walking Crane Style fighting stance. She stood with her left leg crossed over her right leg, and sword pointing forward.

Guan made the initial attack, running forward. Xiao used her super hearing to detect his footsteps. *Thump thump* Every step made a sound vibration. His sword makes noises against the air, and from that Xiao can determine how he is holding the sword. His voice also reveals where he is and his state of mind. From all those little bits of information, Xiao can make a mental picture of the scene.

Guan attacked, and she blocked. *Clang* He swings it left and right, and she blocked them. She tried to counterattack, and he jumped away.

Xiao stood there and continued to listen for clues. Guan was waiting for something to happen.

On the other side of the wall, the class was being assembled. All the students gathered together and began sparring with each other. This was bad news for Xiao because there were too many sounds coming from the other side. It was distracting and hard for her to focus on Guan.

Knowing that she lost her concentration, Guan charged and attacked. Xiao quickly reacted. *Clang* She blocked it, but almost did not do it in time. She stepped back to regain her balance.

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

"Do you know why this happened? Your Walking Crane Style is clearly superior to any of the temple's styles." He picked up the pebble. "Yet it is a mere pebble that caused your defeat. How ironic. You are able to use your ears in ways that regular people cannot possibly use them. You can sense my footsteps whether they are loud or soft, and you even knew where my weapon was at all times. But there is one fatal flaw...you can only hear things that **move**. Since a pebble does not move, you cannot detect it. I purposely forced you to go near the pebbles, but you did not see that strategy.

"I had the students gather up at this time on purpose...to throw you off. You thrive in a quiet place. But in a noisy environment, your hearing will be distorted and you cannot focus on one thing. You fight well when the ground is smooth, but what if it is not? Then you are at a huge disadvantage."

"This is why I live in a quiet place. I will avoid the noisy places." Xiao replied.

"Things do not always go your way in the real world. What if you cannot avoid a noisy place? You seem to hang around Li a lot. You will be in constant danger and the circumstances are not always favorable."

Xiao was beginning to see his logic. His words of wisdom are truer than anything she has heard so far.

Right now, it is decision time for her. She came all the way to the temple to have her eyes healed, yet she was hesitating. Her mind was very troubled. Her brother Jiang Ye stole money for her operation. That is why he resorted to crime right? That's why he had to run away from society to hide in the Valley of Death.

After much thinking, she made her decision. She went through day after day of meditation. Finally, the day has come when she must **open her eyes**.

Chie Du removed the blindfold from her. "Ms. Ye, you can try to open your eyes. Do it slowly. Take your time."

Xiao definitely felt something on her eyes. She was not able to feel them for a long time, but lately, she was able to feel them slightly. Her eyes were twitching. Slowly but sure, her eyelids opened...from the bottom to the top. She had bright, black eyeballs just like her brother Jiang.

Her vision was blurry. The light was overwhelming and it hurt. Xiao looked at her hands. "I...I can see again! It's a miracle!"

Chie and Guan smiled. They need not say anything at this point.

"I did it!!" she said as tears streamed down her face. "I did it, brother. I can finally see again."

No words could describe the joy she was feeling in her heart. All those years of suffering and living in darkness...they are over. Her sight was unfairly taken away as a child, but now they were given back to her as an adult. In her moment of joy, Xiao hugged Chie, who heartily returned her hug.

What a defining moment it is in her life. After eleven years of darkness, she can once again see the light of day...literally. This is what her brother wants more than she does for herself. To be able to see her lovely eyes again, that is something he'd die for. After all, the eyes are the windows to the soul.

Li walked by. "Hey Xiao, how's the treatment going?" She did not even realize what she was seeing until two seconds later. "Xiao, your eyes...they're open!"

"Li, I can see. I can see you!" Xiao went to her and touched her face. "Yes, it is you, Li."

Li was blushing from the touching, but she genuinely was happy for Xiao's recovery. At last, they have accomplished their primary mission.

Ho Sai was alone again and took a sip of tea. Sllllleeeerp. "Is this what you wanted, Comrade Genzo?" He started to have a flashback.

A new guest walked up the long flight of stairs and arrived at the training grounds of the temple. The students noticed the man and his peculiar appearance. He was wearing a blue vest over his torso, and he was wearing a straw hat so his eyes were covered. Around his waist was a belt that held a sword's shell in place.

One of the child monks, Chan came up to the stranger. "Are you here to visit our temple?"

Another child pulled on Guan Du's pants. "Mister Guan, we have a visitor."
"Alright. I'll go see him." Guan replied.

Ho Sai was meditating in his quarters, sitting in lotus position. His eyes have been closed for hours and he had a white, nearly transparent aura projecting from his body. Suddenly, his eyes opened and his aura vanished. "What is this presence? I've never felt anything like this before."

Guan Du and his brother Chie Du went to greet the guest, but he was in no mood to chat. "I am here to see the sage named Ho Sai."

Guan frowned as he instantly disliked the stranger's straightforwardness. "Master Ho Sai does not see guests. If you would like to train in our class, or meditate with us, feel free to."

"I am not here for you. Tell your headmaster that the War God is here for him."

Guan and Chie Du gasped. "You're the War God?! Please leave. You are not welcome here."

"Heh. I thought all were welcome here."

"All except your kind. I heard the rumors about you...about the countless people you've killed. Our temple does not advocate violence."

The War God took out his shell and pointed it at Guan, startling him. "That's a nice point of view, but also naive. Let me ask you, are these students important to you? What if someone tried to kill them? Would you kill someone to save them?"

"Of course! I don't hesitate to kill someone who murders children."

"And if someone tried to kill you? Would you fight back?"

"Naturally. I will kill him and I won't feel guilty about it because it's self defense."

"I see, so it's okay as long as it's self defense." said Master Genzo. "How about if you were betrayed, accused of a crime you did not commit, and had no choice but to run away to the Valley of Death? And bounty hunters constantly come after your head. Day after day, month after month...year after year...shedding blood, so much blood that you forgot the original reason you came here the first place. And people forgot your real name and gave you an ominous nickname like the War God."

Guan just realized he told his life story and did not have a response.

"I will see him." said Ho Sai from the balcony.

"Should've said that to begin with." Genzo held down his hat and jumped up to the balcony, surprising Guan and Chie and several of the students.

Upon entering Ho Sai's quarters, both parties sat down on the floor. "May I see that sword of yours?"

"Certainly." Genzo handed him **Fire Sword**.

Ho Sai pulled the blade out of its shell to examine it closely. "Ohhh. Excellent craftsmanship...I feel a mysterious power emanating (發出) from the Fire Sword. You truly are Masai Genzo." He handed the sword back to its owner.

"Now, what can I do for you?"

"I am here for Li Cheng. Do you remember her?"

Ho Sai stroked his beard. "Ah yes. I recall a little girl of twelve years old...or was she eleven? I don't remember. But I will never forget her face and her cheerful smile. She was hard working and encouraged others to do the same, she was our star pupil."

"I see. Li was the same way when she started to study under me. But she began to change in the past few years...for the worst."

"Oh. Do tell?" Ho Sai continued to stroke his beard.

"At first she wanted power to get revenge for her family. I understand that. But her motivation grew into something else beyond revenge...she became obsessed with gaining more strength...it was an unhealthy obsession. I was not able to change her before she left my tutelage. She went back to the city but she will walk a path of darkness. She's lucky if her obsession does not consume her. But I believe one day she will come back to the temple to seek guidance. It may be five years, ten years, or even twenty years. But I strongly believe she will come back. When she does, I want you to humble her...on my behalf."

"I see. Very well then, Master Genzo. Your request is accepted!"

"Thank you very much."

End of flashback. ¹²

Ragnarok came into the room from the staircase in the basement. "Master, the preparations are being made. We have planned this rebellion for months and it shall take effect in two days."

Zhang rubbed his beard. "Good. The king will be at the celebration. The Spring Festival shall be the day of his downfall. Once I give the signal, you can begin Operation Red Feather."

It is a perfect set up, sire. You were able to replace so many workers with our men during the short time you were king."

"Of course, I waste no time." He sipped his tea. Slerrrrrp.

¹² 04/19/2020: New flashback

"I hope that none of our men get careless and get captured and reveal everything."

"I don't think so. But I am sure Liu Cao suspects something. He is not stupid. The question is who is more prepared? For victory goes to the one who has more preparation."

Alex was sitting by his window in solitude, staring at the evening sky. Celina came into the room and wanted to say something, but she did not know what to say. "Alex..."

"It was reckless of me to accept the duel under those terms. I am sorry I did not tell you sooner. It's because...I was embarrassed. I was thinking what'd happen if I lose, and I could not face you."

"Alex..."

"The person I am going to duel...Khan...I have seen his sword craft. He is not to be underestimated. It will not be an easy fight." Alex stood up and handed her the Fire Sword. "Celina, should anything happen to me...I want you to have this. This Fire Sword is what my late master left me. It is the remnant of the God of War."

"No!" she said, pushing it back to him. "You need this for the duel."

"What good is this Fire Sword if it falls to enemy hands? I have not been able to give you anything, so please, take it."

"No, I cannot. The God of War gave it to you. **You** are his student, not me." She touched him on the shoulder. "It will not fall into enemy hand's because you will not lose."

But Alex was still not convinced. "I have to go."

"Wait...where are you going?"

"I have to train more." Alex replied.

"You need to be well rested for tomorrow. Training now will not make a difference. You will not improve overnight."

"Even if so, how can I fall asleep tonight?" He continued to walk.

"No!" She embraced him from behind, her hands clutching his shirt tightly.

Alex was dumbfounded. "Celina..."

"Don't go...This could be our last night together. Stay with me for the night, please."

Her love for him is stronger than he originally thought. He was too in his head to notice that she's always been there for him, during the good times and bad. Especially the bad. "No! Stop saying that. I think you're a great swordsman." "For someone who works as hard as you, you can't be worthless. Not in my eyes." That's what she said when his spirits were down.

Suddenly, he felt selfish for thinking about leaving her when she needs him the most. Her embrace was strong despite her having frail, skinny arms. She will not let go no matter what. Even if he wanted to move, he couldn't. He was still worried about the duel, but the least he can do is spend one more night with her.

Alex was sitting on the window again. This is his usual spot to sit when he is bored or wants to spend time alone. He spends much time daydreaming and looking at the scenery. He has sat here countless times to think about his missing sister. And now, he is thinking about the duel tomorrow.

Celina came in holding a tray with a teapot. "The tea is ready." She put the tray on the table. She looked at Alex, who was staring at the sky and not paying attention to her.

She walked to the center of the room and stood there. She began to unzip the back of her white dress, pulling the cloth off her shoulders, and pulled it down to her legs and let it fall on the floor. She took off her undergarment and let it drop on top of the dress.

Alex looked at her and he could not believe what he was seeing. He gasped as he stared at her naked body.

"C-Celina, what are you doing?"

She just stared at him without saying a word. Today she had a different look in her eyes. She has the eyes of someone who loves and cares, and her eyes were inviting him to touch her. Considering how innocent and reserved she is, it is shocking that she just stripped in front of him.

Alex panicked and he grabbed a blanket from the bed and put it on her body. "You'll catch a cold."

The look on her eyes turned to one of anger. "You...you don't want me anymore." she yelled, and turned away from him with tears in her eyes.

"Wait!" Alex yelled, grabbing her wrist. He pulled her into him and they both stared at each other's eyes and hesitated. Alex lowered his head and kissed her on the lips. During the kiss, the blanket fell to the floor.

Alex grabbed her and tossed her on the bed, with himself on top of her, and he kissed her neck area all over. Celina moaned and turned her head left and right. He kissed her lips passionately, and then went down to her neck. He grabbed her hands and their fingers intertwined while his mouth caressed her breasts.

Tonight, Alex was more aggressive than usual with Celina, the only person who truly knows who he is. Without her, his life is not complete, and she is not complete without him. The candles eventually burned themselves out, but they were still making love behind the curtains, for it could be their last night together.

Before they knew it, the night had passed. Alex woke up next to Celina, who was still sleeping. They were both naked, tucked under the blanket. Their clothes lay scattered all over the floor. Alex stood up and put on his pants.

(Sorry, Celina. But I have to go to my duel. I wish we had more time...)

When he got fully dressed, he left the room. The hour of the duel is almost near. Cheng looked up at the sky. If he fails, then that is where he will end up – in the heavens. The duel today will make him or break him. Will the hero make overcome his toughest obstacle yet?

二十四: Survive! The Duel of Endurance.

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The hour is near for Alex Cheng's dreaded duel. The designated dueling ground is an abandoned backyard, something that is commonly found in the southern district. This area used to be a brewery as one can tell by the numerous empty barrels lying around.

Alex could feel his heart beating rapidly as he approached the front gate. The one waiting on the other side was Khan.

At this time, Sui Long landed next to him.

"What are you doing here?" asked Alex.

"Cheng, I advise you not to fight Khan. I researched his background and my conclusion is that he is a strong adversary. He was part of a northern tribe and also used to work for the imperials as a bounty hunter, and although he was not in the military, many captains and lieutenants relied on him to catch criminals that wandered the cities. He is not someone you want to-"

"Sui Long, I appreciate your concern." Alex said, interjecting. "It matters not what his background is. This is a duel of honor between two men. I must keep my word and show up.

"But Cheng..."

"I understand what I am getting into." said Alex without looking at his comrade. "I am putting my life at risk, and this is what I have agreed to. Losing is not an option for me."

Sui Long stared at Cheng for a good two seconds, and came to the realization that he is not able to convince him to do otherwise. Cheng has already made up his mind and nothing can change it.

"I need you to back to the house and watch Celina."

"Very well...as you wish." Sui Long said, and jumped away.

He may have seemed cold, but Alex secretly appreciated everything Sui Long and Shen Long have done for him. Although Sui Long has never revealed his identity as of yet, Alex treated him as more than just a bodyguard.

With that thought, he walked through the gate, and sure enough, Khan was waiting for him with his arms crossed.

"Ah, Demon Slayer, you made it just on time. I was beginning to think you would not show up."

"This is based on mutual trust. A true warrior does not go back on his word."

"Heh, well said, Cheng. I hope you spent your last few days to say farewell to everyone you know."

"I do not plan on losing." Alex replied.

"Well, one of us has to lose." said Khan. "Only one of us will walk out of this place alive."

"I'm going to make you regret this." said Alex with much anger in his voice. His hand was itching to draw his weapon, but he waited to see what his opponent will do.

There was a moment of silence, which signifies that the duel has begun. The wind blew hard. The two did the stare and right now it was a psychological battle. Both show a strong spirit in their eyes, but the winner will be the stronger fighter.

A bird on the roof chirped and flew away. Alex and Khan suddenly drew their swords and charged into each other. *Clang* It resulted in a power lock and they pushed each other away. Then they slash and hit about.

"Hyah!" Alex gave a strong thrust forward, and Khan blocked the attack. *Clong*

Khan retaliated with strong and hard swings, overwhelming Alex. *Clang! Clang!* Khan advanced while Alex retreated.

Both fighters used a high attack. *Clang* Khan was more muscular than Alex and that strength allowed him to push Alex's blade away, leaving him open. Khan kicked him in the chest. *Thud* Alex almost lost his balance, and Khan continued his brutal assault.

Alex jumped to a safer distance. Khan threw his airbreaker forward, and Alex jumped away from it. *Smash* The airbreaker broke a bunch of barrels into pieces. Alex saw his opponent's skill and he grew worried. He was sure that the Goddess of Victory will smile upon him, but his original worries may come true.

Back in the confines of the palace, Jiang Ye was resting peacefully in bed. He was still injured from the previous fight with the Demon Brothers, but the doctor told him that as long as he stays put and does not do anything strenuous (熱烈嘅), he will recover soon. But his recover may be cut short as someone was outside watching him.

The intruder, a man with a black beard, walked towards the building stealthily. He walked to the door and opened it slowly, and seeing that no one was inside, stepped in. He walked towards the bedroom, where there was a curtain at the entrance. The intruder pushed aside the curtain and entered the bedroom, where his victim lay sleeping.

This is going to be an easy kill, thought the intruder as he walked towards the bed. One stab and it is all over. He brushed the curtains aside and stabbed the body sleeping under the blanket. *Slash*

But something was not right. Jiax pulled the blanket off just see a bunch of pillows underneath. There was no body at all. "Damn it..." exclaimed Jiax.

Jiang Ye was leaning on the wall on the other side of the building. He made a clean escape thanks to his ninja instincts and street smarts. But whoever the intruder was, he certainly will not give up.

Quong Alex blocked Khan's attack, and Khan kicked him into the group of barrels. *Crash*

"Ugh..."

Khan laughed out loud. "Ha ha ha ha. Is that all you've got? I expected more from the famous Demon Slayer. Maybe you're only good at fighting demons and not humans."

Alex crawled back up and got back into fighting stance. "I will not listen to your mockery. I shall use my Heaven's Wrath Style to defeat you!"

"Heaven's Wrath, eh? I've heard of that style. Let's see how much you know about it!"

Alex charged forward and Khan blocked his attack with a diagonal swing. They were in a power lock, pushing their blades against one another. They kept on pushing, and Khan swings his blade up, making Alex lose his balance, and Khan slashed his chest, and a piece of the yin-yang on his suit was cut and he was bleeding.

Alex grunted and charged forward. Khan ducked the incoming attack and put his sword backwards and hit Alex's stomach with the pommel of the sword. *Thud* The pain was paralyzing, especially when he ran into it. Khan used the pommel to hit Alex in the chin, knocking him down.

Alex stood back up, but standing limply. Khan threw an airbreaker at him, and it connected. *What!* Alex rolled on the ground a few times after being hit.

"How unsightly. You can't even land a hit on me. You are just a sorry excuse for a swordsman."

Cheng wiped the blood off his mouth, and he once again found himself at the defeating end of the fight. Somehow, this reminded him of an important fight that occurred not long ago...

Cheng landed several paces away. He needed a plan, but there is no time to think. He must rely on his instincts. Jumping around will be pointless. He must take a risk and attack. Rubble threw another airbreaker, and Alex jumped over it and charged forward with his glowing sword.

Rubble continued to put the pressure on by throwing more airbreakers. Froom! Froom! Alex could only evade from side to side and jump around due to his enemy's quickness. His leg was bleeding and his pants were turning red. He must make the attack now or he will be a sitting duck.

Rubble's sword glowed brightly as Alex charged forward. He too ka might swing, releasing the Ice Blizzard, and struck Alex in the chest. Wham! He fell down and dropped the Fire Sword.

Everyone was shocked at what happened.

The Ice Hunter walked over to the fallen hero and pointed his sword at Alex's chin. "You lose." Rubble announced.

The harsh reality of his words set in. Alex lost his composure and this is the result of not thinking things through. He was now at his opponent's mercy.

Rubble picked up the discarded weapon. "This now belongs to me. The Fire Sword is too good for you anyways, Demon Slayer. Ha ha ha ha ha!"

Even with Jade's life on the line, Alex could not achieve victory. He was reminded of his sister's harsh words.

"...How will you answer to Master Genzo if you lost the Fire Sword, the most important gift that he gave you? To think that he trusted you with it, I do not know why. You are still an amateur."

Li was right. If he loses now, then Khan will surely take the Fire Sword from him. Anything but the Fire Sword, Master Genzo's precious gift. The gift that represents one of the Four Brothers of the land.

"...I think you're a great swordsman." Celina spoke in a voice as fierce as he is. "Master Genzo chose you to be his successor for a reason. He sees something in you that you do not yet see. I remember that day in the palace when you were training hard, just like you were this morning. You train harder than any other self-proclaimed swordsman I know! For someone who works as hard as you, you are not worthless. Not in my eyes."

Her words of encouragement are priceless, for he can still hear them at this very moment. Yes, she is the reason why he is fighting in the first place. He will not allow Celina's name to be insulted, not if he can help it. Celina believes in his sword craft, so why should he not believe in himself?

Pushing the sword vertically on the ground, Alex made himself stand up and got into the fighting stance of the Heaven's Wrath Style. The Fire Sword was glowing red and Khan noticed it.

"This is not over yet."

Instead of being worried, Khan actually grew excited. "Oh, finally, some competition."

"Hyaaaah!" They charged into each other and slashed about.

Cheng fought with much determination...and for a new cause. He was no longer fighting for his own survival, but for the sake of two people. With Celina in his life, he is complete, and he cannot let her down. Once the fight ends, he can go home where she will be waiting for him. To be able to see her angelic face and smile again, that is a cause worth fighting for! *Clang*

"You asked for me, Shen Long?" asked Tai.

"Captain Tai," said Jiang, "I need to find Cheng. Where is he?"

"You are looking for him? I have not been able to find him either. He is supposed to be performing for tomorrow's show, yet he is not in the palace today."

"Not in the palace? Are you certain?" asked Jiang.

"Sorry, but I cannot help you." said Tai and he walked away.

Jiang grabbed his wound. (Damn it, Cheng, I told you not to leave the palace.)

By now, Alex and Khan have fought for over four hours and they were physically exhausted. They stood facing each other eight paces away, panting for breath.

Alex was tired and thirsty, and staring at the sun made him dizzy. Khan faced the same problem. Even if he was bigger and well-trained, he has never fought for this long before. He thought it'd be an easy win against Cheng, but apparently it was not. He can't make a fatal hit due to Alex's persistence. Similarly, it is difficult for Alex to find an opening.

From afar, Sui Long has been watching the fight. (I can't believe how long these two have been going at it. Their will is strong. The winner of the duel depends on who has the stronger will to survive.)

For the two hours, they have been doing nothing but hitting and dodging. As Sui Long suggests, it has become a battle of endurance. The one who lasts longer wins.

Alex decided that resting time is over and charged forward. "Yaaaah!"

Khan charged forward and their blades clashed. *Quong!*

The bedroom was dark and silent, and the person in bed was tossing and turning in her sleep. Celina was sleeping naked, tucked under a white blanket. She was quite uncomfortable and moaning unconsciously. There was nothing covering her frail, exposed body other than a white blanket.

Her shoulders and arms were exposed, and she instinctively clutched the blanket close to her chest, as if someone were going to pull it off. Celina was sweating heavily all over, especially on the forehead. Her lower thighs and feet were exposed, and they moved a little as she continued to sleep in pain.

One can only imagine what kind of nightmare she was having...perhaps it has something to do with Alex's duel?

Clang With each hit, the warriors grow more tired. It has been four hours since the beginning of the fight, and Alex can feel his legs trembling, as he is almost out of energy. But he will not stop here, for his life is on the line.

Alex threw an airbreaker at Khan, effectively knocking him down. Khan stood up and panted for breath. His vision was becoming blurry. (Damn it, I should be beating him already. This lad is a tough one.)

By now, the Fire Sword's glow has faded out. Legend says that the sword's power depends on the user's spirit, and as the user grows tired, so will the sword lose its power.

Khan and Alex screamed and threw airbreakers at the same time. *Wham* The forces collided and cancelled each other out, creating a wave of wind.

Whoosh They continue to throw airbreakers at each other, to see if one will cave in. Eventually, they ran out of strength and stopped.

Sui Long thought: (Both fighters are at their limit. The next hit will very likely determine the winner.)

Alex charged forward with all his might, eventually meeting Khan at the halfway point. The only thing on his mind was to see Celina again...her smile is priceless and her love is to die for. He cannot wait to see the look on her face when he returns alive. She will be so delighted to see him; it will be a priceless moment for the both. Yes, that moment alone is a compelling reason to live.

"Yaaaah!" "Yaaaah!"

Clang!!

They went past each other and remained still. They put their last ounce of strength into that last hit, and from here on, the first one to fall is the loser. *Thud*

Khan caved in and collapsed. He was surprised that he actually lost. "You win, lad. Now finish me off." he muttered weakly.

The Fire Sword felt ten pounds heavier. Alex put the sword back into its shell and turned around. "I have no intention of killing in cold blood. Let this be a lesson to you."

Khan was surprised that he was spared. He has no idea why Alex Cheng would spare him, after all the things he has done, but now he sees Alex from a different light. He is an interesting character indeed.

Did Cheng spare him because he feels Khan can benefit more from being alive, or was it because he has no strength to even raise his sword? His energy was completely drained by now, and he was walking on sheer willpower.

The sun's rays were ten times as fierce, and his body felt like a hundred tons. In actuality, he actually should have fallen before the match was over, but something kept his body moving. Now that the duel is over, he can finally let go. *Thud* He collapsed in the middle of the road.

Sui Long jumped down and came to his aide. "Cheng? Are you alright?"

The woman was lying sideways in bed, covered by nothing but a white blanket. Celina was sleeping but wincing and moaning painfully. Drops of sweat dripped down her face as she was struggling. She was having a nightmare about something that happened a short while ago, a certain something that she could never forget, no matter how hard she tried to repress the memory.

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

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

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

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

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

"Anything, you say?" Jiax asked, staring at Celina.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Celina's eyes twitched and she moaned and squirmed. The pain that she felt on her body that day was still evident, as she was feeling it right now.

The bandits laughed and cheered Jiax continued to cut various parts of her dress. *Slish* He made a vertical down on her neckline, revealing some cleavage on her breasts. "MMMMFFF!" she moaned. the bandits stared with glittering eyes.

He put the knife on her leg, making an incision on the dress, revealing more of her legs. *Slish* Each cut he made was one step closer to being exposed completely, which did happen eventually, no matter how hard she prayed to the heavens.

There was nothing Celina could do to defend herself but moan and shed tears of helplessness as the bandits stripped her clothes, and her dignity at the same time. *Slish slish*

"MMFF! MFFF!"

It was truly a nightmare come true for Celina, having her dress cut to pieces, while these perverts glared at her, all waiting to see her flesh. And she was bound to the chair, her wrists tied behind her back and her ankles were tied up, just sitting

there like a helpless puppet. This has the ultimate humiliation for a woman, to lose everything that is important to her to a group of rapists.

While she was sleeping defenselessly, a man came into her room. His shadow slowly approached the bed. It was easier to get in than he thought, for there was no one guarding the building. What luck it is indeed for him, it will make his job much easier.

Jiax had a wicked smile on his lips as he approached the bed, where Celina was resting like an angel. An angel about to have her wings cut off. Jiax came to the bed and took a good look at her frail, weak body. He smiled as he looked at her cleavage, and God knows what he was thinking in that dark mind of his.

How defenseless she was, just laying there naked, not having any idea what was about to fall upon her. How convenient for him that she is unconscious, it will be an easy job for him. How unfortunate for her to be in this situation, as she had let her guard down completely. Jiax had no trouble getting in and there was no one to protect her.

He could do all sorts of things to her, and she would not be able to do a thing about it. When she wakes up, it will already be too late.

Celina's eyes twitched as the image continued to haunt her mind.

Jiax's hands locked her wrists to the floor. They were face to face and she just stared at him with pure fear. "No...please..." she pleaded with tears.

"Who's going to save you now?" As he spoke, she could feel his breath. "That worthless king isn't going to save you!" With that said, he forced his lips onto hers.

The pain and horror came as a surprise. "MMMMMMMMMMMMFFFF!!!" Her eyes grew wide open from the shock and even more tears streamed down her face.

It was truly a horrible feeling indeed as he tasted her lips...as well as the inside of her mouth fully. Celina was completely and utterly helpless

Her fingers squeezed the carpet tightly as his hand was holding her wrist. This situation was never fair to begin with...she happens to be at the wrong place at the wrong time...for she is the king's concubine. She was minding her own business and one night, she was captured and brought here to be this pervert's sex slave.

Her feet kicked and thrashed about. Poor Celina could do nothing in her situation, as she was physically overwhelmed. Every single moment was revolting and unbearable, as she felt his tongue inside her mouth. Each second felt like ten years.

Celina woke up a little dazed. When her eyes opened a little, she saw a man standing in front of her. She blinked a few times and her vision became more focused, and realized that there actually was a man standing in front of her. When Celina realized that it was Jiax, she was so shocked and scared that she was about to scream, but no sound came from her mouth.

There was no time to wonder how or why he is here, but other than the fact that he is, and she was in danger. He was exactly how she remembered him - he

had the eyes of a demon and a killer, a bastard of a man who'd do anything to get what he wants.

Celina sat up and clutched the blanket close to her chest. Her eyes were shaking in fear.

Jiax drew his sword and held it high.

Tears dripped from Celina's eyes from pure fear. This is probably the worst-case scenario that can happen...she was naked, her hands clinging onto the blanket, the only thing covering her body. She was weaponless and completely defenseless, and about to be attacked by a killer with a sword. Celina just woke up, and found herself in a comprising situation.

At first she thought it was a dream, but he is real and in the flesh. And without any way of defending herself, her life was on the line. How will Celina get out of this situation?

[C] Title Contents

In the first few seconds of consciousness, Alex saw Sui Long's face. Apparently, he was feeding Alex water while he was unconscious.

"Cheng? You are awake. Thank goodness." said Sui Long.

Alex got out of bed and put a hand over his head. "Ugh...what a headache. How long have I been asleep?"

"It has been over six hours."

"I must have been really tired. What are you doing here? I thought I told you to go back?"

"There are certain orders that I cannot comply with. My job is to protect you, and I intend to carry out that duty despite your wishes."

"You were watching me during the duel, yes?"

"I saw the whole fight. It was painful to watch, but in the end you triumphed. You're improving every day."

Alex reached around the bed, looking for something. Sui Long handed him the Fire Sword, and Alex sighed in relief. "I wouldn't want to lose this again."

"It was a duel to the death, that was the agreement, correct? Why did you not kill him?"

"Killing in cold blood isn't my style." Alex replied. "Besides, I'm sure Khan would have done the same if he was in my position. I can sense that about him."

"If you say so."

"Oh right, I promised Celina I would go back to her as soon as it's over." Suddenly, his eyes grew wide open as if he's seen a ghost. "Celina's in danger!" He grabbed the Fire Sword, flipped the blanket off his body and hopped off the bed.

"What do you mean?"

"I can feel it. I need to see her now or I might never see her again!" ¹³

Jiax's shadow covered Celina as she watched in pure fear. Her eyes were shaking as she stared at this horrible man, wondering what he will do. One hand was on the bed, and the other hand was clutching the blanket close to her naked body, and her body was trembling and shaking all over.

She was so shocked that she could not even scream, but just watched, paralyzed. Jiax raised his sword high and brought it down.

"AAAAAH!!!" screamed Celina. *Slish* It cut the blanket between her legs, making an incision. It was **this** close to her womanhood. But next time he will not miss. Jiax raised his sword and slashed again, and Celina squirmed to the side, and the blade hit the blanket, almost hitting her leg. *Slish*

She was completely helpless against a man with a weapon...after all, what can she do without any weapons or clothes? Jiax aimed at her head, and she quickly dodged and crawled backwards. *Slish* He managed to cut off pieces of her hair.

She quickly grabbed a pillow and blocked his next attack. *Tffffff* The pillow was cut in half and feathers flew all over the place. Everything happened in slow motion and the feathers slowly drifted in the air. Jiax was grinning wickedly while she gasped and stared at him with frightful eyes.

What a predicament for Celina to be in, to be trapped with a killer in the bedroom, and her life was on the line. The man who once raped her is now trying to kill her, the very same person that haunts her memories day in and day out...and she is here, all alone, with this madman, who is out to take her life. No one was here to help her.

She seemed like a deer in headlights, her body frozen and not knowing what to do. She had nothing to defend herself with...nothing but her own flesh.

It was nightfall and there was no one on the streets, no one except for one. **Alex** ran as fast as he could back to the house from where he came from. For some reason, he was absolutely certain that Celina's life was in danger. One can say it is a sixth sense that he has developed in order to protect his loved one.

But he was still exhausted from the duel, and he had not properly rested, and he was out of breath. Alex grabbed the wall and panted for breath. He knew that time was running out for Celina, for if he does not make it on time, he might never see her again. He must push his body to the limit and get back to her as soon as possible. Hopefully, Celina will do fine...

Jiax raised the sword high and brought it down, and Celina quickly dodged to the side. "Aaaah!!!" The blade hit the pillow next to her. *Plop* She rolled out of

¹³ Original: Jiang Ye visits Alex. It makes the story more complicated. Jiang Ye should stay in Alex's building in the palace.

the bed and fell on the floor. *Thud* She was lying there sideways, watching in horror as Jiax pulled the sword out of the bed while he stared at her. For some reason, her body felt weaker and heavier, and she was unable to move. Maybe she just woke up, or maybe she was paralyzed by fear.

What will she do in this situation? Poor Celina is just a woman, attacked while she was off guard, and the moment she woke up, she was thrown into this life and death situation without warning. Celina watched helplessly like a fallen bird, her hand clinging onto the blanket, the only thing she had to cling to in the world. The blanket covered everything from her breasts to her lower thighs, but covering herself up will mean nothing if she is hit by his blade.

In this situation, she was nothing but a naked woman, watching the madman approach her. Will she escape before the hard steel penetrates her flesh?

His shadow covered her, and he grinned evilly. It was not just any grin, but the grin of a villain about to do something wicked, the grin of a devil about to make a sacrifice. Jiax swings his sword at her, and she quickly rolled out of harm's way. *Cling* The blade hit the floor.

Jiax continued to slash at her, while Celina rolled away and screamed for her dear life. He slashed like a madman, laughing as he did, and he cut some of the curtains in the room.

Jiax stabbed at her, and she rolled out of the way, and the sword plunged itself into ground, stabbing the loose part of the blanket. The curtains fell on him and he could not see and struggled with it, and his back hit a jar and he fell down. *Crash*

This was her golden chance to escape, and Celina pulled the blanket desperately to get it loose. Jiax was struggling and groaning as he tried to get the curtains off. Celina pulled and pulled, her heart pounding rapidly. Jiax stood up and walked towards her. She pulled hard and tore a piece of the blanket.

Celina stood up and backed away to the wall, her hands clinging on the blanket, never letting it fall off. That is the last thing she needs in this situation. Jiax pulled the sword out of the floor, and Celina ran to the other side of the room.

Ever since Jiang asked for Cheng's whereabouts, Tai grew worried, and ordered a search for Cheng and Lady Ce. It has been several minutes since then, and he was becoming impatient. At last, one of his men came back to report to him. The soldier bowed. "Captain Tai, we have searched the entire imperial complex, but there are no signs of Alex Cheng or Lady Ce."

"They're not in the palace?" Tai said. (Where are they? Could it be...)

Celina ran down the dark hallway like she never ran in her life. She had no destination in mind; all she wanted to do was to escape from the psycho. There was a set of stairs in front of her, and she took a wrong step and fell down painfully. *Thud thud thud*

She lay on the floor semi-conscious, unable to get up. But when she heard Jiax's sinister footsteps from the top floor, Celina opened her eyes. She forced herself to get up, no matter how hard it was, for if she does not, the consequences will be unthinkable. She was limping across the hall, with one hand on the wall and one hand over her blanket.

There was a room in front of her, and she opened the door and shut it and rested against the door. She panted for breath, as she was never this scared before. Her heart was beating rapidly, and she had shortness of breath.

This is a hopelessly desperate situation for her. She was weaponless and weak, and on top of that, wearing nothing but a **white blanket**. There was no time to even think about what to do, all she could do was run away. Time is of the essence, and she had better do something, otherwise it could be her end. Maybe, just maybe if she stalled long enough, then someone will come save her?

There was no time to even rest, as the tip of the blade came out of the door. *Crack* It was in close proximity to Celina's face, and she screamed in shock as she saw the blade. She fell on the floor on her bottom, and just watched as Jiax tried to cut the door open. *Crack* The blade went through the door, making punctures.

"I know you're in there!" said the haunting voice from outside. "I'm coming to get you..." *Crack*

Eventually, he broke the door open, and he approached in his usual threatening manner. Celina realized that this could be the end of her as she knew it. The entrance from which he came in is the only way out, and she was trapped.

"No, please!" She crawled backwards as he approached. "No, no!"

Jiax knew that this is it for her, there will be no more running away.

"Please, no! No!!!" she pleaded.

But pleas mean nothing to him, for he was itching to shed some blood.

The man in the darkness was standing there, with his deadly sword, the sword that he will use to slice his victim into pieces. Lightning flared, showing his brute face for a split second.

"No! Please!" cried Celina, lying on the floor. She crawled back as he approached ever so slowly. "No, no!"

Jiax brought the sword down like an axe, and it hit the floor between her legs. *Chop* Celina screamed as the blade was this close to her womanhood. Then he swings it at her, and she tilted her head back to avoid it. *Slash* Pieces of her hair was cut, and she rolled away from him.

Celina stood up and backed away to the wall. There was no room to run to now, for he was directly in front of her. Each step he took towards her was one step closer to her demise. Her blanket was cut in several places, and it was the only thing protecting her precious body from this rapist and murderer.

Tears dripped down Celina's eyes as she gasped and feared for her life. The blanket was a little loose, and it fell off. Now she was completely exposed, and Jiax saw everything. His eyes widened and lit up and his smile grew wider.

The worst that can possibly happen has happened, Celina was now standing naked in front of him, a killer with a weapon, with no means of escape. Tears drip down her eyes as she wondered what fate awaits her.

Jiax raised the blade high and swings it at her, and Celina screamed.
“AAAAHHHHH!!!”

While running, Sui Long finally caught up to Alex. “Cheng!” he shouted. Alex continued to push and push, but he found himself not able to run any longer. He collapsed on the street from pure exhaustion. Sui Long went to his aide. “Cheng?”

“Celina...I have to save Celina...”

“You are in no condition to do so.” said the masked bodyguard.

“But...she is in danger...”

“I shall go in your place.” His dedicated bodyguard ran stealthily down the street.

Celina was kneeling on the floor, nearly her entire body was covered by the white blanket, except her arms and shoulders. She was panting for breath. Jiax stood before her, snickering and smiling at her. He bent down and grabbed her hair, yanking her head up.

“You thought I was dead, didn’t you? Heh heh. I’ll keep coming back for you because you’re my woman.”

“Please...stop...”

“Heh heh.” Jiax’s eyeballs darted to the side and he turned around. Zi was in the room. Celina gasped in surprise. It was a relief to see someone else, especially a friend.

“You are a sneaky one. You snuck in here undetected like a rat.” Jiax drew his blade and charged.

Zi’s blade knocked his blade to the side and stabbed him in the chest.
Schleb

“Ugh!” Jiax coughed blood and he fell against the wall, and slowly slid down.

“Lady Ce...or Celina?” Zi bent down and placed his palms on her shoulders.

“Help me...” she murmured.

“Of course.” They embraced.

Celina fell unconscious against his shoulder. He lifted her body up along with the blanket and dashed out of the room.

Jiax exited the building with a hand over his bleeding wound. “Come back here you bastard...ugh.” He fell down on the street. No one else came to check up on him so it was unknown if he died or not.

Sui Long came back to his lord to report the bad news. Alex, upon seeing him, anxiously grabbed his chest. “Did you find the Celina? How is she?”

"I am sorry." Sui replied while staring off to the side. "By the time I got to the house, she was already gone. There was no trace of her."

Alex wanted to deny it, but at this time, what is the point? He loosened his grip on Sui's clothing and slowly let himself fall on his knees. Today was supposed to be a victorious day, but it turned out to be a day of grievance... for Celina, the person he wants to see the most, is no where to be found.

二十五: The Red Feather Rebellion

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Khan was sitting in a bar and drinking alone. The defeat from before still haunted his mind.

They went past each other and remained still. They put their last ounce of strength into that last hit, and from here on, the first one to fall is the loser. *Thud*

Khan caved in and collapsed. He was surprised that he actually lost. "You win, lad. Now finish me off." he muttered weakly.

The Fire Sword felt ten pounds heavier. Alex put the sword back into its scabbard and turned around. "I have no intention of killing in cold blood. Let this be a lesson to you."

Khan was surprised that he was spared. He has no idea why Alex Cheng would spare him, after all the things he has done, but now he sees Alex from a different light. He is an interesting character indeed.

He was certain that victory belonged to him but instead he suffered a defeat. Even though he failed his mission, he was delighted that he met someone like Cheng, who is an interesting character. Most people would have taken his life, but not Cheng. Khan amused himself with this thought as he gulped down another cup of wine.

Somewhere in the imperial complex, a servant was standing by the well, holding the rope. There were several swords loaded in the bucket and the servant was lowering the bucket.

Lord Yu came in and said: "What are you doing?"

The servant reacted with shock. "Uh, nothing." he replied with his head lowered.

"Why are you not at your post??" Yu asked.

"Sorry, I was thirsty so I got some water."

"What did you put into the well?" asked Yu.

"Nothing." the servant replied.

"Load up the bucket." Yu ordered.

The servant's eyes glanced left and right. He suddenly drew a knife from his pocket and ran at Yu, who grabbed his hand and punched him in the stomach. Yu proceeded to flip the servant upside down. *Wham* Then he stepped on the servant's stomach.

Two other guards came in and grabbed the fallen attacker and lifted him up by the arms.

"What have you hidden in the well?" Lord Yu asked.

"Nothing but weapons...what's it to you?" said the attacker.

"Search him." said Yu.

The guards put the attacker on the ground and searched his clothing. Servant A found a red feather and proceeded to give it to Yu for closer examination.

"This is all we found, my lord." said a guard.

"A red feather? What is the meaning of this?"

The attacker smiled. "How should I know?"

"Is this part of Liu Zhang's plot? Do you work for him?"

"Why would I work for someone like him?"

"You're a stubborn one, eh? Men, take him away. Administer one hundred spankings and then send him to the dungeon."

"Hai!" The servants dragged the attacker away.

The **Mid-Autumn Festival**, also known as the **Moon Festival**, is one of the most celebrated holidays in the land, second to the Spring Festival. The holiday is based on a legend about a man named Houyi who came from the heavens to the land and fell in love with a mortal named Chang'e. There are many variations of this legend, but in one variation, Houyi and Chang'e became married.

Since it was forbidden for a heavenly person and a mortal to become married, they had to live in secrecy. They decided to drink the elixir to become immortal. However, a man by the name of Feng Meng was jealous of them, and he murdered Houyi. Chang'e discovered his plot, and in order to keep the elixir from Feng Meng, she drank it all herself. She finds herself ascending to the heavens, but instead lives on the moon.

Chang'e lives on the moon, but her heart is still on the earth. To this very day, citizens of China still celebrate the Moon Festival, as it is called, by eating mooncake and playing with lanterns at night.

People all over Yi Ling were preparing for the Mid-Autumn Festival. Children were getting excited, going to the stores and buying lanterns in the market place. In the palace, there will be a performance, consisting of dancers, and even a play, and after that will be a grand feast.

Sitting on the royal chair, Liu Cao was sitting in his usual position, with his chin resting on his hand and his legs crossed. He seemed to be bored with the

performance on stage. The dancers gathered together in two lines, single file, and then they danced to the center of the stage and formed three lines.

They proceeded to open their pink umbrellas and spin in circles with the umbrellas waving around.

"The performance has already begun, and both our star performers are nowhere to be found." said Cao.

"I have already sent a search party to look for them. They have not been found yet." said Tai. He bowed and left the room.

Liu Cao continued to watch the show with disinterest, as he was thinking about an earlier conversation.

"A red feather?" Cao asked. "What is the significance of the red feather?"

"I do not know." Yu replied. "Perhaps it is a message that spies are sending to each other."

"Lord Yu, I want you to find out what Liu Zhang is planning and tell me right away. This mission is of the highest priority."

"Hai." Lord Yu bowed and went on his mission.

Ever since that conversation, Yu has been in the library, diligently searching for books that have anything to do with a red feather. He has gone through row after row of books, but still found nothing. On the floor was a pile of books he had already gone through. Yu was searching frantically, flipping the pages. Just then he found something interesting and gasped. "Can this be it...?"

Yu, after making his startling discovery, hurried over to see the king. He kneeled. "Sire."

"Don't bother kneeling. Have you found the answer yet?" asked Cao.

"I have found out the meaning of the red feather symbol...it means that..."

In an arbitrary garden, two servants were watering the plants. One of them took out a knife and stabbed the other one. *Schleb* "Ugh...why..." the victim yelped as he collapsed.

"There is going to be a rebellion?!" Cao said in surprise. "Are you certain of this?"

"There is a high likelihood that this is the case." Yu replied nervously, with sweat dripping down his head. "This method is the same one used back in the Han Dynasty. The rebel soldiers all kept a red feather insignia (徽章) so they could identify each other. Once the outside attackers tried to raid the palace, the soldiers inside the palace betrayed the imperials...and they were able to slay the Han King."

"What? So that is the secret behind how the Han Dynasty fell..." said Cao, reflecting on the knowledge of the library. "I never knew this...but apparently my grandfather, **Liu Shen**, had much knowledge of the past."

"That is what the book says, sire. I believe it is relevant to our situation."

"Is this why it is called the Red Feather Rebellion?" asked Captain Tai.

"Can Liu Zhang really be this smart and cunning? He never goes to the royal library...how would he know of such a method?"

Tai bowed. "Sire, we can still stop it before it happens. With your permission, I shall do a sweep of the entire imperial complex and look for those with a red feather insignia."

In the darkness of the room, Ragnarok was kneeling before his master. "My dear pupil...our time will soon come." said Zhang. "Oh, how long I have waited for this day to come...it is unfortunate, since Liu Cao is a very capable leader. I could have used him as my subordinate, but now I have no choice but to eliminate him from existence."

"You should have done it from the beginning." said Ragnarok.

"Ragnarok, do you know that there is but a small difference between a murderer and a hero? If I kill the king during peaceful times, I am a murderer, but if I should kill him during a rebellion, that will make me a hero! Ha ha ha ha...Liu Cao will be eliminated...just as I have eliminated Han Tien, the last king of the Han Dynasty. If only the foolish king would have obeyed me, his family could have prospered for generations to come. But Tien wanted to betray me, he thought I was a fool, but look at who is the real fool. Once again my Red Feather Army shall rise, and you will be their leader. Ragnarok, it is time for you to reveal yourself. You have been waiting for this moment for a long time, and the next time we meet, it will be in the royal hall, and I will already have become king."

"Yes, master." he replied with his head down. But if one were to see his face, he'd have a wide grin on his face, as he finally gets to let loose...meaning go on a killing spree.

Little did the imperials know, the rebellion has already taken its course. In a certain courtyard, servants were cleaning in up the area. The traitors gave each other a glance and proceeded to draw their weapons, and slashed the other servants. The servants, taken by surprise, were killed. One of them grew scared, and ran away, and bumped into a servant in blue clothing. *Schleb* The servant in blue clothing stabbed his coworker. The victim had a look of surprise on his face before he collapsed.

This was happening in various parts of the palace. Without even saying a word, those who wore red feathers drew their swords and killed those without red feathers. *Slish Slash* The servants and soldiers were killed without knowing why. The floor became stained with blood.

Captain Tai and his men came to the garden to stop all the servants. "Hold it! Everyone freeze!"

All the female servants screamed in fear as the soldiers approached them.

"I promise that we will not hurt you if you cooperate." said Shu Tai.

All the servants got on their knees and lined up single file.

"Search them all. Kill those who carry a red feather on them!"

The guards began to search the servants one by one. The servant who was at the end of the line grew nervous. He was staring at the ground, afraid to look up. The guards were almost up to him, there were four people left and then he will be exposed. He grew more nervous and worried, and the suspense was too much to handle, and he took out a knife and charged at one of the guards and stabbed him. Then he grabbed the guard's sword and charged at Tai.

Guard A: "Watch out captain!!"

Clang Tai drew his sword and blocked the killer's attack. After knocking the killer's sword back, Tai stabbed him in the stomach. *Schleb* He was killed on the spot and the servants who were on their knees screamed like hell.

The soldiers came to the dead body and searched him, and found a red feather.

"So it's true...damn it." said Shu Tai.

Guard A asked, "What now, sir?"

"Search our own men for red feathers...and kill them immediately."

"Uhhh...yes sir!"

The evening has past and now nightfall was fast approaching. At long last, Ragnarok can now walk freely in the complex and he can kill whomever he wishes. For the longest time, he has been hiding under the guise of Lord Zhang's servant, always having to follow the rules and his master's instructions. He had no freedom at all, but his patience has paid off. He can finally roam freely like he once did.

Imperial soldiers approached him. "Hey you, are you part of the Red Feather Army?"

A smile fell upon his lips. "I **am** the Red Feather Army!!" he replied.

Two soldiers charged into him. *Clang* *Slash* He killed them both in two quick motions. They were so quick it was almost unseen to the untrained eye.

The remaining soldiers gasped. "Such skill...who are you?" He charged forward, only to be stabbed by Ragnarok.

"That face...I recognize him...you're...you're **Chu Yen**!"

Slash Ragnarok had stabbed him right after he mumbled his true name.

"Chu Yen is the name of the past...I am Ragnarok, the hero of the kingdom!!"

[B] Title Contents

At this time, Cheng and his bodyguard, Sui Long entered the palace, only to find it in dismay. Troops approached them.

Cheng asked, "Has anyone of you of see Lady Ce?"

The troops, noticing that Cheng did not have a red feather, drew their blades. "Demon Slayer..."

"What is the meaning of this?"

One troop charged and slashed, and Cheng dodged to the side. *Whoosh* He took out the imperial seal. "Stop! I order you in the name of King Cao!"

The troop charged at him, and Alex quickly drew his Fire Sword to block it. He pushed the troop away, and Cheng stood back to back with Sui.

"It looks like talking to them is useless." said Sui.

"What is going on here?"

"Shall we ask them?"

The troops charged forward, and Cheng and Sui Long make short work of their enemies. Only one in the group survived but he was dying.

"Tell me why did you attack us?" asked Alex.

The dying soldier smiled, even though blood was dripping out of his mouth. "**Operation Red Feather** will be a success...long live Liu Zhang's army..." Those were the words he uttered before he died.

Back at the royal hall, troops barged in during the performance. The dancers screamed and ran for their lives as the soldiers stormed the place.

Liu Cao and Yu nearly jumped out of their seats. "They're here already!?" said Cao.

The imperials and rebels charged into each other and fought.

Sire, we better get to safety."

Yu and Liu Cao, accompanied by six soldiers, left the balcony and ran off. The rebels killed the imperials and caught up to the group.

Yu drew his sword. "I will take care of this, sire. Just go!"

As the king left the scene, Yu prepared himself as the rebels charged at them. Cao turned around one last time. (You must survive, Lord Yu.)

Archers loaded their arrows with fire and shot them. *Twang* They hit houses and trees and things started to burn. Pretty soon, almost everything was burning. The palace became a burning inferno in the night sky. The soldiers continued to fight chaotically, half the time not knowing friend from foe. From this aspect, the rebels have the element of surprise.

Alex and Sui ran from place to place, surprised to see that it was burning. "No, the palace is burning!"

This reminded him of **Operation Dragonfly**, the time when the high lords teamed up to raid the palace that was under Duke Xiang's control. How ironic it is, that last time Cheng joined the rebels and they were the ones who served justice, yet this time, it is him fighting the rebels.

"Is this...Operation Red Feather?" said Alex. "Is this part of Liu Zhang's plot?"

"Quite possibly." said Sui.

"Celina...I hope she is not in the palace. Where am I going to find her?"

"It is almost impossible to find her under this situation...unless...perhaps she is with King Cao?" said Sui.

"Yes, of course...they are close friends. I have to find his majesty."

Soldiers came out from the fire and Alex could not tell if they were friend or foe. Judging by the looks on their faces, they were foes. Sui Long got in front of Alex. "Cheng, I will take care of them. You go ahead and find our king!"

"But..."

"Just do it. Your safety is my priority." said Sui Long. "Just like you went to the duel despite my wishes, I will defend you despite what you wish for. Now go!"

"Sui Long...thank you." Alex ran to the other side. It is always painful to leave a friend behind in battle. Even if Alex has never seen Sui Long's true face, he considers him a true friend.

Those who were stationed to guard Zhang's house witnessed the fire.

"We're under attack!" one of them shouted.

"We better check up on Zhang."

The guards entered the premises. Guard A entered the living room, where Zhang should be, but he was not there. Guard A decided to take a closer look by stepping in. Zhang was behind him, leaning against the wall. By the time the guard turned around to look, it was too late, for he has been stabbed by Zhang's quick movements. *Schleb*

Two guards drew their weapons. "Your time has come, you traitorous dog!"

"Ohh, is that so?" Zhang said, smirking.

Slish *Slash* Before they knew what happened they were cut in the stomachs.

Zhang came out of his house he observed the surroundings as he walked about. Buildings were burning and there were dead bodies lying on the ground. This is exactly what he envisioned the rebellion to be. Alas, his plan has come to fruition; all the months of planning have not gone to waste.

This is exactly how it was back in the Human-Demon War. There was chaos and murder everywhere. The ground was filled with the dead bodies of humans and demons, and the foul stench of death filled the air.

Zhang has been holding back on his sword craft for a while, but now he can fight freely, not fearing being discovered anymore. There were still some imperials roaming around the area. One trooper saw him. "It's you...Liu Zhang you treacherous dog!" He drew his weapon and charged.

Zhang moved his right arm with lightning fast speed and cut the man's sword into pieces. The troop was scared out of his mind and stepped back.

"Uhhh..."

Zhang charged into him and stabbed him deep into his chest. He never stood a chance. The eunuch pulled his sword and the troop collapsed into a pool of his own blood. After the kill, Zhang walked away nonchalantly.

In the royal hall, King Cao and his guards were anxiously waiting for news from the outside. A scout came in and bowed. "Sire."

"Skip the formalities! What is going on outside? Are our forces winning?"

"Our forces are losing in numbers. There are too many fights to keep track of, sire. I am sorry."

"Damn it!" said the king, banging his fist on the armrest. "How can this happen in my own home? My army is losing...this is a scenario I had not anticipated. Men, you go outside and join the fight."

"But we need to stay here and protect you." said the royal guard.

"I will be fine here." said the king.

"But our duty is to protect you. We cannot ignore our duty to you, sire." the royal guard replied.

"Your comrades outside need your help. You've fought alongside them for many years. I will be fine. I can defend myself. If anything happens, I will flee through the underground tunnel. Now go and fight, this is an order!"

The guards finally see what kind of leader he was, and they respected him for it. "Hai." They bowed and left the premises.

[C] Title Contents

The battle has already escalated to its critical point. Troops were fighting everywhere and since they were all dressed the same, both sides became confused. The only way to determine foe from ally is verbal confirmation. Servants wanted to escape the battle but the unfortunate ones became lamb for the slaughter as they were in the middle of the fighting.

Tai was separated from his group. He went to the eastern side to make sense of this chaos. He walked close to the wall, sensing someone on the other side.

Alex, from the other side, approached the corner of the wall cautiously, sensing someone on the other side. Both men pointed their swords at each other, and they became surprised.

"You're on our side, aren't you?"

"Of course. I serve only the true King of Shen."

Just the answer Alex needed to hear. "Good."

It was good to finally run into someone you trust, especially in a confusing battle as this. None of them expected a rebellion like this to occur. The last time the palace was in a state of confusion was Operation Dragonfly, the event that made Alex Cheng a hero.

Tai and Alex headed towards the royal hall, hoping to reunite with the king. But troops wielding red feathers on their weapons got in their way and they fought. The only sounds were those of death screams and blades colliding. Tai and Alex got separated due to the fighting and Alex fought so he can get back with Tai.

Ragnarok was close by, and as his eyes caught a glimpse of Captain Tai, he approached the fight scene. Ragnarok slashed some imperial soldiers and then attacked Tai. *Clank*

Tai was being pushed back constantly, and it is was that Ragnarok is the superior one. *Clunk* Tai almost lost his balance and stepped on the ground to firmly regain his footing. Then he charged forward and they clashed blades. Ragnarok pushed his opponent's blade way, and he plunged his own blade past Tai's safe zone, stabbing his stomach.

"Ugh!"

"Captain Tai!" shouted an imperial. He and two others attacked Ragnarok. Alex came and helped Tai stand up. "Go find his highness, I will take it from here."

"Alright. I'll leave this up to you." Tai ran into the flames.

Ragnarok killed some troops and Alex killed some troops and that was when they saw each other. All the other troops were finished off, thus only the two of them remained. The two warriors stared at each other with much intensity. They could feel the burning heat of the flames around them but the real flame was their anger.

Ragnarok hated the Demon Slayer before he even became the Demon Slayer, and Alex recognized his opponent as one of Zhang's servants. But apparently, he was no ordinary servant, judging by the way he wields a sword. Alex must play this cautiously.

They wordlessly charged into each other to strike. *Clunk* It is said that one can judge his opponent's strength just from the first strike. Alex's intuition was right; his opponent was no ordinary swordsman, perhaps even an exceptional one.

Alex switched to defense since he cannot attack. *Clang* Alex was spinning his weapon in circles to do a continuous block sequence. *Slush* One of Ragnarok's attacks broke through his defense and he was able to stab Alex's shoulder.

Fortunately it was not a deep wound but blood was squirting out and it was painful for him to move his arm. Alex became angry, and his anger reflected on the Fire Sword as it glowed red and **caught fire**. It was a sight to behold he held the fiery sword and there were flames in the background.

Ragnarok's eyes widened as he recognized that sword. He did not notice it before, but now he was certain...it is that very sword that he has been seeking for many years. So Genzo passed the precious weapon onto this fool? That thought filled his heart with sheer rage.

"Hyah!" Alex charged and swings his fiery blade. Ragnarok blocked. *Clang* They jumped to the air and hit. *Whoosh* *Cling*

After they landed, Ragnarok heard men coming. "Tch." He ran away into the flames.

Lightning flared in the royal room. The king in golden arm was sitting on his golden chair, waiting in the dark and quiet room. His mind was in a state of despair. The imperial complex is his domain, yet it is falling apart due to the battle outside. The rebellion came as a complete surprise. What an oversight.

Liu Cao has been king for only a short period of time, and his reign might end soon. This is one of the few times in his life where he was actually afraid. Being born taller than others, Cao usually goes around and bullies those smaller than him. He was like that back when he was a duke.

From the day he was born, Cao was interested in the art of war and combat. He'd study it judiciously from masters and read books on this subject of interest. But the peaceful Liu family denied him his opportunity to learn and he became fed up and left the kingdom. After receiving his training from General Tsai of Leinwan, he became a stronger swordsman and a tougher leader. After he defeated Zhang at the Heaven's Eye Match, he was confident that he can run the kingdom. But now, his life was falling apart.

Slash Another troop was added to Zhang's death count. Now standing in the entrance to the royal hall, he stared for a moment, reflecting on what it will feel like to be victorious. Only one thing remained in his grand scheme...Tonight, there were no troops guarding the doors for all of them were in battle.

Zhang walked into the royal hall, stepping on the red carpet. **Lightning flared**. He saw Cao sitting on the chair, not moving a muscle. Cao was sitting on the seat that once belonged to Zhang, and tonight, he will take the throne back.

"Long live the king." Zhang said sarcastically.

"Liu Zhang, this is all your doing. You did all this! You ruined my kingdom!"

Zhang looked at him with a smile. "No, your highness. This is your fault. You let this happen because you are a terrible king. Your own troops are rebelling against you!"

"Bah! Rubbish!" Cao said angrily, and stood up. "Zhang, you scoundrel! You set this up, didn't you? How did you get all those men to betray me? You replaced them during your short reign as king, didn't you?"

"Very good, sire. You figured it out. Oh wait, I should not address you as sire anymore. Because you will not be king any longer."

Cao walked down the stairs. "You think you can take my place? I defeated you, and according to Heaven's Eye, I am the rightful heir to the throne. It is the will of the heavens!"

"You abandoned your right to the throne seven years ago when you left!"

"That does not change the fact that I am the next in line to inherit the throne. It is the Mandate of Heaven!"

"It is clear you cannot manage a kingdom. You cannot even manage your own people. Shall we redo the Heaven's Eye match today?"

Cao laughed. "Ha ha ha ha! You were utterly and completely defeated by me in front of everyone. It is blatantly obvious you are a sore loser."

Zhang smiled. "Oh? You think that was the extent of my abilities? Perhaps I lost the match on purpose just to mislead you."

"You are a terrible liar." Cao replied. "If you want another match, that is fine by me."

"Then so shall it be." Zhang drew his sword. He has been waiting for this moment for a long time. At this point in the game, there was no need to hide his excitement any longer.

The two did the psychological stare. During these few seconds, it is important to stay mentally strong to try to psyche out the opponent. However, Zhang is not easily psyched out, for he has fought many battles...countless battles. For him, it is but a walk in the park¹⁴.

Cao charged forward and attacked. His style demands that he stands sideways and attack, since standing sideways leaves less openings.

Zhang recognized his stance. (The western Eagle Style.)

Cling Zhang stepped back to block the attack. Cao swept his blade low and Zhang jumped up. Cao swings his high and Zhang ducked. *Chang*

Zhang counterattacked and Cao stepped back. The king now grew worried. Why was his opponent's fighting style different than last time? Can it be true...that Zhang held back and lost on purpose?

Cao screamed and did a horizontal slash, Zhang blocked and pushed his blade away, and he stabbed his blade into Cao's chest. Cao groaned in pain as the tip of the blade penetrated his golden armor and blood was leaking out from the hole.

"Ugh...why you..."

Zhang: "Do you really think you won last time? I was only pretending to be weak and I let you win. You think are so smart, yet you were unable to figure this out. Ha ha ha ha!"

"You are a sly fox, Zhang. You've been secretly studying sword craft...but you are not better than me!"

"But of course, you are in denial...so has everyone else that I have killed. You use the Western Eagle Style, the style that I mastered sixty years ago."

Cao's eyes widened as he cannot believe what he was hearing.

Zhang continued. "As a matter of fact, I have mastered nearly **every style** that exists today...I even know styles that are extinct. I know all of your moves and I can easily predict them. Nothing comes as a surprise to me in the battlefield."

"You...you demon! How dare you take the Liu family name!" Cao charged forward angrily and attacked aggressively.

Zhang blocked or dodged every thing Cao did. Cao had a hard time finding an opening. (Grrr! His style has switched to Heaven's Wrath!)

Standing sideways, Cao thrusts his sword forward. Zhang ducked the attack and swings his blade into Cao's side bone, cracking his armor and hitting his flesh. "Aaah!" (Now it's Walking Crane?!)

Zhang kicked him in the face. *Pak!* Cao fell and dropped his sword.

¹⁴ Idiom meaning it's nothing to him

"Now you can join Liu Bei in hell." Zhang raised his sword high and was ready to make the final strike. Suddenly, he heard footsteps coming from outside. It was Alex Cheng with two royal guards. Zhang decided to run away.

Alex saw a glimpse of Zhang, but when he saw the fallen king, he decided to help him. "Your highness!" Alex lifted his head up. "Speak to me."

Cao was bleeding from the mouth. "Liu Zhang is escaping...he is going to the underground tunnel..."

Alex gasped. "Liu Zhang did this?"

"There are guards stationed in the tunnel. They should be able to buy you enough time to catch up to him...do not let him escape!"

"But sire, you are injured." said he.

"It is but a minor scratch. Just go! This is an imperial order!"

"I will come back for you right away." Alex left through the rear exit.

Liu Zhang jumped into the pool and swam his way to the bottom where there was a hole. This is one of the secret entrances to the underground tunnel. The ancient tunnel has not been used since Operation Dragonfly; it was filled with moths and seaweed. The tunnel should be empty, but Liu Cao set up wooden gates and had two guards stationed by the first gate.

When the guards saw Zhang, they crossed their spears. "Hold it! Who goes there?"

"So, King Cao is not so dumb after all."

The guards charged and attacked. *Quong! Quang!* Zhang finished them off with moves of the Eagle Style. He proceeded to the gate and cut it apart with his sword. *Crack*

Alex arrived only to find two injured guards. They told him Lord Zhang escaped and it was too late to catch him.

As the fight continued in the complex, Shu Tai and his men came out of hallway and charged into an unsuspecting group of red feather troops. They were taken by surprise and being outnumbered, they were crushed.

Tai was somewhat able to get things under control. Using his leadership abilities, and his knowledge of the complex, he organized the imperials into three different groups and they only moved on his command. They swept through each part of the complex, attacking the red feather traitors.

Ragnarok just killed another troop. "The assassination of King Cao failed..."

A Red Feather soldier came to him. "Sir Ragnarok, what are your orders?"

"We are losing our advantage. Eventually the reinforcements will arrive, so we must flee for the time being."

The Red Feather troops escaped either through the front gates or the back gates. Those who were unlucky to stay behind were slaughtered by the onslaught

of imperial troops. Shu Tai made it clear to show no mercy to anyone that has a red feather.

Once all enemies were cleared from the palace, it marked the end of the Red Feather Rebellion. The imperial troops succeeded in driving out the traitors. But it was an empty victory for Liu Cao, for he is critically injured, and his palace is ruined, filled with dead bodies of his men. It was indeed an empty victory.

二十六 The Remains of a Battle.

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The Red Feather Rebellion was over, but the palace was in a disastrous state. Rare was there a spot that was not burned or a building that was not deformed to some degree. Most of the flowers and grass have been burned down and the air is polluted with the foul smell of dead bodies.

Alex was sitting on a piece of concrete while talking with his bodyguards. "We are glad to see you safe." said Sui Long.

"I survived the fight, so what of it? I let Liu Zhang escape. Now he will cause trouble to us and we can no longer monitor him."

"Many have been killed during the confusion. Count this as a blessing, Cheng." said Sui Long. s

"That's true." Alex replied. "As long as we are still alive, we can still do something about Zhang. Sui Long, I need you to find his whereabouts."

"Right away, Cheng." Sui Long jumped away from sight.

"I should go with him." said Shen Long.

"No, you go back to your quarters and rest. Sui Long is a very capable swordsman."

Jiang Ye nodded in agreement. "In my condition I will only slow him down. I suppose I should take your advice and rest. Later." With that said, Jiang walked away.

Later, Tai showed up he bowed. "Sir Cheng."

"Captain Tai, there is no need for formalities between us." Alex replied.

"But you are still the Demon Slayer, and must be addressed as such."

"That title was given to me by Liu Bei. All I did was slay one demon. So, when no one else is around, you do not have to address me by titles."

Tai smiled. "You are humble indeed. I am finally beginning to see what Lady Ce sees in you."

"She is still missing, isn't she? She is the one person that I want to see right now...I wonder where she could have gone to."

"Well, I have good news for you, Cheng."

Celina showed up with her servant, Lei. Alex's eyes widened. "Celina?" He jumped off the concrete and stared at her in disbelief. She was as happy to see him as he was.

Her lips naturally smiled and her eyes became filled with tears. "Alex..." She ran to his arms and they embraced. Their embrace was ever so tight; as if they were glued together.

"Celina...where did you go? I was so worried about you!"

"I'm sorry! *Sob* I tried to find you!"

Then they let go of each other. "I thought I'd never see you again..." she said.

"No...I don't die easily. I thought that you were dead...I was looking all over for you." said Alex.

"It must be heaven's blessing that we are both alive." Celina commented.

Tai and Lei smiled, silently agreeing that these two were meant for each other.

All this time, they had to keep their relationship a secret, but now it was okay, because no one else was watching, with the exception of trustworthy people such as Tai and Lei. Normally, Alex and Celina were quiet people, and the only exception was when they were with each other. When they do speak, they speak strongly, pouring out all their emotions.

Liu Cao was resting in a private room, a place where only his closest subordinates know of. It has only one window, and it was dark and damp. There were bandages on his upper body from his previous fight with Zhang and he was resting in bed, with the curtains drawn as to not let others see his injuries.

Alex came in and saw Tai kneeling. Upon seeing the silhouetted figure from the curtains, he kneeled. "It is me, Cheng. I am here to see you, sire. How is your condition, sire?"

"I am fine. These are but minor scratches." Cao coughed. The truth, however, was quite different than what Cao presented it to be. His wound was deep enough to make it a serious condition, but his pride would not allow him to admit it. He is the type of man who will never show weakness, not as the king, nor as the sole heir of the Liu family. He continued. "Do not tell the others about my wounds. As far as they are concerned, I am perfectly fine. It will take some time for my recovery to take place. Demon Slayer, I called you here because I needed to see you."

"This is Zhang's doing, isn't it?" Alex said with spite.

"Rest assured we have eliminated most of his forces." said Tai.

Alex clenched his fist. "We had him right where we want him. If I see Zhang I will personally take him down."

"Cheng, do not underestimate Liu Zhang. That is of utmost importance." Cao screamed and did a horizontal slash, Zhang blocked and pushed his blade

away, and he stabbed his blade into Cao's chest. Cao groaned in pain as the tip of the blade penetrated his golden armor and blood was leaking out from the hole.

"I have studied sword craft for most of my life, and yet Liu Zhang was able to defeat me. Do you remember the Heaven's Eye Match?"

"Yes." Alex replied.

"Have you not noticed anything peculiar about the way he fights?" asked the king.

Tai answered first. "Indeed, I did notice that his movements were sluggish. Is this the same person who defeated you, sire?"

"Yes. He injured me by himself. He was fighting like a completely different person."

"How can this be? Are you suggesting that he is pretending that he knows nothing of sword craft, but secretly he is an expert?"

"I cannot be sure of such a thing right now." said Cao. "But when I fought him, he was able to predict all my moves. The style he used was a variation of many styles, some of which I have never seen before. He somehow knows the Eagle Style in and out. If my fears are correct, we may be dealing with an exceptional swordsman...one who can match the caliber of that of the Four Brothers. He had us all fooled."

"He is still just a swordsman. You talk too highly of your opponent, sire." said Alex.

"In any case, you are to be cautious when dealing with him. You must not fight him one on one. Understood?"

"Yes, sire. Thank you for the warning." said Tai. "We will not disturb your resting time, we will leave now."

As Tai and Alex walked towards the exit, Cao said, "Cheng, you stay."

"Yes, your highness?"

"Captain Tai is in charge of finding and exterminating the Red Feather rebels. We cannot let them escape Yi Ling. Tai is going to need a considerable amount of men to complete this mission, which leaves us short handed. That is why I am putting you in charge of the palace's reparations. You will be in command of the men here."

"Does this mean..."

"Correct. I am promoting you to captain."

"Why, sire, it is too much of an honor for me." said Alex. "We already have Captain Tai."

"You need not be modest about it. Shu Tai is a very capable man, but he is only one man. Many lords have revealed themselves to be traitors, thus I do not have many whom I trust. Cheng, you are the only other official I can trust in times like these."

"Thank you, your highness. This is much appreciated." Alex bowed.

Standing on the rooftop of the building, Xiao was feeding the pigeons. She has always heard the sound of pigeons but she has never actually seen these creatures with her own eyes. To see them take flight in packs and swoop down to eat the rice is another experience altogether.

These creatures are quite peculiar from Xiao's point of view. They come and leave in groups and when they sense a threat they fly away immediately. Xiao was enjoying herself, just watching the pigeons eat their food.

Fu came to the roof to see her. "Having fun, Miss Ye?"

"It is so much fun to be able to see again. Everything is so vast and nothing is what I imagined it to be. It has been so long since I opened my eyes that I forgot what the colors look like." Xiao looked up. "This is the color they call blue? It's one thing to know about it but another to see it with my own eyes."

"Indeed it is." Fu replied. "There are certain things that your other senses cannot experience."

Xiao's head lowered and stared at his chest, causing Fu to be embarrassed. "What is it?"

"What color is your uniform?"

"It's gray."

"I see. So that is what you call gray."

"When you are done feeding the birds, Chie Du would like to meet with you." Fu said.

"Very well."

As Fu was about to climb down from the roof, he took one last look at Xiao, and could not help but admire her beauty. Not just her outer beauty, but her inner beauty, which was shown in her personality. Now that her eyes have opened for the first time in many years, she has become a child-like adult, experiencing and learning things that constantly surprise her. There can be nothing more picturesque (風景如畫) than a young woman who is genuinely having a good time, not necessarily needing the company of others, but one who can enjoy life just by watching the sky.

Chie Du asked to meet with her so he can show her around the temple. Even though she has already taken a tour of it, this time it is different now that she can see.

Li watched them from above. She was bored as usual while Xiao was having the time of her life. Li was happy for her friend, yet she could never be happy for herself. She hardly enjoys anything. Perhaps the way she was living was not the way life was meant to be lived? Was she meant to be careful and miserable all the time? Ho Sai's lesson still echoed loudly in her mind.

"I watch and monitor the progress of all my students. The old habits that you developed ten years ago are still evident today. Your second mistake is that you expected to achieve victory from that one move, and when it failed, you left yourself wide open. What a narrow minded view that is...to risk everything into

one move. Li Cheng, if you still feel that your way of the sword is correct, then by all means, continue living the way you do."

Master Ho Sai is indeed a mystery. He had not seen her in ten years, yet he was able to remember all her moves, even her habits. Is he really the wise sage that everyone makes him out to be, and if so, were his words correct?

Under the king's orders, Alex was placed in charge of the reparations. He has changed ever since the life and death battle against Khan. He himself did not even know how much he has changed.

Celina was standing next to him while he was sitting on a fallen column. "Lord Yu," said Alex, "We have servants and stationed men who can repair the palace, but our soldiers need to be fed and paid too. We currently have a shortage of money."

"Then we should raise taxes to pay for the reparations."

"What about the gold storage we have in the reserves?" Alex asked.

"The gold reserves are for emergencies only. If a war should erupt, we would need that money."

"This **is** an emergency," Alex replied. "We are at war, not with another kingdom, but within ourselves. Right now Captain Tai is chasing the remaining members of Liu Zhang's group. Rumors tend to spread like wildfire...the rumors of this rebellion have probably spread throughout Yi Ling. If we raise taxes, it will further agitate the people. We are a kingdom of the people; we are here to serve them."

Lord Yu saw the wisdom in Alex's words. "Very well, Cheng. We shall use the gold reserves."

As Lord Yu turned around and walked away, Zi showed up. "Ah there you are, Alex. Lady Ce, it is a pleasure to see you, as always." He bowed.

Alex was not pleased with Zi today. "Zi, where have you been the whole time? You missed the entire battle."

"Sorry pal." Zi replied with a big wide smile. "I did not want to be involved in the Red Feather Rebellion. It is too risky for a guy like me."

"You always avoid what's inconvenient for you. And you're always slacking. Man you never change, still as unreliable as ever."

Celina interrupted. "Alex, don't say that. While you were away, I was attacked by an assassin and Zi rescued me."

"Is that true?" asked Alex. "I know Celina is telling the truth. I had no idea, sorry."

"It's alright." Zi replied. "Don't get all serious on me."

"So you do have your uses. As long as women are involved, right?" Alex said playfully. "Since you're here, I might as well have you help with the palace repairs. As a matter of fact, I am putting you in charge of it." ¹⁵

Zi raised an eyebrow. "Me, in charge of it? What about you?"

"I'm going to take a page out of your book¹⁶. I'm going to slack off. There's someone I want to spend time with." He glanced at Celina, who blushed in reaction to it. "Zi, you're responsible for the building restorations and the cleaning up of the corpses. When you're done write me an official document stating the number of deaths and the cost of the damages."

"Very well. Consider it done, Lord Cheng." Zi bowed in a playful way and went off.

"Alex, do you mean that?" asked Celina.

"Of course. There are some things more important than duty."¹⁷

[B] Title Contents

Shu Tai appeared before the king for a report. "Your highness, time is of the essence. We need to freeze the borders of Yi Ling, lest Lord Zhang will escape our grasp."

"Freeze the borders?" Liu Cao asked. "That would stop trading, causing the economy to stagnate."

"We have no other choice. It is the only way to prevent Liu Zhang and his men from escaping the city. No one is to come in or out of Yi Ling."

"Yes, unfortunately that is the best way. Very well, send the men the orders to freeze the borders. Security will be tightened in every single entry point. This is an imperial decree!"

"Hai!" Tai left immediately to perform his duties.¹⁸

"Cheng," addressed Tai, "Our forces are in pursuit of Liu Zhang. We are close on his trail. As a precautionary measure, we closed the borders to Yi Ling, leaving no option of escape."

"That is a relief." said Alex. "He is a dangerous person, as his highness suggests. We cannot have someone like him on the run. Tai, I must commend you, you have helped us a great deal. So much has happened since the Demon Extermination Ceremony, yet you continue to help myself and Lady Ce."

"Please, think nothing of it." Tai replied humbly. "If it wasn't for Lady Ce...I'd probably be dead. I owe her a favor from back then."

Before Tai became a captain, he was but a mere soldier. All imperial troops start off at level one and they must earn their promotions to work their way up. But Tai did not want to earn his promotions; he was too greedy to be patient.

¹⁶ Idiom meaning I'll copy you

¹⁷ Original: Celina compliments Alex on his leadership qualities. 04/18/2020: Alex puts Zi in charge of palace repairs so he can spend quality time with Celina.

¹⁸ Original: A soldier suggests Tai close the borders. 04/18/2020: Tai suggests to the king to close the borders. This forms the narrative that Liu Cao is unpopular with the people, causing them to support Lord Zhang.

One day, he was assigned to guard the royal treasure room. It was just him and one other soldier being assigned that day, as per General Chung's orders. Tai and the other soldier did as they were told and stood in front of the **treasure room** and did nothing but guard it. But there was an emergency at the palace, and all the soldiers were needed.

Tai saw this as his chance. He snuck into the treasure room and he was wowed by what he saw. There were so many relics (舍利) and jars, and he had never seen this much wealth in his life. He knows he should not be doing this, but greed got the better of him, for he came from a poor background. Both his mother and father were peasants, forced to work hard and earn little money. But Tai wanted to change his family line...and all he has to do is sell one of these relics and he will be set for life.

One particular jar caught his attention. It was a jar made of jade; a relic from the Han Dynasty. Tai picked it up and his eyes lit up with greed. Suddenly, General Chung stormed into the room. "What do you think you're doing?"

Tai was caught by surprise and he dropped the jar, and it shattered into pieces as it hit the ground. Crack!

"That was one of the king's most valued treasures...and you broke it!" Chung shouted.

"Please forgive me!" Tai said, getting on his knees. "I did not mean to!"

Chung grabbed him by the collar and dragged him out of the treasure room. At this point, two soldiers held Tai by the arms and made him kneel.

"I did not mean to..." he kept on repeating.

"You blasted idiot!" shouted the angry general. "You tried to steal from the royal treasure room...and you broke a priceless vase. You have no excuse for your actions, Tai. You will be executed immediately!"

Tai's eyes were wide open with shock. "No, please!"

This certainly was Tai's darkest moment and when he thought it was the end, by a twist of fate, Lady Ce walked by. "Why are you making all this noise in the palace?"

Everyone instinctively bowed as they should when a royal family member walks by. "Your highness," said Chung.

"What is going on here?" she demanded to know.

"This man tried to steal from the treasure room...and he broke one of the king's valuable jars. It was from the Han Dynasty and it is irreplaceable! That is why I am going to condemn (譴責) this thief and behead him!"

"I'm sorry!" said Tai.

"Silence, fool!" Chung shouted.

"Enough!" said Celina. "Give him a second chance, general."

"But your highness!"

"I do not want blood to be spilled in the royal palace. Our kingdom is a peaceful one; we do not condone (寬恕) murder over a trivial reason."

"But he destroyed one of the king's treasures." Chung replied.

"The king has many treasures passed down from generation to generation. His wealth is nearly immeasurable." said Celina. "What is the value of one vase to him? Is this worth taking the life of a soldier? Life is the most valuable treasure of all...because every person has only one. These are my orders."

"You may be the only concubine but I only take orders from Lord Fei. You're new to the palace so you don't know how things work here."

Lady Ce raised an eyebrow. "Little do you know that I am on good terms with Lord Fei and all the nobles. Sometimes they take my advice."

"Lady Ce, I suggest you do not intervene with military matters."

"Lord Fei has to answer to the king. And the king takes my advice. Do you want the king to view you as an incompetent general?"

Chung began to sweat. He assumed her to be just another pretty girl who doesn't know a thing, but he was mistaken. She has a fierce nature about her...and she knows how to play **the game**. "Yes Lady Ce." said Chung. He then spoke to Tai. "Consider yourself lucky, private. The concubine is in a forgiving mood today. But if I ever, ever catch you committing a crime again, I will not hesitate to behead you. Understood?"

Tai did a kowtow with his head touching the floor. "I humbly thank you, General Chung."

"Hmph." Chung and the two guards walked away.

While walking down the hallway, Tai caught up to Celina. "Your highness."

Celina turned around. "Oh, it is you, Tai."

"I am honored you remembered my name. I do not know how to say this...but I owe you my life."

She smiled. "There are rules here that must be followed. If you break those rules, then you will be punished. Even so, there are rules that I do not agree with. You are not a thief and I can see that."

"I...I didn't know what came over me." said Tai. "I'm really sorry."

"Enough. I know you are better than this. You have much potential...one day you will make a fine captain." With that said, she walked away.

Tai bowed and he could not believe his ears. He has always wanted to be a captain, but to hear it from someone else is certainly enlightening, particularly coming from the mouth of a concubine! Not just any captain, but a fine one, imagine that! He knew not how to repay her for sparing his life, but what he can do is work hard and make her words come true.

Alex was shocked as he listened to the entire story. "I had no idea, Tai."

"That is how it happened. If it was not for Lady Ce, I would not be where I am today. She was the only one who saw potential in a common thief like me."

"That sounds just like her." Alex said.

"She deserves a peaceful and happy life." said Tai. "Cheng, I do not care what has happened in the past. The fact that you have been banished for adultery...matters not to me. Promise me that you will take care of her."

Alex's face grew serious. "Tai, you have helped us even when we were banished. I cannot thank you enough. I promise you that Celina will live the life that she deserves. But right now, our priority should be to catch the traitor, is it not?"

Tai smiled. "Of course."

They shook each other's hands firmly, non-verbally agreeing to an alliance of comrades who look out for each other no matter what. They have been allies from the very beginning, and need not a handshake, but this handshake solidifies their relationship and they can only look towards the future.

Xiao rolled up a small scroll and tied to a red messenger bird's leg. "Are you sure it will reach its destination?"

Chie Du said, "This bird is trained to do as such. It is very wise, for it knows of many places it traveled to over the years. It can always find its way back to our temple."

"I cannot wait for my brother's reaction when he finds out the good news."

The bird, resting on Chie's finger, cocked its head and looked around. Chie moved his hand up and the bird flew off.

The red bird, as Chie mentioned, has traveled to many places over the years. It knows where the great landmarks of the Shen Kingdom are, including the Gate of Hope, the imperial palace, the entrance to the capital of Yi Ling, the port city of Yi Ping, the commoner's paradise, and the city of Yi Ting, the commoner's paradise. Many of the temple members have used this bird as means of communicating with those who are in the city. It has traveled back and forth from the temple to Yi Ling many times. This bird has traveled more than most people do in their lifetime!

After countless hours of flying, the bird finally reached the palace. It landed on a soldier's head. "Huh, what is this?" He grabbed the bird and saw a scroll attached to its leg. Naturally, he untied the scroll to read it.

The soldier reported this to Captain Cheng.

"I see." said Alex, after reading the whole thing. "You did well. You may go now."

"Hai." said the soldier.

Alex looked at the sky in a triumphant manner. (Xiao...your eyes are finally cured. Your trip to the temple was not a waste. I am happy for you. I am sure your brother will be thrilled to hear this.)

Jiang Ye read the letter in anticipation in the bedroom. He has been worried about his sister ever since she left the city, and now that she has written him, he cannot wait for the news.

Dear Brother,

I have great news that I cannot wait to tell you! After much time spent here in the Temple of Enlightenment, I can finally open my eyes and see the world as I once did. It is still quite an adventure for me, I am still getting used to it. I leave the Temple tomorrow to come back to Yi Ling, and I anticipate getting here around ten o'clock in the morning. Please take care.

**Love, Xiao Ye
Your sister.**

Jiang Ye nearly crumbled the letter as he read it. Tears swelled up in his eyes from joy. "Little sister...you're finally cured. I've waited this day for so long." No words could describe the joy he felt at this moment, for it was the happiest moment in his whole life.

[C] Title Contents

Jiang came out of the room with a renewed sense of hope. One can tell from the look on his face that he was filled with joy. "Did you read the letter?" Cheng asked.

"I've read it over and over." Jiang replied, "I wanted to make absolutely certain that it is true and not just a dream."

"She has been blind for a long time, correct?"

"Because she was blind, she was not even able to write. Yet she managed to write this letter...my sister can finally live the life that she deserves. I can hardly wait to see her. I shall leave tomorrow morning."

"Leaving in the morning?" asked Cheng. "To meet them half way?"

"Yes."

"But you are not fully healed. Doctor Taifu recommended that you stay put." said Cheng.

"Thank you for your concern, Cheng. But I can manage." He pounded his chest. "I have been through worse than this during my life. These are minor scratches compared to what I've been through."

"I wish to see Li as well, so I will come with you."

"Don't you have duties to perform here, Cheng?" asked Jiang.

"I can have Zi take my place. I do not want you to go alone."

"You don't have to do this."

"I am doing this because I want to. I will prepare us three horses. One for myself, you, and Sui Long."

Jiang smiled. "Very well."

As they were conversing, a servant overheard them. He was one of Liu Zhang's servants whose identity has not been exposed during the rebellion. After

hearing their plan, he snickered, thinking of the rewards he may receive when he tells his master what he just heard.

Vincent hurried down the hallway and stopped when he saw **Cho Mei-Yang**, his fellow senior member as well as his best friend. Cho is a swordsman who wears a white robe with long sleeves. Unlike Vincent, Cho is a purely traditional swordsman; he carries only one sword and no hidden weapons.

"Cho! Thank goodness you are here."

"What is the matter? Is it urgent?" Cho asked.

"Have you heard...that there was a rebellion in the imperial palace?" said Vincent, catching up on his breath.

"Yes, I have. As a matter of fact, Taishi and a few of his men are discussing it as we speak." said Cho.

"Oh, good. I thought I was first one to hear about it. News sure does travel fast, does it not?" Vincent asked.

"And we received it fast because we are an information network." Cho replied.

In a more private room, Headmaster Taishi and four of the elders were discussing the very same situation. These elders are the highest ranking members in the Council.

"Can it really be true?" asked Elder-A. "Someone dared to attack the imperial palace?"

"Sources say that the attack came from the inside. There must have been a rebellion." said Elder-B.

"But who can it be?" asked Elder-A.

"It must be Liu Bei's murderer. He must have been hiding in the shadows, gathering his army, and waiting for the right time to strike." said Elder-C.

All the elders became startled. "Who could have been the culprit to lead such a rebellion?" asked Elder-D.

"I have a few suspicions." said Taishi. "It could be like you said, **Elder Jong**, the same person who murdered Liu Bei. My suspicion is that it is Lord Liu Zhang. The rebellion has failed and now he is on the run."

"That explains why the security has tightened in our area." said Elder Jong.

"This spells trouble for our future operations. Our forces cannot move easily like we did before." said Elder-B.

As the men continued their discussion, Taishi went deep into thought. (Can this be the doing of Liu Zhang...no...the doing of the **Vanishing Warrior**?)

Clang! Jin just stabbed a soldier in the stomach, effectively killing him. Roh swings his blade, creating an airbreaker, and knocked a group of soldiers through the wall. *Wham!* The Demon Brothers made quick work of their pursuers, just as

they have done back in their kingdom. Up to this day, they have never been caught.

"Hmph. Security seems to be lacking recently." Jin commented.

"Could this have something to do with the Red Feather Rebellion?" Roh asked.

"Is it true? Did it really happen?" Jin asked.

"According to rumors, the rebellion failed, and Zhang's forces are on the run from the imperials."

Jin wiped the blood off his blade and put it back into its sheath. "Where is Liu Zhang?"

"Who knows? But security has been tightened around the borders of Yi Ling. Which means we can move around easier inside the city. But as for Liu Zhang, if I know him, he always finds a way to survive..."

Zhang met up with Khan in a random restaurant. As usual, Zhang wants the top floor where there are secluded rooms. He likes privacy because most of the business he conducts is illegal. Khan is a known alcoholic so Zhang ordered wine for him.

Khan finished a whole bowl of wine and slammed it on the table. "Aaah, that hit the spot!" He wiped his mouth.

Zhang does not mind that brutes that impolite and have no table manners, so as long as they are working for him. "That was good wine, was it not?"

"That sure was. But I'm sure a guy like ya did not invite me here just to drink?"

"You are quite perceptive, Khan. We did not hear from you when the rebellion started. Ragnarok and I became worried.

"My job is done, isn't it?" Khan replied. "I had a duel with the Demon Slayer, as planned. But I lost to the lad and failed the mission. I never expected that to happen. But I will return the money you paid me if that is what you wish."

"No, my dear Khan. Quite the contrary, I still want you to work for me. I have lost many men during the rebellion so I have a shortage of manpower."

"I'd love to, Lord Zhang, but I'm afraid I have to refuse."

Zhang was displeased, and it showed in his face through a grimace, a bad habit that he had acquired. "Why is that?"

"Cheng was a tough opponent, although he didn't look it. Not only did he have the guts to accept the duel, but he put up a good fight. And he spared my life."

"He spared you? That is an insult that cannot be left alone." Zhang replied, trying to attack Khan's ego. "You must use this chance to get revenge."

"Not many woulda spared me life. Up to this point, I still dunno why. He has a good sense of sportsmanship. I can't fight against a lad like that."

"You do not wish to kill Cheng?"

"People like him are rare in this day and age. Everyone's corrupt and cowardly, it is rare to find someone who is a genuine swordsman, ya know?"

"Is that your final answer?"

"Sorry, my lord. This line of work is dishonorable, ya know? I want to make an honest living from now on." said Khan.

Zhang was upset, but he kept his feelings to himself. This brute, who does not even know proper etiquette, is talking of sportsmanship? What a joke. Sword wielders like him, who cannot even speak properly, should be willingly to do anything for money. "That is perfectly fine." Zhang replied. What he despises the most is insolence, but he has a solution that will turn Khan to his side. "Here, please drink this bowl of soup. Consider it as a token of appreciation for working for me."

"Thanks a bunch." Khan took the bowl and drank it without even a second thought.

Zhang smiled as the brute gulped down the soup which has the spice in it. Once the spice takes over, he will desire it more and more until the day when he will do anything for the spice. He shall travel the same tragic road of that of King Liu Bei and become Liu Zhang's slave. All it takes is one sip.

二十七: The Trip Home. Danger in Xizang Forest!

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The aftermath of the Red Feather Rebellion was a disaster, leaving the palace severely damaged. This paradise, which is the home for the royal family, has suffered many battles in the past. It has been repaired over and over again. This paradise, which is supposed to be a place of peace, ends up being a place of power plays and a battlefield of bloodshed.

Most of the Red Feather forces have escaped the capital with their whereabouts unknown. Liu Zhang has disappeared from sight, along with his pupil, Ragnarok. They have yet to leave the city, knowing that now was not the best time to escape due to the tightened security around the borders. Because of the security, trading became increasingly difficult for merchants, and rumors of the Red Feather Rebellion spread amongst the populace.

They already view Liu Cao as a cold blooded tyrant, and now, with the addition of this internal rebellion, they further question his ability to run a kingdom.

Jiang was still thinking about Xiao's letter as he was holding it tightly. He read it many times, making certain of its authenticity, because this news is just too good to be true. Indeed, it is his sister's handwriting. Over the years, Jiang has

taken Xiao to see many doctors, but none of them were able to heal her eyes. They all said the same thing. "Sorry, but she will be blind for the rest of her life." But now his goal has been realized, and best of all, it did not cost him any money.

Sui Long and Jiang were already on their horses, ready to go at any given moment. Alex hopped onto his horse.

"Are you sure you do not need me to come?" Celina asked.

"The three of us will be enough." said Alex.

"You still have your duties to perform here, my lady." said Jiang. "This is my family business, and I do not require your help. Going to the wilderness is not fitting for a lady like yourself."

"I know you cannot wait to see Xiao." said Celina, "But I still think you should wait until your wounds are completely gone."

Jiang smiled. "Thank you for your concern, Lady Ce. I am fine, see?" He flexed his right arm to show his **biceps**. "I am stronger than a regular person, for I am the second student of the War God. I've waited eleven years to see my sister's eyes open...and I cannot wait any longer. I must see her today."

"I understand. Be careful, especially you, Alex."

"I will." Alex replied.

"Thank you for coming with us." said Sui Long. "You chose to come with us even though you do not have to."

"Non-sense." Alex replied. "What is with these thanks between comrades? You have served me ever since that day we met in the Valley. You risked your lives for me during Operation Dragonfly. This is the least I can do. We must be on our way."

Celina waved them goodbye, and off the horses galloped. On the surface, she was worried about Alex's safety, just as any woman would in her situation. He just came back from a life and death battle with Khan the barbarian as well as the Red Feather Rebellion. But deep down inside she knew that he has a strong foundation as a swordsman, as proven by his survival from the many fights he has. Plus, Sui Long and Shen Long are his bodyguards and they are extremely cautious. They have sworn to their late master to protect Alex Cheng with their lives and protect him they will.

Alex was going with them for his own reasons. Perhaps he wants to repay them for helping him all this time. But the main reason he was going was to see Li. At first, he had his doubts about letting her go with Xiao, just the two women. But circumstances and obligations prevented him from going to the Temple with Xiao. Alex can never forget the time he spent in the Temple and all those people he met there. It was the experience of a lifetime.

Now that their main purpose has been accomplished, Xiao and Li must now say goodbye to the folks at the Temple of Enlightenment, as they do not want to overstay their welcome. Both of them have gained a lot in their short time at this temple of miracles.

They bow to Guan Du and Chie Du. "Farewell, Master Guan." said Li. Her tone of voice was different than before. She did not sound so cold and heartless, but rather, she sounded normal for once.

"Thank you for everything you've done for me, Mr. Guan Du and Chie Du." said Xiao.¹⁹

"It was a pleasure having you here." Chie replied.

"Thanks to help of you monks, I am able to see again. I am truly grateful for this gift...I don't know if I can repay you, but perhaps someday I will."

"Surely." said Guan Du. "It was an honor to have you here, Ms. Ye. And if at any time you decide to become one of my students, feel free to come back. You're always welcome here."

"Thank you." Xiao smiled at him, and it was one of the most sincere smiles she had given out in a long time. Although a complete stranger, these monks treated her like one of them, and at no point did she feel alienated or out of place. This place is truly a utopia (烏托邦), as the legend says.

The three students Fu, Chan, and Shang were standing on the side, unwilling to say anything. Ever since the sparring match, things have been awkward between them. Li has offended both Master Guan and Master Ho Sai and the students do not know what to say to her.

Li and Xiao said their final goodbyes and went on their way. As they walked towards the stairs, Shang was feeling a burning urge to say at least something. This was her last chance to say goodbye, isn't it? The last time she saw Li was **ten years ago**. After she leaves, who knows when Shang will see her again? Another ten years? Perhaps twenty? Perhaps never?

Each second felt like an hour, and Shang could not help it anymore. She ran to the stairs. "Wait!"

Li and Xiao turned around.

"Li! No matter what, you are still the same Li I knew ten years ago!" Shang shouted. "You are still one of us!"

"Thank you, Shang." Li replied, smiling for the first time at the temple.

Shang waved enthusiastically. "Farewell my friend!" Unable to control herself, tears drip down her eyes even though her face was a happy one.

Fu and Chan followed her example and waved goodbye to their friend. "Goodbye, Li. Come back soon!"

"You are my best friend in the whole world! Come back soon!" shouted Shang.

Li's eyes opened wide and suddenly felt something struck her chest and felt it move up to her eyes. The way Shang was crying and her words were affecting Li, making her feel sad. Li hates long goodbyes, they are too emotional and sappy. But this one time, she will make an exception, and open up, just a little bit.

¹⁹ Original: Chie Du was not here. There's no reason he shouldn't be here to say goodbye.

"I will come back soon! Just wait and see!" Li shouted with enthusiasm. She waved as hard as Shang was.

Master Guan Du and Chie Du watched the scene and they were happy to see that they were able to say goodbye to Li. Although Guan still has some doubts about Li, but for now, she is still a member of the temple.

As the two women walked down the long staircase, Li was silent the whole time.

Li Cheng was still a teen when she first came upon the Temple of Enlightenment. She walked up the long flight of stairs and reached the top at last. To her surprise, she was greeted warmly by Shang, a female monk of her own age. Also, Chan and Fu greeted her as well. They were so warm and welcoming that Li opened up to them immediately.

There were many monk students here, but Li got along with Shang the best. Although unannounced to each other, they were no doubt best friends. They train together, sleep together, eat lunch together, talk about boys, and laugh heartily. Li had so much fun that she forgot about her family or revenge during her stay here.

Once they reached the bottom of the stairs, Li could not hold in any longer. Tears drops appeared in the corner of her eyes.

Xiao noticed. "Are you crying?"

"Me, cry? It must've been the wind." Li wiped her eyes. "There's dust in my eyes." She was here ten years ago, and it felt like a million years ago...yet it felt like yesterday. Shang's final words made Li even more sad...yet happy. The last time she was here, she was just a child who was naive but happy. Now she was an adult. Last time, she bonded with Shang well. Yet this time around, she treated Shang poorly, which she regreted now. Suddenly, the tears came pouring down uncontrollably and she was sobbing. No matter how much she wiped, the tears kept dripping.

Xiao smiled. "They are good friends."

"They are my best friends! *sob* And I'll never know *sob* when I'll see them again! Ten years? *sob* Twenty years?"

Xiao snatched Li's hand and squeezed it firmly. She did not need her mind's eye to know Li was finally speaking from the heart. Xiao understood her feelings because she too, has someone who is irreplaceable to her. She has Jiang Ye, her dear brother she had not seen in eleven years but who will always be there for her no matter what.

Holding her hand and seeing her tears, Xiao felt all of Li's emotions pouring out. It must have been hard putting up a strong front, a tough exterior and berating others. Li acted strong all this time because she needed to be strong. But deep down inside, Li still cared about them. The temple has not changed at all in ten years and while being there, Li felt like she was in a time capsule...and felt like she was ten years old again. It's okay to release your emotions, even for a little bit. ²⁰

²⁰ 04/23/2020 : Updated farewell scene to make it more sad

After Li's emotions have calmed a bit, the two continue to traverse the thick forest. While walking on the rocky road, Xiao was looking at her surroundings, bewildered by everything she saw. "So these are trees, right? And this is what a forest looks like? Wow."

"What's the matter?" Li asked. "Have you never been in a forest before?"

"I have never left the southern district my whole life." Xiao replied.

"Oh yeah, I forgot you told me that. But surely you have seen trees in the city before, correct? You were not born blind. At one point you were able to see."

"That is right, but it was a long time ago. I was living in darkness for twelve years. I am just...not used to it. All the colors and mixtures of light...and the sun's overwhelming presence. I forgot what everything looks like."

"You'll get used to it eventually." Li said.

Like last time Li led the way, for the path was unfamiliar to Xiao. After going past the Gate of Hope, Li said, "Do you mind if we take a detour?"

"Uh, okay."

Li took her to a grave with flowers in front of it.

"Where are we now?" Xiao inquired.

"We are at the Valley."

"The Valley? This is the well-known Valley of Death, isn't it?"

"Correct. The God of War once lived here. He was my master." Li kneeled in front of the grave.

Xiao checked the inscription on the tombstone. "That is...the God of War? He is the one in the rumors...the one who is my brother's teacher."

"He had only four students, and he treated us like we were his own children. But he was murdered...I've already made an oath to get revenge for him."

"The God of War...Master Genzo is one of the Four Brothers of China. Who could have done this?"

"We intend to find out. After we get back to the city, I will make this my mission."

Xiao also kneeled, to pay respect to a fellow martial artist. Even though Xiao never met him, she has heard many things about him from other people, particularly Jiang Ye. She could feel the War God's impact right now, as she was kneeling, staring at his name on the tombstone.

Li fixed the flowers on his grave. "Rest in peace, master." Li picked up her sword. "C'mon, we still have a long way to go."

"Okay!" Xiao replied.

While everyone else was away, Celina went to visit the shrine, the place where Liu Bei's gravestone was placed. The room was dark and lit by candles. There were rows and rows of stones, all of them Liu Bei's ancestors. His stone was placed directly next to that of Liu Zhao, Liu Bei's father, and of Liu Dao, Liu Bei's

mother. Next to that was the stone of Liu Shen, Liu Bei's grandfather, the founder of this great kingdom.

Even though there was no true love between them as a couple, Celina felt something for him. Even though it was a minor emotional connection, it was still something.

King Liu and his concubine, Celina Liu, were taking a stroll through the imperial garden. Flower petals fell off trees as they walked by elegantly. The servants bowed as they walked by, and they felt as if the king and concubine's presence was enchanting them.

One servant whispered to another: "Lady Celina is absolutely beautiful! How, I envy her." said female servant.

"She has married the king and wow that she is the concubine, she no longer has to worry about money...she can buy anything she wishes." said another.

"I can see why the king has chosen her. She is a beauty amongst beauties. Like a rose in a bush of thorns." replied the female servant. "Our kingdom will surely prosper."

Unfortunately, those joyous, carefree days are over now. With his death come many problems. There are no clear guidelines as to what happens to the widow of a deceased king. Unlike other concubines and princesses, she is from a commoner's background, something that many in royalty dislike. Her role in the imperial court is still unclear and she hopefully she will not be tossed aside and outcast from the court.

Tears stream down her eyes as she thought about the happy times she had with her former husband. By having her marry into royalty, she had a life that she never would even have dreamed of, an opportunity that might not happen even in ten lifetimes. Yet, Celina did not cherish her life in nobility, but rather, she took it for granted. Liu Bei did so much for her, yet she wronged him so by having an affair with another man.

Celina wanted to repay him for everything that he did for her, but unfortunately, she will never be able to pay him back...not in this world. Perhaps he can forgive her while he's in heaven.

[B] Title Contents

"Hyah!" Jiang, Sui Long, and Alex were riding on their horses. Long and far they have traveled, but they still have much to go. Jiang no longer wore a **mask**, as he desires to not wear it. Or, more accurately, he has been waiting to get rid of it for a while. To take it off was a big burden that has been released. Sui Long, on the other hand, still protects his identity, wearing the same ninja-styled black mask that covers his nose and mouth, as well as the straw hat.

Jin and Roh, sitting on horses themselves, were watching the heroes from a cliff. "You are right, brother." said Jin. "They took this path like you said."

"Hmm. To get to the Valley this is the safest path...but it is no longer safe for them." Once their targets passed by, they immediately followed them.

After several minutes, Jiang noticed something wrong. "Sui Long, do you sense that?"

"I kind of do. Are we being followed?" Sui replied.

Alex grew curious. "No one but us would come to the Xizang forest."

"I see only two." Jiang commented, looking behind him.

The Demon Brothers rode in their horses, galloping away, and they were making steady progress. Behind them followed a group of soldiers, also on horses. They all have the red feather insignia on their helmets. "Yaaah!"

Jin and Roh were getting closer in distance, causing the heroes to grow more anxious. Gallop, gallop, gallop. Roh loaded an arrow and aimed carefully at his target. To use an arrow is no easy task, but it is more so difficult when aiming at a moving target, while the shooter himself is on a bumpy ride. But Roh is a highly trained professional; the skills he has learned are unrivaled.

Twang! Sui Long ducked and the arrow missed.

Alex shouted, "Be careful!"

Jiang said, "We have to lose them somehow!"

Roh loaded another arrow and aimed with one eye closed. Twang! This one hit Jiang on the back. He felt a sudden jolt of pain on his back. "Ugh!!" Normal people would have fallen off the horse, but Jiang held on.

"Shen Long!" shouted Alex.

"I am fine! We have to lose them!"

The two female travelers continued to walk down the forest. They left the Valley two hours ago and right now they were deep in the Xizang Forest. "We are almost home." said Li.

"I cannot wait to see my brother." said Xiao. She mentioned it calmly, but one can see she cannot contain her excitement. "What will he say when he finally sees me with my eyes open? He will be thrilled."

"Yes, I am sure he will be." said Li. "He's been waiting for this day for a long time." Li knows all about it, probably more than Xiao does. While training under Master Genzo, Jiang Ye mentioned that he had a sister, and that she was blind. He had kept a secret for the longest time, yet he was dying to tell someone.

"I bet you are happy to see your brother too, are you not?"

Li grew silent for a while.

"I heard that you two were separated for many years as well. But you two are not getting along." Xiao commented.

Li grew annoyed. "Don't concern yourself about it." Suddenly, her sense of danger grew rampant. "Something's not right! We are being followed."

"By how many?"

The ninja girl listened carefully to the sounds of the footsteps. These footsteps were coming from the ground. She could hear their bodies brushing against the wind. "At least two."

"What now?" Xiao asked. "Do we wait for them to move?"

"There's more than two. We must move faster."

The bandits noticed the women were moving faster so they increased their own speed as well. At this point, both realized they were outnumbered, and the enemy was catching up. Doosh, doosh.

Several of the bandits ran ahead and got in front of the heroes and the heroes stopped running. Once they stopped, they became surrounded.

The bandits began to grin. The leader of the group walked forward. "Heh he, look at what we have here, boys. Two female travelers alone, without the protection of men."

"They're not bad at all. We should have some fun with them." said another.

"I get first dibs, of course." said the leader.

"Tch, you lowlives disgust me." said Li. "Men like you aren't even considered men, but mere animals."

"What was that, little girl? You better watch your tongue." He drew his sword. "If you beg for mercy, perhaps I will let you live."

Xiao said, "We want no trouble here. Just let us be and we will walk our separate ways."

Li smirked. "Hmph. Since when do bandits run this fast? And since when do they work so well in a group? Aren't you men a little too well trained to be mere mountain bandits? Tell me!" She drew her Ice Sword. Schling. "Who paid you to do this? Liu Zhang? Ragnarok?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Then I have nothing to say to you."

One of the bandits attacked first; he jumped and raised his sword. Li ducked and stabbed him, and pulled the sword out. Schleb!

Li's instincts were right on the mark. These so called bandits carry a red feather inside their pockets.

"Grrr! Get them!" shouted the group leader.

The entire group attacked at once. Xiao and Li, being experts in swordcraft, had no trouble fighting them. *Clang clang* Even if it was Xiao's first real fight with her vision, it was no problem for her. *Slice slice*

Most of the group was killed in a short time. The one who insulted them was the leader. He charged forward and Li evaded his attack. *Whoosh* Li stabbed him in the stomach, and it was all over in one hit. But he laughed as blood oozed out of his mouth...then he collapsed.

Li realized why he laughed before his moment of death. There were more bandits from not so far away, they were waiting in secret. They revealed themselves, and Li and Xiao made a run for it. They slid down a hill. *schhhh*

Just before they hit the ground, they rolled a few times. Their pursuers slid down the hill in the same fashion. Imperials appeared and they were running uphill and the heroes found themselves in a pincer attack.²¹

Li took a good look at her opponents. "What is the meaning of this? Imperial troops are working with bandits now?"

The leader of this group, who was wearing a helmet with a red feather on it, stepped forward.

"Criticize us if you want, woman." said the Red Captain, "But you and your friend are within our grasp."

"I see." said Li. She noticed that all soldiers had a red feather tied to their arm bands. "You are not imperials. You're part of Liu Zhang's army."

"And what if we are?" said the Red Captain. "For him to deploy so many of us...you sure have offended the wrong person."

"Soldiers have to lower themselves to the level of mountain thieves. How pathetic."

The captain smirked. "You sure talk tough for someone who is moments away from death. We are the Red Feather Army and we serve the one true king Liu Zhang! All who serve Liu Cao must perish!"²²

The bandit group began to slowly move downhill as the soldiers moved uphill.

Suddenly, they heard horses coming from the west and that caught everyone's attention. "There they are!" Jiang shouted. "Hyah!"

Xiao gasped as she heard her brother's voice. (Brother?!)

Jiang and Sui Long's horses crashed into the group of soldiers. Li and Xiao took this chance to fight the troops. *Clang Cling*

"Xiao and Li are over there!" Jiang pulled the reigns on his horse and the horse turned around and ran towards Jin's horse. They galloped towards each other and prepared for their attack. *Clang* They went past each other and turned around and continued their assault. Jin was able to hit Jiang, knocking him off his horse.

Meanwhile, Sui was fighting the soldiers nearby. Roh loaded an arrow and fired it, hitting Sui's horse. Naturally, the horse whined in pain and stood on its hind legs, forcing Sui Long to jump off.

Roh charged forward on his horse while making an attack. Sui Long rolled on the ground to avoid Roh's blade. *Whoosh*

Roh pulled the reign, telling his horse to stop. "Men, do not them escape. Not a single one of them shall escape!" he shouted while raising his sword to the air.

Alex, still riding on his horse, fought the soldiers off. *Clang* He found it easy to fight while mounted, as he can target their heads easily. But it became

²¹ Being attacked from two directions

²² Original: Xiao mentions the Red Feather Rebellion. Update: There's no way she'd know about the rebellion during her stay at the temple. Updated dialogue.

increasingly difficult as the number of enemies increased, as he has to keep his distance. The soldiers continued to slash at him, as he tried to retreat while swinging his sword randomly.

Amidst all the chaos, no one noticed that a group of archers have arrived at the top of the hill. Alex saw them gather together, and instinctively he knew it was a bad sign. With the exception of thick trees in the way, there was nothing to stop them from firing into the battle zone.

Without further hesitation, he charged uphill. Several of the archers fired. Alex swings his sword to block the incoming arrows, but he was not fast enough to intercept all of them. One hit his horse, and it screamed and whined, and Alex fell off its back. *Wham*

Xiao and Li were occupied with their own fights, and it was indeed chaotic, as a group fight normally is. *Cling* *Slash* Xiao was still not used to fighting with her eyes open, but she was still doing well somehow. The sounds and images now match and she can respond appropriately as the enemies came at her. *Clang*

Li used a spinning move and slashed two men. *Whish* She glanced at Sui Long, who was occupied with Roh. (Shen Long and Sui Long made it already? Even Alex is here? But the Demon Brothers are here as well. It must mean they followed us. Have we fallen into their trap?)

Alex was hiding behind a tree in fear of being hit by arrows. He found it difficult to approach from here, for he will be wide open. He considered moving out of their line of sight, but that would take too long.

Sui and Roh Demos were still going at it. They exchanged a few moves and stepped back. "Sui Long! We must group with Li and Xiao and flee!" Jiang shouted.

"You must pay attention to the fight." Roh said, attacking him with a quick thrust.

Sui was quick enough to block it. *Clang* Jiang wanted to help his sister but at the moment he was being attacked by Jin Demos. He found it difficult to fight with an arrow stuck to his back. Eventually he will pass out from the loss of blood if this keeps up.

The archers loaded their arrows and fired. Sui and Roh jumped out of the way.

Jiang pushed Jin out of the way, so he can yell to his sister: "Xiao, watch out!"

Xiao heard his voice and saw the arrows coming. She used quick swinging motions to block most of them, but **one hit her thigh**. *Schleb* "Ugh!"

The arrows hit some of the soldiers. *Scting* Li slashed the arrows as they came. *Crack crack*

Both Li and Jiang saw that Xiao was hit and they immediately went to her aide. Unfortunately, soldiers still blocked Li's path. She was becoming desperate but still must fight with patience.

Slish Xiao killed another man and she could no longer sustain herself and fell on her knees.

"Xiao!" shouted Jiang.

The archers began loading their arrows and pointing their bows. Xiao began to move away, but her movements were sluggish because of her injury. *Twang!* The arrows were shot and they flew to the air.

Jiang threw an airbreaker at Jin, effectively knocking him into a tree. He hurried over to where Xiao was, running in desperation. Xiao, thinking that this was the end, gasped and prepared for the worst. But Jiang was not about to let her die, not even if it costs him his life, in the literal sense.

While running to save her, Jiang witnessed the bloody memory of Xiao losing her eyes.

As Jiang was fighting the thieves, one of them slashed Xiao on the face with his knife. *Slash!!* Xiao fell to the floor, with her hands over her eyes, with blood dripping on the floor. Jiang was dumbfounded at what he saw, and he went into a violent rage, and killed the thieves mercilessly.

Indeed, he killed them all mercilessly. It was the first time that Jiang recalled where he lost control of himself. After all, he has only one sister. Their parents died young so she was his only family and she meant the world to him. Her cute, childish smile would brighten his day and he would do anything to protect that smile.

Jiang Ye never stopped blaming himself for what happened to his sister...he has kept this guilt inside for many years and never told anyone about it. When she was blinded, he was right there, yet he could not protect her.

But today, he will not let Xiao be hurt, especially not be killed. Her eyes have just opened and there is a whole world for her to see. He has failed back then but today he will do his part as her older brother.

Finally, Jiang made to where Xiao was, and took all the arrows on his back.
Schleb! Schleb Schleb

When Xiao opened her eyes, expecting death, she saw her brother's face. She gasped in disbelief, realizing that Jiang was the one who took all the arrows. "B-Brother?"

Li was shocked, as was Sui Long. "Shen Long!!!" shouted his comrade.

Jiang still managed to smile. "You're s-safe now, Xiao." he mumbled as he collapsed.

Alex Cheng also saw what happened from where he was. "Shen Long!"

Xiao lifted him up by the head. "Brother...speak to me!"

Jiang opened his eyes. "Xiao...your eyes...they r-really are open. You can see...right?" He touched her face.

Tears dripped down Xiao's eyes. "Yes. I can see. I can!"

"How long I've waited for this day. The day when your eyes are open. But your eyes don't look good with tears in them."

"Hang in there, brother, we will get you to a doctor!"

"No...it's too late..." Jiang said weakly. "I am not going to make it."

"No, don't say that!" Xiao shouted. Indeed, he was speaking the truth, for he has lost a lot of blood. There were too many arrows plunged into his back, and some of them hit his vital organs. It is much too late to save him, but Xiao, being in the emotional state she was in, denied it. "It's not too late! Just hang in there!"

"Xiao, I did everything I could to get your eyes open...I've waited eleven years to see your eyes...and now my wish has been fulfilled."

"Brother! Don't go!!" she said, sobbing. "Don't leave me behind!"

Jiang's hand touched her face. "I am sorry, Xiao...if I had been a better brother...you w-would not have been b-blind in the first place. I still feel guilty about what happened that fateful day." Blood was oozing out of his mouth, and at this point, he could only mumble weakly, but he must finish what he needed to say.

"No! No! You protected me! You did the right thing!" Each of her eyes had two streams of tears dripping down her cheeks and some touched her lips.

"I have never been there for you, Xiao...this is the least I can do...as your brother."

Jiang's hand left her face, leaving a mark of blood, and his hand fell to the ground. His eyes closed and his head turned to the side. Xiao gasped.

"Brother! Brother!!" Xiao screamed at the top of her lungs...she has never screamed this loudly in her life. **"Brother! NOOOOOO!!"**

A strong, cold gust of wind hit Xiao, and she must accept the reality that her brother is gone...forever.

Li did not make it in time to help and she grew extremely angry. Usually she fights with a cool head, but not this time, for she was not rational anymore. Her Ice Sword glowed radiantly, reacting to her anger. She used the Ice Blizzard on the soldiers in front of her, resulting in them being partially frozen. One of the soldier's hands was frozen and he was unable to hold a sword. Li charged at them and killed them. **Slish slash slish** She just killed three soldiers.

She charged uphill towards the archers, the ones who killed Shen Long. The archers loaded their arrows and fired. Li blocked the arrows that came at her, and one hit her shoulder. *Schleb*. Full of adrenaline, she felt barely any pain and continued to run up.

Alex continued to go up on the path, now that the archers were distracted with Li. Finally, he made it to the top, and he gave the archers a surprise. **Slish** After stabbing one of them, he continued to slay the rest. The other archers ran about ten paces away and loaded their arrows. Suddenly, Li showed up and slashed one of them. She gave a mighty swing forward, producing the Ice Blizzard. **Froom!** The archers screamed as they met their demise.

Sui Long attacked Roh aggressively. **Fwoosh** Roh just slashed his straw hat away. The death of his comrade triggered his anger and it showed in his eyes. His eyes told his opponent that he will take revenge for his comrade no matter what

the cost. Like Li, Sui Long was usually cool headed and tactical, but he too was overcome by his emotions.

Two soldiers approached Xiao and the fallen Jiang. She can sense them behind her - she proceeded to pick up her sword and stand up. Her back was still facing them, so they did not see her face. "Whoever approaches his body will die," she said. Her voice was calm and showed not a hint of anger, but that is how she sounds when she is angry beyond logic.

Clearly, the soldiers will not listen to her warning and they attacked. Xiao turned around and slashed them in the torso. *Slsh* Blood splattered all over her clothes.

Another soldier charged at her. "Hyaaaah!" Using a Walking Crane move, she slashed him, causing him to fall on his back. He crawled away from her. Xiao plunged her blade into his right thigh. *Schleb* He screamed from the pain. "Ugh! My leg!" Xiao took a step forward and stabbed his right arm. "Ugh! My arm!"

A soldier snuck up behind her. She turned around while lowering herself and then stabbed him in the stomach. *Schleb* He fell on his back. Xiao then went back to the soldier she was originally torturing. With a broken leg and a broken arm, he was useless, so it is time to finish him. She stabbed him in the neck, killing him instantly.²³

Alex just arrived but it turns out he was not needed. The fallen soldier was crawling on the ground and he stabbed him in the neck, killing him quickly. Xiao stood still, staring at nothing, with her face full of blood and her clothes full of blood. She looked like a different person today.

Roh and Sui Long jumped away from each other after exchanging moves. Jin came to his brother's side. "Brother, what should we do now? We lost half the troops that we came with," he asked.

Roh replied, "The death of their comrade has affected their morale. They no longer care about their own lives. This fight has become disadvantageous for us, we shall retreat for now."

"Very well." Jin put two fingers into his mouth and whistled. Apparently, this was the signal to retreat.

Roh latched onto his horse.

"Hey, come back!" said Sui Long.

"Sorry, our fight is over for today. We'll continue another time." Roh replied.

"You coward!" Sui yelled angrily.

The imperial soldiers retreated, following Roh's horse.

²³ 04/18/2020: Added more details to Xiao's rampage, making the scene more intense

Now there was nothing left but an empty battlefield and the corpse of Jiang Ye. Xiao, staring at the blood soaked corpse, fell on her knees and cried. Today they were supposed to celebrate Xiao's newly found vision...but now, their celebration has turned into grieving.

The heroes grieve for their lost friend in an abandoned area on the top of a hill. This area is outside of society, thus an area where they cannot be disturbed. There is an old house that has been there for ages and ages, judging by how it looks, and behind the house is nothing but wilderness. The mountains are in the background, and this scenery provides a calm atmosphere, something much needed after all the fighting.

Xiao knelt in front of her brother's grave, which has his name 江野 engraved on it. She was sobbing as she stared at the grave, her face full of tears. "Brother..."

Standing behind her, Alex, Celina, Zi and Sui Long watched her grieve. Everyone felt the same way, yet they remained silent. There was nothing that they can do comfort her.

Xiao continued to speak. "Brother...you said you wanted to see my eyes open. They **are** open now...why must you die before we can celebrate? Is this my fate...to live in darkness...and just when I can see again, the first thing I see is your death? The death of the person that I care about most?" She continued to sob, with her face facing the dirt, her hands clenched in fists.

Seeing her like this, Alex can no longer remain silent.

Celina noticed he was feeling uneasy. "Alex?"

He walked forward, touched Xiao's shoulder and offered her a handkerchief. Xiao embraced him and cried into his chest. Alex was taken aback by her sudden move. The right thing to right now was to do nothing and embrace her back. This is what she needs right now. She needs a friend to comfort her during the darkest hour of her life.

"It is unfortunate that Jiang had to die so soon." said Zi.

"We cannot predict when we are going to die." Sui Long commented. "This is the fate for us martial artists."

"At least he got to see his sister one last time." Zi replied.

Sui Long said, "This is the fault of the Demon Brothers...they murdered him. I will get revenge for Shen Long no matter what."

Celina felt Xiao's sadness and she too began to cry silently. She has always been a caring person, and when a friend is sad, she too is sad. This reminded her of Liu Bei's death. She remembered a sad song she once danced to when she used to work at the theatre. The lyrics were melancholy; it was about a woman who lost her lover during wartime.

Li was as sad as the others, but she grieved alone. She slammed her fist against the wall as **tears** streamed down her face. Jiang Ye taught her many things

in martial arts and in life as well. She trusts him the most, besides Master Genzo. Jiang was more than just a comrade; he was like an older brother to her.

Inside the house, Sui Long was cleaning his sword with a hand cloth. Zi came into the room. "Sui Long...although I did not know Shen Long or you that well, you two have helped myself and Alex a great deal. I understand that Shen Long...or Jiang was your best friend for many years. You must be really angry."

"You do not know the half of it." Sui replied.

"Please, do not do anything rash." Zi said.

"Youngsters should not give their elders advice." Sui replied.

"Sorry." said Zi. "It just occurred to me that this whole time, I've never seen your face. You always wear that mask."

"This mask is to protect my identity. Jiang and I studied under the tutelage of Master Genzo for many years. I was the first student of Master Genzo and I've been studying under him for fifteen years, and Jiang for twelve years. During that decade, we became best friends. He was my best friend."

Xiao was still kneeling in front of the grave; she has been like this for two hours. Celina, concerned about her well being, came out to see her. "Miss Ye, you are still here?"

Xiao did not move or say anything.

"It is getting late. Please, come inside. You need some rest." said Celina.

Still no answer. At this point, Celina can either go back inside, or continue convincing Xiao, and she decided to do the latter. She, after all, knows the pain of losing a loved one. "Miss Ye...please, kneeling like this all day will not bring Jiang Ye back...I know you are saddened by his death...and you feel extremely angry and helpless at the same time." As Celina spoke, she was thinking of none other than Liu Bei. "I am sure if Jiang was here...he would not want to see you like this. He sacrificed his life so that you can live...so please, you must treasure your life, the life that he gave you."

At this point, Xiao was still staring at the grave, not moving an inch. There was no indication if Celina's words have gotten to her. "I know..." Xiao finally answered. "I will come in soon. Do not worry about me."

Celina was relieved. "You must be getting hungry. We will be making dinner for all of us, so please join us."

Alex came into the room with a concerned look on his face. "Sui Long, are you alright?"

"I am fine. Do not worry about me." replied he.

"I understand it must be hard for you. You two have done a lot for me..."

"Spare me the sweet talk." said Sui. "Both Jiang and myself have orders from our late master to serve as your bodyguards. I intend to carry out that duty until the end."

“Sui Long, I never asked you to be my bodyguard. You no longer have to. I am fully capable of defending myself.”

Sui sighed and took off his straw hat, walking over to the window. “When we came back to Yi Ling, we were prepared for this day. We martial artists never last long. Such is the fate of those who wield the sword.” Then he turned around to face Alex. “Do you feel you are able to fight the Demon Brothers?”

It was a question he could not answer at the moment.

Sui Long proceeded to remove his mask, and Alex saw his face for the first time. He was a middle-aged man with silver hair and a wrinkled face. There is a scar above his left eye. So, this is the face of his comrade.

“Like Jiang, I was a small time thief. But I made too many mistakes and killed people for the sake of stealing. I became a fugitive and I could no longer stay in the city. I had to flee to the Valley of Death. Not only did the War God spare my life, but he accepted me as a student because he saw my potential. He was not the cold blooded killer the rumors made him out to be...he was misunderstood.”

“Yes, he even accepted myself and Zi as his students.” Alex replied.

“The one who killed him was Ragnarok and he works for Liu Zhang. The Demon Brothers killed Jiang, and they also work for Liu Zhang. All of these events are related...” He proceeded to take out his sword and hit it against a piece of concrete. *Cling* “No matter what, I must avenge Jiang’s death.”

“Whatever you do, do not act rashly.” said Alex. “We will arrange a meeting to discuss what to do about the Demon Brothers. In any case, thank you...for trusting me with your identity, Sui Long.”

Summary Contents

Next Chapter: 二十八: History of the Four Brothers

Finished 2009
Revised 2020
Revised 2021

Name	Role	Personality
Alex Cheng	Demon Slayer	S
Celina Ce	The former concubine of the king	R
Zi Lai	Alex’s childhood best friend	A
Li Cheng	Alex’s sister, a rogue	S

Jiang Ye	Shen Long, second student of War God	S
Sui Long	First student of War God	T
Xiao Ye	Jiang's sister, the blind prodigy	S
King Liu Cao	The former king's half brother	A
Capt. Shu Tai	Captain of the armed forces	S
Lord Zhang	The conspiring demon	S
Chu Yen (Ragnarok)	Lord Zhang's henchmen	S
Taishi Tze	Founder of the Heaven's Council	S
Vincent Chan	Sr. Member of Council	R
Cho Mei-Yang	Sr. Member of Council	R
Roh Demos	The elder Demon Brother	A
Jin Demos	The younger Demon Brother	A
Jiax Tartar	Henchmen of Zhang	A
Khan Manchu	Leader of a northern tribe	A

Attacked While Sleeping 1

Attacked While Sleeping 2