

Stories from the Land of 9 Dragons



Birth of the Tiger

The storm was still raging near Central Passageway in Zhengzhou. It had been pouring down for hours and every now and then lightning cracked open the sky. The surrounding heights cast thunders back ninefold and it was as if the Thunder Emperor himself had come to the Land once again, raging in wrath.

The wounded man was lying in a state of semi-consciousness between several giant boulders. It was all that he could do to hide, before passing out the first time. That and hoping for the rain to erase the traces and drive the savage beast known as Blood Wolf King back to his lair, as well as keep the Heavenly Demon disciples at bay.

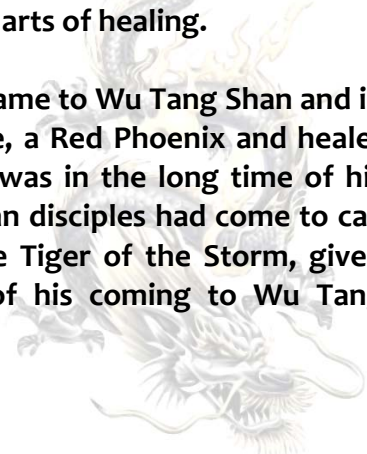
His jacket was smeared with his own blood, but even so it was plain that it displayed the insignia of none of the clans wrought in struggle for control of the land. He bore the simple and worn down garments of vagabond travelers, the kind of which thousands roam the Land every day in an attempt to forge their fortune. His brief, but near deadly encounter with the Blood Wolf King had left barely more than rags of them - as well as his face. A blood smeared slash on his right cheek had cost him an eye and nearly his life. In the dreams of his fever ridden unconsciousness, the bared teeth and piercing eye of the red furred beast turned into gleams of flaming sabers. For some brief moments, he fancied catching glimpse of a huge, black, single-eyed leopard but later he would not be able to tell if he had heard the black feline's purr, or if it was the roar of the beast in his nightmare.

It was in this sorry state that a couple of disciples of the Wu Tang Clan found him a couple of hours later. They had traced the single-eyed leopard to that place at the behest of their master only to see the agile cat run away and finding the wounded man instead. By now, fever and blood loss had overcome him completely and the disciples had to carry him the nearby village of Lushan. The old doctor at the clinic shook his head in dismay. Lushan was a quiet little village and though it was through here that disciples of all the White Clans in the land passed when setting foot on their Road to Dragon, it was ill prepared to tend to such serious wounds. His scarce moments of awareness had disappeared completely. All he kept muttering in an almost obsessive way in his feverish sleep was the word 'Tora', which means tiger. The Divine Turtle, the doctor at the clinic could do little more for the wounded man than supply some calendulas for his wounds and an improvised stretcher for the disciples to



carry him to Baiyun village in Wu Tang Shan. For what the man needed, was a skilled disciple, trained in the higher arts of healing.

It was thus that he came to Wu Tang Shan and in the care of Leandine, a Red Phoenix and healer of Wu Tang. And it was in the long time of his recovery that the clan disciples had come to call him Arashi Tora, the Tiger of the Storm, given the circumstances of his coming to Wu Tang Shan.



Dream Faced Buddha

Zixia Dong, 12 years after the War of Nine Dragons

Celestial Crone pauses her story for a moment to look at the young disciples sitting in silence before her. Six young girls, in their mid-teens, looking at her with incredulous eyes. And yet, they have been handpicked from many who have come to the gates of the Sacred Flower clan's stronghold and in each of them there can be seen a glimpse of the Mistress of Chaos herself, in the first of her three forms: the young maiden. Celestial Crone coughs, a dry old woman's cough to clear her throat, before continuing her story:

"She was greeted there by Fachang, Shaolin's elder, and she knelt before him, begging entrance. Fachang listened to her story, observed her great skills, and offered her a blessing and an apology, for he could not grant entrance through their gates to any woman, not even one as talented as she. "But the Emperor will kill me!" she said. "Where is your great Shaolin mercy?" To which he replied, "My mercy, child, is not so great as this karma which grips you." With that he bowed and closed the temple door.

Caught between an evil man who wanted to marry or kill her, and a supposedly kind man who denied her safe haven, despite her ability, simply because of her sex, Sura Mahu vowed that she would survive and change the world. She murdered the first monk she came across and stole his robes, then shaved her head and walked back down the mountain, disguised. She passed right by Heavenly Demon's patrols unnoticed. Once safely away, Sura Mahu proceeded to found her own clan, the order of The Sacred Flower."



Bloody Plain, the Tenth Year of War of the Nine Dragons

For ten long, hard years The War raged, spreading pestilence, plague, famine and death throughout The Land. Disharmony touched the life of every man, woman and child, and it became devastatingly clear that no matter who won The War, The Land itself might never recover its vitality. The skies opened and the heavens wept for the common people. A prayer could be found on every set of lips, to gods known, and gods secret, to end The War. Their answer came in the form of vagabond with unknown past and unknowable future. And yet, he managed to convince each of the nine warring factions to send a representative, a Dragon, to the wasteland known as Bloody Plain. Upon arrival, they were magically compelled to duel against each other. All who lost or were slain were to retreat from the world along with their clan and desist any further warfare.

The Immoral Monk of Shaolin and Sura Mahu, the Mistress of Chaos from Sacred Flower stepped forward. The enmity between their clans deep buried roots. While Shaolin closed their door to any woman, no matter how skillful, the Sacred Flowers seeked to avenge thousands of years of humility by teaching their female disciples subtle but deadly techniques, based on speed and seduction rather than force. The monk's spade whirled about at dazzling speed, though it seemed to hit only the ground more often than not, and sometimes, a blood red

dagger countered its attacks while seeking to make its way through his ribs. However, none of the two Dragons appeared an immediate winner.

As darkness descends, the other Dragons can see little of what is going on in their midst, where the monk and the flower have been fighting for hours, seemingly evenly matched. They are both tired, covered in scratches and bruises, but non willing to give up the fight. Just as the sun is about to set for good, Sura Mahu manages to draw one more slash with her dagger across the Immoral Monk's chest, cutting through both skin and the robe of his order, through the holy beads he wears and... through something else. A small amulet falls in the dust at their feet, two entwined violet snakes. What is an enchanted amulet of the Sacred Flower doing in a Shaolin monk's possession? For they cannot be stolen, not even pried from a dead body. They must be given willingly, lest they should crumble to dust. For a brief moment, Sura Mahu pauses in disbelief; however it is a fatal mistake because a decisive blow of a spade strikes her to the ground, knocking the air out of her lungs. "Curse you, whore... curse you double, curse you thrice. May you live on in your treachery, bitter, aged and withered prematurely and forever bound to this scum" she breathes into the dust, spitting blood.



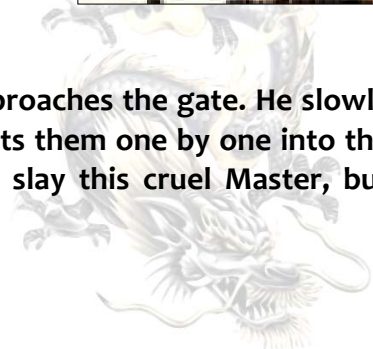
Southern Death Valley in Zhengzhou, 12 years after the War of Nine Dragons.

A party of adventurers is gathered on the bridge. They are exhausted and healers are tending to the wounded, but there is a barely contained enthusiasm in all of them. Swords, staffs, spades, gloves are checked. Blessings are cast, prayers are risen. Some have fallen into meditation to regain their vital energy, others are simply resting. For four long days they have battled their way through Death Valley fighting their way through hundreds of swordsmen, confucianists, giants and iron flowers - female warriors wielding poisoned blades. And now, here they are. They have gathered three magical passes from the slain deviants and they have arrived on the bridge, where even those who barred the way so far dare not venture.

In front of them rises a giant skull - the foreboding gate they have sought to open. Beyond it, it is said, waits the Master of Southern Death Valley, Meng Mian. No one knows who is and few dare challenge him. It is clear he was once a disciple of the white clans, but now he is but a vicious blood thirsty brute. He is said to slay his enemies with deadly kung fu techniques but a hat in the fashion of which the shaolins wear always hides his face, so that only a serene smile can be seen. This is said to have earned him the nickname 'dream faced Buddha'.



Upon surveying the ones gathered around, the party leader approaches the gate. He slowly draws out the three passes gathered around the gate and inserts them one by one into the slots in the skull. It is now done. They are bound to try and slay this cruel Master, but whether they will succeed or fail... that is the Choice of the Fate.



The Shaolin Temple in Song Shan, just after the end of the War of Nine Dragons

Fachang, the Elder of Shaolin, holds a parchment in his hands. They are trembling, as does his upper lip. Seldom has the Elder ever lost his composure like this. A second parchment lies on the small table next to him, bearing the Seal of the Vagabond. It is not needed to testify to the authenticity of the letter in his hand; the champion of Shaolin known as the Immoral Monk has been his pupil since childhood, he knows his handwriting all too well. His fingers have started playing with the holy Buddhist beads in his lap, that came together with the letters, but he is barely aware of this. Over and over again he reads his former disciple's letter. Former, indeed, for it was not signed Faxian - his clan name, but Guangxian and it was his holy beads that the Elder's fingers were playing with.

It appeared from both letters that the Immoral Monk had defeated the Mistress of Chaos but had refused to participate in any further duels, renouncing his duties as a disciple of Shaolin. Though unclear, the reason seemed connected to a disciple of Sacred Flower whose amulet Faxian seemed to have been wearing during his first duel. Whether any of the two survived or their current whereabouts were unknown.



A lonely tear fell down Elder Fachang's cheek. "Woe to you, my boy... woe to you, to bind your life to such a deceitful woman, in disgrace to all your teachings. You are now but a fallen disciple and the more dangerous for all the skills you have learned here. Woe to you and to those unfortunate enough to challenge either you or the one who has enthralled your senses." he whispered before sinking into deep prayer. Early in the morning he cast both letters as well as the beads to the flame. No one else need know of the fall of the boy on whom Buddha had once smiled upon.

Wuan Village in Zhengzhou, 12 years after the War of Nine Dragons.

A ragged beggar enters the village, coming from south. He seems to have been wandering for days without water, food or even sleep. The guards have tried to stop him, but he clung to one of them yelling "It's a woman! It's a woman!". One of the guards decided to take him to Xinmen Xianji, the doctor of the Wuan clinic, for the man seemed clearly delusional. He went from tears to mad laughter and back again. While the doctor was mixing him some potions, he tried to relate his story.

Apparently he was part of a team of several disciples of white clans who had attempted to defeat the Master of the Southern Death Valley. They were all skilled in their respective kung fu techniques and had decided to take on the one named the dream faced Buddha. It appeared to have been a close call however, for even in his dungeon the way was heavily guarded by earthworm demons, giants, archers and blind mad men who fought ferociously. Even had it not been so, they had all been poisoned by the foul air in the dungeon and the Master of Southern Dead Valley proved more than a match for them. Thus they were relieved to finally defeat him and sought for an escape.

However, as they approached the doors, the dust to which the Master had crumbled rose up and formed a new body. It still bore the vestments resembling a Shaolin master, but to everyone's surprise, it proved to be a woman - and a deadly foe. The ragged beggar was the only survivor of the party. He had picked a throne pass that the woman had dropped when falling to dust again and had somehow managed to scramble out of the dungeon before the poison claimed his life.

He neither knew nor wished to know what had happened in the dungeon after his escape, but he presumed that, as the Master had reformed once after his defeat, he might reform again. "It's a woman!" he added, then started laughing hysterically before the medicine finally took its effect and he fell in a deep sleep of recovery.



Under the Sign of the Raven

They say a man can pick his fights. Sometimes, however, a fight picks the man and won't let him go until either his or his foe's death might extinguish the fire in his heart. I am caught in such a fight and I have vowed it is not me who will perish. They also say that it is angels who fall first, yet not a word is mentioned of the fate of those that they leave behind. I can tell you what becomes of those touched by angels in their lives who are then left alone. They turn to demons.

My name... names do not matter. I have taken on another and it is this one that will make each and any of those who support the Emperor shiver, no matter who they are. For innocence and guilt were all the same for the Emperor, why should they make a difference to me then, a mere commoner?

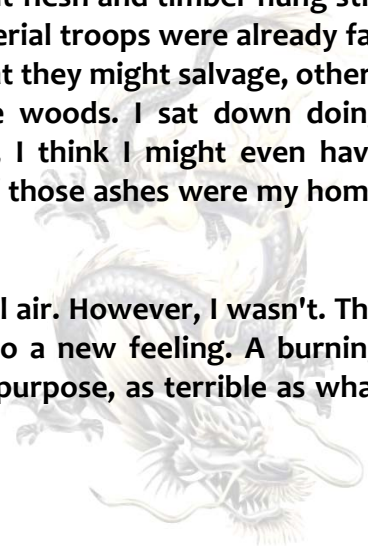
I had never intended to set foot on the Road of the Dragon. I was however pushed onto it one night and the events that followed have led me to embrace, out of all, the Fire Dragon. It was the night I watched my entire life reduced to ashes - all I had and all I loved. I was returning home from a trip to Hefei - there were several of us who had traveled there to sell and buy goods. However, what greeted us home was neither the laughter of our children, nor the arms of our wives, but the blaze of our homes on fire.



Images that I have engraved upon my mind forever from that night are scarce but gruesome and they are the engine that drives me on. Apparently what had happened was the price our village paid for harbouring a runaway. I don't know who he was, what he had done and whether or not he had been hidden by someone or by whom. And none of this mattered to any of the soldiers who had razed our village the previous evening. None of it really mattered to me either.

For a long while, I sat down in the hot ashes. The stench of burnt flesh and timber hung still heavy in the air along with an ominous cloud of smoke. The Imperial troops were already far on who knows what other mission. Some looked around for what they might salvage, others found relatives who had managed to scamper away into the woods. I sat down doing nothing, eating nothing and drinking nothing. At some point, I think I might even have forgotten who I was. The sole thought in my mind was which of those ashes were my home and which belonged to my wife and children.

Slowly, as night was setting, the ashes started to cool in the chill air. However, I wasn't. The pain that had struck me with numbness had started to yield to a new feeling. A burning anger was slowly rising inside me, red-hot and even slower - a purpose, as terrible as what had befallen me.



I left the village that same night, without a word or a gaze back. The last memory I bear of it is the creaking of the ravens that circled above that followed me late into the night, perhaps only in my imagination. I felt as bleak and gloomy as those birds of evil gods and heavy as the fate they foretell. And thus, I left behind the last bit of the man I once was - my name. That night I was born anew, not out of a woman's womb, but of pain and anger and I would bear a name suiting me: RavenSoul.



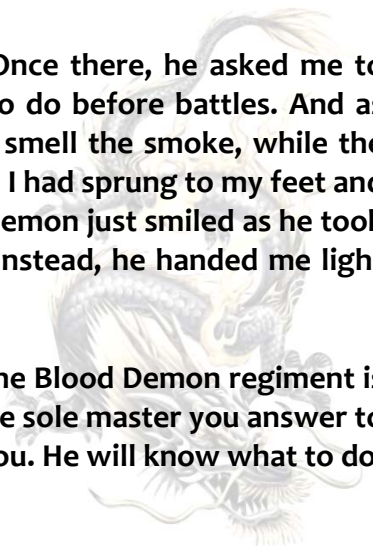
To the vow that night I stood true. I shall not tell of you of the years that followed, of the many doors that were shut in my face or how I came to be dismissed from apprenticeship of several clans because of my erratic behaviour, for those made me not who I am. The only place I was welcomed in my hatred for the Emperor and all he stood for was the stronghold of the Heavenly Demons. It was this, rather than my martial skills that made them keep me. I was merely a suitable tool for them, I know. A weapon which they planed to hone and then aim at the Emperor, the White Clans or anyone that stood in their path.

For many years, I was thus trained as an infantry warrior, one meant to strike in the first rows, for I cared not whether I lived or died. I just made sure my saber struck at as many as possible. Somehow, I managed to survive every time to endure yet another half numb half painful emptiness, until the next battle would allow me to unleash the next fit of rage. And it was so, until one day I was called to Xiao Zhuiyang. I had often seen him but never talked to him before, for he was the Senior of the Storm Demons, the elite troops of Heavenly Demon, the summoners of flames sowing death from afar with the sheer power of their minds.



He spoke no word, but motioned me to the training ground. Once there, he asked me to meditate and clear my mind, as I had been previously taught to do before battles. And as always when I did that, I could feel hot ashes in my hands and smell the smoke, while the croaking of ravens echoed in my ears. I never even realised when I had sprung to my feet and drawn my saber, which was now glowing in flames. The Storm Demon just smiled as he took the weapon from my hands and bid me get rid of my armour. Instead, he handed me light and comfortable black clothes.

"You, my son, are not made to wield steel. Whoever put you in the Blood Demon regiment is not in their right mind. From this day on, I am your trainer and the sole master you answer to. Go seek the Black Soul Lord Viper Eyes. Tell him it is I who sent you. He will know what to do. When it is accomplished, return to me."



I did as I was bid. I do not know what Viper Eyes has done. I felt like a haze descending upon me, no in me, like some cloud of forgetfulness. Suddenly, the weapons seemed clumsy tools to me, but the fires that once again rose inside wouldn't let me ponder that thought for long. Weakened, I stumbled back to the training grounds to Xiao Zhuiyang. Only then did he explain that I had undergone a purge of the chakras, freeing me of the training I had achieved so far and opening a new path before me. Under his guidance, I learnt a different way of controlling my chi, more suitable for that of a Storm Demon. For that is what I had become. Master Xiao Zhuiyang had recognised the fires inside me and the poor channeling they received in combat. I needed no saber to fight. If I learned to control them, those very fires would become my sole weapon in combat.

It is years since then. The images are just as fresh though, even as I sit here in the Bloody Plains, emptying my mind of all other thoughts save the burning fires. When I feel ready to release them, I get up and raise my glance. As always, ravens circle the sky. They know it is their day of feast. Under their watchful eyes, I step out into the open, a ball of fire already forming in my hands.

They say that it is angels who fall first. I can tell you what becomes of those touched by angels in their lives who are then left alone. They turn to demons. So be it.



Tiger's Revenge

Darkness still enveloped the Southern Trail in Zhengzhou. Though the moon was full, it seldom shone through the thick and heavy clouds and the coming dawn was more of a guess of the skies changing hues in the east. Huddled by the road was a figure dressed in black clothes. He had come there long before. A pack of black leopards had attempted an attack, but the figure had struck back at a couple of them, his clawed gloves slashing open their throats and the pack had departed, thinking it wiser to leave the man alone.

Seeing they would be a bother no longer, he had sat down by the road and had sunken into deep meditation. The way he did it betrayed him as a disciple of Wu Tang, in spite of him wearing black clothes instead of the blue garments that the Wu Tangs usually proudly displayed.

A couple of hours had passed since his arrival and an unknowing grasshopper might have wondered what the man was doing there, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, in the cold of night. As the faint light in the east grew with the approaching dawn, and everything turned from blue and deep black to shades of dim grey, it became apparent that the man was missing an eye. The scar of a slash wound was drawn across his right cheek and he did nothing to conceal it.



Indeed, it was none other than the young Wu Tang Adept known by his clan mates as Arashi Tora, the Storm Tiger. To this day no one, not even the three close friends he had made within the ranks of Wu Tang knew his real name or his past. He seldom spoke about things before the night he had been found wounded in exactly the same region he was now. And when he did, it was nothing that could tell his identity.

The days of his recovery had been long and he had spent them either studying the ways of the clan, reading through endless rolls of scrolls documenting the history of the Land or of the clan itself, or in the company of his healer, Leandine. It had come as a natural thing to join the clan and when the time came to choose his role among his peers, he only said two words and none could change his mind: White Tiger.



It must be known to the grasshoppers that the disciples of Wu Tang may choose among four different roles, according to their skills and inclination and with the approval of the Elders, and that each of these roles bears the name of one of the revered Celestial Animals in Feng Shui. The sword wielders are the warriors of the clan that brought its fame and are known as the Blue Dragons. Masters of Chi Kung are known as Black Turtles, while the Healers of the Clan who can both tend to the wounded and greatly increase anyone's abilities with their mastery of the Fortitude Arts bear the name of Red Phoenix. And lastly, there are those who choose to train in all of these arts. While they don't rise to the skill mastery of any of the other roles, they can hold their own in physical combat, master the channeling of chi kung in deadly ways and prove effective healers and fortifiers of their allies. Known as hybrids, they bear the name of the White Tiger among the Celestial Animals .



It was thus that Arashi chose his personal path on the Road of the Dragon as a White Tiger, keeping true to his name, and he walked on it in the company of Leandine, as well as the two other friends he had made - a warrior named Bloom and a hybrid named Marsyas. It was such that he had reached the sixth cheng of the rank of Raising Light. He had often been warned by his more experienced comrades to stay away from a couple of dangerous creatures plaguing the province, as his level of achievement was yet no match for them. These creatures seemed to have an astounding constitution, as they resisted well the most vicious blows a warrior could deal and some of them wielded deadly skills that could cause severe bleeding or tie their opponent to the ground, unable to move. And yet...

He had departed his friends early the previous day and had come to the small village of Lushan. From the doctor of its clinic, Divine Turtle, who had once helped save his life, he bought pills made from herbs that would help him staunch the bleeding and had headed out at nightfall. He was not often into the habit of heading advice. He listened, he nodded, he learned what there was to learn from it but he went out to try it for himself.

However this time, he had a more personal reason. The ferocious creature for which he planned to lie in wait was known throughout Zhengzhou as the Bloodwolf King, a huge blood red wolf with deadly sharp claws, fangs to match them and a collar of white fur that stood spiked around his neck, giving him an ominous appearance. It was a beast of the same kind that had nearly killed him some years ago. He was lucky he had gotten away with a missing eye and a scar on his face and he knew it. Yet, the approaching dawn found him in wait near the beast's lair.

Arashi opened his eyes and stood up in one slow fluid motion, preparing for combat. The leopards had grown restless. He crossed the path and cautiously went up the low hill by the side of the road. Suddenly, a deep menacing growl rolled through the cold morning air. For several seconds he found himself unable to move as something like a huge ball of red fur swirled through the air. Then the swirling stopped and for a brief moment all movement froze. Arashi was gazing directly into the fiery eyes of the Bloodwolf King, looking upon him. Had they been human, he would've called them hateful. He shook his head to clear his mind of the fear that had briefly grasped it. The memories of his past encounter with the beast were not easily overcome but he could not let them cast doubts upon him.

Something like a savage dance begun, to the sound of growls and the rhythm of steel. Clawed paws and clawed gloves alike were slashing out for the other's throat, reflecting the first red rays of the rising sun. All of his friends' warning came to his mind. Through several tears in his clothes he had started to bleed and had to use every breathing moment to swallow Divine Turtle's healing pills to staunch the bleeding and attempt to heal his wounds. None of it however stopped the burning of the wounds the wolf gave him especially when he found himself bound to the ground and unable to move.

After several long minutes, he broke into lightfoot, swiftly changing direction to deceive the beast. Behind some shrubbery he stopped to better tend to his wounds and calm the heavy panting with meditation techniques. But he couldn't indulge for long in this luxury. Not as long as the wounded beast was still out there.

It was proving much more difficult than he had anticipated, but as he returned to the fight, he slipped in a sort of routine. The fluid motions his Wu Tang masters had taught him not only imitated the constant flow of water, as all of Wu Tang's ways, they helped him carry on hitting at the beast in spite of all its slashing. Hit, dodge, heal, hit, dodge, heal, hit, dodge, heal... it was like a mantra molding its rhythm to that of the fight, adding a strange beauty to the savagery of the deadly dance. The sun had by now risen over the horizon, bringing light into the morning mist and the full sight of his opponent heartened Arashi. The Wolf's attacks had not waned for a moment, but it was now clear that not much breath of life was left in it. Grinding steadily away at it, as a water grinds steadily at the stones, he was now certain that he would succeed.



The next time he fell into deep meditation, it was in the bright light of a cold autumn morning, next to the dead body of the huge red-furred beast. And in spite of all his teachings, he couldn't suppress a feeling of pride. No, he shouldn't have sneaked out to come here for the hunt. But he had succeeded alone, with nothing to rely on but his own skills. Slowly a grin spread over his face, lighting the seriousness the scar usually gave it.

He stooped and almost lovingly caressed the now soft fur of the wolf. It had thought him a valuable lesson. As he prepared to move, he saw something glistening on the ground. Picking it up from the dewy grass, he let out a gasp of surprise. He was holding a huge single crystallized, perfectly shaped drop of blood... but he knew that it was nothing else than a much prized Blood Essence. With another grateful glance at the beast he had just slain, he took another of Divine Turtle's pills and headed for the village.



Demon Clad in Ashen Grey (I)

motto:

*I met the demon on a summer's day -
Her name was Lily Anne was what she said.
She was standing there alone, waiting for the fall.
[...]
Only sorcerers of death remains,
Only shadowed ones as some would say
And the night that sings to me of Lily Anne the grey.*

Back then the world was still in order, or so it seemed to her. Now all seems desolate.

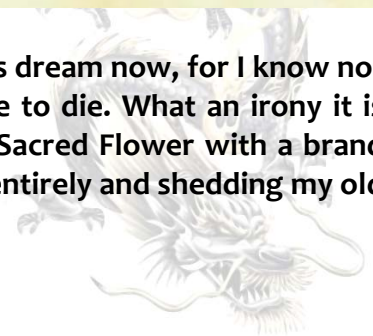
Back then, mother and father were alive and looking after her. Now they are dead.

And maybe most importantly for her, back then, her brother was there and to her he was like a hero of old, protecting her of all evil (in the shape of the old lady whose plums she had stolen). Now... she has to take care of herself.

Outside, she hears the distant clashes of metal on metal and the high pitched shrieks of fellow apprentices and shakes her head in disapproval. Those silly girls think of nothing but fighting all day long. Even though it is their time off in the afternoon, they still run around brandishing training wheels and daggers. With a sigh, she grabs the writing brush and starts out on another parchment. It is both good practice for what she learns in matters of calligraphy and a way to stay clear of those hens outside.



“I am writing these lines to monitor myself. I am trying to live his dream now, for I know not what has become of him and it is a dream that doesn't deserve to die. What an irony it is though, that as I start this little diary, I do so as apprentice of Sacred Flower with a brand new name. The sisters said I should leave my old life behind me entirely and shedding my old name was part of the ritual.



What they do not know is that in choosing a new one, I have bound myself even stronger to who I am and to my brother's name. I have chosen to be called Arashi Shinji, Faithful Second of the Storm. As children, we called my brother Arashi, Stormy, because of his temper. As the little sister trying to follow in his footsteps, it seemed fit to me.

The last time I saw him, he had come to my bedside late one night, kissed my forehead and took his farewell. I know he needed to leave if he was to survive. Telling to the face of a Soul Lord of Heavenly Demon that one's greatest hero is Wu Tang's master Lingyun is not a wise idea, even more so if the Soul Lord is a customer in the tavern of neutral Hefei and the one saying it is a young man working as an aid in the tavern, with next to no kung fu skills. I do hope with all my heart he has made it to safety and maybe he is living out his dream, though no word has ever reached me.”

The girl leans back with a sigh and grabs her aching shoulder muscles. She is not yet used to writing, but her clumsy characters do show some improvement. Keeping the parchment sheets clean and inkblot-free at the same time is almost as tiring as maintaining the difficult meditation posture she has recently learned, or the daily drill at the kung fu grounds. Resolute, she dips the brush in ink again and adds one more paragraph before calling it a day.

“I know I must find my own place in the Land. I know also that to conquer one such, it is paramount to join a clan, yet I was reluctant to do so and postponed it as much as I could. However, things that must come to pass will come to pass, regardless of our will. Forces beyond our understanding guide our steps towards the paths we must walk. The reason for which I am writing this, is the strange events that have made me seek out the sanctuary of the Sacred Flower.”



Iron Face Demon

“You were lucky to have survived, grasshopper.”, said the elderly man next to his improvised bed at the Nanjiang Clinic and in doing so, startled the woman tending to his wounds.

Squinting in the sunlight, Zi Jing recognised Wang Sanniang from the local tavern and gave her a tentative but grateful smile. She had cared for him on several occasions when he was but a little boy while his mother was away, working for a living in the village of Tiantan and later, during her imprisonment by the bloodclaws of the Valley of Hell.

He tried to sit up but found that he couldn't.

“Don't overexert yourself, Zi Jing.”. Doctor Eight Hands had returned. Bringing a fresh batch of calendulas, by the smell of it. “Those are some ugly wounds those Toad Demons gave you. The village chief was right when he told you that you weren't ready to face them just yet.”

“It wasn't the Toads”, replied Zi Jing, stubbornly repeating his attempt to sit up, in spite of the searing pain that seemed to rip his chest apart. Doctor Eight Hands just shook his head.

“I'm afraid the grasshopper is right”, interfered the old man again. Nobody knew his name or where he came from, even though he had settled in Nanjiang long ago. For as long as Zi Jing could remember, the villagers had referred to him either as the Hermit or the Nameless Elder. For even though he seemed younger in years than Ma Weizhao, their own elder and chief of the village, he appeared to be a well traveled man and was much more knowledgeable of both the lore and the perils of the Land.



“He was much taller than the accursed Toads and seemed human”. Zi Jing had finally managed to sit upright in a position that made the pain from his wounds somewhat bearable, or maybe it was the effect of Doctor Eight Hands' medicines. Apparently finding approval in the Hermit's glance, he continued. “At least, he seemed human from what I see of him. He was wearing a mask.”

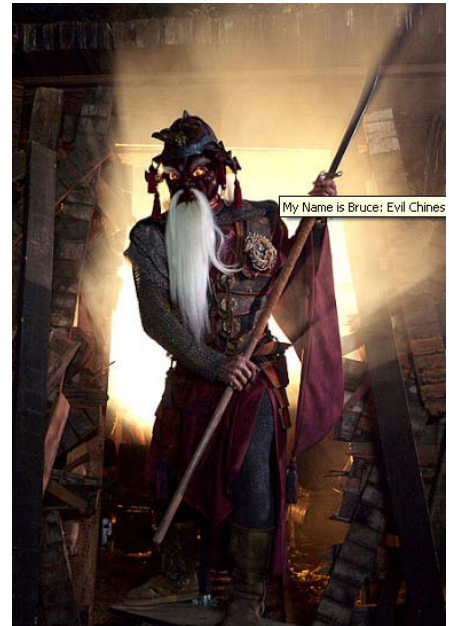
The Nameless Elder nodded knowingly in response, then cleared his throat. “You've run into the one known as the Iron Face Demon, grasshopper.” He glanced expectantly at the faces of those around: the wounded youngster, the village doctor and the woman from the tavern.

There would've been more but most villagers were working in the fields and Doctor Eight Hands had shooed some other curious ones away to allow Zi Jing to rest.

The Hermit sighed. It was clear that knowledge of the lore was not as widespread in the Land as he had expected it.

“His name is Hao Shi and he is one of the three Colour Face Demons. Rumour once held it that they were brethren, the offspring of Lord Mara himself, but I do not believe they have such a high standing among demonspawn.

The other two brothers, Si Mazhao and Yu Mazhao are known as the Blue and the Red Face Demon. The two of them have plagued the regions of Nanchang and Hangzhou for years. Sometimes a valiant warrior takes them on, but on the rare occasions when the demons face defeat, they just retreat to the Underworld only to reappear later and begin their foul deeds anew. Some say they are bound to the service of the Golden Coin Clan, while others claim they serve the Beast Clan – both of which hold dominion and quarrel over the provinces. Personally, I think they wreak havoc for their own delight and maybe enjoy playing the clans out one against the other.”



“Then... what is the third brother doing in Jinan?”

“Hao Shi was always the weakest of the three, but he also has the darkest heart. I believe that he didn't want to share the reign of his brothers, but neither was he powerful enough to overthrow them and establish his own dominion in the Land.” The Nameless Elder paused with a sigh.

“What happened after he left them is but a guess of mine, but I think it came as it always comes to be when the weak are blinded by their greed. He renounced his status as a Colour Face Demon and started using an iron mask to conceal his Face. Rumours hint that he has sought a tool powerful enough to help him achieve what he couldn't alone but has instead fallen prey to it. I am talking about the one who calls himself the Master of the Valley of Hell – Mei San He, the Iron Claw.

You have already suffered at the hands of some of his lesser minions – the toad demons and the bloodclaws, as have almost all who live where the long arm of the Valley of Hell clan can reach. It looks like Mei San He is enthralling all those weak or evil enough – and sometimes both - to walk his dark path. To what end, only the gods may know, but certainly nothing good can come out of it.”

“It only sounds to me like I have more learning and training ahead”, Zi Jing concluded after a long and troubled silence. “I had only meant to stand up against the demonic scum that has troubled us all... now not one, but two foes seem to have appeared. I will hold true to what I've told the brave warrior who rescued my mother... I will train long and hard and one day I will master my Kung Fu. One day, I will rid Jinan of the Master of the Valley of Hell himself.”