

AN IMPORTANT DELIVERY

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PART 1: A DAY'S TRAVEL

A powerful wind tumbles through the endless green of The Grove. Fū has been traveling through the same jungled terrain for days, his katana slashing through every leaf and shoot that blocked his path. The wind blows gently through his long hair tied in a messy bun, clearly left untouched for days. Matching his unkempt hair is a stubbled beard. Fū's military-grade clothing is peppered full of scratches from his previous opponents' blades. Fū, and any other swordsman, see this as a symbol of experience.

The dense plant life begins to thin, and Fū enters a small clearing. He looks up, his first view of the sky in hours. He stands still for a moment, letting his sun-starved skin and soft features bathe in the sunlight. The moment is cut short by a soft rustling in the brush behind him.

Fū shifts his feet to face his new opponent, his hand gripping the hilt of his blade. A small warthog sniffs the dirt nonchalantly, too focused to even glance at the hungry eyes staring it down.

"Well, *Rakurai*, looks like we finally have a worthy opponent," He says to his blue ribbon adorned katana "Or should I say...dinner!"

Fū charges forward, licking his lips as he imagines the hearty stew that will become of the creature. Before he can reach his target, a figure comes barreling out of the brush and snatches the hog before tumbling to the ground.

"Hands off, old man! We have been tracking this food since before the dead trees!" The figure on the ground blurts out, struggling to keep the hog in his arms. His

wide-brimmed straw hat hides half of his face. Fū notices makeshift armor peeking out from underneath tattered robes.

“We? Who are y—” Fū is cut off by the distinct sound of a hemp bow string colliding with the forearm guard of an experienced archer. Fū has only one advantage over the arrow flying towards him: he knows it’s coming.

3 DAYS PREVIOUS

Fū stands with his feet firmly planted in a field of flowing tall grass. A cloth blindfold is wrapped tightly around his eyes. He takes a long, deep breath and bends his knees, his hand firmly grasping the hilt of his blade. Around him, the air is still. His ear twitches, hearing the nearby sound of a bird flapping its wings.

No. Not yet. He thinks to himself. His ear twitches again, this time catching the sound of a ladybug leaving its home to start a day of hard work.

“Hmpf.” He grumbles.

Then a new sound catches his ear: the tall grass being flattened by a footstep. He’s approaching.

Fū shifts his balance to face the direction of this sound, but before he can take another breath...

CRACK! The menacing sound of a *Yumi* bow firing echoes through his ears.

Fū curses, his reaction is late and off balance. *Rakurai* flies out of its sheath, he must make up for his mistake with swiftness. His blade connects with the arrow, sending a shock through his arm and down his body. With no balance he falls to the ground, the arrow sent flying behind him.

“What are you doing on the floor, Fū?” A calming yet commanding voice echoes through his ears.

Fū tears the blindfold off of his eyes and immediately the daylight overwhelms his vision. All he can see is a silhouette standing over him.

“I’m sorry. My reaction was late. I can do better.” Fū says, trying to make up for his mistake.

“Remember! Archers are distanced, your five senses must be used even before you draw your weapon. You cannot close the distance between you and your opponent, so you must first know your environment.”

“Yes Master Wei.” Fū’s vision begins to adjust to the bright sun, his master stands over him, wearing pristine brown and blue robes alongside a ribbon-adorned straw hat. The massive wooden bow is slouched over his shoulder casually. It may seem harmless now, but a killing machine when combined with a craftsman’s arrow. Wei stretches his hand out to Fū.

“You are becoming quite the swordsman, young Fū.” Wei says sternly, grasping his hand and helping him up.

“Then I guess these last two years of training are finally paying off. ” Fū says.

Wei chuckles, but his eyes squint and focus on something in the distance.

“What is it, Master?” Fū asks.

He looks at Fū and grins, “Incoming.”

A bird cries out from above. Startled, Fū looks up to see a messenger bird, diving at supersonic speed down from the clouds. Its reddish wings tucked into its sides, blasting holes in each cloud it passes through. Approaching the ground, the bird extends its wings and slows down before landing perfectly on Master Wei’s outstretched arm. Wei unscrews the cap of an ornately decorated letter carrier on the bird’s back. He pulls out two small paper scrolls wrapped around two colorful packages.

“It’s for you,” Master Wei rolls up the scroll and turns to Fū, “your father has a task for you.”

“Is that my father’s incense?”

Wei hands Fū the package, “See for yourself.”

Fū grabs the package nervously out of his master’s hands. He inspects it by putting his nose up to the package and taking a deep inhale. He instantly recognizes the smells of his home, where his father hand rolls all of his famous incense. He never knew exactly how his father could make it smell so good, only that he has a unique gift

for crafting scents. Lost in memory, Fū remembers the letter. He opens it to see his father's scribbled handwriting:

My son,

I am sorry to interrupt your training, but I have a very important delivery. These two packs of special incense must be taken to the home of one of my most loyal customers, he is a great master. So be respectful! The journey is far too much for my old man's back to handle! So I am sending you on this journey, I know you are ready.

Love and peace,

Dad

PRESENT

Fū's eyes move from the young warrior struggling with his dinner to the unknown assailant beyond the clearing. He inhales, his hand is already on *Rakurai's* hilt, and his eyes squeezed shut. He focuses on his training, locating the position of the archer with only his hearing and allowing time to slow around him.

The archer is about 15 feet away standing behind a tree, and his heart is beating. Fast. Fū exhales and unleashes *Rakurai*. His blade perfectly collides with the approaching arrow, sending a different, more satisfying shock through his body. Fū

opens his eyes with confidence as the arrowhead is sent straight back to its target.
THUNK! Master Wei would be proud.

“Tell your partner to stand down and how about we share that hog, there’s enough meat for the both of us.” Fū says, clicking his weapon back into its sheath. Just then, a booming thunderclap echoes through The Grove. The hog squeals in fright and slips out of its captor’s arms.

“Hey! Get back here!” The warrior on the ground scrambles to his feet and chases the hog, but it is too quick for him.

“And there goes our breakfast,” The archer says, walking into the clearing, “This is why we always have our backup rations, Koda.”

Koda grumbles and returns to his business kicking the dirt. The archer wears dark blue robes covered in bamboo armor pieces, a powerfully crafted bow slung on his shoulder. Fū’s hand hovers above *Rakurai’s* hilt.

“There is no reason to fight here,” The archer says calmly, “My name is Roshi, this is my...ally, Koda. We watch over these woods. What is your name?”

Fū takes a moment to look at the two warriors. He takes a deep breath and forces his hand to relax at his side.

“Fū.” He replies simply

“Well, Fū, the rain is about to pick up. If you need to leave the forest, we know the quickest way out.”

“A seasoned archer and a boy who can’t catch a hog, how’d the two of you end up here? ” Fū asks, he wouldn’t want to fall for a simple bandit’s trick. There’s something about Roshi and Koda that was familiar to him, Fū’s gut is telling him to trust them but his brain says otherwise.

“Koda and I both grew up in The Grove. It used to be much more than this desolate, rainy landscape. There was our fishing village, but it’s gone now,” Roshi stops and looks Fū up and down, noticing his military-style clothes, “It seems you may already know how it got turned to rubble.”

“Wait, Rosh, you think this guy is military? He could finally be our way in!” Koda chimes in, excitedly

“Way in?” Fū replies sharply.

Roshi steps in front of Koda. “No. His robes may say otherwise, but his technique is too refined to be a soldier. We can trust him.”

Roshi peers at Fū, his eyes stone cold.

“Besides, Koda, the military isn’t something to be trusted. We are fine on our own.”

“Hmpf.” Koda scowls and turns to the trees. A raindrop falls onto Roshi’s arm, followed by more, one after the other.

“We best get going, don’t want to get caught in the rain out here,” Roshi says, quickly gathering himself and leaving the clearing. He looks to the disheveled swordsman behind him, “You coming?”

Fū looks at the dark storm clouds forming over his head, “Lead the way.”

END OF PART 1

PART 2: MEETING THE MASTER

Massive bright red gates separate cascading rice paddy fields that line the mountainside. A soaking wet Fū and Roshi trek through a thin dirt path in between the recently flooded rice fields. The rhythm of their footsteps echoes through the valley, there are no workers around. Koda looks into his reflection in a still puddle lagging behind the two older travelers. He skips a rock across the still water, making a small but satisfying splash at the other end. He searches the ground for another suitable skipping rock. A small insect races past his feet, so instinctively, he chases after it. He reaches out to grab the bug but just as his prize is within reach, he bumps into Roshi.

“Koda!” Roshi snaps in a near whisper, “No time for play. Look.”

Roshi points to the next red gate about a hundred yards out.

“So what? We’ve passed at least a thousand of those gates already…” Koda replies.

“You are not LOOKING!” Roshi scolds back and directs Koda’s attention to the military checkpoint stationed under the gate. A guard leans up against the wall of his station, dozing off but trying to stay awake. “The guards will not take our presence lightly, we must pass by unnoticed. That means you too, Fū. I trust you can handle a little stealth?”

“Hmpf.” Fū replies, already walking towards the checkpoint.

As the group approaches, they get a better look at the guard's station. Faces of missing and wanted people line the wall behind him, nailed up over the years and cycles of new guards. The guard, struggling to stay awake, notices the disheveled travelers approaching and jolts up.

"Hey! You!" He calls out.

"So much for sneaking by. Don't say anything." Roshi whispers to both Fū and Koda. They carry on through the gate, gaze towards the floor. Except for Koda, who puts his hand up to his nose and sticks out his tongue at the guard.

"I said hey! You over there!" The guard continues to call out at them, starting to walk towards them.

"Koda!" Roshi snaps at his companion then immediately switches his tone to speak to the guard, "He's a little misbehaved! We are just passing through to the next town. Come along."

"He needs to learn a little respect for his nation's military." The guard replies, pushing up his sleeves. Koda sneers at him.

"Indeed. We have a long journey ahead of us, let's get going." Roshi replies, trying to move along before anything can happen. They shuffle past the guard who peers at them trying to sneak past.

“Hey! Wait a minute, I feel like I recognize the two of you...” The guard says accusingly. They stop dead in their tracks. The guard gasps and looks behind him at one of the posters:

WANTED! For theft, resisting arrest: Archer and “The Kid” REWARD: 5,000

The guard’s hand shoots out and grabs Roshi’s wrist.

“Bad move.” He says as a battle cry from Koda calls out from behind him. Roshi ducks and Koda, who had a running start, launches himself over the archer’s head and grapples the guard.

“What the!” The guard struggles to stand while Koda hangs on him, hitting him and crawling over him like a monkey. While Koda distracts the guard, Roshi sneaks his way behind the two and tears their wanted poster off the wall. With the poster clenched in his hand, he nods to Fū and they begin a swift exit.

“Koda!” Roshi yells, picking up his pace. Koda gnaws into the guard’s helmet, slobbering on it, “Koda now!”

The boy leaps off and makes a face at him one last time before sprinting off to reach Fū and Roshi ahead of him. The guard stands there, dazed and confused at what just happened.

Fū holds out his map to Roshi, who analyzes it thoughtfully. Koda jumps up and down behind the two men to try to get a peek at the map. Roshi points at the map and looks to Fū.

“This is as far as we can take you. Beyond this is no longer our territory,” Roshi says, looking out at the beautiful scene. The midday sun shines through the remaining rain and gloom, birds fly far above the rice paddies and the light breeze blows through the hilled landscape, “I have never traveled to the edge of The Grove with a stranger before.”

“Your guidance was helpful and the journey we accompanied each other on was enlightening, I cannot thank you enough, Roshi.”

“Hey! What about me?” Koda chimes in.

Fū laughs and pats the boy on his head, “Of course, we wouldn’t have gotten here without your help, little warrior.”

“So I guess this is farewell, Fū. Your destination lies just behind the next red gate, follow the path there.” Roshi says bowing to him.

“Farewell.” Fū bows back and continues on. The Grove’s protectors disappear into the distance behind him.

Fū follows Roshi’s directions to the next red gate, and after looking around the area, he notices an overgrown footpath covered in weeds and flowers alike.

This has to be it. Fū thinks to himself. His father's clientele were always similar to him, the hermit type. Although his father wasn't quite a hermit, he just acts like one. The path looks like it goes nowhere, hidden behind layers and layers of green brush. Fū unsheathes a knife from his waist and slices back a couple frills. *Well, there's only one way to find out.*

Behind the dense and dark layers of greenery is a steep stone staircase, and with what little light he had, Fū starts the ascent. The stairs were small and delicate, he could only plant about half his foot on each stair. Fū was puzzled why a great master would care so little about his staircase. The great masters his father spoke of would have large, elegant houses with plenty of space and large staircases.

Fū worked his way up the staircase, stumbling through the overgrowth. A small beam of light shines through the canopy. He starts moving faster up the stairs and more beams of light start lighting him from above. Finally, Fū can see the exit and pushes his way out, revealing a beautiful view of the sunny valley. The water of the flooded rice paddies reflects the orange sky, surrounded by lush green of the forest. Before him was a continuation of the staircase leading underneath a red gate, its swooping beams hanging over the top of two sturdy legs. He takes in the view once more before heading up.

Passing through the gate, he sees a small pond with a couple of unlit lanterns set up. A dark cave draws his attention to the rear of the plateau. Fū looks around and behind him, there is no house, just the small mountaintop abode.

After a brief moment allowing Fū to absorb the space, a booming voice echoes out from the cave, “State your name and business!”

Startled, Fū replies, “I-I have come with a delivery, ” he pulls the package of incense out of his rucksack, “I do not mean to disturb you, great master, I will leave the package here and be on my way immediately.”

Fū had never met a master beside his own, though he has heard stories of stricter and more disciplined masters. Some masters especially do not like to be interrupted so rudely. Fū turns to leave but is stopped by a loud sniffing from the cave.

“Mmm! Wait a minute!” The booming voice belts out, “I know that smell anywhere!”

Just like magic, from the cave slithers out the azure, scaled body of a long-winged dragon. Its four muscular legs are supported by gnarled claws scraping through the dirt. The claws lift from the earth and the dragon elegantly floats in the air, its mythical presence makes Fū’s jaw drop.

“You are the great master that lives here? A dragon?” Fū can’t believe his eyes.

“Hand that incense over, or I will unleash my great powers upon you and admonish you from this earth!” The dragon floats down and lands an arm’s length out in front of Fū. Up close, he is able to get a good look at the dragon. It has shimmering green scales with blue frills and whiskers up and down its long body. He snarls, revealing his large teeth. The swordsman winces and holds up his arms, prepared to die

a slow death by getting eaten, or engulfed in flame. After a moment, he realizes he has not been eaten or set ablaze and the dragon bursts out laughing.

“You really thought I was going to eat you? If I was going to eat someone, it would not be you. Follow me.” The dragon says, turning his slinking, scaled body around and picking up the incense. It feels like Fū has no choice but to follow. The dragon walks over to the edge of the mountaintop and looks out on the clear sky.

“Get on my back.” The dragon says calmly.

“What?” Fū replies

He turns his head to the young swordsman and gestures to his long body. Fū looks the dragon up and down before slowly approaching his back. He climbs on and secures himself, his feet hanging on either side of his slender figure.

“Like this?” Fū says to the dragon. He had never ridden a mythical beast before, only the strong stallions from his home. Even then, the steeds were difficult to mount and nearly impossible for him to control. This felt different. He felt secure and balanced, both internally and externally.

“However.” The dragon replies, picking up the pack of incense dexterously with his fanged mouth.

“Your father told me you’d be ready, I hope he was right.” He says, the incense in his mouth muffling his voice. Before Fū can respond, the dragon lurches backward and prepares to launch, “You might want to hold on.”

With that the dragon sends sparks down his scales and jolts forward, scraping the tips of the incense on the side of his cave and sparking them with flame. The two fly off the edge of the mountain and into the open air. Fū's arms wrap tightly onto the dragon and his eyes are forced shut from the intense wind. After a steep downward dive closer to the valley's rich vegetation, Fū can feel the air around him settle. He peeks out with one eye, seeing the trees rush past miles below. Looking up he sees the setting sun casting a beautiful orange glow over the landscape. His nose catches the familiar scent of his father's sacred incense. The sticks that the Master holds out in the wind are almost gone already. Luckily he had delivered the dragon two packs. The two fly meandering, completely separated from the world below. The great dragon slows down.

"How does a great master like you know my father?" Fū asks, nearly shouting, his voice competing with the wind.

"It's simple, he makes the best incense in the land! When I smelled it for the first time, I knew I had to have some for myself," He pauses, "You look a lot like him, you know. He was about the same age as you when he first started delivering to me. He would march all the way up those crooked stone steps just so we could share a cup of tea and enjoy the scent of nirvana."

"I never would have thought my humble father's incense would make its way all the way to you. I'm honored to continue what he started." Fū knew his father was kind and well-respected, but to share tea with a great master like him is an honor beyond his imagination. The two glide through the air currents, catching new winds and yelling out into the open air. They swoop down and land on the precipice of a nearby mountain.

The master nudges Fū off his back. He catches his breath from their great flight as the sun dips down below the horizon and dark shadows fill the valley below.

The dragon turns to him, "It is magnificent to finally meet you, young Fū."

"My father told you about me?"

"He couldn't stop. Every time we spoke he would go on about his newborn son. He told me you turned out to be a fine warrior, and I can sense he was right."

"I have a reputation to live up to." Fū responds as the dragon turns away and looks out to the night sky.

"Our journey has come to an end, Young Master."

"I am no Master. And far from greatness like you."

"You are much closer than you realize. Reflect upon our journey today and find what's blocking you from a new perspective. I am no different from you, just two souls finding their way through the universe."

"But you are one of the greats, clearly you are further along your journey and much wiser than me. How can I even begin to become a master like you?"

"All the answers are already within you," The dragon replies, turning toward the edge of the cliff, "Now, I must return."

The great dragon inhales and prepares to launch himself into the air.

"But wait, before you go, what is your name?"

“I go by many names, The Rain-Bringer, The Eastern Dragon, The Mighty Shijin...” He says, the scales lining his body spark green and blue in the darkness. He shuts his eyes and floats into the air, electricity lighting up the dark sky behind him, “But you can call me Seiryū, the Guardian of the East.”

Seiryū soars off into the night sky, disappearing into a glint amongst the stars and leaving the humbled swordsman below.

END OF PART 2