


Book III
THE HOUSE OF ZHU

CHAPTER 2:

Shortcut



Feel the fire

The lower section features a pink-to-purple gradient background. On the left, a circular frame contains a detailed black and white illustration of a boar. To the right of the boar, the text 'Book III' is written in a large, white, serif font, with 'THE HOUSE OF ZHU' below it in a smaller, grey, sans-serif font. A large blue arrow with a white outline points from the left towards the right, positioned below the chapter title. The text 'CHAPTER 2:' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font above the arrow. The word 'Shortcut' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font inside the arrow. At the bottom right, the text 'Feel the fire' is written in a small, italicized, black font.

Once upon a time...

The Elemental Alliance spent all the previous day rebuilding the damage that had been done to the Temple of White Tiger, so they all slept deeply in the dining hall. They were on futons as their rooms remained on fragile foundations from the cannon fire. They decided that they needed additional help to repair the structural damage. Everyone was in a deep sleep, so nobody noticed Wu had gotten out of bed and gone to the washroom to change out of his night gown into his gi. He walked back into the dining hall with a ladle and copper pot and started banging them together. The Elemental Alliance started slowly waking up. Fremt complained, "I was having a nice dream. I will never have that dream again and now I don't know the ending. I demand to know why we are getting up."

Sage instructed, "To train."

Blaze argued, "Shouldn't we be doing something more important? The Viking Empire has landed on the coast in the vacuum of power after Tsar Kresovy's death."

Sage replied, "We will be doing something- training. Those who train hard fight easy. We won't always be able to summon the Sword of Invincibility. To beat the evil, we will need to use our own fighting techniques."

Sage ordered, "Wu, have them practice their Spinjitzu in the dojo."

Wu began to train them. He said, "I want you to hold a plank for as long as you can."

They all got into position. Blaze was the first to stop. Wu insisted, "Blaze, I know you can do better than this. Why aren't you trying better than this?"

Blaze argued, "I can use my muscles in a fight, so I see no purpose in using them now."

Wu replied, "They are muscles they grow stronger with use, not bo staff's which grow weaker with use."

Sage advised, "You shouldn't take a shortcut to success."

Krispal argued, "I always take shortcuts to success. If you work hard and become successful, is it really success? After all the work you only gain what you put in. True success is that which gain more than you put in. I try to work as little as possible and gain as much as possible."

Everyone sighed. Sarcea exclaimed, "Krispal, you are so insensitive."

Wu trained them for many more hours. The whole time Blaze wasn't trying very hard and was performing the weakest of the clan. Wu told Sage, "I don't know what to say to get Blaze more enthusiastic about being a better fighter."

Sage advised, "There are many more enjoyable activities to spend one's time than defeating enemies in combat. You shouldn't try to make it something to be enthusiastic about. You can, however, make it something he takes seriously."

Wu asked, "But how? I have been trying all day and he hasn't so much as tried to beat Fremt."

Sage asked, "So, I also have not tried to beat Fremt- and look how wise you consider me, you came to me for advice. Is attempting to beat Fremt the measure of a true ninja- or is attempting to do what is right the measure of a true ninja?"

Wu advised, "Trying your hardest in sparring is what is right."

Sage replied, "You came to me unsure what to say. Now you know what to say."

Wu told Blaze, whom was resetting the bell on the trip wire he had triggered, "You are doing the wrong thing if you aren't training your hardest."

Blaze insisted, "No, I am not. Keep your accusations to yourself."

Wu announced, "We will hold a tournament after lunch. Whoever wins the tournament will receive two tickets to the leather-ball championship match."

Fremt asked, "Wait, how did you get tickets? Tickets for that are harder to get than tickets for the leather-ball championship match."

Wu explained, "I know a guy who knows figures. What? My dad was like a god."

Sarcea said, "I would love to attend this year's championship match. Asami Kabuki is playing."

Bamf argued, "If you ask me, women don't belong in leather-ball."

Sarcea replied, "Then it is a good thing I didn't."

Blaze and Krispal were sent by Wu to bring wood from the wood storage shelter for the stove to cook lunch. Blaze asked, "How am I supposed to beat everyone in the tournament, so I can take Sarcea to the game?"

Krispal said, "Let me tell you a secret."

Blaze asked, "What?"

Krispal replied, "Don't go with Sarcea, she is bad mojo."

Blaze asked, "Was that the secret?"

Krispal replied, "No, what sort of secret is that? This is the secret: remember when I burned down the chicken coop when playing with the lantern and how when mom came home it was fixed?"

Blaze replied, "Yeah, you would have been in so much trouble, but how did you fix it?"

Krispal replied, "I drank a special tea called, professional-tea. It grants you the skill of a profession of your choice for a few hours."

Blaze replied, "I don't have time to go to town. The tournament will begin after lunch."

Krispal replied "I saw Sage has some in the locked vault."

Blaze asked, "Can you pick the tumbler for me?"

Krispal chuckled, "*Can* I pick the tumbler for you? The question is, *will* I pick the tumbler for you?"

Blaze replied, "I will grab you some Tea of Truth. You can embarrass someone until their life is ruined with it."

Krispal replied, "We have a deal."

They carried some split logs to the stove. Wu ordered, "Bamf, you are available, go down to the cellar and bring up a bag of white rice and a bag of brown rice."

Krispal insisted, "Don't worry, Bamf, Blaze and I will get it."

Everything fell silent, even the crickets stopped chirping. Wu said, "Alright then. Bamf- get a horseshoe, Ajna seems to have escaped the Cursed Realm."

Blaze and Krispal went down the spiral staircase in the kitchen. Krispal touched his ear against the vault and started turning the tumbler. Eventually he got it open. Blaze handed him both bags of rice, one brown and one white. Blaze ordered, "Go up before anyone suspects anything."

Krispal began a slow and difficult ascent up the stairs. Blaze entered the vault where the magic teas and the Fountain of Youth extract were stored. He noticed the vault door had a latch on the inside so nobody could be locked inside of the vault. He closed it behind him, hoping he made the right choice. He easily found the wooden box labeled "professional-tea." He took off the wooden lid by sliding it off; there was only enough left for one use. He went over to the teabag spool and pulled off a few inches before cutting with the scissor jaws. He wrapped the remaining tea leaves from the box in the teabag and tied it with some string. Then he heard the tumbler click. He scurried behind a Fountain of Youth Extract rack. On his way a throwing star fell off from his belt. It was Sage. Sage went to a larger box labeled, "Tea of Enlightenment". He too cut himself a teabag and string and wrapped up some tea leaves, except from the other box. He stepped on the throwing star, but it didn't pierce his wooden sandal. The vault door closed. Blaze picked up the throwing star and packaged another bag, this one of the Tea of Truth. He opened the vault door, exited, and closed it behind him. He put the tea of truth in his right pocket and the professional-tea in his left pocket. He walked up the spiral staircase. Sage had his back to him as he was filling a kettle from a glass jug of water. He asked, "Who else would like tea?"

Blaze, a safe distance from the stairs, replied, "I would."

Sage put more water in the kettle and got two teapots out of the cabinet. He handed one to Blaze. Blaze took it and went into the dining room. The clan was rolling up futons and bringing in the tables and chairs from the foyer. Blaze passed Krispal the teabag in his right pocket. He plunked the tea in his left pocket into the teapot. Soon Sage came with the kettle and poured hot water into both his and Blaze's teapots. Soon everyone was eating. No matter how fast Wu ate he didn't finish before the builders arrived. He said that he was done with his half-finished plate and went to show the team of builders the structural damage that had been done to the temple. Ahimsa mentioned, "Wow, Wu is working himself into the ground."

Sage commented, "Let's see if his ambition is long-lasting or just temporary."

Blaze poured some tea into a teacup and drank from it. Ahimsa asked, "That tea smells nice, may I have some?"

Blaze replied, "Back off, it's mine."

Ahimsa responded, "I am sorry, I didn't know you would be so upset over me asking."

Sage advised, "Tea is not to be hoarded, only shared- unless it is your own teapot- then it is to be hoarded."

After lunch the Elemental Alliance went back to the dojo for the tournament. Wu showed them a bracket drawn on a piece of slate with chalk. Instead of names it was filled out with numbers, that read one through twelve. Wu was holding a helmet. Wu announced, "I will not be participating because I will be judging. Everyone picks a piece of paper out of the helmet. The number on the piece of paper is where you are in the tournament."

Everyone did as instructed. Wu asked, "Who is number one?"

Bamf raised his hand. Wu erased "one" on the bracket and replaced it with "Bamf". He did this for everyone's number until it was complete. Blaze's first opponent was Ahimsa. Wu then announced, "Rule number one: no injuring your opponent and no pretending to be injured."

Krispal asked, "How do you know for sure if someone is injured?"

Wu replied, "You are Ninja. If you can't tell the truth over something as meaningless as sparring, then we have a much bigger problem than not being strong enough."

Wu then announced, "Rule number two: you may have as much armor and weaponry as you want, but we will first run a mile. Whatever you have with you at the end of the mile you can use. Leave what you discard near to the trail, so I can find it."

The clan gathered weapons and armor and began running the mile loop trail near the Temple. Bamf was running the fastest with the most number of weapons but quickly began to lose his strength. Wu was trailing the clan with a handcart collecting the discarded items. Krispal was in front of him barely jogging, he had the second most weapons and armor. Krispal told Wu, "Those dummies. If you run slowly you can carry more. What difference does it make what place you finish in in the race if you have enough weapons to win the tournament."

Wu demanded, "If you finish last, you get automatically disqualified."

Krispal argued, "You can't do that. I didn't know, you just made that up! Everyone else is already at least a quarter mile ahead of me."

Wu ordered, "Then you better pick up the pace."

Krispal complained, "No way. I am going back to temple and taking a bath."

Krispal put his breastplate in the handcart and started walking in the other direction. Wu said, "You can't do that. No taking a bath unless you participate in the tournament."

Krispal asked as he walked away, "Whatevs, how are you going to stop me?"

At last Wu was back at the temple. He went into the dojo without bringing the handcart to the shed. Blaze said, "You didn't have to bring the handcart inside."

Wu announced, "First match, Isabelle versus Bamf."

Bamf finished the run first, only because he was too stubborn to admit he had overdone it.

Bamf said, "I will go easy on you."

Isabelle replied, "Don't worry, so will I."

Bamf swung his mallet. Earth shot out from the head. Isabelle easily dodged it with a fast slide out of the way. The earth was many moments behind her. She slid to the left, and to the right, dodging Bamf's blows until she was right on top of him. She pulled out of kunai knife from her sleeve and stabbed it against the hammer head. Pieces of metal went flying from the head propelled by water. When the water cleared, it was nothing but the end of a rod. Bamf swung the rod at Isabelle. She pulled out a baton and blocked the side swing. The hammer handle cracked with a thud and splinters of wood went flying, propelled by earth. Isabelle swung the baton at Bamf's side. Water from the baton slapped him in what sounded like a painful belly flop. He clutched his side where he had been hit. He pulled out hook swords and grabbed Isabelle's baton. He then hooked one of her ankles. He pulled it out from under her, but instead

of landing on the floor she did a back-roll. Bamf lunged at her, bringing down the monk hooks. She jumped up from her crouching on the floor and water propelled her out of the way. Where Bamf landed the cobblestone, the floor rattled and shifted. He did a forward roll, much like Isabelle's back-roll, and ended it with a kick. Isabelle throw her kunai knife at a wall and a stream of water from the back of the kunai knife propelled her out of the way. Bamf's kick collided with the sandstone wall and pieces of the wall started to fall on him. Wu declared, "Isabelle is victorious. And to think the estimate the builders gave me was just within our budget."

Isabelle cringed, "Sorry."

Next was Sarcea and Fremt. Sarcea threw a medicine ball at Fremt. She increased its mass midair by throwing a ninja star at it. This would make it collide into him with more force. He barely ducked out of the way. His hairpiece had a new mold where the medicine ball had carved a divot in the top. Fremt shot a blunted arrow, lighting followed it. It neared Sarcea quickly. She really wanted to get the tickets, so she quickly drew her chopsticks. She torqued the arrow with her chopsticks, moving it back toward Fremt. Fremt shot another arrow and the two collided in a field of lighting. When the flashes cleared, Sarcea was nowhere to be found. Fremt looked around but could not find her. Then he looked up. She had gravitated herself to the ceiling. She dropped a throwing star on him, which slid harmlessly off his head. It did, however, increase his weight. He fell to the floor with too much weight to move. Wu declared, "Sarcea wins."

Next was Blaze's turn to beat Ahimsa. Ahimsa clubbed her baton. It shot out a rickety wall of ice. Blaze spun around with his pole sword shooting fire from the blade in every direction. The ice melted. He did three spins forward with the pole sword. Fire sliced from the blade at Ahimsa with each spin. She aimed her baton at the oncoming fire and blocked it. A sheet of ice appeared where the baton stopped, and the fire melted it into water. When Blaze was right on top of his sister he swung his pole sword toward her. She sliced her baton and it collided against the pole sword with a deafening snap. The baton bent. Ahimsa discarded it and formed her Chi Dragon, a conflagrator. She swung around her dragon's tail, which Blaze blocked with his weapon. The pole sword vibrated in Blaze's hands, which would make most anybody drop it. He spun around his hand piece, a move he had never done before, and it sliced toward Ahimsa. He stopped it right before the fire reached her. Ahimsa was knocked off from her massive chi dragon, which disappeared. Everyone, except Krispal, was shocked. Wu announced, "Blaze won! That was incredible."

Wu announced, "Diptidulla versus Herold."

Herold held his katana sternly. Diptidulla held her bo staff, ready to move. She was going to use what she learned from Silch Levi and try her hardest to win without feeling remorse for Herold. Herold slid down his katana. Diptidulla circled around him. She swung her bo staff as hard as she could. The wooden staff splintered into two pieces against Herold's Metal shell. Diptidulla then created a tornado of wind. Herold tried to root himself but soon his feet were being pulled off the ground. He spun around the tornado and circled back to Diptidulla. The tip of the katana was racing at her chest. She stopped the tornado. Herold still had momentum and was about to slide the katana into Diptidulla's chest. He froze. He growled as he tossed the

katana against the wall of the dojo. It clanged around before stopping on the floor. Wu admitted, "I am proud of you Herold. You advance."

Herold snarled, "Of course you proud. Everyone impressed by Herold."

Diptidulla couldn't believe she had lost. She knew she tried her hardest and had nothing to show for her improvement. Wu announced, "Zoro and Krispal are next. Since Krispal was disqualified- Zoro automatically advances."

Blaze insisted, "That's not fair. Zoro doesn't have to win as many rounds to win the tournament. Go get Krispal."

Wu replied, "No, he didn't complete the run, making him disqualified."

Ahimsa asked, "How come he didn't complete the run? Surely he was fit enough?"

Wu replied, "He chose not to because he was losing and the last person to finish gets disqualified."

Sarcea argued, "Then Fremt should have been disqualified. He was last to finish."

Fremt said, "Whatever."

He left the dojo. Wu yelled after him, "Go get Krispal. He is in the bathhouse."

Isabelle said, "This makes no sense. I thought he was disqualified."

Diptidulla asked, "I have to use the outhouse. Can I go while he gets Krispal?"

Wu ordered, "No, stay."

Soon Fremt and Krispal arrived back. Krispal was in a bathrobe. He took off the weapons he had left on the trail from the handcart. Wu looked at Isabelle and then ordered, "Krispal, I disqualified you."

Fremt commented, "He needs weapons if he is going to train as a ninja."

Diptidulla stated, "I need to use the outhouse and I want to write home, too. I have so much to tell my parents about Silch Levi."

Wu ordered, "No we are continuing the tournament."

Fremt commented, "Whatevs."

He took off his quiver and left the dojo. Soon everyone was hanging up their weapons on the wall and leaving. Krispal asked, "Who made Wu the leader anyway?"

Bamf said to Wu, "You need to give them a reason to want to participate."

Soon Wu and Blaze were the only ones left. Blaze asked, "So what are you going to do with the tickets?"

Wu said, "Sure, you can have them."

He then rethought and said, "If you train up until dinner, then you can have them."

Blaze picked up a fifty-pound dumbbell and started pumping his biceps without challenge.

While Blaze was training Zoro asked Wu, "Where is Blaze, I need a chess partner?"

Wu replied, "He is training."

Isabelle asked, "Where is Blaze, I need the oven lit for my bread recipe?"

Wu replied, "He is training."

Fremt asked Wu, "Where is Blaze, I need a sitar player for me to try singing with my new voice?"

Wu replied, "He is training."

Soon everyone was gathered in the hallway outside the dojo. They were watching Blaze splitting the backs of arrows with more arrows. Wu walked into the hallway with a hamper of dirty linen. He asked, "What is everyone doing?"

Ahimsa said, "We were just thinking how nice it is to have Blaze in our clan."

Fremt commented, "If he wasn't Blaze and trained this hard- I would say he should be leader."

Wu ordered, "Come on, let's go make dinner."

Nobody budged. Krispal argued, "No way, you just tell everyone what to do and treat some of us better than others."

Isabelle stated, "Blaze is somebody who trains for hours non-stop. You won't even run with us, you walk from behind. Blaze is somebody just like us who by sheer effort has become so much more."

Wu agreed, "You are right. I was so concerned with punishing and rewarding you I forgot to lead with example. A great leader encourages you to do your best by being the best. If you want to be like Blaze, go to kitchen and make the most difficult meal you can. Surprise me- make it a feast. I won't look until it is time to eat."

The clan left, except for Bamf. Bamf put a hand on Wu's shoulder. He said, "I am proud of you. You just one-upped Blaze, whom we were all admiring."

Wu looked down, not sure what to make of Bamf's out of character emotional talk. Bamf let go of Wu and angrily ran after the others.

Wu left to the washroom to clean the sheets. When they were out on the drying rack, he went to the dojo and handed Blaze the tickets. They followed the smell of delicious food to the dining room. Blaze asked, "What is that smell?"

Wu said, "I don't know- other than it would be advantageous to happiness to eat."

They opened the door to the dining room to hear cheering. Fremt announced, "To Blaze, who trained until his muscles ached and his bones micro-teared and to Wu who managed to prepare a feast while washing the sheets."

The clan started scarfing down food. Wu didn't eat any sweets in order to keep his fighting body in shape. Blaze got up and walked to where Sarcea was sitting. He got on one knee and said, "There comes a time in the procession of one's life where it is no longer satisfactory to walk the streets as a lone figure and join the comradery of a date. Hopefully of somebody you share an emotional attachment to for the sake on mutual sympathetic growth. While I am aware I am unsure of the eventuality of our relationship, will you join me in section fourteen row eighteen, not merely as an expression of our love of athletic presentation but with possible romantic ambitions to be demonstrated? I will provide currency for vitals as the male partner on this proposed romantic outing."

He pulled out the tickets. The clan gasped. Sarcea replied, "I demonstrate my possible liking of you with this agreement to attend the game as your date. However, as a modern date, I ask for us to pay mutually for the edible and drinkable attained items."

Krispal mocked, "Sarcea and Blaze, sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g."

Sarcea yelled, "Shut up. I am only going with him because he has tickets, you brick head. You would think that because you are so socially inept. I don't actually like him, he is so arrogant."

Krispal replied, "Well, at least I don't shampoo twice in one bath."

Sarcea replied, "It is called, 'conditioner.' It is why you have greasy hair."

Flowious asked Krispal, "You like her, don't you? You just don't know how to say it."

Krispal replied, "Yes I like her. She makes a fine target dummy."

Sarcea said, "Be honest. We never really talked about how we feel about each other."

Krispal admitted, "I will allow you to keep your life in my presence."

Sarcea replied, "I will allow you to keep your life in my presence too."

Flowious replied, "Wow things are getting serious between you too."

Blaze and Sarcea got on horseback in the stables. It was sunset when they took off down the muddy road. The red ball in the sky slowly set behind the mountains. Just before nightfall they came to the Haunted Forest. The warmth Blaze felt with the presence of Sarcea dimmed as they heard small rodents scurry in the bushes around them. They looked up at a bolder against the starry sky. A wolf howled from the boulder. Soon they came to a large log laying across the

road. They tried to get the horses to go over it, but the horses didn't want to. Out of the corner of Blaze's eye he saw a man stand up from the forest floor. He was wearing a branch and leaf blanket over him as camouflage. Blaze turned around. The man raced toward Blaze with a katana. Blaze pulled the pole sword from his shoulder piece. Sarcea was in her own fight with an arrow shooting man. Blaze realized they were Ronin Indians. He used his pole sword to shoot a slice of fire at the Ronin Indian. The Indian barely dodged. He slashed his katana hard in an attempt to knock the pole-sword out of Blaze's hand. Blaze tried to spin it around in his hand again, but it didn't work- he dropped his weapon. Blaze realized the professional tea had worn off. He formed his chi dragon. The leaves blew away from where the chi dragon appeared. Sarcea climbed on behind Blaze. The Burning-burner circled around the Indians spitting fire. Sarcea asked, "How did you lose your pole sword?"

Blaze exclaimed, "Um."

Soon Sarcea slid off the dragon. Blaze didn't know what happened. He shot around and sped toward where he thought she fell off. Soon another dragon lifted from the tree cover. It was a large black spikey dragon with red triangle eyes. It wasn't a chi dragon- it was a physical dragon. On his back was Undead X. Blaze clenched his fists. Undead X killed Genin, an innocent baby. The physical dragon slowly started to open his mouth. Sparks started to stream out. Blaze turned off his chi dragon and dropped out of the way of an explosion of flames from the dragon's mouth. He fell to the forest floor, where he saw Sarcea knocked out with a blow-dart stuck in her back. Sarcea started moaning. Blaze started running over to her. Undead X's dragon grabbed Blaze with his tail, restricting his motion like a constrictor. Undead X climbed down the spine of his dragon with all four limbs. He reached out and started examining Blaze's

face. He backed his hand away like he had discovered something he wish he hadn't. He yelled in an angry rasping voice, "Are you a Zhu?"

Blaze replied, "Yes, Zhu Blaze."

Sarcea woke up on the forest floor and slowly stood up. She was limping from how she had fallen. The Ronin Indians surrounded her. Undead X yelled, "Aziz's and Mundia's child. I knew there was a reason I saved you in the blizzard. Leave. I never want to see you again."

Undead X stomped on his dragon's spine and the dragon dropped Blaze, who fell to the ground. Blaze asked, "Are you a member of the Zhu House?"

Undead X asked, "You have no idea. Do you?"

One of the Indians asked, "What about her?"

He was gesturing to Sarcea. Blaze yelled, "She is my girlfriend."

Undead X ordered, "Then leave her."

The Ronin Indians got on horseback and galloped away. Undead X circled his dragon around and disappeared into the night. Blaze and Sarcea went to find their horses. By the time they arrived at the stadium, people were leaving and getting into various carriages. They overheard two spectators say, "That championship game was the best one in history. With only a few seconds left Kabuki won with a three-point score."

Sarcea exclaimed, "Oh no! We missed the game."

Blaze admitted, "I am sorry I called you my girlfriend. I was afraid if I said you were only my date Undead X would kill you."

Sarcea giggled and revealed, "I am your girlfriend. You can be very kind."

She then said, "One thing I don't understand is how you beat Ahimsa, one trained in the ninja arts, with the most powerful chi dragon, and then lost to a katana wielding Ronin Indian, after training all day."

When they arrived back at the temple Sarcea limped into the foyer from her horse. Wu was waiting up for them. Wu told Blaze that Krispal admitted Blaze used the professional tea. Blaze then commented, "You became a great leader by making mistakes, I became a great warrior by drinking a tea. Today, you were the better ninja."

Wu said, "Come on. I promised Fremt I would comfort him once I made sure you two got home safely. The whole temple knows what attire he dreams Isabelle wearing, thanks to that Tea of Truth."

It was a moonless night over the Temple of Rhythm. A figure in a trench coat was standing on one of the gargoyles. The figure stood motionless as another figure climbed the stairs to the entrance. The trench coat figure jumped through an archway into the rafters of the Temple. The figure on the steps unlocked the door and walked in. He turned around and locked the door behind him. The figure in the rafters jumped down from a trapdoor to in front of the portal to the Metaphysical Realm. The figure at the door commented, "I guess it is true. They do always come back."

The figure in the trench coat moaned, "Did you bring the map?"

The figure at the door slid over a brief case. The trench coat figure picked up the briefcase and lowered his hood. The red glow of the portal revealed it was Serpentes Falco.