

Sheiji Mei panted as he finally reached the top step of the Black Spear Head peak, the mountain housing the Black Spear sect's main school and seat of power. A flowing building made from wood and black ice that stood in defiance of the two suns nearing their peak up ahead, Blue Bird and Reaper. Facing true north to the right of Mei the violent reddish orange of Wanderer rises from the pitch-black leviathan sea. Interrupting the peaceful harmony of icy blue and violet light swirling in the sky.

Mei taking a moment to breathe ogled at the sunrise, then the sun Wanderer bursted with a green flash temporarily blinding him. A moment later Mei saw a dissipating green haze like tobacco smoke swirling in the sky where Wander used to be. Taking a moment to absorb the sight of the haze frantically dancing in the sky, only had seconds left to bask in their exuberance till they dispersed to nothingness. The sky was painted a soft purple on one side and the other a cold blue, cutting the sky in half with a war in the middle. All on top the black depth of the leviathan sea speckled with pitch white icebergs strewn around it.

The Wander had fulfilled its namesake, once every century disappearing for four to ten leviathan wakes at a time. Then illuminating the sky with a violent burst of light leaving people sunburned and plants wilting under the heat. Mei knew the time was near but he never thought that he'd get to see the fleeting sight as it happened, maybe the very end of the dancing wisps. But he always thought he'd be stuck somewhere mopping or sweeping the floor, he didn't know what to think of the luck. Then he heard three loud bells ring in the distance, crap he was going to run late if he didn't stop standing like an idiot.

He ran on the slightly uneven cobblestone path to the school and went into the servant entrance on the south side of the building. Going into the servant's male changing room, taking off all his overgarments and leather sandals, putting on a plain gray linen shirt and black pants, replacing the sandals with tan wooden clogs, the only decoration on any of them being the Black Spear emblem and the character Ko'ixu meaning supporter, or in this context servant. Directly underneath the Black Spear emblem, the emblem a circle with a spear surrounded by ocean waves.

As he rushed out of the room, pushing his clothes into one of the servant cubbies protected by a simple lock and key, Xukali greeted him at the door leading into the greater building.

"You're late, Elder Lo'iju is going to give that stare and tell us, that he's not angry, just disappointed, speech!" she said, making the end sound gruffer.

"Sorry, some stuff with my family took a little, but then Wander, well uh wandered off, couldn't really miss that."

"I know right, that was beautiful, it reminds me of a time when some Unseele performers came by, wait, that doesn't matter, hurry and run with me to the training court. We got leaf raking duty."

"I'm hurrying, I'm hurrying," he said, tucking the key necklace under his shirt and following Xukali.

Mei and Xukali awkwardly held juniper wood rakes as they entered the main training court of the Black Spear keep. A half mile by half mile square, with eight stories of black ice and blue painted wood, the skeleton of a leviathan in the middle of all of it. Slain by the founder, Abyssal Spear Xangru Zho'inu, the court even dwarfed the Earthen Flame sect's training court, the leader of the O'ozhiwu clan they all lived in.

And standing by the skeleton being lifted like it was swimming in the water by wires. Next to it was a nearly seven-foot-tall man with salt and pepper hair and pitch black sclera surrounding icy blue irises, the elder Lo'iju. The Elder kept his gaze on us and let out a foggy breath that you wouldn't find on a warm season's day like this.

"Late I see," he said in a slower, well-enunciated, nearly eloquent but more stern manner of speech.

"Sorry we got caught up—" "Sorry Elder, we bear no excuses," I interrupted Xukali, we dipped our heads in a slight bow, and Mei saw Xukali giving him an annoyed glance.

Mei feeling the gaze of the Elder stayed silent and still in his half bow till he said, "I see, do not let me keep you, I want you finished before the sun's eclipse."

"Yes," Mei and Xukali both said in unison

Elder Lo'iju grunted in affirmation, then his body flaked away in icy petals, the color creating the illusion of the body dissolving from them as they left to the wind. They both relaxed and released the bow, quickly getting to work, clearing large debris from the cobblestones. But soon after starting Xukali asked.

"Why'd you interrupt me, kind of annoying you know."

"Sorry, it's just people like him don't like excuses, it's better in the long run to just fess up to something."

"He's never reacted like that to me, he's not like the Young Master."

Mei looked around for a couple of seconds and spoke in a softer voice, "True, but he reacts to deference with favor and goodwill, and I want even just a bit of that if I can, sorry for uh, interrupting you by the way."

"Don't worry, never really give any thought to stuff like that, I just don't want to die, that's my only political goal really."

"It's not politics, it's just I already have a hard time here, I just want to make things a little easier on myself, you know?"

"Kiss ass."

"I'm not kissing ass, I'm just, I just want a little bit of decency outside of the basic laws."

"Ah, so a boot licker with a gift of words," she said in a dignified tone, putting down the rake to pick up the edges of the piece of cloth we put all the leaves, strike, stone ext in.

Mei stopped for a bit, then said, trying not to grin, "How'd you know I was into that?"

Xukali stumbled a little and snorted at the same time, starting giggling a little bit, and said.

"By the Mother you're bad."

Mei smirked and they finished tying up the ends of the cloth to create a large trash bag.

"You're wrong though," Xukali said.

"About what?"

“About gaining favor and all that, if you want that, or anything in the world you force yourself to get it, sure talking can get you a lot of stuff, but nothing that matters. Though muscle and the Sacred arts can get you something you want, I mean look at the Sects and their leaders, they got there with the sheer might of themselves and their parents. Depths, look beyond our clan, the Fomor, Unseelie, and the Seelie clans, all of them are so much more powerful than them. Some of their smaller nobles' mansions are as big or bigger than this building, and they get what they want.”

“That’s true for the strong.”

Those five words stung, like a bee sting in their guts, making so many memories surface, but Mei just pushed them down.

“I’ll still try,” Xukali said weakly, “I’ll still try,” she said firmer with a spark in her eyes.

Mei nodded saying “Um, I’m.... Going to get a wheelbarrow for this,” he vaguely gestured at the trashbag.

“Yeah.”

Mei went to one of the supply closets at the northern wall of the courtyard, returning with a slightly janky wooden wheelbarrow, returning with it helping Xukali heave the bag in just as they started to leave a voice called out to them, filling Mei with dread.

“Well, it seems like there are some slow workers still here,” the Young Master Karu said

Mei froze for a second, then turned around with a bow from the waist, hands by his side, and said

“Sorry for our incompetence, Young master, please send us on our way.”

“Screw off Karu,” Xukali helpfully added.

Xukali’s words confounded Mei, but he couldn’t say he was surprised.

“Words like that, from you, people with such bad blood shouldn’t talk like that, be more like him.”

“My parents didn’t have bad blood, they’re just bad people.”

Mei could hear her gritting her teeth, he had to stop her before anything too bad happened.

“Please forgive us Young Master.”

“Oh, screw-” Mei tugged on her sleeve, but she just pulled away, “I’m not bad blood, they’re as good as blood could come.”

“Yet you can’t practice any path that’s given to you, because you’re too weak, and so were your parents, they’re killed for a reason. They were killed off because they had to inflate their egos with all the power they could take, and they earned none of it”

Mei saw Xukali tense up, he reached out to stop her but he was too late, Xukali stepped forward and tried to slap Karu but he just gracefully stepped back. And raised his hand to do the same, but Elder Lo’iju grabbed his arm and said in his cold, even tone.

“Let the ants do their job, don’t disrupt them or they may try to bite you.”

“An ant sting couldn’t hurt me.”

“Yes, but they do the work we don’t want to do, so let them do their jobs, it’s not your place to punish them.”

“Shouldn’t I punish subpar work”

“Don’t distract yourself with the matters of an ant, you’re not an ant are you?”

Karu sneered let out a puff of air took his arm away and walked away, followed by Lo’iju, the Elder’s eyes never even crossing over them. Xukali started towards them but stopped and

walked towards me grumbling curses under her breath, Mei let out a sigh, finally straightening up.

He tried to talk to Xukali as they pushed the wheelbarrow together, but she ignored him, only replying when he called out instructions to turn. The pattern dragged on for the rest of the day, when they cleaned the floors and dusted the room, Mei expected some sort of small punishment to be dolled out to them at some point. A beating, and some extra work, but nothing happened, only the silence of his only companion, and his thoughts.

The Bell struck nine times, indicating the ending of their work day. Mei went to the male servants' changing he came in that day along with a dozen or so others and made his way home. He saw the sunset, Blue Bird to the east and Reaper to the west, from the south Mei saw two out of six moons if you didn't count Blue Bird's Feather, Gold leaf followed by the smaller teal Sylvan. And at the edge of the Reaper's light, he could see the flickering gold and black Firefly rising from the west, slightly eclipsing Reaper.

Taking a moment to admire it, Mei sat down as the sun rested beyond the horizon, both of them letting out a flash of light as they did, only the edges of the sky still painted in blue and purple pastels. The stars descended into the sky, and a line of dots poked into the sky with swirling splotches of blue like stagnant gas-like haze now adorning the sky. A strong warm breeze blowing through the grass, with the cold hint of winter, Mei saw the land beneath the mountain light up like the stars. The beach shore was a distinct line into the abyss that distorted the lights coming from the cosmos above. Mei felt a warm fuzziness fall over him, it swirled in him, settling in his gut, it felt like things had come into perspective. Or that he finally figured a puzzle out, as chaos came into order, he'd seen what happened to him and knew it was going to be alright.

The cold stale light of the lamps along the chalk-white stone stairs lit up, ruining the view of the heavens and cutting the moment short, Mei let out a sigh, sitting up. Patting the dust and dirt off the back of his pants, and walked down the winding stairs, smelling the fresh air of the mountain and the sea salt intermingle as he got further down.

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Mei opened the rod iron gate of his house, leading into the artificially bland yard, only filled with a singular type of grass. Walking through the gravel path, opening the wooden door with his key, then taking off his outdoor sandals at the entrance and putting on his soft wool slippers, the inside was like a cloud. But they're getting old, they hadn't been replaced since three Weather Fall festivals ago when he was gifted them, so they're feeling more like soft grass on the hard earth.

Nevertheless, he went forward to the dining room, the solid wooden doors serving as a wall to the porch were open to the balcony, showing the ocean and the sky in its splendor. Facing a different direction than the city to avoid the lights, the house's owner sat at the very

table with Mei's mother Ke'ixa, and his two younger brothers. The twins Re'io and Gixu, Mei's father and mother sit together at the head, backs facing the beautiful scene behind them, the twins at father's left hand.

Mei sat to his father Ogomei's right, but three seats down, the other two were meant for his older brother and sister, the respected children. The twins were talking fervently to mother and father about their day and what they learned at the Black Spear martial arts school, meant for children that hadn't yet awakened their Spirit Avatars.

Soon after Mei sat down the food came, a beef stew and fried grain patties, placed on the thigh-high table. Tall enough so that the diners could reach all the food, but short enough to show all but the legs of the people sitting on chairs, so they could have proper conversations. Mei's family chatted away as they started to eat, but Ogomei stopped everyone else, raising a hand.

"Wait, wait, Xu'uina and Ko'ipo are going to be here any second now, just wait."

Some protests arrived from the twins, "But we only ate lunch today because Gixu didn't wake up this morning."

"That's not fair, you're supposed to wake me up earlier than the Second bell, it was nearly third when you tried."

"No, I tried earlier than Second Bell, you're just lazy."

Gixu's face turned a little red, and he started to talk but Father interrupted, "Now did I hear you right Re'io, because if I did that would constitute a grounding."

"No, I was talking about, um, uh," Re'io fumbled for words.

"He was merely wishing that Gixu would fall asleep earlier instead of training so hard and waking up late," Mei intervened for his little brother.

"Right, right," Re'io shook his head vigorously in agreement.

They sat in silence for less than a minute when Mei heard the wooden front door creek open, accompanied by footsteps. Then two absurdly tall figures came through the hallway to the dining room, the one on the left was a broad-shouldered man with green streaks in his shoulder-length hair. Looking like a taller and younger copy of Dad, Ko'ipo must've reached Star or Moon Lord while Dad had stagnated at Night Lord for longer than any of them have been alive.

The woman, Xu'uina was even taller than Ko'ipo, having to hunch over so her head didn't hit the shorter parts of the ceiling, she was even taller than Elder Lo'iju. But she was always taller than everyone in the family, her straight hair inherited from her mother and shared by Mei reaching the middle of her back. The only visual oddity Mei could see was that her fingernails in the right light flashed a purple color, but otherwise, she looked completely normal. In contrast with Ko'ipo, riddled with oddities, like how some patches of his skin look scaled or his pupils are catlike.

"Welcome back, it's been too long, so how's the training been, I caught word that you both ascend beyond Night Lord."

Both of them sat by me, Xu'uina sitting closest to father being the eldest, and Ko'ipo sitting directly right of Mei.

"Oh, yeah, I became Moon Lord, while dear old Xu'uina became a Star Lord," Ko'ipo said most of his attention on filling his plate and bowl, everyone else following suit.

"I was able to get a position at the third Ko'i," Xu'uina said, "same level as you Dad," a slight smile on her lips

Mei saw pain and rage flicker in his father's eyes for just a moment, "Congratulations, which position is it," he said only letting excitement into his voice

"Assistant to the head Smith at the Divine Forge."

"Show off," Ko'ipo said through a mouth of food.

"Don't speak with your mouth full, it's rude," Mei's mother Ke'ixa said, surprising Mei, she seldom spoke or made eye contact with anyone, only speaking when she was passionate about something or when spoken to.

"Yeah, it's rude Ko'ipo," Xu'uina said with a hefty portion of sarcasm slathered on her words.

Ko'ipo grumbled but continued eating his food, everyone ate, talking to each other boisterously, excluding Mei, sitting at the end of the table, just getting through his meal. No one even extended a word to him, outside of the conversation in mind and input, then Xu'uina said something that interested him.

"Ko'ipo and I can bring along three plus ones for free to the Weather Fall festival, we're thinking of using them on mom and the twins so any of you could bring along some friends."

"Oh, I was thinking of something similar," Ogomei said, swallowing a mouthful of food, "I was thinking as a gift for you two ascending above Night Lord that I was going to give you my two plus ones to each of you. For a, you know, any special someones, eh?" saying the last part with a smirk.

Ko'ipo choked on some food and said "Dad!" blushing a little.

"Oh, we couldn't," Xu'uina said following the rhythm of politeness

"Come on, I insist."

"I truly couldn't."

"It's a gift, for both of you."

"If you insist," They both said, Ko'ipo more meekly than his older sister.

"Oh, what about our offer to you Dad."

"Oh, I couldn't, I'm your Dad."

The rhythm of polite denial repeated till Ogomei conceded, but something caught Mei's notice. "The only people here that had automatic acceptance are Dad, Ko'ipo, and Xu'uina, Dad was giving them a choice of a plus one with his freebies. Xu'uina was covering for two people, and Ko'ipo was covering for only one person since he was still a fourth Ko'i, which meant."

"Um, I'm going to have to be covered for," Mei said firmly in the beginning but faltered not even halfway through the sentence.

Most of the family looked at him, making him feel like he had weapons pointed at him, then Ogomei said.

"You're of age, you have a job, you can pay for it."

"I'm not old enough till this Festival, and you take nearly all my salary."

“Find a way.”

“Isn’t this supposed to be a family thing, every one of us together,” now everyone was really staring at him, especially Ogomei’, they had a spark of fire in them.

“If I hadn’t tested your Spirit Avatar to see if your mother was unfaithful” Mei saw his mother flinch, “I would’ve thrown you out by now, even now I can barely believe we’re related by blood. You look nothing like me, and you can’t even summon your Spirit Avatar without throwing up, if you want to come then earn it.”

Silence, then Mei half whispered, “Yes Father,” a little hole in his chest growing wider

The Meal continued, spoons on bowls and chopsticks on plates, talking to one another, with Mei in the back, silent. After it ended everybody stayed at the table for a couple minutes to talk, Mei only staying there for normalcy’s sake. When everybody stood up to finally leave Ko’ipo bumped into him and he felt something in his hand, a large bronze coin. When he looked at him he saw his older brother give a discreet wink.

Mei felt a warmth rise in his chest, he wanted to thank his brother but Ko’ipo was gone and in his room, Mei started humming to himself and went inside his room. Consisting of a bed, a window, and a small closet with about ten or so feet of room to walk around in, not a thing out of place. But in his doorless closet, he saw that a green robe had fallen off its hanger, he hadn’t properly tied the robe belt so the collar expanded till it fell. He took some time to fix it, getting lost in seeing every little imperfection he got lost in cleaning the little thing. At the end he hid the loose floorboard on the ground by placing the robes that touched the floor over it, to hide the seam.

He jumped as he heard something at his door shake it a little, and then something slid under it. Checking over he saw a large bronze coin at the door and an even larger shadow from the hall move away. “Who was that, Mom and the twins couldn’t make a shadow that large, Dad? No, Ko’ipo already gave me some money so unless Kai’ixu the Sea Mother herself gave it to me it must be Xu’uina.”

Mei opened the door to confirm his thoughts, but as he suspected no one was there, he closed the door, went back into his room, and pried up the loose floorboard. Underneath the wood, on the foundations was a small wooden box about the size of his foot, after dusting off the cover of the box first he took the lid off. Inside were 16 large sea iron coins about twice the size of a fingernail, equaling exactly one large sea bronze coin. It only took a single small bronze coin to get into the festival and watch all the show’s performances, but it took one and a half large bronze coins to watch the matches.

He’d seen them every Weather Fall festival since he could remember and seeing the one on one fight between people had made his blood run hot to his very core. But with the job that he got just so he wouldn’t get kicked out of the house, he would’ve never gotten even this amount of money in time. With his dad taking rent since the Weather Fall festival before and all, so he had resorted to taking the occasional trinket from the house that no one would miss

knowing that he most likely wouldn't pay for the tickets. Now he had more than enough money to get tickets, but now the problem was that practitioners could feel Sea Bronze.

Sea Iron was faint enough that he didn't have to worry, but bronze would attract his father's attention, especially if it was coming from his room if it stayed there long enough. He had to get rid of it, he had to bring along another person, but the relief overrode that. The relief that he could go to the matches, not have to steal more or something bigger, and the feeling of power as he held just a slight bit of freedom in his hands. He started giggling, sounding a little bit insane, he stopped when he heard the wooden floors creak. He rushed putting the money away and jumped into bed covering himself in the sheets, hoping no one heard him.