

I'ani hummed to himself sitting on a cliff ledge, kicking his legs over a hundred or so foot drop. Taking a sip from some tea mix native to the region that tasted like a mix of green and white tea. *Then adding in what he thought was jasmine, made it really delightful. It was definitely going into his collection.*

He took another sip, watching a group of construction workers building down below. Half a dozen Remnants floating among them unseen, still obeying the walls even though they could float straight through them. Parts of them clipping through the ground and the random passersby they were too slow to get out of the way of.

This sight repeated a hundred times over in the city, centered mostly around the lake. Way to many. *Remnants only formed when the soul's connection to the physical was strong enough to persist without a body, usually practitioners. But every single person that died three weeks ago, be it a babe or elder, had one. And they weren't fading away bit by bit, so why? Is something keeping them here, or could these people just have naturally stronger connections?* "Hey,"

The voice of his apprentice snapping him out of his thoughts. Turning his head he saw them a few steps away from the ledge

"Hey you, wanna take in the view with me," he said, patting the rock beside him.

"I'd rather die some other time."

"Worry wort," He rolled his eyes, "You know I saw someone with your path blown in half and win the fight by biting the throat out of her opponent. And they were barely a century old then! now that I think about it I should probably check up on them some time soon. Her birthday's coming up I think."

"Well, when I'm barely a century old I'll do that."

"Ok, ok," I'ani waved their free hand in defeat.

"So back to what I wanted to talk about. When you are finally choosing your apprentices, I'd rather not stay here much longer. I got rocks thrown at me the other day because I was a, and I quote 'A filthy blooded foreigner.' for Heaven's sake!"

"I was thinking about a day or two so after the funeral rites. I wanna see it. Plus all my prospects are gonna be there, so two birds with one stone baby." He raised his tea cup in mock triumph.

"Can we narrow it down to like one... Or day of?"

"Need to give them some time to think about it, be slower to turn around a week into training. Don't you think so?"

"Don't you know, you have to, like, hunt down The Others real soon?"

"Hmm, there's already more qualified people doing so. Plus I gotta focus more on... recovering to my former state."

"Oh... sorry I, uh, forgot about that."

"Oh, no worries. Hey, I'll set a hard limit of two day, ok? And I'll start doing more of the essential shopping so you don't have to interact with the people."

"That sounds good. Gonna be fun seeing that insane girl trying to become your apprentice again"

He grimaced, "Don't remind me."

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Karu strained to keep a stripped wooden log straight in a hole as three other workers filled it in with dirt mixed with a hardening agent to make sure it stayed.

"Finished, time to water it!" the man to his left said.

One left and brought over a bucket of seawater, tossing it over the dirt. Making sure to soak all of it, the hardening agent absorbing it in an instant. The color changing to look like greenish-gray stone

"Finished here big guy," the third said patting his lower back

Karu slowly let go of it just in case they were wrong, relaxing when nothing happened.

Then the chimelike lunch bell rang. The crew around him threw a mini celebration.

"Hey, big guy. Wanna eat with us." The seawater bucket guy to his right said, *or was that the one on his left? Ah, it didn't matter.*

"No."

"Ahh, you're breaking my heart here man. You ain't even tell us your name, at least do that?"

"No."

"Come on," the one to his left started, "We know you're some Practitioner or whatever, but it's not going to kill your honor to tell us your name."

"No."

"Oof, rejected," the one lagging behind them said

The three chattering about him as they got the provided meal of a mystery stew. And against his wishes ate with him like they were old friend. Karu doing his best to ignore them. Then the bells chimed again, and they got back to work. The suns lowering as the work day neared its end. The Bell finalizing it

"Have a good one big guy," One of them said waving buy as the four went their separate ways.

Karu went his way up the northern mountain, ignoring the main building and heading straight for the smaller plain two-story building that housed the Alchemy division. Right next to the Smithing division.

Going inside he witnessed the explosive chaos of over a hundred people trying to get from A to B, looking like an ant colony. Masters and students doing each other's jobs and uncaring of rank. The halls flowing with people carrying supplies to whoever was awake enough to make healing Elixirs and sava.

Standing trying to find a way in to do something, someone randomly shoving a small box into his hands, "You, this. Second floor, room directly in the middle of the northern side. Master Ko'i'ofe."

"Yes," Karu nodded

*He'd been shocked by this the first day or so but quickly got used to being treated so... simply. It actually felt nice in a weird way. The title of Sion non-existent.*

*Simply someone helping move stuff around among the halls perfumed with dozens of acrid and floral smells of the very overworked main shop.* Most people here staying awake a full day and night, barely getting a handful of hours to rest. Then going right back to work as the sun rises and they had to make another concoction for somebody on death's door.

Then the suns fell below the horizon. Reaper and Bluebirds light softly caressing the edge of the mountains and waves below. Karu leaving the building so he could maintain a healthy sleep schedule. *Unlike the poor Alchemists that he could feel the jealous stares on his back as he exited.*

Going directly to the small one-story building behind the main one. Roof tiles a deep sea blue, the juniper wood the building was constructed out of stained black with the blood of some great historical sea beast.

He walked into the building, *his home*, going to the dining room. His Father sitting at the table with Karu's favorite dishes untouched. The only other thing at the small family table being a shrine to his mother.

"Have a nice day, throwing away another day of training?"

Karu grunted in response, pulling out a chair for himself.

His father sighed, "So how long are you going to do this?"

"Till I get accepted," Karu brushed off the comment, filling his plate.

"That's not very likely from what you've told me. He's been impossible to find. Sheji Xu'uina has been trying to do what you've told her."

"I know," Karu grimaced, "She bothered me nonstop on information about him till last week."

His father snorted, "Really? That must've been fun. Anyway let me get to my point, I don't think chasing after this person's apprenticeship is a good idea. You could be wasting months of training just for him."

"Respectfully Father, I believe even a year's training is worth the sacrifice."

They locked eyes, Both of them going silent. his father looking down first, "I will concede, but only for a year."

"Thanks."

They chatted as Karu ate his dinner. Telling each other the small meaningless things of their day. Clashing over Black licorice, Karu discovering his fathers insanity. *Seriously, how could anybody like that gunk?*

Shortly after discovering this disturbing truth, they went to bed. Karu falling asleep faster than he had in a while, finally not waking up in the middle of the night covered in a cold sweat like usual.

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Mei washed the dried blood and gunk off his hands at the water basin. A bamboo tube with holes drilled into it and water flowing through it constantly from a pump made by a Sacred Smith.

After scrubbing the viscera off his hands from an incident where a master had protected a group of students. Getting severely injured but saving all but two in the process. Mei looked around for a drying towel, but it was none in sight. So he just flicked his hands out hoping the small layer of water left would air dry.

Afterwards he picked up the lunch boxes he made, containing a stir fry and some preserved fruit on the side. walking over to the steps that led up to the rest of the main building from the courtyard. Sitting on them alongside Xukali, handing her one of the lunches.

Xukali rapidly ripping the top off, devouring the thing like a starving animal. Making sure to pick out the beets in the stir fry with a weirdly scary precision.

“Hey,” Karu started, picking at his food, “Ain’t it kinda, like, weird...”

Xukali whipped her mouth, “Gotta be more specific. Are you talking about your fashion choices or you continuously putting these vile thing into the food you make me,” she said the last part waving a piece of purple beet around with her free hand

“First of all, this is a uniform. We’re wearing the same damn thing.”

“But I wear it with style.”

“Second, beets are the best vegetable damn you!”

“Nutzo,” she muttered under her breath

“And third, I mean that I’m... We’re cleaning up a body and we’re acting like nothing happened?”

She swallowed another bite of food, “Get what you mean. It kinda felt like this after my parents died. A, a,” She construed her hands like she was holding a sphere,” Just a blank nothing, then just everything,” She relaxed her hands, “And Got in trouble everyday basically, for punching somebody that ticked me off-”

“Still do.”

She jabbed his shoulder with a death glare, he giggled giving her a self satisfied loo. Rubbing the area that got hit.

She rolled her eyes, continuing like nothing happened, “Then it just sets in. Like dried bricks sorta. That make any sense?”

“Yeah sorta... wait I didn’t know your parents died?” he widened his eyes, “Oh, uh sorry for your losses.”

She snorted, “Don’t worry, it happened before we met. Way before, it’s why Karu treats me like a stray dog.”

Mei furrowed his brow, “Why would having dead parents make him hate you?” releasing he said something stupid again he tried to amend, “Oh, not to pry or anything.”

“Don’t worry, I should’ve put it slightly differently. My parents were executed for disgracing the name. They are, were distant relatives of the Xangru family.”

“Ah,” he said dumbly

The conversation died out at that, so they ate in silence again, trying to stuff their stomach before their break ended.

“Hey,” Mei said through a mouth of half-chewed food, pointing to a purple flower growing out of crack. “You know what those things are? I always see them, like, just before and after winter but never again.”

“Oh, uh. Yeah, that’s a Leviathan Fall Aster. Never really liked them, it’s horrible growing them because they really only grow in late autumn or early spring. Lavender is easier and smells good. Plus they’re pretty, they’re my favorite if you couldn’t tell.”

“Oh, my favorites are those ones that look like bushes that have a, like a sphere, bulb? Whatever. Of flowers, but they don’t smell at all.”

“Hydrangeas?”

He snapped his fingers, “Yeah, that’s the name.”

“Yeah, I like them too. I’d grow them more often if they weren’t so big, it take up most of my plot.”

“Hm, yeah, that makes sense.”

Then the break chime rang. Mei and Xukali groaning in unison, but got to their feet and start back to the mess of dried blood on the ground. Putting their masks back on to block some of the smell.