

Mei sits on the front porch to his home, cold air surrounding him as he lets the slow drip of water fall onto his feet. His breath fogging up like a dragon's breath in the air, only desiring for the cold to seep into him. To slow down, to never have to move, to be in a moment that's at least ok.

He breaths out, fog rolling up to the heavens. Dissipating he sees l'ani standing in front of him like the fog had created him.

"So this is where you live.

"Uh, umm. How did you get here, the gates locked..." Mei trailed off

"I jumped."

"And the walls are over ten feet tall."

"Rookie number baby," he sat down beside Mei on the step, "So, nice winter morning eh. First snow, well slush now."

"I hate winter."

"Oh... so why you out here?"

"Preparing."

"For the Funeral Right?"

Mei gave a noncommittal grunt

"... So I wanted to talk to you about something."

Mei grunted again.

"I want you as an apprentice."

Mei snorted, "That's unlikely."

"Why?"

"I can summon my Avatar, well not properly. It's broken somehow"

"Dizziness or pain I'm guessing."

"...the first."

"Can you hand me you hand."

Mei looked at l'ani for a second then pushed forward his right hand palm up. l'ani grabbed it with both of his, closing his eyes. Mei felt a slight shock then a pleasant tingle, l'ani soon pulled away.

"I've been wanting to confirm that. Your core has a mutation so it manifests differently then usual, when you try to do it like how others do it causes any number of small nasty things."

"Oh, can you fix it!?" Mei straightened up.

"Why would I change it," a near manic grin spread across l'ani's face, "This opens up so many possibilities!" he got closer to Mei's face, "I haven't even tested you for your natures yet, or your innate mana yet!" he got closer, "I'm going to have to scour my catalogs of Paths for you!"

Mei scootched away from the giggling man as he did arithmetic on his fingers, muttering under his breath.

After a moment Mei cleared his throat, "So... you're going to teach me... Why?"

"Cause your unique," he went right back to muttering.

"No, why did you... how do I put this. Why should I start?"

l'ani shrugged, "I don't know, why do birds fly?"

"Very convincing argument," Mei said in a flat deadpan tone.

"Sorry, but I can't really give you a why, it's something... just, something that's there. I do it because I love it... sometimes. Other times it just has to be done you know? Sometimes birds were gifted wings and only know how to fly, so what else could they do?"

"But what is a bird," Mei continued, "That can not fly."

"A penguin," I'ani said.

"Eh, what? What's pongin?"

"Penguin. They're flightless birds. You can find them in the far north on that region's equivalent of the Ice Steps neighboring here."

"Must be pretty damn useless," Mei let out a small laugh.

"They do look kinda ridiculous, but they learned to swim."

"So a worse duck?"

"A duck ain't got nothing on a penguin, they can swim faster than most fish. And they live in some of the coldest regions of the world without a sweat."

"Well, you sweat in the cold."

"Smart mouth."

"So A bird can learn to swim better than a fish?"

"Given the time."

"I think I will be joining you."

"Great! Have a nice time with your family at the Funeral... oh, right. It's a funeral. Um, my condolences?"

Mei let out a proper laugh, "Don't worry, I'll try and have a nice day, have a good one too."

I'ani waved as he left and jumped the wall.

Outside the gate Mei heard someone else yell, "What took you so damn long! I nearly froze my nose off!"

"Sorry, sorry. I'll make sure to-"

The voices muffled into incomprehensible noise as they walked away.

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I'ama pulled on her sister's hand to lead her forward through the newly beaten path created by the new residents outside the city walls. The mess of tents and shacks around them created from a crisscross of new and old material. All of the new residents placed haphazardly, uncaring for one another or any future.

The suns peeking just over the horizon, grazing the land in their blue and purple light. Casting shadows on the mountains, vailing the people below in a fractal tapestry of shadow and light. Bouncing off the lake water and wavering in a forever unrepeating pattern over the ground and paths surrounding it. Hitting I'ama and her sister as they walked it, heading for the Right of the Dead.

Ma'u stopped, head down. Eyes staring into the earth.

I'ama turned around, "You need to rest?"

"Can... can we not go?"

"Why are you asking, are you feeling ok?"

"I just-I can-I don't... I don't want to remember."

l'ama held her sisters hand with both of hers, slowly rubbing her thumb on the top it, "We have to remember them. We have to give them peace in death, it's the kindest thing we can do."

"Not them, not the dead."

"Can you elaborate?"

"That night..."

"Ok, you don't have to speak anymore. We don't have to stay if you don't want to, but we have to climb our stairs and give them their last heart. Is that fine with you?"

They kept following the rocky path, circling behind the stadium rooted in the holy lake like a tree. Finding behind it a river, the water splashing up and misting. Some of the foliage around it covered in ice and frost. The thing spanning nearly thirty feet wide, the water sliding down the mountain almost like a waterfall, hitting the lake below with a constant froth and boom.

And cutting down the middle of it like a sword strike was a line of unpolished stone, depressed into the river. But water would not fall onto it, two sets of stairs built into it on the side. In the middle a burbling stream of glowing blue water snaking through it. Finally falling and mixing with the lake below.

The sister walked across the arched bridge to get to the stairs finding l'ani and his apprentice sitting on the steps. Relu, *if l'ama was remembering right*, in an absurdly thick wool coat, shivering despite it. l'ani dressed in thin clothes, though looking to pale to be healthy. *From what l'ama remembered him looking.*

"Been waiting for you," l'ani said, standing up.

"That's a rather creepy thing to say to a girl you've only met once," l'ama bit back

"Don't flatter yourself, wait a thousand or so years. But I ain't here for none of that, I want you and your sister to become my apprentice."

"Why, we don't got no lineage or bloodline secrets."

"It'd all be crap anyway," he said waving his hand, "What I see in you is power."

l'ama snorted, but her sister stepped forward eyes wide, "Really?," Ma'u said.

"Yeah, you especially kid. My guess is a dying blessing, since your orphans I'm thinking your parents right?"

l'ama stepped forward in front of Ma'u, "So what!"

"Nothing, really. What you getting worked up about."

"l'ani," Relu cleared her throat, "Orphans are considered bad luck here, especially ones that mother died at childbirth."

"Sorry, didn't know I touched a nerve there."

l'ama sighed, crossing her arms, "No worries

"So... will you accept?"

"Sure," both of the sisters said in unison

"I know that- oh, wait. Really?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, mph. Why?"

“Didn’t your apprentice already tell you. We’ve had our wings clipped since birth.”
l’ani grinned, putting a hand forth, “Took the words out of my mouth.”
l’ama took it, Ma’u putting a hand over it and they shook.

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Xukali kneeled down on the smooth but worn wood stained black with the blood of a Leviathans child. The masses of people surrounding her on the black black and blue painted temple, some of them on the shore of the lake the building stood in.

The stream of blue glowing sacred water cutting through the crowd of people, coming from under a solid steel gate. The ethereal blue ghosts of people long dead standing in line over the Sacred Stream, with hearts of given coins. Their only discernible trait being their eyes.

Hundred standing in line down the stairs to to temple in the river with falling down to the lake below starting as the melting ice of the Dragon Gate mountains tip miles above. The suns above starting their day's journey starting their monthly eclipse.

Marking the holy day as their light blanketed the earth below in warmth, melting the nights frost. Dampening the air with dew, droplets forming on the temple. Darkening the pure white cloth of the peoples prayer robes all in uniform rows, their hair creating a checker board of brown and black.

Xukalis bright blond hair disrupting the harmony. *When will this end*, The head priest walked out in the same garb as all others but at a towering ten feet tall. *Her great grandfather Li’iu*, the former seventh generation leader of the O’ozhiwu clan.

Karu walking on the left of him, and on the right was the man's youngest child, the current leader of the Black Spear Sect. And Karu’s father, Xukali stared daggers at them, *the traitors, kin killers*.

Li’iu the head priest started talking, his booming voice reaching even the people on the lakes shore, “May this day blessed by the sun be one of rest for both living and dead,” the mass speaking along, Xukali just mouthing along. The head priest turned around facing the metal gate, placing both hands on it, adjusting his footing and pushing on it.

The metal screeching as it opened, revealing a rock peking up from the wood gushing out the Sacred Water. Surrounded by 12 wooden statues, three nearly 20 feet tall representing the suns. The other nine the size of a regular person, representing the moons.

Li’iu pulled out a knife with a handle made from whale bone engraved with one ancient character “zhi’iana” translated as “Purify.” Or advancement, or change, or flight, or forging. There was no longer a word that could truly encapsulate what it meant anymore. Just a forever lasting process to be and become better.

Li'iu cut his palm with the blade. Closing his fist he walked over to the statues starting on the left, walking clock wise he put his bloody hand print onto them. Muttering a prayer no one put the priest could know.

Stopping at the first tall statue painted blue and decorated with a feather cloak he projected his voice again, "May Bluebird look over these Remnants and guide them to the Father above, and retrieve those sunken down to those Forever Below Creation. And make sure those trapped in Blazing Winds stay where they belong," the mass repeating after him, and the statue started to glow.

He kept on walking, getting to the one painted red and orange with green eyes and holding a sword, "May Wanderer look over the worlds of the living and dead, and look over the ashes The Leviathan in the frozen land and blazing womb. And give us of the Black Spear and Leviathan kin Sects the power to help him," the crowd echoed it. And it started to glow to

Li'iu walked to the final one painted purple, carved to look like it was in a cloak. It's face obscured by a pure white mask nearly porcelain like in quality, "May Reaper look over our souls in the sky and bless us with strength in our hour of need."

As the crowd said the final word the Reaper statue glowed in unison with the rest and started to hum. The waiting Remnants started to go one by one slowly at first, then in pairs every few second, then half a dozen every second.

And countless disappearing every moment. Their light being sucked into the spring till none were left.

And the Head Priest said a final prayer, "May you rest easy in the sky above and never know the flames or mud," the crowd saying it softer than the rest."

Then like the Remnants the people started leaving via the stairs. As she was following them, feeling relieved at the fact she felt a hand on her shoulder. Turning around, ready to elbow the person, she saw it was I'ani.

"So you finally show up?" she crossed her arms.

"Yeah, uh. Can you wait here for a minute while everybody leaves. I'm going to decide who to pick in a bit."

"Oh, ok-"

"Great, Relu," he turned around to his apprentice which Xukali didn't see before, "Stay here, if I somehow piss them off, run. Bye!"

He left in the blink of an eye, somehow navigating through the shifting maze of people effortlessly.

"So..." Xukali started up, "Will I regret this?"

"Don't assume that you'll be picked."

"Ah, oh..."

They let the silence trail on as the mass filtered down the stairs, till only they and the priests remained.

I'ani from across the temple waved at them, Three people following him. Li'iu the Head priest, Karu, and Karu's father.

"So you're choosing between yy grandchildren?" Li'iu said, in a gentle tone of voice you would never connect to him if you heard him guide the Funeral Right just a minute ago.

"Yep."

"Can't you pick both."

I'ani gave a noncommittal grunt.

"Aren't you a bit small for a practitioner?" Karu's dad said.

"They're ways around that."

"Oh, how so? My back has been giving me problems in-"

"No more questions," I'ani cut off the Head Priest, making Xukali snort and Relu sigh, "You two," he pointed and Karu and Xukali, "Stand in front of me please, makes it easier to tell a speech you know."

The two complied, making sure to stay an arms length away from each other.

"Ahem, so I don't don't want either of you at all. I'd rather just leave you here right now after seeing what I have. But I have made a promise that I can not break," Everyone but Relu's eyes widened at that, "Karri, or whatever your name was. You're just so... how do I put this. So boring, you never try to innovate anything. You keep on trying to fish with your hands without even thinking of a spear."

Xukali snickered, giving Karu a joyfully venomous gaze.

"And you," he pointed at Xukali, making her straighten up, "You're just empty... you have nothing, you do nothing with the time I gave you, you do nothing to get what you want. And you whine at the world when you don't get what you want when you didn't even try. You're just so... pathetic."

Xukali stepped forward, snarling, "Don't you pretend like know-"

"Isn't this a little too fast?" Li'iu said, "This is a bit too fast to truly determine if they deserve your tutelage."

"I've seen enough."

"Why not a simple challenge? A never ending game perhaps, the first to give up. Not fail, gets to proceed. If both give up, well you didn't break their promise. They just decided to back out."

"But that'd be so annoying," I'ani tilted his head back, eyes toward the heavens as the suns separated from their eclipse. Eyes seemingly unaffected by the light hitting them straight on, he tilted his head back letting out a sigh "Fine, I'll just make what I already have planed harder. Your two next week same day, same place. I already told everyone else that I want the same, so don't be surprised when other people show up. Now shew," He flicked his fingers at them, making them get out of his sight.