

Xuluri fell backward onto the springy straw-woven floor, bouncing a little bit, tears started to well up in her eyes. Before she could start crying her mother picked her up, starting to shush her, her father came over hand on the back of his head, cringing.

“Sorry, sorry, didn’t mean to make you go flying like that Xuxu.”

“She’s only five, I told you that’s way too young to practice with the sword like this,” Xuluri, her mother said, snapping at Gai’ika, her father.

“She asked for it.”

“Yes, but she’s way too weak for her to practice against you, a Night Lord, by the Depths she’s not even a Mistling yet, she’s barely older than a Leviathan Fall, at least get her someone her age to practice with.”

“Sorry, sorry,” he said looking sheepish, “I’ll make sure to do that.”

“You better,”

Xuluri turned away from him and looked at her child, “Hey, hey, is anything hurting, only bruises and scrapes right.”

Xukali nodded her head vigorously, seeming like nothing happened.

“Ok, I think it’s time for a nap alright?”

She shook her head in agreement.

Before Xuluri could stand up a fully armed man walked into the room, bowed from his waist, and said.

“My Lord, a group has infiltrated the mansion.”

“Wait, what! Xuluri get Xuxu into our panic room.”

“I will,” her mother said eyes wide

“What’s happening?” Xukali asked.

“Oh, we’re just going to a different room to nap than usual, ok?” she said with a weird look on her face that Xukali hadn’t ever seen before, but it made her feel weird like she was balancing on a rope above a canyon.

They walked for a few minutes till they got into her parent’s room, and then her mother put her down on the floor to stand, holding her hand. Feeling the wall with her free left hand, when it landed on a seam she pushed in with her body weight, till a small brighter piece of circular wood like a button appeared. She pushed in it, and the wall panel swung open, revealing a barebones room with two beds, and each wall covered with jars upon jars of food and water.

“We’re going to be staying here for a little bit,” Her mother said with the same quaver in her voice from earlier but worse.

She closed the door behind them and placed Xukali onto the small bed, telling her a story about the Sea Mother and Sky Father creating the earth and humanity. Xukali quickly started feeling sleepy, having a hard time keeping her eyes open, before she knew it she was asleep.

Then she woke up with a start, when she heard a thunk, looking up Xukali saw her mother open the door revealing her father, with a large slash on his forehead. Starting to scab over but still trailing blood on his face, he wiped away the blood with his now grimy white sleeve. “Oh Depths, are you ok honey, what’s happening out there?” the quaver in her voice now fully audible

“Traitors, traitors, the lot of them, their throwing a damned Coup, the ungrateful bastards.”

“Who?”

“The Sects, at least four of the five major ones from what I've seen.”

Xuluri gasped, covering her mouth with a hand, “No.”

Father just nodded his head gravely.

“What're we going to do?”

“Wait here and slip out when they're gone.”

“That's it?”

“What else can we...” He trailed off seeing Xukali sitting up from the bed, rubbing her eyes, “Oh honey how are you?”

“Hungry,” she said, yawning.

He chuckled, “How about we get you some food then?”

They took down the jars, checking what was in them one by one. Most of them were filled with dried, fermented, salted, dried, pickled, or sugared food so they could last longer. They took out barley bread, put some pickled vegetables and salted meat, making a sandwich for Xukali. She tried to avoid the pickled beets but her mother caught on, chastising her. “You're not going to grow up big and strong if you don't eat all your food.” She grumbled but forced herself to swallow the horrible things

In the last few bites of the sandwich she heard a heavy metal thunk on the door, then a muffled yell.

“It's right here.”

Her father jumped up, pulling out his shorter blade “Ki'iolo”, meaning Imp, instead of his longer “Kai Ma'ani”, meaning Great Beast, because of the small size of the room. Her mother picked her up, pulling her close to her chest, not minding the squashed sandwich. After a few more thunks against the door, it smashed open, the door falling to the ground half in splinters, the other half falling into splinters.

Gai'ika, her father dashed to the side, deflecting a solid black spear thrown at him with his blade, embedding it into the wall, smashing a couple of jars. Gai'ika sidestepped and came forward, blade crackling with black lightning on the Sea Silver blade, with a Sea Steel spine. Two people came inside, Gai'ika targeted the taller, sterner-looking one, slashing at him, but it was blocked with a Solid black spear. The one stuck in the wall now gone, He stepped back from the two, directly in front of his family, barring their path. Keeping his sword up in a high guard, wobbling it in the air one-handed in a constant faint to bait out an impatient attack.

The woman on the right, worn with age, with gray coming into her ear-length dirty blond hair, cut into neat bangs around her face. Charged forward, stabbing forth with a Sea Bronze staff that had a warm glowing red Remnant Bone crystal on both ends. Gai'ika slashed, aiming for her vulnerable neck, but blocked it with the staff, a surge of black electricity coursed through the staff.

But all the electricity went to the gems on the end of the staff, their warm glow slightly dissipating, cracks forming in them. She went to strike his temple with the back end of the staff,

controlling the sword by keeping the guard up, Gai'ika swiveled his wrist. Making the curved single-edged sword blade face up, thrusting forward to stab her face at an angle.

She abandoned the guard, stepping to the side to avoid the stab, but still following through with the strike. Gai'ika also tried to sidestep, but something that looked like lava that had an ethereal Nettle growing out of it was wrapped around his right foot, pinning it to the ground. Forcing him to block, making him stagger into horrible footing, the black royal lightning charge only dissipates the light of one of the crystals, making it lose nearly all of its glow, some of it starting to crumble.

Gai'ika tried to recover but the butt of the stern mans pitchblack spear rammed into his liver, making Gai'ika crumple to the ground. Dropping his short sword, then he was chained to the ground with shackles of that same lava like liquid that stuck his foot to the ground. Xuluri held Xukali closer to her chest, slightly smothering her, Xukali couldn't figure out what was going on. Why were they attacking her dad, why were they hurting him, were they going to do the same to her?

Three more people came into the room, two of them middle aged, the last one looking ancient, with pure white hair, wrinkles starting to form on them. He held a scroll in his right hand, he stood directly in front of Gai'ika, the rest forming a circle around him.

"What are you doing here traitors!" he said, trying to force himself out of the cuffs.

"We are the major Sects of the O'ozhiwu clan, the Silver Thorns, Black Spear, Leviathan Kin, Earthen Flame, and the Pearl Titans leaders. And we have unanimously decided that you, Patriarch of the Royal Lightning Sect is no longer fit to rule the O'ozhiwu clan."

"For what reasons, I've been the perfect leader!"

"We have decided for many reasons, but primarily your incompetence at diplomacy cost alliances and trade, the worst of which led to the massacre of one of the innocent Fomorian clans. Which after refusing to charter your goods, that you caused in your incompetence, decided to throw a military campaign against them, so hastily put together due to your rush killed nearly as many soldiers as did Fomorians."

"Their clan no longer exists, You can't say I failed," he said snarling.

"True, but it was a completely avoidable and unnecessary disaster."

"They insulted by honor!"

"You don't throw a war against someone who decided to not trade with you!" the tallest man with green streaks in his red hair said, stepping forward.

"Mai'efa please don't interrupt," the old man said.

The leader of the Leviathan Kin sect clenched his fist but stepped back, staying silent.

The old man continued, "There are many many more reasons to why, but we are listing the final one, you increased the taxes on nearly every source of trade we had 15-45%, from grain to textiles. Making it nearly impossible to gain profit when put into context of your previous raises in taxes. Which was discovered that the money was being used to increase the size of your mansion and imported luxuries, after we put spies into your accounting team."

"Lies, all lies," Gai'ika said, the wind in his sails faltering.

"We have had the spies confirm beyond a reasonable doubt that you have been embezzling that money for your personal use, we also have evidence that your wife has been stealing that money herself and been personally involved with many of your more atrocious actions. So from the evidence that we have uncovered, we have decided to execute you and your wife."

Xukali could feel her mothers arms trembling, then she said, "Wait, what about Xukali."

"Yes, what about my child, are you going to kill her, you monsters!"

"No," the man with straight black back length hair with the pitch black spear said, "I'll be taking her in."

"Mommy, what's happening," Xukali said, feeling hot and hollow, like she needed to throw up, tears streaming out her eyes.

"It's going to be ok, you're just not going to see me or Daddy again, forever. You're going to be with your Cousin Xangru."

"I don't like him, he's cold."

She laughed, "Apt description."

The old man continued, "And as for the new leading clan we have chosen the Earthen Flame sect, for they are the only ones that still have a good reputation with the outside world, and the resources to rebuild."

With that statement nearly everyone looked disgruntled, but the blond woman with bangs and smoldering red eyes that had fought Gai'ika, she had a smirk on her face that she hid quickly.

"Mother, why, you're going to kill me, and you don't even have the heart to take care of your own grandchild," Xuluri said, keeping back tears.

"I was never good with children, you know that personally, but I never thought you'd turn into such bad blood," she said in a husky voice, shaking her head.

Xuluri just sat there, still, Xangru went up to her and held out his hands, she gave Xukali reluctantly, whispering in her child's ear one last time.

"Kill them all, those filthy bastards don't deserve to live."

That was the last time Xukali saw or heard her parents, as her Great Uncle took her out of her parents bedroom she heard her parents heads hit the floor

Time passed in a blur, by the next Weather Fall festival came around she had awakened her Spirit Avatar, it was Stinging Nettle, similar to her grandmothers. They tried putting her on the Earthen Flame path, but that's when they learned that her Avatar generated Lightning mana like her father.

So they tried to the Royal Lightning path, then they learned that her Spirit Avatar had some sort of mutation that made it impossible for her. So they just made her a cleaning girl for the Black Spear sect, they kept a close eye on her to make sure she wouldn't try to overthrow them.

But fate had decided that for her, that's what she thought, no matter how much she said otherwise, she would become strong. She would kill them, she would do everything in her power to make them hurt like she did.

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Xukali woke up on the bottom bunk bed with tears on her face, it was that dream again, she always had a dream like that. At least it wasn't the bloody one. She could only vaguely remember what happened that night, she didn't actually remember her mother's last words, but they'd always be something loving, encouraging. But now, they've changed to something violent and grotesque.

Wiping away her tears, getting ready for the day with her three other roommates, taking turns using the washroom, and getting the gruel that was called "Food". After eating she splashed her face with the cold water, then walked out with her three roommates, through the halls with multiple small groups of other servants.

Everybody talked and gossiped but Xukali stayed in the back of the back not talking, not because she was lonely or anything. but because she found everyone slightly too outrageously annoying, so she just ignored them, getting ready for the workday alone.

She stepped outside seeing Reaper start to float above the horizon, she had been surprised yesterday when all three suns had risen that morning and at Wanderer's disappearance. Admiring it she looked directly at it, the light only slightly hurting her eyes, the suns didn't give off enough light to damage someone's eyes, unlike Wanderer. She felt a tap on her shoulder and stopped the person one of her roommates, Gu'oki "Hurry, you can't be late like last time," she said. Xukali nodded, annoyed, following her to the Black Spear Sect main building, only about a hundred feet up the mountain on fairly steep stairs.

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She clocked into her job at the female changing center with a drove of other workers, then she went walking to the other side of the building to the male changing corters. She was always annoyed by how far apart they were, over a half mile walk just to meet up with your partner. That was just ridiculous, then she was snapped out of her thoughts when she felt something hit her right shoulder.

Turning she saw Karu with a gaggle of five or so other people matching his age, his soft green eyes unlike his fathers dark blue, matching her gray. He was technically her cousin because his father was her Granduncle, her great Grandfather had only had two children that survived beyond a single Leviathan Fall. The very first one, her Grandmother, and the very last, his father, six Leviathan Falls apart, her great grandfather Karu I dying at 21 Leviathan Falls old. Karu III metaphorically holding his Grandfather's name, held a smooth pebble in his hand tossing it up and down in his hand, with a sneer he said. "Now why is someone with such bad blood here?"

She knew this game, if she talked he would throw the rock at her, if she didn't he would give her permission and then find some small reason to throw it. So she just held up the small linked tablets with three characters on them each, one to indicate job then two for the room name.

"Speak"

"Going to pick up my partner."

"It's almost three bells, you're running late."

"Work only starts at three bells."

He threw the rock at her face, and she stepped out of the way.

"Did I give you permission to speak again, or move for that matter?"

The posy of bootlickers behind Karu trying to climb the rank or gain favor giggled.

"Nope."

Xukali said, turning around to walk away, and starting to whistle, she heard them start to yell but she just ignored them, whistling some random notes to a song she half-remembered.

Then she felt a flurry of rocks pelt her back, then clatter onto the cobblestone of the training ground. And they just kept on coming, dozens after dozens, hitting her head and exposed skin, which wasn't much and most of her body was protected by the baggy cloth, but that just made them aim for the head more.

She covered her head and face with her hands, leaving bleeding scratches all over them. Xukali started to walk away but someone tripped her up making her fall hands and knees to the cobblestones, leaving behind even worse gashes. The momentary exposure of her face made them aim towards it, leaving nasty cuts on it before she curled up, face towards the ground so she could protect the rest of her head.

Tears fell onto the stone below her, her body shaking, chest filled with fire, she wanted to hit them, she wanted to kill them. She wanted to humiliate them, she wanted them to hurt, but all she could do was shake on the ground sobbing. Then the rock pelting stopped, she laid them just to make sure this wasn't some sort of trick, but after a couple moments, she looked up.

Snot running out her nose, and tears blurring her vision she whipped them away with her sleeve to see Elder Lo'iju standing behind the Karu and the gaggle of bootlickers nervously looking at him.

"Why are you all not practicing? I left for a minute to go to the restroom to see you slacking off,"

He turned his head to face Karu, "I expect the young master to set an example, not lower it."

Karu looked down and nodded his head.

"Now get back to practice, all of you."

They all left except for the Elder, shaking his head letting out an exasperated sigh, he started to leave but Xukali called out to him.

"Why?" she whispered out, not giving it enough breath but the Elder stopped nonetheless, turning to face her.

"Why do you always protect me?"

He tilted his head to the side and said, "Is that how you see it?"

"What else, you always do something like that, and you're always around when it happens."

“No, I’m not protecting you.”

“Then what?”

“I’m always around the young master, his father charged me with protecting and guiding him. As his guide I find that it’s unbecoming of someone who’s going to take over this sect one day to waste his time on bullying an ant.”

Xukali just laid there, too stunned to speak.

“If that’s all, I’m going to leave,” he said, turning away.

As he walked away she spat at his feet, gritting her teeth trying not to scream.

After getting up she patted the dust off her clothes, going to the well at the very corner of the training court next. Washing her face with water and washing it off with a rag she kept in her pockets, she held the edge of the well with a vice grip. Looking into her reflection made by the dark water, she grimaced and kicked the stone of the well letting out a yell then a yelp.

She hopped on her good foot, holding her bad right one, there wasn’t much damage because she was wearing wooden clogs and they took the brunt of the force. But a jammed toe still hurt like the Depths, taking a few breaths she went off to join up with Mei, trying not to think of what happened again.

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After picking up Mei they went to clean one of the kitchens on the east side, and he brought up the Weather Fall festival.

“I was thinking I could buy the tickets for both of us, but I can’t really get reservations because my family makes me keep a strict timetable and I can’t exactly do it on the job.”

“Why me?”

“As a uh, favor because i’m asking you to go through the hell of getting them.”

“Ha, true.”

“So.... a deal?”

“Yeah why not.”

Something felt a little wrong to Xukali about that, it was a bit too much money to justify going through that line and filling out the forms.

“Hey,” she said, catching Mei’s attention, “I pay for the food ok.”

“No, I couldn’t”

“Depths, can we just skip the formalities and get a straight yes or no.”

“I couldn’t”

She glared at him.

“Oh, um, yeah, yes, you can pay for the food.”

“Thanks.”

“Uh, you’re welcome.”

The day passed on, at the end of it Mei gave her the coin, she went to her dorm while Mei went to his house and she tried to forget about the day. Breaking the poor random sticks she found on the ground outside before going to bed.

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Xukali hung upside down, rope tying her ankles and hands together, “No, no, no, it’s this dream again.” she thought. She heard the door open, not seeing it, the constrained light that only showed the crusty stone floor in a three foot circle.

Then a hunched over figure in a filthy black cloak came into sight, she could see remnants of different colors on it, maybe blue or green, but the crust covering it revealed nothing.

“Hello, I’m the doctor, I’ll be helping you today,” it said in a voice just as crusty as his cloak. She tried to scream but the gag in her mouth stopped it.

It chuckled, “There’s no need to tell me, I can tell just by looking, anyone could tell.” She kept on trying to scream.

“That blood, it’s rotten, and that skin, hmph, I’ll need to replace.”

It grabbed a rusting knife off a table, bringing it towards her throat, she closed her eyes.

“Don’t worry,” it said, whipping away one of her tears with a shriveled finger, nails needle like, “You’ll be perfect soon enough.”

She felt the metal touch her throat, digging it, ripping away at flesh, sawing more than slicing, she felt the blood leak down onto the floor. Dripping and dripping, for longer than she could count, distantly she could hear the thing giving her reassurances of how she was going to be perfect soon enough. All she could do was close her eyes and endure it, hoping it would end quickly.