

Relu desperately tried to think of a way to salvage what was happening

"I could kill you just like that!" l'ani snapped his fingers, "And I wouldn't even sweat," he said to the guard standing at the gate to the city they were trying to enter.

"No, you couldn't, I'm a Star Lord, and even if you're on our level there's only one of you and I can see that your friend there is a Mistling."

"Oh, I'm so much more than a Star Lord."

"Right, you're a great Sage on equal grounds with Elder Lo'iju, a word of warning. Get lost before I make you."

Relu could sense that l'ani was summoning his Spirit avatar, a wooden club with shark teeth tied onto the edge to make a sword.

Relu had researched the weapon because they couldn't get a name out of l'ani in the week they'd been together. It was a common weapon on isolated islands that didn't have good access to metal, it had around half a dozen names, Grikeer, Mauni, Leiomano, Babau, etc. They tried to trace his name to the islands in question, but none of the languages quite fit his full name l'anikaela.

Though they supposed that he could've lied to them now that they thought about it, they snapped out of their line of thought, kicking l'ani in the back of the leg. Making him stumble and glare at them

Relu leaned into l'ani's ear, whispering, "Let me talk."

He opened his mouth to retort but closed his mouth then said sheepishly, "I'm not good at this, sorry."

Relu patted l'ani on the back and stepped forward to talk, "Sorry, sorry my friend and I have just left Shaemae, the capital of the Haphme clan, I hope you can forgive us for being on edge."

"Apologies for what happened but that is no excuse for this behavior."

Relu pulled out a small pouch of coins, opening it to reveal Sea Silver coins they had gotten for exchanging goods in the last town.

"But I'm sure there's a way to forgive anything, isn't there?" the gruff-looking guard said, vastly changing his tone.

Relu slid two silver coins into the guard's palm.

"But I need just one more thing before I let you two in."

"And that is," l'ani said exasperated

"An apology, from you, for my honor."

"Why would I," Relu glared at l'ani, making him soften up, "Sure I apologize."

"Sorry, I couldn't hear you," the guard said, cupping his ear like he was hard of hearing.

l'ani took a deep breath and looked up into the sky with Blue Bird illuminating it like he was looking for guidance from some greater power.

"I am sorry," he started slowly, "For threatening to kill you, alright? Alright." he ended quickly

"Ok," the guard said.

Then whistled up to the people positioned on the wall, the wooden gates surrounded by walls of black ice started to open towards them, revealing a sprawling city. No Xangru, the home city for the Black Spear Sect, the name meaning “Home of the Hunters” or “Home of the Xangru” since Xangru was a family name.

People were walking from every direction to another, some were sitting at the side of the road in battered clothes begging for money. Dust, rust, tinging the sticky sea salt stench in the air from the Leviathan sea and the fish brought in from there. Being butchered then fried in oil or grilled over an open charcoal flame by street vendors, bringing multitudes of spices into the air along with them.

As they walked through the city Relu had to put a handkerchief over their nose, perfumed with jasmine to block out the ever-present and persistent smell of fish in the air.

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“Why isn’t there any red meat, something from a cow or pig at least?” l’ani asked browsing over food stalls

“Don’t really know, probably because there isn’t much flat land to graze due to the mountains, and there’s a giant convenient ocean that no one could miss. If they did have any red meat it’d probably be something like goats or sheep.”

“Ah, big ocean, small land.”

A silence descended over them as l’ani kept on browsing over the stalls till they came to a stall that said in phonetic spelling “**Mu’is Spicy Marinated Venison Skewers, Cheap, Only two bronze bits**”

l’ani walked up to the stall, asking Relu, “You want any?”

“As long as it’s not fish.”

“Can I have four?” He said talking to the old lady manning the stall

“That’ll be two Small bronzes.”

l’ani handed the old woman the coins, As the lady plucked four off the open flame l’ani asked her.

“Do you know any good places for people to stay?”

“Oh sure, my daughter runs a pub with rooms, they’re cramped but cheap, it’s the fifth building up third street, with a sign saying pub on it.”

“Thanks,” l’ani said, holding the skewers in one hand, tossing over two more small bronze, “For the tip.”

“Oh, you didn’t have to-”

They’re already walking away before the woman could finish.

The food's smell helped overpower the fish smell and fill Relu’s empty stomach, but they tried to find the building using the street signs, which wasn’t mixing well with their very bad understanding of the O’ozhi writing system. As they walked down the street they hoped it was

the right one this time, the last two third streets were spelled phonetically, then with a character meaning “The Third”, this one using the numeral.

Then Relu asked with heavy sarcasm. “How long are we staying here, a shocking long two days?”

“About two weeks.”

The response made Relu look at l’ani like he just said he was one of the suns.

“That’s a change of pace.”

“There’s going to be a festival in half a week, they called it the Weather Fall of Cold’s Decent or something like that, the O’ozhiwu clan celebrates it religiously, see those lanterns everywhere.” He said pointing at a lantern colored dark blue, white, sea green, and black, a yellow emblem of a mountain with a red stylized flame in the middle. Relu had not noticed them at all, but now they looked, they saw them hanging off every single building.

“Those are put up about a week in advance for it.”

“So you’re staying for the festival, can’t say I disagree, but we could’ve just stayed at any major city if you wanted that.”

“That’s secondary, there’s a tournament for the new Practitioners every time at the Sect’s home cities, I’m planning to take a couple of the people as my students, like you.”

“I don’t think you’re going to get any big hitters, the O’ozhiwu are notoriously loyal to the sect they’re from, and the Sects themselves crush anyone they consider rogues.”

“Not my goal, people that far in their training are too annoying to hammer out any misconceptions they have. Especially in closed systems like this, no innovation or creativity, only tradition, primitive people always somehow create a system like this.”

“Maybe don’t say stuff like that out loud in one of their capital cities.”

“Right, right, but how do they keep on showing such regular levels of stupidity?”

“It’s not really about stupidity, it’s more about keeping power I think, the first people to innovate usually want to keep the power they gain. So they strike down any budding flowers before they can rival their own, then the next generation comes into the power and learns the behavior. Rinse and repeat.”

“Still stupid,” l’ani muttered, throwing away the wooden skewers into a faraway trash can with pinpoint precision, “Yes!” he pumped his fist

Looking up from the trash can Relu saw a sign that they thought roughly translated to “Booze drinking, Resting available”. The O’ozhiwu writing system was weird, it started with a character at the beginning of a sentence then put words from a different writing system in front of it for context, it made Relu’s head dizzy translating.

“Think we found the place.”

“Finally.”

They walked towards the building, then a person ran past l’ani, bumping into him, running off with his coin purse.

“Hey, oh you little bastard!”

l’ani started running after them, absurdly fast, nearly breaking the lead, but the thief pushed some planks stacked against a wall.

They came crashing down, like dominos, all of them connected by ropes, creating a cloud of dirt and dust. But l'ani just pulled out his Spirit Avatar, cleaving through the wall of wooden planks and dispersing the cloud in a single strike. The edge of the planks smoldering and black, Relu followed behind l'ani to make sure he didn't do anything stupid.

Relu couldn't catch up to l'ani not even considering the unknown gap in advancement, Relu had noticed that l'ani's Spirit Avatar was connected to Movement mana. So there was no chance in the Hells that they would catch up in time to stop l'ani from being a numbnut.

But Relu just gritted their teeth and leaned forward, running full tilt, following l'ani behind a corner, going into an alley. They saw l'ani standing weapon on the defensive against the purse snatcher, along with three other people, all either holding knives or their Spirit Avatars, wispy in comparison to l'ani's rock solid one.

Two of them charged towards l'ani, holding knives, the ones with Spirit Avatars obviously in command, staying back. The one Relu recognized as the thief stabbed forward toward l'ani's gut, but he just stepped to the side in a flash, grabbed her extended forearm. Hammered them in the gut with the butt of his weapon so they were reeling in pain, twisted the arm so the palm was facing upwards. Turned around positioning the arm over his shoulder, then slammed it down, an awful crunch coming from it, the arm facing the wrong direction.

The thief let out a screech, dropping to the floor, holding the now dangling arm, like it was a piece of meat just attached to the person. The second one charged in, much slower than his partner, his eyes wide, he didn't even try to attack. Taking advantage of this hesitation l'ani tripped him, then used the same knee to slam into his liver, the combined force of the fall and knee knocking him out.

l'ani started to approach the two holding their Spirit avatars, but Relu heard something behind them. As they turned around a metal shovel slammed into their face, nose first, their vision blurring and blackening. But Relu started to circulate their mana from their path of the Endless One.

They caught themselves from falling to the ground, widening their stance, they saw two more burly men, both of them holding sharpened shovels. Relu's mana was running out quickly due to their small core and only half-formed Mana veins leaking it out like a faucet. Relu stopped it so it healed just enough, the two men backed away, one holding a now slightly bloody shovel.

"By the depths," the one who just hit them said.

"Did you hit her hard enough?"

Relu twinged at the misgendering, but shrugged it off, focusing more on trying to live.

Hells, they weren't a fighter, they were a scholar, they learned how to read scrolls and forge sacred treasures, not fisticuffs. The one in the back closed in, Relu backed away, then they both jumped at them, they stepped back quickly and lost their balance, falling to the dirt.

Which ironically helped them dodge it, but they now directed their blows downwards back towards them. And they hit, one after the other, digging into their flesh, cracking their skull, Relu activated their mana again, dulling the pain, making the injuries disappear like they were never there.

Relu couldn't think straight with the pain, even dulled, it was now a battle of attrition, Relu's path may almost entirely focus on defense and regeneration. But it did the bare minimum for everything else, and they could barely do any techniques on a good day so that wasn't an option. Relu was running out of mana by the second, a million thoughts flew through their head, paralyzing them with indecision.

Then their mana ran out, the shovel hitting them in the face, Relu's consciousness fizzling out into the darkness. Drifting and falling.

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Relu watched floating from above, seeing a war rage on, thousands of people murdered in a frenzy of bloodlust. Slaughtering the prey for fun, grinning faces red with blood, they tried to run but they were caught, be it seconds or days on the hunt.

Relu tried to reach out to them, any of the soldiers to stop, they all heard them but they ignored them, Relu gave the prey directions to avoid the hunters. But they only saw what was in front of them, and the next moment they were impaled on a spear.

This happened over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over again, days, weeks, maybe centuries passed as Relu tried to help them. But at every step they ignored them, taking what was easiest for them to see, but no matter what Relu kept on trying. "I know it's the right thing to do but they won't listen, why not just ignore them and rest." That sounded quite nice to Relu, eyes bloodshot with bags under them, refusing to sleep till they succeeded, once, at least once, just one damned time.

"You keep on telling yourself that, but it never happens."

"If there's a small chance of me helping someone I'll keep doing this."

"But isn't it easier to just rest, to just sleep a little, you can always pick up tomorrow."

"Yeah, I can, can't I?" they chuckled

Relu let their eyes close, dropping off, then woke up too screaming, flames engulfed the battlefield below them. A giant bonfire below them, Relu moved out of the smoke and heat, the smell of sizzling fat, to see soldiers gathered around it cheering, drinking, and dancing to nonexistent music around the bonfire. Then Relu took a closer look at the bonfire, the logs stacked up started to squirm and move, at the bottom of the fire Relu saw half-charred corpses of all the people running from the soldiers.

Every single one of them was still alive, they all turned to look at Relu, all of their eyes on them, blaming them.

“Why didn’t you help us, you should’ve died with us.”

“No, I tried to help, why didn’t you listen to me, all I did was sleep,” Relu screamed, crying, feeling like something was crushing their chest to nothing. They couldn’t breathe, they couldn’t breathe, everything was wrong, no, no, no, no.

“We were hunted while you slept, you selfish little-”

“Oh seas and stars,” a voice interrupted them, “you’re not doing this in front of me, of me, of all people!” the familiar voice infiltrated the edge of their consciousness, was that l’ani?

Then Relu felt something tug at the nape of their neck, pulling them up, like being tugged out of water when drowning. Relu sat up violently in an uncomfortable cot, feeling clammy and hot at the same time, shaking a little, l’ani sitting right next to them.

“Um, uh, l’ani where are we?” Relu asked breathlessly, looking around at the cramped room with one of the walls having wooden bars.

“Well, I found a place to stay the night.”

“And that is.”

“A prison cell.”

“And what in the hells was that dream?” a slight quaver in their voice.

“Something that really shouldn’t be happening.”

“And,” Relu took a breath to prepare themselves, “And what is that?”

“The Others.”