

The crisp salty morning bit through Mei's clothes. He'd dressed for colder weather, but he'd misjudged. The water beneath the docs sucking warmth from the sun into its shallow depths. Slowly releasing it and radiating upwards.

Sea town was built onto the saltwater lake Xi'oruki, or the guardian's water. Named so because it was blessed in between the Blessed Lake and the Leviathan Sea. The Sea Mother placing the blessed lake for protection against storms and the Beasts of the Ice Steps to the south.

The soft blue and purple light shimmering off the water. It was shallow enough that you could see the bottom... at least near the edges where you could build supports so people could live on the docs. But spiralling towards the center it got deeper and deeper. Like a mouth trying to swallow whatever or whoever fell in.

Be it the blue and black lanterns floating in the sky, depicting a dozen different historical events. From the slaying of a Leviathan, its skeleton proudly on display at the Black Spear sects training ground. Of humanity's creation, the earth's creation as the cradle for us to escape the Depths and the Blazing sky. The lanterns enchanted to float in the air, bobbing and waving with each roll of the wind.

But never escaping the lake. No matter how hard the wind pushed and pulled for it to leave the water it would never leave out to sea. Pulled closer and closer to the Blessed Lake beyond. The last blessing left by the Sea Mother, given as a final gift for her beloved children.

"Hey, do you think I'll get into trouble if I throw this into the water," Xukali said holding up a crumpled wax paper food wrapper.

Mei chuckled, looking at her he slowly realized it wasn't a joke, "I don't think throwing trash into a lake that leads into one of our most hallowed places on one of our most sacred festivals is gonna get you into trouble. Nope, not in the slightest."

She rolled her eyes, "Where did you learn sarcasm, I thought you were like a kicked puppy," she said throwing it into a nearby trash can.

Missing, by like a foot and a half. She cringed and went to pick it off the floor and into the bin.

"You know you could've done that from the beginning."

“Oh, shut up.”

The suns over the horizon started rising over the sea's edge on the last day of the festival, blinding her as she looked over to Mei. The aptly named Blue Bird is ahead of the purple Reaper.

They walked for a couple of moments in silence, then broken by Xukali “So who do you think's going to win tonight?”

“I don't know. But if I had to guess it would probably be Karu. I know nothing about the others so don't take my word, but he doesn't even look like he's trying when he fights.”

Xukali rolled her eyes, “I think it's the guy from the Silver Thorn sect. She's ridiculously fast, I can't even keep track of her.”

“Didn't she get knocked out yesterday?”

“No, no. That was someone else. The same sect though, looked similar, maybe her sister or something.”

“Ah.”

Silence descended upon them again.

“So, uh,” Xukali said, looking for something new to say, “What games do you wanna play?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“That's just boring.”

Mei shrugged

“ ... “

“ ... “

“What if we made it a competition?”

“Um, sure. What's the prize?”

“Bragging rights..?”

“Nope. No way in the Depths with you.”

“Fine, fine. Uh..., how about an IOU.”

“Within whoever lost discretion.”

“That’s boring though!”

“I don’t want to have to wake up in the middle of the night to hide someone’s body.”

“OK, fine. I get it.”

“Good. Wait, what if we draw or both loose?”

“Oh. Uh, whoever got the closest to winning then?”

“Sure.”

“...I get to pick the first game!” she said rapidly, bolting off.

“Hey, what? No fair!”

“Early bird gets the worm sucker!” she yelled back, running to the closest game she could find

OOO

Mei walked beside a grumbling Xukali. The suns hanging high in the middle of the sky. The small rise in heat prompting Mei to take off a layer to cool down a bit. Even though winter was still prowling at the edge of the wind. But that was in the mind of his mind, because today, today he’d learn something about himself. He was really, really good at festival games. The current score of 23-1 in his favor supporting the revelation.

The only game she won being a weird fish-catching one where you got a paper net and tried to catch as many fish as possible. He’d only got one fish, after five whole attempts, five damned tries. While she got two at least each game, one time even catching six.

But otherwise, Mei was happily eating a Maimai. A steamed meat bun covered in sauce, grilled, then sprinkled with crushed peanuts.

“One more game,” Xukali barked out

“Why?”

“Well,” she huffed through her nose, “It’s not the end of the day. I can still win.”

Mei just looked at her.

“What?”

He kept staring at her, “Hmph, ok.”

“Oh stopped that blazing look,” she pointed at him

“What look?”

“That one.”

“It’s not a look.”

“Oh yes it is. It’s the one where you think someone’s being dumb but you’re just too gosh darned polite to tell them.”

“Oh, and why would I be giving you that look?” he said trying to suppress a grin

“You little squid.” fire sparking in her eyes, “Ok, that game over there, let’s play.”

She pointed towards a bald middle-aged man yelling out, advertising the game he was employed at.

He was standing at the entrance of what looked like a mini-doc that was jerry-rigged to the main mass. At the end were some buoys connected by rope in a square shape divided into quadrants. People in their Fu’ianu diving into the netted-off areas, then surfacing with rings

“That doesn’t exactly look the safest.”

“Oh, are you scared,” She said pulling him towards it.

“A little.”

“Can’t swim can you?”

“Fine, fine.”

She went up to the man, paying the fee of half a bit each for a game.

I'ama broke through the surface of the water. The salt in her eyes stinging. Ignoring it, she pushed forward through the water with a yellow ring big enough to wear as a necklace in hand. Her whole body burning from strain as she kicked forward. Grabbing onto the scrappy wooden doc.

She Pulled herself up. Flopping onto the wood, rolled over onto her back, eyes to the sky. Seeing her sister Ma'u standing over her holding a green ring, a smirk on her face.

"Wow, I can't believe how good you are."

"Shut up," I'ama said through gasps of air.

"That ain't a nice thing to say to your sister, now is it."

I'ama stayed silent. Her eyes closed, letting the sun pierce through the cold vale of water covering her skin. Some of it dribbling out her ear.

"So how bout another game?" Ma'u continued

"Sure, can't end on a loss."

"Oh, sweet summer child. That's assuming you'll win though."

"Drown in the depths you ogre," I'ama said standing up.

Then giving the boy who looked slightly younger than her that was manning the game half a small bronxe for two more games.

"Thank you. Oh, I think there's two more people coming. Um, do you mind waiting for me to explain the rules to them, you're on the only grid with open spaces."

"Sure, no worries."

"Thank you, Miss- Oh hello." He said waving to the newcomers. One a slightly short fiery-looking blond-haired woman with gray eyes looking slightly younger than herself. And behind her was a boy the same age who was a head taller than her with black hair and blueish-green eyes. All hunched over like he was going to get attacked by a kamikaze bird.

"Hello," the blond girl and boy said.

"Do you mind waiting for me to tell you the rules of the game?"

“Quick run down please.”

“Thank you. So y’all get assigned a ring with a unique color. After throwing them in into the water you must wait for me to call out so you can dive in. The first person to the doc wins, and if you beat certain times you get a prize. Ten seconds for a small silver coin, 15 for-”

“-You don’t need to tell us the prizes,” the blond girl says, interrupting him.

“Oh, uh. Ok, Miss...”

“Xukali,” she said pointing at herself, “And Mei.”

The employee nodded and went to get two more rings

“Ok, now let’s get started.” Xukali said.

They started undressing into their Fu’ianu. A two-piece of waterproof clothes that went over underwear but under regular clothes. They were given the rings, I’ama getting green this time. Then they lined up at the edge, waiting for the employee to call out. Waiting... Waiting... Waiting... Waiting...

The employee hit the cheap sheet of metal used as a gong. I’ama dived in. The cold water submerged her head first, the cold covering her body like a blanket. She was starting to freeze up, but she was used to the cold now. Unlike the two new people.

She kicked down, opening her eyes. Forcing them to stay open through the burning sting of the water. Looking for her ring in the light bending and swallowing depths of the black water. She knew the color was swallowed just 20 feet under water but it still stuck out like a sore thumb under here.

But she still had a hard time locating it. She looked around and around, timing dragging on behind her like a hunting predator. The breath in her lungs starting to burn white hot. The water crushing her like the caves, just waiting to bite down. Her blood feeling like needles in their veins, and she needed to breathe.

But she had to find the ring first and foremost, but she couldn’t see hide or tail of it. Then something caught her eye. Something weirdly. Shifting over she saw it It was lying on the side of a rock. From her original vantage nearly completely blocked. She pushed herself over to it, with her hands on the sea floor. She grabbed it. A cloud of black dust that looked like an ash plume bellowed from the ground where the ring was.

She spun herself. Kicking off the ground. Kicking and kicking as the breath in her body was trying to claw itself out of her throat. The edges of her vision starting to turn black. Then she breached through the film of water.

Into the world of light and air. Once again ignoring the distorting water in her eyes she swam to the doc. Pulling herself up. Seeing the tall black-haired boy, what was his name again, oh right, Mei, talking to the employee with his jaw hanging slightly open. Then he gave Mei a small silver coin.

What? Wait, no. No way! No way in the depths! Did he beat the ten-second mark? Of course he did, they wouldn't be giving him the coin if he didn't. But how? She knew damn well from experience that you couldn't beat that mark. It was just there to tempt people who didn't know better to keep spending money to get a prize that they'd never get. Doubly so because she was pretty sure that the timer was sped up.

So unless he was a practitioner, was he? He is weirdly tall, no, not freakishly so. And he doesn't have any of those ethereal spirit bones, like scales or fur, or those weird eyes they always have. He must've just gotten damn lucky. The ring getting caught in a current and staying up maybe?

He was walking back towards Xukali so she decided to stop him.

"Uh, so how did you beat ten seconds?"

"Oh," he stopped speaking, shifting, not elaborating.

"How did you... you know."

"I, um, swam," He started walking away,

She tried to stop him again but failed, "You cheeky little squid," she muttered.

They went another game. And for the second time, Mei somehow beat ten seconds, getting the 15-second prize. Since you could only get a prize once. Something they conveniently left out. A Mei'un, a talisman made of a blessed wood you're meant to burn then send the ashes out to the sea or sky depending if it was a 'masculine' or a 'feminine' wish.

She'd only ever used one Mei'un, with her father. Sending it out to sea so in the hopes that the Sea Mother would give protection to l'ama's stepmother when giving birth to Ma'u. A wish for protection like that would usually be considered masculine and be given to the wind

accordingly. But when it came to birth it would be sent out to Sea Mother instead. In hopes her spirit would lend her experience to one such as herself.

I'ama shook herself out of the memory and the employee started the game. And once again Mei won, and every game afterwards. So it became a race for second place, and so Xukali's eyes started to burn. Not from salt, but with fire deep in her soul. She slowly went from always getting last, to third and now consistently getting second.

Oh Depths no, I'ama was not going to lose to this girl in all of the blazing skies. I'ama started pushing herself, ignoring her aching mussels, getting faster and faster along with Xukali. Ma'u dropped out half an hour in, looking like a fish gasping for air. So did Mei saying "I'm getting tired." But she didn't even look like he was sweating... Well, he did since he was covered in water, but that wasn't the point.

I'ama pushed him out of her mind. You gotta win this one, repeating in their thoughts repeated endlessly. She and Xukali exchanged glances, both their eyes swirling with blazing intensity. They would win, both of their minds could not doubt otherwise.

They played game after game after game, their very bones starting to strain against their bodies. Breath cutting their throats and burning their lungs. The insides of their mouth tasting like blood, even though they didn't bite their tongue, or see any crimson when they spit. But they ignored it and kept on going, only having eyes on the rings and each other. The water only becoming something in the way, losing its meaning.

Then the tournament bells rang indicating it was an hour before the semi finally followed by the who would be decided the strongest began. The bells sounding much louder and clearer than normal and in a different pattern. Reaching across the entire city, their chimes reaching beyond the mountains where the main city stood.

"Still wanna go," Xukali said between breaths

"Sure."

"No!" Ma'u barked out

"Come one, please."

"We can't miss the final fight," Ma'u demanded, "You're supposed to be the older sister here aren't you?"



“Just one more game?”

“You said that ten minutes ago.”

“Please?”

“No!”

“Fine.”

l’ama got up onto the wooden doc, pulling out a small splinter that stabbed into her calf. Wincing as she did. Dried off and dressed, her hair still dripping some water.

“Hey, where you sitting at?” Xukali asked, “The stadium I mean.”

“Oh, um. Ma’u,” She turned her head towards her sister” what do the tickets say?”

“What?”

“Where are we sitting at?”

Ma’u pulled them out of her pants pocket, “Uh, the southern section, row five, seats three and four.”

Xukali’s eyes widened, “Oh Depths, we’re sitting right next to you, seats one and two!”

“Well, that’s one damn coincidence.”

“Yeah, I know right.”

“Hey, wanna get food together. Before we collapse from exhaustion”

“Sure.”

OOO

l’ama walked alongside her sister. The musk from a group of people mixed with the smoke of charred food, oil, and spices in the air. Seasoned with the salty sea breeze trying to cut its way through the crowd surging through Sea Town to the stadium on the blessed lake. But they’re taking their time before they went. They had more important decisions to make.

“I still want Maimai,” Xukali said.

“We’ve already had those,” Mei muttered.

“So? What if they want some?”

“I don’t care what we have,” Ma’u added.

“I can’t have peanuts.”

“Well, you could just order it without peanuts.”

“What I mean is if my food even smells like peanuts I have to stay a respectful distance from it,” l’ama elaborated

“How bout we just order different foods for each of us maybe?” Mei interjected

“Nothing with peanuts or I’m gone, I ain’t risking it.”

“Fine.”

With that, they reached an agreement

They spent around ten minutes wandering around the vendors, Mei and Ma’u getting fried calamari. Xukali a dozen steamed dumplings. And now l’ama was grabbing two grilled fish skewers from a man across a counter. Walking away, then she saw two people, one a tall girl with light brown hair, the other a shorter but still freakishly tall boy with black hair combined with pitch-black streaks of the void. Wearing expensive embroidered clothes, harassing an old lady just a couple of feet away from them.

“Come on, just give us the food. My father’s a part of the guards, he’s protecting you and many others. You basically already owe him and me a debt anyway. Why not repay some of it and give it to us for free, eh?” the black-haired boy said

“If you’re not paying, then go away,” She enunciated every word like he was a toddler

He slammed his fist against the wood, some of it splintering, “Stop being so selfish already! Just give me and my date some blazing food!”

Damn it, it’s a noble. l’ama gritted her teeth, taking a deep breath. You have to get away from this, or else you’re going to get yourself and Ma’u hurt or worse.

She started to turn away, a painful knot in her chest. Grabbing Ma'u so she couldn't act like an idiot. But she was holding onto the wrong person. The pitch black-haired boy raised a fist and Xukali Bolted forward. Punching him in the liver, the tall almighty noble crumpling to the ground like a rag.