

Relu stopped at the side of an out of the way building less than a five minute jog away. The wood beneath, darker and more worn than the rest of the docs they've been. A touch of chill in the wind when away from the bodies of nearly the whole city in one place.

They pushed their barely shoulder length hair away from their face, taking a breath to recollect. Looking back at the small group they helped, the one named Xukali and l'ama looked absolutely whipped. Both of them sitting down, steam blowing into the air illustrating their breath in the evening light. While Mei and, what was her name again?

"You ok Ma'u?"

Well, that was convenient. l'ama grabbed her sister's wrist, Ma'u barely responding.

Then they felt a tap on their right shoulder, they turned to see nothing. But from their left, they heard.

"Boo!"

A jolt ran through their heart, goosebumps rising. And they jumped a little, turning around face flushed, they saw l'ani soaking wet—clothes covered in blood stains and holes, a stupid grin on his face.

"Ha, got you good tha-ooph," He grunted when Relu softly punched them in the gut, "Ah, hmm. Guess I deserve that."

"Very much so," they shook out their fist, damn is his stomach made of rocks.

"Are you a practitioner?" the blond one named Xukali asked between breaths.

"Obviously," Mei muttered

"Are we being chased?" l'ama frantically asked

"Don't worry, don't worry," l'ani raised his hand in a placating gesture, "I took care of the guards so we can go to the games without worry."

"Wait a minute mister," Relu said, trying to channel their inner mom, "Unless you can dry yourself and pull a new pair of clothes out of the air. And before you ask," They raised a finger, "I'm not carrying our stuff, it's still at the inn across the mountain. We two can't go to the games, you make your bed and you lay down in it."

They smirked, "Well then, I guess we're in luck," A poof of warm, nearly scalding air swirled around l'ani. Making the water turning to ice all the more evident, feeling like snow was in their stomachs. Drying l'ani in an instant. A smug look on his face as he then pulled out sloppily folded clothes definitely not made for the weather from a warping in the air. Like a shimmer of heat from a furnace.

"How?" Mei stared incredulously at where the clothes had come from.

But Relu was feeling something... different, "So, you're telling me. That I've been carrying everything. While you had that... thing," venom spilling out at the edge of their words.

"It's not anything malicious. It was just a simple training method for the early stages. Been doing it for decades," Mei gave l'ani a sharp look, "You already knew that. Plus it can't actually carry much stuff, I just keep absolute essentials or valuables

They bite the inside of their cheek, "Mother ffffffff," they took a breath, "Fine. Fine, fine, fine, fine, fine."

"Good, now uh. Can you, you know? Move away while I.... change. You don't have to wait for me, you can get going to the matches. I can catch up, so no worries. Alright?"

“Fine,” Relu spit the last word out.

OOO

Relu stood alongside I’ani and Mei as the clerk processed their tickets. The rest of the group catching their breath, Xukali looking like she was about to die from exhaustion. They’re handed back their stamped pieces of thin wood.

They walked along the wide wooden dock made of ancient and worn wood. Big enough to comfortably fit ten people shoulder to shoulder. With ancient runes carved deep into it, no matter how chipped or worn a piece of wood was. The carving would be there, always present, always deeper.

The walkway leading to the stadium, altar, or mass. A giant forever growing mass of pitch and sapphire ice, with spires grasping for the heavens. Leaving a thin film of ice on the water, breaking away with the waves. Leaving shards like glass swirling with the current. Always and inevitably to the growing mass of the stadium.

Relu was rather intrigued by it when they learned of it. It was one of the O’ozhiwu clans’ most sacred places, especially for the Black Spear sect. They used it for numerous sacred rituals and as a last bastion for the beast of the Ice Steps over the mountain range to the south and Leviathan sea. Apparently, this tournament was originally a ritual to determine the warriors that would stand in the frontlines of the fight to keep the Sacred Beasts away during the reign of winter. When the Sacred Beast were at their height of power

They came to a small wooden sign at a split inside the weirdly warm structure. The writing indicated where the seating sections were.

Relu turned to the nice group of people they met and gave a small bow, “I believe I would’ve had a nice time meeting you under different circumstances. But now I bid you a goodbye.”

“No need to speak that fancy like,” I’ama said, giving a wave.

“Yeah, yeah,” Xukali said, still trying to catch their breath. Wow, that girl needs to work on her cardio.

While Mei and Ma’u just nodded their heads, the girls still looked slightly in shock.

“Come on, the first fights already started,” I’ani said, bouncing on his feet.

And so Relu and I’ani walked away. But they heard feet behind them, turning their head they saw the group still following them. Ah, their section must be in the same direction. Relu ignored them, face going slightly flush.

Then they finally reached their section, “Ah, I guess this is the actual goodbye then,” They waved awkwardly.

Mei cleared his throat, “We’re also sitting in this section.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah.”

“Can I, uh. Can I see your ticket? If that isn’t rude.”

“Sure,” He handed it over

“Oh... we’re, umm. Sitting one row down from you, directly under if I’m not mistaken.”

“Ah.”

They turned around trying to hide their face from the group, seeing I’ani’s smirking face as they walked to their seats.

The winner of the match walked away, Relu only catching a glimpse of their ghostly teal hair. The announcer calling out his name, but they ignored it. Damn, his voice was annoying.

The announcer called out, hyping up the crowd for the next fight with Karu and Shixu’e. An absolute giant of a young man from the Pearl Titan sect. A glowing silver streaks in his hair, an ethereal halo of ivory thorns around his head. But from this distance, Relu could barely make out anything more except for something silver around his hands. One said hands resting around a spiked metal club half his height.

Karu came walking out too. A field of violent black and white spikes made from ghostly ice spreading from his footsteps. Sickles of the same material flickering in and out of existence around his forearms.

A display shown to one another. So powerful you could feel the mana pouring off them in waves. Telling the other without saying.

“Amateurs,” I’ani mumbled.

Relu looked at him befuddled, this was something that they could probably never do. But they ignored him, looking back at the fight that was to begin.

The two Practitioners stood not four feet from each other, stare meeting glare. The referee standing in between them. She said something to the two.

Karu and Shixu’e shook each other's hands, then a shallow bow. Turning around, walking away to their side of the arena.

The announcer started a count with the crowd, “5!”

The rumble of the voices shook the stadium and all those inside.

“4!”

The fighters took stances.

“3!”

They looked at every little adjustment, making their own in response.

“2!”

They locked eyes.

“1!”

They tensed and jump

Blurs of motion follow behind them for a second. A carpet of wild jagged frost covers the floor in front of Karu in every direction. But with one clear target, Shixu’e. The giant man swings his club onto the ground. A wave of ghostly white force sweeping across the force of the

stadium floor, followed by a spider web of cracks. The ice beneath the dirt exposed and mixing with it. Blowing away the encroaching frost.

Karu jumps over the wave. But his opponent swung his mace again. A sharp scythe of the same white mana flying at him mid-jump. Karu spear made of pitch black ice extends, without Karu moving a muscle. Pushing himself out of the way.

The edges of his clothes were still caught in the attack. The edges unfrayed. Shixu'e charged forward, smashing the still mid-air Karu in the side. Back onto the ground.

Shixu'e planted a foot onto Karu's chest, pinning him down. Slamming down his club once more. But Karu deflected it out of the way with the ethereal black and white sickles on his forearms.

Thrashing Shixu'e legs to the bone. Sending him to his knees, all his weight going onto Karu. At the same time, a black spike of ice emerged from the ground at Karu's behest. Straight for the throat of Shixu'e.

A white outline appeared around Shixu'e and he disappeared with a light sapping flash. Declaring Karu the winner. The crowd went wild. A rumble of applause mixed with shrieking whistles. Thousand or so people crying in exultation as their beloved three time winner would go to defend his honor.

Xukali yelled at Mei, who was covering his ears, "Damn that was a good fight."

He nodded, looking slightly more anxious than usual.

"Mm, they're decent," I'ani weighed in

"How so?" Relu asked.

"Make your observations first. You need the practice."

Relu's eye twitched, they weren't trying to learn how to fight. So why was he doing this!

"Can I join in!" Ma'u asked. A garish grin on her face, looking more animate than minutes before

"Sure. Hey, why don't you tell me the first mistake?"

"Oh, sure! Uh, um," she sat silent for a moment, "When Sion Karu jumped?"

"Oh, cool! Can you tell me why that's a mistake though?"

"He was just floating in the air. Practitioners are super fast, like suuuuper fast," She spread her arms out illustrating. Um, distance?, "Sion Karu was able to make it halfway towards the crowned guy in like, that," She snapped her fingers, "And well, what was his name?"

"Shixu'e," I'ama supplied.

"Yeah, that Shixu'e guy got longer legs so he'd be able to get there faster. Right?"

I'ani smiled, "Not exactly. But on point, that silver one was faster than the blue one" he flicked over what looked like a small green, dried preserved fruit. Ma'u happily devouring it, "Now can you tell me what he could've done better? Relu."

They bit their cheek in thought, "He could've just let a small wave of mana around him to get rid of the portion that was going to hit him, a second use of that frost thing would've worked. It isn't a question of power, right? I mean," They waved all around them, "This whole stadium is built

out of ice produced by his same path, and it's nearing winter. There's no shortage of ice or cold mana for him to influence."

"True, that was a genuinely strange decision," I'ani said.

"I think it's because he thinks of himself as a Spearman first and practitioner second," Mei mumbled.

"Oh, how so Mr. Uh."

"Mei," Xukali replied for her friend.

Mei's eyes darted around. Shrinking back on himself, but still saying, "Well, he's a late bloomer. In the Practitioner's sense I mean, I don't mean he's not grown or."

"We get it," Xukali said softly to Mei, "Karu only gained his Spirit Avatar this Leviathan Fall," She elaborated for him, "But I remember him in the courtyard training day and night with that spear."

"Oh, interesting."

"Wait," Relu said, "How do you know about the training habits of the Sion of the Black Spear sect?"

"I'm a maid at the main building."

"Oh."

The feedback of the weird enchanted piece of purple crystal vibrated, somehow amplifying his voice screeched out. Assaulting the ears of the people. But Relu was trying to figure out how it worked.

"Heh, heh, sorry about that. But now is the fight you've all been waiting for. The great Sion of the Black Spear sect, and the prodigy of the Leviathan Kin sect. The best of the two great warrior sects fighting each other in a great clash for the histories! And today we shall finally settle the score!"

Fireworks in every color shot up into the sky. Blooming into a giant portrait of a blue man holding a spear, back against a wall of ice. Facing against a green and teal man holding a giant sword and fish hook stood upon a wave. All surrounded by a billion rainbows of color, all clashing and fighting for dominance. But the main color showed over all the other being crimson blood, but then superseded by an orange flash that enveloped all.

And with that, the lights were gone. Two young men walking out from opposing gates. Karu, and the other one they only caught a glimpse of. He had streaks of nutmeg brown hair within his mane of light teal or green hair that looked like it was almost glowing white with power.

He has similar features to Karu in almost all ways except for slightly more angular features. And half a head taller, with darker skin. But also deep bags under his eyes like he hadn't slept in days. He almost looked like a painter was commissioned a piece of Karu, but only ever saw his once.

"Hey," Relu said, over the cheer, brows creasing, "I'ani isn't that the drunk guy from the prison?"

"Huh, what? Oh yeah, Ha! You're right, can't believe that's the prodigy of the Leviathan Kin sect."