

The hiss and boom of flying fireworks accompanied K\*\*\*\* as they looked down their nose at Karu. The steadiness flickered in their opponent's eyes, then snapping back in place. But \*\*i\*\*\* already knew.

“Shake each other's hands please,” The Referee said over that damned announcer's annoying voice, *could he just shut up already.*

They took each other's hands, \*\*\*\*o smirking at Karu and seeing him trying oh so hard to keep the rock-solid wall in his eyes.

They bowed and then took their steps backwards. The announcer counted down with the crowd in tow as the fireworks embers above fizzled out.

“Five!”

They locked eyes, watching each other's movements

“Four!”

Reacting to each other's changes in stance and mana flow to counter the predicted move

“Three!”

*Wait, what is he doing there? Oh, Skys.*

“Two!”

\*a\*\*\*\* realized with dread as Karu predicted every move before he could do it himself. He'd just have to settle for what he- A screech like the death rattle of a whale erupted behind them, making them jump. Turning their head they saw the purple trickster grinning ear to ear, waving at him

“One!”

The ring of the gong announcing the start of the fight with \*\*\*e\*\* back to their opponent

They turned around. Seeing Karu rushing towards him, like a beast possessed. A small wave of prickling ice tore at them from the ground. K\*\*\*\*\* jumped out of the way. But a spike of ice shot out of the ground, ready to skewer them

K\*\*\*\*\* pushed himself out of the way using the spike itself. Getting scratched all over their hand even though they didn't even touch the tip.

Now with \*\*j\*\*\* crouching, flat on his feet, Karu took advantage. Thrusting directly at their head. \*a\*\*\*\* sent Leviathan Tracker Mana into their baton, encouraging the cohesion mana. Deflecting the blow, letting the Tracker mana course out on the area of impact, the burst of force sending the spear wide. Leaving Karu open.

K\*\*\*\*\* stabbed out with their shortsword. Karu jumping back in response, landing a few feet away. Letting \*\*\*\*m\* finally get on their feet

They circled each other, the rumble and buzz of the crowd in the air. The smell of sweat, dirt, blood, and oncoming rain in the wind. K\*\*\*\*\* readied his mana for a technique as Karu observed.

K\*\*\*\*\* formed a Sacred Pearl. Sending it flying to Karu. He In response coating the tip of his spear in black ice, slicing through the weak thing. Revealing the short sword throw right behind it.

With no time to deflect, Karu staggered to the side. The blade still catching the edge of his cheek, cutting away some of his hair. K\*\*\*\*\* now right in front of Karu taking advantage of the distraction, threw dirt into his eyes. Swinging a baton at his temple.

But before it could connect Karu fell to a knee. The air above him whooshing. K\*\*\*\*\* redirected the weapon downwards, Karu thrusting upwards at the same time.

And considering Karu's stick was longer and pointier K\*\*\*\*\* aborted. Steppin' a few feet away. Now that the time was right they pulled on the invisible tether to the sword they'd thrown. Letting it fly back while he was safe.

But once again standing Karu bull rushed forward, eyes forced open, bloodshot and leaking tears like a river. K\*\*\*\*\* now falling back even more as Karu slammed them with blows. Forcing K\*\*\*\*\* to use the Tracking Cloak enhancement technique, devouring their mana reserves

But \*a\*\*\*\* still pulled on the sword, preparing to strike. And the useless thing just bouncing off Karu's hardened leather armor. Thankfully though they could reduce the mana given to the enhancement technique while using two weapons to block.

But before they knew it K\*\*\*\*\* back was almost to the wall as it started to sleet down on them. The ice only helping Karu keep better traction with his natural element present. While \*\*j\*\*\* looked desperately for a way out. In the process losing the final bit of ground.

K\*\*\*\*\* readied to escape. But Karu predicted it. Blocking the way out with an ice spike meant to skewer him, but prematurely done. The action making Karu pause for less than a second in his barrage.

But just enough time for K\*\*\*\*\* to form a technique of their own, with their mana starting to run dry. They created a Sacred Pearl again, intentionally letting the cohesion barrier collapse. Blinding Karu, while K\*\*\*\*\* kept his eyes closed.

\*\*\*e\*\* struck out to attack but Karu did so before them in a wild fury. Forcing K\*\*\*\*\* to stay in the same place, even with their opponent's temporary blindness. Thinking last second \*\*\*\*m\* caught the spear with their weapons crossed, surging mana through his baton.

Letting the final dregs of energy run rampant through Karu's spear, disintegrating the metal and splintering the wood. But sacrificing the Baton in the process. *And, oh. Crap.* Their short sword turned to dust, falling victim to the same fate.

Karu, barely blinking, covered a fist in crude obsidian-like ice. And socked K\*\*\*\*\* in the cheek, scraping away their flesh. Leaving a small hole in their cheek.

K\*\*\*\*\* stumbling into the wall. Once again looking for a way out. But missing the fist hurling toward them, hitting them square on the chin

The blow sending \*\*\*\*m\* falling to the muddy slush. Sleet pelting into their eyes, blurring their vision. Feeling a hand clench onto their neck. Followed by an ice-covered fist thrashing his face.

Then, then? Then it stopped. The sleet censing. Above him, seeing perfectly through his obscured vision. The Purple Piper

“So, how is the fight going?”

“Oh you can go choke on a knife,” they spat out.

“Now that’s just so rude to say to a friend,” It said. Sealing \*\*\*e\*\* mouth shut, leaving a smooth patch of skin where their lips should’ve been. Though he could still breathe through them for some reason.

“Now, have you calmed down yet? Good,” it said without waiting, “You know, I can help with this little predica-”

“No!” they said, the seal was gone like it never existed.

“Now really, hmm? I think you forget one thing... I am more you than you are you. I have your name, I have your face, I have your eyes,” Its smile dropped, “So I’ll tell you again. I can give you power, but you must give me everything.”

It held out a jade key in the palm of its hand.

“Power is something that can only be earned, power given is just borrowed.”

The Purple Piper looked them straight into their eyes, “I have met many types of liars in the time I could say ‘I be’. But all of them boil down to just three. Few lie for the thrill, makes them feel free. Some lie because they believe it’s good, for others or a ruby. But all... all lie six inches away from the mirror, so they can feel happy. So they can feel like they can be. Quoting adegise’s made by those who dream but do not see. To make themselves feel glee,” It took a fake breath, “ So... which are thee. I do not have to be to see the second is not thee. So tell me, is that feeling pumping in your heart so effortlessly of **thrill**... or **glee**... Do tell me,” it said the last three words punctuating every syllable.

This is why he never let it talk. Kai’emo knew all the reasons not to take the offer. He’d rolled them over and over and over to a polished gleam. Be it the guilt, the shame, the sorrow it would cause. But the only thing he felt was adrenaline shivering up his spine as he took the key from its hand.

Then he lay sprawled out on his back in a bird’s nest. Eyes up to the moonless black sky, seeing perfectly fine despite the abyssal night. There were stories of lights in the sky called stars. But the Bloodied Rott had corrupted the blood of the Leviathans upon birth. The first of them eating the stars and their home, forcing them to the sea where they’re imprisoned. Forever to be the prison guards

But that didn't matter. He recognized this nest and what the day was. There was only ever one moonless night he lived through. It was a whole two Leviathan Falls ago if memory serves correctly. Before he even awakened his spirit avatar.

He had ignored his parents' warning about staying out before the suns set. Gleefully wandering the woods. But as his parents had warned him. The last sun, Wanderer, fell below the horizon.

He'd tried to find his way back home but kept on tripping in the absolute darkness. Then he'd heard the high then low Cuckoo, Cuckoo, Cuckoo. He'd crawled around till he found the fallen nest. Curling around the baby Cuckoo bird with its sibling's eggs crushed around it.

He was found the next morning, was scolded, got grounded, blah, blah, blah. But that didn't matter, he had a pet bird. It was dead now, killed by a sacred beast, a Wanderer Hawk if he remembered correctly.

Kai'emo shook away the memory. Standing up, seeing the only light. Coming from a door alone on the ocean shore. Pulsating sickly lavender, like sludge flowing through veins.

He stepped out of the nest. Sticks and dirt clinging to his bare feet, then sand as he walked onto the beach. The cold sticky salt water then washed away the grime. And spraying onto him in a mist, clogging his nostrils with the smell of rotting seaweed and fish.

Kai'emo stopped at the door, the wood covered in boils. Sliding the key into the hole. Turning it with a click. The hinges creaking and moaning as it slowly opened on its own. Two figures on the other side. The golden-haired man cut in half, his molten silver eye locked onto him. The other with his face worn all wrong, grinning.

A film of rot clinging to the outside of the door and walls of his soul slowly drifting in along with its Lavender colored master.  
"Yet another idiot," The golden-haired man said, whispering under his breath as the door shut in his face.  
"Indeed," It said, "Yet another idiot."

Kai'emo felt his fundamental existence shift to the whims of the being in front of him, understanding it better. Seeing it. Knowing it.

It may have taken the name of his being, the windows to his soul. But it wore his face all wrong. All it did was change what others said. Bend the light before it hit his eyes. But there was one thing it did not lie about. Power, he would grasp it.  
Ka'e\*o held out his hand, "Let's shake on it."  
The Piper, wearing its ear-to-ear grin, tilting its head, saying, "Look who fell out the Cuckoo's nest."

Their hands touched, the two becoming \*\*\*\*\* as one. A surge of energy ripping through the sky. Creating a hole in the fabric of reality, letting The Others pour into the physical realm for miles in an eruption of power.

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Karu's eyes fluttered open. His left eye nearly swollen shut, the rest of his body riddled with little pains. The front of his chest covered in light burns except for where his now charcoal armor was covering.

The sleet still rumbling down, pushing itself into his throat. He jerked up at the intrusion, rolling to his hands and knees. Coughing out the water in his throat. Making his vision start turning black from the lack of air as he pushed the last water droplets out.

Wiping off his mouth Karu stood up, finally seeing the world around him. An orange icon of an orange sun flecked with red, and green ribbons surrounding it like dancers. Reminding him of Sage Lo'iju Icon of The Knight, as it sucked up legions of monstrosity. Flowing into every nightmare he ever had. Made of flesh, of rot, of death, and darkness. Screeching like Banshees as they disintegrated into the flames.

But despite the efforts dozens of bodies littered the floor. Bones and flesh torn away, blood mixing with puddles of rainwater. Some of the bodies were thrown around so violently that they ended up inside the fighting grounds.

*Wait, one's still moving!* A little boy that couldn't be older than two Leviathan Falls old with both his arms ripped out of their shoulders. His left leg twisted then bent at the shin, a rod of bone sticking out and dripping Marrow.

"H-help. Mommy, Daddy. I-I-it hurts, please," the kid rasped out, barely audible.

Karu scrambled over, hovering over him. *Crap, crap, crap, crap. How do I heal this? No idiot, you obviously can't fix this, you have to get him to a healer, apothecary, or alchemist.*

"D-Daddy, is that y-y-you."

"Um, uh. Y-yes," *what are you thinking!* "Don't worry you'll be ok soon... s-son."

Karu tried to pick him up, fumbling around for half a minute, looking for a way that wouldn't make his injuries worse

But before he even got to the gate Karu saw the light in the boy's eyes dull. *No, no, no, no, no, not now.* Karu gently put him on the ground where the water wasn't pooling or made of mud. He put his finger on the boy's neck, trying to find a pulse just in case he was wrong. But... it wasn't there.

He started giving CPR, compression after compression. *Wait, how many of those are you supposed to give? 20? 35? Ah, he just settled in the middle. But he didn't know how many*

*he'd given so far...* Karu gave five more just in case, feeling the boy's ribs crack like glass. *That was good, that means he was getting to the heart.*

Then two rescue breaths. *Wait. no, crap. You're supposed to pinch the nose.* He did them again. And then back to compressions, keeping counts of ten so losing count was harder.

Back to breath, compressions, breaths, compressions, breaths, compressions. Over and over and over again. Losing count every single time, so he just did the breaths when he thought he should.

Then his arms gave out, almost falling flat on his face. Sitting back up he just looked down at the corpse of the boy, the defenseless child that had done nothing to deserve this fate. That he'd failed to save.

The blood that he'd pumped out of the boy pooling around him, swirling into the water. There wasn't any saving him, so much blood was lost. *His arms were ripped off you idiot, you should've tied them up somehow. It could've given him minutes for you to get him to some sort of healer.*

"Damn it! Damn it, damn it, damn it," He kept on muttering under his breath, bloody hands smearing his face when covering his face

Then In the corner of his vision, Karu saw one of the monsters made of black goo rip away from the blazing sun. Descending to the muddy arena floors. From the formless sludge solidified a towering body of a skinless man holding a giant meat cleaver, with the head of a swine. Facing Karu, mouth open and slobbering.

Karu looked it straight in its beady black eyes. Then something clicked for him, it was going to eat him, the boy, then anyone else it could get its hands on. Karu would not allow that, he would not allow a being like this to exist when he did. He would shield those that this thing sought to consume.

It charged at him, squealing. Spit flying from its mouth. Karu felt something surge inside of him, a spark, a connection in his soul. He formed a Black Spear from pure tar black ice, the namesake of his Sect. Hurling it with every muscle in his body, putting every ounce of weight that made his up his being into the throw. Feeling as though electricity surged through his veins, from his fingertips, and coursing into the weapon.

The spear flying straight and true to its master's will and obliterated the monstrosity into ectoplasm. The droplets sucked into the sun icon above, incinerating it in a burst of flames.

As the last of it burned away the sun dimmed. Revealing a foreign man. Mana bursting out of his darker skin. His wavy black hair flickering around like in a storm. Holding a magical platform of five people above him. Two of which Karu recognized. Mei and Xukali

“Hey, you,” the glowing man said, “The name’s I’ani. I can pay you a little something if you escort these fine people. And also my apprentice away from here as I deal with The Other.”

“The what? Now why would I-” Karu stopped himself.

*Just because his filthy-blooded cousin was there didn’t mean he couldn’t at least get something out of this. Plus hadn’t he just sworn to protect everybody from those things? Endangering the other four people because of her just didn’t, what’s the word... it didn’t click in place with what this new spark of energy felt like. Not to mention pissing off an obviously powerful Practitioner was not usually a good idea,*

“Sure, why not,” Karu finally replied

“Oh. Ok, good. Now here’s a little upfront,” I’ani pushed his hand into seemingly nothing. Pulling out an elixir from nowhere, giving off a thick prickly aura. Tossing it over to Karu.

“Oh, thanks. And um... what exactly is this?”

“It’s an Elixir of Shattering Needles. It’s similar to those old crystals you dig up. But easier to cultivate, and uh... just sorta better. Now shoo, I got a job to do.”

“Yes sir,” they said not exactly believing him, about it being better. But cultivation Elixir was Elixir

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Following Karus' lead, the group took the most direct path through the fighter's gate to the ancient wooden doc. Leading out to an absolute orgy of chaos.

The sea town being eaten by flames while the abyssal mouth of the lake swallowed everything crumbling down. Coincidentally all the paths being connected said docs. *Ok, so nothing was going to be easy for him. Great.*

Karu looked out from the carved wooden doc to the ice sheets swirling in the currents like shattered glass. *He could create a path of ice to the land, they’d probably have to slide the way. Since normally people couldn’t really walk on ice. Another way the stadium was weird now that he thought about it.*

Then from the corner of his right eye, Karu saw something familiar flicker. Turning he saw one of Kai’emo Tracker Orbs flying straight for him. He raised a spike of ice from the lake, blocking its path.

But it swerved around it. Clocking Karu straight on the chin, sending static through his vision as he fell unconscious. The last thing he saw being something wearing Kai’emo face-tinged lavender.

But worn all wrong.