

INHERITANCE
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The Festering Pit of Fu Leng

All is quiet in the Shadowlands. The blighted lands, which in previous years might be filled with the crackle of unnatural storms, howls of challenge from warring ogre bands, or perhaps screams from an ambushed patrol of Crab scouts, are silent. The Tainted soil itself is still and gray, seeming like nothing so much as a vast landscape carefully sculpted from ash, waiting for the inevitable breeze that will sweep it away in a bleak reminder of transience. No such breeze comes, however. The sickly oranges of the clouds do not move, and though their swollen mass threatens to rain their acrid contents upon the land, they are painted upon the dull sky, a dismal and unchanging portrait.

Into this frozen image, a figure climbs forth from the depths of the Pit. Hands like desiccated claws grasp crumbling earth, near-skeletal fingers carving handholds where none exist. It makes no noise save for the dull crunching of the dirt giving way under its powerful grasp, stoically making the ascent out of the seemingly bottomless abyss. The ledge it grasps at disintegrates under its advance, and it responds by driving a hand into the loose stone to the elbow. Though the maneuver arrests its fall, the silence of the waste is split by a dull crack as the deceptive weight of the figure bears down upon its trapped limb. Save for a grimace of pain, the figure does not react, regaining its hold on the side of the Pit and drawing the ruined arm forth. Clutching the loose bundle of skin and bone to its body, the figure continues to climb one-handed.

Finally, it emerges, surmounting the edge of the Pit. It crawls forth, like some pitiful creature emerging wailing into the world from some hellish womb. The figure does not wail at its birth, instead rising to its feet, using its good arm as a brace against the shattered soil. It reaches its full height, surveying the wastelands without speaking a word. It stands tall, its frame and stance suggesting either an immense human warrior or infantile ogre, but rather than the creature itself, the silhouette lends itself more to a shadow-puppeteer's imitation of such. It is thin, gaunt, bearing signs of atrophy all about what remains of its musculature. Furthermore, it stands naked in the weak illumination that passes for sunlight, the fading rays filtered through the acidic clouds lending the grey flesh of the figure a pallid glow, the few shreds of what was once fine cloth that still cling to the figure lying limp in the still air. The one part of the figure's body that is even partially covered is its face, which bears a burned and faded mask of porcelain.

As if realizing the mask's existence for the first time, the figure reaches its one good arm up, cupping the false face in its palm. Pulling forward, what remains of the mask's cord gives way, and the figure idly rolls the mask in its hand to regard the visage. Its bloodshot eyes sweep the surface of the semblance of a demon's face, lingering momentarily on the cracks and crevices, the faded crimson where a painter's elaborate work was long since desecrated, the shattered stump where the twin of the mask's single curved horn once lay. It considers the accessory for a long moment, massive fingers tracing lines of soot and earth across the

last smooth thing in its possession, before tightening its grip. The abused porcelain gives way, shattering first to shards, then to dust, rendered unto powder in the skeletal grasp of the figure. Like sand, the fine white remnants sprinkle to the dusty earth, frosting the corrupted soil in a shimmering trail from the figure's bony claw.

Letting its good hand fall to its side, the figure languidly turns its gaze to the limp ruin of its left arm. It regards the useless limb for a short moment, then grasps the area that once constituted a wrist with its other hand, and yanks violently. A snap, much louder than the initial break, cracks across the silent plain as the limp appendage is wrenched back into place. The figure seethes, teeth grinding, and a shiver passes through it. Pitch black crawls through veins and arteries, making them momentarily and vividly stand out against the skin, before the corruption retreats to more internal passages once more. With a long breath, the figure releases its newly healed arm, flexing its fingers to test their agility. Satisfied, the figure turns, surveying the blighted landscape around it, then faces the direction of distant Rokugan. It begins to walk, slow and sure, feet kicking up the dusty landscape with every step.

The disturbance in the silence does not go unnoticed. A lone bakemono pokes its head out from a burrow in the earth, regarding the figure's passage with interest. It begins jabbering to its hidden fellows, who immediately run to gather what supplies they can. An ogre sentry spies the walking figure, and bellows for the tribe, who come running. A great Oni, taking the form of a gargantuan blade-legged spider with far too many limbs shakes itself free from torpor and scrabbles to join the growing procession. With every step the figure takes, its entourage grows more fearsome, both in numbers and variety.

The Shadowlands are no longer silent. The air is filled with hooting shrieks and intermittent violence as the gruesome march follows their dark master. The dusty earth is churned to mud with the slavering of beasts, the blood of those unfortunate enough to trip and be trampled, and the rumbling footsteps of the thousands of emerging monstrosities. In their wake, the orange sky rumbles ominously, and the clouds let loose their bellies of acid rain. The Tainted water hisses as it strikes the soil, as if burning the memory of the figure's passage into the very earth.

As the hideous army marches, the figure seems to swell, the atrophy sloughing from him like a dry snake-skin. Hollow flesh begins to fill out, the fervor of its followers strengthening it with every step they take, every hope trampled beneath their feet. As the weakened frame gives way to renewed vigor and a wall of rippling muscle, the figure's lips twist into a wicked smile.

A Dojo

The shark-toothed monstrosity surged forward, clawing with wicked talons at the teenage girl that stayed ever so slightly out of reach. She danced nimbly in and out of direct engagement, throwing punches that did not seem to slow the beast in the slightest. Despite her apparent ineffectiveness, the creature consumed by the Taint could not catch her.

Seeing as her blows were not even bruising the chitinous hide of the beast, the girl briefly considered seizing one of the many blades that hung on racks about the dojo, giving a long look to a razor-edged sword as she ducked underneath a grasping claw. She shook her head as she retaliated to no effect, replaying her training in her mind.

If I were to wield anything less than a polearm, it would still have reach on me. Plus, anything I grab will simply slow me down enough to get caught. And should it get ahold of a weapon...

Fortunately for the girl, the bestial mind of her opponent was apparently incapable of searching for such an advantage. Despite passing by several of the blade stands in its frantic quest for her blood, it paid them no mind. Frustrated at its inability to catch its taunting prey, the beast screamed, mouth splitting vertically as well as horizontally to reveal an impossible number of fangs, the rows upon rows of slicing blades chattering with the force of the vocalization.

The girl considered her options. It seemed to be immune to simple trauma. She had no jade upon her person to exploit the weakness of the Taint. The obsidian sticks holding her hair in place might pierce the abomination's plating, but they were too short to cause serious damage from a casual strike.

So, cheat. All I need is an opening.

She tumbled backwards from a slashing talon, then oriented herself in front of a support pillar.

"Come on, sensei," she taunted, adopting a mocking stance. "You taught me better than this. Is this really all the once great Suikotsu has to offer?"

The former monk's clawed hand ripped into the sturdy beam where its student was standing but a moment before. The heavy wood shredded under the monstrous strength of the strike, but what remained of the pillar caught the claw fast. The beast whipped its head about, trying to locate its prey, but its own swollen arm blocked its view. As it attempted to yank itself free of the ruined wood, the girl, hidden in plain sight beneath the creature's grotesque arm, jumped into an acrobat's handstand. The deceptively powerful muscles in her slight frame tensed as one, and she pushed up, driving her foot full force under the creature's shoulder. A whip-like crack and pained shriek split the dojo as the joint separated, thoroughly dislocating the monster's arm. The girl's celebration was short-lived, however, as she righted herself some paces away only to see the now-free arm as it swung around to meet her midsection.

The backhand with the limp claw sent her flying through the dojo's wood and paper door, rolling her into the hallway to smash into a much sturdier wall of granite. For a terrifying moment, she could not breathe, and her gasps brought only the taste of fire to her mouth. When her lungs chose to fill once more, she imagined that she could hear her abused ribs creaking in protest. When the panic of choking faded, the taste of fire was replaced by that

of copper, and she wiped an arm across her face to clean the thin trickle of blood from her nose. She forced herself to her feet, blinking stars out of her vision, just in time to evade a smashing punch from the beast's good arm. The stone ruptured behind her as she rolled away, but the trace of black ichor left in the indented wall showed that the chitin had cracked as well from the force of the blow. She jumped over the following charge, kicking off of the wounded shoulder to buy herself time to recuperate. The howl of pain from her former teacher told her that her gambit was successful even as she stumbled from her own injuries on the landing. She scooped a hand across the floor, gathering the shards of wood that were responsible for many of the lacerations acquired during her brief flight, and spun, chucking them into the small beady eyes of her opponent as it came after her once more. Its teeth chattered as it shrieked again, its pain only multiplying as it unthinkingly attempted to use its injured arm as well as its good to paw at its eyes. When it had cleared the debris, it saw that the girl has retrieved a large stone, and she brought it down upon the beast with all her might.

She stood over her foe, breathing hard, and ripped the sticks from her head. Her shoulder-length hair flew free as she looked down upon the pitiful monstrosity struggling to lift the flagstone from its chest, shrieking every time exerting the dislocated limb defeated its efforts.

All it would need to do is press from one side and roll. I suppose it is no longer capable of even the simplest tactical thought.

She planted her foot on the stone, eliciting another cry from the beast, and lifted the sticks. The eyes stared at her with hate and hunger, bulging in their recessed sockets. If there was any question of whether or not her sensei was still in there, it was heavily denied by the near-absence of any pupil in the feral gaze. There was nothing left but madness.

Just as you said sensei. "Inferior warriors are the tools of the Taint. Pity for such is weakness. The superior warrior must be without such weaknesses. Above all else, show no mercy. A warrior must stand alone in this world, and none will show mercy to you. Take their hate, and return it in pain. Take their spite, and break their bones. Take their blows, and return them one thousand fold. The mark of the superior warrior..."

Without a moment's hesitation, the obsidian spikes plunged down.

"... is ruthlessness."

"You have done well," a voice commended her as she stumbled off the still-twitching corpse of the thing her master had become. She turned, and gave a bow, ignoring the screaming in her midsection.

"Master Sora."

“Such a disappointment. It sickens me that this pile of flesh was once Tetsuo’s student,” Sora said without emotion, walking out of the alcove from which he had observed the combat. “Wasted potential. Yet,” he turned to the girl. “He at least managed to accomplish your training well enough. Tell me, girl, do you feel nothing having killed your master?” He offered a rag to the battered fighter, which she accepted.

“I do not mourn my master, nor did I kill him,” she responded, her voice wavering only slightly as she cleaned the Tainted fluid from her makeshift knives. “He killed himself years ago, brought down by his own weakness. I merely cleaned up the result of his failure, and I shed no tears for refuse.”

“So young to have come so far...” Sora mused, nodding to himself. “It is good that we took you I think.”

“As you say, Master Sora.”

A thought occurred to the older monk, and a wry smile creased his mask.

“Were you a samurai, such a feat at this age might mark your gempukku. What do you feel for what you have lost the chance at?”

“I have lost no chances, Master. They were never mine to begin with. I only own that which is given to me, and that which I can take.”

“I freely give you the option to continue your training with us. You have more than proven yourself ready for the next level.”

“There is something I wish to take from this day.”

“Then take it,” Sora shrugged. “You have claim to any trophies you wish. What will you take from your victory?”

“A name,” the girl replied.

“You have earned such,” Sora agreed. “What will you be called?”

“Haihime. Taken from fools, given to the strong. Under this name, I will take what my father thinks he owns by right. I am Haihime, Princess of Ashes, and the unworthy will tremble before me.”