

The surface remained still. Calm. Unbroken. She felt a cool breeze forming a mile away. Any minute now, she would have to fight it back.

Rei sat, legs crossed and hands upon her knees. She inhaled deeply and incredibly slowly through her nose – held a full breath – and exhaled silently. It took a full minute. She felt the solid rock beneath her, and knew it went on, uninterrupted, until it reached the earth's core and became something entirely different. But that was very far from here. Everything was.

Her life's beginning (as far away as the Earth's core) was over 40 years ago, and it was just about as impossible for her to fathom. In her past were such features as a childhood (lived in Japan's highlands, far from the cities she would later become familiar with), an adolescence (filled with quiet nights alone, far from the social bounciness that other teens enjoyed), and a young adulthood (seasoned by a general malaise, far from the driving sense of purpose that others lived for). She felt no connection to any of them, the same as how she felt no connection to the earth beneath her now—it was hard, cold, and all too dense to reveal anything of value.

It was a cold day, but it would be no different were it a cold night. In this darkened place, the hour of the sun's arc made little difference. Decades ago, Rei left the confusing world of streetlights and neon signs behind, and joined the monastery. Here in the 21st century, of course, it was no longer a single-sex brotherhood. She had no trouble joining the Kung Fu programs and folding her world into a daily life that revolved around strength training, flexibility stretches, and tiring chores. These things rendered her stronger, more flexible, and kept her from tiring ever again. She threw herself into the work, but not from a sense of devotion or intent so much as a sense of numb participation. Much in the same way that you can relax your eyes and cause the world before you to blur itself into an unrecognizable nothing, Rei let the monastery in the hills blur her life into clarity and contentedness.

But she didn't stop there. There were always whispers, you see, of an elevated sect within this particular Shaolin brotherhood. Once she began to devote herself to that something more, she gave up the privilege of speech. And whispers of what may be only came from those who were now below her. At her level and above, there were no whispers at all.

She didn't miss speaking. Rei wasn't necessarily the type to want to discuss the things that she found important; she found them important just the same. A beetle ambled along with the same lack of grace whether she told a brother about it or not. A cloud stayed in the exact same patch of sky for an entire day whether she mentioned it to her master or not. And a brook sang the same song whether she hummed along with it or not. Relating a tale didn't enrich it; in fact, it deflated it. Something about summarizing a magical event with a series of nouns, synonyms, and emphases made it desperately dull. Without magic. Still.

The next thing that she left behind was movement. Rei was still free to move, but all of a sudden, her movements were measured and carefully guarded. If a shift in posture was unnecessary, she didn't make it. If she itched, she embraced it with a stoic awareness. And if she hungered for a meal, she'd eat it tomorrow. Years of being in complete control of her body ensured that she could manage everything that it did—gone were the days of dance for the sake of dance, or even of daily stretches; she still did all of these things, if only within the space of her mind. Calm.

As she moved forward in this rigid training, she finally lost her eyesight. Her eyes worked the same way as they ever did, but she was now forbidden to open them. Unnecessary movement, and all that. Believe it or not, in this dark place, her eyelids were a troublesome liability. Her work was incredibly intense, and she no longer needed her eyesight in order to perform it. And anyhow, seeing needed light, and light needed fuel. And fuel was too dangerous to bring to the place where her life's work was being accomplished. No, she would live in the absence of light; absolute and all-encompassing. Unbroken.

Rei was as far from her previous life as if she had turn from it and started running over twenty years ago. She'd covered a lot of ground – put untold distance – between her now and then. To look at her now? To see the calm veneer of her life, one would never detect the youth and bounciness and malaise that roiled beneath. And it was not sin to have that past, and those agitated memories. It would be sin to release them. It was Rei's burden (and privilege) to maintain a calm, still, and unbroken surface. What roared beneath was beside the point. The surface was everything.

High in the mountains, cold and rocky, she sat. Her mission was holy and pure, and had been passed down from one monk to another for centuries. She felt that same far-off breeze begin to rise, and she began to raise her hands to combat its entreaty. She sat in complete darkness, miles deep within a jagged mountain crevasse. Her belongings were minimal, and she had but two tasks. Every day, she would gently grind a pinch of dried lavender blossoms—this gentle and faint scent would be detected by the nearby brothers (miles away though they were) – and would signify to them that she was still alive (for they were forbidden from visiting or speaking with whoever was within the mountain chasm). And every day, she sat near the sect's sacred pool (a mere puddle, to tell the truth), and ensured that no disturbance must ever cross it. Never. No ripple. No wave. No surface disturbance whatsoever.

For this pool? Here it sat, deep within the high Nepalese mountains, and it hadn't suffered a tremor for over 1200 years. Keeping its pristinely smooth surface was her life now.

She had been in this cave, surviving off ambient moisture and a minimal diet of dried mushrooms and herbs, for over 6 years. She was prepared to fulfill her 50-year vow, and she looked forward to a life served as a chapter of the pool's peace.

A seemingly impossible task, to be sure. But the monks of old thought, in a very deliberate way, about how to preserve this calm. To begin with, the pool was found deep within the mountain range, so no manmade disturbance was ever likely. And, being deep within the mountain itself, no weather-related drama could reach it either. The monks themselves, those charged with the mission of protecting and monitoring the water's presence, were the greatest threat. Hence, they trained carefully, and Rei was no exception. She was thoughtful, careful, and in complete control of anything that could upset the pool's balance. She was a proud link within a chain that the world was not aware of, nor needed to know about. Their duty was obscure, unimportant, and near-foolish. She knew this, and she embraced it. It was a life of concentration and single-minded effort, destined to go unnoticed by the universe beyond her dark walls. But then again, couldn't that be said for all lives?

The marauding breeze that she'd sensed moments ago blew into the cave's deepest recesses. To prepare for its arrival, her broad palms described slow, small, practiced figure-eight movements, nearly undetectable to any onlooker. She created a gentle yet undeniable wall of pressure – an invisible shield – and thus, a breath of wind entered the pool's chamber and was rebuffed into a nullifying nothingness. No one was there to see her effort. No one would notice her success.

It was the most excitement Rei had experienced in over half a decade. Her heart leapt for a moment, and she felt an embarrassing surge of adrenaline.

And the surface remained still. Calm. Unbroken.