

Carer

The endless desert stretched before them, the scorching sun bathing the sand dunes. Naha was unaccustomed to it, the heat, the dry air. Her body was resilient enough that she didn't have any real trouble, but it was... she did not enjoy the experience. It was not truly an endless desert, of course. They were close to the end, to the Northern borders of the Empire and the lands of grass and forests, of mountains. And so, she couldn't wait to leave the desert behind. Her homeworld didn't have deserts, only the sprawling jungles and high mountains. She barely remembered that time, seldom thought about the distant past. It was... like snapshots of emotion and memorable moments. Her first hunt, the day she received her first spear directly from her father's hand—she remembered his pride and her love. The day she learned how to care for her claws from her mother—knowledge that she no longer needed with her body and powers and yet she still practiced, for the memory of her mother's kind eyes. The day Framework arrived, the confusion and death. The day her village died. Her class and the fighting. People cheering her name, loving her, the hope in their eyes and the gratitude. She had lived in that world, in that life, for decades, now... what she remembered was barely a couple of minutes when it was all put together, moments only. Today, she was over five hundred years old.

It made her understand Zach, how he could've forgotten. Five thousand years was so much more time.

They had taken their time as they traveled, tried to save people as they pushed north. Finding groups that were left behind, the weak and the injured. They rarely arrived in time to do anything good and when they did... People were not so trusting, not in these times. They helped them, and walked with them until they felt safe. Then they left them and continued on. The lands they had passed through had a few monsters remaining, the main force was further north, and even that was... weakened, less than it was. If the stories are to be trusted. And yet, those numbers had broken an Empire, forced its people to flee. A sacrifice of an Emperor had taken out the monster's claws, but they could still bite. And the taken were the worst, seeing people, what

used to be people, do such terrible things... They had spoken with some, Zach holding them down, asking questions and getting evil answers. Even with Hastur dead, their minds... they didn't think right. She could hardly stand to look at them, to listen to them. Their words... it reminded her too much of her own past.

She had a lot to make up for, she had done things just as terrible, back when she was someone else—The Night Horror. Oh, how she wept when she knew no one could see. She knew what she had done, it was a gift that Zach had given her when he helped remove her Cultivation, when he helped her fight her madness, and it was a curse. She knew now how twisted she had become, and the worst part were the urges that still showed their claws, though, less and less. But when they came... they... she felt good, they filled her stomach and mind and whispered that it was all good and great. It whispered of pleasure and power, and when it passed it left only the knowledge that it was wrong. She felt sick to her stomach, and tried so hard to resist. For Zach, for herself, for all those that had died at her hands.

To do good, to be better today than she was yesterday. That was what they had decided. It was why they had come on the mission to kill the Dome Leader, to do good. To seek power to enable them to do more. She couldn't have refused, no matter her insecurity, her questioning, inside she knew. She had to atone for her sins. Once she was hailed as a savior, beloved by her people. She couldn't let those that she failed, those that believed in her, down. Sully their faith with her evil.

And now... now she was left without her pillar to lean on and hold close when the receding madness tried to pull her along.

She glanced at Zach, sitting with Hiro, talking in low voices, explaining how a Class works. The poor child had little opportunity to learn. His family was poor, from what Naha understood, and the basics that the Empire taught were... they were solid in some ways, but the war came before the child could learn more, before it could experience. Zach took it upon himself to finish his education. The young man's Class was **Survivor**. A simple Class, and one that was earned. It would grow, she knew. She saw how Zach looked at the child. He wouldn't let him go. He took responsibility for him more than any others that they had saved. Those others were many, groups, who had people

to rely on, people that knew and had power. To them, he gave a chance, a helping hand. Hiro was different, he had no chance on his own.

How much this man was like Zach that she used to know, and how different at the same time. He didn't know how she struggled, he didn't see it in her the same way he could before. She was left to fight it on her own now. Instead of him supporting her, she was the one supporting her. How their roles had changed, and how much she needed to endure. She couldn't fail him, fail his faith in her.

Like the Skinwalkers, the old gods of her people, she had to change and be what was required of her to be. She had to be strong and steadfast, to endure and resist. And she had to be a carer, a mother and a lover.

She had learned quickly that Zach, for all his power, he had lost much. He would often forget to eat, to drink, thirst and hunger barely affecting him. Pain, barely affecting him. She knew why, he had spoken about it. In that wretched world that Hastur had thrown him in, there was no death. Hunger and thirst did nothing but cause him agony, he was used to them. And so she had to care for him, to remind him when to eat and when to drink. To watch him and tell him what all the things around them were.

And yet, in his ages of false life—no, it was real to him, and that was all that mattered—In those thousands of years, he had been granted a kind of knowledge. Theories, yes, that was a better word for it. He had all the time in the world to think, and theorize and toy with the world that Hastur had created, a false world. But built to be like the real one. Essence fascinated him, she saw. And he had some insights into it, from his skills or his long life, she didn't quite know.

He was different, and he was the same. So she sat beside him and listened as he taught, and explained. Trying to suppress the desire to bite and tear them both. Holding on to his words and voice, holding on to because without her he would forget to eat and forget to drink. It was her turn to be the pillar, and she couldn't fail him.

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Two years, a bit over for sure. She wasn't quite certain, she hadn't kept track of time. A mistake on her part, and she cursed herself for it. She had forgotten, their stay in the Empire, their preparation for the mission, it was so long ago. They had spent months training in their time chambers. More than three years since he took it, she was sure.

But two years was how long it took them to finally reach the end of the Empire's territories from when they killed Hastur. A forest spread before them, a valley with a large river splitting it in half. She sat under the moonlight, near the fire, looking in the distance over the cliff where they were camped. The monsters were on the other side. Their backline, a couple thousand of monsters and taken. She could tell that they were pushing North and East, toward the core, though she didn't know why. Beyond them, far North was where most of the others had gone to the Twilight Melody Sect. Naha and Zach hadn't yet decided where to go, but had been leaning toward the same destination. Zach wanted to talk with Ryun, learn from him what past they shared. But now... their plans didn't matter.

Zach was what mattered. He had gained so much power, had changed. Had lived for so long. And that had masked it from her, she hadn't seen it. The madness.

The elixir had granted him three years of safety, three years of holding off madness. And that time had passed. Yet, it couldn't be more than a month, two, a handful at most. It was too soon, he shouldn't have been... like this.

She watched him staring at the fire, muttering to himself. It came in these moments, when he had the time to think, when things were silent. He stared at the fire and she knew what he was doing. Studying it, thinking on all things related to the Aspect of Fire. His madness, it was... it wasn't bad yet, and it came from his desire to learn. From his skill that let him see flaws and one that dealt with time. From his Class and the need to rule aspects, to know and understand them.

She didn't know in what manner it could turn bad... but she knew that it would, eventually. They didn't have the time. They needed to find for him the same thing that he had found for her. And she knew only one person that could help her.

East then, away from the monsters and fleeing Empire, away from the sects.

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The storm raged in the distance, thunder roaring and lightning flashing. Zach stared at it intently, with unblinking eyes. “It sings to me,” he whispered.

She saw him raise his hand that turned into a blade, then... Lightning Qi flashed along it, pulsing in time with the lightning in the distance.

“Light and power, more? What is it made out of I wonder,” he murmured to himself.

She wanted to speak, to try and break him out of his trance, but decided against it. She wished she had a way to help him more.

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She woke up to a touch on her face. She looked up, and saw Zach above her, his hand on her cheek. His eyes staring intently. She was... surprised. The intimacy between them had... there was none since his change. Love and passion, those things were not with him, not yet at least. She had been heartened when he she understood what him remembering her name meant, after all those years. Had hoped that this would...

She noticed his eyes, looking at... not hers. He was staring at her cheek, his finger trailing a line over her jawline, touching the few errant scales that framed her face. He... he was muttering to himself, low, but she could hear him.

“Changing Essence? How? It is flesh, and bone, scale and skin, but it can change,” he whispered and her heart froze.

“Zach?” She whispered, but he didn’t respond.

He tilted his head, raised his other hand and touched her face again.

“How does it change? Flesh to bone at will? Is it... is all Mind still?”

She tried to move but he pressed, his strength keeping her pinned. “Zach!” She said, louder.

“Are you real?” He whispered. “Is this Flesh or Mind?”

“Zach!” She reached up with her hands, grabbing his wrists, but he didn’t move. His fingers pinched her skin and pulled, hard. “You are hurting me.”

He blinked, stopped. His eyes cleared, he pulled back and she let him go, he shook his head and looked at her then at his hands. “I... I...”

She rubbed her cheek for a moment, glanced to the side and saw Hiro sleeping. He didn’t hear them. Then stood and walked over to him, like her people’s gods, she changed, even though she was afraid she became someone who was not. Someone who was a strong pillar. “Zach?”

He raised his head and met her eyes. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, but there was confusion in his eyes. “I... I don’t know what came over me. This... this isn’t like before, how I lost my mind in the prison. I... it was me?”

The way he said that last part, there was disbelief there. She didn’t know what to say, but she remembered how it was for her. You don’t lose yourself, you become something else, each step seems... logical at the time.

“It’s okay, we’ll be there soon, we’ll find a way to help you, I promise,” she whispered, and she hoped that she wasn’t lying to him.

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She watched him stand before a group of people; kreativean and human, a few ravzor. They sat on the ground, all were young, as young as Hiro was, who sat at the edge of the group. All of them were looking at Zach with wide eyes, with awe. He was, a hero, the same as High Rankers, more than they. They knew his name, it was on the notification that all the world had seen.

And here he was, standing in front of them, talking and explaining.

“Earth Essence is not just one type! It is an amalgamation of many different types of Essences, crystals and dirt and minerals and more,” he bent and scooped up the earth with his palm. His strength, high enough that the ground of this territory parted easily. “Earth is one of those Essences where they do not mix properly, do not turn into something else completely. It is... a jumble, a chaotic mess. That is why it has so many different types! And why it has so many flaws. It is not all same tiered Essence. If you want to get

through Earth efficiently, drilling and digging can be enhanced with targeted application of force on the weakest parts of Earth Essence—”

She turned her head, it was hard for her to look at him like this. He seemed good, right, like an excited teacher. But she knew just how easily his fascination could turn to something else. Obsession. That was at the core of his madness.

“Do you see it, sir?” Naha asked.

The tall kracean met her eyes for a moment, then nodded. Gemheart turned his gaze back to Zach, and studied him for a while more.

She had turned them East as soon as they had reached the Frontier, straight for Gemheart’s home, the territories held by his Company. They were lucky to find a teleporter that worked. The situation in the core had changed. Wars had run their course, the strong survived and conquered, the weak were conquered or dead. A few wars still raged, she knew. But a lot of the core was again stable. The taken had made their move it appeared, the monsters in the inner core, but that was a worry for those who were near them it seemed. Even after everything, the core was so... self involved. The Dome Leader was dead, and what did the rest of the Settled Territories care that a piece of the core had fallen? The Settled Territories spanned ten times the size of what the monsters had taken, with unknown billions of people who had never even seen a taken or a dome monster. No, they cared about the enemies that they knew, not some threat that they couldn’t even see.

She had come to the one place she knew she had allies at. Where she hoped to find Gemheart. And she had been lucky enough to find him. Lucky enough that he wasn’t like the others, and that he was in his home, preparing for what he thought was coming. “How long?” Gemheart asked.

Naha grimaced. “A few months since the Elixir stopped working. It is happening too fast,” she added. Madness came over years, decades even. Zach... he was spiraling too quickly.

“He is... highly imbalanced. One focus pushed to the end, another more than half, and his Cultivation...”

“I know,” Naha said. “Can you help us? I know that it is too much to ask, but...”

“You’ve done what we’ve asked of you, killed the Dome Leader. I would help, if I had any means. I have no elixir to give, and I have no way of getting another.”

Naha bowed her head and closed her eyes tightly. She had put a lot of her hopes on this. She had rushed them here as fast as she could, knowing that every day he was getting worse. She hoped... “I... there must be something?”

Gemheart didn’t respond immediately, and so she opened her eyes and found him looking at her. “I know of two people who had a focus removing Elixir; both are... dead, or close enough that the difference doesn’t matter. Still...” he shook his head and folded his four arms across his chest. “Elar Treekeeper, the ruler of the World Tree Kingdom in the far north had one, two hundred years ago, if he didn’t use or barter it away by now. He had ignored my messages when I was trying to purchase one for you. But his kingdom was at war last I heard, and I have heard no news from his lands, no teleporters had turned back on, and messages are hard to carry these days,” Gemheart said. “The other... Yirrel Annsi, your Warden Commander had one in her vaults, she kept it for someone she... it doesn’t matter who now. She is dead, and a monster wears her flesh. The Elixir might be in her vault still, but the taken rule there.”

Naha wondered if she could sneak in, shape change into the taken. Could she fool one of them? She still had her warden’s badge, perhaps she could gain entry to the vaults.

“No,” Gemheart said. “Your best chance would be to seek out an alchemist who could make it for you. The great ones.”

“Do you know where I could find one?” Naha asked, trying not to bring her hopes up.

“The wars had changed many things... But... the sects would be your best option I think. Their wars had been as many as in the rest of the core, but... theirs are less violent. Twisted honor they might follow, but it makes for easier wars. They had lost the least people. Even if some wars still go on, you will not be in as much danger. And... their alchemists are some of the best in the world. The Dragon Heart Sect still stands, and the head of one of

their branch families is lauded as a great Alchemist, you might find what you seek there.”

Dragon Heart. They had passed so close to their lands on their way here, and yet... She had a way, something that might not be suicide. She glanced at Zach, then nodded to herself. “Dragon Heart then.”