

## **Naha**

“Welcome to our little club,” Ikris gestured with his arm at the room they just entered. Inside were four other people, all warriors, looking at them studiously.

Naha walked in with Zach on her arm, guiding him. He was more in his head these days, but at least his bouts hadn't repeated. She was glad of that, but she worried how much longer they had before it started again. They needed the potion to stop his deterioration, but it wouldn't just cure him immediately. She remembered how her own mind had been when she had removed her focus. It had taken her a long time to recover, and still she felt the shadows of madness from time to time.

Ikris led them to a couch in the middle of the room, opposite two other couches where the others were already sitting. Naha sat and pulled Zach next to her, then looked at the people across from her as Ikris introduced them.

“This,” he pointed at a female drake closest to him. “Is Kotara Fah Storrah, our resident fire expert.” The woman wore sect combat robes, and had orange scales. Her eyes were like two ember orbs, and her claws as black as charcoal. Her name meant that she was in one of the main three families of the Dragon Heart Sect, perhaps even a direct descendant of the Sect Head.

“Next,” Ikris gestured at the ravzor male next to her. “We have Liss Nighteye, our scout,” the ravzor waved at them and grinned mischievously. His fur was all black, and his eyes shone like the moon. His robe was also in the shades of dark red, with a hood that could be raised and a face covering that was pulled down to his neck. She knew from experience that dark red was a color that was a lot better for night sneaking around urban environments, black was more easily seen in the shadows cast by artificial or firelight. His name meant that he wasn't part of the three main families, which meant that he was very trusted if he was sitting in a group like this.

“This is Merin Fah Kutah,” Ikris introduced the drake male with scales that looked as if they were made out of crystal. Each scale looked as if it was carved, purple, blue, and white in color. And his eyes were all blue, as if they were made out of marble. “He is our tank.” He was also part of the third sect

family, which she had already assumed were somehow focused on crystals, seeing as their entire peak was covered in crystal spires.

“And finally, we have Hiandrin Fah Durrah, my wife,” he smiled at the female drake and she smiled back at him. She, just like him, had metal scales, they obviously followed the same Path.

“Everyone, meet Nahamassa Plainrunner and Zacharia Gardner, they will be helping us with our mission.”

Naha inclined her head and greeted them. Zach did the same after prompting.

They all murmured their own greetings, and then Liss spoke up, turning to look at Ikris.

“Is it true that the Eternal Master won’t be making us elixirs?” He asked.

Ikris nodded. “Yes, he decided that having Nahamassa and Zacharia helping was more valuable.”

Naha knew that Vitor had planned on brewing some kind of elixirs that would’ve helped his people and their mission, she just didn’t know what.

“Thank the Heavens,” Liss exclaimed, and the others all nodded in relief.

Naha blinked and tilted her head. Ikris noticed her expression and answered the unspoken question.

“Our job is to protect the Sect Head, and while we are expecting an attack, we don’t know exactly how it will look like. The elixirs that we were supposed to get were ones that would increase our main focus tiers for a short period of time. Myself and Merin are the sect’s only Evolved Realm warriors, it would’ve fallen on us to use them in combat. And... I’ve used one of them before. Though I was a lower Realm then. The elixirs would push both of us to Eternal Realm, but... it gives power without any real practice at it, or understanding. I would much rather rely on the power I know than something that I am not used to. It doesn’t even last that long, and the side effects are... hard to deal with. Having two more powerful individuals on our side who know and understand their power is far more valuable.”

Naha had never heard about an elixir that could do something like that, but... it was impressive.

“How would the new perks work then? Do you choose them?” Zach asked, his tone interested.

“No, you just get the most likely options based on your current Path,” Ikris said.

Zach hummed to himself, and his attention quickly waned, his eyes turning back to their blank stare. It wasn't good, she knew that, but at least he wasn't trying to set them all on fire to see how the Essence interacted.

“So,” Merin leaned forward. “You guys fought with a Dome Leader, right? What was that like?”

Naha saw that all of them looked at her expectantly, eager to hear what she had to say. With a glance at Zach, she started telling them the tale.

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She rushed through the hallway, and into the garden of their temporary home. She had sent Hiro with the other young sect warriors to train. He could learn a lot from the way that the sects taught combat with a weapon, and while both she and Zach had taught him, having a real teacher wouldn't hurt. And, she needed privacy.

A week had passed since they agreed to fight and protect the Dragon Heart Sect Head. They had gotten to know the other members of the team that were in charge and in the know. They didn't know what kind of an attack they could expect, so they were for now just watching the city. They didn't think that their enemies would make a full-blown attack against the city with their armies, such a troop movement would be noticed. Instead, they believed that their enemies would send a smaller assassination team. Ikris, his wife Hiandrin, and Merin were tasked with protecting the entrance to their Sect Heads inner sanctum, which was in the Fah Storrah peak. Naha was to keep watch throughout the main pagoda that housed the sanctum. With her ability to blend in and move through the dimly lit corridors with ease, she could ambush any attackers that tried to get in.

Liss and Zach were to be positioned down in the city, where they could watch for any attacks and quickly respond as they had ways of moving quickly across distances. Zach with his wings and blink, and Liss through his

own means. They also spread a lot of misinformation, so the enemy shouldn't be able to know which peak housed the Sect Head, and they had other teams pretending to protect other sanctums.

For now, their protection had been calm with no sign of anything strange. Today was their day off though, and also the day that she had been waiting for so long. Vitor had delivered on his promise, and given Naha the elixir that would remove Zach's focus. She found him in the garden, sitting on the ground and staring ahead with a blank expression on his face.

She was worried about that, but... there wasn't much that she could do. The others just thought that he was standoffish, but they didn't realize that his mind was probably occupied by something else. This reminded her of the early days, when he struggled to keep up with everything else around him. The scale of how time passed outside of the prison Hastur had him in was something that she couldn't quite grasp, but it had obviously affected him greatly.

She sat down next to him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Zach?" She tried to rouse him, unsuccessfully.

She shook him gently and called him again. It took her a full minute until he blinked and looked around, and another half a minute for him to realize that she was next to him and wanted to talk with him.

"Naha," he said slowly. "What is it?"

"We got it, finally," she offered him the elixir.

He tilted his head in confusion, and then once he took it, she saw him read its window. A few seconds later a glimmer of understanding appeared in his eyes and he nodded.

"Ah, I should remove my focus, shouldn't I?" Zach asked.

Naha nodded, her heart breaking a bit. This would stop any further progression of his madness, but the damage that was already done was going to recede slowly. Still, this was all that she could do. That and to remain by his side and help him, just as he had helped her.

He uncorked the elixir and downed it quickly. He closed his eyes and then shivered. She could see something flash beneath his skin, then fade as if draining away. He rolled his shoulders and opened his eyes.

"Ah, there," he said.

“How do you feel?” Naha asked.

“Hm...” he hummed. “Not much different, I guess. I... there is a hole inside me, where my core used to be... It is... disconcerting. I didn’t realize how much its presence was... there, until now.”

Naha nodded, it was the same with her.

“You aren’t unbalanced anymore. In time, you’ll get better,” she said, trying to reassure him. But he... just smiled at her.

“In time,” he murmured. “Yes...” he opened his mouth to say something more, but then closed it and turned back to just staring ahead, his eyes glazing over once more.

She sighed and stood up, leaving him to it. He had told her that he had been contemplating how to improve his skills with Time, and she encouraged it. It was better than everything else that could happen. She walked out of the garden, leaving him alone, while keeping her shadow sense on him.

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## **Zach**

Drinking the elixir had removed his Path. There was pain, but... it was in the past, already swept away by the river of time, only the ripples of the pain’s impact remained. He heard Naha speak, and he responded, a part of him that looked behind at what the river of time had solidified. What drew his attention from the river of time was not the pain, but... the absence of something. The missing core and conduits, the hole inside of him. For a moment it brought clarity.

He saw the past few months, his obsession with time, clearly at last. And he realized the danger, the madness in it. He hadn’t had an episode in so long, he had thought that he was fighting against the madness, that he was resisting, that his attention on Time was helping him. Now he realized that he had been wrong. He hadn’t eluded the madness, it had consumed him instead. Time, his focus on it, his need to understand it and shape himself by it was madness. He was in the middle of an episode, only Naha able to pull

him out for moments at a time. His body moving on autopilot as his mind tried to make sense of a thing that might never be sensible.

He opened his mouth to tell her, to ask for help, but he felt the small glimmer of clarity slipping. And then he was back on the river, the moment of clarity forgotten once again.

He was sitting on a piece of wood, both young and old and rotting and growing at the same time. A cycle of life and death, of passage of time. It was his, he knew that. Crafted by his mind to help him stand on the surface of the river.

The scape that he imagined; the idea of Time was more... solid now. His will shaping the image for him. The river was wide and powerful, and he rode the wave that was at its head, the end of the river, charting the way forward in a blank scape ahead.

Behind he saw a world coming into being. Not immediately, it was... shimmering into existence far behind. Mountains and forests, cities and people. As if it took time a little bit to solidify, to make it written in stone. He wondered what Time really was, or how he could grasp it. It touched everything that he knew, all Essence around him, other people, their actions. All was impacted by Time.

Therefore, it made sense to him that Time was one of the basis of the entire existence, the reality itself. At least this one, the Real Realm. He wished that he could enter the Ethereal to test things, but it was still somehow locked from everyone.

He understood that this was all inside of his head, his own understanding of the Time. To him it was a River of Time. For others, it might be a ball of string, or a tapestry woven on the wall. Understanding and will shape the Essences, the Aspects, and how people could use them.

Zach's Time Blade was not his own understanding of Time, it was borrowed, stolen from the shade that he had killed for it. That had been one clue that led him to create this scape inside of his head. And it helped him, it gave him clues and context about how to infuse the ideals of Time into himself, his skills. He needed to find out why Time fought him, why it refused to let him create skills infused with it from the start. Something was nagging

at the edge of his understanding, but he couldn't grasp it, not yet. He needed more... Time.

So he focused all of his being on what he needed the most, he contemplated Time, it was all that mattered.