

Airship

Naha watched Zach as he sat on the ground his eyes closed, his hands in front of him as if they were trying to grasp something in front of himself. After a few minutes he finally sighed and opened his eyes, disappointed.

“What are you trying to do?” Naha asked.

Zach turned to look at her, for a moment almost looking like he didn't expect her to be there, but then he recovered.

“I'm trying to make a skill,” Zach said. “Though I don't even know what I need.”

“What kind of a skill?”

“I... I need something to help me understand time. My strike is... too powerful, too much of a drawback. I need something simpler.”

“What about your Time Blade?”

“No,” he shook his head. “It... it is too rigid, Time that it uses is... set. I am trying to understand something broader.”

“And you aren't having any luck?” She asked.

Zach shook his head. “It is... elusive. It came so easily to me before, but now... I don't know why I can't do it. When I escaped the prison I felt filled with might, with power, I reached and grasped whatever I wanted. And now that is lacking. My willpower has recovered, I feel that my strength is back to where it was back then, but... something is missing and I don't know what.”

Naha had tried not to talk too much about the past. Most of the last three years they had spent getting to know each other again, looking after Hiro, trying to find a way to help him. He hadn't spoken much about how he gained all those skills, aside from telling her that he simply made what he wanted, which was insane.

“Perhaps it is something else then,” Naha suggested. Keeping him occupied by anything was always better than letting his mind wander. It often wandered too far down the spiral.

“I don't know what it can be,” Zach said, clearly frustrated. “I need to know.”

“What about... do you remember what parts of yourself you locked in those skills that you made or evolved?”

She had tried to ask him about that once before, but he had gotten distracted by Earth Essence. It was something that she needed to know in order to help him more.

“Hm... I remember,” Zach said, but she wasn’t convinced.

“Do you remember what you sealed before the prison?” Naha asked.

Zach blinked, then spoke. ***“I want to protect those that I care about, those that I love, always. I will never stop trying to be better. I will always move forward. I will fail, but I will never stop trying to do good.”***

Naha was glad that he remembered at least that. She hoped that by reminding him about it, he could try to anchor himself, to if not remember his past, at least remember what he wanted to be.

“And after?” Naha asked.

Zach tilted his head and closed his eyes. “I will always remember the past, even when it hurt... no, not that one. I remember those words carved into the wall, but it was not part of what I sealed inside of myself. I almost did seal it, but... I couldn’t, I didn’t remember.”

Naha didn’t say anything when he grew silent, she let him work through it all by himself. He narrowed his eyes and looked as if he was trying to remember something.

“I... ***I will never break. I need to learn.*** Those two... they are the big ones, the anchors that hold my two great skills. The rest... I... they were small things, what I felt in the moment. Love of the sword, a thousand voices as one, the joy of noise, the... I don’t know, I can feel them, but I don’t...”

She saw him getting agitated, and she worried that he would slip again. She stepped up closer, put her hand on his. She squeezed it, forced him to look at her.

“It’s okay Zach, you don’t need to remember right now,” she told him.

He shook his head, and slowly calmed down. His skills were his highest focus now, most of his madness came from them. I need to learn—that one had to be pushing his Class, making him want to learn about all the Essences. I will never break—she didn’t know if this one was helping him or hindering

him, and she doubted that she would have the time to figure it out. For now, the only thing that she could do was

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The city of Leu was small compared to the largest cities that Naha had visited in the past. It was nothing compared to Dal'dvor, to the Jewel of the Empire, or even Emeros. But it was sizable enough that it was busy, that she could see caravans making their way through the main streets, their guards looking relieved that they had reached their destinations—the world was a far more dangerous place these days. Wars had changed things. It was strange to her, these people had struggles, but in the end they had never encountered the taken or dome monsters—the greatest dangers in their world right now. To them, they were just some far away threat that would never reach their lands.

She envied them that. In a way they had far more freedom than she did. At the price of not knowing the truth, not being prepared for what could come at their door.

They walked down the streets, she had already scouted the city and informed herself about their laws and any dangers that they might encounter. Her first visit she had made in her ravzor form, walking around, pretending to be a simple traveler, talking with people in the city. Their kingdom was a small one, and their main exports were items. They had six dungeons that they farmed often. Which meant that they had a sizable adventuring population. Her second visit was at night, lurking through the shadows. There were several gangs in the city, controlling different areas of the city. The Thieves Guild had representation, but from what she saw she believed that they liked to be very discrete. She made sure to know where every threat could be. She wasn't about to let Zach into a city filled with hundreds of thousands without knowing everything in advance. She had to reduce the risks of him being set off at all costs.

There wasn't anyone in that city that could match him, and... if his madness hit him hard enough... He wouldn't forgive himself the death that he could cause. He might not remember what was to him a distant past, but

he was the same. He only had the power to enforce what he believed in now. To protect people, to be better. It was why he had taken Hiro under his wing. And why she knew that his madness was hurting him so. Not just the descent that he was powerless to stop, but the knowledge that he would do things that he didn't want to. She understood that feeling too, and she wasn't going to let him fall.

She had a route planned already, and she led them down the streets at a brisk pace. Both Zach and Hiro were looking around, the kid had not seen many large cities. She remembered him being enamored by Gemheart's home. There wasn't much to see, just buildings and people going about their day. She purposefully led them away from any merchant shops, from the bazaars, and anything else that might trigger Zach's curiosity. She feared that the airships themselves would occupy his attention, but she couldn't leave him alone.

They made their way to the airship shop, a large shop front with a big lobby. They entered the empty building and saw a man sitting behind one of the counters, a drake, with his head leaned on his hand as he was doodling something on a piece of paper with his other. He looked... bored. She did notice that the other counters were empty, and she knew that the shop had been forced to scale down their operation. She had scouted the shop on both her trips, had asked around about it and pieced together what happened. Most of their airships had been bought or *appropriated* by the kingdom's military over the last few years when the wars started, after the Tournament. By now people didn't have the funds to buy any, and their main supplier had been a kingdom that had gotten conquered, the faction no longer existed.

She knew that they still had some airships available, what she didn't know was how many and of what kind. She had scouted their storage facility from the outside, but she didn't enter. It had some pretty good protections on it, and she didn't want to risk it.

They approached the counter, and the worker didn't notice them, his eyes were completely occupied by his work. It was surprising, he probably had a class that helped him in his work, and he shouldn't lack in powers that were meant for awareness of his surroundings. A good salesperson knew everything that happened around them.

Naha cleared her throat, and the drake startled. His head slipped from his hand, and he nearly hit the table with it. Then he turned to look at them.

“Oh,” he exclaimed. “Sorry, I didn’t notice you the...re.”

She saw him blink as he took in her appearance. She was in her base form, an amalgamation of many different races and bodies. She could even tell what he was thinking, probably suspecting her of being a Cultivator. His eyes slid from her to Zach then Hiro. They were not a sight that was common, but the man quickly recovered.

“How may I help you?” He tilted his head.

“We are here to inquire about purchasing an airship,” Naha told him.

His expression immediately changed, and he stood up, smiling. “You’ve come to the right place! I’m Zarke, come this way, quick. We have only a limited amount of vessels available, unfortunately, but the demand is high these days,” he said as he led the way, through the back door and into a large warehouse. It was obviously made to hold dozens of airships of various sizes. There were suspended *anchors* and walkways all over it, with berths that would hold them now empty. “You won’t be able to find anything else anywhere close to here.”

Naha suspected as much. The man was obviously trying to make their situation better than it was. The demand wasn’t high, but she didn’t comment.

He led them to the end of the warehouse, up on the walkway and to three berths.

“Here they are, beauties all,” Zarke said. There were small plates filled with information about the ships in front of each one, alongside the price, but she first took a look at the ships themselves.

One was immediately out of the question, it was the rightmost one, too large for what they needed and far too expensive. It was a white airship, shaped like an arrow, sleek and made out of some kind of metal. She saw defensive and offensive arrays lining its surface, and the two crystals at the end of it that probably were what made it fly. Different types of airships achieved flight in different manners. If she wasn’t mistaken, those were some type of air or wind-crystals, under the right circumstances they would be able to carry a ship up into the air. It was a closed form ship, which made it

defensible. It was over two hundred meters long, and probably just as wide at its widest point. And it was far too costly. They had enough wealth to buy it, it wouldn't bankrupt them. But she was reluctant to pay 25k Immortal Essence for it. It was a flying warship, a small one, probably not up to par with the better ones out there, but still.

"The Wind Arrow Mark III," Zarke said. "It is a fifty-year-old design, but its drive makes it able to keep up with many of the modern and far lighter airships, plus it has several powerful tier 7 arrays both for defense and offense."

That was powerful, for an airship.

"That isn't really what we are looking for," Naha said. "Something smaller, and faster is our preference."

Zarke looked disappointed for a second and then shook his head. "I'm never going to sell the damned thing," he sighed, but then led them to the other two.

These ones were much better choices. One was of them was obviously a luxurious mobile palace. It was a circular platform, perhaps 50 meters in diameter, with earth layered on top of it and a small house built at the back. The front was taken up with a beautiful garden, colorful flowers and one tall tree with bright blue leaves. Beneath the platform were the actual airship components. Four large turbines which would provide thrust, along with a series of arrays attached to them. She saw no defensive or offensive arrays, but that didn't mean that it didn't have them.

"Herondy Garden," Zarke started. "It has two powerful defensive arrays that can cover the entire ship, also one that can create a weather sphere, no weapons, but it can be fast in short bursts. A good ship if you are looking for a mobile home. The house comes equipped with everything that you need, furniture, kitchen, even a waste removal system."

Before he could continue Zach stepped closer to the railing and narrowed his eyes. "That tree, what is it?"

Zarke blinked, but then immediately covered his surprise with a smile. "Good catch," Zarke said. "It is a special tree that grows only in the Heron Dale Valley, it increases the quality of Life Essence around it, making healing easier when near it. The entire line of these ships had been envisioned as

mobile healing houses, in the early stages at least. It was later decided that there wasn't too much profit in trying to sell to healers, there were too few of them that traveled around. Still, the trees remained a key component of the airship design. It will still benefit anyone on board, giving them a slight boost to healing effects."

That was impressive, and useful. She saw Zach's eyes glimmer and she realized that the tree had drawn his attention. She caught his arm and pulled him away. "And the last one?" She asked as she led Zach to it, Hiro hurrying to follow behind them.

"Ah, Braum's Legacy," Zarke grimaced. "I don't know if you want that thing."

"Why not?" Naha asked.

It was the simplest looking of the three. It had the general shape of a human built water faring ship. Made out of wood, with a curving narrowing front and wider back. It was perhaps only ten meters long and less than half that wide. It was not a large airship. But she saw that the back part held a small raised and covered area on top where the controls were, and it had a door that led inside that raised area and probably below deck as well. It had two sails as well, both in sections like a fish fin or a strange wing, and attached to the sides of the ship instead of the center mast that a traditional ship would have. All in all, it didn't look impressive, at first glance. Naha however, could tell that the ship was made out of quality high grade wood. Plus, she could see a large exhaust looking things at the back, with two large boxlike metal attachments that were probably arrays.

"Well, it is an Essence sink for one," Zarke answered. "It runs on Essence crystals, mid-tier ones, and very specific ones. It requires anything sky related. And it has exactly zero defenses, all of its arrays are for maneuverability and speed. Now, don't get me wrong, it is fast, probably one of the fastest things in the skies. But... without any defensive arrays... well, few people can survive a trip in it at full speed. Unless you have over five thousand endurance, it will crush you like a grape under a foot. Few can make use of its full capabilities. True, it is a human design so it is also capable of traversing on water, which can save you some Essence, but it isn't nearly as maneuverable on it as it is in the air."

She looked at it with a different expression now. That much speed would let them get places faster. True, with Hiro they probably wouldn't be able to go as fast as they wanted. Unless they figured out a way to protect him. But it wouldn't be a problem for her or Zach.

She looked at the price, just over 8000 Celestial Essence. Still expensive, and would be more expensive with the fuel that it needed. Though the auction was always filled with air related Essences, and they weren't exactly strapped for funds.

Naha turned to look at Zach. "So, what do you think? Which one do you like?"