

Brilliance

Hiro watched Zach as he climbed on top of a rock and gestured wildly. He couldn't take his eyes off him, he was learning so much, even though sometimes his lessons went to places that he couldn't quite understand. Hiro wondered if others felt this way. Those who were taught by the elites of this world. And he had learned that Zach, his guardian, was one of the strongest in the world. That he had been part of the team that killed the Dome Leader. He had seen the notification, but he hadn't made the connection, he hadn't even remembered the name that he read back then. But just knowing that he was being taught by people that had defeated the monster that took his home...

Well, Zach did most of the teaching, but Naha did some too. Mostly she interjected when Zach went on tangents, getting fascinated by Essences around them. But who wouldn't be? There was so much power in Essence that Hiro couldn't wait to evolve his Class. And Zach had promised that he would, they had even given him enough Essence to level to level 50!

Soon, he would get his first Class Evolution. He hoped that it was going to be a good one, he didn't want to disappoint them.

"The Essences are the basis of everything. All that you can see, all that you can feel, and more!" Zach gestured with both hands, spreading them wide and opening his hands. "You need to decide on an Essence type, something that you feel can be a part of who you are."

"But how can I choose? I... I might not get the choice I want," Hiro said slowly.

Zach frowned, opened his mouth, then closed it quickly. His expression turned thoughtful, then his eyes got the faraway look that he often got.

"All Classes have requirements," Naha said from the side, and Hiro turned his eyes to look at her. She was sitting near the fire, preparing their meals. She glanced at him. "Don't worry about that, I know enough requirements for the lower tiered Classes. Just think about what kind of Essence you would want to be tied to your Class. Though, your starting Class will... influence what type of Classes you can get."

Hiro dipped his head down in shame. He had the **Survivor** Class, something that he had been almost forced to take. He... he didn't like it. It made him feel like a coward. His abilities and perks let him... just survive. He couldn't do fight like Zach could.

"Don't be ashamed," Naha said, and he raised his head. "There is nothing shameful about your Class, many of the Rankers from the old worlds had that same Class. And many of them had reached the Infinite Realm, survived their old worlds."

Hiro blinked. "Really?"

"Really," Naha smiled at him.

He already suspected what kind of Essence she had. Strange things happened around her. Her shadow... sometimes it didn't move right. And the shadows around her sometimes got darker when she walked by. So, he turned to Zach, who blinked as he saw Hiro looking.

"What is your Essence?"

Zach looked down at his hands as he answered. "I... I rule over many, some more than others. So many Essences, Aspects of this world... But... I see one more than all others..." he trailed off.

"Which one?" Hiro asked.

Zach raised his head and looked straight ahead, over Hiro's head. His eyes were suddenly almost... blazing with power. "**Time**. It moves so... so... how is it like this?" He whispered, almost harshly. His hand turned into a blade, dark green in color. And Hiro felt Naha stand up and start walking toward them slowly. "Time, time, time! In the prison it was... a copy? A pale imitation. Yet it passed, mind tricking the mind, accelerating. But Time itself... Oh, how it moves... Can you see it? Can you tell?"

Zach turned his eyes back down at Hiro and he smiled at him. Hiro didn't understand what he meant, but he could tell that he was getting lost in one of his... waking dreams.

Naha stepped close to him, her hands wide and spoke.

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“Zach, do you hear me?” Naha whispered, trying not to upset him. He couldn’t have picked the worst one today. She should’ve known, should’ve steered Hiro’s curiosity in another direction. Talking about Essences... it helped Zach, but sometimes he got caught up on things that only his mind could understand. The only upside was that they were in the wilderness. The last time they had been in a village, and he got obsessed with fire. She had to pay for the damages. They had decided then to keep to the wild on their trip to the sect lands.

“Do you not see it?” Zach turned to look at her, then his head swiveled and looked all around him.

“It’s okay Zach, it is just... time,” she didn’t know if he really saw Time, or if it was just a figment of his mind. She pretty sure that he could somehow... sense the Essence, one way or another.

“How could it be okay?” Zach returned; his voice almost hysterical. “It is wrong! Can’t you see it? How is it so wide? So large, it can’t be like this! It is not supposed to be. Shaped by will, but whose? How many different ones? Each a different idea about a different thing, yet all still *time*? It cannot be, it shouldn’t.”

“Zach, look at me,” Naha said, the shadows around her trembled, her image taking form. Shapes, hands and tails, faint but there if one looked closely enough. Her image was weak, but it was that of a shadow given form.

Zach finally turned his eyes on her. “How can different understanding shape something so vast?” Zach whispered, he opened his mouth to say something else, then tilted his head as he noticed her shadows. “A shadow given substance... I remember that...”

He got a step closer, then another, and then Naha was in front of him. She grabbed him and forced him to look her in the eyes. “Let it go Zach,” she said slowly.

He blinked, not understanding. His eyes studying her face, studying the Essence of it. And then... his eyes cleared, very slowly.

“Ah,” he only said. “I slipped again.”

“We need to get to the Dragon Heart Sect, as soon as possible,” Naha told him.

Zach nodded his head, agreeing. She glanced over his shoulder at Hiro, looking at them with... not fear. The boy worshiped them too much for that. He had been with them for years now, had grown into a young man, but... he was still just so... afraid. He didn't quite understand what was happening to Zach, he just knew that he lost himself sometimes. No one had taught the poor boy about focus madness, and she didn't have the heart to. He looked at Zach like he was his hero, she couldn't take that away from him, not when he had lost so much already.

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Later that night, after Hiro had gone to sleep. Naha sat next to Zach, and they spoke in low tones.

"We are too slow," Naha said. "The teleporters between the sects and the other factions aren't open yet, and it will take us months to reach the Dragon Heart Sect this way."

She didn't want to say it, but the child was slowing them down. She had tried to convince Zach to leave him with Gemheart's faction, but he felt... responsible for him.

"We could push him to evolve his Class," Zach said. "He needs to grow stronger."

"It won't be enough," Naha argued. "He would still not be able to keep up with us."

Zach didn't say anything for a while, but then turned to look at her. "Do you have a suggestion?"

"I... yes, I do," Naha answered. "We are in the territories of the Halsoi Kingdom, they are a small kingdom, on the edge of the core, but they are large enough that they will probably have many Guild representatives in their capital. I suggest that we visit and purchase an airship, a small one."

They had enough wealth for it, their rewards from Hastur as well as their items were substantial. And she would trade anything that they had if she needed to. Getting an airship wouldn't be a problem, surviving the trip on it would. Naha had dismissed that idea initially for several reasons. The main one being that... Zach's bouts made him... volatile. Sometimes at least.

She didn't want to wake up in the middle of the night to see him dismantling the array that held them in the sky.

"If you think it is best," Zach nodded, agreeing.

She would need to watch him far more carefully, make sure that he doesn't crash them, but... she didn't have any other choice.

With that, he turned his eyes to the forest around them. Naha studied him for a while, and then spoke.

"Do you really see it? Or... or is it just your mind tricking you?"

Zach turned back to look at her, then tilted his head. "See what?"

"Essence?" Naha said. "Are you using your ability?"

Zach shook his head. "Sometimes. The ability lets me see, but... I don't like it. It feels like it lets me see, but narrows my vision."

Naha didn't understand what he meant. "How could you see otherwise?"

"How could I not?" Zach asked back. "What are skills? Just ways of improving what we can all already do. Everything is Essence, we are Essence. All our sensations are just interactions between them, effects that come from contact."

Zach raised his hand, showed her his palm, then placed it against the ground. "There, I am sensing Earth Essence."

Naha blinked. "That's not what you..." she trailed off when he smiled. For a moment she feared that she had nudged him when perhaps she shouldn't have. That perhaps he would go into the deep again, but his eyes seemed clear.

"Is it not? Perks, skills, abilities, and techniques, they can all let you interact, control, and see or sense Essence better. But... you are always sensing it, always interacting with it," Zach whispered. Then, he closed his eyes. "Sometimes, when I... lose myself. I feel so much closer to it all. As if... as if I can glimpse into something more. I don't know that is just my madness playing tricks on me, but when I come out of it there is always a sense of failing to grasp something, as if it just slipped through my fingers."

Naha didn't say anything as he made a grasping motion in front of his face.

“I can feel the wind on my skin,” Zach whispered. “I feel my soul buried deep inside. And... time. The three that are part of my attunement, they are closer to me. Had been even in Hastur’s prison, even though they were fake. They feel like they are so much more here. In the moments like these, I... I don’t feel like there is anything really different. Time moves faster here, but in the prison it felt... I don’t even know how to explain it, it was both slower and faster. It didn’t feel like Time that exists here, as if its rules were different. I don’t feel what I feel when I lose myself. Perhaps it is just madness, playing tricks on me.”

“I don’t know,” Naha said. Trying to remember how her own madness had felt. “I didn’t feel like that. I just... I had urges that forced me to be... more of what my focuses shaped me to be.”

Zach nodded. “The Lord of Aspects, a Class for someone who knows and understands Essences, a Cultivation Path of the Lightning Blade, and two skills; one that cut through time, and the other that lets me see all flaws—even in Essence. I... I’ve always enjoyed—or no, I don’t know if you can call it enjoyable, not when you have nothing else better to do—but I’ve always sought to understand Essence. And in the prison, I... I feel like it is all the same as it was there, but also different.”

“It was all fake, all just made out of Mind Essence,” Naha said.

“It isn’t just that,” Zach argued. “I don’t know how to explain it, since I don’t know what it is myself and I can’t trust what my madness tells me. But... It is as if the rules that existed inside the prison are just... a part of the greater whole here. What the Essence of Wind was in the prison still applied here, but there was... more in this world. As if the nature of the Essence, the concepts behind that Aspect, were... malleable.”

Naha nodded. “Your understanding can shape what your Aspect is like, how it acts.”

“How?” Zach whispered. “And most importantly, why?”

Naha had no answer for him. After a few minutes of silence, she urged him to sleep. He didn’t need it, just she didn’t, but she still forced him to. It helped him keep himself together. She pulled out a sleeping potion and had him drink it. It wouldn’t work on him for long, an hour at most, though it had

started at five. He was becoming more and more resistant to it. They would need to find a different one soon.

The city of Leu was days walk. She hoped that they found what they were looking for there. She didn't know how much longer he had before the madness consumed him.