

## Contemplating Time

Zach sat on the floor, with Hiro sitting across from him. The Dragon Heart Sect's reception had surprised them, Naha in particular. She hadn't expected for them to be welcome, not like this. When they'd visited Gemheart and his faction, they had been received well, but Zach had believed that to be the result of a prior relationship. As far as he knew, neither Naha or Zach had any interaction with the Dragon Heart Sect, aside from Zach fighting their team in the tournament. But, they had welcomed them because of what they had done. Naha had told him that people in the sects valued strength and honor above all else. That they could fight each other and anybody else on the smallest provocation, but that the strong were respected.

Zach didn't quite manage to understand her explanation, culture was hard for him to grasp. His needs and desires were simple; learn, survive, protect. There wasn't much more that he needed or wanted.

He looked at Hiro's expectant expression, and smiled, both because he was glad that the child was feeling good and because he was finally able to understand some expressions of the people around him.

"Are you ready?" Zach asked and at Hiro's nod, he glanced behind him at Naha sitting beneath a tree in the shade.

They had been given a guest-house, a large building on the side of one of the peaks. It was a tower pagoda with three floors, and a small plateau to the side that housed a garden. They didn't overlook the city, but the mountains around it—for which Zach was glad, the city was beautiful, but it gnawed at his mind. There was something about it that hit him deeply.

"I'm ready!" Hiro said firmly.

Zach understood that the child was impatient, but Zach didn't like rushing. At least Naha had agreed with his decisions. But, today they would let him level and evolve his Class. The two of them had been teaching him for years, Zach taught him how to fight with a sword—well, the spirits of Terra did. Zach considered himself a good enough sword user, but some of those spirits had been great teachers. There was much that Zach learned from them about the sword, and about teaching itself.

Naha taught him how to sneak around, how to hunt monsters, and they've tried to get the boy some accomplishments that would get him better Classes. Naha said that just being taught by high tiered individuals would open some Classes for him. Still, Zach was excited to see what he would be offered.

"You may level," Zach told him.

Hiro closed his eyes and focused, and then he did it. He didn't say anything, then he raised his eyes and met Zach's as he made his choices visible.

<b>CLASS</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>Shadow Survivor</b>	<i>You lurk in the shadow, avoiding and surviving.</i> The Shadow Survivor is a scout focused on surviving and moving unnoticed through shadows. A Shadow Survivor relies on being able to escape or remain unnoticed in order to accomplish their goals.
<b>Worldly Traveler</b>	<i>You've walked the world and seen sights that call to you.</i> The Worldly Traveler is a wanderer, always seeking to see new sights and experience new things. The world calls to them.
<b>Adept Survivor</b>	<i>You survive, even when all else crumbles around you.</i> The Adept Survivor is someone who has a close connection to the world around them, using his powers to navigate danger and survive it. An Adept Survivor is someone who seeks to understand any type of danger that they might face and be ready to avoid or weather it.

Zach could tell that Hiro was disappointed. He knew that the young man had wanted a combat Class.

“I...” Hiro started, but couldn’t finish.

Zach wondered what he should say, what he could say. Moments like these made him curse his slow mind, operating on such different speed was hard for him. Fortunately, Naha stepped in.

“Those are great choices,” Naha told him as she came around to sit next to him.

“I wanted... something else,” Hiro whispered as he bowed his head.

“I know, but this doesn’t mean that you can’t have it,” Naha told him. “You still haven’t decided what your main focus is going to be. You want to fight? Well, Zach and I are very good at skills, we can teach you how to fight with them. And it might be a good idea to have a Class that isn’t focused on offense, but something else to balance you out a bit. Give you more options.”

Hiro frowned at that, but then his eyes lit up as Naha’s words sunk in.

“Really?”

“Really,” Naha nodded. “So, look carefully, and tell me which Class you think fits you the best.”

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Zach sat in the garden, his attention on the ground beneath him. They had been here for two days, and he hadn’t left since they were given the use of the guest house. Naha and Hiro went out, but never for long. Naha didn’t want to leave him alone for too long, nor did she want to risk him going out and losing himself in the city. These people were their only hope, and they couldn’t jeopardize that. Zach understood that, which was why he didn’t complain. Waiting was nothing to him, he preferred this in many ways. Hiro and Naha were inside the house, theorizing and planning for his new Class, the **Adept Survivor**. They had decided on the simplest of his evolutions, a rare Class.

Zach was studying the ground, the Earth Essence actually. When he had first laid eyes on this city, he felt something, a moment of profound clarity. In that moment he understood that even such beauty as what these people had wrought would fall eventually. Nothing was Timeless, everything would eventually falter before the weight of time. At times, he felt the same

way. As if he just stood and they just passed him by. Their lives fleeting. He feared losing Naha, Hiro, but in the grand scheme of things to him it was as if he had known them for a handful of moments. Not a long time at all.

Which was why Time interested him so much. It appeared to flow differently for him than it did for them. But... he was sure that something was wrong. He and Time were old friends, at least in his mind. Inside the prison Time had been one of his closest friends, and the more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that Time itself hadn't been fake. He wasn't quite sure why he thought that way, but... he didn't think that just Mind Essence could've made him as he was now. The Dealmaker himself had told him that he was the oldest being in the Infinite Realm now, the oldest of the chosen at least. Would that still hold true if the Time he experienced was just fake? He didn't know, but he thought that perhaps not. Hastur was a being that was immensely powerful, perhaps its power was more than just over the mind.

The fact was, there was no denying that something was... wrong. Time fought him, it resisted him. None of the other Essences did the same.

He reached to the Earth beneath, felt his willpower ready to bend the world to his bidding. He thought that he couldn't create skills, but he had only tried to create skills that were tied to Time. Since yesterday, when Hiro evolved, he had been thinking about skills appropriate for him, had tried to imagine what those could be. And that had made him suspicious... he was pretty sure that he could make a skill tied to any other Aspect.

Yet, he had been able to evolve his skill with Time. It had fought him, but in the end it had succumbed. Was it because the skill was already established by the Framework? He didn't know, but it annoyed him, it angered him. It had started after his strike against Hastur, as he slowly adapted to this world. As he tried to change his subjective time, to speed himself up after more than five thousand years of living at his own pace.

He saw flaws in all things, but there were no flaws in Time. He could almost feel it around him, everywhere, touching everything. Time was a constant, a law above all other laws in this world. And yet... all Essence could be bent; all could manifest in different ways based on personal ideas and understanding. For him, Time was a river, that was how he imagined it and

how it appeared to him. He wondered if others saw it differently. To him, Time was something that could be bent, but could never be thrown completely off-course. He could walk on the surface of the river when it was calm, jump back and forth, but change? To change an event he felt like that should require a monstrous amount of power. As he let his thoughts flow with the river, a new idea occurred to him.

He had never really given much thought about the future, about what was to come. The river flowed down, and yet... did it already reach the end? Was there a set direction, or was it... a large delta, with different riverbeds waiting ahead for people to choose the direction. Or perhaps... was it just an empty field and they just riding the first wave in existence, charting the path.

None of his powers worked that far into the future. He could anticipate things, but those usually worked on intent and actions in the present, extrapolation. His **Temporal Fighting** was technically from the future, but... it could change mid movement if he changed his mind. So perhaps they were a step behind the wave, able to see just a tiny moment into what was ahead of them.

Or was that just his understanding of Time? Was there someone else who could influence it to be more than that?

His will was great, he understood that. Naha had told him that she had never seen or heard about anyone with such a will. He could bend it on the world and force it to obey. Could he force Time to obey his understanding of it?

Perhaps. For some reason, Time fought against him, and nothing else did. If what he thought was true, he could fill his skills now, but... he wouldn't be able to use Time with their inception and that was what he was trying to do. He wanted to make the greatest image that he could.

He shuddered to think what he could've done if Naha hadn't gotten a reward that informed them about Images. He would've created skills that wouldn't have done anything for him in the long run. No, skills needed to be planned, to be carefully arranged so that they fit with one another.

Which was why everything frustrated him so much. There were no Time relates skill tomes on sale on the auction or any of the shops they visited.

And the Dealmaker... every time he thought about trying to go to him he felt... angry, like it would be a failure, and he didn't know why.

Naha thought that it was a perversion of one of his Anchors, and perhaps that did play a role. Zach suspected more.

"Zach," Naha's voice and her hand on his shoulder interrupted him. He blinked and realized that night had fallen. He frowned; it had been morning when he had taken a seat in the garden...

Time was playing with him again.

"What is it?"

"It's time," Naha said. "The Sect Leader sent for us. We can go and meet him."

Zach closed his eyes. Perhaps if they succeeded, if he removed his Cultivation, his mind might get clearer. Perhaps he could finally see what was hiding from his sight.