

Interlude - Skills

Naha kept her eyes closed and enjoyed the sensation of the wind on her face and hair with a smile. She had traveled by airship before, but this was a completely different experience. The ship was small, around ten meters long, looking like an old human-built ship. The back had a raised platform with the maneuvering wheel on top, where Hiro stood with a wide smile on his face. The child had really taken to driving the ship, and it wasn't like any of them knew more than he did. Flying it wasn't hard at all, it was made to be simple and easy to use by anyone. And it wasn't like he had much to do other than keep their direction straight.

In a day since they had left the city of Leu they had already crossed far more territories than they would've in weeks of travel, and they weren't even using anything near the ship's best speed. Hiro couldn't handle it. Still, at this pace they would reach their destination in days, compared to months that it would've taken on foot.

Her smile slipped as she felt something stir the shadows below deck, and she turned around. She waved at Hiro, grabbing his attention.

"I'm going down," she yelled up at him over the noise of the wind. "Yell if you need us!"

Hiro nodded his head enthusiastically, he loved the wind and flying too.

She opened the doors that led into the small narrow hallway, with two doors on either side each having a small cabin. She and Zach took one, while Hiro had the other. It was cramped for them, but at least it provided some privacy that they had lacked for years. She walked past them, and then down the stairs that led below deck. The darkness didn't bother her, nor did it bother Zach. She found him at the back of the ship, sitting next to the large engine and arrays attached to it.

He had gotten very interested in how the arrays worked, and she thought that studying them would be a good distraction for him. Of course, she monitored him with her **|Shadow Sense|**, she couldn't let him start dismantling them. Her sense was only a tier 3 skill, but ever since she had

started forming her image it had become much stronger. She had been debating about evolving it further, but there was no need for it now.

She found Zach looking at a spread of skill tomes in front of him, a large pile was all over the floor, while he had two in his hands, glowering at them. She could tell that he was agitated and could hear him muttering to himself.

“This is wrong,” he threw one of the tomes across the room and she winced as it hit the wall. It was a basic skill tome, but she had paid for it.

On Zach’s request, she had gone to the Leu’s Adventurer’s Guild and purchased as many of the basic skill tomes as she could. The Warden’s no longer existed, not in any real way, but their badges still accorded them some benefits. She didn’t spend a lot on them, they were cheap though somewhat regulated. It still pained her to see him throw it across the room.

“What is wrong?” Naha asked as she walked over to him.

“This one is wrong too,” he whispered harshly. As he was about to throw it, she reached out and stopped him, then gently pried the tome from his hand.

“Tell me what is bothering you, what is wrong about them?” Naha said slowly.

Zach grimaced, then turned and met her eyes. “I... none of them are what I need.”

Naha didn’t understand what he meant, but still she took a seat next to him and looked at the skill tomes on the floor. They were all the most basic skills, common and uncommon ones, in total: **|Stagger|**, **|Jump|**, **|Gaze|**, **|Double Step|**, **|Increase Internal Heat|**, **|Increase Regeneration|**, **|Dash|**, which meant that the one that he threw away was **|Intimidate|**. She didn’t know why he needed them, what he wanted to do with them.

“And what do you want from them?” Naha asked.

Zach’s face turned frustrated. “I need a skill to help me understand Time, why it... why it is wrong here. I need to know, to learn.”

The heat in his voice made it clear to her that it was his madness that drove him. Learning, trying to advance and become better was not a wrong thing, but Naha knew the danger that he faced. His madness pushed him, and the more it affected him the more he would lose grasp on anything but his goal. It was the curse of those afflicted with madness. They could gain a

great power because they usually became so focused on the things that their focuses want of them. They became great and powerful, but they also turned into monsters that cared only for their own selfish desires.

If he continued down this path, he would slowly lose himself in his pursuit of knowledge. And she didn't know how to help him.

"What kind of a skill?" Naha asked, if she could help him make progress, perhaps it would alleviate his need, for a while at least. She had to try.

"Something that lets me grasp Time, take it and use it, so that I can learn it better. A skill that can affect it," Zach said.

"I... I don't know if any skill can do that Zach, basic tier one skills that can manipulate time... I don't know if there is one," at least she thought so. She had never really focused much on other Essences, her skills had always been made for shadows.

Zach snorted. "Of course there are," he said as he picked up one of the tomes and showed her the **|Increase Regeneration|**. "This one I could easily turn into a skill that uses Time. This one increases the rate at which a persons recoverable stats regenerate: healing, stamina, mental. I could improve it, get a second or a third tier, higher even. Make it so that instead of boosting regeneration it simply accelerates it, or perhaps somewhere down the line, make it so that it restores me to a previous state or even jumps into the future where my stats are recovered. That is not the issue. This is just not what I need. It is a limited application of time, not what I am seeking. I need something that shows me more, that is... too simple."

Naha didn't quite understand what he meant, but she was surprised by his insights. It... made sense to her, the way that he thought about evolving skills, merging them with types of Essence that he wanted. In truth, all of them were already tied with Essence, so... perhaps he was right. There might be skills that already had Time Essence.

"I need things like... **|Waiting|** or perhaps something else that is directly made for Time, not just something that uses it. My great skills, they are both tied to it, one less than the other. **|I Strike Through Time|**, the past, the present, and the future. **|I Focused And Saw All flaws|**, I saw them in the past, even before I gaze upon something I know its flaws. All around me I see them, even in time itself. But I still don't understand it. I... I

believe that I had infused at least some small sliver of Time into most of my skills. I didn't mean to, but... Time was my only companion in the prison, the only thing that I kept track of through all of my life there. A notch a day, enough to fill mountains."

His eyes glazed over as if he was remembering something and based on how he looked it was not pleasant. She spoke, trying to distract him again.

"You want to understand Time... when you evolved your skills before, skipped tiers, did you see... visions?"

Zach turned to look at her, then tilted his head. "No, what are these visions?"

"When you skip a tier, achieve a large evolution of your skills, you are shown a vision of someone using the ultimate expression of that skill. A glimpse into what is possible."

Zach frowned. "Why didn't I see them then?"

Naha didn't answer, even though she suspected the answer. The visions showed that exact skill being used by someone who had held that skill before. It was a demonstration of someone that had already walked that way of skills. To not see a vision meant only one thing. That you walked down a way of skill that no one had walked before. Where you were the first. She told him her suspicion and he nodded, grateful.

"At least I know that I am not lacking too much. If no one had ever then I simply need to be the first."

"Couldn't you just... make a skill that you need?" He had shown that he was able to create skills that he wanted, at least he could back during their battle with Hastur.

"I didn't create anything," he said slowly. "I simply did what I knew I could, I demanded what I wanted. Skills are... they are expressions of a persons ability and willpower. There should be no boundary between us and the world, it is ours to force the world to bow to our will, and yet..." His face twisted in anger and he swiped at the air in front of himself in an angry manner as he glared straight ahead. "This... thing, it denies me."

Naha blinked, trying to find what he was looking at. There was nothing but the wall of the airship. "What thing?" She asked slowly.

“The shackles, the Framework. I had something before that could force its hand, and now... I lost it. My willpower is as strong as it ever had been, but... no matter what I try, it will not give me what I want. Here, I look at this tome and I pour my will into all that surrounds it,” she saw him looking at a tome that he picked up and then... she could feel his willpower churning inside of him. It was such a strange feeling, the same as what she felt from him during the fight with Hastur. “I will it that its Time turns back.” He looked at it, his will crashing on it, so much so that even Naha felt the pressure. And then it was gone, and he sighed.

“See?” He asked. “Nothing happens. It should, the Framework should at least offer me something, a conduit for my will to act upon the world. If it doesn’t agree with what I want, it should at least give me something that was... lesser, but it denies me even that. I need these skills, if I am to become better. Time... it calls to me, more than any other of the Aspects that I have rule over. I know that my Class influences me, that I need to learn about them all, but... I am pushing back on it too; I want Time to be the first that I truly master and understand. It is a... small rebellion, for what the focus is doing to me.”

He spoke as if he could interact with the Framework on a level that was far deeper than anything that Naha had ever known. And she had to wonder, was this all just his madness or was it real? Still... Time Essence, an Aspect of Existence, as far as Aspects went it was one of the core ones, the most powerful. She had heard about a few people that utilized it, very seldom Cultivators as it was hard to cultivate with, Classers mostly. And even then, they rarely used it in a way that Zach was attempting to. He had a Time attack at tier nine of skill. She had never heard anything about anyone having that. Most just utilized it in conjunction with Space, to control areas, accelerate or slow down, that was the most what people have managed to do with it. Rewind and freeze Time for only those who were the best of the best, at the peak of their Classes. None of their focuses ever reached far or got to high rarities. And if what Zach said about visions was true... he could be the first one that would step beyond them.

She was glad that he was trying to fight against the madness by himself, but... she wished that he had picked an easier Aspect. She would've been able to help with shadow. A thought occurred to her, and she spoke again.

“Did you think about going to the Dealmaker? Asking him for a skill?” Naha asked.

Zach froze, and for a moment she feared that something had triggered him again. But then he responded, slowly and with his voice barely contained. “I... I did, but I cannot do that,” he grimaced, as if in pain.

Naha nearly let it go, but... she needed to understand what was troubling him. “Why? Taking a skill from him so that you could learn should be alright, you can learn.”

“Because *I* need to be better than I was yesterday. *I* will never stop trying to be better. Take something from him? I cannot. *I* need to learn, on my own.”

Naha felt her heart drop as she realized what was happening. His anchors, one of them was already altered, changed, the madness was progressing. What used to be a way for him to grow, to learn, was now isolating him. It forced him to learn on his own, simply because he had sealed it with a word “I”.

She reached out and put her arm around him, pulling him closer. “You will learn it all, I have no doubt,” she whispered as she gently ran circles on his back, trying to calm him down. Slowly, he relaxed in her arms, but didn't move away.

They remained like that for a while, as she remembered the past. They had to find a way to help him soon.