

Clarity

Zach stood on the front of the ship, he didn't know any nautical terms, though something in his mind told him that there were ones that could be used. He didn't know or remember why he knew that, but some knowledge seemed to be almost instinctual for him. He enjoyed the wind on his face, and the noise of it passing him by. There had been no noise in the prison, just... silence. He alone was responsible for any disruption of it. Here, so much happened without his input. It was... overwhelming. And his skill didn't help anything. He had managed to get it under control, somewhat. It still hit him hard sometimes, the flaws of the world invading his mind. But he had learned how to keep the skill running in the back of his mind, and only call it up when he needed. It didn't mean that he no longer got distracted by it, he did, but he could cover it up better.

Just as how he had learned to cover up everything else. He had learned from others, how they acted, how they lived, and he was trying to emulate. He still didn't understand most of how and why they did things. He still forgot to eat and drink, the hunger and thirst barely affected him. Thankfully Naha was there, keeping track for him. It was... strange to live like that, especially after being alone for all of his existence. He knew that without her he would've lost himself. He... appreciated her for that. She was there, always, ready to help him. To talk and explain when he needed her to. He felt bad for how he was. Even now he found the pace of this world... too fast. Often he would lose himself in conversations, it would begin and end before he could even process what it was about. Time... it passed so slowly for him, and so fast for everyone else. It made him... embarrassed. He considered himself someone who could endure anything, and yet he was in a world that constantly tried to make him move even when he wasn't ready.

It was why Time was so fascinating to him, why he needed to understand it, to learn it, to master it. If he had mastery over Time... perhaps he could catch up to the rest of the world, put himself in sync with them. Because he couldn't allow himself to be... worse than anybody else. He needed to be strong, get better with every passing day. Learn everything that

he could about Aspects, grow, be more. He realized that part of what drove him where his anchors, and... madness which pushed him to the extremes. He was terrified of the moments when he lost himself, when control slipped through his reins, and he became just a vessel for the need that was buried deep inside of him.

Without Naha, he would've gotten worse faster, he was certain about that. She was a caring person, someone who tried to think of others, someone who protected. He found the way that she watched him constantly, even when she believed he couldn't notice... pleasant. He enjoyed being around her, because he felt that she understood. She had shared her and his past with him. Told him that she too had lived through the madness, that she had been completely twisted by it. A part of him was unable to see the person that she described in her, the Night Horror. A murderess, someone who robbed others of their chance at existence. But he had remembered how he acted when he was in the throes of madness. It was... like you were a different person, as if your entire way of thinking was suddenly warped and you didn't even realize that there was anything wrong. It was... terrifying.

The things that she had told him about them, how they met and fell in love, that... he understood more. He saw how he could love her, and perhaps, he would love her again. He was already halfway there, he felt like. And it was because of the same thing, he felt like she was a kindred spirit, someone who understood. He did not begrudge his young self saving her, all life was precious, it deserved a second chance. But... all that death, it weighed on him now. How callous it all was. And yet... he that once was had helped her, had gone against the rule of the law that they had obeyed, and protected her. It was a good decision in his mind. Naha had fought Hastur, had helped them kill him, that one act had saved more people than she had ever killed.

To know that he himself had done the same... That he had killed people on Earth, a world so alien to him that he could barely wrap his head around it. How could've he done that? It didn't make sense to him, even with the things that she told him. He didn't believe that he would've done something like that. That was why he needed to find Ryun again once he recovered, he needed to know more from someone who was there, even if he was an enemy. The memories themselves didn't matter, even if he remembered, they were a

blink of an eye in an age beyond counting. Nothing would change him. He was who he was, and his priority at the moment was to remain that way. To fight the madness and find a way to cure himself.

That was all that mattered.

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They landed their airship in a clearing as it needed to be refueled. The crystals that they used came from the shop auction, and thankfully they had enough wealth that they could buy them even overpriced. And air-type Essence Crystals were abundant.

Hiro was back on the airship, replacing the crystals. Naha sat in the shadow of a tree, meditating and working on her skills nearby. And he explored their surroundings. He... he didn't have as much time to work on his skills as he wanted. Mostly because... time. Time was what hurt him the most. They stopped and just as he managed to get into the state of mind that allowed him to focus, their break was over and they were on their way. It frustrated him to no end, and yet... It didn't, not nearly as much as he knew it should. Three years were nothing to him, what did bother him was that he didn't live at the same pace as everybody else did.

Today, he tried something else. He walked through the forest, working on his skills. His eyes saw in the dark of the thick forest, seeing the critters jumping around him, both curious and completely oblivious to his threat. He kept his will restrained, and he didn't intend to harm them, so they were safe.

He had realized a while ago that he would need a new skill that allowed him to track his surroundings, similar to Naha's **|Shadow Sense|**. Though, he hadn't taken anything new since he escaped the prison. He wanted to tie it to Time somehow, but he didn't know quite how.

He didn't have that problem for his other skills. And now, after a long time preparing, he was ready to evolve his skills again. He had known that evolving them would come easy to him, his will was enough to force them to, but he hadn't for the simple reason that he wanted everything to synchronize. Naha's reward, her image, had taught them both a lot about what they could

expect from reaching the end of the Skill focus. And he wasn't in any rush, he always had time.

Now, as he walked through the forest he focused on his skill, **|Perfect Spatial Evade|**. An active skill, that when used moved him through space, evading. He had learned in battle just how important it was, and had spent a long time trying to decide how best it should evolve. The Framework denied him, it no longer allowed him to sift through and choose. He was missing something that he once had, and he didn't know what it was. He could no longer guide an evolution in process, that much of he was certain. So, he followed Naha's advice, the way that others did it. Will and certainty of outcome.

He stepped and his skill activated, moving him through space. The more will he put into it, the more distance he gained. Though, it had an upper limit, a few steps at most. A part of him believed that he could shatter that limit if he pushed it, but there was no need. Now, he ran through the forest and focused. Time was all around them, constantly moving forward, a calm river flowing in one direction. A mighty river, one that fought any attempt to be moved.

He let his willpower out, all of it. The space around him exploded in rolling waves, all Essence trembled in his presence, except one—Time. He didn't know why it didn't. It wasn't above the other Essences, but it was... as if it was fighting him. Space rolled, the Air was pushed around, the Light bent, and the Shadows curled, everything responded to his will. And he knew that all those Essences were just a small part of the greater whole, a tiny portion of their Aspect. But Time, it alone fought him, it pushed back against him as if all of it was focused on this one place in space. As if he was somehow worthy of such attention. As if it didn't want to bow to his will.

He pushed it anyway. The river of time grew turbulent, as if it prepared to fight him pushing it in another direction. He didn't. He was on the river, the same as all things that felt the influence of time. Guided by his will, he moved. It felt almost as if he tricked it, instead of trying to move the river, he moved himself along the river, back up the stream. His skill triggered, the part of it that moved through space grabbed hold of him and he was thrown to another place on the river and back.

He stepped and then he rippled through everything, appearing behind and to the side. Ahead of him, he saw... himself, running, willpower rippling around. The him from the... past? No, the future, glanced back, his eyes widening, and then he shimmered out of the existence, like a mirage. It had lasted only a moment. He stopped and felt around... Time was... it rippled and then settled, such a small change doing nothing to affect the flow of the river.

He stopped and closed his eyes. The skill had felt... right. It was... **Rewind**, only, it didn't move him back through time, it jumped him through space and time. To before he even used the skill. Already he could see how useful that could be. His enemies wouldn't even know that he had used it. More training would be necessary, contemplation, meditation, but... this was what he wanted from all of his skills.

He looked at his screens and notifications.

Your skill has evolved!

|**Perfect Spatial Evade**|>>|**Perfect Spatial Evade: My Step, Through Time and Space**|

Ripples of Time and Space (Skill Perk)	Your My Step, Through Time and Space allows you to sense the smallest of fluctuations in time and space around you. You sense any spatial powers used in your immediate surrounding a moment before they are executed. Gain +15% to intelligence.
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A lot more experimenting it seemed. But... he had gained a perk that gave him some sensory power, which made him wonder... did he gain that because his mind was on getting a sense skill for himself, or was it just a coincidence.

For all the time that he had spent practicing skills in his prison, for all that he thought that he had learned and understood, there were still things left to discover.

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He stood at the front of the airship, Naha standing next to him as they came over a mountain peak. His they dipped through the clouds and then... “There it is,” Naha whispered as she looked at the massive city nestled among three close peaks. “The Dragon’s Peak, finally.”