

Price

They were led through the twisting corridors carved inside the mountain peak, up the stairs that ran in a spiral, leading them toward the top. Once they reached the peak itself, they were led through the well-tended to gardens, with tall pink trees flanking the cobbled path. Tiny streams and ponds were everywhere, with fish dancing beneath the surface. Just being around the nature and walking through the gardens instilled a sense of peace and calm in Naha. She recognized that the effect was intentional, as it seemed everything in the sect city was.

They were escorted inside the great pagoda on top of the peak, which looked a lot larger up close than it had from the distance. The inside was made out of pale wood, slick as if it was covered in something that gleamed in the light. The walls held ornamental carpets and art-pieces depicting great warriors, drakes predominantly but other races too. Dragons, mountains, and great river landscapes. Each evoked something different in Naha, but they moved away from them before she could really feel the effects.

Their escort was the drake that spoke with them at the docks, Ikris Fah Durah Peak Commander—his title meant that he was one of the three of the sect military commanders. One for each peak and family, their power and influence second only to the Sect Leaders. Naha put him somewhere in the Evolved Realm, based on everything that she had seen.

They didn't have to walk for long before they reached a guarded door. The warriors saluted and let Ikris lead them through. The room beyond was a small box, she saw symbols on the walls, which told her that the entire room was warded with formations, brown pipes hugged the ceiling and coming in from the side walls and then entering the wall across from them. Ikris walked to the warded door opposite of them and then paused.

"I apologize for this, but the Eternal Master is very busy, the only way he could've met you was in his laboratory," the drake with metal scales said.

Before Naha could process anything that he said, Ikris pushed open the door and a waft putrid smoke rolled out. Ikris grimaced but entered, and Naha followed behind him with Zach. They stepped into a large and well lit

room. Glass tanks filled the walls on the left, a row of at least twenty of them, each with different labels stuck on top of them. A hanging platform was filled with plants, and formations on the bottom of it obviously kept anything harmful from touching them, she saw smoke impacting an invisible barrier and moving away. Large rotating blades were on the tall ceiling, moving slowly and pulling out the smoke. The right side wall of the room was no wall at all, but an open balcony that looked out at the sky. Formations were everywhere on the walls, and the wall on the far side was filled with shelves that held jars filled with reagents, and above them hanged larger ingredients mounted on hooks. Tables filled the center, with all kinds of different alchemical instruments, burners, vials, stills, mortars and pestles.

Her eyes were drawn to the drake standing hunched over a table, looking at a vial filled with green liquid. The drake was tall, and was wearing only hide pants and an apron made out of the same material. What was the most striking about him though was that he had no scales. His skin was pale white, and marred with burn scars.

Ikris stepped closer, one hand over his nose and spoke. “Eternal Master,” he bowed. “Your guests are here.”

The drake turned his head and glanced at them. “What? Ah, right, a moment.”

He swirled the vial in his hand for a good five seconds and then placed on wire-like slot that he then spun around.

“Thank you, Ikris, that will be all,” the drake turned and looked at them with a smile on his face, allowing Naha to fully take his appearance in. His red eyes were the most striking thing about him, but the fact that he had no scales made him look strange to her eyes.

“Of course, Eternal Master,” Ikris bowed and then left the room. Eternal Master, it finally registered with her, the title that Ikris called the man, it meant that he was in the Eternal Realm, the peak of Cultivation. She hadn’t known that.

Before Naha could introduce them, the drake gestured. “Come, let’s go to the balcony, I know that some people can’t handle the fumes.”

Naha followed after him eagerly—she had been holding her breath. Zach next to her was frowning, but didn’t seem affected. She stepped over

the edge of where the wall was supposed to be and felt something pass over her, making her realize that there was a formation there. She took an experimental breath and realized that the formation kept the fumes from getting out that way. They probably pushed them out somewhere else, or used them for something.

The drake stopped next to the railing and turned to look at them, Naha bowed deeply before he could speak.

“Honored Sect Leader, I am Nahamassa Plainrunner, and this is Zacharia Gardner, we apologize for any inconvenience that we might’ve caused.”

He inclined his head in return to her, Zach hadn’t bowed and she hit him with an elbow to remind him. She had instructed him in how to act, but... he seemed lost in his mind. She worried that his madness had manifested again, but the Sect Leader spoke before she could apologize.

“I greet you in the name of my sect, I am Vitor Fah Storrah,” the drake smiled at them. “There is always something to do for Sect Leaders like me, but it isn’t everyday that we get a visit from such distinguished guests. I can spare a time for you.”

The lack of titles from him, and the fact that they were alone with none of his attendants told her that this was a more casual visit. Which she had to admit made her glad. She didn’t know if she could keep Zach from blundering in an official visit.

“We thank you for your time,” Naha said.

“I was very surprised when I heard that you arrived in our city. You’ve earned a lot of respect among the sects for your actions. Some of the names that accompanied you on your mission are known and respected. You’ve done a service to the world, and for that you have our thanks. But, you’ve come here with my name on your lips, so I understand that you have a need. I cannot promise that I can help, I am pressed for time at the moment, but the least I could do in light of your actions is hear you out.”

Naha noted that while the drake was welcoming and open, he was also in a hurry. She could imagine what a Sect Leader of one of the strongest factions in the world had to do on the daily, especially if he was also an Eternal Realm Alchemist.

“Thank you, our situation is time sensitive,” Naha said, cutting straight to the point. “We are in need of your service, we need a focus removal potion, one that can remove a tier 2 Path.”

The drake blinked, obviously taken aback. “Why would you want those wretched things?”

“I...” Naha glanced at Zach who was staring at Vitor, probably intrigued by his body. She placed a hand on his elbow, snapping him out of it. She tried to decide what they should say, but in the end... if they wanted help like this they would need the man’s cooperation. “Zach is unbalanced, he needs it.”

Vitor turned his eyes to Zach. “How unbalanced?”

“Severely,” Naha responded.

“What you want might be possible, but I would need specific. People don’t understand what those focus removal items are. They cripple, you cannot just cut a piece of yourself off without consequence, and the blasted Framework doesn’t warn anyone.”

Naha blinked. She remembered the pain, she had known that she could’ve died, her Cultivation had been high enough that she had a True Body. But... she didn’t think that Zach would have that many issues.

“His Cultivation is low he—” Naha started, and then Zach interrupted her.

“—Six, two, nine,” he said, telling him his tiers of power.

The drake grimaced. “Severely indeed.” He took a deep breath and reached up to scratch the side of his neck. “That... how far did the madness progress?”

“Not far, it was a recent thing, the result of our fight with Hastur. And he drank a potion that shielded him from the madness for a while,” Naha said quickly. “He gets hyper focused on certain things from time to time, but I can keep him stable,” she didn’t want them to think that he was a threat. A person with his tiers of power was very powerful, someone who was also mad? They hunted people like Zach across the Infinite Realm. She didn’t lie to him, but she did... bend the truth. Zach hadn’t reached a point where he turned malicious in his madness. He was... more childlike, inquisitive, but without any inhibition.

Vitor met Zach's eyes, expectantly waiting for his answer. It took Zach a few long seconds to answer.

"I will not harm your sect," Zach said slowly, and she could tell that he hadn't really been listening, or hadn't understood.

Thankfully, Vitor didn't know him enough to be able to tell. The drake just nodded his head.

"Your overall tier of power is too high, yes, I can make a potion to remove your Path, but... Potions like this can only be used once, and it will impact you in some manner. No way of knowing what right now, but... the higher overall tier someone gets, the more integrated all of their focuses become. Your Path might not feel like it is a big part of your being, but it is one of the building blocks..."

"We don't have any other choice," Naha added. "It is this or let him go mad."

The drake sighed, then shook his head. "I can make it, but the cost..."

"We can pay any price," Naha said. Even if they didn't have enough Essence, they had their rewards from Hastur, and those were all Eternal Grade items and elixirs. They could trade them.

"It is not a question of price. The ingredients are rare, and while I do have them on hand, I need them for something else. Your arrival couldn't have come at a worse time for our sect... We... I cannot use those ingredients on outsiders, not now. I will not be able to work on it for months, and getting new ingredients will take at least a year..."

"We can pay a premium, trade items, we have—"

"—It is not about that, no amount of wealth can change what... Unless... you are strong, very strong. What I need those ingredients for is a matter of strength. If you could... replace what I need them for, personally—"

"—Anything, we will do anything that you need," Naha said.

The drake looked at them both then a window appeared in front of Naha. A contract request, a binding agreement between them. They would show him their screens and agree to fulfill one task for him, he would never reveal what he learned from their screens and they will never reveal anything relating to the task he gave them. In return they would get the Focus Removal Potion.

She blinked as she finished reading, then met the man's eyes.

"I would need to know his screens anyway, if you want me to make a potion to mitigate the risks. If you agree to do one task for me, I will make it, I'll start working on it today. It will take me about a week to finish it."

Naha glanced at Zach, trying to see what he thought about it. He met her eyes and then nodded.

It wasn't like they had much choice in the matter. They both accepted the contract.

"Yes... you will do great," Vitor said after he looked over their screens.

"What do you need us to do?" Zach asked.

The drake took a deep breath. "Protection."

Naha frowned and he continued. "My brother, the Sect Head of Dragon Heart Sect, is currently in seclusion that has lasted for a decade. He is nearing the Eternal Realm, and we believe that he will advance soon."

Naha blinked, that wasn't what she had been expecting, but she didn't interrupt.

"When the Dome opened, and the wars started... They of course impacted us as well. We fought off several attacks by other sects, though none of those were real threats or intended as such, simply tests. No, the real problems came from the coreward factions."

The Dragon Heart Sect was on the border of Sect lands, in the outer ring of the core and bordering several kingdoms and empires.

"Our northern neighbors, the Collective Territories, took advantage when they thought we were occupied by other sects. They attacked and pushed into our territories. We've... managed to fight them off, but... My brother's presence, or rather the lack of it, was noticed. You are not Cultivators, so you don't understand, but... him not making an appearance during a war like that... It made our enemies suspicious. His seclusion was a secret, and we didn't anticipate the wars that came after the Tournament. Now... we have heard word that our enemies have learned or at the very least suspect, that my brother is attempting to reach the Eternal Realm. And that... they cannot allow such a threat to manifest. My advancement had sparked at least a dozen assassination attempts, and I am just an Alchemist. My brother

is... We have intelligence that suggests that they will attempt to stop my brother before he can reach Eternal Realm.”

Vitor Fah Storrah looked at them with a determined look in his eyes. “You accepted the contract. I will craft and give you the potion, and then... I need you to stay here and protect my brother until he advances.”