

Beginning Again

Bubbling... bubbling...bubbling! My heart is beating in my head, and all I can remember is my own blood covering my eyes and filling my mouth... there was a man I was trying to save... what was his name? —did I save him!?

I can hear my heartbeat clearly, and I remember there was a girl who killed me. We were surrounded by people did no one intervene? Why did they have smiles on their faces? I saw two men behind me... I don't remember them but I know the looks they had on their faces was a rare sight... there was only one who fought for me, just like the last time. I just don't remember her face... was it red or grey?

What happened?! This bubbling in my chest, this numbness in my lips, the sharp stinging in my fingers as I remember digging into the aether that was me alive... Pain is the only certainty in my memory, a constant retelling of a tale of chanting and stabbing, or restricting me to a lab chair and needling my skin. I want to be stronger than this life, and I don't want anyone else to have to relive this pain. I don't want him to die.

I can only remember a village burning when I was younger, and a girl my age fought for me then. And then this pain that sent me here today, the woman who murdered me sadistically smiling and breathing on me as she tore through my body, I want to be stronger than her... I don't want her to kill anyone else like she did to me. I don't want anyone else to die. Wait... there she is...

A viera and an au ra lock eyes as they both float in an abyss of pitch black, their bodies being the only thing visible. They have matching wounds along their chest that don't bleed, but seemingly tether to one another as the skin of the wounds begin to close and mend themselves back together. The viera smiles and drops a sigh of relief as the wound disappears, the Au ri smiles back sympathetically. The viera's skin slowly loses its color, as dark circles splotch around his eyelids and his irises roll into the back of his head and come back a glowing shade of red.

The endless abyss begins to expand and fill with a sense of dread and hopelessness. The girl's skin curdles and boils from a pale grey into a sanguineous crimson, and a figure, somehow darker than the abyss around them, climbs into their view. With his features, sharp and pointed, a twisted smile of jagged teeth and a pair of bright yellow eyes, he spread his clawed wings and froze the pair in place.

"Live... Feed..." a voice whispers from the void below.

A massive reflection of the creature's jagged face painted the abyss around them. As black, coiled tendrils rose from the pitch black and pulled them away, and back into consciousness.

Star juttet up from a medical examination table, Armina and Soren were looking at the cluster of monitors connected to the equipment plugged in the viera's arms. His eyes darted around, first

noting the various tubes pushing blood and a black liquid into his veins, then to Armina seemingly tampering with one of the vats of black liquid. His vision blurred and sharpened, and then the urge to give in to his impulse grew. He launched himself onto Armina, knocking away the knife she grabbed from the table, and taking hold of her neck. The Au ri girl was tackled to the ground, as Soren carefully shuffled over to the pair in protest.

“Control yourself boy!” The elezen proclaimed, flicking his wrist and launching a duo of undead towards Star. The undead Garlean soldiers struggled to force him to the ground, until another pair of soldiers were summoned. Armina grabbed the knife and cut into her palm, then proceeded to squeeze her hand over the vat of black liquid. Soren would fill a syringe with this solution and inject it into Star’s temple, quickly calming him into an almost unresponsive state.

The viera opened his mouth to speak to Soren, only coughing and wheezing in place of actual words. His eyes confusedly opened wide as he continued wheezing in the elezen’s direction. Soren places a hand on Star’s shoulder.

“You’ve been pronounced dead for the better part of a moon cycle... your mind and body will need to relearn what you did before...” the elezen has a somber expression on his face as he continues explaining, “Rowan gave you an inhuman amount of blood transfusions to keep you alive, and with them you’re now afflicted with her illnesses.”

Star nodded, looking to Armina with a doubtful glare.

“She’s assisting me with your supervision, as reconcile for her attempting to end your life.”

Armina looks back at Star, noting the massive scar covering his chest, tosses the medical utensils she had onto the counter and walks to the door. Star softens his expression and forces a smile towards Armina, and it’s met with a disgusted scowl as she turns to leave the room. Lowain, Gabriella, and Rowan are at the door, and the former shoos Armina back into the room as they walk in.

Rowan and Star’s eyes light up at the sight of one another, but it is immediately overshadowed by the sibling animosity building directly beside them. Soren and Lowain roll their eyes at them before the miqote claps his hands loudly to get everyone’s attention.

“Now that Remy is no longer deceased, the merger is complete...” Lowain exclaims, “now we can all be friends —err friendly...” He looks to Armina who’s trying to distance herself from the group by standing near the door again.

“To commemorate this occasion, we’re swapping students.” Soren interjects.

“Gabbie and Rowan will be with me...” Lowain laughs, getting a similarly disappointed reaction from both Armina and Star, “and Soren will take you two.”

“Bu— w—” Star chokes out before beginning to wheeze again, Soren watches his movements carefully.

“Well... we agreed to split the sisters and the infected, being you and Rowan. And the way we’ve established training groups has always been a role based system, frontline/backline to simplify.” Lowain lectures, “Forcing one of our mages to play vanguard for the other will stunt their growth, as will allowing you and Gabriella to charge into tasks with reckless abandon. There’s flaws in all of you and the merger was to show us those flaws firsthand.”

Gabriella raises her hand, and Lowain excitedly points to her.

“We didn’t really fight much in the merger, how do you know what our weaknesses are?” she says motioning to herself and Rowan beside her.

“Rowan and Remy both definitely lack decisiveness...” the miqote chuckles “...their interactions with a particular Versi sister and numerous training regiments have made that quite apparent.”

“The two Versi sisters let their emotions get the better of them when a situation reaches its climax...” Soren interrupts, drawing opposite but negative responses from both Armina and Gabriella. “This was our reasoning for the pairings; Ms Armina will force Amara to keep pace and defend her when she makes a mistake, and Rowan will be forced to support Ms Gabriella and her lack of communication.”

Gabriella scoffs at the elezen, as he and Lowain at the sound of beeping coming from the PA system overhead.

Rowan shyly places a hand on Gabbie’s shoulder, and gets no reaction, as the group seemingly scoff at one another and leave the room as well.

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