

Another snowstorm lashed against the city of Uto, blanketing Key in a layer of snow that buried the old piles of grey icy chunks, allowing the residents to pretend that life could continue as it once had. The streets disappeared, the rubble lay listless and dusted in white, and the people bundled up as best they could to ward against the subzero temperatures, humans struggling the most as the storm grew too intense for the ether casters to continue knitting a new breathable atmosphere.

In the aftermath of the world breaking apart, each day brought a unique challenge to overcome. The first few days had been about getting humans and nautipods into survivable conditions. New shipments of etherbands came in once a week, produced by overworked dramasks and gravents in Stonewing, though because the technology was still in its infancy, sometimes unexpected problems arose and it would take at least a week to get sorted.

The word did rebuild as soon as the shock of raining bodies and brutal weather dulled just a bit; when the wormlingkin finished reforming and licking their wounds. As what remained of a functioning government took their positions and assessed the extent of the damage with their decimated workforces, streets had been repaired, and utilities were fixed.

Though the threat of rolling blackouts never quite went away, those with shelters still standing could at least attempt to spiderweb out from their epicenters and try to make way for new construction. Scaffolding went up before winter gnashed teeth into the beleaguered masses, and those who could work were scooped up and trained in mass. It was never enough, but it was a start.

Hacksaw grew restless and snippy after returning from his failed mission to find Misty, a nautipod that annoyed him greatly, but provided good conversation and sharp observation. She hadn't been in either of the standing towers he'd been directed to, and after coming back to New Paths to lick his wounded pride, an overwhelming malaise rested in his chest and burrowed into his stomach.

He loathed to feel stupid, and instead of barking and biting, he took to doing whatever physical labor he could get around the property. This consisted of gutting the basement of whatever salvageable material there was, digging troughs in preparation for a UBF foundation survey, and, most pressing of all, shoveling snow.

Hacksaw gripped a shovel in massive cyan hands, forgoing the gloves, hat, and scarf that Ludus gifted him a few days ago and heaved enormous mounds of snow into piles along the walkways. His enormous black-and-white body burned with the effort, and that kept him warm enough to keep going with loud grunts, his tail whipping behind him to keep balance. In the dark, his stripes broke his silhouette and made him appear like a shambling mound of snow with threatening red spikes to claw at unsuspecting travelers.

"Hey, dude, aren't you cold?"

Hacksaw heaved another pile of snow off the walkway, the scarlet cluster eyes around his forearms swivelling in their cage to the porch, where Neo stood, bundled in a coat and scarf. His frosty breath trailed up and into the dark night, illuminated by dim lights from cracks in the front door.

"I am working," Hacksaw replied, turning his attention away from Neo. "And I am not in the mood."

"You're never in the mood," Neo shot back, but there was no bite to his voice. It struck him as odd that Hacksaw even decided to stick around for as long as he had. "Want some company?"

"What do you want?"

Neo hopped down the sagging wooden steps and perched on them, his elbows resting on his knees, his dense brown fur bunching underneath him. "I figured we could hang out for a bit. It's been a while, you know? I miss you."

"I do not want to hear about it if you are going to cry," Hacksaw said. The heavy slosh of snow cascading out into the yard punctuated his irritation. "I have heard enough crying for a lifetime."

"Still a dickhead, I see," Neo huffed, rolling his eyes. "I'm actually coming to check on you. Is that okay, Mr. Grump?"

"That depends."

"On?"

Hacksaw hummed, and answered only after he scrapped the shovel on the concrete slabs a few more times, chipping at the icy layer developing underneath. "Ludus is too stupid to see it coming. Perhaps you can see the snakes in your grass."

Neo blinked. "Huh? Snakes? Do you mean Cygnus?"

"You need not worry about him."

Neo rubbed the creases of his eyes, pinching at them and dragging his clawed hands over his blue patch. Hacksaw had always been difficult to decipher when he was in a bad mood. Neo chalked it up to old Banishment habits, as Idris and Mithras often did the same thing. Used old language or didn't specify what they meant.

"Whatever, Hacksaw, be cryptic," Neo muttered. "You've been extra mean these last few days. Is something wrong?"

"It might be more accurate to ask if anything is right these days."

Neo rolled his eyes again and let Hacksaw shovel for a few more minutes without comment. Something was definitely wrong, and Neo, despite his own turmoil, decided he was going to pry it out of him, if for no other reason than it would make the atmosphere of the house feel less suffocating. Ever since Jolyne yelled at him about leaving, the emotional turmoil at New Paths climbed to a new height.

Hacksaw noticed it as well, and apparently knew what the problem was, but wouldn't get involved and definitely wouldn't offer advice to anybody. Neo licked his inner teeth, mulling over his angle of approach.

"Alright," Neo said, "I'll bite. What happened to you, dude?"

"I was lied to, and fell for it."

"You're gonna have to be a little more specific than that."

Hacksaw turned and stared at Neo, narrowing his eyes and growling, but didn't snap. "While you were gone, I went to apologize to a nautipod because I destroyed her life. I made up for most of it, but then she disappeared. I went to make sure she was still alive, and failed to do so."

Neo recalled Hacksaw dragging him and Jolyne through Fever to ask about a place. Frill and Gills. It surprised him that Hacksaw would even care enough to go through the effort to ask

if the owner was alive, let alone apologize to her after the fact. Neo legitimately could not wrap his mind around Hacksaw behaving that way, let alone being upset that it didn't work out.

"The business district is what they called it," Hacksaw continued. "It is a territory now, and they did not want me there, so they lied to me. And I believed them. Like an idiot newt. And now I am here, wasting more time until I am bitten or until you bite each other."

Neo cycled through a few follow up questions, but came to the conclusion that Hacksaw couldn't call this nautipod, and wouldn't go back to the business district unless pressured to. And whatever drama boiled under the surface would be catastrophic. Neo twirled his light blue tendrils in his hands.

"I don't think you should give up so easily," he said.

Hacksaw's shoulders knit together and he went back to shoveling, the corners of his lips curved into a tight frown. "Is that so? Is this coming from experience?"

Neo winced. "Okay, I deserved that one, but only once, asshole."

"Then what does your wisdom suggest? Since you have all of the answers."

The way Hacksaw's sorrowful voice sounded gave Neo pause. They had both suffered incalculable losses, and now that the immediate danger passed, all that remained was a cavern of hopelessness and fatigue. Hacksaw's final thread to Skire had severed, and his gruff persona really had been the only thing that had ever kept him alive.

Neo didn't get it before, but now he did. That same force drove him to launch that eye over the wall, and would propel him forward for as long as he had the stamina to keep putting one foot in front of the other. That same force scared him away from home and reeled him back. He just couldn't find the energy to be mad at Hacksaw. Not about this.

"I can go with you," Neo offered before his nerves stopped him. "They won't know me. I can find out for you, and take you wherever else too if you want."

Hacksaw stopped shoveling. The methodic rhythm ended and the lingering quiet of the snowy landscape settled over them. His huge breaths marked him in the darkness, his tail limp on the concrete and his ears flicking. Without his tendrils out, he looked comically bald, but the black blocks of color along his head and neck faded with the tapering light, a chilling gulf between him and the house.

He should reject Neo's offer. No point in trying when another obstacle lay just beyond this one. And another after that. He reasoned that it would be better to just let the evil world swallow him up. The world he protected for no real gain. All he got out of killing ichor beasts was a wasteland and broken connection to a land that successfully obliterated most of the life that lived on it.

A flash of spite pecked at his cheeks alongside the blistering cold.

"Fine," Hacksaw replied finally. "You can come with me."

"Really?" Neo expected Hacksaw to reject him. He'd already had a rebuttal ready. A lecture about letting people help you when they wanted to, because crooks needed to stick up for each other sometimes. "Okay, cool. Whenever you're ready, we can go. But, we should probably go inside now, it's cold as shit out here."

Hacksaw finished clearing the walkway and plunged the shovel into the highest mound of snow before retiring for the evening, content to roll up into the big quilt that Ludus loaned him. Neo, still a pain in the ass, didn't deserve his aggression. They had much more in common now. Wouldn't it be spiteful to this wasteland for him to let it flourish?