

Interlude: Chris

Chris stood in front of the empty gateway hall.

It was strange. Triz-adu were well used to goodbye's. Everytime Chris discarded an old shell and inhabited or crafted a new one, it was a piece of them that they said goodbye to, forever.

Farewells were brief in their culture. A simple wave would usually do. A handful of words. And if you never saw someone again, that was just that. Life was ephemeral, and people changed. In some ways, even a simple wave was a permanent goodbye, since that person might be different when you meet them again.

Chris wondered, then, why this one hurt a little more than they were used to. Had they really grown so close in those few months? They smiled faintly, making a fist over their chest. Where humans had their hearts.

Such strange organs those were. Chris felt a small amount of pain in their chest region. A heart-ache, it was called? How bizarre. Their other shells suffered no such ailments, of course. They shook their head, lightly, and turned around.

There was work to do. Even if walking through the empty city on their own was a strange experience. Usually there would be someone alongside them. Matt would joke, Reya would check if they were okay, Fio would run ahead and leave them to follow, and Emilia would ask after them.

Humans truly were so bizarre. Chris had been sent to kill them, and the way they understood, that was a pretty significant occurrence in human culture, too. Yet, it had barely taken them a few days to break that ice and feel like part of the group.

Community. That was something hard to come by as a triz-adu. As people who were ever changing in shape and expression did not do particularly well when made to be static. Yet, they hadn't felt that way with this group.

New jokes, new questions, new experiences popped up at every corner. The humans were happy and sad and angry and they experienced it all so vividly. Chris wondered what that was like? To see the world in such strong shades.

They shook their head, discarding those thoughts - another very human habit they'd picked up, but one that felt surprisingly fun. They imagined thoughts like a kind of fog that stuck in

their head, and shaking their head was like waving a hand through water vapour, dispelling it.

Hmm. That water vapour analogy felt like it might come from the shell they were currently inhabiting. Chris smiled faintly at that. They were rapidly becoming more in sync. That was good, because they would need it.

With the eclipse ending, Chris did not bother to stay in Inu. Archmage Zolycc was still in the city, and now, her might would easily be enough to hold it against the incoming hordes. Frankly, holding the horde here had been a surprisingly positive outcome.

They'd evacuated it, but by now, people were slowly coming back. Chris had good eyes, and from the temple they could see a lot of it. People were sharing food. Blankets being handed out, the guards who were off their shifts helped with rebuilding houses and clearing rubble.

Chris smiled. Then, lazily, they stepped away. Work was to be done.

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Three weeks. That was how long they walked for.

After all, there was no hurry anymore. Chris felt their heart thump slowly in their chest. It was steady, an eternal rhythm never changing. They did not exert more force than needed, and no less than appropriate.

Any threats were dispatched by their non-human shells. The leshi and rockhound were a terrifying combination, wielding the forces of the earth against whoever stood before them. Chris' enemies vanished without a trace, and the water-aspected fighter whose body they had made theirs walked through the forest unabated.

And into the desert unabated. And past the desert unabated, too.

Chris walked and walked and walked... to the spire. A massive formation of needle-like mountains, piercing eternally high. The clouds were thin and wispy, pierced by the rock formations. Shadows drifted among them. Wyverns battling birds of prey. Blood dripped down from there more often than water, dyeing the sand at the foot of the mountains red.

They looked up. Shadows and red raindrops fell, but none landed on Chris. Each drop of crimson was mostly water, after all, and they slid to the wet ground in a small sphere around them. Chris breathed.

The air was faintly damp. The sun had mostly returned from behind the cover of darkness, hanging low in the sky, and casting the red sand even redder in the hues of twilight. That was another habit they'd inherited from the group.

Deep, steadying breaths.

Smiling, they took another one. It was time to lay their past demons to rest. The world looked so different now, they didn't imagine it would be much trouble. Mentally, they reached into their heart, and cast the doubts aside.

Another deep breath. It smelled of iron and sand and regret and heart demons. Hah. Heart demons. When was the last time cultivators had spoken of those? How old was Chris now, even?

They shook their head, discarding that thought, too. Then, they stepped toward the mountain, placing a foot on dull rock. Then again, and then once more.

Chris walked. The mountains were far too steep, but when Chris stepped on Qi, they could walk up a ninety degree wall, too, so it didn't matter all that much really. Heart steady, lips in a faint smile, and all three shells with them, Chris walked.

And walked, and walked some more.

By the time they broke through the layer of clouds, dawn had broken.

And Chris had, instead, broken dozens of bodies.

Carcasses of wyverns, drakes, giant birds, and even a handful of gryphons laid at the bottom of the mountain. Each had tried to take their pick of the triz-adu's flesh, and each had paid the eternal, great prize. Scarlet blood fell, broken bodies fell, and Chris ascended.

Step by step by step. Dawn broke, and the dark world turned red again and Chris walked. They smiled, even, as they headed further and further up.

To the top of the mountain.

Eventually, Chris crested the top of it. Up there, above the clouds, where the air was thin, a human, a leshi, and a rockhound climbed into a circular platform. The top of the spires was rather different from the bottom, being a network of platforms and interconnecting lines of rock bridges.

More walking followed after that. Chris hadn't picked the right mountain on their first try - how could they? There were dozens. So they walked. It was only a matter of time, after all.

Twilight came and went, and another dawn rose upon the world before Chris found their target. Atop a rocky platform was the scaly creature's enormous frame.

A dragon.

Yes. Chris' last shell had been that of a true, full dragon. It once looked majestic - aquamarine scales covering its tough hide, four glimmering horns spiralling down next to its majestic skull. The best was full of power and it was by far the best shell Chris had crafted until then.

And now it was a shell of its former self.

The flesh sloughed off its bones. The scales were broken and torn open. Its muscles revealed, and half its face a grimace of festering flesh and bones revealed to the world. All majesty was gone from the slumbering usurper - a flesh eating, parasitic fungus.

It had burrowed deep into the flesh of what once was a part of Chris. Had stripped away their autonomy, stripped away what made it *them*. Now, they puppeteered what remained of the dragon, mocking the world as a ruler of the spires. And today, they'd be buried.

With a steadying breath, and a calm heart, Chris stepped forward.

The beast cracked open the one of its eyes that still had a lid and huffed, at first. A simple display of indignation. Some vestigial pride lingered within the bones of the dragon, and the fungus mimicked that, too. It didn't replace the original brain, after all.

Lazily, Chris withdrew some human weapons from their inventory. They hadn't brought much. Only what was necessary. Knives, suited for a butcher rather than a fighter.

Calmly, and without any malice, Chris spoke. "Come. Let me lay you to rest, old friend. Old self."

The dragon roared in reply. It was earth shatteringly loud, the stone cracking around them, and Chris' human ears popped. But their other shells were unshaken, and the battle began.

Water flew forth from the human shell. The leshi grew claws, and tossed seeds, which instantly popped open as vines spread over the plateau. The rock hound manipulated the earth, driving spikes against the dragon's thick hide.

This fully roused the creature from its sleep. Chris' past self spread its tattered wings - ones it would never be able to fly on, anymore - and roared again. Its massive tail smashed through the spikes, even though a few dug chunks out from its flesh.

Vines wrapped around it, and broke. Water slammed into its scales, peeling them off and breaking skin, but the furrow it carved was nothing but a flesh wound. A tiny mark, revealing streaks of mold and clouds of spores.

Chris stopped breathing, then. Their human shell was rather likely to get infected by the spores, after all. Not that it mattered, though. Chris smiled, still. So many talents. So much they could see and feel.

The life thumping through those vines. The way the rocks shifted to create divots in pressure. It was an open world to them. Barely a second had passed, and already Chris had learned so much, their techniques growing.

[Life Manipulation has reached (High)!]

In the span of a single breath, Chris improved by leaps and bounds. Right now, they were a [Prodigy] and a [Genius] and spreading their [Precipitous Wings]. They grinned, and water turned to ice at their back.

Glacial feathers sprouted from their shoulders, and with a flap of their wings, Chris' bodies escaped a dragon's breath.

Aquamarine. Scale colour often indicated a dragon's affiliated element. That of aquamarine was raw magic.

Mana, massive amounts of it, tore through the mountain. Rocks disintegrated into dust, then nothingness. Mountains shattered in the breath's path, and thousands of lower critters died. Only hundreds of meters later did the ray of pure, aquamarine mana finally end, having carved a smooth hole through the landscape.

The fungus infested corpse choked on its own breath, though, and more attacks landed on it. Foul skin and rotten flesh was carved away, peeled aside bit by bit. Every inch of flesh was taken apart, dissected.

Butcher's knives and wild claws tore into the thing. Water and wind, vines and rock slammed into the dragon's body. Its vestigial instincts made it fight, whipping its tail, slamming into Chris.

[Stoney Constitution has reached (High)!]

But they survived. Understood. Dissected the thing's moves, learnt from each and every thing that happened. They [Adapted]. As they always did. As they always would. Their past was the past, and it was time to lay it to rest.

Flying far away, Chris took a steadying breath. None of the fungus entered their lungs, of that they made sure. Then, once their human shell was ready again, they dove forward.

It felt symbolic, really. A beacon of their new life finally cutting the last remains of the old one down. Regrets chopped to bits in the face of the support of their new friends. Chris smiled.

Cleavers fell upon the dragon's skull, carving through its middle, smashing apart its jaw and making its breath unusable. A second strike blinded the usurper, and their other shells dove in, digging claws and teeth into its hide. Chris fought, and fought, and fought.

And they slaughtered their past.

At the end, that was what they were there for, and that was what they did. Their heart calmed, and they did what needed to be done.

The dragon fell when its brain was cut, and its tendons severed. There was nothing there for the fungus to puppeteer anymore. The muscles gave out, and no instincts remained. It was done.

Only then, did Chris breathe another deep breath - with a filter over their mouth, of course - and truly smile. It was done. Almost.

They grabbed the corpse, and all the bits of flesh that had been thrown aside during the fight, and they picked it up, and then walked down the mountain.

This time, with the dragon in tow, nothing attacked them.

Hours passed, until they were at the foot of the mountain, in the desert, and then, they opened their inventory again.

They pulled out a shovel.

It was a simple, steel tool, without much craftsmanship. But it was made by Chris themselves. Each burial deserved respect. Each past life lived deserved effort in the new one. Honor, even. So each burial meant making a new shovel.

Chris shovelled for a long while, another full day, before it was one. A giant hole in the sand that the skeletal remains of the dragon were laid into. Then they shovelled it closed.

A mound of sand was all that remained of that life. Chris put the shovel back inside their inventory. With their three shells, they stood before the grave. Chris took a deep breath, and remained silent for a little while. They mourned. They'd grieved, already, and now they mourned a little again.

And then, after a minute passed by, Chris moved.

They opened their inventory again, and prepared to open the biggest secret of the triz-adu.

Slowly, gingerly, Chris pulled out a creature. It was an unmoving boy, fiery red streaks of hair, blackened bones and dark armor, an enormous skeletal frame. It was grafted from darkness and fire.

The triz-adu weren't limited to possessing three bodies. They never had been. It wasn't impossible to control more shells. In fact, Chris could probably manage... maybe around a dozen, as they were now. Three was simply... appropriate. The most comfortable.

But laying a past life wasn't about comfort, it was about closure. Each triz-adu went through it. Crafting a *gravetender*.

A shell made to burn past ones. Chris breathed, and slipped into theirs.

Flames ignited, and the fiery hair waved in the air like strands of liquid magma. This was, by far, Chris' most powerful *current* shell. It was far beyond the dragon. The amount of power it needed was so much that they usually only used it for burials, but by now? They could most likely sustain it for longer than that.

But they didn't. It was a gravetender. And the ritual of closure mattered.

The shovel was tossed atop the mound of sand. It was to be buried with the dragon. Then, Chris stepped back as a human, and a leshi, and a rockhound. Chris stepped forward as a gravetender.

They raised their hand. Slowly, reverently. A long second passed.

Fire reigned.

It was a torrent of unbelievable, scorching heat. The flames were so bright they went beyond red and straight to white, incinerating every grain of sand, first to glass, and then evaporating, breaking down into atoms.

At the end, all that was left was a *crater*.

The corpse, a past of of Chris', had been turned to less than ash, vaporized and forever disposed of. No more spores. No more regret. Chris, the gravetender, lowered their arm. Chris, the leshi, kneeled in respect. Chris, the rockhound, whimpered silently. Chris, the human, cried.

Chris, the triz-adu... mourned, and grieved, and lived.

They left their gravetender shell, turning it back into a lifeless husk of basalt and skeletal darkness. Then, it went back into their inventory. The desert would cover the crater with sand again, soon enough.

Another deep, steadying breath. What a lovely lesson of Fio's that was.

Chris looked to the sun in the sky, and felt closure. For a few more long, long seconds, they basked in the sunlight.

Then, they turned around, and walked back towards Inu.