

VETERAN OF THE WASTES

Blood matted the cuff of the man's pant leg, as he limped along, moving with a strength that belied the haggard look on his face. He stoically ignored each passerby, as they stared, then hurried away.

Always with the plague victim treatment.

He winced as he pulled himself up the stone steps and knocked at the back door of the doctor's simple home. A riveted igloo, the dwelling did not have the usual electric fence other homes required. The owner, Doctor Harvey, had no gardens or livestock to protect. As the leading medical man of Helix, his service was all he needed to earn his rations.

The bleeding man waited. He heard the raised voice of the doctor through the door, "Rebecca that had better not be you. You still have a whole month before that baby comes. I know you're—" a freckled, middle-aged man, opened the door and paused at the sight of his visitor's pale face. "—worried," the doctor finished his outburst. He grinned. "Maazer Basilisk."

"Doctor Harvey." The wanderer stumbled into the small, curved kitchen and settled himself in at the table.

“Who is this barging in here, all soaked in blood?” The pear-shaped nurse said eyeing the man like he was something the cat drug in.

“This is Maazer Basilisk. He’s made of steel and sinew.” Harvey clapped him on the shoulder. The patient grunted. “He isn’t the biggest guy around, but he’s got the biggest presence, you’ll ever see. Don’t get on his bad side, he won’t hesitate to knock some teeth out if he thought it would do any good.”

The nurse harrumphed, “Don’t give him the right to come in the back door. We see patients in the exam room. Not the kitchen,” as she went back to the clinic.

The doctor shouted, “I don’t need your attitude, Phoebe. And get back in here, I’ll need your help.”

“Always someone special, always an emergency. I swear if I ever—.”

“Phoebe, pretty please?”

“Pretty please, Phoebe. Get me the bandages, Phoebe. Stop the attitude, Phoebe,” she muttered, as she scrubbed her practiced hands at the sink.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you in here, all bloodied up.”

Maazer humored him with a weak smile, his eyes closed.

The nurse helped remove his leather duster and rolled up his shirt sleeve, in order to insert an IV into his arm. The doctor was eager to chat, once the color had gradually returned to the wanderer’s face.

He was glad to see his adventurous friend despite his infrequent, and mostly self-serving, visits. Not only did he enjoy Maazer's visits, but he always looked forward to seeing the better half of the duo. The dynamic raven-haired beauty that was Madalynn Dove, Maazer's partner. No power source in Helix could light up a room the way she did, and few were more dangerous.

"Where's my girlfriend? I'm surprised the charming Madalynn's not hovering over you, with an injury like this."

"She won't be coming," Maazer replied in a cold and tired tone, opening his eyes momentarily. The doctor swallowed his disappointment. Silence followed. Harvey tried to remember ever seeing one without the other. A few moments passed, before the significance of her absence sunk in. Madalynn Dove wasn't off running errands. She would never come.

"What happened?"

Maazer gave no response.

"Is Madalynn dead?"

Maazer swallowed, nodding once. Doctor Harvey sat back.

The silence was deafening.

The nurse busied herself, organizing the already clean linens, so as not to intrude. Grief sucked the air from the room. When Doctor Harvey looked up to his face, Maazer appeared to be asleep. The doctor was momentarily grateful; he was at a loss as to what to say, how to comfort someone like Maazer.

In his unconscious state, some of the naked emotion began to show in the creases around the man's eyes and lips. He seemed much older.

With the wound still calling for attention, Doctor Harvey couldn't wait much longer. He lifted his patient's right arm carefully and traced his finger along Maazer's skin.

Each wanderer had the unique and alien companionship of a symbiote that provided them with the ability to survive the toxicity of the wastes. Doctor Harvey fantasized about the day he would be able to study one. At the doctor's touch, Maazer's eyes snapped open and he yanked his arm away.

Sitting up, he pulled out the IV, muttering, "Thanks for the fill-up, I was exposed to some high toxin levels."

Harvey sat back. Maazer tried to sit up, but the doctor knew just the right place to apply pressure to keep him in the chair. The wanderer yelped and shot daggers with his eyes.

"Sit," Harvey challenged, and in a softer tone, "Please... we need to stop the bleeding on your leg. Your symbiote in combination with the painkillers might make you feel superhuman, but you're still mortal. You've been wounded in more ways than I even know." Harvey paused, waiting for a reply, but none came.

"Maazer, you're my friend," the doctor stated. "Maazer?"

"What?" he hissed.

“We are fixing that leg.”

Maazer glared. Finally, he gave in and allowed them to move him to the recliner in the exam room.

Together, the doctor and nurse gently cut the blood-soaked fabric from his leg. Turning him to his side, they revealed a deep gash with ragged edges. Both Doctor Harvey and the nurse let out a hiss at the sight.

“I don’t know how, but your hamstring seems intact. Suppose we should start with a gel coating to stifle the bleeding and stifle the pain,” Doctor Harvey said to the nurse.

As a cool, tingling sensation gradually covered the wound, Maazer let out a sigh. He could feel pressure from the prodding, but the pain was gone.

“Old Man, if you weren’t a wanderer, you would’ve snapped this femur the second you put weight on it. You’re tough as nails.”

Doctor Harvey’s voice faded as Maazer drifted toward unconsciousness. Finally, the vibration from the drilling of his bone woke him.

“Hand me the hernia mesh,” Doctor Harvey requested with an outstretched hand. The nurse and doctor delicately inserted a thin artificial layer of skin. The mesh was a sort of patch that held the fleshy bits in place while allowing the damaged skin to stitch together. Another thin gel coating was applied across the gooey attempt to reconstruct the leg.

“You had a large bone shard break away from your femur, I had to reattach it with a couple screws. I

think you were with us for the rest of it.”

Maazer sat up and stretched.

“Much appreciated, Doc,” Maazer said. He slowly stood. The nurse helped him back into his worn leather duster.

“You’re just going to stroll—well hobble, on out of here aren’t you? Wanderer wonders never cease,” the doctor said.

“I’ve got wandering to do.”

“You’re going to call a SAW Ceremony because Madalynn’s gone,” Harvey stated as a matter of fact. His ability to be tactful was usually lacking. Maazer looked at the doctor and nodded curtly, his face long, tired, and expressionless.

“Got no choice. We all gotta’ do what we gotta’ do.”

“Best graduation ceremony in the west.” The wanderer shook his head. “Come watch their faces when that first name is called. Come stare at the families, while they give up their children,” he harrumphed. “Only two wanderers will be called, and no one will want it to be them, but someone’s got to do it,” Maazer growled. Harvey made a face. “No one volunteers to be a wanderer.” Maazer hopped carefully on his whole leg and slipped on his pack.

“I know the timing is all wrong,” the Doctor said. “But when are you going to give me a chance to study those *things*?”

“Just *things*, are they? Those *things*, are the reason we survive. The reason anyone in this forsaken town survives, I don’t have time for...”

The wanderer opened the back door. “Some other wanderer might give you a chance to study ‘em, to poke around in what you don’t understand, but it ain’t me. I didn’t choose this.”

“Forget I asked. Not now, not that... Look, I’m sorry. You will be the best mentor anyone could ask for. Just go easy on ‘em, the ones you pick, okay?”



Maazer Basilisk felt the eyes of the curious homesteaders peeking through the windows in the evening light. When he was chosen years ago, he felt the sting of their disassociation. Now they were the least of his concerns. He wished the same agent that numbed his leg would work on his mind. He raised a hand in greeting to the tower guards, as he hobbled through the wrought iron gate of the city. He could hear the sizzle of the spiked electric fence as the top portion reconnected. Gaps in the iron palisade provided insulation to the bottom half to prevent it being electrified.

Bolves, dark hulking bear-wolf creatures, whose shoulder stood as high as a man, sniffed the air. Though they caught the scent of Maazer’s blood, they remained loyally, at the bottom of the metal look-out tower, where their young masters kept watch.

The trip to the Wanderers’ base took longer than normal. At the foot of the fortress, Maazer brought out a massive wreath of keys and fumbled for the one that would open the entry door. Once inside, he removed

his duster and boots, with some difficulty. What was left of his pants had to be cut free. He wrapped his freshly patched thigh with a clean towel and wobbled into his bedroom and dug through his desk for food. Energy would help the healing process.

Maazer bit into a dense ration bar and held it between his teeth. He used his now free hand to rifle through the desk. Finding an earbud, he pressed it to his ear, suppressing a yawn. The meal bar dropped to the floor. Maazer grumbled and touched a large data screen. It flickered to life with the insignia of a blazing green hydra. The last thing he felt like doing was making a report, but he carried the mantle of leadership.

“This is Maazer Basilisk reporting on the trip to Silent Crossing. It was a success. The outpost is fully supplied. I am wounded, nothing that won’t heal in a few days. Madalynn... I... I lost her.” He stuttered the last sentence. He paused for a moment, his head bowed. He faced the screen again. “I will be out of contact for the next couple days while I sleep it off. I will need to return to the Grove to retrieve the symbiotes. I will make a full report later. Madalynn Dove is dead. I have requested an early SAW to take new wanderers from this year’s Mill. Maazer out.” He swiped the screen and it went dark. He removed the earpiece and dropped it into a drawer.

Still compressing his wound, Maazer hopped away from the desk, lurched to his bed and collapsed on the worn, faded quilt. He could summon no words to describe the shock nor the depth of grief that had been

crashing over him in angry waves. Doctor Harvey was right; he wouldn't have made it without his sym. At the moment, he'd rather be fighting for his life than enduring the emptiness of the sanctuary without Madalynn Dove.

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