

Final Breath
By Angelus

Naraku had tasked the Saimyosho with following a pair of strange creatures that had appeared in his territory almost a week ago. Both creatures had a strange appearance, leading him to believe they were full blooded demons, but strangely, neither gave off the aura he expected if that was the case. The reports from the Saimyosho hornets painted a slow picture. The bigger beast had arrived first, appearing as if from nowhere in a forest within his domain around Mount Hakurei. The second was a much smaller biped, almost human in appearance, but with long, sharp ears and a lengthy tail.

The larger beast, a quadruped, had a beast-level intelligence. It fled from where it appeared and spent its days hunting, eating, and sleeping. The smaller biped followed the bigger beast, as though tracking it. Occasionally it muttered to itself in an intelligible language, and from that the Saimyosho were able to report that its name was Zanna.

Naraku tapped his fingers against the floor as he sat cross legged in his hideout. His three lizard-like tails swayed behind him as he listened to the buzz of the Saimyosho's latest report. "Mmh, I see. So that Zanna was last spotted confronting the beast they were hunting?" he asked, and the hornets buzzed an affirmative.

They continued, and a brief flicker of genuine interest crossed Naraku's face. "Zanna turned into a larger beast to confront their prey? But they don't give off any demonic aura at all hmm? Interesting..." He snapped his fingers. "I'm sending a lesser demon to interfere in their fight. Watch it and let me know how things play out."

For a while, there was silence, and Naraku sat in motionless meditation as he awaited another report. Presently, the Saimyosho returned. "So," Naraku began, "the beast and demon were both killed but Zanna was mortally wounded in combating them both. Good. If either of them were demons I might have use of them, but as it is, both corpses would be useless."

Naraku furrowed his brow and bit his tongue as a sudden thought occurred to him. "That being said. A monster that can fight a demon, take a more human guise, and that lacks demonic presence... They could make a useful weapon for a time." He got to his feet and straightened his blue robes, and palmed a shard of the Shikon Jewel. "Or at least an amusing pet, like that Kagura. Lead me to them."

Zanna knew they were losing blood, and fast. Their consciousness was fading as they struggled to remain awake as blood poured from the lacerations on their chest and belly, soaking their clothes, and the ground. Thinking they could stem the blood loss by cauterizing some of the gashes, they tried to ignite a flame around their trembling hand, but they just didn't have the energy to summon a flame.

Two large, monstrous bodies lay nearby. One was sliced open, guts spilling out, and the other had been burned to a crisp. The forest around them was broken, with felled trees and scorch marks carving out a clearing in the canopy. The escaped monster they were following had been tough, but nothing they couldn't handle. It was the other monster showing up that had

tipped the tables and left Zanna barely clinging to life. They were on the verge of blacking out, breathing ragged and shallow as they tried to crawl away, to find someone to call out to before it was too late.

"You don't look like you'll last much longer." A cold, gravelly voice caught Zanna's ears. Their thoughts jolted alert, though they could still barely move, and couldn't see who was speaking.

"H-help... please..." Zanna could barely beg. Their last breath drew near.

"Of course, I couldn't just leave you like this. Though I will be expecting a favor in return. I can't just save a stranger's life for free." Naraku barely masked his intentions as he opened his hand, revealing the glowing Shikon Jewel shard. With a clawed hand, he pressed the shard into Zanna's neck, making them gag as they felt their throat pieced with what felt like a large splinter of rock.

"Stop..! What are you, hrkk!" Zanna gagged, and coughed up a mouthful of blood that covered their face.

"Now now, relax, you'll feel better in a moment." Naraku stood back as the jewel shard sank into Zanna's neck, the glow disappearing under the skin.

Zanna's body went limp and still for a moment, and then, they gasped, filling their lungs with air and sitting upright, head swiveling in a panic. They patted down their torso, trying to get a grasp on things. Their body armor was torn in several places by huge claws, and still wet with blood, but the wounds on their body were healed completely. Their hand leaped to their heart, and they could feel its rapid, panicked beating that matched their panting breaths. Slowly, they stood up, legs still shaky. A hand grabbed them around one arm and lifted them up, and Zanna turned and finally saw Naraku.

He was a tall man, or something like a man, with a sharply-featured face and somewhat ragged black hair that fell to his waist, though Zanna could tell by the three tails he had that he wasn't likely human. Naraku was also covered in armor that looked to be carved from bone, and it covered his torso and arms, along with some pauldron-like protrusions.

"Thank you. Who are you? How did you do that? I was knocking on death's door..." Zanna said as they put a hand to their neck and rubbed it where they had felt that small, sharp stab just before suddenly reviving.

"I am Naraku. All I did was simple bit of magic. I'd be happy to explain it when we're in a safer location." Naraku said, his voice still cold. "May I know the name of the life I've saved?" he asked.

"Z-Zanna. I'm Zanna." They looked back to the body of the demon they had been forced to burn. Conventional weapons hadn't been very effective against it. "Safer would be nice right about now."

"Indeed. Demons roam these lands all hours of the day. It seems you were particularly unlucky to be caught by one right at the edge of safety." Naraku began to walk towards the mountain that Zanna could glimpse through the forest clearing they had accidentally made.

"What do you mean by that?" Zanna asked as they followed. There was always so much to learn about the new worlds they visited.

"We are at the base of Mount Hakurei. It is a sacred mountain with the power to repel demons. The closer we get to its peak, the stronger the effect is. If you had been just a few

minutes closer to the mountain, it is possible the that demon would not have been able to attack you.” But a stronger demon would have faired just fine, and Naraku had plenty to expend.

“That thing was a demon?”

Naraku kept walking, but Zanna noticed an odd twitch of his tails at that question. “An odd question. Anyone from around these parts can tell a demon from wildlife, even the commoners.”

Zanna clenched their jaw. Crap.

“But,” Naraku didn’t give them a chance to respond. “I would have thought you a demon, with that long tail and odd clothes. If you’re not, then you’re clearly from elsewhere.”

Zanna struggled to think of what to ask next, but one question seemed more important than the others. “If you thought I might be a demon because of my tail, does that mean that you-”

“A half demon, actually,” Naraku didn’t wait for them to finish their question he knew was coming. “I felt I might be saving one of my own.”

“But, didn’t you say demons can’t approach that mountain?”

A few moments passed in silence as the underbrush crunched under their feet. “The stronger the demon, the deeper they can go without being purified. They are simply weakened. My demon half is strong, and my human half gives me some additional resistance to the barrier’s purifying effects. Enough to lead you to safety.”

“I see. Do you live nearby then?” The path grew more steep as they approached the mountain.

“I do. Humans aren’t too friendly to half-demons, so I live alone. Neither humans nor demons will bother you at my home.” Naraku turned suddenly and approached a steep incline, but he didn’t break his step. As Zanna watched, he disappeared into the mountain, as though walking through the rock.

Zanna followed, easily stepping through the illusory wall and into a dim cavern that led deeper into the mountain. “Ah, sure. I was hoping to head home soon, though. Not to be ungrateful.” Zanna said, tail whipping anxiously.

“I was hoping to ask some questions about who and what you are, if that’s alright. I did ask a favor of you before helping you.” Naraku spoke very matter-of-factly.

Zanna got the feeling that refusing wasn’t an option. “Ah, sure. If that’s the favor, I don’t mind. I’ll accompany you and stay a while.”

Naraku smirked, though Zanna couldn’t see. If everything went his way, Zanna would be staying for more than just a while.

The cave opened up to a large shrine that obviously doubled as Naraku’s current home. Torches lit the interior, and warmed the otherwise chill cavern air. Naraku led the way up the stairs and slid the door open, allowing Zanna to pass inside before he closed the door behind him.

He took a seat on a mat on the floor, and seeing nowhere else to sit, Zanna took a seat on the floor across from him. Naraku’s tails curled into his lap, and he fixed his gaze on his guest. “So, you can become quite the beast I’m told, with control over fire no less.”

Zanna leaned away. “Wait. How do you know that?”

"I had my Saimyosho hornets watching you from the moment you arrived. You were almost amusing, but I didn't think much of you until you killed my demon. Very impressive, for whatever you are." A slight but cruel smile lifted the corners of Naraku's mouth.

"Y-your demon?" Zanna bristled as things started to come together. "You try to kill me and then save me?" Zanna got to their feet. The red rings around their arms and tail started to glow. "Why? What do you want?"

"Want?" Naraku chuckled. "I already have what I want. A monster from another world. You're quite the trophy, and you might even be useful."

"Hell no. Whatever game you're up to here, give it up. You can't-erk!"

In the span of a blink, Naraku had stood and lunged, grabbing Zanna by the neck. His clawed fingers pinched the front of their throat, and a dull glow shone between his fingers as he squeezed the jewel shard embedded in Zanna's throat. "If there was a game, it was over before you even started. The jewel fragment I planted in your neck is the only thing keeping you alive right now." He squeezed.

Every injury that Zanna thought had healed suddenly burned like it was fresh, making them cry out in pain.

"You said yourself that you were on death's doorstep, and you were right. All I did was freeze your last breath inside your body. If I remove this jewel shard, you'll expire in a single breath." He released his grip, and Zanna staggered backward, choking. "If you want to stay alive, you'll do as you are told."

"You can't... urgh... Can't be serious..." Zanna held their throat, catching their breath. They felt like puking from how terrible the pain had been.

"Oh? You doubt me? Fine." There was a sound like crunching bone, and the bone armor that Naraku wore produced an ivory dagger that he threw to the floor at Zanna's feet. "If you don't believe me, then go ahead. Cut the jewel out and flee."

Zanna kicked the knife back to Naraku without hesitation, and it spun across the floor and stopped at his feet. It wasn't a risk they could take, not as long as Naraku was willing to let them live. There had to be a way around this. Somehow.

"I didn't think so. You learn your place fast." Naraku crushed the dagger into dust under his foot.

"So... What will you have me do?" Zanna asked, still on edge.

"I'll have you serve as my personal bodyguard. In time. First I need to know I can trust you. Come closer." Naraku ordered.

Begrudgingly, Zanna obeyed, snarling all the while.

As soon as they were in arm's reach of Naraku, he plunged his arm into their chest and pulled out Zanna's heart without the slightest change of expression on his face. Zanna felt pain, and reeled back, and found themselves staring at their own beating heart in Naraku's hand. Their face twisted with pain and confusion.

"I told you," Naraku's voice was steady as always. "The Shikon Jewel shard in your neck is keeping you alive. Even if you don't have a heart, your body won't stop. That being said, your heart needs to be intact." He gave their heart a gentle squeeze, and Zanna gasped, clutching their chest and falling to their knees in pain. "That means, if you disobey me, I can kill you at any time, at any distance. My Saimyosho will watch you, and through pain, you will learn

obedience.” He let up, and Zanna was able to catch their breath. The hole in their chest had already closed up.

Zanna spit a mouthful of blood onto the floor and glared at Naraku. “You’re a monster.”

“No, I’m a half demon, and soon I’ll be a full demon whom none can challenge.” He pointed to the cave exit with an outstretched arm. “Go and patrol the base of the mountain and learn about the world you will now call home. When you have walked it twice over, you will return to me.”

“Fine.” Zanna huffed, but obeyed, not wanting to experience having their disembodied heart squeezed again. Two loops around Mount Hakurei would likely take a few days they guessed, judging by the size of it as they approached. They hoped they could find someone, or figure out something to get them out of this so they could get home. For now, they knew they had to get used to living in a world full of demons, and monsters like Naraku.