

Dealing

A week had passed since Zach found out that Ryun was in the Tournament City. A week that he had spent trying not to think about the fact that the monster that had killed his wife and daughter was nearby and that he had decided not to do anything about it. Naha had left on a mission, or rather Nyathulla had. A mission from which she wouldn't return. Naha would come back in a different body and be assigned as his new partner. The timing of it was... not the most opportune. Zach was not quite sure what to do. He was... lost.

He wasn't stupid, he was pretty sure that the Warden Commander had ordered this on purpose. She wanted him alone, to see what he would do. Would he change his mind and go after Ryun. Zach had tried not to think about it. He practiced with his team, working on tactics for their future matches. But now, he found that he just couldn't take staying in the city any longer. He needed to get out, to find a place away from everything to just think.

So he made his way out of the Tournament City, and just wandered aimlessly. He had always been someone who took his time thinking about things. Just because he had made a decision, it did not mean that he had thought everything about it through. There were greater implications that he needed to go through himself. Naha was... she was great, she anchored him in a way that he had lacked for a long time. But she couldn't help him now, this was something that he needed to do by himself.

When he had first arrived in the Infinite Realm, he had taken the time to learn as much about his new circumstances before making any decisions. He spent time with the adventuring team, learning about the world and the best way for him to learn more about it. When he had the opportunity to join the Wardens he did so, because it was a way to gain more knowledge with greater ease. He had then spent months in the library, in training, months during which he learned more about the Framework and the powers that it provided. Only after he felt that he knew enough did he level. Since then, he had tried to gain as much power as he possibly could, in as short of a period

of time as he could. Because he needed to be strong. Strong enough so that he could keep Naha safe, so that he could stop her if their attempts at helping her failed. Strong enough so that he would never need to watch people around him die without him being able to protect them. Strong enough so that he could stop the World Ender.

And now, he had found him. The monster that had killed the Earth, that had killed his family and friends. And he couldn't go after him, not without risking a death toll that rivaled that of Earth. He couldn't do that, watch innocent people die just so that he could have his revenge. No matter what he had promised, the weight of his promise was nowhere near equal that of innocent lives.

So, he found himself wandering around the rocky terrain, alone, with only the moon shining from high above as his companion. He had made mistakes, he knew that. He wasn't perfect, he had never been nor had he ever claimed to be. The only thing he had wanted to do was protect people from monsters.

He had gotten to do that in the Infinite Realm, and it had helped him. He hadn't realized just how much darkness had seeped inside of him on Earth, not until he saw the faces of the children he and Naha had rescued. Not until he had seen the grateful look in Gen's eyes as he saved her from being sacrificed. That was what he had always been meant to do.

He glanced at his hand, it felt and looked like normal, except for its color. It took on the color of the active form. Currently that was the pale green of the **Lesser Wind Aspect**. He could control the wind around him without summoning its blade form. He had experimented with his hand a lot since he gained it. He could switch forms nearly instantaneously and could use some of the forms abilities without needing the blade form. It was a powerful weapon, perhaps the most powerful weapon in his arsenal. And it was a constant reminder of his failing. It felt like a real arm, but it was not. His own arm was gone, as was the basis of the **Shade Reaver**—Mistral, his awakened weapon. Destroyed, killed—if an awakened weapon can be killed, by a being that made anything Zach had ever seen before pail in comparison. Zach had made a mistake by trusting it, he had been naive. He had found a living, thinking monster inside the dungeon, a shade imprisoned, and he had pitied

it. He had thought that mutual aid would be enough for him to honor their deal, and perhaps it was. The Yeti had honored their agreement, only it had done so in its own way.

It was a monster that was Zach's responsibility, something that he himself had set into motion by releasing it. He was aware that whatever the Yeti does, will ultimately be his fault. It was one of the reasons why he needed to get even stronger. Because in the end, he only wanted to protect people. And to do that, he needed to be stronger than everybody else.

Now, he felt lost. For so long, finding Ryun had been his main goal. The reason why he pushed himself. Now... he didn't know how to live in a world where someone he had seen only as a monster ran free. And yet, Ryun did not act like he had on Earth. That much was clear. It made him question everything, but ultimately he was not responsible for Ryun's turn, nor the things that he did. He had stood in his way, trying and failing to protect the innocents. And if Ryun turned to his old ways again, he would be there once more, standing between the monster and the people. It was why he needed to get stronger.

He stopped as he reached a canyon cliff, beyond it was darkness, but with his **|Greater Night Vision|** he could see something down below. The sound of running water confirmed to him that there was a river flowing at bottom of the canyon. He sat down on the edge, and closed his eyes, letting the sound of the river fill his mind. It was soothing, relaxing, and he hadn't been relaxed in a long while.

He had skills that kept his mind whole, that prevented outside interference. His **|Clear Mind|** evolved from **|Mind Resistance|** protected him from any intrusive powers. His **Enlightened** perk did the same thing, it meant that such powers would be incredibly weak against him. But while his mind was protected from the outside, his perks and skills did little to protect him from things that came from within.

He settled and pushed his will into his skill, **|Greater Meditation|**. A kind of trance overcame him, and he started sorting through his own feelings, trying to untangle the mess of emotion that had started to fill his mind. It was clear that most of his issues stemmed from seeing Ryun again. He had prepared himself for finding him again, of course he had. But he

hadn't even entertained the thought that he would find something other than a monster. And why would he? He had tried to reason with Ryun dozens of times, he had pleaded, he had raged, he had fought, and he had cursed him. Nothing had moved the monster that he had become. Yet something in the Infinite Realm had changed things, and instead of the monster he found someone... someone else.

He put that out of his mind. His decision was made, now he needed to center himself again. To decide on what it was that he wanted to do. Naha's words echoed through his head.

“Move forward, but be better than we were yesterday.”

It was a simple thing, to take a step forward, one at a time. But sometimes, it was the hardest thing in the world. Both of them wanted to protect people, to shelter them from the horrors that the Infinite Realm inflicted upon them.

I will protect the innocent, always.

Something about those words, spoke to in his mind for his own benefit, felt right. It was as if they resonated within him. As if... he didn't know how to describe the feeling. He felt something similar to what happened when he pushed his skills to evolve, when he grasped at an understanding deep inside and forced it on the world. Only this was as if he was pushing an understanding on himself, not outside.

To protect people felt right. He hadn't always done that, he had stood aside, he had failed. But a value held within was something one aspired to, always. Even when one failed, when things got rough and hard, when one wanted to give everything up. Zach had come to that point once on Earth, and he knew that he would come to that point again. He would fail.

I will fail, but I will never stop trying to do good.

Another piece clicked into place, and he sighed. There was something inside of him that wanted more, but Zach felt his meditation skill slip and his body sag with exhaustion. He sat on the ground, breathing deeply and feeling as if his muscles had been put through a marathon. He had done something; he just didn't know exactly what.

I will protect the innocent, always.

I will fail, but I will never stop trying to do good.

Simple words, idealistic perhaps. But good foundations for the future. For a guiding light in this darkness. He remembered what Yirrel had told him, what she wanted from him and Naha. For them to stand between the ordinary people and things in the dark that wanted to harm them. It was a goal worth having, and he would do all in his power to achieve it in truth.

He turned his eyes to the sky and looked at the full moon. Letting all his thoughts bleed away from his mind. The moon in the Infinite Realm was beautiful, strange, but beautiful. It wasn't often that Zach was reminded of the beauty of this reality. It was moments like these that made life worth living. He only wished that Naha was here so that he could share it with her.

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Less than an hour after he returned to the Warden headquarters on the next day, Bera, the Warden Commander's assistant found him. With little explanation she had him follow her. Bera led him through the corridors and then beneath the ground, to a room that looked very familiar to him. Not because he had ever been in it, but because it was built in a similar way as one he had seen before—Gemheart's Vault.

He recognized what it was immediately, an access point to something else. The guards in the room bowed to Bera as she approached the control mechanism and turned the wheel around. The Vault entrance was a large door made with blue stone, with arrays surrounding it. A loud sound of rolling stone filled the room, then the door slid open, and he saw a familiar curtain of light. An entrance to the Vault.

The Wardens, it seemed, had a single massive spatial place just like Gemheart. A spatial space that they could access remotely, as long as they built the access gate somewhere. He still didn't know how exactly they made sure that someone else couldn't get in, and he doubted that he would learn that anytime soon.

Bera motioned for him to follow and they entered, they found themselves in what appeared to be a library. The ceiling was low, but everywhere he looked there were rows and rows of shelves filled with books, tomes, and scrolls.

She took a step forward and then turned to look at him.

"I assume that you didn't lie when you updated your information with the Citadel?" She asked him.

Zach blinked, but then shook his head. "No, I didn't." He had updated his Class progression for the records.

"Good," she said and started walking in between the bookshelves.

They didn't walk for long before she stopped and started looking at the tomes on the shelves. She pulled out a scroll and then offered it to him.

"That holds the information about the most direct class evolution of your current one. Information about the perks you can get and what you can expect to be able to evolve that class into. It of course has what the requirements for that immortal class are. It isn't the simplest of requirements, but it is something that you should be able to achieve in a fair amount of time."

Zach blinked, then pulled the scroll open and gave it a cursory reading. The Class name was **Riftlord**, and one of the requirements was that he visit certain planes. Every base Element plane, every base Concept plane, and every base Law plane, of at least tier 5.

"I was thinking about taking up a Class quest from the Dealmaker," Zach commented.

"You still can," Bera said. "Just like previous evolutions you get to make a choice, you currently don't meet any requirements for an immortal Class, but there is no limit to how many requirements you may meet. You will just need to choose one. Although, I would warn you that the Dealmaker quests are often lethal. Few people survive attempting them."

It looked like he wasn't forced to choose just one way. He could pick up the quest, but he didn't need to finish it.

"There are a few more different Class records here whose requirements you might meet. Unfortunately, your evolutions aren't all that common, so we don't have that many and often the records are incomplete beyond just the immortal Class, further evolutions might bring you to a wall that you will need to rely on by yourself."

Zach nodded his head as she pulled out a book and a tome from the shelves and offered them to him as well.

"Why are you sharing this knowledge with me now?" Zach asked. He knew that they kept the library in the Citadel limited to only the first few evolutions. But he had always suspected that they had more knowledge hidden somewhere.

"Because we believe you are trustworthy. Because we want you to get as strong as you possibly can. Few people in this world are truly worthy of great power. We need to be very careful with who we allow to advance, lest we allow monsters to gain power."

Zach nodded his head, he understood that all too well. He looked at the minotaress for a few seconds. He was still not quite sure what to think about her and the Warden Commander. And he felt as if any moment they could decide to come after him. He had been terrified that they would just execute Naha, but his **True Link** perk still worked, which meant that she was fine.

Finally, he thanked her, and she let him take the information out of the vault, with the promise that he doesn't show it to anyone else. She hadn't insisted on a contract, but somehow Zach knew that it was just another test. And he didn't intend to fail.

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Zach sat in his room; the information he took from the vault spread in front of him on the floor. He had a few pieces of paper where he put down his own thoughts on the Classes that he read about. There were several that were interesting; like the **Riftlord** that Bera offered him first. It was a Class

that focused greatly on movement and traveling through rifts to other planes. As well as pulling power and attacks from them.

If the information he read was true, he could expect a lot more movement perks as well as an increase of his blink limit in combat. It would also change all of his abilities; all immortal Classes did that it seemed.

The few other Classes that he found interesting were the **Exemplar** and the **Soul Warden**. Both were pretty big sidesteps from his current evolution, though. Which would mean an extensive change in his perks and abilities, which might take some getting used to. From what he read, Class evolutions were like different trees, stretching upward with some branches growing straight up staying within that tree, while others reached to the side and intersected with other trees, allowing for a change of focus. It was what Zach had done several times, now he just had a visual aid to go with it.

The Exemplar Class was more focused on physical combat, focusing on a single weapon and attaining great mastery of it. It boosted skill leveling speeds of the chosen weapon significantly, but it also seemed to have some kind of a significant drawback. The attunement seemed to have a rule, by which the Exemplar had to follow a certain code of conduct. In return, it did provide significant power in the way of perks that could deal incredible amounts of damage. Zach also already met one of the requirements, which was a perfect weapon or combat related skill.

The **Soul Warden** was completely different, in the way that it focused mostly on defense. It would also pull him back in the direction of the Ethereal, protection of the souls, his own and others. There were some offensive perks recorded thought. It would give him a lot of defense against soul damage, which could be useful. The requirement thought was... hard. He had to survive incredible soul damage, as well as fulfill certain acts in the Ethereal Realm.

In the end, he realized that he still had a lot to think about. There were a few more Classes that he needed to look over. But the more he read, the more he was sure that he would need to talk with the Dealmaker as well. These Classes were good, but Zach needed power, he needed something more. And while it would be risky, he had never shied away from danger. He

continued reading, but in the back of his mind, he had already made his decision.