

Act II - Zach

Zach watched in amazement as the elevator slowly moved down the hole in the center of the city of Dal'dvor. The elevator itself was an open platform, so they could see the city embedded in the walls of the hole all around them. And the view was spectacular. Zach hadn't seen it this up close before, and it was the most amazing thing that he had ever seen. It dwarfed anything that people on Earth had ever made, all of their achievements paled in comparison to this one thing. The hole was completely settled, a cylinder filled with buildings, homes, even parks and large balconies filled with plants that had vines falling down to the floors beneath them, creating a kind of a curtain to give privacy.

This part of the city was built in a spiral fashion. With stairs being visible and close to the surface of the wall, while there were streets carved in deep as well as more buildings. He could also see moving elevator platforms, all around the massive hole. He didn't know exactly how large it was, but it had to be several kilometers across at least.

Most of the buildings seemed to be made out of white stone, with very little added color. The light was provided by braziers that were attached to the railings of the stairs. But Zach could see that there were street lamps deeper in, as streets moved beneath the ground. There seemed to be several levels in this part of the city that Zach hadn't really been aware of. It made Dal'dvor a lot larger than he had imagined.

And they weren't even close to the bottom yet. The ride down would last for several hours. Naha and Zach sat on the seats close to the edge of the elevator platform, but a few other seats were occupied as well. Mostly by adventurers that were heading down into the Under to hunt monsters.

The Under was the area of space deep beneath the ground. It is basically a subterranean world of massive caves and caverns, with its own ecosystem. It was filled with tunnels and interconnecting cave systems, and also with monsters. There were entrances to Under all over the ground. With many caves actually leading down. The issue was that few of them were known and safe.

Monsters down in the Under were stronger than the average strength on the surface, so few people survived trying to reach it through unknown caves. Even if they somehow managed to reach the ground, they were more likely than not to end up in a part of the Under that was filled with monsters, far away from any of the cities.

Dal'dvor was one of the few cities that extended from the surface to the Under, and it had one of just a handful safe entrances to the Under itself. Zach didn't know a lot about the Under, only what Naha told him, but it did not sound like it was a safe place. At least not anywhere outside of the defended entrances.

They sat mostly in silence on their long way down. With Zach simply soaking in the sights around him. He couldn't help but wonder how long it had taken for all of this to be built.

"Less than you think," Naha's voice snapped him out of his thoughts.

"Are you reading my mind?" Zach raised an eyebrow.

He saw her eyes crinkle, which let him know that she was smiling. With her wearing Nyathulla's skin, it made it hard to tell sometimes.

"What if I am?" Her voice sounded playful, without any sign of madness in it. It sounded so much like how she used to be with him before, when he only knew her as Quell. It was always like this when she had recently sated her needs. Zach made an effort not to comment on how her mental state fluctuated, he knew that she was trying hard to change and take control of herself. And that she did all of that for him.

"Well, it isn't like I have many secrets from you," Zach shrugged, as playful as her.

He could tell that that pleased her, but she then shook her head.

"No, I am not reading your mind. I was just the same as you before. I am a Ranker too," she turned her eyes to the spiraling city scape around them. "My people had never built so much, we lived in simple huts, prowling the plains and hunting. Being more in touch with nature, when I first came here... All was alien to me."

"So your people didn't have much in the terms of technological advancements?"

Naha shook her head. “No, in a way that made it easier for us to adapt to the Framework. I have heard stories from some of the other Rankers, Cthul in particular who had taken it far harder. From what I remember of their stories, their civilization was advanced, had spread across many worlds with ships that could travel between the stars. When the Framework arrived it took all of that from them and put them back on their original world.”

Zach couldn't even imagine how they handled the arrival of the Framework. Humanity had a tough time with the loss of technology that they had, if the Cthul had been even more advanced... Well it had to have been bad.

“Still,” Zach said changing back the topic. “I can't imagine how much effort it took to build all this.”

“It took far less time and effort than you think. It only took several high tiered builders. There are people with powers that can move the earth, that can raise a building in minutes that was far sturdier than anything that mundane means could accomplish,” Naha told him.

“Really?” Zach had known that people who had high tiers of power could get incredibly powerful, but he hadn't thought too much about what non-combat paths could accomplish.

“Oh yes,” Naha answered. “Dal'dvor was built by a legendary builder. He is a High Ranker now. Weron, the Stone Shaper, and he had done it long ago. Now a days he is employed by the wealthy and powerful when they want a new keep, castle, or even a city raised quickly. He owns a faction of builders that almost exclusively caters to those on the top.”

“Huh,” Zach said. He hadn't really imagined that one could become as powerful as the High Rankers while not being combat focused. Although, there was probably a way to weaponize every type of power.

They fell into a silence again for the rest of the trip. It took them another two hours to reach the bottom, and there Zach was met with another large cavern, and a city. It wasn't as large as what was above them, and the buildings were all fairly reinforced from what he could see. He even noticed walls in the distance with high towers that reached the top of the cavern and had walls on the ceilings as well, with some kind of hanging and inversed parapet beneath it.

They walked off the platform and asked one of the guards for the directions to the Unbroken Mining Company building. The High Ranker had representative branches all over the core.

They walked briskly down the streets until they reached their destination. The building was unremarkable compared to some of the others he had seen on the way, just a simple gray stone two story building. They walked up and entered through the open doors. They stepped into what was obviously a reception area. There were tables all around them, with people sitting behind them and some in front. From what words the wind carried to his ears, he learned that most were miners that wanted to join the faction or looked to unload what they had independently mined. Zach also spotted a familiar looking board in the corner of the room where a few miners stood looking at it. It seemed that the Unbroken Mining Company had its own “bounty” board for rare materials and such. He imagined that some adventurers probably took them on. If they had people that could mine while hunting monsters they might be able to get earn more Essence.

There were four guards inside the room, and they Zach knew that their eyes were on him and Naha. Both of them wore armor and their badges openly. Zach disregarded them, they were just doing their jobs and Zach had no intention of making any trouble.

Zach headed toward one of the free tables and stopped in front of it. Behind it sat a human woman, one of the orc variant. Her skin was a deep brown with tusks peeking out of her lower lips and her curly hair falling down to her shoulders. She wore a black uniform with a crest of the company on her shoulder—a four sided diamond.

“Welcome to the Unbroken Mining Company, I am Representative Resha Larr, how may I help you today?” She asked with a smile on her face.

Zach cleared his throat and looked around, wondering if he should just say it there. Seeing no other option he answered her question.

“We are here regarding the contract,” Zach said.

“The contract board is over there,” she pointed to the corner, the smile on her face not moving but Zach could tell that she was annoyed.

Zach sighed and pulled out the piece of paper he had taken from the board in the Guild and put it on the table.

“I meant this contract,” Zach said.

The woman frowned and glanced at the paper, and then she froze, her eyes widening. “Oh, If you will come with me please,” she took them in for the first time, and noticed their badges. “Wardens.”

She led them to a back room and told them to wait in a small room. There were armchairs and couches on the one wall, but both Naha and Zach remained standing.

Barely a minute later the doors through which the woman left opened and she entered into the room followed by a group of people. The one in the lead wore a more elaborate version of the uniform that she was wearing, and he was a demasi. Behind him came a group of armored and armed people. Two were kreativean, one a human, and three ravzor, they looked more like adventurers than miners, and Zach could tell that they were strong.

“Wardens,” the demasi man greeted them. “I’ve been told that you are here because of the contract posted by our leader.”

“That is correct, it says that you require someone who can open a way into the Ethereal.”

“That is correct,” the man said. “We were unsure that we would find someone so quickly. I assume that you have such power?”

Zach nodded his head. “I do.”

The man didn’t look entirely convinced, but then he spoke again. “I am sure that you as a warden understand the need for us to check? Would you be willing to show us your power? I will be the only one to see, of course, and you many count on my discretion.”

Before Zach could respond a window popped up in his vision, a contract similar to the one that he had done with Ferrut. It said that the man would not reveal the knowledge of what Zach showed him to anyone.

Zach knew that people here were all about privacy of their screens, and he figured that at least some of their reluctance was valid. He accepted the contract and the man nodded his head.

He asked everyone to turn around and then for Zach to show him his power.

Zach went to his screens and found his **Ethereal Fissure** perk, then made it visible. The man blinked when he saw that Naha hadn’t turned

around, but then he shook his head and focused on the window in front of him.

Finally he sighed, and gestured for Zach to dismiss his window.

“Thank you,” the man said. “Such powers are rare, and we had to be sure. There are always people that want to take advantage of things. Forgive us for the intrusion. My name is Margos Ehm, and I am the administrator of this Guild house. Your power fits the requirements given by our leader.”

He gestured to the team behind him. “The Under is a dangerous place. These are our combat specialists, they will escort you through the Under to the location where we need the breach opened quickly.”

One of the kracean stepped forward and put his hand out. “I am Team Leader Kishua,” he said as Zach shook his hand. He then shook Naha’s. “Thank you for coming, I know that many would’ve chosen not to. Come, we must get underway as soon as possible. Every moment is of importance.”

“Of course,” Zach said and all of them rushed out of the room and then the Guild house.

They jogged down the streets, heading to the wall that was built outside a large tunnel. Zach could see things that looked like cannons on top of the walls, and guards with bows and arrows held ready.

As Kishua led them forward the Guard noticed them and then yelled for the gate to be opened. Their eight people group left through the gates without stopping. Zach noticed burn marks and craters at the tunnel entrance, suggesting that the city was attacked regularly.

“Will we encounter any monsters on the way?” Zach asked.

“Possibly, their last attempt to breach the wall was recent, and adventurers patrol these tunnels fairly often. We should be clear, but the Under is never safe.”

After that they all remained quiet and focused on running. The pace they set was brisk, but not too much so. He could tell that the six combat specialists were using powers to monitor their surroundings. Zach and Naha were doing the same.

The wind was bringing in strange noises to his ears from the distance, things that he couldn’t identify. The noise was eerie, and he could’ve sworn that he was hearing battles in the distance, still they never encountered any

monsters. Zach couldn't explain it, but he almost felt a sense of dread filling the tunnel. The further down the tunnel they went, the more it intensified.

It was a feeling of hopelessness that almost made him want to turn around and run. They navigated through the net of tunnels, passing through areas that were filled with flora, large mushrooms that were softly pulsing with light, moss that was illuminating everything that was all over the ceiling. And small moth looking insects that flew around the light.

Zach lost count of how long they had been running, but it had to have been hours. And all the time they were moving deeper down, underground. Finally Zach saw a light out in the distance, torches and crystals illuminating a barrier at the end of the tunnel. As they approached, Zach could hear shouts announcing their arrival.

They entered the medium sized cavern and what Zach assumed was a mining camp. Only it looked more like a war camp. There was a lot of mining equipment scattered around, but almost everyone was armed. They were led to a large pavilion that was at least three stories high.

They were allowed inside. Immediately Zach noticed the person sitting inside. It was the tallest kracean he had ever seen. His entire body was massive, dominating the inside of the pavilion. The kracean had four arms that were working on two cannons in front of him. The weapons looked like they were wrought out of metal, and were short cylinders—well, relatively short for the kracean's height, they were probably as tall as Zach was. The kracean wore a black and purple armor that looked as if it was made out of volcanic glass, and it had a big blue gem locked in the center of the upper torso.

Kishua approached and bowed to the kracean. "Master Gemheart, these wardens had answered your bounty."

The kracean immediately raised his head and looked at Zach and Naha. His eyes piercing through him and making him feel small. This was a being on the same level as Warden Commander. Someone who held absolute power.

The kracean stood up and walked over, towering over them. Then, he knelt, which made the top of Zach's head come up to barely the middle of his chest.

“When I sent out that bounty, I did not expect anyone to answer so quickly. Your aid means more to me than you can possibly know,” Gemheart said.

“We are wardens,” Zach said. “If there are innocent people in need of help, we will provide what we can.”

Gemheart studied him for a moment, and then nodded his head. “Thank you. As my contract says, you need only open a way into the Ethereal, and you will have your reward.”

Zach cleared his throat and spoke. “Sir,” he said, unsure how to actually refer to the man. “We would like to come into the Ethereal realm with you.”

The kracean blinked his relatively small beady eyes that were still almost as large as Zach’s head. “The Ethereal realm here will certainly be dangerous, you must know this.”

Zach swallowed and then spoke. “Actually, I do not know much about the Ethereal, I only got my power recently. My experience with it is lacking,” Zach admitted, as this did not seem like a man that he should hide the truth from.

“Then, it is even more dangerous for you,” Gemheart said. “You need not take that risk for people you do not know. Opening the way is more than aid enough.”

“I admit that a part of it is that I want to go, that I want to push myself to get stronger. But, it is also because of the nature of my power. Any way that I open will remain open for only a single day. If you do not find your people in time, you will be stuck there without me,” Zach said,

The kracean tilted his head. “Thank you for telling me. How long is the cooldown on your power?”

“One month,” Zach said.

“A long time to be stuck in the Ethereal...” Gemheart glanced at Naha, then back at Zach. “I assume that you would want to go together?”

“Yes,” Zach said.

“Far be it for me to stand in the way of people wanting to grow stronger. It is the way that the Infinite Realm should be. Still, would you willing to tell me what tiers of power you are on?”

Zach glanced at Naha, and she met his eyes. Then after a few seconds she nodded her head.

Zach took a deep breath and then answered. "I have six combined tiers of power. My partner has eight combined tiers."

Gemheart nodded his head. "The spirits that attacked us were at least as strong as you are now, and we expect stronger foes inside. I will not be able to protect you inside. But I expect that if you survive you will gain more power," Gemheart seemed to think about it for a few more seconds. "I shall allow it, but know that you can still stay. The reward for your help in opening the way through alone will be enough to see you grow strong."

"Thank you for your concern, sir. But the kind of power that I seek is not something that I can gain through such means."

"Ah," the krecean said. "I see. I have not met many people like you, most of them die long before I could even come to remember their names. But some have risen to be at the top of the Infinite Realm. Those names I do remember. What are your names?"

Zach bowed his head. "I am Zacharia Gardner."

Naha did the same. "And I am Nahamassa Planerunner."

Zach blinked as she used her real name. He looked at her and got a determined look in return. He didn't know why she did that, if someone here tells someone in the Guild... it could pose problems. On the other hand, it wasn't like they would have any reason to. And Zach was at least glad that they hadn't lied to a High Ranker.

Gemheart nodded his head. "We'll see if I will remember those names. For now, come, we will prepare for the retrieval of my people. There are things about the Ethereal Realm that you must know if you are to accompany us."