

Act II - Zach

The moon shone brightly as Zach walked through the forest, climbing in silence toward the top of the hill. The trees were all bare of leaves, this entire territory frozen in the moment of eternal Autumn. The trees were strange, not something that could be found on Earth, instead they were from some other world. Twisting with sharp pointy branches that curved toward the sky. This territory was bland in Zach's opinion, gray grass and black leafless trees covered it, making it look like something out of a horror movie.

It was a poor territory, it had nothing of worth in it to allow people living here to support themselves, the three towns inside it were desolate and nearly empty, the only people still living there the old and those who had nowhere else to go. It was... confusing to him to see something that looked so much like some of the places on Earth, to see people with empty looks and no prospects. Especially since the Infinite Realm gave great opportunities for those willing to take risks. Yet, the reality was that not everyone had the drive or even desire to try and find something better. Some people would rather remain in squalor than risk death.

Zach shook his head. It was not his place to judge, not that at least. The territory was a part of a faction, a monster hunting guild, similar to the Adventurer's Guild—which was the largest faction of that type in the core—but more specialized. Hunting a specific type of monsters, some kind of stone gargoyles. The territory once had a large population of such monsters, and the territory had been very rich. They had survived on exporting the skin of the monsters and selling hunting rights to people willing to pay Essence to hunt them. But as the core developed and people grew stronger, more and more people came, and eventually they wiped out the monsters, destroying the territory's economy in the process.

Most monsters reproduced the same way that animals on Earth did, except that they grew faster and their growth and initial power depended on the monsters that spawned them. The monsters grew in power with time and kills, both by killing other monsters and people. There were, of course, other ways for monsters to spawn, there were dungeons that periodically released swarms. There were special events that created monster spawning portals

that gave quests to all in a territory. But sadly, this territory had seen nothing of that, and it had declined.

It being a poor territory meant that it did not have much to offer to people, and so, most avoided it. Zach would've avoided it as well, except that he had seen a bounty posted in a neighboring territory. The bounty was for a small band of bandits, all suspected to be over level 140 that were terrorizing the territory. The territory itself had no standing wardens since it couldn't support them, nor did it have any type of a guard capable of fighting the bandits. The highest guard in the territory was level 54, which made it hard for them to deal with the criminals.

The bandits had arrived from another territory and had set up shop. Zach found out from the Adventuring Guildhouse in the other territory that such bands were actually quite common. Sometimes people defected from various factions and went to weaker territories where they could live as kings, or where they could terrorize those weaker than themselves.

And rarely do people go out of their way to hunt them down. There was little to no gain for them. Zach had spoken with the wardens where he saw the bounty, and he was... almost disgusted by their responses. It was a waste of time for them, there were always criminals, and they saw no point in going after the bandits when the reward was a lot less than even their monthly contribution gain.

In truth, the thing that made Zach angry was that he might've done the same. The only reason that he had decided to come was because he needed to, because the bounty wasn't asking for capture but execution.

He shook his head and turned his thoughts back to the matter at hand. He walked up the trail toward the light at the top of the hill. He was close enough now to hear laughter, to see shapes moving around a fire. He felt slightly exposed in the leather armor that he was wearing, his **Greater Armor of the Silver Sentinel** was currently undergoing upgrades and he had to get a cheap replacement. If he had any choice in the matter, he might've waited before going out on a bounty, but life rarely gave Zach what he wanted it to.

He approached the camp without bothering to keep himself hidden, there was no point in it. There were six bandits in the camp, one of who was standing watch. He saw Zach and called out to the others all of who were

sitting around the fire. Zach's eyes took in their camp, seeing the horses tied to a solitary tree on the hill next to a large rock. The tall pole stabbed in the ground and the two women whose hands were tied to it. They looked bad, covered in bruises and blood, with no clothes on.

If there was one universal law in the Infinite Realm that Zach agreed with wholeheartedly, it was that the punishment for rape was death. The bandits got up to their feet quickly, pulling their weapons and staring at Zach and then behind him. Once they saw that he was alone, they relaxed.

Zach took them in, their gear was of good make, leather armor with metal plates attached at the most important areas, but covered in grime and filth. Their weapons were dirty and poorly taken care of as well, as were the men themselves. Zach was certain that they hadn't washed in a while, and as the wind brought the sounds of them talking among each other to his ears it also brought their stench to his nose. He scrunched his nose in disgust, but he didn't stop walking.

He only stopped once he was barely ten paces away from the closest bandit. His hand went to his waist and he pulled off his warden's badge, raising it high above his head. The golden badge that showed his rank shone in the firelight. He still didn't know how he felt about it, he had gained his new rank after the events in Emaros, and that made him feel... undeserving.

"I am a warden of the Guild, surrender and your deaths will be quick," Zach yelled. There was no point trying to deceive them and offer leniency, the punishment for what they had done was clear in all of Infinite Realm.

They looked taken aback for a moment, and then one of the—probably the leader—stepped forward. He looked at Zach and spoke.

"A single warden? A gold rank at that? Ha," he laughed. "You have a death wish warden?"

Zach didn't respond, he just calmly returned his badge to his waist.

"Turn away warden, we can't kill you, but we will make you hurt," the leader said.

Zach sighed. What they said was true. Bandits knew better than to kill wardens, but there was a lot that could be done to someone without killing them. They could capture him and torture him for years without anyone checking in. Or just beat him up and letting him go. Wardens avenged their

own, but there was a difference between beating up a warden and killing one. The Infinite Realm was too large, there were too many criminals for the wardens to bother going after someone who didn't kill a warden.

“There is a bounty on your heads,” Zach said as the bandit in the back of their group, who looked only slightly drunk, was suddenly grabbed and pulled back into the dark without a sound. “You have done terrible things, the bill always comes due.”

The leader brandished his weapon in a theatrical manner and Zach took advantage of it. Zach's Qi moved through his body and **{Calm Before the Storm}** settled around him. Then, he used **[Ethereal Leap]** and jumped forward, summoning a rapier in one hand with his **Ethereal Sword** and pulling out his dagger with his other hand. The bandits were startled, and one even managed to fire off a ball of white light at him, but Zach was still in his leap and the attack passed through him harmlessly.

Zach stabbed forward with his rapier, his **|Perfect Tempest Dance|** making his movements fluid. He triggered his **Last Heir of Terra and Old Heritage**, feeling his stats skyrocket. The leader moved his hand to defend, and somehow managed to get it up in time. His sword deflected Zach's rapier, but Zach pirouetted and opened up a gash on his ribs. Immediately he danced away, as other bandits attacked. He focused on defense, deflecting and pulling them away from the fire and into the dark. He used his wind skills to batter them and make it even harder for them to see.

His eyes saw in the dark, his new skill proving quite useful. As the bandits attacked him, he evaluated their power. He didn't have a skill or perk, but he could tell by the power of their strikes and the abilities that they used. They were all around level 160, if he was not mistaken, powerful, but poorly trained.

Zach kept moving backward, forcing them to follow in a line, only one or two able to attack him at a time. A shadow moved behind them, and one more bandit was pulled back, a dagger piercing his chest and eliciting a sharp exhalation of breath as his lung was punctured. None of the other bandits noticed.

Four of them were left, each seeking to strike Zach, but never to kill. He took advantage of their reluctance to go for kill shots, and he opened up

wounds on all over their bodies. He could see them getting frustrated with him, their attacks getting stronger and more desperate. They were realizing that while Zach wasn't stronger than them, he was better.

The leader's sword suddenly burst into light and he executed a swiping attack that sent a crescent of light at Zach. Instead of blocking, Zach used his **[Spatial Evade]** and his body flickered, the crescent passing through at the moment when he moved slightly forward.

And then the shadow among them pounced again. This time there was no attempt at stealth, instead the shadow stabbed the dagger in the bandit's shoulder and twisted eliciting a scream of pain. The other bandits noticed this time, two of them turned and the shadow pulled out the dagger from the bandit's shoulder and then cut his throat, bathing the other two in their blood.

For a moment they were frozen, and one of them screamed in anger. The bandit leader turned as he dashed away from Zach, and saw his two remaining friends covered in blood. And then Zach felt a sensation of horror fill the area, his technique making it easier to resist it, and the fact that it wasn't targeted at him.

One of the bandits covered in blood screamed in horror, his sword swinging widely around him.

"It's an illusion!" The leader yelled as he ran back toward them, but he was too late. One of his friends turned with wide eyes at the other and then stabbed him in the stomach, taking him to the ground and hitting him with his fists as the man died. Then the shadow came close and hit the bandit on top with the pommel of the dagger in its hand. The leader prepared an attack, but Zach used his **[Ethereal Chains]** and caught him, the green tinted chains misted as they curled around him, preventing him from moving.

The shadow walked closer and then dismissed the skill and then Naha was standing there, staring at the leader. She wore a female ravzor body, black as night with burning orange eyes. She tightened the grip on her dagger as the leader started yelling.

"I have Essence Crystals! I can give them to you, the two girls too. Everything that I have—" Naha broke his jaw with one powerful blow and forcing him to his knees.

“You should take him,” she said, her eyes turning to look at him over the bandit leader.

Zach glanced at the other dead bodies and then back at her. “Was this enough?” He asked. There was no need to elaborate what he meant.

Naha shuffled uncomfortably, but then nodded her head. “They were... terrified at the end.”

Zach grimaced, but nodded his head. He tightened his fingers around his **Great Dagger of Essence Siphoning** and approached the bandit leader. The man looked at him with wide eyes, tangled up in chains and with a broken jaw. He was trying to speak, but there was nothing that could save him. He knelt and then stabbed the man through the heart, feeling the Essence flow into him from the dying man.

He sighed, and looked up, seeing Naha’s eyes glued to him. It unnerved him sometimes when he caught her looking at him. He pulled his dagger out of the bandit and stood up. She had already used her dagger on the others for her gains, taking their stats for her own.

They went over their bodies, looking for anything of value and put it in their storages. Then Zach took the head of the leader and put it in a small box and then in his storage. Finally, they walked back to the camp and set free the two women that had been captured.

Zach barely managed to get through their crying and thanks, the wails of relief. He understood, yet... he didn’t feel like he deserved it. They hadn’t come to save them, they had come only because Naha was getting restless and they needed a bounty that she could use to alleviate her... needs.

They escorted the women to the nearby town collected the bounty from the guard house, which was barely two hundred Greater Essence and then left, heading back to the neighboring territory.

Zach and Naha walked into the city, Reeser, and headed toward the Adventuring Guildhouse. She changed to Nyathulla’s form, which was a necessity when they dealt with other wardens. Zach tried not to look at her,

as the only thing he felt when he did was guilt. He knew that it wasn't really his fault that Nyathulla died, it was her own actions that had led to her death. But he hadn't avenged her either. He had spent enough time with her to get to know her, he felt sad every time he saw Naha wearing her body. But he had made his choice and he didn't regret it.

Naha was more important to him than anything else. They had been on the road for just over three months, and had been hunting criminals ever since. It was all that they were doing. Zach had leveled to 150, with the Essence that he gained from his monthly contributions and the bounties that they were doing. All, except for the last one, paid well. Since the only bounties they hunted were those for those that required proof of death.

Each bounty was between 4000 and 8000 Greater Essence, and the bandits had been their ninth bounty. The Essence accumulated quickly.

The two of them checked in the Adventuring Guildhouse, and then walked nearby to an inn that catered mostly to adventurers. They got a room and walked up, asking for dinner to be taken to their room. The common room was filled with other adventurers and a few wardens, but Zach and Naha didn't interact with them much. He saw a few people taking a long look at them, some frowning. While cross race relationships were not uncommon, seeing someone with a cthul was. Their race had the lowest birth rate, and as such they rarely had relationships with other races.

It didn't bother Zach much, not nearly enough to stop posing as a couple. He still didn't feel that it was safe to have Naha out of his sight for long. And in reality... they were a couple. Not that they had done much since Zach had learned the truth. The things between them were... weird. Naha was acting very subdued, following his lead and doing everything that he asked her to. Mostly she appeared completely sane. She could speak with other people with no issues, her outward facade was perfect.

When they were alone... That was when her madness manifested itself. He had asked her to explain completely how it felt to her, and what it made her do. It was his understanding that pretending was easier than being herself. That her mind could keep itself together if she was playing a role, but the more time she spent playing the role, the more often she needed to satisfy her needs. To kill and to make people feel horrified.

When alone, she didn't pretend, she let real self be known. And Zach was conflicted. She was so alike Quell that he used to know, only... more relaxed. Her eyes were brighter, and sometimes he could see the madness in them.

They entered their room and he saw her relax, and then her body shifted back into her Quell form. She always took that form when they were alone, probably because she felt that he was most comfortable with it—which he was. He had asked her about her original shape, but she had told him that she didn't have it anymore, that she had lost it a long time ago. It didn't really matter. Naha was a shapeshifter and Zach was trying to wrap his mind around that. To her, one body was as good as any other.

She turned around, looking at him from the center of the room as he walked around her and toward the chair near the right side wall. He took a seat and sighed, his eyes meeting hers.

He struggled with his own feelings, his love for her on the one side, and his desire to keep people safe on the other. He understood the reality of the Infinite Realm, far more so now when he had the chance to see it firsthand. It was a brutal world filled with brutal people. Each person that Naha and he hunted down and killed had been evil, at least in Zach's eyes. Someone who raped, who murdered innocents, who caused chaos and mayhem.

Zach looked at Naha and he knew that she could've been like any one of them, that if she had made more noise and killed more people she could've had a bounty just like they had on her head.

And yet... Zach *knew* that she could be better, he didn't think that he could've fallen in love with an evil person. She was just... damaged, the power that the Framework granted had twisted her, the people around her had pushed her in this direction, made her this way.

But this was his path now. He had decided that he was going to help her, that he wasn't going to abandon someone that he loved again. This was his new purpose in life, something that he felt was a good and worthy goal.

He took a deep breath and then spoke.

“Naha, I think that it's time we had a real talk about the future.”