

Act II - Zach

Zach stood in the small living room made out of wood and decorated modestly but with enough stuff to make it have a cozy and comfy feel. It was a perfectly ordinary morning, which was why Zach was so taken off guard that he didn't even attempt to fend off Quell's attack. Her fist hit him in the shoulder and he winced, not expecting her to be so strong. Which he immediately realized, he should've. Before she became an archivist, Quell had been training to be a combat warden.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" Quell demanded, glaring up at him.

"I didn't want to bother you," Zach said weakly as he took a step back from her. This was the first time that he had seen Quell with such an intensity in her eyes.

"You didn't want to wake me?" She asked, every word spoken slowly, which somehow made it worse.

"There wasn't any need for that," Zach managed to say.

Quell's eyes narrowed at him and he walked closer, grabbing hold of his shirt in her small fists. "You thought the fact that the killer you've been chasing dropped by for a chat wasn't worth waking me up for?"

Zach grimaced, when she put it like that...

"Listen here," Quell started. "I've allowed you into my home and my bed, I think that I am owed a bit more than that. I think that we've shared enough with each other that you should've felt comfortable in speaking with me immediately."

Zach took a deep breath and nodded. She was right, of course, he probably should've woken her up. Any normal person probably would've. But if he was being honest with himself, the encounter with the killer hadn't really been that much of a deal to him. He had survived far worse on Earth. It should've occurred to him that it was a much bigger deal to people here. Especially since he and Quell were dating.

Zach looked at her, with that dark and thunderous look in her eyes, with her fists bunched up in his shirt. He couldn't help but smile, her small stature was directly opposed to how ferocious she looked. And ordinary

person would've probably been afraid, but there was no sign of fear in her eyes.

“You think that I am amusing?” Quell asked.

Zach immediately cleared his expression. “Of course not,” he put his hands around her, embracing her. “I’m sorry, I should’ve woken you up and spoken to you immediately. It’s just that...”

He didn’t know how to even start this conversation. He hadn’t been shocked or even much frightened by his encounter with the killer. Yes, he knew that he could’ve died, but courting death had been a daily task on Earth for years. No, nothing like that frightened him, but he had been affected by the encounter, only not by anything obvious. He looked down at Quell; one of his fears was that the killer might kill her because of their connection. It was why he had, in the end, decided to come to her house. He knew intellectually that Quell didn’t fit the profile of the killer. She had become an archivist six years ago, before that she had been training to be a warden and had advanced. She wasn’t in the over ten year range of people who didn’t advance. And he did trust his gut on what they had uncovered about the killer. He had a criteria for his victims, and Zach was almost certain that he wouldn’t break his code.

On the other hand, Zach had seen the madness in those eyes, heard it in the killers words. For all he knew the killer would do whatever struck his fancy.

Quell had to have seen something in his expression, because her face turned gentle. She let go of his shirt and her hands took hold of his face on both sides. She pulled down his head and gave him a soft kiss. Then she took his hand and pulled him over to the couch. She sat down first and then pulled him down next to her, making him lie down and put his head in her lap.

Slowly she started to run her fingers over his hair, and then she spoke.

“You can tell me anything Zach, you don’t need to hide things from me,” she said in a soft soothing voice.

Zach closed his eyes and wondered how he had gotten here. Almost a year ago he had been on Earth, fighting constantly, his mind and heart filled with hate and anger. And now... he felt comfortable in her hands. He knew why that was, he had been craving companionship, the feel of a warm

embrace, and the confidence of someone he could speak about anything. He never had much experience with relationships, even though others always thought that he did. He was popular, but he had always been reluctant to take the first step. Linda had been his one real relationship, he had loved her despite her flaws, he had felt comfortable with her.

But ever since she was killed he hadn't allowed himself to look at anyone else, he hadn't even tried to. And then he arrived here, to a new world that was so far removed from his hate and the broken pieces of the world that reminded him of the past. For the first time in a long time, he had allowed himself to relax, to open himself to getting to know new people.

He hadn't expected what happened between him and Quell. If Griss hadn't pushed him, he wouldn't even have asked her out. But he had, and he found that he did like her. They shared the love of research, and they had spent many nights pouring over the archives and reports, working on the case. One couldn't spend so much time together and not grow closer. It seemed almost unreal to him, but he and Quell had been together for more than three months now. Their relationship had progressed to the point where he spent most of his nights in her bed.

It had been a bit strange to Zach in the start, Quell was most definitely not human. There were differences, both physical and mental. But he had adapted, and he was aware of the fact that his feelings for her were growing daily. He knew already what was going to happen: he was going to fall in love with her. It would be hard not to. She was reserved and shy in public, studious and smart in her Archive, and open and free with her words and emotions in private.

She had shared her painful past with him, and he with her. It made them grow closer. And he enjoyed the fact that he didn't need to speak constantly when they were together in order to fill the silence. She understood the pain of loss, and she knew the warden world. They were well matched.

He opened his eyes and looked at her alien ones. Dark green with a star pattern looking down at him. It had been a long time since he had felt this comfortable, this safe. She had said that he could tell her anything, but he was afraid.

The caring look in her eyes never wavered, and that more than anything else pushed him forward.

“I didn’t wake you up because I was afraid,” Zach said.

“Afraid of what?” She asked softly, her hands caressing his face.

“I wasn’t afraid of the killer, I’ve faced monsters that the Framework threw at us every day on Earth. And I have stood across a real monster, one who had once been my best friend. Who I had loved like a brother once. Who had taken everything from me and everyone else on the planet. He is so much more than the Night Horror could ever be.”

Quell’s hands stopped for a moment as she blinked, but then she continued. Zach barely noticed it, he was remembering.

“But what scared me was the look in the Night Horror’s eyes,” Zach whispered. “It was madness, and I had seen that before.”

“Oh?” Quell asked.

Zach took a deep breath. “I don’t know if the cause was the same, but it felt similar to me. Ryun... he had gone mad with grief, he lost his love, and then he killed those responsible, along with everyone else who was in the way. Guilty or innocent, he didn’t care.”

Quell’s eyes were on his, her entire body still as she listened to his story, all of her attention was on him. Zach appreciated that more than she could know. It had been so long since he had been able to talk with someone, to free himself and unburden his pain. And the way that she listened, it made him fall in love with her just a tiny bit. Zach knew that emotion like that was dangerous, but he also knew that he wanted it to happen. He was so tired of being alone and in pain. He had friends on Earth, his comrades, but that wasn’t the same. Even Linda had been at times aloof, preoccupied by something else when he needed to talk.

But with Quell, he knew that when she looked at him, he had all of her attention, that he was all that existed in her world. The intensity of that knowledge scared him a bit, but it also made him happy.

“After that... I found him,” Zach continued his story. “I found him in the abandoned town where he lived before she died. And that is when I saw the madness in his eyes. When I learned that it was he who had killed people that I was supposed to protect, I didn’t know what to do. I loved him, I loved

Melody who was killed by someone on my side. How could I punish him for what he had done? I couldn't fight my brother, even though we've been estranged, the time before Framework was still fresh in my mind. So I left him alone, I told him to go somewhere else, away from those under my charge. It was the wrong choice. I could see that he was hurting, I could see that spark of madness in his eyes, and I left him. He left and he lost himself. If at that point there was anything left of my friend it was then later consumed by his madness, my friend died. And only the monster was left. He killed my family, he killed an entire city, and he grew so powerful that nothing we did could stop him."

Zach hadn't even realized that he had closed his eyes. He found the strength to open them and look directly in Quell's eyes. He had told her much about the past, but this was his greatest secret, the knowledge that had been eating away at him for years, something that he had never spoken out loud.

"When I saw that madness in the killer's eyes, I was reminded of Ryun. I was reminded of the moment when I found him standing in a deserted settlement, still holding on to some semblance of sanity. Alone and in pain, filled with grief. My friend, my brother... And I left him there alone. I left him, and he was consumed leaving only the monster. And I know deep down, I **know**. That if I had stayed, if I had helped him out of his grief, then maybe nothing that followed would've happened. Perhaps my family would still be alive along with countless others. I failed him, and I failed everyone else that I loved. I loved Ryun, but I hate the monster that he had become."

Quell's eyes looked down at him, and he studied them, looking for any sign of disgust of an accusation. What kind of a man leaves someone they love in that state? To suffer alone? Zach had done that, and while he didn't take on the monstrous deeds that Ryun had done after he went insane, he still felt responsible for the turning point, for not trying to help him.

But he saw none of that in Quell's eyes. Only a loving gaze and an understanding. He didn't know how she could understand, but that almost made things worse. A part of him was relieved that she could still look at him like that, and another had hoped that she would hate him.

"It is okay Zach," Quell whispered to him. "It isn't your fault."

“Perhaps, but what if it wasn’t Ryun’s either? Not at the start, at least, I cannot forgive him for what he had done, it is... it is too much. There is only hate in me for him now. But what if the madness that consumed him came from someplace else?” Zach wondered. “I’ve looked into the Night Horror’s eyes Quell, and I wonder... Is he like Ryun too? Is he someone who was driven insane by the Framework. Was it the imbalance of their powers or just the reality of this brutal world that had broken them?”

Quell closed her eyes, and turned her face away so that he couldn’t see her expression. And then she spoke. “I... I don’t know Zach, but even if it was so, it changes nothing, right?”

“I... I guess not,” Zach said. Both Ryun and the Night Horror had killed too many innocent people. The reasons for their actions no longer mattered. This was not Earth, where insanity might be a valid defense. No, this was a brutal world where real monsters were beasts as much as they were people. Everyone was mad here, it was only a matter of degrees.

They didn’t speak more after that, instead they just held each other tightly, taking comfort in each other’s embrace.

Two months later, their little task-force had no new leads on the Night Horror. There were no new murders that were suspicious or that fit the profile they had established. With no new leads, he had spent most of his time with Quell, sometimes working together in the Archive trying to find another clue to help them catch Night Horror, others on just walking around the city. Quell had been taking him to interesting places showing him new sights that he hadn’t seen yet. Emaros was a massive city, and he was yet to see even half of it.

But, every week, Zach also made time for training. The instruction that he had gained from Ferrut was all theoretical, but as he had come to realize there wasn’t a training regimen for skills. All of it was internal, an individual effort. He had found a training room to rent in the city, which actually wasn’t hard to find. And he had spent all his time working on advancing one of his

skills to tier 6. He knew the secrets now, but even still it wasn't going as fast as he wanted it to. He knew that his perk allowed him to advance sword based skills five times faster, which was an incredible boon. He felt himself learn at a rate that he had never experienced before. And the Spirits of Terra were an incredible help as well.

Zach had managed to call out two other spirits in the two months that he had been focusing on his sword art skill. From Sasaki Kojirō Zach had learned the sword, the clean and formal use of it. The art that Sasaki Kojirō had practiced, and with the help of his perk he had mastered its basics. He doubted that he would ever be a true master of that style, but Zach didn't want that anyway. He needed to improve his skill to the next evolution, to create his own art. The basis of it would always be Sasaki Kojirō's art, the use of a long sword because that was what Mistral was. But an art was more than knowing how to use a single weapon. Sasaki's movements and stances weren't perfect for people with powers, and although the perk allowed all the spirits of the old masters to learn, Zach was the one who could use powers. He had managed to enhance the art he learned from Sasaki with powers, to alter it so that he could incorporate more of his powers in the art.

As far as passive skills went, sword art was strange. There were the lines that he saw when in combat or when he focused, but it was more than that. The passive effect was constant. He found that the higher his skill went the more his body started to move in the ways that would facilitate the art he had learned. He could slip into any stance at any time seamlessly. It was a weird feeling.

But Zach wanted to improve more, he had to. And getting a perfect skill was how he wanted to get stronger. He knew what the guides said about imbalance, but he also knew what Ferrut had told him. His levels and cultivation were too low to have any overt influence on him, and if he placed the right part of himself in a skill... He could mitigate the effects, he could have enough time to raise his class afterward without getting influenced too much.

And so he had been training. The second spirit of an old master he had pulled out, had been the one that had been fighting Sasaki for the honor of

being the first. His rival, the man that defeated him in life—Miyamoto Musashi. The man had been a... handful.

He was brash and not at all as good of a teacher as Sasaki. Zach had known that he wouldn't learn much from him, but he had taught Zach one thing:

“Never fight fair,” Musashi said as he glared at Zach. “If you are fighting, then you are fighting for your life. Why give your opponent an advantage when you don't need to?”

Zach didn't answer, they didn't have much time and he knew that Musashi would continue speaking without Zach's prompting.

“Cheat, lie, insult, goad and debase yourself if need be. You are fighting to survive, not for some idiotic ideal. Everything is a weapon, everything can be turned to your advantage. Learn your opponent, and do everything in your power to push them off balance. Throw your sword in their chest, you can do it with that magic sword of yours. Spit in their face, put the sun in their eyes, kick dust and call them names. Everything is a warrior's weapon.”

Zach had only had two lessons from Musashi, his style of teaching didn't exactly fit Zach. But he had still learned, and he had understood the lesson that Musashi had given him. There was no room for honor in a fight to the death, that was arrogance, or the right of those so strong that their victory was assured.

He hadn't learned much from Musashi, but it had been enough to add one more piece to his art. The way of moving and of thinking that had crafted one more piece in his own art. And what he had taught him fit with the way that some of his perks could be used, namely his wind based perks.

But he still needed one more piece. And so he had pulled another master out of his perk, someone who could teach him a way of fighting without Mistral. His awakened sword was an incredible weapon, but he was large. He wasn't suitable for every environment.

And so Zach, found himself in the training room, holding an **Ethereal Sword** in his right hand, one that was much different than Mistral, and his

dagger in the other. He moved, attacking the air in front of him with the rapier in his hand, then pivoting and raising his dagger to block against an invisible opponent before he entered the gauntlet with the target dummies. Six weeks of training had allowed him to make great progress, and he felt like he was nearly there. Framework allowed for far faster learning for everyone, but Zach's perk put him even further ahead.

And he knew the secret of evolving skills. The skill levels didn't matter, they were there for people who weren't broken, those who couldn't wrap their minds around the concept of skills. A way for them to grind it out and advance them. But if there was one thing that Zach was, it was broken. He had shown the pieces of himself to Quell, and she was slowly helping him put them back together, but even if he managed it he would never rid himself of the cracks.

He could evolve a skill directly, by forcing his will on it, by warping his understanding of it. He knew that skipping tiers all the way to tier 6 could harm the skill. It could make it... less encompassing, make it have less utility. Which was why Zach first focused on making his own art. He didn't need to master it, he needed only to create something new and learn the basics. He could always improve it later.

Zach danced among the target dummies, his rapier cutting quickly and precisely. He was surprised how much the new weapon fit in his hand. With Mistral he felt powerful, he knew that he could cleave people in half with a single strike. A rapier was something else, a weapon far more precise that was meant for a different kind of fighting. His dagger flashed, scoring hits as well, and then he was through the short gauntlet.

“Well done,” a voice said, and Zach turned to look at his new teacher.

The ghost standing there had a long mustache and a short beard, an imperial style. On his breast his tunic had a crest, a seven hearts arranged in a cross with a phoenix on top. He was the Supreme Knight of the Order of the Seven Hearts, and his name was Salvator Fabris, an Italian master fencer. He had been the ghost that had fought to the forefront when Zach tried to pull someone who could teach him how to fight with a sword and a dagger.

And Salvator was a far greater teacher than Musashi. His instructions had adapted, tried to incorporate both his powers and what he had learned

from the previous two spirits. In just over six weeks, Zach had gained a distinct style that was a mix of what Sasaki and Salvator taught him, coupled with Musashi's philosophy of fighting dirty.

He could feel that he was close to making something that was his own.

"Thank you, master," Zach said respectfully. The spirit had been more than useful.

"Of course, my student. We do not have much time. Keep practicing your parries as well as the quick turns. With your physical abilities and the powers at your disposal, you should be able to accomplish things that I had only ever dreamed about."

"I will try," Zach said as he felt the perk run its course and the spirit fade away, going back to the **Last Heir of Terra**.

He sighed and sat down, dismissing his rapier into a tiny particles of light. He was close, but not quite there yet. Soon, however, he was going to try and push his skill to tier 5 with his own art. And then there would only be tier 6.

Zach cleaned up and left the training room, then the building it was housed in. He headed down the streets, the warden that had waited outside for him stepping behind him. Zach was too tired to engage in any talk, but he didn't know much about the man. He had only seen him a few times since Relas rotated wardens that followed them all around. Ever since the Night Horror incident all of them who were on the case had escorts. Even though Zach thought them unnecessary by now.

Zach frowned as he saw an unfamiliar street, he had been so lost in his thoughts that he had to have taken a wrong turn on his way to Quell's house. He turned around, looking at the warden when he felt something strange at the back of his head.

He blinked and looked around, he could feel something at the edge of his consciousness. Something that he couldn't quite identify.

"Do you feel that?" Zach asked the warden.

The Demasi man frowned, looking around. "I don't feel anything."

Zach suddenly turned to look at a wall, for some reason he felt as if there was something there, he just couldn't see it. And then, he got an idea, or perhaps it was some kind of an instinct.

He turned his eyes toward the area where he felt the source of this sensation was, and then he used his new ability—**[Ethereal Sight]**. It wasn't the first time he had used it. But all the other times he used it, the world just turned slightly gray with everything almost swaying around him.

Now the effect was much different. The world shifted around him. And the wall that he was looking at suddenly had a hole in it. Zach blinked as he saw the inside, and realized that he was looking at something like a nest. And in front of it sat a tiny creature almost fae-looking. A cat-like being that had horns and six limbs, along with fur that was painted in psychedelic blues and greens in a stripe pattern.

Zach's mouth opened wide as the creature turned to look at him, and then did one thing he had never expected it to do.

The creature sniffed in his direction. "What you looking at human?"