

Act II - Zach

Zach raised his Ethereal rapier and blocked the axe coming at his head. The **Spirit of Terra** sang through his mind, and he pivoted, letting the axe slid past him as he guided it to the floor. His opponent hadn't expected that, and Zach took advantage. He pushed his dagger up and into the throat of the kidnapper, then slid it up and away, cutting it open. The man's stats were high enough that he didn't die immediately, but that outcome wasn't in question.

Zach saw the man's demasi eyes widen and a potion appearing in his hand as he jumped back trying to get enough distance and time to heal himself. Zach didn't let him. Wind twisted and pushed into the man's back, making him stumble forward. Zach kicked with his leg at the hand holding the potion, sending the vial flying across the room and shattering against the wall. A moment later he dashed forward and stabbed his dagger into his heart.

The Essence filled Zach and he allowed his rapier to dissipate as he looked around the bottom floor of the warehouse. Bodies of the six criminals he had killed lay lifelessly on the floor. The screams on the second floor above him intensified, and Zach heard one of the kidnappers beg for his life, before his voice was cut short forever.

Zach made his way up the stairs, and found Naha in her ravzor skin standing above the dead. The moment she saw him she shifted back into Quell's skin and stepped close to him. She gathered him up in a hug and shuddered against him.

They had tried to delay her cravings for as long as they could, using her new meditation skill to see how she would cope. It had been successful... in a way. She had managed to hold on for longer than she ever had before, a few months. But eventually the cravings nearly overpowered her. He had seen firsthand how she became. It was as if all emotion was drained from her, leaving only a predator who looked at everyone and everything as prey. She had nearly lashed out at an innocent bystander once when they were just walking back home.

He made slow circles on her back with his hands as she tried to control herself. And a few minutes later, when she stopped shuddering, Zach spoke.

“Are you alright?”

She nodded against his shoulder and whispered. “Yes.”

“We need to free the children,” Zach added.

“I know,” Naha said.

“You need to change.”

She held on him for a moment longer, and then took a deep breath and stepped back. Her skin rippled and she changed into Nyathulla’s skin. Zach looked her over and saw no madness in her eyes, or at least none that he wasn’t expecting. He nodded and then they walked to the large barred doors. They unbarred the door by removing the large piece of wood from it and then opened it.

Inside six young children. Two human, a karura, and three demasi. They had been kidnapped weeks ago from a poor area of the city. The Guard had been unable to find them so they put up a bounty with the guild. But since it had been such a poor area the reward had been small, and few wardens in the city wanted to take the contract. It was disappointing, but it was the way that the Infinite Realm worked.

By the time Zach saw the contract, Naha had been close to snapping. He took the contract out of necessity. The Guard had placed a dead or alive bounty on the kidnappers heads. And Zach had hoped that being on the hunt would let Naha hold on for longer. It did work, hunting the kidnappers had made her focused and eager to find and kill them. And they had.

The children screamed as they saw Zach and Naha, and he knelt in front of them.

“It’s okay, we aren’t the bad guys. Here,” he raised his warden’s badge. “See, we are wardens.”

Most of the kids were cowering, but one of them saw his badge and exclaimed.

“You are here to rescue us?” The demasi child asked.

“We are, come, we’ll get you back to your families,” Zach said.

The child managed to talk the others into following them and Zach and Naha escorted them out of the warehouse. Zach had no idea what the kidnappers had wanted with the children, they had no access to Essence so they weren’t really valuable even as simple slaves.

An hour later, Zach and Naha were back in the Adventurers Guild, the Guard had been called and the children taken into their custody. The reward had been given and Zach and Naha payed their share. After that, they retreated to the Guilds common room, and sat down at a table in a corner.

They relaxed and ordered some lunch. “Are you really alright?” Zach asked after a few minutes.

Naha glanced at him and nodded her head. “I am, I can think much more clearly now. The skills are helping.”

“Good,” Zach said. “How long do you think until you can get another to tier six?”

“Hm... a few months perhaps, my **|Cut|** is getting close to a tier five,” Naha answered.

She had evolved it to tier 4 only a month ago. They were still not sure which part of her they wanted to lock in. She had three things sealed inside her skills. Her desire to punish the unworthy, which had over time and her madness gotten twisted to her wanting to punish those that wasted the opportunities that were given to them. Because that made them unworthy of this world, at least in her eyes. The second was her desire to grow stronger. It hadn't gotten twisted all that much, instead it had just constantly pushed her to kill and use her dagger. Even when she tried to control it and go slower. The last was her love for Zach. That was a stabilizing influence, because it made her want to get better for him. It didn't mean that she obeyed him or anything idiotic like that. Love did not make people someone else's slave. And sealing her love inside her skill only meant that her promise to love him forever was true. It had been her choice. They did disagree on things, Naha was willing to follow Zach's lead, but she had her own thoughts.

The next part of her personality to be sealed needed to be something that would help her even more. And they weren't sure what that was just yet. It was another reason why she had taken up meditation. In part because they needed her to know herself a lot better. To understand who she was and what she wanted.

“And what about the quest for the tier 7?” Zach asked.

She had gained her skill quest for a tier 7 skill, for her oldest skill **|Perfect Danger Sense|** which required her to sense danger to her person

10,000 times. Thankfully since they were often in dangerous situations, it was proceeding fairly well. Zach still hadn't gotten a quest for his tier 6 skill, and she couldn't really explain to him how she got it beyond the simple: *I understood the skill.*

Zach had been trying to do that, but with no success so far.

"I've almost reached one hundred, at this rate I might get it to evolve by the end of the year. If we continue doing contracts at this rate."

"That's the plan," Zach said.

Everything that he did was the purpose of getting stronger. Their contracts, Naha's skill evolutions, and Zach's leveling. He had picked his new class evolution for a simple reason really. Their travel and contract work had shown him that while it could be lucrative to be a bounty hunter, it was not a quick path to power. Or rather it was not a quick path to the kind of power that Zach wanted. He remembered Ryun on Earth, and the things that he could do, and Zach knew that he needed something like that. A power that was overwhelming and unique, something that no one else could achieve.

Toward that goal he had started focusing his evolutions and perks to the Ethereal, in preparation for the search of that kind of power. Everything that he had read about the Ethereal was shrouded in mystery, a clear sign that it had not been explored much or by many. And that told Zach that it was still unknown territory that held secrets and treasures just waiting to be found. He knew what the Framework did, it rewarded those who were ahead, those who acted first.

And the Infinite Realm and the core where he and Naha lived had been tamed long ago. But the Ethereal was something else entirely. Dangerous for sure, but the more dangerous something was the greater the reward, that was how Framework worked. It rewarded effort.

He had taken Ethereal Warrior Class before his plan had fully formed, but even then it had been in that service. He had avoided anything that had to do with spirits, because in his mind it was borrowed power and because he had a suspicion that the Framework would've pushed him further down that path. And Zach did not want to rely on the power of others, to summon them to fight for him. He had taken his **Phantom Slayer** evolution because

what he planned would require it, and the attunement that it offered was perfect for that.

The Class description also appealed to him, it rang true with what he wanted to do. His goal after all, was to hunt down someone.

A commotion at the entrance to the contract room drew Zach's attention and he turned around to look. Adventurers and even some wardens were huddled around, talking excitedly.

Zach exchanged a look with Naha, and then they stood and walked over to see what the fuss was about. As they approached Zach's perk sent fragments of conversation up to his ears.

“—team was attacked!”

“—heard that—”

“—spirits, gossip says elementals—”

“—by Gemheart himself!”

“—damn my luck! If only I—”

Zach and Naha approached and looked around. They saw a contract posted on the board, only this one was made on an elaborate piece of paper that was larger than the others. It was gold paper, with blue borders elaborately painted and a crest on top that looked like a four sided diamond.

“What kind of a contract is that?” Zach asked.

“I don't know,” Naha said. “I've never seen one like that.”

That said a lot since she had worked for the wardens for years.

“I'm not surprised you don't know what that is,” one of the wardens said. “It is extremely rare for one of those contracts to come up.”

“Oh, what is so special about them?” Zach asked.

“It is a contract given out by a High Ranker, in this case Gemheart,” the warden answered.

“Really?” Zach said in surprise. He wasn't sure who Gemheart was, but the name was familiar. Zach hadn't researched much about High Rankers, he knew only that it was the term used for the strongest people in the Infinite Realm. “What could possibly someone like him need enough that he put up a contract?”

“You didn’t hear?” The warden asked.

“We just came back from finishing up a contract, so we didn’t get the chance to hear the latest news,” Naha said.

“Well,” the warden cleared his throat. “Gemheart has a team beneath the city, in the Under. They usually dig for treasure, although some people think that he is trying to see if the Infinite Realm has a bottom. Regardless, they found something apparently, and were attacked by spirits. The spirits kidnapped some of Gemheart’s people and retreated into the Ethereal realm through a rift that they then closed.”

Zach blinked at that, he had never really thought about whether there was anything beneath the ground, if it had an end. Still, he wondered what kind of spirits they were, from what he understood only certain kinds of spirits were hostile in almost every situation and would go out of their way to attack. The literature that he read never even mentioned instances where the spirits left the Ethereal realm to attack someone in the real realm.

“So what is the contract for?” Zach asked interested.

“Gemheart intends to go into the Ethereal Realm after his people, but he was here with one of his smaller teams to train his daughter up. He sent word to his main company, but they are too far away to get here quickly. So Gemheart has posted a contract to every guild in the city, looking for someone who has a power to open a way into the Ethereal. The reward is a fortune, but helping a High Ranker is probably worth a lot more than what he put up as reward.”

Zach blinked and exchanged a meaningful look with Naha.

“Is that kind of power rare?” Zach asked.

“Oh, yes. Very few people are willing to deal with the Ethereal, it is suicide for most people. So even if someone does try to go that route, they die fast,” the warden said.

Zach nodded in understanding. He had been aware of the dangers. “But why post the contract, why not wait for one of his own people?”

“Well, because Ethereal Realm and time have a weird interaction, as far as I understand it. Sometimes someone can spend a week inside the Ethereal Realm while only a minute would pass in the real world. And sometimes they could spend months or even years in the other realm and

only moments would pass in the real world. And it isn't even applied to the entire Ethereal Realm, it seems like some areas are constantly in flux, while others are set in stone. Gemheart has no idea how time passes by on the other side. For all he knew his people could've been there for weeks, months, even years!"

"Ah," Zach saw the predicament then.

He looked at Naha, and gestured with his head. The two of them separated and walked back to their room. Once inside in private, Zach turned to her.

"What do you think?" Zach asked.

"It is a High Ranker Zach, they are... not good people," Naha said.

"I know, but it is a chance for us to gain a lot of power," Zach added.

Naha shook her head. "I don't know if we are up to going into the Ethereal."

"Gemheart only asked for someone to open the way, not a guide. I don't need to enter," Zach tried to sound nonchalant.

Naha chuckled. "Yeah, right. I know you Zach, if you go down there, you are going inside. Which means we are going inside."

Zach sighed in defeat. "True. Still, it is an opportunity like we haven't encountered before. Going in with a High Ranker would be a lot safer than if we did it alone."

"That is true, but what are we going to do if we get stuck in there? What about my... condition?" Naha asked.

"We just finished a mission, with your meditation we have months until you will need to do it again."

"I don't know Zach," Naha sighed.

"We can ignore it, go at it slowly. In a few years we will probably get a lot stronger. But you know that the kind of power that we need cannot be gained by just doing contracts. The core is too regulated and... it is not new. Everything of worth had been taken, we will find no powerful reward that the Framework left for us to find. We will just... follow in the footsteps of others. We will be strong, but not High Ranker level strong."

"I know," Naha said and Zach could see that she was frustrated. "I've always known that we can't grow strong enough to be free of them here, not

while we followed in their footsteps. But this... I don't like the idea of helping a High Ranker."

"We don't know him," Zach said. "I am sure that some are what you say they are. But there must be some that are good. Regardless, it is not like we would join his faction or anything. We are wardens, simply answering a contract."

Naha's eyes bored into his, and for a full minute she said nothing. Zach let her think. Then, she finally responded. "Fine, let's go."

Zach smiled at her, and the two of them walked out of their room and made their way down to the contracts room. Wardens and Adventurers were still there, talking amongst themselves and lamenting the fact that they couldn't take the contract.

Zach pushed his way through and reached the board. He stood in front of it and read what was written.

**Urgent aid needed. Gemheart, the Unbroken, requires the services of anyone able to open a passageway into the Ethereal Realm. If you have that power, please report to the Unbroken Mining Company representative at the Dal'dvor entrance to the Under with utmost haste.*

Request: Opening the passageway to the Ethereal Realm at the location the Company indicates.

Reward: 2,000,000 Greater Essence, A pick of a Mythic Grade Item from the vault of the Unbroken Mining Company, Possible Admission into the Company, A run through a dungeon appropriate to your tier of power in the Unbroken Mining Company territories.

Zach was quite impressed by the rewards, it was a fortune. And if Gemheart was willing to pay that much just to have a chance to save his people, then he couldn't be all that bad.

Zach reached up and pulled the contract off the board. Immediately he heard the voices behind him go silent. He turned around, Naha standing next to him. He looked at the administrator of the Guild and spoke.

“I am Warden Zacharia Gardner, and this is my partner Warden Nyathulla Rell, we are taking this contract.”

Before anyone could recover, the two of them pushed through them and left the Guild. Heading down the street toward the hole in the center of the city, that led to the entrance to the Under.

Zach only hoped that this was the right decision.