

ACT II - Zach

Zach and Naha left the city of Reeser and headed for the mountains. They had decided to take the contract on the rogue adventurer. Their target was a drake who had murdered other adventurers and stolen all of their gear. The drake had been a part of two team group that had attempted to brave the mountains of the territory, where apparently a new boss monster had spawned. The guild didn't have much information, other than the notification that the people in the area had gotten and then the people disappearing into the mountains. That suggested a powerful monster. Two gold teams decided to take the contract and attempt to kill the boss monster. As far as the Guild knew, the two teams hadn't worked together before and had both been visitors to this territory.

The only reason why the Guild even knew about what happened was that one of the adventurers was a twin, and had spoken with his sibling to call for aid. None came in time, and the team that had been sent into the mountains was missing as well. Two teams were confirmed dead by the twin, and the third was presumed dead.

All three teams had been gold rated, with levels between 90 and 110. They had been hoping that the rewards from the boss would be enough to get them over their second evolution. Zach was on the stronger end of a gold rated warden, which usually capped at around 5 tiers of power. Naha was currently on 8 tiers of power, but she wasn't really built for head-on confrontations, and her build wasn't really all that balanced. Still, Zach felt confident that they could handle the rogue.

None of the other wardens in the territory were over level 100, and while adventurers sometimes did take on bounties on people, all of the most powerful teams operating out of Reeser were currently out of the city.

It was a good opportunity for Zach and Naha, so he decided that they should take the contract. They walked for the better part of the day, before making a camp at the foot of the mountain where they believed their target was hiding out. Before leaving the city they had taken their monthly contribution from the warden interface at the guild. Since they had done four bounties in the last month, the bonus was substantial. It was another of the

reasons why he had agreed to do the last bounty, because even though the reward was close to nothing it would add to their monthly bonus.

Both of them had gotten around 15,000 Greater Essence, which meant that Zach would have around 30,000 GE to use, since Naha was not advancing her Class or Path but was focusing on her skills. She would cycle and create Essence Crystals for Zach to use for his Class. With the dagger and her crystals, he was going to be advancing at a fast rate, but he wasn't going to advance unless he had enough to gain another perk. So far he was more than 30,000 GE short of reaching level 165.

If their hunt was successful, he should have more than enough. The reward was 20,000 GE for the confirmed kill, plus whatever they manage to get by killing the rogue and from his gear.

After they set up their little camp, they moved a bit away and started practicing their skills. Naha had evolved her **|Shadow Stealth|** into a tier 6 skill, relatively easily at that. She had always felt safe in the shadows and it didn't take much for her to take that leap. Now, she was practicing her **|Dagger Mastery|** and her **|Cut|**, along with her new skills **|Mind Resistance|** and **|Evade|**. Her mind skill was actually progressing quite fast, and had already hit tier 2.

Zach on the other hand was practicing his **|Flurry Strikes|**. He had improved his **|Enhanced Weakness Sense|** and his **|Greater Evade|** to **|Vulnerability Sense|** and **|Evading Dash|**. He had also managed to hit the 10/10 for his **|Sealing Slash|**. The issue with it, and why Zach believed that its progress had slowed, was because he hadn't been using it on different people. Since then, he had used it on several different opponents. And he was starting to get a better sense of the sealing part of the attack. The ability to silence someone's power use, even if for a few moments was invaluable and had saved his life many times. The quest for it was to seal 1000 different people or monsters powers for more than a second, which meant that he needed to charge it for a few moments. It was slow going, but Zach was planning to skip the quest anyway. He just needed to get a feel for it a bit more.

Naha and he trained for a few hours, sparring in the clearing next to their camp, and then they retired for the night, taking turns standing watch. They needed to be well rested for the next day.

The trek through the winding path up the mountain was without any surprises, but both of them remained alert, looking for any signs of their target. A flying monster flew high above their heads, heading away from them and as soon as Zach's eyes fell on it windows appeared in his vision.

Great Eragill (LVL 123-Mid Foundation)

Strength	97
Dexterity	154
Vitality	121
Endurance	111
Intelligence	37
Wisdom	32

Classification	Great Eragill (R)
Tier	4
Aspect	Wind
Ability	Swoop
Aura	Screech
Ability	Rend

The Ring of Deepscan on his finger showed him more than he usually would've seen. It was Naha's, another powerful item that she had gathered over her long life. She had one as well. They weren't the most powerful of their type of items, as Naha had told him. They worked better on monsters than on people. When looking at people the most that he could get was their level and cultivation realm. Still, it was useful, so he did try to use it when he could. He didn't wear it in public nor when he was expecting combat against

more than one opponent. The ring couldn't be filtered so it always showed the screens from those Zach looked at. And that distraction could be too much in certain situations. Now, they were expecting a single opponent so he wasn't that worried about it.

They walked for a while, heading toward the last known location of the adventuring teams. Finally, they arrived at a clearing in front of a shallow cave, and found a bloody scene. The bodies of the adventurers were still there, most stripped clean of even their clothes. Blood covered the ground, and the lifeless eyes of the adventurers gazed blankly at the sky. The bodies were arranged in a circle, almost as if they had been part of some kind of a ritual.

Zach walked over to one of the bodies and knelt, looking it over. The wounds on the naked body were savage, made by a big bladed weapon, something with enough power that it cut through bones. He walked around, looking at the other bodies, inspecting them. The bodies told the story of a battle, and it made Zach worried.

"What do you see Naha?" Zach asked.

She walked over to stand over him and looked at the bodies. She wore her female Ravzor body, mostly because it was bigger and therefore had longer reach.

"The wounds are from a person, not a monster," she started. "I don't see the monster's body, so they either killed it somewhere else or it is still alive. They died at the hands of their comrade."

Zach nodded, he could tell that she knew what he was worried about. She walked a few steps away and looked at the other bodies. "All of the wounds were made by the same type of a weapon," she knelt and touched one of the wounds, pushed her fingers inside and then repeated the process with another body. "The exact same weapon I guess."

Zach had feared as much. That meant that the rogue was stronger than them. One person had killed seven others. The bodies here didn't even account for the missing team, they could still be alive somewhere in the mountains but... If the rogue was this strong he could've ambushed them somewhere else.

"The rogue is too strong," Naha said. "The information said that he is level 97, this..."

She gestured with her hand at the bodies, at the ritualistic placement of them.

“Do you think that he had help?” Zach asked, they could be interpreting what they were seeing wrong.

Naha’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t think so, there are no signs of other weapon use on the bodies. All were killed by a large bladed weapon, an axe most likely.”

That tracked with what they knew of the rogue. He was supposed to have a Berserker-like-class. What worried Zach was the way that the bodies were arranged. He opened his mouth to tell Naha his suspicion when he saw her sprang into motion. She smashed into him and pushed him to the side, rolling with him over as something smashed into the ground where he had been kneeling.

They both sprang to their feet as soon as they could, and Zach saw what looked to be a stone double-headed axe embedded in the ground. Naha’s **|Perfect Danger Sense|** had saved his life, or at least saved his **Second Chance** perk.

The axe dissolved, turning into gray dust that disappeared a moment later, letting Zach know that it was a construct, an ability or a technique.

A petulant sigh came from somewhere above the cave entrance and Zach turned his eyes there, immediately seeing the orc-looking man standing there, another axe forming in his hand. His ring immediately showed him the man’s window.

Name	Balloras Fotes
Class	Essence Ritualist
Level	203
Main Path	Path of the Stone Axe
Realm	Peak Lord
Secondary Path	Path of Demonic Power
Realm	Early Lord

“Why is there only the two of you? The last ones had a full team!” He sounded almost as if he was pouting. Zach frowned at his screens. The man

was stronger than he was supposed to be, which made little sense since he was an adventurer. He had to show his screens in order to become one, his class was not the one that was on record, nor was his path. But... Zach knew that such things could be faked, Naha was the proof of that.

Zach summoned his **Ethereal Sword** and pulled out his dagger, Naha crouched and summoned her dagger as well. The man's pout turned into a smile.

"Oh, you are going to fight? This is going to be so much fun," the man said as he swung and threw his axe at them. It flew fast, faster than Zach had expected it to. The wind around him pushed him as he used his **|Evading Dash|**. He got out of the way as it shattered the ground where he used to stand and Naha got shrouded in shadow and moved, jumping forward toward the man. She used her movement ability and closed the distance, appearing next to him as a formless shape made out of shadows and swung her dagger at him even as a blast of Qi left her.

Zach recognized her **|Field of Horrors|** and knew that she had sent an illusion at the man. The rogue didn't seem too phased by it, two more axes manifested in his hands and he blocked Naha's strike and then swung at her with the other. Zach could see that the man had incredibly high stats, but Naha was strong as well. His axe hit her arm as she put it up to block, but Zach could see that she had shifted the limb into something with thick hide. The axe bit into the hide, but only shallowly. Naha pulled back for another strike, but the man stomped on the ground and a rolling wave of stone burst from the impact point, forcing her to back off. He took advantage and swung his axe throwing it at her.

Naha blocked with her dagger and the axe shattered, pelting her with what looked like Stone Qi. Zach had already been running, his **{Charged Focus}** thrumming inside of him. He dismissed his **Ethereal Sword** and sheathed his dagger. The moment he saw that Naha was no longer next to the man, he summoned **Mistral** and sent a blade of wind flying at the man.

The rogue noticed and his skin turned to stone, the blade of air breaking against his skin while cutting only his clothes. An axe flew at Zach's head in retaliation. Zach used his **[Ethereal Leap]** letting the axe pass through him and soaring toward the rogue. The man was surprised by that,

and Zach focused. His **Perfect Tempest Dance** allowed his body to perfectly execute his attack. As he neared the man, the rogue summoned two new axes and raised them to block.

Zach activated his **Last Heir of Terra, Old Heritage**, and one of his new perks—**Dazzling Strike**. He came out of his leap, now again corporeal and swung. His sword met the man's axes and cracked them, but surprisingly they held. It didn't matter. His **Dazzling Strike** activated as it came into contact with his weapons, which in turn were directly being touched by his hands. He saw the man's eyes go wide and wild as he was blinded. With **Perfect Tempest Dance** Zach pirouetted behind the man and pulled **Mistral** back, then he swung activating his **|Flurry Strikes|**.

Instead of stabs, this time his skill activated a flurry of side swipes, or rather strikes with the blade of his sword. The skill smashed into the blinded rogue's unprotected back and Zach felt and saw his rock skin crack. The force of the attack sent the man flying from the top of the cave and down toward the clearing, where Naha was waiting.

The man's eyesight returned, and Zach saw him see Naha waiting with her dagger ready. He roared and the bodies on the ground twitched. Zach watched as they started to glow and then exploded in a shower of blood that sent Naha flying to the side, hitting the ground hard.

Zach felt anger build inside his body as he flew toward the ground, Qi moving through his body as **Old Heritage** nearly ran out. He landed and extended his hand, using **[Ethereal Chains]** to bind the rogue as he got his bearings. Zach flew toward him, wind pushing him forward faster.

The rogue's skin rippled, and stone spikes grew out of his skin, horns on top of his head and he ripped Zach's chains apart, freeing himself. Zach hadn't known that his **[Ethereal Chains]** could be broken by brute force. The man turned at Zach and roared, sending rolling stone at him. Zach charged forward and used **[Ethereal Wing]** he passed through the man's attack, his sword glowing white and attacked. His strikes cracked the stone skin, but didn't injure the man too much as far as Zach could see.

As Zach turned from his attack, a stone axe flew straight at him, and he had no time to dodge nor did have any of his cooldowns available. He raised

Mistral and blocked, the axe shattered and pelted him, sending him flying back and rolling across the ground.

Zach grimaced as he tried to get up, only to have another axe smash into his chest. He felt the impact deep inside his body, but his armor held. Suddenly he was very much grateful that he had decided to upgrade it. The man was charging at him, new axes forming in his hands when Naha appeared behind him. She had to have used her **Rapid Regeneration** because Zach could see that the side of her face was still mangled from the explosion. She stabbed as she unleashed another technique. Zach saw spectral shapes charge at the rogue, her **{Phantom Army}** attacking him. The rogue startled, and Zach wondered what faces he was seeing, but he didn't dwell on that. He moved, charging at the man as he was taken aback by Naha's attack.

He saw her take advantage and stab her dagger in the man's side through the crack in his stone skin. The man howled, his eyes focusing on Naha just as Zach arrived from the other side. Zach focused on his technique and stabbed forward as he activated both his **{Lightning Strike}** and his **Double Ethereal Strike**. His sword found a crack in the man's shoulder and pushed through, unleashing his Lightning Qi into the man's body, and then, half a second later another strike followed, a copy of the first. The ethereal blade stabbed through Zach's sword in the same spot, and unleashed its attack. Ethereal damage burned the man and he roared, suddenly his stone skin cracked and exploded outward showering both Zach and Naha with stone, blowing them back.

Zach got back to his feet and saw the rogue bent over, breathing heavily, his protection gone. He sent a blade of air at the man's feet, and the rogue still had enough willpower to move. He evaded right into Naha's attack. Her dagger stabbed him in the lower back, and Zach saw his legs go limp and him fall as she severed his spinal cord.

She bent over and grabbed the man's hair, pulling him back. Then glanced at Zach.

"Use the dagger," Naha said.

Zach saw the man glaring at Zach, and then open his mouth to speak, but Naha didn't let him, she crushed his windpipe and he started choking.

“Hurry,” she urged him.

Zach walked forward. “Isn’t it your turn?” He asked.

Naha glanced back at the man. “He is advanced, you will benefit more.”

Zach sighed as he pulled his dagger from his lower back. He stabbed the man in the heart, trying really hard not to think of how just executing the man looked. He was a terrible person, someone who had killed his teammates and did horrible things to their bodies. The bounty on his head called for his death. There was nothing wrong with what he was doing. Except for the fact that he was taking his Essence, and that Zach was pretty sure that the man was a Pilferer too. Someone who had gone off the deep end and turned into a monster. He wondered if he too would become like him in the future.

The Essence flowed from the man and into Zach. He blinked as he saw the amount, the man had to have had a lot of Essence unassigned. Perhaps what he gained from killing the other team, but hadn’t had the chance to use yet. Zach had gained just over 70,000 Greater Essence. If his math was correct, if the man had cycled several times, then at most he should’ve gained around 50,000 GE, which meant that the man had almost 20,000 GE unassigned.

“That’s good,” Naha smiled at him as he told her how much he gained. They moved the body to the floor and started taking down valuables. He had some epic rings that boosted stats, a nice rare belt and epic boots. Then, they found his storage ring and looked inside. The man had a smaller storage than Zach did, but it was filled to brim with items, probably all that he had stolen from the other teams. By rights, all of that now belonged to Zach and Naha.

They cut the rogue’s head off and stored it as proof of their kill, and then they walked half way down the mountain to make camp, and go through the items in the storage. It seemed like this contract had turned out more lucrative than Zach had hoped it would be.