

Act II - Zach

Zach and the woman he rescued, who he now knew was called Gen and was apparently Gemheart's daughter, ran down the corridors. He understood now why the High Ranker was in such a rush to get inside and search for his people. Perhaps he would've done it anyway, but having his daughter inside was probably a big factor too.

They were heading away from the ritual room, as they heard spirits and probably even shades behind. Zach had seen a few patrols with shades as part of them. He didn't know if those were just shades that worked with the spirits, or if the spirits were releasing some of the prisoners in return for something. It didn't matter in the end, Zach had no intention of fighting. They had to survive for less than eight hours, inside a prison where everyone would be looking for them. He hoped that the response would be something like the one he had seen below when the yeti escaped. But the noise behind them made him think that it was unlikely. For some reason that ritual was more important to them than one prisoner escaping.

Zach kept his Dark Form active, without the blade, and he was using its power to pull darkness around them as they ran. He led Gen down the corridors that he had mapped out days ago.

"This place is crawling with spirits, can we even survive until your cooldown comes back?" Gen whispered.

"We are going to try," Zach said. "We are not going to fight, we are going to run. Think that you can keep up this pace for a few hours?"

Zach couldn't see her face, since she was just a blob of darkness, but he could tell that she tensed through the hand he was holding.

"I will keep up," Gen answered.

"I know that you said that you can take down a wall, but do you have anything else that could be of use to us?" Zach asked.

He felt her hesitation, people in the Infinite Realm didn't like to reveal their powers. "I can crack the stone floor and stun the spirits for a moment or two, and if they get close my mining abilities can probably put a hole in a lesser warden spirit."

Zach grimaced, that wasn't enough, but he hadn't planned on relying on her anyway. Finally, they reached the doorway with stairs leading down that he had been looking for.

"Down? Where are we going?" Gen asked.

"I've spent weeks on the lower floors, I know them better while I have no idea what is above us. I'd much rather contend with what I know. Plus, I have a plan if the worst comes," Zach answered as they ran down the stairs.

"Smart, I don't think that we want to encounter the things that are on the upper floors," Gen shuddered.

"You know something? When I came in with the High Ranker's team, we encountered powerful shades and hundreds of lesser spirits."

"I saw a spirit, I think that it is the strongest spirit here... I couldn't see its level, I saw only question marks. But the color of its name, the rarity... I never saw that color before, and I spent a lot of time with powerful people, the company has recovered some pretty powerful items from the Under. That was... I think that it might be the highest rarity possible."

Zach didn't say anything, he really didn't want to encounter anything like that. They headed down, rushing through the corridors and searching for more stairs leading down, heading toward the area with the shade cells.

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It took them over three hours to reach the three ringed shade area. They had a few close calls, where they had to hide inside rooms as large patrols of spirits and shades passed through. But it seemed like most of the spirits and shades searching for them were focused on the higher floors, which was Zach's intent in the first place.

The voices of the old masters were muted in his head, ready and waiting. His cooldown on it had decreased and he could keep it on for longer since he advanced. But not even the heightened stats that he gained from it could push away his tiredness. He was aching all over, the wounds that had started to heal, bruises and cracked bones. If he didn't have his **Phantom Avatar** and **Phantom Mantle** during that last fight he would've died for certain. With them, he had 70% more resistance to physical and special

damage, and his **Resistant Soul** was helping a lot. He could tell that the wounds of his soul were healing faster, not that they were critical in the first place. But the elemental had managed to score a few powerful hits on him.

He was keeping himself up and running by sheer will alone. He knew that he needed a healing potion or at least a week of rest, but he had to continue. He still had three **Spirit Bomb**'s, but he didn't want to use them, he needed them in case things really turned bad.

"How long?" Gen asked as they huddled in one of the side rooms. They were taking periodic breaks to rest and for him to recover some of his mental stamina. Using the darkness form of his soul weapon was draining him.

"Less than five hours," Zach said. They were going slowly, making sure that they don't run into any of the spirits. They had been lucky so far, but just before they had gotten down to this floor they heard a lot more noise above them. The spirits were coming behind them, probably searching floor by floor.

He couldn't even imagine how many spirits it would take to cover one floor, he had never reached the end of one.

After a few more minutes of silence, Gen spoke again. "You must be very strong, the way that you fought those spirits was incredible. You have to have at least nine tiers of power, right?"

For a moment Zach wondered if she was trying to draw information out of him, but by the end he had heard the nervousness in her voice. She was afraid, and wanted to be reassured. Zach could lie, but that wasn't who he was. And it was also a bit of a sore spot with him, the way that everyone in the Infinite Realm believed that power alone was important.

"No, I have six tiers of power," Zach said to her.

"Oh, you have a single focus then," she said in a tone that was almost surprised.

Zach chuckled. "No, I have tiers in all three ways of power. I am level 239," Zach told her.

For a moment she didn't respond, but Zach could feel her shock radiating outward. "That... how? That elemental alone should've killed you." She whispered.

“Power isn’t the only thing that matters. Mastery of your own powers and real skill can bridge the gap. And I am very good at what I do,” Zach said.

He had spent ten years on Earth honing his combat instincts, his fighting style and understanding his powers. He had done the same in the Infinite Realm, perhaps not to the same extent, but a lot more than an average person here did. The **Last Heir of Terra** was one of his greatest weapons, it improved all that he was, made him able to stand against those who were much stronger.

“You are just one level away from an evolution?” Gen asked excitedly. “That fight in the ritual room had to have given you Essence, can’t you evolve?”

“I can,” Zach said. He had the Essence to evolve, he had it before he even entered the ritual room. “But I won’t.”

“What? Why?” Gen asked.

Zach wondered how he should answer that. Telling her that he wanted to fight those stronger than him while he was weaker in order to gain more power later would probably not be received all that well. And that was a truth, although not all of it. Zach had other reasons for not evolving his class.

“It is too much of a risk,” Zach answered finally.

“Risk? What do you mean?”

“I don’t have the time to train with a new evolution, nor to even to consider which evolution to take. And I have no idea what will happen to my abilities when I evolve. Depending on the choice I make they might change slightly, or they might change greatly, and we can’t afford getting into a combat with me not understanding my abilities.”

Gen didn’t respond, but Zach knew what she was thinking. Those kind of reasons were probably alien to her.

“Come, we should move,” Zach said and stood up, pulling her behind him.

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Zach pulled his sword out of the eye of a warden and then looked behind him. Gen was standing there, breathing hard. They had run into a

small patrol group of three spirits. Zach had jumped at them immediately, but his tiredness made him slower. He missed a killing attack and a spirit headed for Gen. It was injured, so she did manage to kill it with one of her abilities. It was actually pretty impressive. She put her hands in front of her and something resembling a drill appeared in her hand, it pushed through the spirit... not easily but she got the job done. Zach was pretty sure that she had drilled through one of the wounds that Zach had made in its torso.

As Gen walked over Zach glanced at his cooldown. Less than half an hour was left, but now they were in a tough spot. He could hear more and more spirits around them. And this fight had screwed them. The noise and the fact that they had been forced to stop had cost them, it announced to the other spirits where they were.

“We need to go,” Gen said, her voice panicked.

Zach grimaced and looked around at the cells. “One moment,” he said and moved over to a cell. He pulled the lever and opened it up. He hadn’t wanted to do this, but now he didn’t think that they had much more choice. They were so close.

“What are you doing?” Gen demanded as Zach entered the cell and summoned his **Ethereal Sword**. He raised the big two handed weapon and moved his Qi. Then he slashed with it and used his **[Flurry Strikes]**. Chunks of the wall and the formations exploded as he destroyed them, and he saw the other formations in the room dim then wink out. The shade in the middle slumped and he saw it stir. He jumped out and opened another cell, then did the same in another two cells before the first one managed to wake up groggily.

A five ringed shade glared at him from the floor and Zach grabbed Gen and ran.

“Why did you do that?” She asked as they heard the shade howl.

Then, as they rounded a corner Zach heard more loud noises and then the sounds of combat. “Because of that,” Zach pointed back. The spirits had reached the place and found three escaped shades.

They ran down the corridors, listening intently for any signs of spirits. Gen had some kind of seismic sense, so they could avoid them fairly well, but there were too many of them for her to be precise with them.

Once they were sufficiently away, Zach stopped and started opening cells again. He let out four shades and then they ran again. They repeated the same process twice over the next ten minutes, getting another ten shades free.

Soon, he could hear sounds of fighting behind them intensifying as they ran deeper.

They didn't bother with covering themselves with darkness, they only needed to evade their pursuers. They were minutes away when they entered a large round room with several corridors leading in different directions.

Zach was about to take a random one when Gen yelled out.

"Incoming!" She said and pointed at one of the dark corridors. With his **|Night Eyes|** Zach saw the shape approaching and he barely had the time to raise his hands and summon a sword to block. A shade attacked with an axe and drove Zach's feet into the ground, cracking it. He groaned from the strain as the he stopped the axe from killing him, but it still bit into his shoulder.

He yelled and activated **Phantom Avatar** and **Old Heritage**, with one big burst of strength he pushed the shade away and kicked it in the chest, sending it flying across the room.

He was about to take Gen and run, when he detected another shade enter the room from another corridor to the left, carrying a long sword in one hand. *Fuck*—Zach thought to himself, keeping his eyes on them.

"Get back Gen," Zach said, the voices in his head intensifying. He was too tired for them to run, they had no way of outrunning them.

"We are dead," Gen whispered as she walked back behind him.

The first shade stood up and glared at him as it joined the second one in the center of the room. Two sets of eyes glared at him with seven rings around their eyes. They were both the molten type of shade, and both wore armor and had weapons, which meant that these shades served the prison. Behind them he heard the sounds of battle as the spirits fought the prisoners, but Zach knew that they didn't have a lot of time before they arrived and overwhelmed them.

His cooldown was almost done, a less than two minutes remaining.

He stood and waited as his **Old Heritage** run out, he didn't attack first, deciding that his goal was to steal as much time as he could.

But then the shades decided that they had waited enough. Both of them jumped forward at him, moving incredibly fast. Zach changed his sword to a short one and summoned his Time Blade as he dashed left, closer to one of the shades.

The fact that he closed the distance surprised it, and Zach took advantage. He feinted with his blade toward its head, making it raise its sword to block, but Zach pirouetted instead and cut with his short sword on its thigh. His sword hit the armor and sparks flew as it rebounded. He missed the seam that he had been aiming for, his tiredness made him sloppy. The shade attacked, but Zach blocked by striking at the shade's sword and using **Dazzling Strike**. The shade roared in anger as it was blinded and Zach turned his attention to the other shade.

He had put the sword wielding shade between himself and the other one, making sure that they couldn't gang up on him. But while he fought the other shade had enough time to move around and attack.

Zach saw that he wasn't going to be fast enough to block, so he triggered **Slow Time**. The shade's axe slowed and Zach moved out of the way as he changed to Blood Blade. It took less than half a second for his blade to change forms, but it still took some time. The shade struck the floor and a crack of fire exploded in all directions. It stumbled forward as it hadn't expected to miss him completely. As soon as Zach's blade changed, he attacked using his **Flurry Strikes** and cut into its hand and back.

The shade's skin was tough but he did manage to open gashes and draw whatever it was that shades had instead of blood. His blade didn't just take blood Essence, but also life. Which apparently shade's still possessed somewhat. He felt the blade fill with the Essence and used it immediately. He triggered the blade's healing and felt his tiredness abate slightly.

He jumped back, the voices in his head singing a symphony along with his own mind. They were in sync and he acted on instinct. He got some room between himself and the shades as the other shade recovered its sight. He looked at them waiting for them to come to him.

Then a sword came for him, the shade blinking next to him faster than he could react. He moved, but he wasn't fast enough. The sword cut right through his throat, but he had managed to at least save his spine. He

triggered **Rewind** and the sword and the wound were gone. He immediately started to move, and when the shade blinked again, it wasn't as close to him as it had been the first time. It attacked again, and Zach blocked with his blade. The strength of the attack surprised him, his blade managed to move the attack only slightly aside and the sword punched through his shoulder eliciting a cry of pain from Zach's lips.

Before the shade could pull his sword out and attack again, Zach stepped forward, impaling the sword deeper and then twisting with his hips and shoulders. He cut the wound open and deeper, but then the sword got caught in his armor and he managed to rip the sword away from the shade's hand.

He raised his hand and [**Ethereal Chains**] enveloped the shade. It screamed as the chains burned it, it bound the soul and shades were nothing but the soul.

He saw an axe made out of fire coming for his neck as the other shade attacked, Zach had just enough time to use |**Spatial Evade**| and move out of the way. The now weaponless shade broke his chains and its body increased in size and a new sword replaced the old one in its hand, then it charged at him. Zach used his **Plane Blink** and got out of the way, landing near Gen on the other side of the room.

She looked at his chest with wide eyes and Zach realized that she was looking at the sword still in his shoulder.

"Grab hold of it," Zach said, and then when she didn't move immediately, "Now! Quickly!"

That snapped her out of it and she put her hands on the sword and started to pull. Zach yelled in pain as he moved back and added his strength to hers. The sword wrenched itself free and he turned around only to see the two shades heading toward him.

He pulled out a **Spirit Bomb** out of his ring and threw it. The shades saw it coming, of course, and moved to avoid it, but he hadn't thrown it at them. He threw it on the ground in front of them.

The bomb exploded and the liquid splashed over one of their legs. The shade screamed immediately and Zach used [**Ethereal Leap**] to close the

distance, then he used [**Ethereal Wing**]. He cut through the shade that was injured and it fell to the ground screaming, but still alive.

The shade with the axe roared, fire blooming all around him, then he flashed into fire and flew across the room. He rematerialized in front of Zach and swung faster than Zach could block with just one good hand.

Zach changed to Blood Blade as soon as he activated **Time Stop**. His head throbbed in pain as he used another of his Aspect abilities and the shade froze. Zach pushed through the pain, his mind nearly cracking, but his focus unshaken, he attacked with his |**Flurry Strikes**| opening up gashes across its side where its armor had openings. As the last attack, he stabbed his blade into its side and drained more Essence. Then, before the time continued moving he jumped back and healed himself and went back to Time Blade.

The time resumed and the shade fell to the ground, the fire around it disappearing. Zach heard it yell something, but he didn't pay it any attention. His cooldown was down to seconds and he turned around, he used **Plane Blink** and arrived next to Gen. He saw her eyes open wide as she looked over his shoulder.

The symphony in his head exploded but it wasn't fast enough, the sword from the other shade cut through his side as he tried to use |**Spatial Evade**|, but he wasn't fast enough. The pain made him lose the skill and he looked down to see his body nearly cut in half. He focused on his blade and used **Rewind**. The wound disappeared and he just ended his blink again. He used his |**Spatial Evade**| to get away, taking a step to the right even as he activated his **Ethereal Double Strike** to swing widely behind him.

The sword didn't cut through him. Instead the shade had seen him evade before it had even made the strike. Zach cursed himself as he saw its attack come a moment later and change its trajectory. He had still surprised it as its eyes were open wide, but Zach couldn't avoid its attack this time.

The sword cut through Zach's thigh and cleaved his leg clean off. Then Zach's attack arrived and cut through the shade's face, right over its eyes. It screamed as the Ethereal portion of the attack came a moment later and dug deeper, but it didn't kill it. The attack was shallow, enough to cut out the eyes, but not enough to cut through the head.

Zach fell on the ground and saw Gen standing above him in with a terrified look on her face.

The shade fell to the ground, howling in pain and Zach gritted his teeth tasting blood. His body was shaking from the effort as he turned and pushed himself up, summoning a large sword and leaning on it, using it as a crutch.

His cooldown came back and he yelled.

“Come here!”

Gen was startled, but she ran to him as Zach activated his **Ethereal Fissure** and stabbed the space in front of him with his blade. The blade sunk into space and he howled as he tried to force the perk to be faster. He heard spirits approaching and then a loud roar behind him.

He turned his head and saw the axe wielding shade running at him with its weapon raised high. Zach couldn't raise his other hand, since he used it for support and would fall over, and his other was stuck opening the rift.

But then Gen stomped with her leg and the stone floor cracked beneath the shade's legs. It lost its footing and stumbled into the crack, falling to the ground.

The rift opened and Zach dismissed his blade and grabbed Gen, pulling her inside as he fell into the rift. He hit the stone in a dark room that was the exact copy of the one they were in just a moment before.

Zach focused on the rift and it closed shut behind them.

Then they were alone in the dark and silence. Zach looked at Gen with his **Night Eyes**, he opened his mouth to speak, but he felt his mind and body just give up, and he slipped into sleep.