

Act II - Zach

Zach woke up slowly, his mind foggy at first, but then he remembered. He sat up summoning his **Ethereal Sword**, his eyes scanning his dim surrounding as his **|Night Eyes|** slowly made everything clearer.

“Easy warden, you are safe,” a voice nearby said. Zach turned his eyes in that direction and saw a massive shape sitting on the ground. It took Zach a moment to recognize the High Ranker, Gemheart. “You’ve finally awakened. We were getting worried, it had been several days since we found you.”

Zach immediately dismissed his sword and looked at him. The High Ranker did not look good. One of his lower arms was missing, and his carapace had a long gash down the middle of his body that looked like a scar, or at least as if something had cracked his carapace and then that crack was filled with something. He turned his eyes up to look him in the eyes and noticed that one of his eyes was missing too.

“Yes, we’ve both suffered injuries,” Gemheart said, and Zach remembered losing his leg.

Immediately he looked down and saw that he was sitting in bed, covered by a blanket. He reached with his hand and found that he had both of his legs. Although the one that he had lost felt... numb somehow. He turned his eyes to Gemheart and tried to think about what he should ask first.

Gemheart made the choice for him. “By the time we found you, your leg wound had closed itself. Gen said that you had no potions, so I assume a perk of some kind. It saved your life, otherwise you would’ve bled out.”

Zach glanced at his leg, it had to have been **Second Chance**. If a wound would cause him to die, it healed the damage. Blood loss from losing a leg seemingly counted.

“We gave you a high grade **Elixir of Restoration**, it grew your leg back, and then we gave you a **Soul Restoration Potion**. You are lucky that it hadn’t been too long since you lost it, otherwise you

would've never walked on that leg again. Still, it had been lost for a few hours, it will take a few months for it to get back to normal."

Zach nodded his head, thankful. "How did you find us?" Zach asked, he didn't think that Gen could've carried Zach all the way to the top.

"My people were exploring the structure in the real world, trying to figure out what its purpose is," Gemheart said.

"You escaped before my rift closed," Zach turned to look at Gemheart, afraid to ask a question.

"We did, we were unable to get much deeper into the structure before we were overwhelmed. I killed thousands of shades and spirits, but ultimately I saw that we had no chance. Without knowing if you lived or died, I knew that we couldn't risk getting stuck in the Ethereal."

"My partner, Naha, is she..?" Zach asked finally, fearing the answer. He knew how powerful some of the things in the prison were, and he was sure that they had sent all of their strongest against Gemheart. Perhaps that was why he hadn't encountered anything on the level of the shade he had seen on the bridge.

"She is alive," Gemheart said and Zach relaxed. "Although, there is something that you should know. I am not certain if you are aware or not, but your partner is a shapeshifter."

Zach saw Gemheart studying him calmly and he sighed. "I know," Zach said finally. He didn't know how much Gemheart knew. In theory, warden records were not accessible for anyone who was not part of the Citadel, so Gemheart shouldn't be able to tell that Naha was masquerading as warden Nyathulla. In practice, though... Gemheart was a High Ranker, who knew what kind of information he had access to.

"Ah," Gemheart said. "I will not pry, I owe you much and for that alone I will not meddle in your affairs."

Zach released a breath that he hadn't realized he had been holding. "Thank you. Where is she?"

"Well, she did not take your fall well. We... we've had to drag her out of the Ethereal, and after... She is currently restrained."

Zach winced, and tried to get up. “I should go and—”

Gemheart raised a hand and stopped him. “A few minutes more, there are things that we should discuss.”

Zach grimaced, but then nodded, a few more minutes wouldn't change much.

“First, you've been inside the structure for a long time, I would like you to tell me all that you've seen and experienced,” Gemheart said as he leaned down to look at Zach.

Seeing the intensity of that one eyed gaze, Zach took a deep breath and started to speak. He told him of his fall and of how he found Kishua dead on the ground level. Then he spoke of hiding in the bottom levels, of seeing the imprisoned shades. Gemheart's pincers twitched, but Zach didn't know enough about kreceans to tell what he was feeling. Finally, he reached the portion about the yeti and its prison.

Zach decided to tell the man the truth. Releasing the yeti had been... He didn't yet know if it had been a mistake, without what the yeti had done to Mistral Zach probably wouldn't have survived. And yet... the yeti was a dangerous individual. He didn't tell him anything about the dream or his soul weapon, but he did tell him about the conversation he had with the prisoner and that he had released him. The High Ranker didn't react, or try to interrupt him, so Zach continued telling his story until he reached his rescue of Gen and then their escape. There Zach noticed a slight change in the krecean's posture, but again he couldn't recognize it.

When he finished, Gemheart nodded his head.

“A prison for shades and an eighteen ringed shade... I don't know how smart releasing that thing was, but, it is not my place to judge. We opened the cursed thing, this is all my fault.”

Gemheart seemed lost in his own thoughts. Zach felt like he should stay silent, but his curiosity got the better of him. “Why are you still injured?” Zach asked. If the High Ranker had resources enough to heal Zach, he should have some that could heal himself too.

The High Ranker glanced down at his body, then gestured at his wounds with one of his hands. “During our retreat we encountered a

spirit, what I believe to be the ruler of that place. It was... too strong, even for me. I managed to hold it off for a few precious seconds, enough for the others to get through. In that time it did this to me. The wounds are proving... hard to heal.”

Zach blinked, something powerful enough to damage the High Ranker that much and also prevent healing... he couldn't imagine what it could be. And yet, if yeti had been kept prisoner then perhaps something even worse watched over that place. “It was that strong?” Zach asked.

“The strongest being I have ever seen. Spirits and monsters don't have the same advancements as we do, they have no class or cultivation or skill. The levels and stages that we see when we look at them are just approximations of their power, meant to tell a person what they should expect from a monster. That spirit... the level and the stage that I had seen were the last in both class and cultivation, and I am pretty sure that it had something similar to skills. It was too strong, and my focus is not combat. That place cannot be conquered like this. It will take a team of dozens of the strongest combat focused High Rankers to even attempt it, and even then...”

“What are you going to do?” Zach asked.

“I've closed the hole in the wall that we made, and collapsed the tunnels, we will leave this place be for now. I am going to need to speak with other High Rankers that I trust and let them know about what we found. Perhaps someday we will be strong enough to take it on.”

Gemheart shook his head, and then spoke again. “But that is not your concern right now. You've done me a great service, you saved my daughter, for this I am in your debt. You will receive the reward promised to you for opening the way to the Ethereal Realm. But, for saving my daughter, when you didn't have to, I will provide you with anything that is in my power to give.”

Zach blinked, his first instinct was to say that it wasn't necessary, that he had done it without expecting a reward. And while that was true, this world was not his old one. He bowed his head and spoke. “Thank you sir, may I think about it for a while?”

“Of course,” Gemheart said. “Me and mine will be departing this place in a few days, you are welcome to come with us to our territory since access to our dungeons was part of the reward. Or you may come at any time you wish.”

“I would like to speak with my partner before I make any kind of decision,” Zach said.

“Very well,” Gemheart said and stood up slowly.

Zach followed, he placed his weight on his leg and nearly fell. It worked, but he could barely feel it. The numbness was... annoying.

He followed Gemheart out of the pavilion and into a large cavern that was their base. He saw people packing things up and preparing to depart. He noticed Gen standing next to a group of miners. She saw him and waved, Zach returned the wave as he walked by.

They reached a smaller tent and Zach glanced at Gemheart.

“She is inside. We’ve told her that you returned, but... we didn’t remove her chains,” Gemheart put his hand out and a key appeared in it.

Zach took it and then entered the tent.

She was sitting on the ground, her hands tied behind her back, her legs crossed and her eyes closed in what Zach recognized as her meditation pose. “Naha,” Zach said and her eyes opened immediately.

She was in Quell’s form, and as soon as she tried to get up. “Zach! I knew that you weren’t dead,” she said quickly, and then bowed her head. “I’m sorry, sorry, sorry, I lost control. But they, they said that you were dead and I was going to kill them all but I remembered what you said and I tried and tried but they grabbed me and dragged me and—”

Zach walked over to her quickly as she started to ramble, he put his hands around her and she relaxed in his embrace. He saw madness in her eyes. Sometimes he forgot, she could be doing so well at times, or she could pretend to be well. But then... things like this. She was unstable and broken, and it made his heart ache to see her like that.

He unlocked the manacles around her wrists, feeling their neutralization power—they were the same ones that wardens used on

criminals. As soon as he released her, she put her hands around him and didn't let go.

Zach closed his eyes. He could've died, and if he had... This would've been her fate. Chained somewhere because she was a threat to others. Zach knew what she was, knew that there was blood on her hands. And yet, he loved her, and couldn't just let her go.

He kept his hands around her as she moved hers over his back. As she mumbled to herself and tried to convince herself that he was real. He couldn't guarantee that he would always be there for her, to help her control herself. They needed to find a way to help her, and Zach knew exactly the person to ask for help.

* * *

Zach sat inside the tent that he and Naha shared. She was asleep next to him, her hand touching him as if she was worried that he would disappear if she didn't keep in contact with him. It had taken a while for her to go to sleep, but Zach couldn't and didn't need sleep.

He had talked with her and they decided to go with Gemheart and his people. The offer to go through their dungeons was too great to leave for later. But for now, Zach wanted to focus on evolving his class. He had received the Essence reward from Gemheart, but he had enough to reach level 240 even without it. Still, he didn't plan on leveling beyond 240 for now. It was a lot of Essence and he wanted to see what kind of dungeons Gemheart had to offer, he was going to choose the best dungeon for him and Naha to gain something, and he didn't want to over level something that could provide them with good gains. Besides, there was a lot that that much Essence could buy.

For now, he was only going to hit his next evolution.

He placed the Essence into his Class and leveled. The three choices appeared in front of him and he read through.

Class Evolution Available		
CLASS	DESCRIPTION	ATTUNEMENT

<p>Spirit Slayer</p>	<p><i>You are the bane of all spirits.</i> Spirit Bane is a warrior focused on dealing with spirits. A Spirit Bane is always at home when fighting in the Ethereal and gains bonuses geared toward disrupting spirits and killing them quickly.</p>	<p>Spirit Hunter: All ethereal based powers are 20% more effective. You gain +20% to all stats when fighting spirits and deal 20% more damage to them. Change your abilities and relevant perks to Spirit Bane type abilities and perks. Gain +10% to strength and 10% to wisdom.</p> <p>!Gain one of the following:</p> <p>-Spirit Sense support ability: Able to detect spirits in a radius around you while in the Ethereal Realm. Radius and duration depends on your highest stat.</p> <p>-Spirit Annihilation offensive ability: Release a devastating Ethereal attack directly in front of you, sending out a blast of concentrated power. Deals 50% more damage to spirits.</p> <p>-Might and insight: Gain plus 10% to base strength and 10% to base wisdom.</p>
<p>Shade Slayer</p>	<p><i>You are a warrior that hunts down and slays the broken, the souls that had gone mad.</i> Shade Slayer is a hunter of a different kind. Instead of hunting monsters, a Shade Slayer</p>	<p>Shade Hunter: All ethereal based powers are 20% more effective. You gain +20% to all stats when fighting shades and deal 20% more damage to them. Change your abilities and relevant perks to Shade Bane type abilities and perks. Gain +10% to dexterity and 10% to wisdom.</p> <p>!Gain one of the following:</p> <p>-Shade Sense support ability: Able to detect shades in a radius</p>

	<p>specializes in hunting shades. A Shade Slayer is always at home in the Ethereal Realm, and gains great power when fighting shades.</p>	<p>around you while in the Ethereal Realm. Radius and duration depends on your highest stat.</p> <p>-Shade Annihilation offensive ability: Release a devastating Ethereal attack directly in front of you, sending out a blast of concentrated power. Deals 50% more damage to shades.</p> <p>-Deftness and insight: Gain plus 10% to base dexterity and 10% to base wisdom.</p>
<p>Planar Warrior</p>	<p><i>You are a warrior, facing enemies to grow strong and protect no matter what plane of existence you reside in.</i> The Planar Warrior is someone who fights in any of the realms in order to gain enough power to protect those who are in need. A Planar Warrior feels at home in any realm and draws his power from the planes of existence he currently resides on.</p>	<p>Planar: All planar powers gain +20% to their effectiveness. Change your abilities and relevant perks to Planar type abilities and perks. Gain +10% to strength and +10% to dexterity.</p> <p>!Gain one of the following:</p> <p>-Astral Projection support ability: Send a piece of your soul to the Astral Plane while your body stays behind. Duration of effect depends on intelligence stat.</p> <p>-Banish to Source offensive ability: You send out a blast of Planar force that returns the target to its own Plane of existence. Denizens of the Ethereal Realm will be sent back to it if they are in the Real Realm. People who have entered the Ethereal Realm in the flesh will be sent back to the Real Realm. Astral Projections will be sent back to their bodies.</p>

		-Might and Deftness: Gain plus 10% to base strength and 10% to base dexterity.
--	--	---

Zach looked at his three choices. He had spent a lot of time thinking about Classes and how they should be raised. From everything that he had read in the Citadel it seemed like specialization was always the best way to proceed. And Zach did agree with that somewhat. But he had a... feeling, something that told him that there was more. It was why he hadn't always picked a direct evolution of his Class. Because while it would've given him more power and focus, it would've narrowed him down into one thing. But a Class's power wasn't that. Specialization and improvement of oneself was what Cultivation did. A Classer had more perks, and they could cover a wide range of powers.

All three of his choices were great, and they were powerful as proved by the change in abilities and some perks. From the Citadel library he knew that such things were rare, but that they did happen, usually when a Class rarity went up.

Zach had always had a nagging suspicion that by picking different paths, by basically jumping from Class tree to Class tree, he would eventually unlock something better. Everything you do and had done in the past influenced what Class you were going to get next. Better Classes were unlocked by achievements, but there had to be some Classes that required different types of Class evolutions to be taken prior to getting unlocked. It had been only a hunch, but now he felt like he was right.

His first two choices were direct, if branching, evolutions of his Phantom Slayer class. Each specializing in one of the type of foes that his Phantom Class gave him bonuses against.

But Zach didn't believe that such focus was the best. He would still keep his attunements, the passive effects would never go away. And his third Class option was more interesting regardless. Each of

them was powerful, but that one called to him. The flavor text was what made him feel like it was a step in the right direction.

Zach had nothing against specialization. And indeed he planned on doing it in the future. Once he had reached high enough and gained powerful enough Class. He didn't want to specialize a Class that was basic, that was... weaker. A great Swordmaster might have enormous power if he managed to specialize and increase his Class rarity, but he would always remain just a sword user. Zach wanted more, a unique type of power, like his soul weapon. He didn't know if his soul weapon had influenced his Class choices at all, and in the end it didn't matter.

He made his choice and immediately got new notifications.

Your Class Abilities and Perks have evolved!

Ethereal Wing >> Planar Whirling Wing

Ethereal Leap >> Planar Wings

Ethereal Chains >> Planar Binding Chains

Ethereal Sight >> Planar True Sight

Double Ethereal Strike >> Double Planar Strike

Ethereal Fissure >> Planar Fissure

Phantom Mantle >> Planar Mantle

Plane Blink >> Planar Blink

Zach pulled up his screens and took a look at the changes.

Planar Whirling Wing

Your weapon turns into a large wing of Planar energy. The energy will be the same as that of the last plane you traveled from. Real plane will deal physical damage, Ethereal plane will deal Ethereal damage, Essence plane will deal an essence damage of the corresponding most dominant essence type. Execute a forward dash, slashing everything around

	<p>you with your weapon. While dashing you are invulnerable to all damage sources. Each slash deals 60% of total damage you would've dealt if you executed a physical slashing attack, as Planar damage of corresponding type. Cooldown: (20sec)</p>
Planar Wings	<p>Summon a pair of wings on your back that last for ten seconds. The type of wings depend on the last plane you traveled from. Real Realms will summon physical wings which you can use to fly. Ethereal will summon Ethereal wings that can let you phase through objects. Essence Realms will summon wings of corresponding most dominant essence type. Cooldown: (50sec)</p>
Planar Binding Chains	<p>Summon a chain construct that bind your target. The type of bindings depend on the last plane you traveled from. Physical, Ethereal, Elemental. Each with different effect. Physical lowers their physical resistances by 20%. Ethereal inflicts soul damage equal to 0.05 percent your total wisdom. Essence deals essence damage of corresponding most dominant essence type. Cooldown: (15 sec)</p>
Planar True Sight	<p>Activate your Planar True Sight in order to see into the weak spots in the Planes around you. Range of sight equals 20 paces around you. Cooldown: (50min) Duration: 1h or until canceled</p>

Double Planar Strike (Class Perk)	Once per combat execute a strike that will copy itself. The copy depends on the last plane you traveled from. Real will copy a physical strike. Ethereal an Ethereal strike, Essence an Essence strike of a corresponding most dominant element. The strike follows behind the first one on a 0.5 sec delay and deals 40% of the original attack's power.
Planar Fissure	Once per fifteen days cut through space with any weapon and open a rift that will allow you to fully step into another plane. The fissure will remain open for one day unless closed.
Planar Mantle	Gain a passive bonus depending on the last plane you traveled from. Real plane, gain +10% bonus to all stats. Ethereal plane, gain +20% reduction to physical and special damage. Essence plane, gain +20% bonus to essence damage of corresponding most dominant essence type.
Planar Blink	Eight times per combat, and unlimited outside of combat, teleport to any place in a twenty meter radius around you, or step through a weak spot on the plane you are currently in to blink to another plane.

Zach felt good about the changes, even though he didn't quite yet understand what all of them meant. But he had time to figure it out. He saw that he had a perk to chose, but he put it aside for now. There

would be time for that in the future. For now, he relaxed and listened to Naha's breathing as she slept.