Act II - Zach

Zach and Naha rode their mounts up the twisting road leading toward the pass between two mountains. They had spent two weeks traveling to their next destination, hoping to find more bounties. They had outgrown or finished all the bounties that fit their code in Reeser, and needed to move to a new territory, find a new base of operations.

Back in Reeser, Zach had asked around the guildhouse about where they could find more bounties as well as contracts that involved the Ethereal realm as well as more information on it, since he wanted to explore that part of his powers. They had been pointed toward Dall'dvor, the city of inventions. They had been forced to take a teleporter to get close enough to the city. The only reason why they had to even travel was because a teleport directly to Dall'dvor's teleporters was expensive, and they didn't have enough Essence to pay for the teleport. Dall'dvor was one of the big cities, a hub, teleports to it were expensive.

They reached the pass, and finally saw their destination in the distance. Zach blinked at what he saw, his eyes open wide and his mouth hanging open. Before him stood a massive gate built into the mountain's side. Two statues of carved out of gray stone flanked the entrance, one a minotaur holding a small hammer raised above his head, and the other a demasi holding what looked like a feather—a quill, Zach realized. The gate was far in the distance, enough so that he could tell that the two statues were truly massive.

But what made him even more amazed was the entire mountain side spreading in the distance. There were large towers built in the mountain range, and from each smoke was rising up to the sky. The more he looked the more he realized that they were probably just massive chimneys or something like that.

Zach knew little about Dall'dvor, only that it was a city focused on inventions. He knew that it was from here that the technology of the Infinite Realm came from, such as it was. He hadn't really seen any signs of any kind of technology anywhere else, not like what Earth had before the Framework arrived. There were small things. Carriages that moved by themselves, street

lights, but all of those things were powered by formations not by what he considered technology.

He was quite interested in seeing what the city had to offer.

Dall'dvor was one of the largest cities in the Infinite Realm, with a population of over three hundred million. It was led by a single faction, the Inventors Guild, which ruled only this one territory. The city was underground, and it spread throughout the entire mountain, and bellow it. The city actually had a connection to the Under, the world that existed beneath the surface. The city's power came from the fact that they were constantly in conflict with the monsters surging from the Under, and that allowed for a lot of opportunities for people to grow stronger.

It took them nearly an hour to reach the city gates, and as they waited in line to enter, Zach looked up at the towering statues. They were as tall as skyscrapers on Earth had been—those on the smaller side at least. It was really impressive to see, humbling as well.

Finally, they reached the entrance and a group of guards that were checking everyone coming in.

"Purpose of visit?" The Karura guard asked, since Zach and Naha were in the visitors line.

As an answer Zach just pulled out his warden badge and showed it to the man, Naha followed suit a moment later. The guard took the badge and looked it over before returning it.

"Is this your first time visiting?" The guard asked.

"Yes," Zach answered.

"Are you here on Warden business?"

"Not currently. We are hoping to pick up some contracts here," Zach answered.

The guard nodded his head. "There is always a need for more help. If you are going to operate in the city you will need a permission from the Guard, your Guild can help set that up. Learn our rules and follow them, and you will have no issues."

Both Naha and Zach nodded in agreement and then they were allowed through. They entered through the massive, opened gates, and down a massive corridor that was held with wide pillars. On the side walls and the

ceiling, elaborate murals were painted, showing battles that Zach knew nothing about—but they were pretty to look at.

"That is gorgeous, even if it is terrible," Zach said, looking at a particular scene which showed a battlefield. An army being destroyed in what looked like the same mountain pass that they had arrived through.

"The battle of the red dawn," Naha said. "When the third Iteration slaughtered the armies of the first and the second. It is said that so much blood was spilled that day that the entire valley beneath the mountains turned red for a hundred years."

Zach blinked at that, he didn't know much about the history of the Infinite Realm, he had never really had the need to learn it. What he knew about the Third Iteration was only what Griss had told him. That they had been exiled beyond the core and that they were probably all dead.

Except that perhaps they weren't. Zach had never followed up on what happened on the frontier. They had relayed the information to the Citadel, and that had been the last of it. Now, he felt like he should've asked around about it more. Although in his defense, it wasn't like it had been that important to him.

They walked on, along with other people walking ahead of them. Naha had been in Dall'dvor before, so she knew the way. They reached the end of the corridor and saw several open rooms with people filling in them. Zach and Naha entered the same one as the people ahead of them. They entered the room and waited, looking around as more people filled in. And then, the doors closed and the room rumbled. A moment later it started moving and Zach had his suspicions confirmed.

The elevator dropped and suddenly the walls were gone and then entered the city. The massive metal chain was revealed next to them, the part of the elevator's system, but Zach didn't spare it more than a glance. He looked around in amazement at the sight beneath and in front of him. The Dall'dvor was an impossibility. It looked as if the entire mountain range was hollowed out, and was stretching out into the distance, curving around along with the mountain range. The city was filled with buildings of stone, illuminated by bright spheres of light that hung in the air above it, looking like miniature suns.

Below them, tiny objects moved around through the air, and Zach realized that they some of them at least were flying platforms, while others were just people that could fly.

The buildings were ornate, sparkling in the light. Some tall like skyscrapers, others barely off the ground. Several massive parks, looking more like small forests, were spread around the city, Zach had no idea how trees could grow down here.

But the most impressive part of the city was the hole. A massive circular opening was in the center of the city, and Zach could see buildings, stairs, bridges, and elevators leading into the darkness below, so deep that he couldn't see the ground. The city spread through the hole, all around its walls spiraling downward.

"It is an amazing sight," Naha said, snapping him out.

He turned to look at her, and saw her looking out at the city with a complicated expression on her face.

"You said that you were here before, did you live here?" Zach asked.

"For a short time only. I came…" She glanced around at the people around them, and lowered her voice to a whisper. "To hunt."

Zach grimaced, he should've known that it was going to be something like that.

"It didn't work out how I imagined," Naha continued. "I thought that the city this big would be a good place for my needs… It turned out that I was wrong."

"How so?" Zach asked.

"The city is… too bright," Naha said.

Zach glanced at the miniature suns hanging in the air above the city. The entire inside of the mountain was as filled with light, he could see how that could be a problem for someone like Naha.

"And…" She started again. "The Guard here is good, the people strong. And the hole… the lower you go the stronger the people get."

They remained silent for the rest of the trip, and Zach tried not to think too much about Naha's past. Once the elevator reached the ground, they stepped off and headed into the city proper. Zach followed Naha as she led

them through the streets, looking for an Inn that she knew from her last stay in the city.

Meanwhile, Zach looked around seeing so many new things, as well as some old. The streets were filled with people, but also with all kinds of strange things. He saw what looked like a some kind of a walker vehicle. A demasi was sitting in a chair, surrounded by glass while a dozen mechanical-looking legs moved him forward. The vehicle was covered in what looked like formations, but it moved any visible input from the driver.

And then Zach saw another thing that made him stop. It was clearly a car, moving slowly and hissing loudly as steam left a valve on its side. It had a big tank in the back, but everything else was what he remembered from history books about how the early versions of cars looked like.

Naha noticed him staring and walked a few steps back to stand next to him as Zach watched it roll by.

"I think that they call it an automobile," Naha said.

Zach turned to her and gave her a smile. "I know, we had them on Earth."

Naha blinked and then nodded. "Oh, right, humans had them too. I think that the only other Iterations that had them were one of the demasi iterations and the cthul."

Zach was surprised at that. "I've always wondered why there wasn't much of what we had on Earth wasn't available here. I'm sure that some people who knew how to make stuff made it to Infinite Realm. I know that on Earth, we couldn't make anything more technologically oriented, the Framework just destroyed everything above a certain technological point. I thought that it was the same here."

Naha shrugged. "I don't know much, but I don't think so. It is just that the rules are different here. They might have effects that appear similar, but they are really not. The Infinite Realm is made out of Essence, we are made out Essence. The laws that governed our old worlds no longer apply. Inventors have to discover the new laws from scratch, and even then it often isn't worth it to pursue."

"What do you mean?" Zach asked as they continued walking.

"Well, you noticed that there aren't may such vehicles and devices in the other cities? There is a reason for that. The ones that run on formations are terribly expensive, and people would much rather advance and gain more power than spend Essence on getting a vehicle that can push them around slower than they can run. And the ones that don't require formations are cumbersome and fragile. Any one with a strength over two hundred could tear them apart easily."

Zach frowned and thought about it as they walked. In some ways it did make sense. With the Framework, people could accomplish amazing things. What good is a tank when a classer could cut through it? A bullet fired from a gun might not even be powerful enough to scratch someone with a high enough endurance.

They walked in silence, while Zach looked around and taking in the sights. He saw a few more vehicles and devices that looked familiar, but he couldn't really place them. He also saw a shop filled with clocks that had thirty hours on them, some mechanical, others clearly operated by formations.

Finally, they reached the inn. They entered and Zach secured them a room to stay in. Once they settled in, they spoke and decided to get some rest before going to the Adventurers Guild tomorrow.

Naha settled in to meditate and improve her skill, while Zach sat next to her and looked at his stat screens.

Name	Zacharia Gardner
Race	Human (Earth—Iteration 7)

Titles		
First Kill	Kill the first monster in the Framework run world	5000 Essence
First to Ten	First person in the world to reach level Ten	+10% to all stats, 10 000 Essence

Adventurer	Hunted more than 100 monsters	+5 to all stats, 5 000 Essence
Hero of Promise	Save more than 10 people with a single action	+5 to all stats, 5 000 Essence
Chief	Create an outpost	+3 all stats, 1 000 Essence
Leader	Upgraded outpost to a town	+3 all stats, 2 000 Essence
One Against Many	Fight against more than 10 opponents alone and win	+5 to all stats, 5 000 Essence
First to Sixty	First to Evolve their class in the world	+10% to all stats, 100 000 Essence
Class Evolution II	Evolved your class for the third time.	+15 to all stats, 5050 Greater Essence
True Understanding	Evolve a skill to tier 6	+20 to all stats, 20 000 Greater Essence
Apprentice Bounty Hunter: Wardens	Complete 10 faction bounties for people no more than two tiers of power below you.	+5 to all stats, 1000 Greater Essence

Perks	
Riposte (Class Perk)	Once per combat, gain the ability to execute a lightning fast attack after being damaged. Speed of returning strike equals double dexterity stat.
Wind's Child (Class Perk)	During combat, every strike with your weapon sends a short gust of wind. Strength

	of effect depends on dexterity stat.
Wind Lord (Class Perk)	In combat, wind swirls around you, always blowing gently in your back. Strength of effect depends on dexterity stat.
Consequence (Class Perk)	Every kinetic attack you block, stores a part of its energy. Once per combat unleash all the stored kinetic energy. Amount stored depends strength stat.
Second Chance (Class Perk)	Once taking damage that would kill you, heal it instead. Once per combat. Healing speed depends on vitality stat.
Lightning Body (Path Perk)	Your body's reflexes are enhanced, able to utilize max dexterity at a moment's notice. Strength of effect depends on dexterity stat.
Lightning Qi (Aspect Perk)	When using techniques, your Qi passively enhances you. Gain plus +30% to dexterity while any technique is active.
Forged Conduits of Qi (Path Perk)	Your Qi channels are reforged. Qi channels regenerate faster and are able to handle greater strains. Increases the speed at which techniques are used. Strength of effect depends on Qi aspect.
Last Heir of Terra (Class Perk)	Once per week, you may call upon the **Spirit of Terra**, which grants you the combined knowledge, talent,

	and expertise of all the sword masters that had ever lived on your Earth. The **Spirit of Terra** imbues you with heightened senses, doubling your total stats for the duration and lowers the stamina requirements and cooldowns of your abilities by 20%. All sword based skills level five times faster. Upon **Spirit of Terra**'s ending you will be unable to use abilities for one hour. Duration and cooldown depend on your highest stat.
Formless Core (Path Perk)	Your Qi core loses its shape, instead of containing your Qi it now lets it move freely through your body. You can now use your techniques at 50% faster rate. You gain +10% to wisdom and your Qi passively enhances your body based on your lightning aspect, giving you +10% to dexterity. You are no longer able to enforce your core or upgrade this perk.
Wind's Favorite (Bond Perk)	Allows the bond holder to manipulate wind in their immediate surrounding. All wind based powers are 20% more powerful. The wind passively carries nearby sounds to your ears. Strength of effect depends on the

	depth of the bond with the awakened object.
Old Heritage (Class Perk)	Once per combat you may activate this perk to borrow the power of all of your ancestors, increasing all of your total stats by 100% for five seconds. Duration of effect depends on your highest stat.
Ethereal Sword (Class Perk)	Summon an Ethereal sword in any shape you desire. It lasts as long as you want, but drains you mentally while it is active. The sword deals 20% of its damage as soul damage and 80% physical damage. As it is Ethereal it can endure only 50% of the force that would break an ordinary blade. The quality of the blade depends on your wisdom stat.
Dazzling Strike (Class Perk)	Twice per combat execute a strike that will blind the target for 1 sec if your weapon connects with anything in direct contact with their body.
Double Ethereal Strike (Class Perk)	Once per combat execute a strike that will copy itself as an Ethereal strike. The Ethereal strike follows behind the first one on a 0.5 sec delay and deals 10% of the original attack's power, it deals this damage as Ethereal damage.
Ethereal Fissure (Class Perk)	Once per month cut through real space with any Ethereal

	weapon and open a rift that will allow you to fully step into the Ethereal Realm. The fissure will remain open for one day unless closed.
Phantom Avatar (Class Perk)	Once per day transform into the Phantom. You gain +50% resistance to physical and special damage, and your total stats are doubled. If used in the Ethereal Realm, gain an additional 20% to all stats. Lasts until your mental stamina is drained completely or canceled.

Class	Phantom Slayer (L)
Level	180
Combat Ability	Ethereal Wing
Movement Ability	Ethereal Leap
Support Ability	Ethereal Chains
Support Ability	Ethereal Sight

EVOLUTION ATTUNEMENT BONUS:	
Ethereal	All Ethereal based powers are 10% more effective. All special attacks deal 0.5% of total damage dealt as soul damage. Gain +10% to strength and wisdom.
Phantom Hunter	Gain +20% to stamina and -20% to ability cooldowns when fighting spirits or shades. Gain

	+10% to strength and dexterity.

Cultivation	The Path of the Lightning Blade (R)
Stage	Peak Foundation
Aspect	Lightning
Base technique	Calm Before the Storm
Branch technique	Charged Focus
Fruit technique	Lightning Strike

Passive Skills	Active Skills
Perfect Tempest Dance	Strike (10/10) >> Greater Strike (10/10)>> Flurry Strikes (10/10)
Weakness Sense >> Enhanced Weakness Sense >> Vulnerability Sense (6/10)	Evade >> Greater Evade >> Evading Dash >> Enhanced Evading Dash >> Spatial Evade (8/10)
Night Eyes (6/10)	Sealing Slash (10/10)

Strength	681
Dexterity	615
Vitality	215
Endurance	215

Intelligence	221
Wisdom	317

He felt like he had been progressing well enough, but he knew that he could be doing more. He had been planning on getting a few more skills, but he wanted to be sure about what he took. A skill had to be simple and easy enough so that he could evolve it quickly, but powerful and useful enough that it would be a benefit to him. He had been trying to do some research in the guildhouses they had visited, and see what could be a good fit for him. Sadly, the information available was poor. The only place where he had been able to find something useful had been in the Citadel, and even that information was flawed. The guildhouses didn't have anything really special, just general guides and information.

It seemed like Zach would need to rely on his own intuition in the future. Naha knew somethings, but her knowledge was flawed like everything else that Zach had seen here. Her experience, however, was not. Even from her mistakes, Zach had learned a lot.

He had narrowed down his choices to a few more offensive active skills that would give him an additional powerful attack to use while his other powers were on cooldown. And a few passive skills that could be useful, like |**Danger Sense**|. So far he had mostly relied on Naha's skill to let him know about the dangers, but having his own might be beneficial, and she could tell him how to evolve it quickly since she had already done it. He did want to get something that could help him survive better, so he was trying to find some kind of a defensive passive skill. If such a thing even existed.

A while later, Naha stirred from her meditation and Zach closed his windows and the shop where he had been browsing skills. The two of them got ready for bed, and went to sleep.

Tomorrow they would go to the guildhouse and look for bounties. Naha had been stable for a while now, so Zach knew that they were close to the time when she would start... losing control. They needed to find a target, and the quicker the better.