

## Act II - Zach

Zach hit the ground, again. His practice sword flying away as his opponent disarmed him. Zach groaned and got up to his feet looking at the other warden.

Emerah was a senior warden, a Ravzor that looked like a big weretiger, and he was in charge of training other wardens in advanced combat. He usually taught younger wardens, or at least those who were less powerful. On paper, Zach and Emerah were in the same power level class. Emerah was higher leveled, but his Path wasn't even in the Foundation Realm, and he had a greater mastery of skills. Their practice fights weren't all one sided, Zach could hold his own, his abilities were good enough to give the man problems. But Zach could see the difference in their fighting styles. Emerah was a weapons master, he knew how to fight with almost every weapon. He was even better than Zach at swordplay.

Zach hadn't had the chance to train and learn the sword as much as he wanted, even though it was his focus. Mostly because there were no great sword masters left on Earth for him to learn from. Those that survived the Framework were pale shadows of the masters that had lived long ago in a time when knowing the sword was something more. He had tried to teach himself, as much as one could, and follow his skills in order to learn more. But he could see now that there was much for him to learn.

"You still need to work on your ability rotation," Emerah said as he retrieved Zach's practice sword and put it on the rack. "Knowing when to use your abilities is crucial for a Classer."

Zach nodded his head, he had come to learn a lot more about the way Classers fought. "Thank you for the extra lesson," Zach said.

Emerah waved his clawed hand. "I appreciate it when my students want to learn more, although you and Nyathulla are a special case."

Zach nodded his head. The Cthul was his fellow student, someone else that had joined the wardens in special circumstances. Zach had only met her a few days ago, and hadn't had much chance to really get to know her and her circumstances. Although he doubted that they were anything like his situation.

"I still expect you for our regular lessons tomorrow morning," Emerah said as he gathered his things.

Zach assured the man that he would be there and waved as his instructor left. Zach cleaned up and changed his clothes slowly, taking the time to think a bit about what he needed to do. He still had some Essence saved up from the bounty that he and Griss took care of for the miners, and he was thinking about leveling up. Most of what Emerah instructed him in was the general stuff, but he did also recommend some tomes that he could check up in the Citadel's library. He had been meaning to visit and see if he could learn something more.

Making a decision, after he was finished, he made his way to the library intending to read and learn more before he leveled. He left the training grounds and headed toward one of the Citadel's towers, but as he was crossing the central courtyard a voice called after him.

"Zach!" Someone yelled and Zach turned around.

Griss was waving at him and rushing to catch up.

"Hey Griss," Zach greeted the drake. The two of them hadn't exactly had a chance for a real conversation since his talk with the Warden Commander.

“Ah, I’ve been searching for you all over,” Griss said with a smile. “I got good news!”

“Good news?”

“Yes. The Warden Commander just approved a bonus for us, we are cleared to pick it up.”

“A bonus?” Zach asked.

“For the information we brought back? The unidentified group we encountered.”

“I thought that we didn’t learn enough for it to be useful,” Zach said.

“Apparently the Warden Commander disagrees. I made a full report to her personally, she seemed to think that just what we knew was valuable.”

“So what kind of a bonus are we talking about?”

“We are getting Essence, some stat increasing elixirs and one time access to the Citadel’s dungeon,” Griss said excitedly.

Zach blinked at that. He knew already that wardens get Essence through the Framework Interface once per month, it was basically a salary. It was extremely low, a few dozen Greater Essence, which wasn’t enough to live on, but apparently that could be increased based on a person’s contribution, which was basically a questing system. In a way at least. The more they contributed to their faction, the more Essence they would get. Zach currently had around four thousand Greater Essence, and as long as he stayed in the citadel he could eat and sleep for free. But he knew that out in the city that much Essence would start drying up. It was why he hadn’t leveled just yet. Even though he had enough to reach level 90. “The Citadel has a dungeon?”

“Yeah, the Citadel was built on top of it. It’s a re-spawning dungeon with several different floors, each with different difficulty. It makes it perfect for helping wardens level, since there are floors that have low leveled monsters.”

That did sound interesting to Zach. The reason why he had joined the wardens in the first place was in order to get resources that he would have a hard time getting by himself.

“Come, we should go and collect.” Griss led him back to the Citadel’s main structure through the hallways that he hadn’t been through before, or if he had he didn’t remember. But then again, the inner layout was more akin to a labyrinth, and he was yet to become accustomed to that.

They reached a room deep in the heart of the Citadel, one guarded by several wardens. They were allowed inside and Zach noticed a pillar standing in the middle of the room behind some kind of a counter. It resembled the interfaces that he had seen before, but it was also somehow... more. A spiral of black and white, with the emblem of the wardens, the tower, stamped on its center. Behind it was a massive door, looking as if they were made out of metal, with hinges as long as Zach was tall. The door reminded him of vault doors from Earth.

A man was sitting behind the counter, and as they approached he stood. He was a minotaur, with long black fur and horns that curved like those of a ram.

“Warden Griss and Warden Zacharia I presume?” The minotaur asked.

Griss nodded his head. “Yes, we are here to receive our bonuses.”

“Of course, Warden Commander sent word, everything is ready. Here,” the minotaur bent beneath the counter and then pulled out two baskets. Both were small, but each held the exact same contents. There were two potions and a blue stone with a symbol on it.

Zach reached out and took one of the potions, immediately seeing that it was an **Elixir of Minor Strength**, checking the other he saw that it was one of dexterity. Drinking it would

apparently give him a permanent boost of 2 to his stats, which was incredible in itself. He put both potions in his storage after he saw Griss do the same, then Zach grabbed the blue stone.

Abyssal Deep Keystone (1 charge)	Allows access to the Abyssal Deep Dungeon floors I-V
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He would need to talk about Griss and find out what access to the dungeon really meant.

“Here are the access stones for the Essence transfer,” the minotaur said, bringing Zach’s attention back to him. He put two small stones on the counter, and Zach frowned as he wasn’t familiar with them.

His confusion had to have shown on his face because Griss leaned in and whispered. “Remote access to the Interface, so that you don’t need to touch it. Put one hand on it, while holding your badge in the other.”

Zach nodded in understanding and watched as Griss did it, then he put his hand on it while he placed his other on the badge tied to his waist.

Immediately he got a notification telling him that he had been allocated ten thousand Greater Essence. He blinked at the number, he hadn’t expected so much Essence, but he suppressed his desire to ask questions. He would wait to ask Griss when they were alone.

Even Griss seemed surprised, he thanked the minotaur and ushered Zach out of the strange room.

Zach waited until they were alone in the corridors of the citadel before speaking.

“That seems like a lot of Essence, with this added to what I already have, I could probably hit level one hundred,” Zach said.

“It was more generous than what I thought, yes, but it isn’t as much as you think,” Griss told him.

“What do you mean?” Zach asked.

“Don’t get me wrong, this tells me that the leadership sees potential in us and are willing to support us. The potions alone are worth a ton, and access to the dungeon is nearly priceless. The Essence is good, but I would not recommend you to spend it all on your leveling,” Griss said.

“Why not?”

“Because you need to buy things if you are going to be a successful warden, gear, materials, tents, a mount preferably,” Griss answered.

“I thought that the wardens provide gear for their recruits?”

“They do, for new recruits. And while you are new, you are not as weak as they are. The standardized gear is good for someone who is level twenty, maybe thirty, but beyond that? You need to have your own gear.”

Zach already had gear, but that was from Earth. He had noticed that there was much better gear in the Infinite Realm.

“Half of what makes a person powerful is their gear. At least you have an awakened sword, that means you won’t have to buy weapons in the future,” Griss told him.

Zach knew that his sword was powerful, but in his opinion, it didn’t match some of the things he had seen here in the citadel. There had been several awakened weapons on Earth, and

he had watched some get completely destroyed by Ryun during their last battle. They didn't seem all that great to him. Although everyone that had seen it seemed impressed by it.

"You and I are in the middle of the warden forces, as far as power is concerned. Most of the recruits are around level ten up to twenty, with perhaps a bit invested in Cultivation or a skill or two. The great majority is around level forty to around level eighty." Griss said. "Since the leadership seems interested in investing in us, that means that they want to groom us for leadership positions in the future."

"Those levels, they seem low to me."

"That's because you are a freak," Griss said. "Just getting your Class evolved once is a great feat. You are thinking like a Ranker, which I guess you are. Your life has been a constant struggle, fighting against monsters and growing, but out of your entire Earth only a few managed to get strong. How many people did your world have before the Framework? And how many survived? It is the same on other worlds from other Iterations, only a few manage to get strong enough to survive, the others die. The Infinite Realm is the same. Most people live their lives in the core, in the civilization, never even seeing a monster. They live on the Essence that they gain as their contribution, they craft and sell their wares and they advance when they manage to save enough Essence to do it. Most don't even advance past a point, when they feel like they had achieved something, choosing instead to save Essence to buy their children a better start."

Griss shook his head, and then continued speaking. "They just don't get to live long enough to advance further. And of those who become adventurers? Who go out and hunt monsters? A fraction of them are successful. Yes, there is potential for an incredible rate of advancement, if you can survive the monsters. But not everyone is lucky enough to get ahead or smart enough to know when to slow down. Ordinary people are lucky if they get to evolve their class twice by the time they die of old age. The average level of most of the regular people in the core is between sixty and one hundred or Peak Foundation Realm to Early Lord if we are talking Cultivators. Most people spread their advancement a bit so it is hard to tell sometimes, but that is what they achieve by the end of their life. If they were lucky to advance a bit more when they were younger and extend their lifespan a bit, then they might reach more, but beyond that? The leaders of the smaller factions, of guilds, organizations, they might have two or three evolutions, or they might be led by Peak Lords or Monarchs if we are talking sects. The medium sized factions have people with four evolutions as their regulars, the sects might have a Heavenly Realm Cultivators as their leader. Most of the factions are this level, their people might be slightly higher than average, with their lowest being level one hundred, but their leadership are all greater. And beyond them you have the top of the top, the People with more than five evolutions, Immortal Realm Cultivators. These people have reached high enough that they can live forever, they are the ones that will in time reach further still. But on the peak? Beyond even them? There are only a handful of people who have reached beyond. The rulers of the most powerful factions, those who are High Rankers. Your view is skewed, you achieved all that you have in barely a handful of years. You are a monster compared to everyone else."

Zach nodded his head. He didn't yet understand a lot of how things worked in the Infinite Realm, but he was starting to get a better picture. He remembered the group that he rescued when he arrived. They had been higher level than the average he had seen, but they would've probably died if he hadn't come along. Perhaps they did die after he left.

“On top of that,” Griss added. “People need Essence to live. To pay for food and homes, to support themselves. You too will need it, it’s why I’m suggesting that you don’t spend all of it on your advancement. Once you finish your instructions here we will move into the city for me to finish your training. You will need to pay for a room at least as well as food. The Citadel is too far for you to stay, and in any case, remaining here would mean that you wouldn’t earn more Essence, your contribution would be very low and your growth incredibly slow.”

That at least Zach could understand. “Oh, so you are still willing to be my partner?” He asked.

“Yes, of course,” Griss told him with a grin. Zach sighed in relief, he hadn’t been sure since they had barely spoken with one another since their meeting with the Warden Commander.

“Well, I was hoping to ask for your advice. I was on my way to the library, perhaps you can come with me? I could use some help in finding the right guides and books that could be useful to me.”

Griss grimaced. “I’d really like that, but unfortunately I’ve been asked to consult on a murder case down in the city and I planned on stopping by my sister’s inn beforehand. And I wouldn’t be much of help, it’s not like I know much. Most of what you need, you can find just by asking. The library staff is far better equipped to help you than I am. And... I know that you are not used to things here, but... for most people their advancement is a private matter. Even if they are willing to discuss different builds, abilities or perks, it is rare for someone to just come out and tell you what to do. The resources of the library are at your disposal, but you are the one that needs to make the choice in the end.”

Zach was disappointed, but he understood. “It’s okay, I’ll manage. But I do need lessons in how all of this with Essence works.”

Griss nodded as they reached the courtyard and he waved in goodbye. He really needed to figure out how the economy worked and how he could get more Essence quickly. He did have a few things in his storage that he could probably sell.

He sighed and headed to the library.

The Citadel’s Library was massive, one of its towers dedicated entirely just to books and tomes. Zach stood on the ground floor, looking up through the center of the tower that stretch up far into the distance, with levels going all around the inner sides of the tower.

There were quite a few people in there, most of them young looking, probably recruits on assignments. He found one of the librarians and asked where he could find books and tomes on Class Perks, as well as general builds for sword fighting based Classes.

He was pointed to the seventh floor and given a note with symbols that would tell him what shelf to search. It took him a better part of an hour to find what he was looking for, and then he settled in one of the reading berths to read. There were hundreds of Class builds, depicting exactly where to put every stat, which abilities were the best, as well as what perks were the most effective. He even found his own Class, and unsurprisingly, his choices hadn’t been listed as the most optimal ones.

He read more about each of the options that were available and why they were better than what he had chosen. The list held all of the known ones, but apparently there was always a chance for someone to get something that was unique. For Classes, it seemed like one of the choices of either abilities or perks was always the same for that Class, the second and third were wild cards which depended on the Classers actions in their life as well as their perks. If a swordsman fought mostly one type of monsters, they might get a Class evolution geared more toward fighting those kinds of opponents.

The guides didn't recommend such Evolutions for wardens, as they were too limiting. Zach's evolution, Blade Master, was a common enough one. Although his rarity being rare meant that he would have a better evolution next time. His Class' rarity had upgraded when he evolved the first time, and was a result of his actions and the way he used his abilities.

After reading about what perks would be the best for his Class, he found that most of the choices revolved around the choices for future evolutions. His perks were the things that influenced the evolutions the most. So none of the things in the guide were all that useful to him, not until he evolved for the second time at least. Then he could steer his build in another direction by choosing perks that would give him an even better evolution the third time. Which was also where most of the guides seem to end. There were a couple that showed up to the fourth evolution, but those seemed rare.

Zach leaned back and closed his eyes. There was little that could help him in that book at the moment, although there were lists of possible perks and what best level ninety perks were. But from what he read, he would get one choice tied to his class, which would probably be **Blade Spirit** perk. A perk that allowed him to draw out the spirit of his sword, and have it fight beside him. It was what was suggested as a pick from the guides, as it would allow the Class more flexibility and power depending on the power of the weapon a Classer wielded. The second and the third perk would be a wild card based on his actions, titles, and previous perks.

He realized that he had spent a few hours reading. He sighed, as he knew that he wouldn't get much more from the tomes unless he knew what his choices were. He glanced at his stats and his Essence. He had a lot of it now, and with some quick math he knew that he would still have a lot even if he spent some to level up to level ninety.

Zach made a decision and started putting the Essence in, leveling himself to 90. He dismissed the perk window for a moment, and allocated his stats. From what the guide said, he needed to get his strength up a bit to be closer in line with his dexterity, so he put all his free stats in it.

After he was done with that, he took a look at his perk choices.

Blade Spirit (Class Perk)	Once per day you may draw out the spirit of your sword, allowing it to fight beside you. Power of the Sword Spirit depends on the rarity and quality of your weapon. Duration depends on the highest stat.
Windbound (Class Perk)	Ten times per day you, may turn into the wind, becoming untouchable by any physical or special attacks. You can travel as

	wind anywhere in the thirty meters around yourself. Once you reform, you gain an instance of <b>Haste</b> (stackable) that last for ten seconds and increases your total strength and dexterity by 12%. Using the perk before the buff expires will refresh the buff and increase the bonus.
Last Heir of Terra (Class Perk)	Once per week, you may call upon the <b>Spirit of Terra</b> , which grants you the combined knowledge, talent, and expertise of all the sword masters that had ever lived on your Earth. The <b>Spirit of Terra</b> 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 <b>Spirit of Terra's</b> ending you will be unable to use abilities for one hour. Duration and cooldown depend on your highest stat.

The first perk was no surprise, the second fit in the theme of his other perks. But the third... It made his heart ache. He had read a few passing lines about unique perks that Rankers could get at level 90, things that could give them something that no one else had.

But it was the name that made him feel so many things. His world was gone, as was everyone that he knew. And now he was being offered a perk that would name him. The Last Heir of Terra. It was the truth, the other survivor had stopped being a child of Earth long ago, Zach was the last one who still held love for his world far what it used to be.

All three perks were powerful, a Class defining perks. He knew that perks could get improved with further Class evolutions, that they could get even stronger in the future. But there was really only one choice for him, and he made it.