

Act II - Zach

Zach and Griss walked through the Citadel corridors, heading in the direction of the Crafter Quarter. Their dungeon dive was only a week away, and Zach was finally going to upgrade his equipment. Their encounter with the killer in the city had made both of them eligible for another bonus in their 'salaries'. He had gained 2000 Essence for his monthly contribution from the Framework, which included his work on trying to find clues to help catch the killer in the Archive, according to Griss at least. From the Warden Organization he had gained another two thousand in Essence Crystals as a bonus. So Griss thought that Zach had enough funds that he could buy some new equipment and have enough left afterward that he could live until his next contribution allotment. He was still not quite sure what impacted how much Essence a person gained from the Framework, but according to Griss it depended on the person's level and their actions. But apparently only actions that are directly connected to the person's profession mattered. So as long as he did wardenly things, he would be getting more than just the bare minimum.

So, as soon as they had received their allotments, Griss had taken Zach to the crafters so that he could commission something new. The choices of what he could buy were limited, and not really impressive to Zach. Griss had tried to convince him that it was all good quality gear, but Zach wanted more. He voiced the idea of bartering or selling the equipment that he still had from Earth in his storage. Griss immediately jumped on the idea, saying that he might have enough to commission a piece of armor. Zach was certain that Griss couldn't have imagined just how much stuff Zach had from Earth. His storage was the size of a small room, and it was filled with rewards gained over the ten years of brutal fighting against monsters. Not all of it was even looted by him, but was just the best of what the last survivors could gather from those that had fallen. He had items all the way to epic rarity, and while those items were useful even here in the Infinite Realm, they weren't quite up to par with what he was supposed to carry for his level.

So, Zach had bartered away most of his equipment to the crafters instead of selling it. That way he didn't need to wait for people to buy it through the auction, but he didn't sell it for Essence. Instead, he bought credit that he could use to commission gear from the Citadel crafters. He still remembered the look on Griss' and the other wardens faces when Zach started pulling stuff out of his storage. There had been a lot of weapons, and armor, some of it damaged almost beyond any hope of repair. He also had a few arrays, which were similar to Essence Formations, only the arrays could only be bought through the Framework shop, and the Formations could be created by Cultivators. Once he had pulled out everything that he was comfortable parting with, the wardens evaluated and decided what to do with it. Some of it would go to the new recruits, some to crafters to be repurposed, repaired, or scraped for material.

In the end, he had gained credit value that was almost equivalent to 60,000 Greater Essence. It almost made him wish that he had gone through the auction and earned Essence. He could've leveled quite a bit with that much Essence. Griss told him that there were Adventurers that got lucky enough to find rare treasures that made them Essence rich. He cautioned Zach about leveling without buying equipment to match. A large portion of a warrior's power came from their equipment, and apparently far too many of them leveled too fast without upgrading their gear, and died as the result. Aside from the credit, Zach did have around 10,000 Greater Essence available, and he had been thinking about leveling with it. But Griss advised against it, not only because he needed that Essence to live off of, and all of them were paying for the private training yards, but also because if he was lower level he would get more Essence in the dungeon. It was a risk management situation, where they didn't want to be too weak for the dungeon, but didn't want to be too over-leveled for it.

In the end, Zach did agree with Griss and didn't spend his Essence on leveling. And with his credit, he commissioned a full set of quality armor that would last him for a long while. He was actually surprised that it was finished so fast. He had commissioned it only two weeks ago. But it seemed that having crafting powers speed things up considerably.

Griss and Zach arrived at the smithy of one of the Citadel's main blacksmiths, the work was of course not done just by a smith, tailors and enchanters were involved as well, but they had agreed to pick up the commissioned armor in the store attached to the smithy. The two of them walked in, and immediately the warden behind a large desk waved at them.

"Wardens Griss and Zacharia, good day to you sirs," the burly minotaur said. "Your commissions are done, if you will follow me please."

They followed the attendant through a door that led into a private room in the back. As soon as they entered they saw their commissions. Griss had upgraded his shield with a reflective enchantment that returned a portion of the force taken on it back to its source. But Zach's eyes immediately fell on the armor on a rack in front of him. It was silver with black accents, and it was glorious. The chest and arms looked like they were made out of leaf-shaped and sized scales, and they didn't look like they were made out of metal of any kind. A short battle skirt extended from the waist, made out of overlapping plates that covered the private area and protected the upper things as well as his behind. The skirt didn't seem like it was made out of the same material, and as Zach got closer and touched it. He realized that it was metallic, while the scales felt more like tough hide. The leg parts were also covered in scales, with the boots being more traditional metal plates just like two gauntlets on the arms. The shoulders were also covered with metal, pauldrons on each shoulder that had ridges to protect the neck from the sides. The helmet was impressive as well, it looked more like an insect head with a rounded front plate with just a few holes for air and eyes to peer through and two antennae curving backward from the forehead. He walked around it seeing that the helmet protected the back of the neck.

"It is an impressive set," the attendant said as he approached. "Great quality for the price and level it was intended for."

Zach could see that. Of course, it wasn't crafted by the best crafters in the Citadel, but it had been done by the apprentices of the masters. Zach put his hand on it and a window popped up in his vision.

Greater Armor of the Silver Sentinel (epic)	+10 to all stats, +15% to total stamina and stamina
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regeneration, clean, minor repair, equip

The stat gain as well as stamina was good, the stamina in particular would help him a lot. But it was the enchantments that made the armor incredible. Equip was a standard one for warden armors, since they had to be able to equip their gear in moments at times. But clean and minor repair were extremely powerful on their own. One would clean the blood and grime from the armor automatically, and the other would allow for it to slowly repair itself over time if it gets damaged. Those were things that he had been missing greatly in his gear.

He knew that the rarity concerned the quality of the item as well as the power for the power-level of the item, as his last armor was also of an epic rarity but was weaker than this one.

“The set is made from a level 115 Great Sea Serpent hide and silverite. It is tough, light, and easy to move in. It shouldn’t hinder your speed much, as you requested.”

Zach closed his eyes and thought the word *equip*. And the armor flashed, disappearing from the rack and appearing on his body.

“I hope that it is satisfactory,” the attendant said.

“Yes, very much so,” Zach said as he moved his hands, opening and closing his fists.

An hour later, Griss and Zach were in a private training yard, trying out their new equipment. The others all had other errands today, so it was just the two of them. But all five of them had trained quite a lot over the last weeks. In Zach’s opinion they had gained a good sense of each other’s powers and have started to feel like a real team.

Their training sessions were intense and illuminating. His skills had all improved, with his **|Sword Mastery|** hitting 10/10 and him gaining a skill quest. In order to evolve that skill he was supposed to adopt a sword art. From his research in the library he knew that he only needed to learn a sword

based martial art from someone. Griss had been looking into finding him a teacher, but it looked like it wasn't going to happen before they went to the dungeon in a week. The masters in the Citadel were all too busy before then. His other skills had improved as well. His **|Greater Strike|** had hit 10/10 as well, and the quest required him to use the skill as a finishing blow one hundred times against opponent's that are higher level than him. He hoped that he would have the chance to evolve it in the dungeon.

His **|Evade|** had evolved into **|Greater Evade|** without the need for a skill quest, which was a first one for him. When he asked Griss about him, the drake laughed and said that there wasn't much to understand about evasion. Zach saw what he meant, he was fairly certain that he understood what it meant to evade. The evolved form of the skill let him move faster and farther while evading which was useful.

He had also been training his **|Sealing Slash|** against Griss, and had gotten it up to 9/10. His last skill, **|Weakness Sense|** was currently at 8/10. He had also practiced with his **Last Heir of Terra Perk** twice, once against Griss alone, and then next week against the rest of the team. He could feel his movements improve slowly even when the perk wasn't active. But when it was active it was like he suddenly saw the entire world differently, it was eerie. He had even wondered if he could evolve his **|Sword Mastery|** through it, but he was unsuccessful so far. He retained some of the movements, or rather his body remembered, but he didn't know what the old masters knew. Not yet at least.

Zach jumped into the air, Mistral in held in both of his hands. The wind around him surged and picked him up, pushing him further and just a bit faster. He ended his leap by cutting down with his sword. Mistral hit Griss's shield and a shockwave rebounded out of the shield. Zach felt himself get pushed back, and the force get absorbed by his armor.

He was incredibly satisfied with it. The padding on the inside help him absorb the hits better, and the materials it was made out of were high quality. It was also incredibly light for what it provided, he had the full range of movement and had lost only a tiny bit of speed, but it was worth it.

Zach landed on the ground, and Griss moved his shield out of position. "How was it?" Griss asked.

“I can definitely feel it, I doubt that it will seriously injure anything high level but it is annoying at least,” Zach said, commenting on the new enchantment that he had done on his shield.

“That’s all it needs to do, distract an attacker and make an opening for my teammates to exploit.”

Zach nodded his head, and started swinging his sword around, trying to get a better feel for his armor.

“You up for a spar?” Griss asked after a few minutes of Zach flailing around through the air. His wind perks were definitely stronger than Mistral, and he didn’t seem to lose much power when trying to move himself with the wind. He could still glide for a few seconds and push his leaps from the back to gain more speed. He was even experimenting with pushing himself with the wind while using his evasion skill. It gave him a bit more speed.

At Griss’ question, he turned to look at the drake, and nodded his head. “Sure.”

A couple of hours later, the two of them moved over to the tables, to talk about their session.

“You should have a gear set for the dungeon, I know that a lot of things can be kept in the storage rings, but there is something to be said for keeping things on person,” Griss said after they went over their spar.

Zach nodded his head, he had noticed that Griss usually carried some potions on his belt as well as another smaller weapon on his hip. “Aside from potions, is there anything else that you recommend?”

Griss scratched his snout thoughtfully. “Well, usually I would suggest an extra weapon since you could get disarmed in battle. But, you have an awakened weapon, it is easy for you to dismiss it and summon it again.”

“Right,” Zach said as he stood next to the table, with Griss watching him as he pulled out potions out of his storage. Some he still had from Earth, others he bought here. Aside from his new armor he also had a belt with potion slots made as well as a ring that could hold an extra weapon, it seemed that the Citadel crafters knew exactly what a warden would need.

He looked through his potions, and put two health potions on his belt and two stamina ones, the last slot he put a potion that he bought in the Citadel, one that would give him a boost of twenty to strength and dexterity. It wasn't the most powerful potion, but it could come in handy. Then, he saw the ring on his belt that could be adjusted to any position on its length, a slot for an extra weapon. He still had a few weapons in his storage, he didn't sell everything, just in case that he ever needed something.

Finally, he focused on his storage and pulled out a short golden and white dagger. The **Great Dagger of Essence Siphoning** lay in his hand and he looked at it for a long moment. Then he sighed and pushed the blade through the ring, twisted and slid the hilt into the slot, securing it on the small of his back.

"Uh... You want to use that?" Griss said slowly.

"It is a powerful tool. I can make use of it in the dungeon," Zach answered.

He waited for Griss to say something, but then he just nodded his head.

Zach focused on his armor and unequipped it directly into his storage. All the items he placed on it disappeared with it. Then he called it back on, and saw that everything he had placed on it appeared as well. He nodded before he unequipped it again one last time.

"Well, that is that I guess," Zach said and the two of them cleaned up and headed toward the training yard's exit. Their session had been a good one, his **|Greater Evade|** had increased by an additional level and his new armor was more than worth the price he paid.

A week later, their team walked through the Citadel corridors, climbing down the stairs that led them deep beneath the ground. All of them wore their full gear, their weapons in their hands and ready. Zach had gotten used to wearing and using his armor by now, and he held Mistral in a reversed grip in one hand since it didn't have a sheath. It occurred to him that he could probably have one made for the sword, and he cursed himself for not thinking about it before. But then he forced his mind away from that topic,

he had to focus on what was ahead. The trip down the stairs was eerie, it was barely illuminated by blue glowing lanterns, but what made it worse was that there was no one walking around. Their footsteps echoed around them, as they finally reached the end of the stairs.

Zach blinked as he saw people for the first time since they started climbing down. There was a group of four to one side, sitting at a table and talking with another Warden. They seemed like they were adventurers, but they all had warden styled armor. But what drew his attention the most was what was at the end of the room.

A massive double sided door made out of stone. With blue glowing glyphs engraved in it. The doors were almost three times as tall as he was, and at least five times as wide if not more. Griss led them forward, and they reached the doors. Two warden guards stood in front of it and Griss extended his dungeon key to them. One of them took it in silence and turned around, placing it in the doors. The light intensified, and he saw five lights turn on one after the other in an arch starting from one side of the doors, they didn't even get to the middle of the arc before the fifth light appeared. Zach wondered just how many floors the dungeon had.

The guard nodded and stepped away.

“Good luck,” the human guard said, and then a rumbling noise sprang to life as the doors started opening up and showing them only darkness.

Griss glanced back at everyone. “Let's go.”

The five of them stepped into the darkness, and then the doors closed behind them.