

## Act II - Zach

Life was cruel. It cared nothing for your plans, it cared nothing for your hopes and dreams. There are people who were lucky beyond measure, people for whom all fell just right, who even when they fail came back up on top. It was the reality of life. For some, the cards they are dealt are just always better. So much so, that it might seem like the reality itself is bending over backward just to give them more. But that was the reality, some will go through life without any struggle, for some everything will always turn to gold, and for others it would always turn to shit.

Some will live their entire lives without any struggle, and others will know nothing but struggle. It was just chance, or just a cruel twist of fate.

Zach was still not quite sure if what he had just witnessed happen was real. In a few moments, everyone around him fell to the killer. A cruel reality of life. Zach saw him now, the Ravzor looking at him with a strange look in his eyes. A dagger in his hands and a bleeding wound that Zach had carved in his shoulder. The others had all died, all because they had been foolish, because they had ignored his warnings, and because the reality didn't conspire to make things go their way. Chance and cruel twists of fate.

Even now he wasn't sure what they had been thinking, fighting a killer as if... as if it was just a simple battle, a spar. Griss had died before Zach even reached him, and then Edima charged, enraged at the sight of Griss' lifeless body.

How could they have been so stupid? The killer hadn't wasted any movement, he went in for the kill from the start. The others... they had attacked as if they expected to exchange blows with the killer first before they moved up to use their greatest powers. It was so... inexperienced. That wasn't how these fights went, Zach knew fully well how thin the line between life and death was in the battles between people. One wrong step could mean death. This was not a battle to capture, nor was it a battle to maim, it was a battle to death.

Nyathulla's dead body was to his right, her one remaining eye open wide in shock while the other was a mangled mess of blood. Zach felt sad at their deaths, but a part of him realized that he didn't feel any worse than how

he felt when people from other task forces died on Earth. He had hoped that he could come to see Griss and the others as friends, but he had been deluding himself. They had been kind to him, and he had been grateful for their help, but they hadn't been friends. Not really.

They had little in common, they didn't understand him, not how he needed those he could consider his friends to understand him. He was sad that they had died, but it wasn't the sorrow he had felt back on Earth, when his real friends had died. A part of him wondered if the Infinite Realm had changed him, made him crueler and more callous, or perhaps he had always been like this. Only he hadn't been able to see it behind his sense of duty on Earth.

He didn't dwell on those thoughts, the Night Horror was standing before him. The roof was large, the building below them some kind of a warehouse. It was stone and flat, with no railings or walls on the edges. Only a moment had passed since their clash, and Zach's failure to kill him. He didn't have the time to waste. **Last Heir of Terra** was already singing inside his head and his breathing form pulled his Qi in the form of **{Calm Before the Storm}**, protecting his mind. His emotions dulled, both from the technique and his own state of mind. He had no room for that now, he was not as foolish as the others. He was not going to make the same mistakes. He had all of his gear, the **Ring of Quickening**, his **Greater Armor of the Silver Sentinel**, two more rings of strength and dexterity. He had drunk a potion that temporarily boosted all his stats by 10, and his **Last Heir of Terra** had boosted his stats by 100%. He knew how high his stats were now, he had tested himself extensively, trained and practiced with high stats every time he could.

He lowered his center of balance, and saw the Night Horror open his mouth to speak. Zach didn't let him. He activated **Old Heritage** and his strength and dexterity soared above 1100, his other stats all hitting 500 or over range. Before the Night Horror could react, could speak, he moved.

He used **[Ethereal Leap]** and white translucent wings appeared on his back. They beat once, and a powerful force propelled him forward as he leapt. **Wind's Favorite** let him push the wind at his back, helping his **Wind**

**Lord** perk. He blasted across the roof, his rapier extended forward as he went for the kill shot.

The Night Horror had moved even before Zach attacked, and his attack missed its target. Instead of the center mass, his rapier carved a wound along the Night Horror's shoulder, near the wound he had already made. Zach hit the ground and bled his momentum in a couple of steps, then twisted around his center mass. Every movement he made precise as his body fell into the movement style of the **|Perfect Tempest Dance|**. The Night Horror raised his dagger, a weapon almost as long as Zach's forearm, and blocked his rapier, but Zach twisted his dagger around, scoring a cut on the Night Horror's leg. He heard him hiss, and pressed his advantage. His stats were greater now than those of his opponent, he could tell. But in two seconds his perk would run out, and he felt like they would be more evenly matched.

Zach couldn't let that come to pass. He danced around the Night Horror, his rapier and dagger scoring hits, drawing blood. The Night Horror was covered in his own blood, but Zach felt his frustration build. Every strike he made was a killing strike, aiming at the spots where his **|Enhanced Weakness sense|** told him to, moving faster than the normal eye could follow. But every time the Night Horror evaded. Even with the wind that battered at his eyes, the Night Horror was somehow seeing his attacks. Zach remembered his training in the Citadel and recognized the problem. The Night Horror wasn't reading his attacks, he wasn't that good, his body just jerked away almost before Zach even attacked. *A sense perk, danger sense most likely.* Zach concluded, although from what his instructor had said it shouldn't be enough to give the Night Horror this much advantage. Not unless he had a perk that helped, or his skill was a tier 6 one.

Zach wasn't a genius fighter, but what he excelled at was gathering information and then acting on it. Devising a way to deal with issues after he understood them. It was why he had waited and learned in the library before advancing. Now, with less than a second left of his boosting perk, Zach gathered his attack and then stepped forward in front of the retreating Night Horror. He danced away baiting his opponent's block, and then made an opening.

He used **|Flurry Strikes|** and stabbed forward with his rapier, striking at the center mass. His hand blurred and several attacks hit at the same moment.

Even with the speed of his attack, the Night Horror reacted. He brought his dagger up and blocked two of the strikes, his own dagger hitting his body as it was blown away by Zach's attacks, biting into his own chest shallowly. Three other strikes punched into the Night Horror's body, but immediately Zach knew that something was wrong. Zach saw, in the split second before his attack arrived, Night Horror's chest ripple and his attacks hit something solid.

The Night Horror was blown back and fell onto the ground rolling back and getting up on his feet. Zach's **Ethereal Sword** shattered and his **Old Heritage** ran its course.

The Night Horror was looking at him, a shocked look on his face. Zach could see through the torn shirt on the Night Horror's chest, and instead of fur he saw hard scales.

He frowned, but realized that a shapeshifter might have more such abilities, partial shifts. Perhaps even ways of healing, and he knew that he couldn't let him get his bearings. Zach jumped forward, putting his dagger away as he pulled out Mistral. His stats were lower now and he was slower, more on par with his opponent. But he wasn't going to let up on the pressure.

His opponent extended his hand and something appeared on his hand, a gauntlet made out of red smoking metal. Zach reached with his fingers and his **[Ethereal Chains]** exploded out of his hand, tying the Ravzor up and pulling his new gauntlet to his chest without him being able to use it. The Night Horror grimaced in pain as the chains started to burn his soul. Zach swung his sword, and the Night Horror shifted in an instant, transforming from a Ravzor to the human woman that they had seen before, the chains loosened up and dropped to the ground as the Night Horror evaded beneath his sword. Zach turned, following, wishing that he could use his **{Lightning Strike}** but knowing that he needed to protect his mind.

His decision proved true, when Qi exploded out of the Night Horror from the ground. One moment Zach was on the open rooftop, and in the next he was in a field, surrounded by horrors. The dead reached for him, Gloria

with her white hair and missing half her body. Linda with a hole in her heart. For a moment Zach froze, but then he saw through it with the help of his technique. The illusion was off somehow, not transparent, but unsubstantial. He roared and stepped through the visages from his past, a moment later the illusion disappeared and he was back on the roof.

Night Horror had taken the opportunity to move away, close to the edge of the roof, trying to get away. Zach's cooldown had returned and he used **[Ethereal Leap]**. He smashed into the stone roof next to his opponent and swung, wind followed his attack, a gale of power. The Night Horror, now in human form, ducked again, but the wind caught him and sent him flying back across the roof and away from the edge.

The Night Horror was good, so good, every one of Zach's attacks he evaded just enough to avoid getting killed. If Zach hadn't leveled, he would've been hard pressed to do anything. He looked at the Night Horror, and in the back of his mind, a voice was telling him something. The **Last Heir of Terra's** masters, telling him that it was all too easy, that he shouldn't be able to press his foe so much. But Zach couldn't let that slow him, it would only give the enemy a chance to escape. Zach didn't need to kill him to win, the reinforcements were coming. Relas, the Guard and the Wardens, they would be here, he only needed to keep the Night Horror from escaping. But while he didn't need to kill him, he wanted to.

He ran forward, wind pushing him faster. He saw the Night Horror open his/her mouth again, but he didn't allow for the killer to speak. He focused his mind and cut from the side **[Sealing Slash]** singing through the air. The Night Horror twitched out of the way again, but at the last moment Zach pulled on the wind from behind Night Horror, pulling him into the slash. Even then the shapeshifter managed to evade most of it, but Zach's blade passed through a bit of the shapeshifter's hip, and that was enough.

He knew that it wasn't going to last for long, seconds at most, not without him charging it, but now he had an advantage. He prepared to finish it, readying his **[Ethereal Wing]**, but then the killer pointed his gauntlet at Zach. Then there was only red fire and pain.

He was blasted back across the roof, his armor heating up so much that he felt his skin burn beneath. He screamed as he hit the ground and rolled.

The pain threatened to black him out, but Zach's **{Calm Before the Storm}** allowed him to weather the pain.

He got up to his knees and looked at his opponent. The gauntlet was a powerful item, and he felt stupid for forgetting about it. The Night Horror had pulled it out of storage for a reason. He flipped his visor up and pulled out a potion from his storage, drinking it immediately as he stood up. He saw the Night Horror do the same, Zach grimaced, knowing that he shouldn't give his opponent the time to heal but he needed it as well. His armor was still hot, but his wounds were healing and the pain was slowly going away.

He put Mistral behind him and focused, just as Night Horror still in his female human form opened his mouth to speak again.

Night Horror started. "Zac—warden you—"

Zach slashed at the air in front of him before he could say anything else. He had no interest in his opponent's words. Razor Wind left his sword, a crescent blade made out of wind. It slashed over the roof and the Night Horror dropped to the ground, letting the blade fly over his head. As he got up his body shifted back into his Ravzor form. And then he pointed his dagger at Zach, who was running at him.

Zach felt something hit him, and he stumbled as a notification flashed in the corner of his eyes.

<p><b>You are affected by Dark Greed.</b> <b>-10% to all stats</b> <b>60 Sec</b></p>
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He blinked at the status and the ticking timer, feeling himself getting just a bit weaker. The Night Horror looked at him with piercing eyes, a strange expression on his face. It looked almost like indecision, Zach took advantage of that. He jumped forward, and danced.

Mistral in his hands and wind around him, he attacked, slashed and twisted, stabbed and kicked. He was the tempest, his skill singing along with the voices of the masters of old. The Night Horror was on the back foot, defending, trying to block, to evade. The Night Horror managed to avoid a killing blow, but still cuts and stabs appeared over his body, and blood spilled

on the stone of the roof. Some of that blood was carried all around them by the wind, a tempest filled with blood that surrounded their dance.

He was winning, he could see that. The Night Horror could barely keep his eyes open as Zach's wind carried Night Horror's own blood back into his eyes, but still the Night Horror was evading his strikes. A twitch to the side, and instead of losing his neck, the Night Horror got a tiny cut on the shoulder. A twitch to the right and instead of Mistral piercing through his heart it grazed the Night Horror's ribs.

His opponent's dagger snapped forward as Zach overextended, but Zach had been fighting in armor for years, he didn't even try to pull his weapon back and block, there was no way for him to pull his sword back in time. Instead, he dipped his shoulder and hit the flat of the dagger with his pauldron, deflecting the attack as he twisted his body. That left the Night Horror open, and Zach stabbed Mistral forward.

This time the Night Horror was too slow to evade, and Zach's blade pierced through his stomach. Zach saw the Night Horror's eyes go wide and then raise his gauntlet, pointing in Zach's direction. But, Zach left Mistral in the Night Horror's stomach and pulled his hands away. With his right hand he caught the gauntlet, the bolt of red fire roared next to Zach's head firing off into the distance. Zach's left hand went to his back and pulled out his dagger.

His hand snapped forward toward the Night Horror's head, his mind focused on his skill.

**|Flurry Str—|**

“—Zach,” the Night Horror whispered and his hand froze just a hairbreadth away from the Ravzor's eye.

Zach frowned, looking at his own hand, unsure why he had stopped. And then his mind caught up with what his subconsciousness had heard. The voice out of the Ravzor's mouth hadn't been the one he heard it speak with before. It was familiar, and Zach's blood went cold. He watched as the Night Horror shifted, his form shrinking down, and in a few seconds a Demasi stood before Zach.

He took a step back before he even realized what he had done, and on instinct dismissed Mistral. The Demasi fell to his knees, looking up at him with that familiar face, with those green eyes.

Zach felt fury boil up through him, and he moved. He grabbed the Night Horror by the throat and pulled him up.

“What did you do to her?” He snarled in the killer’s face.

The Night Horror struggled in his grip, mouth opening, but no air coming out. He threw the killer to the ground and got on top of him, his dagger at the Night Horror’s throat.

“Tell me!” Zach roared. “If you hurt her, I swear by everything I hold dear, I will make you suffer a fate unlike anything you can even imagine!”

The green eyes looked at him, filled with emotions. Sadness, guilt, desperation, love... and finally madness. Before Night Horror even spoke, he knew the truth.

“I... It’s me Zach,” the Night Horror said in Quell’s voice.

Zach’s mind went blank, shakily he got to his feet, then stepped to the side, stumbling away from her and falling to the ground. He sat on the roof looking at her, seeing her, perhaps for the first time. She got to her knees and he saw her wounds start to close, she was still covered in her own blood, but she didn’t look away from his eyes. The look in those green eyes, the ones that he had looked into every night was manic, desperate.

“I’m sorry Zach I—” She started, but he cut her off.

“How long? When did you take her?” Zach asked, his voice ringing hollow.

Her face scrunched up almost as if in pain, but he believed none of it. “I—I... It was always me Zach, from the start. It was me, me... I didn’t even have to pretend that much. I am... her, she is me. The real Quell died long ago, along with her parents, decades ago.”

Zach closed his eyes in pain, waiting for the stab to his heart to come, for her to kill him. He realized what a farce their fight had been, this had all been a ploy for her. She had to have waited for the moment when he was about to win to twist the dagger in his heart. She was a predator, she played with her food, she played with him.



“You... you made me fall in love with you, just so you could kill me like this?” Zach whispered. Inside, he could feel himself breaking, recognizing the thing that he had sought and studied months back. A fracture, that thing that broke people’s minds, that allowed them to excel in skills. It was happening to him even as he waited for death.

A part of him wanted to struggle, to try and fight again, but another part of him was so tired. Tired from what had happened on Earth, tired from seeing how his values and desires mattered less than dust in the Infinite Realm. There was no law, there was no right or wrong. There were only those who had power and those who did not.

“No, no, no, no, no,” He heard her whisper, over and over. And he opened his eyes, seeing her hands holding her head as she shook it from side to side. And then she froze, her eyes turning wide and snapping to his.

“It was all real Zach,” she whispered as she started crawling toward him slowly. “Everything we have is real. It was all me. I love you Zach, please, please, please. I need you, I need to watch you, to touch you, to taste you. Pleeeaseeeeeeeee...”

He watched her, seeing the madness in her eyes. *How did I not see it before? How did I*—but he realized that he had. All the little things about her that he had assumed were quirks, differences that he attributed to her being a different race. The way she would freeze in the middle of their conversation and then act like nothing happened. The way her eyes would dart around like she was confused and didn’t know where she was. Everything made more sense, she was the killer, she was the Archivist, she had access to everything that came through the Warden Station. She could stay ahead, she could avoid capture easily.

She froze just a step in front of him, her hand rising up almost as if she wanted to touch him.

“Zach, Zach, Zach, please, please, please,” She chanted, her eyes boring into his.

“I...” Zach started, but he didn’t even know what to say. For some reason he believed her words. Something inside of him believed that she truly loved him, that she was truly Quell revealed to him. He couldn’t explain it,

but he had learned long ago to trust his instincts. He felt sick. “I let you touch me, I slept with you, I... I loved you,” *I love you*. His mind betrayed the lie.

“I’m sorry, sorry, sorry,” she said, her hand falling back, her face turning away as if he had slapped her. That made his heart hurt, seeing her like that. But he couldn’t let himself feel that.

“You killed the innocent,” Zach whispered.

Her eyes flashed the madness dancing in them. “No, no, no. No innocents. They waste what they had been given! They stay weak, and so make those monsters strong, they allow them to stay on the top. To decide who lives and who dies! Who advances and who does not! We were not meant for this! Zach! You and I are the same,” one half of her face twisted up into a grin, while the other seemed to turn down into a frown. “We survived our old worlds! We were the best! Strongest! And then we came here. And they... they... they?”

She seemed to almost lose her train of thought which let Zach think. The things she said, he didn’t know what to believe, was this just madness? Or was it also truth. Were the two incompatible? If it was... if she was a Ranker like him... How old was she? How long had she been lost in this madness?

“They put us down!” She said suddenly. “They kept us from growing, they stifled us! I was great! Protector of my people! And then I failed, because I wasn’t strong enough, because they didn’t let me be strong enough!”

Zach felt her words hammer into him, he understood that, he recognized that pain in her voice. He just didn’t know if he could trust it. Everything was falling apart inside of him, and he didn’t know what to do.

He startled as he felt her hand on his cheek, her eyes open wide and filled with madness, staring at him, so close to him that he could feel the heat of her breath.

“I’m sorry Zach, I love you, love you, love you. I can’t, I— no, I want, I—” He saw her trying to compose herself, for a split second he saw her as he had known her, the Quell that he loved.

“You are like me,” she whispered, her voice even now, the madness in her eyes gone, but he knew that it was still there, behind those green eyes. “You understand, we can be so much more Zach. This... this city, this

constant weight around us that keeps us from getting stronger. We can fight it together. To take from those unworthy! We can grow strong, so strong that we can make our own laws, our own rules!”

For a moment Zach hoped that he had imagined her madness, but the more she spoke the more it peeked through her eyes. He saw her grin and it made him shiver. She wasn't hiding it from him anymore, this was the real her.

“I fell in love with a monster,” Zach said to himself. Memories of the past forced their way up into his mind. He remembered Ryun standing in the abandoned settlement, looking at him with eyes eerily similar to the ones that were looking at him now. He remembered how Ryun had looked at him, the grief and sadness in him. Zach remembered how shocked and how weak, he was back then, how he had turned his back to his friend. How he had turned his back on someone that he had loved. How he had failed.

*I want to protect those that I care about, those that I love, always.*

The words echoed in his mind, almost mocking him. He had sealed that part of himself, that desire, inside his skill. He knew now why his hand stopped when he heard her voice, why he couldn't bring himself to attack her and end it. He started shaking, and the look in Quell's eyes changed, turning questioning almost afraid. Zach realized that he was laughing, his whole body shaking with it. His laughter echoed across the rooftops and Quell drew back, which made him laugh even harder. A monster, a killer, the Night Horror drew back from him.

He stood up, slowly bringing his body back to his control. Quell was still on her knees in front of him, looking up at him with loving eyes tinged with madness. The Infinite Realm had made a mockery of what he believed in. They had laws, but played politics, they let murderers walk because they weren't killing enough people, or not killing important people. What he believed to be law was nothing but a guideline that didn't even matter if you were strong enough. He had thought that the Wardens could help him, give him structure but... He remembered what Quell told him about advancement, he remembered the lack of guides for anything above third evolution in the library. Everything that he had experienced since he came to this world was

flashing through his mind. And then it all stopped, and he felt the calm settle in, finally.

The wind carried the sounds of footsteps coming from far away to his ears, Relas was coming with reinforcements. Zach realized that he still had his dagger in his hand. He looked at it, and then at Quell.

“I love a monster,” Zach whispered to himself as he looked at the creature in front of him, looking at him. He saw himself reflected in her eyes, standing above her with the dagger ready. She didn’t move, almost as if she was ready to let him kill her. It truly settled in then, she did love him. Zach took a deep breath and then spoke to her. “I... I failed on Earth. I didn’t help someone I loved and a world died. I could’ve done so many things; stayed with him, helped him. I could’ve stopped him, killed him, even though it would’ve ripped my heart apart. It would’ve been better than what happened after.”

His eyes hardened and he looked down at Night Horror, at Quell. His hand tightened on his dagger.

“I’m not going to make the same mistake again,” he said as he made his decision and took a step forward.

Zach waited in the back of the hall as the ceremony wrapped up. Griss’ sister was escorted out by her husband and son, Zach didn’t even have the guts to say his condolences. He didn’t know what to say, nothing would change what happened. The other wardens walked out of the hall, leaving Zach all alone. He looked at the warden badges on display, the plaques with names etched on them. He closed his eyes in pain, whispered his apologies and then turned around, walking away.

Outside of memorial hall, he saw Relas, standing on the steps and talking with another warden. Zach made his way to them and stopped next to the warden Relas was talking to.

“Hey, Zach,” Relas said somberly. The Warden inspector had felt like it was his fault that the others died. Because the help he had called came too late. Zach had tried to convince him that it wasn’t his fault, but he could tell that Relas didn’t believe it.

“Hey Relas,” Zach said with a fake smile on his face.

The three of them fell into an awkward silence. Then Relas broke it when by snapping his beak and speaking.

“Do you still plan on leaving?” The Karura asked.

Zach nodded his head. “Yes, I always planned on being a wandering warden. Hunting criminals who have high bounties appeals to me. It will let me see more of the core, and perhaps beyond as well.”

Relas sighed. “I wish that you stayed, we could use someone like you in the city.”

Zach shrugged. “I’m sorry I just... with everything that happened, I just can’t...”

“I understand,” Relas said, his beady eyes blinking slowly. “When do you leave?”

“Right now, there is no need to delay anymore,” Zach said. It’s been less than three days since their encounter with the Night Horror, and Zach still couldn’t quite get himself balanced. He felt as if he was walking through fog.

“I wish that you captured him alive,” Relas said after a moment, his eyes hardening. “Burning to death was too good for Nigh Horror.”

Zach winced, and Relas caught it.

“Sorry,” the warden said as he shook his head. “I saw the body, so I know that you went... I think that it is understandable, with everything that happened I don’t think that anyone blames you. I just wish that I could’ve at least seen his face, what you did... it barely left anything.”

Zach closed his eyes, memories coming to him unbidden. *The gauntlet burned in his hand as the fire came down, scorching everything. Half of the bones turned to ash, and the rest became an unrecognizable mess.*

Seeing Zach’s expression Relas cleared his throat and turned to the other warden. “I’m glad that you made it out alive Nyathulla. I heard that your badge went a bit haywire for a few minutes there.”

Nyathulla bowed her head and spoke softly. “I was very close to death, if Zach hadn’t poured those healing potions down my throat...”

“Yeah, I’m glad that he was able to get to you in time,” Relas said, then turned back to Zach. “I heard that you didn’t want to claim the gauntlet? Why? It is a mythic item, I have no idea where the Night Horror got it, but it could be useful to you.”

Zach shook his head. “I don’t want it, besides it is better for it to be of use to the Citadel. Perhaps it can pay for the families of the others...”

Relas nodded in understanding. “I’m sure that the Warden Commander will make sure that they were taken care of.”

“Hopefully,” Zach said, then he took a deep breath. “We should go, we shouldn’t waste too much of daylight.”

Relas sighed. “Right. I still wish that you could stay, just yesterday the station’s archivist quit, and with everything that has happened... there is a lot of work to be done. Hey, didn’t you and the archivist have a thing?”

“Briefly,” Zach said. The only person who Zach had shared the full extent of his relationship with Quell had been Griss, and he was dead.

Relas shook his head, and then snapped his beak in what Zach had learned meant mirth. “Until next time, take care of yourselves.”

Zach and Nyathulla nodded and turned around, walking toward the stables where their mounts were already prepared with their things.

## **Warden Commander Yirrel Annsi**

Yirrel stood in her office in the tallest tower of the Citadel, and looked out of the window as her aide finished her report. She saw two figures leave the gate of the Citadel and head out.

“Do you want us to stop them?” Bera asked.

Yirrel’s expression didn’t change, but she shook her head. “No, let them go.”

She felt her mind drift as she tried to juggle a thousand different things, plans within plans, politics, wars, and world ending domes.

“This could easily spiral out of control Yirrel,” Bera said.

The use of her name brought Yirrel out of her mind and she turned to look at Bera. The minotauress was looking at her with a stern expression.

“It could all be worth it too,” Yirrel answered.

“We lost three wardens,” Bera reminded her.

Yirrel scowled. “You think that I don’t know that?” Her voice hardened.

“Sorry,” Bera’s expression softened. “I know that you do.”

Yirrel turned back to the window and her expression darkened. “Its all those fuckers fault. Pieces of shit, if we didn’t need them for what is to come I would’ve wiped them all off the face of this world long ago. *High Rankers*, bah, I should drop them all in Gemheart’s caves. Let them see what they should all aspire to be like.”

Yirrel knew that she was ranting, but even after all this time it infuriated her. She knew what the fuckers were doing, knew how they kept people from advancing all in order to keep their own power. And she hated that they needed them, that they couldn’t afford to lose them now. She tried to help where she could, but she was stuck playing politics, she had to appear to be playing the same game as them. Because the only thing that would get the fuckers to unite was if they sensed a threat to their power. And even as powerful as she was, having everyone turn on her would not be pleasant. Nor could they afford it.

“Still, what if they...” Bera started, then trailed off.

Yirrel sighed. “I know that it is a risk, but I don’t think that it will happen. I’ve seen inside of him, he won’t bend that much. I am surprised at what he did, but... I want to see what he does from here on out. ”

“Why even do this?” Bera asked. “We don’t need that... thing with him.”

Yirrel sighed. She didn’t know how to explain, not really. “He is a Ranker Bera, the most powerful one that I had ever seen. The things that Ferrut told me, the others... you read the reports, you should know. He arrived in the Infinite Realm stronger than half of those who had lived entire lifetimes here. We need powerful people, those that we can trust. And Rankers... they thrive in chaos and adversity. This... this is a test, I want to

see what he will do. How he will act. I need to know now if he can be trusted. Only two Iterations are left Bera, once they arrive, the domes will go down and the horrors inside will get out.”

Bera shivered, she was they only one of her subordinates that knew the truth about everything. Her most trusted confidant and friend. Yirrel glanced at the figures in the distance, wondering if she had made the right choice.

“And what about the other one?” Bera asked her.

“The way Zacharia described him makes me think that he is not going to be an asset to us. But I will reserve judgment until we find him and learn his side of the story. The truth always has three sides, the truth of the one side, the truth of the other, and the third which is the real truth.”

Bera nodded her head as Yirrel scratched at the side of her face, thinking.

Finally, she turned to look at her aide. “The shapeshifter killed how many? A few hundred? And several wardens?” Yirrel asked.

“Around that,” Bera said, but Yirrel and her both knew that they knew the exact number.

“I would sacrifice those lives willingly Bera three times over, for one person who could stand by our side when the time comes. For one person that can gain power and not turn out like those fuckers. Even if the other one killed an entire world before he arrived here, it is a small thing to overlook in order to save the rest of us here.”

She shook her head, trying to compose herself. Only in Bera’s presence did she allow herself to lose her composure. She needed to vent, and her aide understood that.

“What happened with the test?” Yirrel asked.

“The standard test didn’t discover anything amiss,” Bera said. “Only when I used the non-standard one did we confirm that it is the shapeshifter. The badge had been attuned again.”

“That’s a powerful power then, if it could fool the standard test while on such a low power level. And I guess serving with the Wardens for so long has its benefits... did Warden Quell work on badges before?”

“Briefly, but apparently that was enough for her—him—whatever, to know how to attune the badge again. It was expertly done,” Bera said.



Yirrel sighed. She really hoped that she was making the right decision. Otherwise, she might have just sacrificed more than the lives already lost on her little roll of the dice. But if she was right, if the Ranker manages to exceed her expectations, well then it would all be worth it.