

Act II - Zach

Zach and Naha sat in their camp, a small mound of items spread all around them. The storage ring that they had taken from the rogue had been filled with all kinds of things; powerful potions, items, weapons, and armor. There was more there than what could be attributed to the three teams that the rogue had presumably killed. He had to have been doing this for a while. It seemed like his method was to join teams and then wait for an opportunity to strike when he could blame their deaths on monsters, since the adventurers had the life tracking on their badges the same as wardens. There were adventurers that specialized in retrieving gear of their fallen comrades called scavengers.

“Look at this,” Naha said, making Zach look up and see her holding a small ornate sphere.

“What is it?” He asked.

“It’s how he fooled the Guild,” Naha said before she threw the sphere to him.

Zach caught it and read through the window that popped up. It was called **The Orb of Deceit**, and it allowed him to change his screens to look like whatever he wanted for a small period of time. It was weaker than what Naha could do, since her fake screens were always active. This explained how he was able to fool the guild checks while still allowing Zach to see his screens with his ring.

“Huh, so useful for us or not?” Zach asked, looking back at Naha.

She shrugged. “I don’t need it, but if you think that you might need to pretend to be someone else in the future...”

Zach grimaced, but nodded his head. He placed the orb on the left pile of items, their **keep** pile. They had two piles in front of them, one where they sorted the items that they would keep and another where they placed those that they planned on selling. They had quite the haul, hundreds of items. So far they had decided to keep only three items including the sphere. The other two being **The Ring of Greater Might** and **The Ring of Greater Vigor**, giving plus 50 bonus stats to strength and vitality. The strength one needed to be charged, which happened by lowering the wearer’s strength by 50, and

when it was full it gave plus 10% to strength for a period of 10 days before needing to be recharged again. The vitality one had the same effect, only it increased vitality by 10% for the same period of time. The charging took a full day for both rings.

They continued looking through the gear, but most of it was rare, with only a few epic pieces that weren't that useful to them. Naha had a lot of items that were of legendary and epic rarity, a few mythic ones as well. Although most of them were useful only for stealth or nefarious purposes. The armor that she wore was a cloth mythic armor that made all her stealth powers 100% more effective and gave her a bonus of 50% damage on the first strike out of stealth if she wasn't detected. Things like that.

Then they came upon the rogue's gear. His armor was an epic one that boosted his Qi regeneration, a very useful item, but not really for the two of them. His rings were also mostly epic, with one legendary that gave limited invisibility for a few minutes. Naha took that one, since having different types of stealth for different situations suited her. He also had two elixirs, and Zach wasn't sure what to do with them. One was for reinforcing a Cultivator's core, increasing its capacity by 10%, reduced the cooldown of all Classer abilities by 1%, making the new cooldown the base. Zach assumed that those two elixirs had to be rewards for the boss, since there wasn't really any reason for him not to use them. Unless he was planning to sell them. The Cultivator's one was interesting, but Zach wasn't sure if they should waste it on themselves.

He asked Naha what she thought about it.

"We should sell the Cultivating one, and you should use the Classer one," Naha told him.

Zach glanced down at the two elixirs in his hands. The Cultivating one wasn't really going to help them since neither of them focused on Cultivation, but the Classer one could help either one of them.

"Why not you?" Zach asked.

"You are weaker," Naha shrugged.

It was true, overall Zach was weaker. She had more stats, and she had more powers. But, she didn't shine in all situations. Naha was an ambush predator, a stealth user. Zach was a fighter, in a head on fight, he did better

than she did. Although, her having shorter cooldowns wasn't really going to help her much. Her abilities weren't really cooldown dependent. Her **[Devour Flesh]** allowed her to make a quick biting attack that dealt great damage, her **[Devourer's Step]** was a good gap closer, and her **[Greater Shapeshift]** allowed her to change shape into anyone that she had observed for a short time. It wasn't like her shapeshifting perk—**Form Shift**, which let her change entire forms, but it was useful. They had used it once before when they went after a bandit camp. They killed a guard and she shapeshifted into him and entered, killed the leader and left with his head. It had been one of the easiest bounties they had done. Her abilities gave her a lot of versatility, allowed her to disappear in a crowd and adapt to most situations.

Zach was the one that needed to get the most from his abilities.

“You are right,” he said and then opened up the vial and downed it. He felt the elixir take effect and looked at his abilities, seeing that his base cooldowns dropped for all of his abilities.

Ethereal Wing	Execute a forward dash, slashing everything around you with your weapon. While dashing you are invulnerable to all damage sources except soul damage. Each slash deals 5% of total damage you would've dealt if you executed a physical slashing attack, as soul damage. Cooldown: 19.8sec (24.75sec)
Ethereal Leap	Execute a forward leap, max distance equals the distance you could have crossed with double your stats. While leaping you are invulnerable to all damage sources except soul damage. Cooldown: 11.88sec (14.85sec)
Ethereal Chains	Summon ethereal chain constructs that bind your target. The binding pins their soul and body in place,

	increasing all their cooldowns by 20%. Cooldown: 7.92sec (9.9sec)
Ethereal Sight	Activate your Ethereal Sight in order to see into the Ethereal Realm. Range of sight equals 20 paces around you. Cooldown: 47.52min (59.4min) Duration: 1h or until canceled

Zach was wearing his ring, which reduced his cooldowns by 20%, but he could see that the base cooldowns had been reduced as well. It wasn't a big benefit, but it all added up, especially in combat where every second mattered.

They went through the rest of the loot, deciding to keep only the potions. The adventurers had a lot of healing potions and some that gave out small boosts. In the end they had one big pile that they had decided on selling. Gear of rare and epic rarity that wasn't that useful to them.

With that done, they slept, and then returned to town the next day.

Zach and Naha entered the Adventurers Guild's interface room, ushered in by one of the guards. Inside they quickly made their way to the interface and Zach placed his hand on it. It had been a week since they had returned from the mountain and finished the bounty. They had been given their reward and had even gained a title. Zach had been expecting it, it was a faction specific title, for finishing ten bounties against opponents of similar tiers of power. He had been worried that because of Naha's presence they wouldn't be able to do it, but apparently she had been inside the requirement. Zach had made sure to pick bounties that were on the stronger side, with tiers of power in between Zach's and Naha's. Still, even with the information from the guild one couldn't always be sure that it was correct.

Now, Zach looked at the auction window and at their gains. He didn't have a lot time to look at all the details, like how many bids there had been per item, or how high each item had gone for. Access to the interface was appointment based for all members, and Zach and Naha had been given a short slot. He looked at the amount that they had earned from selling the loot they had retrieved and his eyes widened. He pulled most of it to himself, since Naha didn't use Essence for advancement, but he still had her put her hand on the interface and retrieve the rest. She did need Essence for living after all to use as currency.

As soon as they were done, they exited the room and headed back to the inn and their rooms. Once there they settled in to see what they wanted to do.

"Do you have enough to advance?" Naha asked.

Zach nodded his head. With their reward, his and Naha's contributions, what he gained from his dagger, and now the sale, he did in fact have enough to advance to level 180. "I do," Zach said, he had just over 180,000 Greater Essence. If his math was correct, then he would need around 142,000 GE in order to hit level 180.

"So, are you going to advance?" Naha asked.

He hadn't been advancing every time that he had Essence to do so. Sometimes staying a lower level in order to face stronger opponents was more valuable. He wasn't rushing in order to gain power, he was carefully growing it. Now... They had exhausted the bounties in this area that were close to their level, in order to progress further they would need to head to more dangerous areas in the core. Most of the core was pacified and relatively safe, but there were pockets where monsters still ruled and where more powerful people resided.

Level 180 would also raise him another tier of power, get him closer to Naha's power. And he needed to be strong enough if he was going to continue traveling and living with her. He needed to be able to subdue her if she lost control. Until they managed to use her skills to seal and stabilize her, he was her first and last line of defense. Zach had made compromises when he had decided to save her, when he had chosen her over what the law required of him. He needed to make sure that she never again takes an innocent life.

He sighed and nodded his head. “Yes, I’m going to advance. But,” he started. “Before that, we should look at more skills for you to buy, we have the Essence now.”

Skills from the Framework shop were generally cheap, although there were some that were more expensive. The two of them had been thinking a lot on what kind of skills she needed to take. So far they had taken things that she felt like she could evolve easily, like |**Mind Resistance**| and |**Evade**|. But there were other skills that could be useful to her. Zach had been suggesting |**Meditation**| as a way to get her mental state even more under her control.

Naha’s eyes glanced to the side and started moving around, and a moment later she made her screens visible. He moved next to her and they looked over the skill selection, discussing each one. They decided to stick with common and uncommon skills, since they were easier to evolve and she couldn’t afford to take her time with skill evolutions.

After around half an hour they made their choice of two skills. Both of them they had already talked about prior to now. She chose |**Meditation**| and |**Night Eyes**|. She could already achieve the effect of |**Night Eyes**| by using her **Partial Shift** and changing her eyes into those of a monster that she killed before, it was why they had picked that skill. Since she could already see in the dark, they felt like she could upgrade the skill quickly, and she could evolve it in a specialized way that could aid her in the future even beyond the ten minute shift of her perk.

After they were done, she settled near the bed and started to experiment with her |**Meditation**| while Zach turned to his screens and started to level.

He quickly reached the next perk level and looked at his choices.

Judgment Cut	Once per combat execute an overhead attack that deals 5x damage.
Ethereal Fissure	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.
Spirit Call	Once per day release a call that will summon any spirits in a large radius to your location, both hostile and friendly spirits will be called, which will answer depends on their will.

Zach looked at his choices. This one was the first where he hadn't gained any wind perks as a choice. It seemed like he had been ignoring them long enough that they were no longer an option. He didn't really need any more of them, the ones that he did have were good enough for him, and as he grew stronger so would they. The wind perks that he had were useful in combat and out of it, allowing him greater maneuverability and his passive wind perks allowed for low-power boost and distractions at no cost.

The first choice was a simple one, but powerful. He had been making more martial choices in the past, trying to go away from the perks that would push him in the more spirit related build. He didn't really want to become some kind of a summoner. He wanted to be a fighter. The second choice was interesting, entering the Ethereal realm wasn't directly related to spirits. It could be useful, he could use it to escape if he ever got trapped somewhere, since the Ethereal realm didn't always correspond to the geography of the real world. Obstacles that existed in one realm might not exist in another.

But the restrictions were a bit... but he could still make use of it. Although getting stuck in the Ethereal realm might not be the best. The spirits that lived there weren't always friendly.

The last choice he dismissed out of hand, he didn't need to be able to call the spirits.

He glanced at Naha, seeing that she was deep in her meditation, not that she could help him much. Her knowledge about Classes was at the same level as his was. Finally, he made a decision. Judgment Cut was simple and powerful, but ultimately Zach didn't have a great need for it. And while he

did want to move in the more warrior flavored direction with his Class, he did want to keep using the Ethereal side of it. It would be foolish not to.

He chose **Ethereal Fissure**, and started leveling again. Quickly he hit 180, and looked at his choices for the next class evolution.

Class Evolution Available		
CLASS	DESCRIPTION	ATTUNEMENT
Ethereal Swordsman	<p><i>You are a swordsman greatly in tune with the Ethereal. When you cut, your blade passes through more than just the body.</i></p> <p>Ethereal Swordsman is a sword master focused on cutting not only the flesh but also the soul. With a wide array of abilities and powers geared toward damaging the soul.</p>	<p>Ethereal Sword: All ethereal and sword based powers are 10% more effective. All sword based skills level at double the speed. Gain +10% to dexterity and 10% to wisdom.</p> <p>!Gain one of the following:</p> <p>-Soul Ward support ability: Apply a ward on your sword that lasts for one hour. Any wound inflicted by a Soul Warded sword deals extra soul damage.</p> <p>-Ethereal Whirlwind offensive ability: Execute a whirling attack all around you dealing soul damage to everything damaged.</p> <p>-Deftness and insight: Gain plus</p>

		10% to base dexterity and 10% to base wisdom.
Phantom Slayer	<p><i>You are a warrior that hunts down and slays the wicked, both in this and the Ethereal Realm.</i></p> <p>Phantom Slayer is a hunter of a different kind. Instead of hunting monsters, a Phantom slayer specializes in hunting spirits, people, and shades. A Phantom Slayer is always at home when on the hunt, no matter whether his prey dwells in the real or in the Ethereal realm.</p>	<p>Phantom Hunter: Gain +20% to stamina and -20% to ability cooldowns when fighting spirits or shades. Gain +10% to strength and dexterity.</p> <p>!Gain one of the following:</p> <p>-Inspect Spirit support ability: Allows you to see the stat screens of targeted spirit.</p> <p>-Phantom Whirl offensive ability: Whirl your weapon around you, creating a ring of Ethereal energy that expands outward from your position.</p> <p>-Might and Deftness: Gain plus 10% to base strength and 10% to base dexterity.</p>
Spirit Warrior	<p><i>You are a warrior of the spirits. Binding them to your will and using them in your quest.</i></p> <p>The Spirit Warrior has a close connection to</p>	<p>Spirit: Any spirit based power is 20% more effective. Gain +10% to strength and wisdom.</p>

	<p>the spirits and is able to make contracts with them that allow for transfer of power. A Spirit Warrior seeks to develop a deeper connection and understanding of the Ethereal, letting them commune with the spirits the Ethereal plane. Allowing them to gain their strength as their own, whether by peaceful agreement or by force.</p>	<p>!Gain one of the following:</p> <p>-Spirit Armor support ability: Call upon lesser spirits to shield you. You bind them into an armor around you preventing soul damage depending on the amount and power of lesser spirits bound.</p> <p>-Spirit Stun offensive ability: Stun a spirit for up to several seconds depending on their power.</p> <p>-Insight and Might: Gain plus 10% to base wisdom and 10% to base strength.</p>
--	---	--

Zach looked at his evolution choices. He immediately discarded the last one, he did not want to deal be a spirit summoner or to utilize them in that manner. Having to convince or force them into contracts sounded tedious, and he still remembered the last conversation he had with a spirit. The spirit cat had been incredibly annoying, its way of thinking was just too foreign to what Zach could understand, and he really didn't have the patience to try and commune with them. And going the forceful route did not appeal to him. That left him with two choices, the first was a clear evolution of his current class, a more specialized version focused on the sword. It was tempting, and it did give him a good attunement. But there was something about the second choice. He didn't know what it was. The attunement was powerful, but it was conditional. And he hadn't really had a chance to fight spirits yet. He didn't

know what shades were, but he did not think that they were something that he wanted to tangle with.

He figured that he had been given this choice because he was a warden, a bounty hunter, and probably because of his last perk. He did know that there were secrets and treasures inside the Ethereal realm. Perhaps a greater opportunity to grow faster. Another reason why it was appealing was because of its bonus to strength and dexterity. He was more focused on physical stats, and had already planned on picking just a stat bonus this evolution. He didn't need another ability right now, and he didn't want to fill his extra three slots with abilities that might not be the best. He had taken **Ethereal Sight** last time because he wanted to focus a bit in that direction, and the ability had paid off.

He thought about it for a while, and then made his decision; he picked **Phantom Slayer** and chose **Might and Deftness** as his bonus.

Then, his next perk choice became available and he took a look.

Great Charge	Three times per combat you may make a powerful charge forward that triples your stats, the stat increase remains for one second after the charge ends.
Phantom Avatar	Once per day transform into the Phantom. You gain a +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.
Ethereal Form	Once per combat, turn yourself Ethereal ignoring all physical and special damage. Lasts until your mental stamina is drained completely or canceled.

Zach looked at his choices. The **Great Charge** was amazing, and it could really synergize well with his powers, not to mention that he could use it three times per a fight. Especially since the boost to his stats lasted for an extra second.

But the **Phantom Avatar** was... It gave him the defense that he lacked, and it gave a boost that lasted for longer, even if it was less. It was the only choice. He picked the perk and sighed. He had advanced again, and now they would need to find stronger opponents to fight.