

## Act II - Zach

Zach walked down the street of Emaros, Quell by his side. They just had a very pleasant dinner with Griss and his date. Zach had ended up taking Griss' advice and had asked Quell to out. It had been... awkward. He hadn't asked anyone out on a date in a long time. And while he did know Quell, a little bit at least, they weren't close. He had met her a few times in the Archives, when he went to research things about the case. And she had helped him every time. They had conversations, and he had realized that his first impression of her wasn't quite right. She wasn't really shy, she was just a private person. And he didn't pry, nor did she pry into his life. Aside from those few conversations, a few failed jokes that were too Earth-centric for her to understand, they hadn't really known each other. But, Griss had been right, Zach did need to relax and focus on something other than growing his power. And so he asked her out as the only real choice. He knew Nyathulla better, but aside from her drastically different appearance, it felt weird with them basically working together.

He realized that no matter how much he wanted to rush back into the dungeon, the others weren't like him. He had even entertained the thought of going in alone with his key, but he felt bad for even thinking about it. Griss was the first person that had really helped him in this new world, his first friend. And even though Zach was starting to see a fundamental difference between himself and others, Griss included, he still felt like he owed Griss something.

It was, in part at least, why he had agreed to Griss' invitation. A double date, a dinner at a real restaurant. It almost felt unreal, and yet it had happened. Zach glanced at Quell at his side, their hands were close enough to touch, and on a whim he moved his and grasped hers. She looked down surprised, then met his eyes. There was a small smile on her lips, and Zach returned it. He turned back, looking ahead, watching the street filled with people, many of whom were couples holding hands just like the two of them.

The date went surprisingly well. Griss' date was another drake, Adir, who worked as a construction team manager for the builders. And he had quite a few stories to tell about the Emaros expansion process. It was quite

easy to like the man, and he had steered the conversation very well, for which Zach was thankful, since he had no idea how to even start a normal conversation. As the night progressed, he was finally able to relax and just enjoy the conversation.

They spoke about unimportant things, he didn't even remember half of what they talked about. The other interesting places around the city, the peace talks between some factions that were half a world away and that Zach didn't even know anything about. They spoke about the Blue Forest Hive of the Skreen and the tensions between Emaros and them. It seemed that the Warden Commander was attempting to clear up the tensions as she mediated with the Hive and the Elder King.

They spoke a only a little bit about themselves. Griss had said that Zach came from the frontier, which wasn't really a lie. He learned that Quell had lived in Emaros for her entire life, and that she was around the same age as Zach was. She had joined the wardens, but hadn't really been cut out for the front-lines. But there were other positions in the organization such as the Wardens.

"I had fun tonight," Quell's voice brought him out of his reflection.

Zach turned his head and looked at her. He let himself smile. "I had fun too. It's been a... long time since I was able to just enjoy myself without any worry."

"Living on the frontier has to be difficult," Quell added.

Zach prevented himself from reacting. Griss' statement that Zach came from the frontier was true, but they hadn't told the others that he was a Ranker. Not that it was a secret or something. It was written in his Warden records, any warden could just look and see it. Quell had access to that information as the archivist, although she would probably have to look in the Citadel records, since the station she worked at only held the information about the city.

Still, Zach found himself conflicted. He could shrug off her question, skirt the truth. But he liked her, even more so after the dinner. He didn't really want to start anything with a lie. Finally, he sighed and spoke.

"I don't really know," Zach started. "I'm not really from the frontier."

Quell frowned at him, tilting her head. “I thought that Griss said that you came back with him from there?”

“We met there, but I am not from there. Actually, I am a Ranker,” Zach said.

Quell blinked, looking confused for a moment. “But you said that you are thirty two years old?”

Zach grimaced. “Around that, yes, I lost count for a bit. And with the different day lengths here... I’m not really sure. But I should be that old.”

He saw her looking confused still, so he spoke before she could ask.

“I’m from the Seventh Iteration,” Zach said as he made a window with his name and iteration visible.

Quell looked at it, almost uncomprehending, and then back at him.

“But... I heard that no Humans arrived with the other Iterations... this... how?”

“According to Griss and the Warden Commander I was... a bit stronger than the usual Rankers that arrive in the Infinite Realm. For some reason I wasn’t thrown with the others in the arrival zone,” Zach answered. “I arrived in the frontier. I met Griss there and decided to join the wardens. I used to be something like a warden back on Earth... And I needed an organization that would allow me resources and time. To learn about this world and to pursue my own goal.”

“Your goal?”

“There is something that I must do... Only two people survived to the end of my world. And I intend to find the other.”

Quell thankfully didn’t pry any deeper, instead her face scrunched up in an adorable expression as she thought. Zach appreciated her way of speaking only after she was sure of what she wanted to say. He had noticed it in during their talks in the Archives. She would often go quiet as she thought about something before responding.

Finally, she turned back to look at him, meeting his eyes. “I’m guessing that something bad happened on Earth?”

Zach nodded, not wanting to share anything else.

Quell seemed to understand, so she changed the subject. “So you are trying to get stronger... That is why you are going in the dungeon, and why you don’t want to level for it?”

Griss had mentioned that during the dinner, making it seem to the others that Zach was crazy for not wanting to level before their second trip. His date, Adir, had agreed with him. Quell had been a bit more reserved, saying that she isn’t focused on combat so she didn’t understand.

“I want to get stronger, yes. And I... honestly, I am a bit disappointed in Griss and the others.”

“Because they want to level?” Quell asked.

“Yes, but also... When I met Griss, I thought that he was a good man, obviously. But also that he was someone who could teach me about things in the world. But he and everyone else I’ve met in this world are too content to play it safe. To level slower. They even said that with what they get from the dungeon they would be set for the majority of their life. They leveled from the first trip and intend to take what we earn on the second trip as fortune, to live off of. I don’t understand that.” Zach said, and then immediately grimace and shook his head. “Actually, that is a lie. There was a time when I would’ve loved nothing more than to find a safe place and settle down. I’ve spent most of the early years in the Framework running around, killing monsters and putting down warlords that wanted to hurt people. And then... then everything went to shit, and I realized that I needed more power if I was to keep others safe. Now, I know better. I need to advance, and I feel like I’ve wasted enough time since I arrived here. I rested enough.”

Quell looked at him intently, as if she was seeing him for the first time. “I’ve heard that many of the Rankers that arrive in the Infinite Realm are... very different than the people that are born here.”

Zach shrugged. “I don’t know, but I understand. I came from a world that was filled with chaos. But here...” He gestured around them at the city, at the people walking around them without a care in the world. “There is safety here, no real need for them to go around and hunt monsters to get stronger. Not for the most of them at least.”

Quell nodded her head. “Yes. And... it is hard to advance, you need to be supplied well if you are doing it without too much risk. Most people have

jobs that pay them a monthly contribution that is just enough for them to survive, maybe improve their way of life. Few can just live with nothing and focus on their leveling.”

“I understand that,” Zach said. “But I am not like that. I just don’t know what to do.”

“You are going to be an official warden soon aren’t you? You will be able to go wherever you want and do whatever you want. If you decide to be a wandering warden. Your contributions will be lower, but you could earn through contracts.”

Zach nodded his head. He knew that there were a few different types of wardens. Diplomats who mediated between factions and gained the most through contributions, since they didn’t hunt anything for Essence. Bounty hunters that went after wanted criminals that were too strong for regional law enforcement to handle. The city wardens that usually set up in a city and worked with other law enforcement as consultants, and those that travel the core and did a little of everything. Griss had been the last kind, and Zach felt like that or the bounty hunter was the best fit for him, but he was yet to make his decision.

“I guess that I still have a few months until I have to make the decision,” Zach said. “I still need to go back in the dungeon, finish my training, and I don’t plan on leaving until I find that Night Horror killer.”

Quell shivered. “I don’t see how you can find him, he is smart and leaves little to no evidence. And there had been no other suspicious murders that could be attributed to him.”

“I know, but I still think that we might find something in the records.”

“We already went over nearly everything that the wardens have Zach,” Quell told him.

“I can feel like I am missing something, some kind of a pattern that I have overlooked,” Zach said, then shook his head. “Let’s not talk about work now, this is supposed to be a pleasant night out.”

Quell chuckled and nodded her head.

They continued to walk in silence, and Zach relaxed, putting all his worries in the back of his mind and just enjoying her company.

The next morning, Zach walked toward the training yards with a smile on his face. He had escorted Quell home, and they kissed. It had been wonderful, and he had promised that they should do it again. And they agreed to meet tomorrow after she was done with work.

He really liked Quell, she was a smart and considerate person. And he wasn't opposed to seeing where the things between them could go in the future.

He reached the smaller training room that he had rented in the yards and entered. He set up, changed into his training clothes which were a simple battle robe and then walked over to the center of the room and sat down.

He focused his mind. It's been a week since their dungeon dive, and his **Last Heir of Terra** cooldown had come back. The others had all leveled to level 105, getting perks and stats that would help them in the next dungeon dive. Zach had decided against doing the same. He knew that he would still get less Essence because the others were higher level, but for some things that he had more contribution to killing he would get more, so he wasn't going to level. But that didn't mean that he did not need to train.

And he had been thinking the entire last week about how he could improve his skills. The last time he had managed to evolve a skill without finishing the quest, and he had two other skills that were currently on a quest. His **|Sword Mastery|** and his **|Weakness Sense|**.

For his sword skill he needed to learn a sword art from someone. It was a simple quest and Griss had offered to find someone, but after the dungeon Zach had told him to hold off on that because he had an idea. His perk was the combined knowledge of the Earth's greatest sword masters. When he used his perk he moved like they moved, his style changed from step to step, adapting into the best possible style for what he needed. But at the end of the dungeon, during the fight with the last boss when he managed to evolve his strike skill he felt something from his perk. A clarity as the voices in his head cleared up and spoke in unity. And he wondered if he might be able to isolate those voices, to perhaps listen to only one. He had a suspicion about that, ever since he read his perk description. The ability that he could use was

called the **Spirit of Terra**, and he felt that there was more to it than just what it said. Perhaps he could learn from just one sword master and be taught an art. He knew that his mind retained things after the perk was over, perhaps if he was focused on just one art he would retain more. He pulled out an hourglass that he had gotten from the shop and put it in front of him.

He triggered his perk, and immediately felt it fill him. The voices in his head awakened and a noise filled his mind. Countless voices speaking with an intensity that he couldn't quite understand anything. But there was an intent there, under his command, just waiting to provide what he needed.

He focused, trying to imagine what he needed. His sword, Mistral, was a long weapon, longer than a katana and a bit straighter. Similar in length and appearance to a nodachi, it had a long handle and a long blade. He needed a voice that understood that kind of a weapon. He summoned Mistral, and placed him on his knees, focusing on the blade and trying to sift through the voices. He could feel the change, some voices spoke louder, those who knew how a weapon like that could be used the best, while others quieted.

Zach tried to force his perk to speak to him in a clear voice, a singular one among the countless. He knew that his perk was an echo of those who had died, but somehow he felt like their voices were real. He didn't know if there was an afterlife, but the Dealmaker and the Three were powerful. They could do whatever they wished. So following that logic, he assumed that his perk contained at least the real memories of the people that came before. And from the library he knew that perks could be improved, that a person could get more from them than what they could when they just got it. As the person deepened their knowledge of the perk, as they learned how to use it better.

Zach pulled on his perk, pulled on the voices trying to make his will manifest. The perk was his, under his control, and he convinced himself that he could do that. The voices were changing, he could hear less and less of them, but they got louder and louder. And then the voices disappeared and he felt the breath leave him. He blinked his eyes open confused. He looked at the hourglass and saw that it had been less than an hour, but the perk had run out and was on the cooldown.

He grimaced as he realized that whatever he had been doing had burned through the perk's runtime. He sighed, and then stood up. He had

hoped to train for hours with the perk, but now he had to wait for a week. He started training with his new skill instead.

Three weeks later, a week before they were supposed to go back into the dungeon Zach sat in the training room again. He had been working on his perk every time it came off cooldown, and he had been making progress. He could feel that he was close. The **Last Heir of Terra** was filling his mind, and he could feel the voices thundering in his head, he was pretty sure that there were only two. Over the last few weeks he had managed to focus on less and less voices. He didn't know exactly how, a part of it was his perk doing the work on its own. But he could feel that some voices were better suited for what he needed than others, and so only those that could teach him a style that would be the most suitable to his long weapon.

Now there were only two voices, both thundering as if they were fighting each other, trying to speak to him. But Zach needed one, a teacher that could let him improve his skill quickly. He knew that he could've gotten someone from the Infinite Realm to teach him, someone who knew styles that could help him against people of different sizes and shapes. But he also knew that his perk was learning as he did, that it was improving. And he would much rather learn from someone who had been the best on Earth even without powers, than a middling swordsman from the Infinite Realm.

The two voices were clearing and Zach tried to focus on one of them. Somehow he was sure that both voices were extremely skilled, but somehow opposed. But one sang to him more than the other, and Zach focused on that one. He felt like his head was splitting, and he felt something wet trail down his cheeks and over his lips. And then, in an instant the **Spirit of Terra** blazed in his mind and something burst.

**“Ha!”** A voice exclaimed, and Zach opened his eyes to see what could only be described as a ghost standing in front of him. It was a man, translucent and holding a long sword, a nodachi that looked surprisingly like Mistral. He had long black hair with a topknot on top of his head and was dressed in a kimono, he looked down on Zach with a big grin on his face.



**“I beat Musashi, can’t wait to rub this one in his face,”** the man said and Zach blinked.

“I... who are you?” Zach asked as he fought through the pain, his head was pounding rhythmically.

**“Sasaki Kojirō, at your service young swordsman,”** the man smiled, and then sighed. **“Thank you for pulling me out, it gets... annoying having to be so close with thousand other minds.”**

Zach’s brain was barely functioning, but then he felt lightheaded.

**“Well, too bad that we don’t have much time, but we know what you want and I will help you, pull me out as soon as you can,”** the man said and then his ghostly form disappeared. Zach felt the **Spirit of Terra** end and his perk go on cooldown. A moment later he fell on his face and everything went black.

Zach stood with Mistral above his head, his legs spread and his elbows close to his body as his teacher taught him. He had delayed the dungeon dive by two weeks because he wanted the chance to experiment with his new perk ability. The description had changed, it now said that he could pull out a Spirit of one of Terra’s masters for a short time. And it truly was a short time. He could pull out the **Spirit of Sasaki Kojirō** for just twenty minutes, and while he was out he couldn’t hear any of the voices of the other masters. Sasaki Kojirō also couldn’t interact with anything around him other than speak. He had gotten a teacher, but he couldn’t use the other part of his perk if he did. It was actually great, while he was training he could summon a teacher, and in battle he could benefit from the voices of every sword master inside his perk.

“How many sword masters are in there?” Zach asked his teacher, the spirit of Sasaki Kojirō.

**“A few thousand, it’s hard to count when we are just thoughts and voices,”** Sasaki Kojirō answered.

“That number seems somehow low, I mean for every sword master that had ever lived?” Zach said as he swung his sword downward. He already felt

like he had improved greatly. Just two twenty minute lessons with one of the greatest swordsmen that had ever lived had improved him this much.

The spirit shrugged. **“We are the best of the best, and the peak of sword mastery hadn’t lasted for as long as you imagine. A few hundred years at most, and the majority of us come from that period. There are a few outliers from other times, but only a handful scattered across the centuries.”**

“So you can talk to each other?” Zach asked, he was still not sure if the spirit was the actual Sasaki Kojirō or just a construct of his memories.

**“Not how you imagine. In a way, we only exist when you use your perk, otherwise we are... asleep I guess, or something like that. We don’t know.”**

Zach had learned a lot from Sasaki Kojirō, both about his perk and other things. While he was using his perk all the sword masters were actually combined into some kind of an amalgamation of them all. They become like a single being that can speak with thousands of voices, guiding him and learning with him. They already had ideas about fighting with people with tails or those with multiple limbs and strange powers. But they needed Zach to get more experience in order to learn better on how to counter them.

Zach swung his sword, then moved, dancing to the side and swiping before activating his **|Flurry Strikes|** and his hand blurred. Several strikes came from the side hitting empty air.

**“Those skills are terrifying, if only I had those before...”** Sasaki Kojirō said.

Zach wondered what that would’ve looked like. His teacher had incredible knowledge about the sword.

**“We are nearly out of the time,”** Sasaki Kojirō said.

Zach could feel his perk slipping from him, as the twenty minutes neared the end. “Thank you for teaching me,” Zach said.

**“It is the only thing that I can do, so I figured I might as well do it. You aren’t the best I trained, but you have the drive to go far. Who knows, with all of these powers you have, you might overcome your lack of talent.”**

Zach chuckled. The spirit had all the knowledge that Zach had, so he of course knew all about skills, abilities, and techniques. But so far they had focused only on his sword play and skills.

**“Until next time young Zacharia,”** Sasaki Kojirō said.

“Until next time Master,” Zach said as the spirit disappeared. He took a deep breath, and then released it slowly. Two sessions, each twenty minutes. They had to go faster in order to get as much knowledge across in the time they had. Zach had then taken what the spirit taught him and then trained for the entire week until the cooldown from his perk came back. And he had made progress.

Zach glanced at his skill window.

Passive Skills	Active Skills
Combat Mastery (10/10) >> Sword Mastery (10/10) >> Sword Art (4/10)	Strike (10/10) >> Greater Strike (10/10) >> Flurry Strikes (3/10)
Weakness Sense (10/10) >> Enhanced Weakens Sense (2/10)	Evade (10/10) >> Greater Evade (9/10)
	Sealing Slash (9/10)

He had improved greatly. A lot of it came from just a few words from the spirit, but the rest was all him. Spending the last several weeks training like crazy. But it payed off, he was ready for the second dungeon dive. But, he had one more week before then, he wasn’t going inside without the **Last Heir of Terra** available. The others might’ve leveled, but he wasn’t going to do that. He needed his ace available.

He returned to his resting stance and begun the dance of stances again, just as Sasaki Kojirō taught him. One more week, and then he would go back to the dungeon.