

Act II - Zach

Zach and Naha stood inside the pavilion as Gemheart and his team got ready for the rescue. Chests filled with potions were opened on several tables and people were grabbing them and putting them in their storage rings. Both Zach and Naha had been given a few. Two boosting potions for their main stats, each giving them a boost of 100 to a stat for two hours. They also got a very high grade healing potions, and three vials of spirit bombs, which were apparently more effective against spirits.

Gemheart oversaw everything, and his team was ready in barely ten minutes. Team Leader Kishua was one of them, his krecean form covered in armor and four long swords fastened to his belt, one for each hand. The others were all people that he hadn't seen before, two were humans, the orc variant, one was donned in heavy armor and carried a large tower shield and a mace in one hand, while the other had a cannon similar to what Gemheart had.

Zach had learned that it wasn't really a cannon, but an Essence Formation that was being powered by Qi. Which told him that Gemheart had at least some tiers of power in Cultivation. The last three members of their team were two ravzor that looked to have spellcasting Classes. That put their team at eight. The people that Gemheart had chosen were his strongest people, and he wasn't taking anyone else because he wasn't sure that they could survive. And he couldn't wait for more reinforcement from his other companies, every moment mattered. Which made Zach feel slightly uneasy, since he was the weakest of the people coming in. But the High Ranker had respected Zach's request to come anyway.

Finally, after everyone was ready, Gemheart walked over to Zach and Naha. He towered above them, the two barely tall enough to reach his thighs. Gemheart leaned down and offered the something with one of his hands.

Zach saw two vials filled with pure white liquid.

"What is it?" He asked without taking it.

"They are **Soul Restoration Potions**," Gemheart said. "One should never enter the Ethereal Realm without them."

Zach blinked, and he picked one of the vials up, while Naha took the other slowly, almost as if she was terrified that she would drop it.

Soul Restoration Potion	Drinking this potion will rapidly regenerate your soul to its most optimal state.
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“Thank you,” Zach said, he didn’t really know much about souls, but Naha’s reaction told him that it was rare.

“You don’t know what that is, do you?” Gemheart asked, and Zach was sure that he sensed amusement in his tone.

“No, not really,” Zach admitted.

“Soul damage is the hardest damage to heal, up until just a few hundred years we had no way to do so, and were forced to rely on a soul’s natural regeneration. But at some point the damage becomes too much, and the soul heals wrong. This, was developed by a brilliant alchemist only two hundred years ago, and it allows anyone who drinks it to heal soul damage almost instantly. Before then we had few ways of recovering from soul damage. It will not work on old soul damage,” Gemheart warned. “The more recent damage it is, the better it will work. That one vial costs more than some people earn through their entire lives.”

Zach blinked. “Why give it to us then?”

“Since I had agreed to allow you to come, I am responsible for you. I am not selfless, of course. What you’ve said makes sense. If we enter without you we risk not being able to come out. Still, I will not lead you to certain death. Since we are entering the Ethereal Realm in the flesh, any damage that we take will also deal damage to our souls. If you take a small wound to your body, you will be fine by healing it quickly with a regular potion. But any wound in the critical areas of your body will need the **Soul Restoration Potion** to heal. Be ready to use the potion at a moment’s notice, but try not to get injured.”

Zach nodded his head. “What are we likely to face inside?”

Gemheart sighed, the mandibles on his mouth shaking. “We do not know, the spirits that attacked the camp weren’t very powerful, but we

couldn't check their screens. That tells me that there are more powerful things inside. We will most definitely face spirits. The ones that attacked us didn't seem more powerful than you are, so I am comfortable in taking you in. At the very least you will be able to help keep them off our backs, if they are present in large numbers, while we deal with anything stronger."

"Will we be able to damage them? Without powers that deal Ethereal damage I mean," Zach asked. He wasn't worried about himself, he had a few powers that could deal such damage, but Naha didn't.

"Of course," Gemheart answered. "We are entering in the flesh, that means that we take all of our power with us. Everything we do inside will harm the denizens of the Ethereal Realm."

Zach nodded his head, he was glad of that. He wasn't really interested in biting more than he could chew. But he was willing to push himself if the opportunity presented itself.

Gemheart gestured for his team and they all started walking out of camp and toward one of the tunnels. There were heavy barricades and people manning them all around, but they were allowed through. Gemheart had some difficulty passing through the tunnel, as it was just large enough for him to enter while crouched.

Finally, they reached what looked to be a hole blown into a dark wall. Zach frowned as he saw light breaking strangely against the surface of it, but he didn't have the time to study it. They walked through dark corridors, until finally they entered a large chamber, filled with a few more people, all armed and focused on the empty space in the center of the room.

"This is where the rift that lead to the Ethereal Realm used to be. It closed before we could mount a rescue," Gemheart said.

"What is this place," Naha asked, her head looking around.

"We do not know," Gemheart answered. "We believed this to be a wild dungeon, hidden beneath the ground, but... there is nothing inside. The walls are covered with Essence Formations and Arrays that none of us can recognize, none of them are anything like the things that we use. That does make us think that it might be a wild dungeon, as some do have languages and formations that are unfamiliar to us. And yet, there are no monsters inside, all rooms are empty. Granted, we haven't explored everything, this

structure is massive. It is a tower that extends deep beneath us. But the lack of monsters makes me suspicious, the Framework has many secrets, and many dangers.”

Zach nodded his head. “Yes, that it does.”

“The most probable thing that we will face inside are spirits. We will need to move quickly if we are to save my people. We don’t know for how long they had been stuck inside. But, the longer we are there the more danger we will face. The Ethereal Realm doesn’t like when people with bodies enter it, unless they use specific powers. The longer we are inside the more powerful spirits will be attracted to the place. But also shades, souls that had for some reason or another gotten stuck in the Ethereal Realm.”

“Shades are people?” Zach asked, he had already suspected, but he liked to confirm it.

“They are. When a person dies in the Real Realm, their soul is untethered from their body and can explore the Ethereal Realm, searching for the afterlife. In case that they don’t find it, or don’t reach it, they will remain stuck inside the Ethereal Realm. And that does... strange things to the mind, they deteriorate in months, sometimes if a soul is strong a few years. But eventually they turn into shades. Wretched things with great power. A soul in the Ethereal Realm cannot advance, and they cannot use most of their powers. Shades are different, as a soul turns into a shade it becomes a part of the Ethereal Realm. Whatever powers it had before death, it gains access to again, and then... the longer a shade survives in the Ethereal Realm, the more twisted and powerful that power becomes. You will recognize a shade by its eyes. They have concentric circles instead of a pupil and iris. The more circles the eyes have, the more powerful the shade is. If you see any shade with more than two circles, turn around and run. You will have no chance against it.”

Zach blinked at Gemheart. That had been... a lot. He hadn’t known about the afterlife, but now was not the time to ask about that.

“How do you fight them?” Zach asked instead.

“The same way you fight everything else, damage it until it dies,” the krecean said with mirth in his tone.

Zach took a moment to digest the information, and then he turned to look at the krecean. “How powerful of a shade could you take on?” Zach asked, interested.

Gemheart’s mandibles flickered, and his beady eyes blinked. Then he answered. “Perhaps one that had nine circles, if I could match it favorably.”

Zach tried to imagine just how much more powerful Gemheart was than him, but... it was hard when he didn’t really have anything to compare to.

“The last thing that you should know is that once in the Ethereal Realm you will not require food or drink, but the longer you are in there the more it will drain your will, your mind. If you stay too long, your body will die, and you will turn into a shade. I do not recommend any stay that is longer than a month, two at most, Ethereal Realm time.”

Zach nodded his head in understanding. That was good to know.

Gemheart looked around at his people, their team ready to enter.

“If you would please open the rift at the center of the room, Warden Zacharia,” Gemheart said.

Zach took a deep breath, then walked over to the center. He summoned his **Ethereal Sword** in its rapier shape and got ready. Before he used his perk, he focused inward.

“I might need to use you inside,” Zach said.

“Of course,” the droll voice answered him. **“You have done well to honor my wishes, and this is important.”**

Zach smiled as he felt somehow better. His awakened weapon was a bit peculiar, but Mistral had never failed him.

“Thanks, Mistral,” Zach said.

Then, he felt something inside of him shift, and then a notification appeared in the corner of his vision. He frowned and then pulled it up.

Mistral	
Razor Wind	Allows the wielder to send razor sharp blades of wind from the sword’s blade. Power and speed depend on bond, depth and charge

	time. Cost depends on charge time and stamina invested.
Wind's Power	Gain plus 5% to all stats while holding the awakened object.
Shearing Gale	Allows the wielder to channel and unleash a violent storm of wind that cuts anything in its path with a swing of the sword. Power and speed depend on bond, depth and charge time. Cost depends on charge time and stamina invested.

Zach blinked at that, his bond with the sword had seemingly improved. He wanted to take the time to check the new power and speak with Mistral, but the High Ranker was waiting and time was of the essence. He took a deep breath, pushed the screen aside, and then activated his Ethereal Fissure.

He stabbed his rapier in the air in front of him and immediately felt resistance. His sword pushed through something, and light started pouring out around it. He pushed further and then something ripped, and a line spread from where he cut up and down before opening up a gash in the fabric of space.

Zach looked at the white curtain that filled the fissure and stepped back. Gemheart and his team walked over, and he put one massive hand on Zach's shoulder.

"Thank you," Gemheart said, and then he stepped through, the others following behind him.

Zach glanced at Naha and saw her tilt her head at him.

"Last chance," she said.

Zach smiled. "No chance," he said.

She rolled her eyes at him and then they stepped through.

They entered a large chamber that stretched far into the distance, with glowing walls all around them, with white lines that resembled massive formations spreading through the stone all around them. They were on what looked like a wide bridge, and Zach could see more bridges in the distance,

crisscrossing with the one they were on. At the ends, he saw large doorways that led somewhere else.

Everything around them looked as if it was covered in a sheen of gray and green.

“Be ready for anything,” Gemheart said, his two cannons already in his hands.

Naha, was wearing her light battle robes, and held her awakened dagger in one hand and a short sword in the other. It felt weird to see her like that in Nyathulla’s skin, but they even if she had said her real name to the High Ranker, they didn’t want to let him know too much. He still wasn’t sure why she hadn’t lied, but then again... perhaps she knew more than he did. For all he knew all High Rankers could tell when you lied.

Zach had his dagger in his left hand and his rapier in his right. His **Last Heir of Terra** perk was on cooldown, and he regretted not having the time to wait for it. But he did have all of his other perks ready, including his **Phantom Avatar**, which would be even more powerful in the Ethereal Realm.

Zach saw one of the ravzor pull something out of storage, a small device with a gem set in the center. She looked at it for a while and then sighed and turned to look at Gemheart.

“It works here, they still have their amulets on. They are that way,” she pointed to one of the side bridges and a doorway at the end of it.

Gemheart nodded and the entire group started walking toward it.

Zach realized that they probably had some way of tracking their own people, which did make sense, especially since they were miners. They probably had to have some way to detect people in case of cave-ins or monster attacks.

They moved at a brisk pace, and soon they reached the doorway. Once they were a dozen meters or so away, Gemheart and everyone else stopped.

“Ready!” Gemheart whispered and everyone moved with the ease of fighting with each other for a long time. Zach wasn’t sure what they had seen, but he trusted their instincts. He saw Gemheart looking at the edge of the bridge, so he did the same. Zach and Naha stood next to each other, in between one orc-human and Kishua.

Then Zach's ears heard movement brought to his ears by the wind, just as a hand reached over the edge of the bridge. Before he even had a chance to react Gemheart fired his two cannons, obliterating the edge of the bridge and everyone else followed suit.

Zach dismissed his rapier and sheathed his dagger. He summoned Mistral and pulled him back and channeled his new power, Naha standing next to him keeping him safe. The others all fired, those that had ranged abilities, while those who were melee specialists remained put to protect those that weren't.

Zach noticed that their formation was a circle, with Gemheart in the center, all of them were protecting the High Ranker as he fired his cannons.

Zach felt his awakened sword's readiness and swung forward. **Shearing Gale** flew out of it, a small tornado with wicked gray blades of air twisting around. It hit the a group of four spirits just as they climbed on top of the bridge and cut them up to pieces and sent them flying back.

Zach grinned behind his helmet, the new power was powerful indeed. Where his **Razor Wind** was more precise, this one was a more area of effect power.

He saw more and more spirits coming up, each looking the same. Tall and gangly, with elongated heads that had only one large eye and no mouth or nose. Their limbs were long and ended in wicked claws. They were terrifying. And he could see their names.

<p>Prison Warden Spirit (LVL 198-Peak Lord)</p>

Zach realized that he wouldn't have the time to channel again, so he started sending weaker wind blades at them, cutting them up and slowing them down.

But there was just so many of them. A blast of fire smashed into the spirits in front of him and he saw that it had been one of the ravor spellcasters. She gave him a nod which he returned.

Zach used Mistral at range, and left any of the spirits that managed to get close to Naha. She waited for them to come close and then pounced on them, stabbing them in through the eye and killing them efficiently.

Zach, looked around, seeing that the spirits were coming in from all sides now, and he knew that they would eventually get overwhelmed. Or at least he thought so. Then Gemheart turned, the gem on his heart glowing brightly. He fired behind them, over the heads of his allies along the bridge that they had arrived on where a mass of spirits was racing toward them. Hundreds of them died in an instant, vaporized by whatever that beam was.

And then, just as Zach felt like they could win, Kishua yelled out.

“Shades!”

Zach turned and saw a group of ten shades running at them from the open doorway, surrounded by spirits. Zach could see their features, their eyes. They didn't look like any race he had seen in the Infinite Realm, but the concentric circles that were their eyes betrayed what they were.

Three of them looked like they were made out of rocks that had molten material beneath. They wore armor, but Zach could still see the glow through the cracks in their body where something orange moved. Their features were vaguely humanoid, but it was impossible to tell. They had two concentric circles as their eyes.

Behind them were two beings that had green skin and what looked like antlers, they wore light armor that almost looked like it was made out of wood. And in their hands they held large wooden staves that had a crystal embedded at the top that shone brightly. They also had two concentric circles in their eyes.

Behind them came a tall being, with white fur all over the parts of the body that Zach could see. He had two large hammers in his hands and three circles in his eyes. To Zach he was familiar, he had seen such monsters on Earth, a yeti. The being next to him was stranger, looking like a sphinx, with four legs and two arms, and somewhat feline features although still more human-like than raptor. And she held a tall spear in her hands. Her eyes had four circles. The two behind it were again the molten people, each having six circles in their eyes. But it was the last being that caught most of the Zach's attention.

He wasn't as tall as the yeti, but still taller than Zach. He was a lizard man, with wicked teeth and heavy armor. In his hands he carried a long and wide sword, and his eyes had eight circles.

Zach readied himself as Gemheart turned to their new foes and everyone got ready for a fight.