

Act II - Zach

Zach sat in the Citadel's library, looking over a spread of books in front of him. There weren't all that many books on the subject he was interested in, but he had found some. It had been two days since his encounter with the creature in the alley. His warden shadow hadn't been able to see it, of course, since Zach used his **[Ethereal Sight]**. The ability allowed him to see into the Ethereal, or the incorporeal world. It was, as the name suggested another plane of existence that occupied the same physical space.

Zach had learned why his first few experiments with the ability didn't show much result. The only thing that he had seen when using that ability before was a gray filter over the world. Now, from the books he had found in the library, he had learned that the incorporeal world could be vastly different than the real world, but that the Ethereal Realm was always changing. The terrain constantly shifted, as did its position in relation to the real world. But, the more people there were in one place, the more the Ethereal Realm became fixed. Apparently, the denizens of the Ethereal Realm didn't really like that, so few lived in places where there were many people.

The creature that Zach had met was apparently an exception to the rules. Zach was incredibly interested to learn more about it, and he had an idea... but first he needed to get it to talk to him. Because, the creature had refused to engage with him, after its first question it had just ignored Zach no matter what he said.

Now, Zach was aware why. Different creatures in the Ethereal Realm lived by different rules. Some were completely hostile to people, some only to specific races, others only to those who invaded their territory and some were only hostile on specific days. It was quite interesting to read about, but for Zach's purposes, he had learned that most of the denizens of the Ethereal Realm didn't like talking with people in the Real world. Some could make themselves visible in the real world, some could even cross over fully—which actually made Zach think that some of the murders in the city might've been committed by some denizen of the other realm. But all Ethereal Realm creatures responded well to gifts. If one wanted to speak with them, it was

almost a necessity unless one had a prior relationship with them or a power to force the issue.

The manner of gift however was a bit harder to pin down. Different types of creatures liked different things. From Zach's research, he was pretty sure that the creature he encountered belonged in the Faelarin category, a naucat. Apparently they were mostly harmless, although the book warned that no denizen of the Ethereal Realm is completely harmless but didn't specify why—which made it a bad book on the subject in Zach's opinion.

A naucat usually spent its days looking into the real world and watching interesting things, mostly people. Which was why they could be found in the cities and places where there were many people. They were also lazy and easily annoyed. They didn't enjoy having their activities interrupted. Zach wanted to talk with it, to learn more about this new facet of his power, but also perhaps, ask for information. But before that, he needed to find an adequate gift.

He doubled his efforts and continued doing research.

The research was going slow, there weren't many books, but they were filled with all kinds of interesting stuff, and he couldn't skim through them. They were more akin to journals of peoples experiences with the Ethereal Realm and its denizens than a real works on the subject. So he needed to read everything carefully if he was to find what he needed.

And while he did enjoy reading and studying, he also needed to keep up with his training. So he booked some time in the training rooms at the Citadel to rest his mind and eyes from reading. He stood in the room, his **Ethereal Sword** in the shape of a rapier in one hand and his dagger in the other. His **|Enhanced Sword Art|** had reached 10/10, in just over two months of him training with it. He knew that the greater speed was because of his **Last Heir of Terra** perk as well because of the fact that he was using the **Ethereal Sword**. The more powers he used in his art the faster it was

leveling. The quest to for the tier 5 skill was as he had suspected, he needed to create his own style.

The problem was that he didn't exactly know what more he had to do. He had spent time with the ghosts of the sword masters developing a style that incorporated swift and precise movements as well as distraction and feints. With his power set he was capable of being extremely quick and adaptable. And at the core of his martial art style was that adaptability. It wasn't yet a truly developed art, of course, that was something that would take a lifetime to create. But he had a basis upon which he could build. He didn't need a complete art in order to advance his skill, only the basics. He could improve even after he evolved his skill.

But for some reason he couldn't push to tier 5, which was frustrating him a bit. He had everything that a new art needed to have, well... except for the name.

Zach frowned as he realized that he hadn't yet decided on a name. *It couldn't be that simple...* He tried to think of a good name. His wind perks were the basics of his art. Using them to move quickly and distract, and even if he never took another wind perk again in the future, that wasn't going to change. His wind perks would only get stronger as he advanced. The next part was his **Ethereal Sword**, with it he was adaptable and able to change weapons to suit different situations. For now he was focusing on a rapier and a dagger, and using Mistral for finishing moves and in open spaces where he had to deal with more than one opponent—which the awakened sword seemed to approve of. And with the dagger he could make better use of his **Consequence** perk, and his techniques synergized nicely with his quick-attack style.

For a moment he thought that Wind Sword Style might be a good name, but then dismissed the thought. Names and intentions mattered when dealing with skills. If he used the word **sword** in the name he might get too focused, narrow his future evolutions and choices. He still wanted to use **wind** but he needed the name to be broader, have it encompass more of what he needed the style to be. Because he was certain that it would impact the way that not only his skill evolved, but also his future class choices—everything impacted those.

He took a deep breath, and got into a stance. A moment later he used equip and his white armor manifested around him. His rapier extended in front of him and his dagger closer to his chest. And then he started to move, going through the katas that he had developed with his ghost teachers. They weren't perfect, but they were, at least in his mind, effective. He moved from attack to block, the spins that wouldn't be that useful in fights on Earth, but here with his stats and powers were. His body twisted and turned, it was a... a dance. He used **Wind's Favorite**, using the wind to move his body as he attacked and blocked against phantom opponents. Since he had reached level 120, his control over the wind and its power had increased a lot. It wasn't quite enough yet to let him fly around, but he could float over the ground for a bit and leap and glide through the air somewhat.

He danced all over the room, the wind surrounding him, his rapier and dagger moved cutting at the air violently. He jumped back into a flip, dispelling his rapier and sheeting his dagger on his lower back. Before he dropped down to the floor, he summoned Mistral, he heard a sigh in his mind, but he put that out of his mind. Qi moved through his body, and then his feet touched the ground. He blasted off immediately, the wind pushing him faster and further. He spun in the air, Mistral cutting everything around him, and then he touched the ground again and blurred.

He shot forward, knowing that his body had turned incorporeal for a split second as **[Ethereal Wing]** activated. His sword snapped around him, faster than he could've attacked on his own. And once the dash and attack was done, Zach pushed off the ground with his back leg, snapped Mistral forward and unleashed his technique. **{Lightning Strike}** blasted around Mistral, hitting nothing but still causing the blast of thunder and light.

Zach stood in that position for a moment, thinking about his style and on his movements. He felt like he had been a storm of wind and blades, like he was unbound, dancing with his weapons and powers. He made the decision on the name as he pulled himself back into a relaxed stance. A notification appeared in the corner of his eye and he pulled it up.

Congratulations, you have finished your skill quest:
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Style — Create a unique combat style.

|Enhanced Sword Art| > |Tempest Dance Style|

Zach smiled at what he read, he had finally reached tier 5 skill. Now, it was time for the next evolution. He sat down on the ground and focused. He could go through the levels of the tier 5 skill to gain a quest for tier 6, but according from what Ferrut taught him, that was not required. In fact, most people wouldn't be able to evolve a tier 5 skill even with the quest. In order to be able to do that, you needed to have suffered through a fracture, something that had scarred your mind. And Zach had lived through many such events.

Following Ferrut's teachings, he calmed his mind and then remembered one such event. He had spent a long time thinking on which one he was going to use, but for this there was only one. The death of his family. He remembered finding them dead, the denial, the rage, the hate that came after. The pain that was so great that he had struggled to breathe. The realization that he had failed, that he could've prevented their deaths if only he had tried to help someone who he loved. Instead, he had turned his back on Ryun, and he was lost in his grief. Madness was no excuse, and the monster that Ryun had turned into deserved all of Zach's hate, but the pain was always there.

As he remembered the moment that had broken him, Zach could feel his mind expanding. He turned his focus from his past to his skill. This was the part where the most important choice had to be made. He needed to focus on one of the tiers of his skill. According to Ferrut, few knew about this, and even of those who knew they often decided to go with the most basic tier, the first one. Because that one would hold a fraction of all the others. But focusing on something else could be valuable in certain situations.

Zach didn't focus on |**Combat Mastery**|, that would make him more proficient in overall combat without focusing him. He didn't focus on his |**Sword Mastery**|, because that would limit him to only the sword. Instead,

he focused on his newly attained tier, **|Tempest Dance Style|**. Because at the core of his martial art style was not any single weapon, but a way of fighting. Fluid movements aided by the wind, lightning quick attacks, distraction and feints. That was what **|Tempest Dance Style|** was at its core, and that is what he wanted to focus on.

He could feel something inside of him, and in his mind, he could see into an inner world. A pillar that was raised further above others, those were his skills, he realized. It was vibrating, getting ready to evolve. He kept his understanding of his skill, of his style, at the forefront of his mind. Inner, personal understanding matter far more than anything else when dealing with skills. They warped reality itself, they didn't need reality for that, what they needed was a person who had the will powerful enough to force their own reality on the real world. And Zach had a powerful will.

He could feel the pressure building, and he knew that the last step was to put a piece of himself inside the skill. To lock a part in it that will never change again. Ferrut's teachings had given him an idea about what that should be, and he had given it a lot of thought. He needed a core facet of who he was, something that he didn't want to change, something that wouldn't screw him over in the long run.

One of his first ideas had been to put in his belief in the law, but that one he had dismissed almost immediately. The law that he had believed in and the reality of this world were nothing alike. And he knew, he had known it for a while now, he was not going to survive this world if he remained rigid. Power was the only law that mattered in the Infinite Realm.

His next thought was to put his desire to get power, to be stronger. It was certainly something that he didn't think would ever change about him, not now, when he knew that he needed power in order to survive here. But... it wasn't exactly right, it could too quickly twist him into something that he was not. He knew that imbalance would affect him eventually. With his low tiers of power he had little to really worry about. His Class and Cultivation were too low for him to feel too much of the effects, assuming that he managed to fix the right part of himself inside his skill to offset the imbalance.

In the end, he knew what he needed to put inside that skill. Something that even if he was affected by imbalance would still steer him in the right

direction. Something that wouldn't allow him to ever step too far from his path, something that would prevent him from going down a dark path.

And so, he focused his mind on the one part of himself that he wanted to keep with himself, forever unchanging.

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

The skill trembled, and he could feel the core part of him hardening, becoming a fixed part inside of his mind.

He knew that by having this as his core, even if he was affected by imbalance, he would never stray too far from the right path that he couldn't come back.

He understood that he could fail to protect someone he cared about, but he also knew that he never again wanted to do nothing. To walk away and leave those he cared about to fend for themselves. No, he was always going to strive to protect those close to him. A part of him had wanted to make it about the innocents, or to protect the law, but ever since he had started a new life in Emaros, he realized that that was too much for one person to handle. And for his first skill, for the piece of himself that would define who he was. The desire to protect those closest to him was the only choice. He didn't have much that he cared about here. Griss, Nyathulla and the others were comrades, could be friends perhaps in time, but the only person he really cared about at the moment was Quell. And he knew that his feelings were only getting stronger. He was never going to let what happened on Earth happen again here.

The perk glowed inside of his inner world, and then he felt it settle. Two new notifications arrived and Zach looked at the first.

Congratulations, you have reached the peak of understanding, all your skill tiers have been absorbed into the new skill.

|Perfect Tempest Dance Style| tier 6 skill available. You've unlocked two additional skill slots.

New title—True Understanding

New skill evolution available:

Beyond Understanding |**Perfect Tempest Dance Style**| —
Specialize and focus your understanding of |**Perfect Tempest Dance Style**| to unlock a skill quest.

He stood up, and summoned his **Ethereal Sword** as he pulled out his dagger. He focused on his skill, and immediately saw the golden lines connecting to everything. Somehow he understood what each meant, some were movements, others attacks or power uses. The skill itself felt... different. He started to move, and immediately realized that all of his movements were sharper, better. He had known that skills give great power, but this was even beyond that.

He danced across the room for a while, and then came to a stop.

He felt... different. A part of him was set in stone now, and he couldn't help but think about Quell. He had known that his feelings toward her were getting stronger, but now it felt like he hadn't really realized how much. He felt like he should be making sure that the Night Horror didn't try to go after her because of their connection, even though he knew that to be unlikely.

Still, the best way to ensure that was to catch the killer. He put his armor and weapons away, and decided that it was time to get back to reading. The sooner he found an appropriate gift for the creature the sooner he would be able to try and gain more information. He only hoped that what he had in mind would be of use.

Zach walked down the street, one that he had walked down a few days before. Only, this time he was alone. He came to a familiar wall and looked at it. The same sensation he felt before was present again, and he used his **[Ethereal Sight]**.

Immediately the wall in front of him changed, a large hole appeared looking like a den. And inside it was the creature, the naucat looked the same as it had previously. A cat-like creature with horns and six limbs, fur that was

painted in psychedelic blues and greens in a stripe pattern, it was the size of a small house cat.

It blinked up at him and its eyes narrowed. “Don’t bother me human,” it said and turned its head away as if that meant that Zach was no longer there.

Zach knelt down to its level and slowly pulled out a plate out of his ring. Finding what was considered a good gift for this type of creature hadn’t been easy, nor had the task of finding something who could make it. It had cost him quite a bit of Essence.

On the plate was a meal, one made out of mouse meat and something that resembled a chicken. It was all arranged artfully and splattered with green and red herbs that gave the meal color. Just gifting a meal was not enough. It had to be made by a highly skilled individual, and convincing a chef to make a meal out of mouse meat hadn’t been exactly easy.

The cat sniffed and turned around its eyes widening at the sight of the plate. Then it glanced at Zach, suspiciously. Zach immediately stood up and walked a few steps back. In order for it to be able to taste it, the creature would need to cross over into the real world. And Zach standing that close was a threat.

As soon as Zach stepped away it walked closer, still glancing at him suspiciously. Finally, it decided that he wasn’t going to attack it and it stepped all the way up to the plate. Its form rippled and it lowered its head and started to eat. There was no physical change, but Zach was certain that it was now in the real world.

He waited patiently for it to finish.

Once the creature was done, it licked its mouth and then turned to look at Zach.

“Fine,” it sighed. “Say what you want human?”

Zach smiled and walked closer, then explained his problem.