

Act II - Zach

Zach was bent over the desk in the Citadel's library, reading the collected information on the Ranker builds. He had spent the last week going through them, looking for anything useful. By the end of the week he had managed to narrow the builds down to three. None of them were close to his build, of course, but they offered insight into what he could do in the future. One was a build of a sword focused Ranker from the Fifth Iteration, she had a few perks that he had. Like **Riposte** and **Consequence**, but she focused on using a shield along with a sword, making better use of the **Consequence** perk. Zach had thought about using a shield too, but his weapon was too large to be wielded in one hand. Windrazor was longer than a katana and slightly straighter with a handle that was as long as his forearm.

The Ranker had guided her evolutions into more sword focused build, with abilities that allowed for quick movement around the battlefield. She even had some of the same titles as his, and if what Zach was reading was correct, his Blade Master Class could evolve into what she had chosen as well. The only requirement seemed to be that the first evolution Class had to utilize the sword. He would have to take the same perk that she had at level 105 if he wanted to go for it. Her second evolution was called Quick Sword, probably because all of her ability evolutions came with a small dash component added to her abilities. She made some interesting choices during her continued climb, and then evolved her Class a third time into Sentinel. There wasn't much recorder beyond that, since she apparently died. But it showed him a few interesting ways of using his current perks, and what he could take in the future that would be useful.

The second build was from a Ranker that had a similar Path to Zach, and had taken the same aspect. His Class perks weren't similar to Zach, but they were in the same vein, which by now Zach knew mattered more. Class evolutions were guided by the type of perks for the most part, a few Classes needed specific perks or titles, but the majority didn't. And because of his titles, Zach was already guaranteed a less known option.

The Ranker had Lightning Blade as his second evolution, and then on the third he evolved that into Crashing Lightning Blade. He focused on more

lightning based perks, which he probably gained because of his path, although he only got those perks as a choice after his second evolution.

That told Zach that he needed to be very careful about what evolution he picked, because his future flavor of perks would depend a lot on how he evolved his Class. The Lightning Blade had some good ability evolutions, favoring speed over raw power.

But the last build was the one that he was focusing on the most. The third Ranker was from the Second Iteration and was still alive today. She was a High Ranker, and had been a part of the wardens in the past. She had a caster-combat hybrid Class, so she wasn't that similar to him at first glance. But Zach had two perks that she had as well, **Wind's Child** and **Wind Lord**. On their own, the two perks weren't that strong, even Zach could admit that. He had picked them because his other choices didn't seem much better. Although he had to admit that the two perks had helped him survive plenty times. People always underestimated how annoying it was to have the wind blowing in your eyes while you were fighting. A single blink at an inopportune moment could be the difference between life and death.

According to the build, those two perks would get stronger and stronger as he leveled, by the end his **Wind's Child** would be sending powerful blasts of wind with every strike of his weapon. The **Wind Lord** would eventually be powerful enough to carry him and let him levitate or rather float off the ground. He had an advantage over the High Ranker there, his awakened weapon's perk allowed him to manipulate wind in his surrounding. So the wind generated by his perks synergized well with his weapon. He was already able to use it to push himself around a bit, to glide a bit. The High Ranker's perk eventually allowed for flight, but Zach was sure that he could do it without an extra perk that the High Ranker required.

But what had caught his eye were the perks that came after the second evolution. All were wind based, and some were more suited for someone who had abilities that could be cast from range, but there were some that were both interesting and powerful. And Zach figured that he could make use of some of it. The issue was that he was almost certain to gain a wind themed class evolution as a choice, but he wouldn't be getting the same one as the High Ranker. Their Classes were too different. But that didn't mean that he

wouldn't be able to gain the same perks, they were shared among the classes with the same theme. So a swordsman could gain the same perk as someone who had a sailing based class, if they both focused on wind as a theme.

The build was incomplete, as the High Ranker left the wardens at some point. But what was there seemed very powerful. He tried to think of what he wanted to do, how he wanted to evolve. For years, his main drive had been gaining power in order to stop Ryun. But now... There was no sign of his enemy, there was no whisper of him, and he went months without having every moment of his life consumed by the need to find him.

There were even days where he forgot about him. He knew that he would meet him again, it was inevitable, even with an Infinite World. If Ryun lived, he would do something that would draw attention.

Zach sighed, and looked at the three builds. From them, he could probably fashion a rough outline of a guide for himself. There were good perks in all of them, and based on his current build, he was almost guaranteed to get some of the perks that the others had chosen as his choices. The perks weren't really tied to level, aside from the perks that came every ninety levels. He could get perk at level 105 that one of the three had gotten on their level 75. The perks weren't level gated, but rather based on his achievements and direction.

He tried to imagine what he wanted to become, how his combat style would evolve. He had read a lot of builds by now, and he knew what all was possible. He could do anything, become anything. He was focusing on his Class and using his skill's to round up his build. He knew that he wanted to continue fighting with his sword, which meant that he would need close combat focus. But with his sword's ability he had some ranged options as well.

A few of his Skills had leveled from his fight with the killer a week ago, his **|Sealing Slash|** had improved by one level and his **|Sword Mastery|** and **|Great Strike|** had both reached 9/10. Just a single step away from the skill quest, and improving. And he was sure that they were going to hit 10 soon. Because they finally had a group for the dungeon, and they were going to have their first training session today.

Griss had asked his warden friend to join, and she had agreed. That brought their numbers up to five, since Zach had asked Nyathulla. He didn't even need to try and convince her, an opportunity to grow stronger wasn't something that anyone in this world would pass up on.

Zach sighed as he finished reading through the Ranker build again. His notes were next to him, a couple of pages of ideas and perk descriptions, as well as some stat calculations. He had gone really in depth with his projections based on the builds of the three Rankers. He rolled his wrist, it almost felt like he had been spending all his time writing.

Aside from going through the builds in the library, he had gone back to the city and the Archive a few times to go through the other records and try to find something to help them catch the killer. Thankfully, he didn't need to write as much there, since the archivist—Quell—helped him with pulling out information and writing it down. She was still quiet and almost shy around him, but he figured that that was just her personality. She was actually quite good at her job, he barely had to ask for information before she brought it to him.

He knew that he should be focusing on the dungeon, but he couldn't help himself. The encounter with the killer had made an impression. He was... shaken by it. The killer was stronger than him, even with his new perk and all of his boosts. He had managed to land blows and none of them had done anything really. But he was sure that if he hadn't landed the **|Sealing Slash|** he would've probably died. Having a silence power was one of his greatest aces.

He had found quite a few mentions of silencing abilities in the builds that he had been reading. They were incredibly useful, especially in fights against Classers that relied more on their abilities. Most of the silencing abilities didn't seal powers like his skill did, instead they increased the cooldown durations of other the target's Class abilities. But he had seen a few that could slow down the Qi movement speed of a Cultivator as well. Those that could silence powers completely were rare, but even they existed.

Zach had decided on trying to focus on the **|Sealing Slash|** during their practice. He had already told Griss that he would like to keep that skill

a secret, but he needed to train on someone. Griss hadn't been exactly happy when Zach suggested it, but he agreed in the end.

Zach gathered up his notes and put them in his storage ring and then made his way out of the library. His training with Emerah and Nyathulla had almost reached the end. They had gone over the basics, and were now learning more about how to disable their targets without killing them. Most of the things that Emerah taught them Zach already knew. But they needed to go through the accelerated warden training if they were to be allowed to act in their capacity as wardens unsupervised.

Zach walked through the halls of the Citadel, the white stone had become quite comfortable and familiar to him. It was nice to belong to something again, to have a purpose. And if he was to stand between ordinary people and monsters like the killer that stalked the city he knew that he would need to get stronger.

The Citadel was populated by almost every race that existed in the Infinite Realm, aside from the Skreen and Kreacean. Zach had learned that the reason for that was simple. The Skreen rarely ventured out of their hives or mingled with other races, but they had a hive nearby. And they hated the Kreaceans, so apparently their kind rarely came here, although there were Kreacean wardens. They just tried to stay as far away from the Citadel as possible. The more time passed, the more Zach realized just how insane the political situation in the Infinite Realm was.

Most of the wardens walking around were lower leveled, the recruits that were attending what was basically school, or at least a course. Most of the wardens start out that way, joining when they are young and hadn't advanced far. Because the wardens offer a way of getting stronger, as well as knowledge. What Zach and Nyathulla went through was an accelerated course, since they didn't really need to be taught how to fight from scratch. Nor could they really be guided properly by the warden teachers since their builds were unique and too far ahead for them to course correct.

There were a few higher level individuals from what Zach had learned, mostly crafters, but some officials that helped with the discussions down in the city between the embassies of the different factions. But then there was

their Warden Commander. She was a High Ranker one of the more powerful ones, she alone was apparently enough to keep the Citadel safe.

Zach made his way to a private training yard, one of the ones that was open to the sky but had high walls to prevent people from looking in. As he reached the training yard area he saw Nyathulla waiting at the entrance where they had agreed to meet up.

“Hey,” she said as Zach walked up.

“Hey, I hope that you didn’t wait long?” Zach asked.

“Not long,” Nyathulla shook her head.

Zach smiled and they walked into the area, heading to their private yard. The yard was large, around the size of a football field, with target dummies in one corner, an obstacle course in the other. A large arena like area and benches with tables that were covered with wooden roofs.

The others were already there, and Zach waved to Griss who stood across the yard near the benches and tables. There were three people there, Griss of course, with Xallar their elf-human healer, and a new person that he hadn’t seen before. It was a female Minotaur, dressed in a full plate armor with a large two handed hammer leaned on the table nearby.

As Zach and Nyathulla approached, he saw the others blink as they saw Nyathulla, and he realized that he hadn’t exactly warned them that she was a Cthul. He knew about the discomfort that the other races had toward them, but it had just slipped his mind. Thankfully the others recovered quickly, and he didn’t detect any strange looks aside from the initial one. Griss grinned and waved.

“Zach! You are late!” The Drake said as Zach got close enough and they shook hands.

“Sorry, I lost track of time in the library.”

“You need to get out more, Zach! You’ve kept your head stuck in books for the past week between the library and the Archive.”

“Uh... you know about that?” Zach asked.

“Of course, Relas told me that you’ve been back,” Griss said and then leaned close to him. “Is this really about the killer or are you just going back to bother a certain quite archivist?”

Zach rolled his head and turned away from the now laughing Drake.

“Hello Xallar,” Zach nodded his head toward the healer.

They inclined their head in return. “Zach.”

Griss stepped back and put his hand on the minotaur’s shoulder. “Zach, this is Edima, she will be joining us as our last member.”

She walked up to Zach, towering over him by almost a head and put her hand out. “It is a pleasure to meet you Zach, I’ve heard good things from Griss.”

Zach shook the hand that could probably grasp his entire skull and smiled. “I’m glad to have you join us, Edima.”

Zach then turned and gestured at Nyathulla. “This is my friend Nyathulla, she will be our last member.”

Everyone introduced themselves and then Griss took charge of the conversation.

“Alright then, we all know each other’s names, but if we are going to have a successful dungeon dive we should get to know each other better. Come, everybody sit down around the table.”

Everyone took a seat as Griss pulled out papers from his storage and started giving them out to everybody.

“These are some notes on the dungeon itself, not really a guide since the Abyssal Deep has a knack for throwing new things at people every time it respawns. But there are a few things that are constant. For now, we should probably start by explaining in broad terms what we each can do, I’ll start:” Griss said then coughed gravely before starting. “My main focus is deflecting or absorbing damage, I am a front line fighter and I have several area of effect disrupting powers.”

He glanced to the side, where Zach was sitting and Zach got the hint. “I am a close combat fighter, sword user. I generally try to end fights quickly, but I have some powers that can keep me in the fight for longer.”

Next was Nyathulla who sat next to Zach.

“Long range damage dealer with a caster-type class. I can use powerful attacks and I can use battlefield control powers to suppress monster movements,” Nyathulla said simply.

“Healer,” Xallar said immediately after Nyathulla finished. “I can heal minor wounds instantly, for anything more drastic I will need a couple of

minutes. Can't grow back body parts so you shouldn't rely on that from me. Once per fight I can restore one target's stamina."

Zach raised his eyebrow at that last one, it could be a very useful power.

Lastly, Edima coughed and spoke in a deep voice. "Frontline fighter, I use my hammer," she tapped the handle of the weapon leaned on the table next to her. "All my powers are enhancing in nature, they improve my ordinary attacks. Don't really have any movement powers aside from charge that is on a long cooldown."

With everyone finished, Griss clapped his hands. "Well, now that we know our broad roles, we should start discussing about what kind of a formation we want to go with. Here, I took the liberty of writing up some ideas..."

Griss started explaining a bit more in depth how they could proceed through the dungeon. Zach was a bit surprised at the level of thought that he had put into it. About an hour later, he finished with what he called a 'preliminary planning' and they moved to the yard proper for some demonstrations and then training.