

## **It Begins**

Zach swam through the River of Time, it was his domain, his to rule and his to command. The River wanted to flow ever forward, as he had decreed it, but it also obeyed, reluctantly. Zach's life was devoted to learning, to understanding Essence, but also to protecting, to fostering a better kind of a world. It was why he had gained his Ideal, he was the **Dreamer of a Better World**. It was ingrained in him, he had lived a life in a world that was bleak and empty. He wanted to see this real world be the best it could. A shining example of what people could achieve together.

Yet, he had seen reality, that there were people in the world who would do all they could do prevent that dream. He had resolved himself to try and show them a better way. And that started with protecting what he could, with teaching them to be better.

Deep in the realm of Time, he grabbed hold of the River of Time and pulled it back. His body so recently reduced, had its limbs returned. Events were moving in reverse as he rolled Time back. The River bank turned to sand, what was built collapsing on the banks back into the endless expanse of sand waiting to for a river bed to be carved through it, for events to solidify on its banks.

It fought him, more than it had before. He frowned, feeling the weight of that time that he rolled back, but he pushed his will against it. He needed more time, pull it back to before the fight with the yeti and the monster in the city. An hour? A day if he could. The more time he had to plan the better the outcome.

He moved past Anrosh's death, her body repairing itself before his eyes. Then the weight increased, and Zach felt as if a mountain was just dropped on top of his shoulders. The river's flow backward slowed, and Zach pushed his will trembling against it. Something was wrong, he looked at the River of Time and saw it there, on the banks, the yeti,

Ra'azel Equinar, a statue of him standing on the banks of the river. A fixture, an event. It glowed with such intensity that even in the Realm of Time, Zach had trouble looking at it. It was him, Zach realized, he was just so heavy on Time, his actions firm as if when he made them the world didn't want to forget.

Zach roared in his head, his will crashing against that of the weight of the yeti's presence in the realm of Time. Time rolled back, fire retreated toward Ra'azel, then he was caught, trapped by frozen roots and vines. Zach pushed and the Time slipped from his grasp, the river crashed down onto the sand and surged forward, carving a path ahead once again.

**NO!** Zach yelled as he failed. It wasn't enough, he knew that it wasn't enough. He needed more time, he reached for his perk and knew that he wouldn't get it. The perk was spent, again it was unavailable to him. There was no more time.

Anrosh as wolf raised her head, and a moon appeared above her manifesting her power, her domain of frost expanded and all grew still. No, it was this moment, Zach realized. She froze it all, Time included. Ra'azel's weight on the River of Time coupled with her power being used made him lose the grasp on Time.

There was nothing that he could do.

Anrosh raised opened her mouth, preparing to blast Ra'azel with a breath of frost, the attack that would destroy his armor, cause him to use the fire that would blow everything around them.

Zach focused his mind, he didn't have the Time in this world, but he needed to think, needed to plan. He focused on **Of Mind, Analysis, and Prediction**, and he sunk into his mental world, crafted by his **Vivid World** perk. He copied the real world, armed with the knowledge stored by his other perk, **Analysis**.

He began.

*Anrosh attacks, and Ra'azel retaliates. Fire destroys everything. Zach jumps into action, getting closer to strike, he puts his all into it, executing **|I Strike Through Time|**. The Yeti survives, a construct teleports him out of his ruined armor. A gash opened from shoulder to groin, bleeding profusely, guts falling out, he glares with hate and madness. Zach's skills were no longer available to him, Naha jumps in, her ideal raises shadows against the yeti as Ender raises a cocoon of trees to surround and deepen the shadows. The field explodes with constructs, their power extrapolated from the information gained. A hail fire of light and destruction. Naha, Ender, and Anrosh are obliterated in an instant, their souls torn to pieces from the echoes of damage so strong that it pierces through all realm barriers. Rifts open to the Ethereal and all other planes from the intensity of it. The territory is cracked in half, Consequence burned to ashes in an instant. The damage bleeds through all realms, wreaking havoc everywhere.*

*Zach survives for a moment, Time fills him to the brim, letting him remain when he was already dead. A moment after, the bank of the River is carved, Zach's fate recorded. He ceases to exist. His last sight is of the injured yeti flashing away.*

*No, Zach shook his head. Again.*

*Anrosh attacks, and Ra'azel retaliates. Fire destroys everything. Zach waits, Ra'azel speaks, then raises his hand. With **|I Arrived, Always On Time|** Zach intercepts, pushing Anrosh out of the way. Black lightning tinged with red comes. Zach uses his items, shields pop into existence around him, they are destroyed in an instant. Lightning hits Zach in the chest, his will opposes it, **Second Chance** triggers. Agony spreads and his soul is destroyed in an instant.*

*Again.*

*Anrosh attacks, and Ra'azel retaliates. Fire destroys everything. Zach waits and pushes Anrosh out of the way, instead of blocking he blinks away. Through his **True Link** he pulls a power from his love. **Shadow's Judgment** strikes the yeti from above, he blinks in low. **|I Strike Through Time|** catches the yeti from below, cutting him in half. The yeti's eyes widen, his hand flashes, a symbol is carved into the world. The world wails as everything is turned white, as destruction expands out of the yeti killing everything in its way. Zach' remains for a moment, he sees a symbol flash on the upper part of Ra'azel's body, it grows a lower part and flashes away as the territory is turned into a giant crater. Then he is no more.*

*Again, and again, a dozen more times, always the same result. Zach turned his will on his skill, pushing it more and more. There had to be a way. He reached a plateau and shattered it, pushing forward. The desire to stop the yeti shaping the skill. He remembered releasing him, remembered the words he carved into stone. He remembered it all. This was his responsibility, his mistake to fix.*

He crafted a world with the Mind Essence, his will shaping it into what he needed. It trembled inside of his head, his understanding expanding. He knew what Mind Essence was, pure possibility, a way to create whatever you could imagine. The Essence of the Mind obeyed his will, he touched its plane, then the gate opened and the full weight of that strange Essence filled him, flowing into his skill. Understanding coalesced.

With **|I Analyze And Predict|** he went deeper. The world around him expanded, all that he knew came into action. Not just abilities, more, re-tellings of past encounters. Naha's words as she watched Zach get switched with the yeti. Ra'azel's laughter as his trick worked, and him killing a High Ranker with ease. The words spoken in his jail cell. The gift of a soul weapon, a contingency placed inside of the gift that he would have had no chance of knowing if it would ever pay out. A profile started

to manifest inside Zach's mind. One of a being that planned for all eventualities, one that placed seeds everywhere just in case. Kill him, and something would trigger to make you regret it, push him enough and he would kill everything. The words of a dragon speaking about his opponent. The dragon spoke of a powerful being that might've been able to kill the dragon, to kill anything in its wake, but one that hesitated. *Why?* Zach's skill whirled through the possibilities, and soon it was apparent.

*Fear*, the yeti feared the unknown. He did not wish to expend resources where he didn't need to. His fight with Zach so far gave credence to the conclusion. He wanted to study, he wanted to know, he did not push blindly when he didn't need to.

His will bearing the weight of his need, he continued. Time after time, always the same result, but getting closer.

*Anrosh attacks, and Ra'azel retaliates. Fire destroys everything. He steps closer to Anrosh before Ra'azel speaks and Naha follows. As he had learned the yeti wants them alive. He speaks, and instead of attacking Anrosh, he lashes out with black lightning at Ender. As always, Ender turns to petals, evading.*

*The ruined ground around them trembles and trees sprout out of the ground, growing tall. Anrosh's armor ripples after the attack, recognizing the threat. Zach dashes forward, attacking in tandem with Naha. The shadows from the trees let her harry the yeti better. Constructs appear, and they fight through them. He pulls on time, destroying them before they could fire.*

*The yeti notices, but Zach is filled with time, it was not enough. They get close and strike at him, Zach is careful not to cause too much injury. Throwing attacks that could kill but miss.*

*The yeti realizes the danger. Roots grow from the ground and frost covers them. Ra'azel blinks away. The frost on the plants is detonated, hitting Ra'azel's raised shield. A giant sword made of Ice falls on his head, and Ra'azel turns on the wolf. Black lightning lashes out and hits her in the side, obliterating her arm, but the armor holds, saving her life.*

*Naha's ideal goes off in the moment Ra'azel's attention was on Anrosh. Shadowy hands grab him and hold him down, a fist made out of shadow appears above him, her image unravels and the realm of shadows opens up beneath him.*

*Ra'azel summons more constructs, a spear of light pierces into a shadow and Naha screams, her image breaks. The trees around lash out, roots grab Ra'azel over the shadows as the fist lands and drives him into the ground. Zach arrives, his sword glowing with his skill.*

*He attacks and time where Ra'azel was out of time before, now he is in sync. His constructs lance through Zach destroying his limbs before he can finish the attack. Chains grab hold of him and pull him into a cage. Then they flash away.*

*Again.*

More and more, Zach ran through the possibilities, refining the result with all that he knew about his allies and enemy. Then, when he finally arrived at something that could work he pushed it through, knowing that his skill could not work for much longer. Then, at last he had a possibility. His skill winked out, and he felt his mind open up, as if all his protections were stripped and laid bare. He didn't have the time to worry, his will was barely holding on. He had to act.

Now it began, for the last time.