

Act II - Zach

Zach stared into the campfire as he sat on a rock big enough to serve that purpose. The moon shone down from high above in the center of the sky, and stars arranged in a pattern that resembled a shield were surrounding it. Letting him know that they were no longer in the Elder King's territory.

The silence weighed on his mind. He knew that they should talk, there were so many things left unsaid. Zach still didn't quite have a firm grasp on what he had done. The events of three days ago seemed almost shrouded in a fog. He remembered speaking, seeing Quell's eyes widen, then... the next thing he remembered was watching her as she bit into Nyathulla's body. She tore a part of meat, ate a part of the dead woman's thigh. Even now he felt sick, both at seeing someone he loved chew meat that came from the body of someone he knew, and because of what he did after.

He grabbed Quell's gauntlet and turned it on Nyathulla's remains. The fact that the fire that came out of it was intense enough to burn the body to nothing but ash, leaving only a few tiny pieces of charred bone lying around, as well as to melt through the stone of the roof, told him that Quell had gone easy on him. She could've killed him with the gauntlet alone. He didn't know how to feel about that. One one side it made his trust in her feelings stronger, on the other...

They had spoken very little in the last three days. Zach had told her what to do and Quell did it without question, acting almost... submissively. She didn't speak to him without being asked something, not that Zach was in any mood to speak, instead she just kept her head down and looked at him when she thought that he couldn't see. She had switched between Quell and Nyathulla over those three days as Zach tried to set things up to give them a chance to get away from the city cleanly.

Truthfully, he hadn't thought much about how they were going to do it when he made the decision to spare Quell. He hadn't known that she could attune a warden's badge again. He had hoped to use Nyathulla's identity just to get away from Relas and the reinforcements. But then... they managed to fool everyone.

And now they were free. Zach knew that it was time for them to talk, that he needed to explain himself and make sure that Quell understood what he intended. The issue was that he didn't know how much Quell would agree to, he didn't know if after everything he would be forced to kill her. *If I even can*—Zach could feel his need to protect her clearly inside of himself. The part of himself that he had placed in his perfect skill. He felt like he could go against his drive if he put his entire mind to it. But he also felt like doing so would not be without consequences. A part of him loved her, but another part hated her. And he didn't know which one he wanted to let win.

On the rooftop, Zach hadn't had a plan really. His choice had been one made on the spot, a moment where he hadn't cared about anything else. But life was not that easy. He now had to live with his decision to spare an insane serial killer that was also the person that he loved. He needed to make right his love for her with the ideals that he had broken. He hated her for that, and yet... His love had been greater than what he considered his ideals. And that... it was not an easy thing. He had a lot of time during the last three days to think, and he had come up with a way forward. A way to coincide his love for her and what he had done, with what he believed in. But before that he needed to speak with her.

She sat on a rock some distance from him, on the other side of the fire. Her posture was hunched over, her eyes looking at the fire with her head bent down. He saw her fingers curling into the fabric of her dress, opening and closing almost rhythmically.

"Quell, I—" Zach started and she startled. Her head snapping up and her eyes meeting his. Zach paused as something occurred to him. "I don't even know your real name, do I?"

She bowed her head and looked away from him, and then she whispered an answer.

"My name is Nahamassa, but you can call me Naha."

"Naha," Zach whispered the name softly, testing it on his tongue. She looked back at him askance, still keeping her head turned away from him, but not being able to help that she wanted to see his reaction.

More thoughts came to him unbidden, followed by more questions. One in particular seemed more important than the others.

“You—what are, I mean were you—” He grimaced in frustration at himself and his inability to frame the question how he wanted to.

But she apparently realized what he wanted to ask, because she answered his unspoken question. “I am comfortable both as a man and a woman, I am both.”

Zach nodded, wondering inside his head what it said about them that she knew him well enough to understand what he wanted to ask without him actually asking. He put that thought aside and spoke again.

“We are far away from the city now. Can you—” before he even finished his sentence she shifted. Her form changing from Nyathulla’s to Quell’s. Her horns grew out of her head, and her eyes turned into the green stars that he had fallen in love with. Zach tried hard to keep his composure. Once her shift was complete, he released a breath that he hadn’t known he had been holding in. He hadn’t felt comfortable with her looking like Nyathulla. It was... disrespectful, he knew. But they had no other choice.

“Thank you,” Zach told her. “Now, we really should talk. I need you to answer all of my questions truthfully. It’s the only way that we can... move forward.”

Quell, or rather Naha, nodded her head, her expression turning serious.

“Before we start; you told me on the roof that you love me. Was that a lie?”

Her eyes widened and she shook her head immediately. “No, Zach. I do love you, I promise!”

Zach didn’t really know if he could trust that. He didn’t even know what part of her he loved. Was he in love with a cover identity? Something that she had just pretended to be? During their trip out of the city and the territory, he had looked back on everything that Quell had told him. And he had compared it to everything that he had heard the Night Horror say. He had to admit that there were similarities, nothing overt. But the core of both Quell’s and Night Horror’s sentiments matched. Perhaps there was more of Quell in the Night Horror than he realized.

“I am going to trust you on that. You already had many opportunities to run or to kill me, so I guess that you trust me too.”

“I do Zach,” She smiled at him. “I know that you want to protect the people, but trust me, together we can grow strong we can—”

Zach interrupted her by raising his hand. “No Naha,” Zach said firmly. “I did not accept your offer, nor will I ever. You are a murderer, you killed innocents and you... there is something wrong with you, I know that you know it too.”

Her eyes flashed with anger, but Zach kept his eyes locked on hers. Then she blinked, her expression changing to confusion.

“If you think that then... why?”

“Because I love you, or at least a part of you. And I will not abandon someone I love again. I will help you Naha, but I will not allow you to continue as you have so far. We will figure out a way to help you, together, and you will not kill any more innocents again.”

“I.. I need to,” Naha told him, her eyes boring into his as she bit her lip and looked unsure.

“We will find out together just exactly what you need to do,” Zach said, then closed his eyes for a moment. He took a deep breath, trying to organize his thoughts. He had so many questions and things that he wanted to talk about, he didn’t even know where to begin. Finally, he decided to just start and see where it went.

“Back on the roof, you seemed... more unstable. Far more than you are now. You didn’t act like that in the last three days. Why?”

Naha’s mouth became a straight line, her eyes glanced down to her hand and he swore that he saw her lips move as if she was speaking. Then she shook her head and raised her head to meet his eyes. “I.. It comes and goes. I have... needs. The more I deny them, the stronger they get. Until they grow so intense that they make it... hard to think. If I deny them too much I risk blacking out, and then... the desires rule me. But in general, I can hold on better when I’m acting a part, when I’m using my skill, it makes me calmer. And...” She trailed off, her eyes avoiding his.

“And? Remember, the full truth Naha, it is the only way.”

She shook her head, then met his eyes. “I feel... better when you are around.”

“How so?” Zach asked.

“It’s easier to push the thoughts back,” Naha answered. “They will still build, but...”

“So, you are feeling better now? More in control of your actions? What changed between the roof and now?”

She looked away again and took a deep breath. “I killed the other wardens, I tasted their... and your horror. When you realized who I am.”

Zach didn’t really have an answer for that. But he knew that he needed to press forward. “So you are pushed to kill people and... taste their horror?”

Naha nodded her head. “To devour the unworthy, those who waste the opportunities given to them by the Infinite Realm. To see the fear and horror on their faces as they realize what is about to happen.” She closed her eyes and her face took on a wistful expression.

Definitely insane then. Zach saw the madness peek through. In a way it was good for him to see it. He had started to think that he had imagined everything, since she had acted normal since the rooftop fight. Now at least he knew that she was just good at hiding it.

“So, the people you killed, my... comrades, they were unworthy?” Zach asked. He knew that the Night Horror had a code, that the murderer killed only people that hadn’t advanced for the last ten years. The ones she killed the other night didn’t fit that code.

She opened her eyes, looking startled. “I... I... They—no, yes! They were, you told me! You said that they didn’t... they didn’t understand! They aren’t like us, they waste their opportunities! You told me what they did in the dungeon!”

Zach closed his eyes. It was his fault then. He had complained to Quell, said that he felt like the others weren’t like him, that they didn’t push themselves. Well, it was just one more thing that he would need to bear if he was to help her.

He didn’t know what the source of her madness was, but he had a suspicion. Now, he needed to confirm it. “Que—Naha,” Zach called, and her eyes focused on him, her expression immediately becoming attentive.

“Can you show me your screens? The real ones?” Zach asked. This was the real test, her answer would tell him a lot about how she really viewed him.

She looked at him intently, then her face went through a series of expressions. To him it was almost looking like she was having an inner conversation with herself. Finally, she nodded her head. Zach stood and walked over, taking a seat next to her. A moment later she showed him her screens and confirmed his suspicions.

Name	Nahamassa Planerunner
Race	Ravzor (Great Plane – Iteration 5)

Titles		
Adventurer	Hunted more than 100 monsters	+5 to all stats, 5 000 Essence
Hero of Promise	Save more than 10 people with a single action	+5 to all stats, 5 000 Essence
First to Ten	First person in the world to reach level Ten	+10% to all stats, 10 000 Essence
One Against Many	Fight against more than 10 opponents and win	+5 to all stats, 5 000 Essence
Beloved	Loved by more than half of a world's population	+50 to all stats, 100 000 Essence
True Understanding	6 Evolve a skill to tier	+20 to all stats, 20 000 Greater Essence
Lord	Reach Lord Realm	+5 to all stats, 500 Greater Essence
Class Evolution	Evolved your class for the second time.	+5 to all stats, 50 Greater Essence
Murderer	Murder more than 10 people that you had no connection and that wished you	+2 to all stats, 10 Greater Essence

	no harm outside of war or feud setting	
Cannibal	Kill more than 5000 people of your own race for their Essence	+10 to all stats, 50 Greater Essence
Torturer	Torture a person for more than three months	+2 to all stats, 500 Essence
Bloody Hands	Murder more than 100 people that you had no connection and that wished you no harm outside of war or feud setting	+10 to all stats, 10 000 Greater Essence
Burglar	Steal more than 10 items that you have no right to	+2 to all stats, 10 Greater Essence
Cruel Mind	Torment more than 100 people that you had no connection and that wished you no harm outside of war or feud setting	+10 to all stats, 5000 Greater Essence
Thief	Steal more than 100 items that you have no right to	+15 to all stats, 1000 Greater Essence

Perks	
Hunter's Nose (Class Perk)	Five times per day magnify your sense of smell by a factor of ten.
Partial Shift (Class Perk)	Change a body part into a different shape. Can only shift into shapes of animals that you have personally killed. Shape change lasts for ten minutes.

Silent Hunter (Class Perk)	Your movements don't disrupt the air around you, making you nearly silent. Strength of effect depends on dexterity stat.
Shifting and Malleable (Bond Perk)	As long as you are bonded with Greed and Change, you are no longer affected by stat imbalance or sickness.
Hunter's Stamina (Class Perk)	+40% to stamina pool.
Enduring Body (Path Perk)	Your body is built to endure, gain a +10% resistance to physical damage. Pain tolerance increased by 20%. Strength of effect depends on endurance stat.
Flesh Qi (Aspect Perk)	Your Qi passively enhances your body with the Essence of Flesh. All physical stats gain +20% boost when a technique is active.
Mind of Horrors (Path Perk)	Your mind is a labyrinth of horrific thoughts. Greatly resistant to outside mind attacks. Reading your mind is extremely difficult. Strength of effect depends on the intelligence stat.
Great Core (Path Perk)	Your Qi core is expanded. Increase core capacity by 50%, and Qi density by 20%. Increases Qi speed based on wisdom stat.
Devour Life (Class Perk)	Executing attack. Once per year kill a person to steal one fifth of their remaining life, and add it to your own. Only works on people on the same tier of power as you.

Form Shift (Class Perk)	Devour a corpse and gain its form. You can completely shift into that form and stay in it indefinitely. You retain all your stats and powers. Your stat screen will change to reflect the identity of your new form. You may have 5 forms saved at a time. Adding a new form beyond the last slot will destroy the oldest form.
Qi Manipulator (Path Perk)	Your Qi control is increased, able to finely manipulate your Qi. Control depends on wisdom stat.
True Body—Malleable (Path Perk)	Your body has been reforged into your true self, adopting attributes to reflect your path. Your path is that of visages from the horrific beyond, as such you may shift your body into unnatural shapes and forms, can only change depending on your body mass. Form change speed doubled for all powers.
Greater Reflex (Class Perk)	Your reflexes are enhanced by 100%, speed of response equal to twice your dexterity.
Powerful Strike (Class Perk)	Once per combat your next attack deals 3x damage.
Rapid Regeneration (Class Perk)	Once per combat, increase your body's regeneration by a factor of ten.

Class	Devourer (E)
Level	148

Combat Ability	Devour Flesh
Movement Ability	Devourer's Step
Support Ability	Greater Shapeshift

Cultivation	The Path of Horrifying Visage (E)
Stage	Mid Lord
Aspect	Flesh
Base technique	Horrifying Presence
Branch technique	Field of Horrors
Fruit technique	Phantom Army

Passive Skills	Active Skills
Perfect Danger Sense	Cut >> Greater Cut >> Spatial Cut
Combat Mastery >> Dagger Mastery	Stealth >> Greater Stealth >> Shadow Stealth
	Perfect Imitation

Strength	492
Dexterity	641
Vitality	508
Endurance	349
Intelligence	344
Wisdom	792

It was obvious that she was imbalanced, and that her Class and Path were influencing her. Even her titles were interesting, showing a picture of

her descent into madness. He turned away from them and focused on her Class and Path. According to everything that he knew, both her Class and Path were on a too low tier of power to influence her too much. Which was probably why she was able to function normally most of the time. The issue had to have stemmed from her skills, the parts of herself that she put into them. Zach couldn't teach her anything that Ferrut had taught him, but most of what he had taught him was about how to guide evolutions and the secrets of how to get tier 6 skills. Naha obviously knew that already, since she had two perfect skills. Zach could still not speak to her about that, but... a plan about how he could help her was forming inside of his mind.

Her imbalance had to be mitigated, but he saw no way to do it with her Class and Path. Not only because it would take a long time for her to crawl out of the madness if she focused on just her Path for example, but because it would get worse before it got better. The higher she pushed her path, the more it would start to influence her, even if she managed to cure herself of imbalance that influence would still remain. The need to see the horror in the eyes of her opponents. It might become more manageable, if she persisted, but it would take her a long time to reach that point. The same could be said about her Class. It would force her to devour. No, raising her Class and Path was a sure way to fuck her up even more. The higher those two influences went, the more unstable she would become. Every evolution and Realm, giving more power to the influences of those two ways of power. The only way to help her that Zach saw was through skills. By locking in parts of her that could help her fight off the influences from her Class and Path.

He started asking her questions, about the needs that she felt. How much time passed between when she satisfied them. Her answer told him that she could go at most four months without killing anyone, but that was getting dangerously close to her losing her mind. She needed to satisfy her needs, or she would black out and do it anyway, only she wouldn't care about who she killed.

That brought them to the topic of her code. He could see how her madness had twisted what was supposed to be an ideal of goodness. It was unfortunate, because she had sealed a part of her inside her skill, the desire to punish the unworthy. It was something that stemmed from her past, on

her home world. She told him everything that she figured out about skills, she knew much, but she didn't understand the importance of making sure that the words and the image of what she sealed inside of herself be precise. Her ideal had been twisted over time, from the intended target, which were criminals and the enemies of her people, it slowly became about people that wasted the opportunities presented to them as she became disillusioned about the Infinite Realm.

Further questions revealed that the second part that she had sealed was the desire to grow stronger. It was why she was killing people and stealing their stats. Although she had been doing that slowly, and only started relatively recently. Relatively for her, since she was over five hundred years old.

She told him that once she arrived in the Infinite Realm, she had been taken in by a faction of Ravzor led by Ravzor from the second Iteration. They had helped them, given them jobs. But quickly it became apparent that they weren't letting them grow. They gave them positions that allowed them to earn Essence through contributions, but only just enough to survive and perhaps save some to advance sparingly. They were not allowed to leave and hunt monsters, not that there were many in the territory they had been living. Eventually, their faction was attacked by another rival one, everyone was wiped out and her people died. She was too weak to save them. Her hate toward the ones that had refused to let her grow in strength soared. And she started her crusade to grow strong enough to oppose all those that suppressed others, all the while hiding from their sights until she had that strength.

She grew in power rapidly, and then... she became imbalanced. She noticed her own madness, of course. And eventually realized why it happened. Naha stopped advancing her Class and Path, even her skills—Zach had noticed that all of them were on 10/10, and that she hadn't been completing her quests.

She didn't know how to fix it, nor was she able to find the information on how to do it. Zach understood, even in the Warden Citadel there was little to be learned in the library. Most of what he knew he had figured out by himself from the fragments and by reading between the lines in the library.

As well from what Ferrut taught him. She had no chance of figuring it out on her own.

Naha then pursued the only other avenue of gaining power available to her. Her awakened object, the ring that could turn into a stat stealing dagger. She had been slowly growing in power, trying not to get noticed and bring someone much stronger down on her head.

Zach could see how she had a good idea, but her execution... it was mad. Which told him that a lot more than just her being forced to kill every few months happened to her. Her mind was damaged even beyond just that, for whatever reason.

Finally Zach finished with his questions, and then scratched at his knees.

“Do you want me to help you Naha?” Zach asked finally.

“I.. I don’t know. I love you Zach, but I...” She didn’t seem to be able to find the answer.

Seeing the struggle inside of her Zach changed his strategy. “Okay then. You say that you love me?” He saw her nod her head at that. “You want to be with me?”

“Yes.”

“Then you will have to follow my rules, because I will not be with who you were in Emaros. If you want to stay by my side then there will be no more killing the innocent.”

“Zach... I don’t think that you understand, I need it. Need to devour them, need, need, need,” she whispered. He could see the need in her eyes, the madness lurking there. But there was also something else. To him, it almost looked like a cry for help, like she was screaming for him to save her.

“Naha,” Zach said firmly. “You will not kill the innocent, but I didn’t say anything about not killing at all.”

Her head tilted and her eyes sharpened.

Zach took a deep breath. This was the part where he was unsure himself. He had never thought that he was a person that would do something like this. Help a murderer, and yet... he fell in love with her. The conversation he had with her, it only confirmed his fears. Quell was a lot like Naha, she talked the same, except with more intensity. Her beliefs were the same as Quell’s, only

pushed to the extreme. Naha was the person that Zach had fallen in love with. Once she told him how she took over Quell, it made a lot more sense to him. The original Quell died when she was 15 years old, along with her parents in a monster attack outside of the city.

Naha came upon them, and took over the little girl's identity. She had then lived as Quell, not as the little girl, more like a version of her real self. It allowed her to keep more of her sanity.

"I plan on being a wandering warden, one that takes contracts on dangerous criminals. The ones that are for dead or alive. If you want to stay by my side, this is what we will do. The criminals will be the ones that you will kill."

"But... if they are worthy..." Naha asked, her face becoming confused again.

Zach changed the topic again, trying to shift her focus, since he didn't want to try and explain how such criminals were unworthy. "You know how to reach tier 6 skills?"

She blinked and then nodded. "I need to carve out a part of myself and put it into the skill, fixing it in my mind."

Zach was sure that she would have no difficulties in doing that, even skipping tiers. So far, she hadn't evolved them on purpose, because she didn't know what was making her insane. "I want you to focus on one of your skills and bring it up to tier 6, and I want you to listen to me and seal a part of yourself that I tell you to."

He couldn't tell her how or why it would help, he couldn't teach her how to focus on a specific tier to gain more benefits. She will need to figure that stuff on her own. But telling her what part of herself to seal into the skill, that was not the knowledge that Ferrut gave him.

She frowned. "What do you want me to seal and why?"

"I want you to seal something that will make you want to follow me, something that will let me help you better. I want you to seal your love for me and desire to stay by my side."

Zach hoped that her love, if it even was real, would be enough to give him some kind of influence on her. To let him guide her away from her other desires. The only way he saw of helping her was if she kept advancing her

skills, fixing the sane parts of her in place and trying to off-set the madness. If she never touched her Class and Path again, then the influences would never get great than what they were now.

Zach had learned much from Ferrut, so he knew how difficult fixing imbalance with skills was. But Naha was already affected, he doubted that she could get much worse. And he wasn't going to let her, he wanted to protect her. He didn't know if the things between them would ever be the same, he was still processing everything that had happened. He felt broken, he had felt the fracture in his mind happen. He had betrayed the ideal that he held back on Earth, broken his vow to the wardens by helping a criminal, a serial killer. At the moment Zach didn't care. The only thing he saw was Naha sitting in front of him, wearing Quell's face. And she needed his help. If there was ever going to be a chance for them, then he needed to help her subdue her madness. He needed to save her.

Naha looked at him for a long minute, and then, finally, she gave him her answer.