

ACT II - Zach

Naha looked at him with an inquisitive look in her eyes, and Zach stood up from his spot in the chair near the wall. He walked over and guided her to the bed having her seat next to him. Just being this near her was hard. They hadn't been... intimate since that night three months ago. Neither one of them wanted to make a move. It was understandable, there were things that neither one of them knew about each other that they needed to learn now. Zach had learned who Naha really was, and she had learned who he really was. Someone willing to go against everything for someone he loved.

He had decided to help her, to be by her side. And she had agreed. Somewhere deep down she knew how broken she was, and she wanted to get better. Zach was certain that he couldn't have forced her to do anything that she didn't want to do. Even now when she had evolved a skill to tier 6 and put her love for him inside of it.

Zach understood that it was not a perfect fix, and that she would need to freeze more parts of herself in her skills if she was to become better. The reason why he had decided to have her seal her love for him was simple. In part, because he knew that she did love him, and that meant that he didn't ask her to do something that she might not want to do. And in part because it would allow him a way to reign in the worst of her urges, while not really taking away all control from her. Just because you loved someone, it did not mean that you couldn't disagree and even act against them. It just made it more likely that she would listen to him.

And he knew that her love was real because even before she evolved her skill she had been willing to do as he asked. Early during their trip they had made a set of rules, a code. It said that she would only ever kill criminals, those with bounties on their head for death. In any other situation she would follow Zach's lead. He wasn't naive enough to think that there wouldn't be situations where they would be faced against people that weren't criminals but wished them harm. This was a brutal world with different worlds and he had come to accept that.

They had also made a decision to use their daggers on their bounties, to both get stronger. But their ultimate goal wasn't something that they had talked about. They were just... traveling aimlessly hunting criminals.

He looked in her orange eyes, studied the face that he had fallen in love with. He knew that it was just a mask, and he had made peace with the fact that she would never have a single form that would be just hers. She would always be changing, her form shifting, it was who she was. He took a deep breath, deciding that enough was enough, he couldn't keep letting the guilt rule him. He had made his decision and he believed in it. Even if she wore the skins of those she killed, she was his.

He took her hand in his startling her and then spoke.

"Naha," Zach started. "We need to decide what it is that we want to do, what our goal is."

Naha blinked and tilted her head. "I... I've always wanted to punish those who had killed my people, but they... They are too strong for me, High Rankers with great power."

Zach nodded in understanding, he knew her history and how she had been twisted into what she became. And he understood her desire, she wanted vengeance, and he had spent the last decade seeking the same. He wanted justice for the death of humanity. And yet, since he arrived here he realized that he might go his entire life without getting it. He had to make peace with that, to set aside his desire to go out into the world and find Ryun, to look him in the eyes and make him pay for what he had done.

His time with the Warden's had taught him that this world was infinite and he might never again set his eyes on Ryun. He needed something else in his life a new goal to strive toward. Naha was a part of that, he wanted to build a life with her. By her side, he had felt most like himself in a long time, he had felt happy, and he didn't want to lose that again. He needed her, probably as much as she needed him.

"So, our goal then is to grow stronger. To become powerful enough that we cannot be pushed around by others, powerful enough that we can choose to have whatever life we want to have," Zach said. It was a simple goal, but he felt better for having said it. Since becoming a warden he had spent a long

time studying, learning about this world and how to advance properly. Now was the time for him to really focus on that task.

“It isn’t nearly as easy as it seems when you just say it like that,” Naha said.

Zach could tell that she was more “herself” now. A result of their recent bounty hunt. It was strange that he was able to tell that now, but it was inevitable from the moment she stopped pretending in his presence.

“All that I’ve heard since I arrived here was that advancing is hard and dangerous. That one shouldn’t rush or they would lose their lives. I think that all of that is a lie. A way to keep people down. Or perhaps it is the truth, and everyone else is just... faint-hearted, they don’t want to take the risks and try to get stronger.”

Zach took a deep breath and shook his head. He had seen this in the others, when they wanted to level before going back to the dungeon, deciding that security was more important than power. “You and I, Naha, we are not like that. We are Rankers, we had lived through the horror that the Framework brought, and we survived. You say that it isn’t easy? I ask you in return: when had things been easy for us? You spent hundreds of years struggling, perhaps you have not gained power in the form of advancement, but you have improved. I know that you had been holding back on that roof, I have seen your mastery over your body and your powers, it eclipses my own. So no, it will not be easy, but I *know* that we will prevail. The wardens will give us the opportunities to fight strong opponents, and our daggers will let us grow faster than others are able. We will get stronger Naha, I promise you that. And after... after we will see. This is an infinite world, we can go beyond the reach of those who want to control others, we can carve a place for ourselves out there somewhere.”

By the end of his speech Naha’s eyes were almost glowing. “You really believe that?” She asked.

“Of course, I know what I am capable of. I had spent ten brutal years on my world, I have seen death and survived battles that should’ve killed me. I carry within me a promise for those who died, for those who gave their power to me. And I know that I might never be able to fulfill that promise,

but that doesn't mean that I can stop preparing and growing in power. That is what my goal is, and I hope that you want it to be yours as well."

He knew that she had sealed the part of her that wants to go stronger, that she would always seek strength. But there was a difference between what she was doing, taking stats from the weak, and what Zach had in mind.

Naha nodded her head. "Yes," she whispered. "I want us to grow strong together. Strong enough that no one can hurt us again."

Zach smiled and moved his hand up palming her cheek. She closed her eyes and leaned into his hand. It had been so long since he touched her, since he had allowed himself to look at her as the woman that he had fallen in love with. It had taken time for him to come to accept what she was and the decision that he had made. He had no doubts now.

He pulled her close and kissed her, lowering her down to the bed.

Zach and Naha—wearing Nyathulla's skin—entered the shop attached to the smithy. Zach made his way to the counter and spoke with the person sitting behind it. Then they waited as the man went to get his master.

Zach took the time to look around at the items on display. Most of it was armor, with only a few weapon pieces. None of it was really impressive, not compared to Zach's armor and the stuff that Naha had in her storage. The pieces on display weren't the armorer's best work of course, only what was available in the shop, which were mostly generic pieces. It was his custom for order stuff that was far better and which was the reason Zach had come to him.

A few minutes later, the attendant returned and asked them to follow. He led them through the back of the shop and into the smithy proper, then to the side where the armorer's workshop was located. They entered and saw the tall kracean, all four of his arms working on a small orb-like item on the table. He noticed them as they came in and left his work on the table as he stood up.

“Wardens,” he greeted as he walked over and shook Zach’s and then Nyathulla’s hand.

“Master Ishu,” Zach greeted in return. “I hope that we aren’t too early.”

“Not at all warden,” Ishu said as he walked over to a large cabinet. “You came just at the right time. I finished your armor this morning.”

He opened the cabinet and revealed a stand with Zach’s armor mounted on it. Immediately, Zach could see the changes. Master Ishu grabbed hold of the two long wooden levers on the sides and pulled the entire thing out, and placing it in front of Zach and Naha.

“As you can see, I’ve done as you asked. I’ve used the materials to cover the most important parts of your armor, giving you added survivability.”

Zach could, indeed, see. He had been searching for a good armorer who could make the changes he wanted ever since they left the Citadel. The armorers in the Citadel had been capable of doing what he wanted, but they had all been too busy. He would’ve had to wait for half a year at least for them to be available to work on his armor.

Master Ishu came well recommended as one of the mid-level armorers of some repute. Zach had given him the material that he had taken from the dungeon from the hobgoblin boss, the dark metal that had been nearly impervious to any kind of damage from him and his team. The material was called dark iron, and was known to be incredibly durable if somewhat hard to work with.

“I had some issues with molding, more than half of what you gave me shattered and turned to scrap, but with what was left I had enough to do what you asked.”

Zach nodded, Ishu had warned him at the beginning that it could happen. He looked at his armor, walking around it to take a better look. The armor itself had been made out of 115 level Great Sea Serpent hide with some silverite to protect important areas, it was tough and light. And it barely restricted his movement. It used to be silver with black accents on the seams, now it had plates of black attached over it that looked more like cut glass than metal. The upper torso was now covered in two plates to protect it, the skirt had a few strips of black plates chained together mixed in with silverite. On the back there was a hexagonal plate over the center of the upper torso. And

the last of the new material had been placed over the helmet, reinforcing the top, the sides, and the back of the head. It had somehow managed to make the armor look even more impressive.

He had a worry that the added weight would hinder him somewhat, but that worry proved groundless. He had increased in strength, the added weight wasn't an issue at all.

Zach looked below the arms, and saw hooks and fabric. He turned to look at Ishu and raised an eyebrow. "You managed it?"

Master Ishu nodded. "It took some doing, but we managed to make it work."

He pulled one of the arms away from the body and the white fabric tightened between the side and the elbow. Zach couldn't help but grin. It wasn't quite a full wing-suit, it couldn't be. It would've been too much of a hindrance in combat, but it was enough that with his command over the wind he would be able to increase the range of his leaps and glides. It might even allow him more maneuverability in the air.

"It looks great," Zach said, then he reached out and placed a hand on the armor and a window popped up in his vision.

Greater Armor of the Silver Sentinel	+25 to all stats, +18% to total stamina and stamina regeneration, clean, minor repair, equip
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The increases weren't much, but they were enough. The main reason as to why his armor cost so much, were the enchants placed on it, but also the fact that it was upgradeable. Not all crafted items were, it required something special added to it in order to allow that. Zach didn't know what that something was, only that it was necessary, otherwise attempting to upgrade armor reduced it to scrap.

"It's perfect, thank you Master Ishu," Zach said, bowing his head in the kracean's direction.

"Good," Master Ishu said as Zach put the armor in his storage and then used **equip** to put it on. The armor manifested around him and he moved

around with it for a bit, experimenting. Everything seemed to be in order and they paid the rest of the agreed upon price. The upgrade had cost just over 20,000 GE, which wasn't a small amount of Zach's budgeted.

Still, his monthly contribution should be available tomorrow and he expected to recoup his loss. Naha and he had hunted four bounties in the last month, which should net them more than 20,000 GE in contributions each.

As soon as they were done in the shop, they headed to the Adventurers Guild to see if there were any new bounties in their level range.

They entered the Guild and immediately noticed a commotion. People were huddled in groups, having heated discussions. Zach and Naha didn't really care that much about the local politics, but the wind carried some of their words to him regardless of his desire.

"...beaten back—"

"...could mean unrest..."

"...war..."

"... Phoenix is..."

There were too many conversations happening at the same time for him to catch anything of use, so he turned to the warden near the bounty board for clarity. He didn't know the minotaur, but he had learned that wardens were generally cordial to each other.

"Did something happen?" Zach asked.

The warden turned to look at Zach, and then blinked. "You didn't hear?"

Both Zach and Naha shook their heads.

The minotaur leaned down and spoke. "There was an attack on a nearby sect. The Golden Phoenix's sect," he said as if that explained everything.

Zach didn't know who that was, but thankfully Naha seemed to know. "Who was stupid enough to do that?" She asked.

The minotaur shook his head. "We don't know, the only thing that is known is that her palace was torched and that she went on a rampage, burning down half of her territory. The leading theory right now is that it was a sneak attack by another sect. People think that someone managed to sneak an army into her city. And the only person that could do that was someone as powerful as a High Ranker."

“So why is everyone so worked up?” Naha asked.

“Because if it is war between two sects... it can get ugly. Those tend to spill over into neighboring territories, and we are close enough that we might be affected. But also because...” He looked around as if to make sure that no one was listening, and then he whispered. “Because the attack might’ve been an attack by another faction, a neighboring kingdom perhaps. The Dal’arav Kingdom had been feuding with the Phoenix for the last century. And if it turns up that it was an attack by one of the factions against a sect? It could start a real war in the core.”

Now Zach understood, he remembered the history that he had read in the library. The sects and the other factions had an uneasy truce. Their philosophies and ruling policies differed too much, they were always butting heads. But the last war between the sects and the other factions of the core had been fought almost seven hundred years ago. Sects generally warred against each other, but to them those wars were only a natural part of life. They considered them just light skirmishes that kept them strong. But if the sects felt like they were being threatened by an outside force... then it would be war.

Zach sighed, it seemed that no matter where he went, people just couldn’t find a way to live together in peace. “Thank you for the news,” Zach told the warden.

They turned to leave when another voice called out, grabbing their attention.

“Warden Gardner!” The call came and Zach turned. He saw the head of the bounty allocation for this Guild waving him over, and they walked to meet him.

“Adventurer Bomis, how can we help you,” Zach asked.

The old looking elf-human smiled at Zach and Naha. “Actually, it is I who can help you. I heard that you are looking for dead or alive bounties, right?”

Zach glanced at Naha then back at Bomis. “More dead than alive, but yes.”

Bomis’s smile widened and he continued speaking. “Well, I have just the right bounty for you. A rogue adventurer, interested?”

Zach narrowed his eyes at the man, and then responded. "Tell us more."