

## Act II – Zach

Zach took the offered seat in the corner of the small workshop.

“Thank you for agreeing to see me again, Warden Ferrut,” Zach said as he sat down.

The Karura Warden grimaced and snapped his beak. “Better that I endure you quickly than to have you pestering me all the time,” Ferrut said as he turned back to his work on the table. “So, what do you want?”

Zach felt only a bit annoyed that the man was dismissing him and disrespecting him, but he put that aside. He needed the Skill Master’s help.

“I was wondering if you could help me with something, I was searching in the library for any mention of a way to increase available skill slots.”

Ferrut chuckled. “Filled your slots with nonsense hadn’t you?”

Zach rolled his eyes. “No, I am quite content with the skills that I have right now. But I would like to try and get another active skill. I know that it is possible to have more than six skills, there are some mentions in the library about it, but I couldn’t find any information on how to do that.”

“You won’t be able to do it, those who can are a rare breed. I told you last time that you shouldn’t focus on skills... young never listen,” Ferrut shook his head.

Zach’s eyes narrowed at the man. “I can understand your frustrations, but there is no need for you to be so disrespectful. I’ve only come to you because you are the only skill user in the Citadel, and because I’ve been told that you can help me.”

The warden glanced at Zach, and then turned back to his work. “Fine, you need to achieve a perfect skill, that means to improve a skill to tier 6. What I told you about before. In order to achieve a perfect skill you need to put a part of yourself in it.”

Zach blinked. “So, I just need to advance my skills slowly until I reach tier 5 and then put a part of myself in a skill to evolve it further.”

Ferrut laughed. “If only it was so easy.”

Zach didn’t comment on that, instead he thought for a moment. He had been doing well in his skill evolutions. His perk and teacher were a great boon

to that. Although Sasaki Kojirō had failed to help him evolve his evade skill beyond the second tier, and Zach had an idea as to why that was. But he had been able to help him with his **|Sword Art|** skill, and Zach felt like he would be able to evolve it to the next level soon.

“Thank you for letting me know. Also, I wanted to ask something about evolving skills without accomplishing the skill quest,” Zach said and saw the warden roll his eyes. Zach tried not to be phased by the man. “I’ve already managed to evolve three of my skills in this way, and I’ve managed to guide one of the skill evolutions into something that I believe I wouldn’t have gotten if I finished the quest. I just wanted to make sure that I’m not making any kinds of mistakes? I don’t want to harm my chances of evolving my skills further.” Zach remembered the man telling him that powerful Skill users could evolve a skill from tier 1 to tier 6 in an instant, but he wasn’t sure if how he had done it was correct.

The warden froze as Zach spoke, his eyes turning to look at him intently. He slowly put away his tools and then turned so that he was facing him with a serious expression in his eyes.

“To what tiers did you evolve your skills?” Ferrut asked.

Zach tilted his head. “Two skills from tier two to three, and one from tier one to two.”

Ferrut’s dark eyes narrowed. “How old are you?”

Zach blinked, he hadn’t expected that to be his first question. “I’m a thirty two years old, I think,” Zach answered. He saw the other warden’s eyes narrow and he raised his hand to forestall his protests. “I’m a Ranker.”

The warden’s look just got even more confused.

“Seventh Iteration,” Zach said, his records were accessible to other wardens so he didn’t feel the need to keep it from him. “I didn’t arrive in the arrival zone, best guess is that I was too strong to be placed there.”

The warden blinked, and Zach sighed, knowing that he would need to show him. He made his name and Iteration visible and showed it to him. Ferrut looked at his screens, then frowned.

Zach dismissed his window, and met the other warden’s eyes.

Ferrut rested his hands on top of his thighs and spoke. “What level are you if I may ask? And your Cultivation, if you have one?”

Zach wondered if he should say, but he was curious to see why the man's demeanor had changed so much. "I've just leveled to level 120 and I am Peak Foundation Realm."

The karura stood up and started pacing, the wings on his back twitching once. Zach didn't react.

"Level 120, and Peak Foundation..." Ferrut whispered to himself. "A Ranker... yes, yes, that could be enough for it."

Finally, he turned to look at Zach. "You said that you want to focus on skills the last time we spoke?"

"My Class is my main focus, but I would like to have skills as my secondary," Zach answered.

Ferrut's beak clicked a few times in quick succession. "Hm... it's not ideal... Your Cultivation is a problem, you might be better off focusing on Class and Cultivation, but... You have talent for skills, this is undeniable."

Zach tilted his head. "How do you know, a moment ago you didn't think me worth your time."

The warden met Zach's eyes and spread his hands. "That is the case for most wardens that come to me for guidance. I usually tell them the bare minimum and send them on their way, but you... You managed to evolve your skills without the quest. I don't think that you understand how rare that is." He walked back to his chair and sat down, then met Zach's eyes. "There are not many Skill Masters in the world, and there is a reason for that. We are a solitary bunch, and there aren't really Skill Teachers out there, because a skill can't be taught in the same way. Others can give you insights and help you understand something, they can help you get through the first few tiers quickly, but beyond that everything is internal. We don't share our knowledge, because it would do more harm than good if those who don't have a talent attempt to focus on the skills. Because it would leave them weak. And none of us want to have their deaths on our conscience."

The warden closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then he continued speaking. "There are a few things that you need to understand about skills. They are... the hardest way to attain power. Out of ten thousand that attempt them, barely a handful will reach tier three of a skill, and out of that handful, nine times out of ten, none will reach beyond. And they wouldn't be able to

evolve a skill without finishing the quest, let alone changing the intended evolution. This is because there is a secret, or a requirement I should better say, in order for you to be able to evolve skills to their end.”

“What kind of a requirement?” Zach asked.

“Well, you need to understand the skills and you need to know yourself, like I told you before. But, that would only let you grind out the skills slowly, grasping and evolving them requires something else. There is only a few of us who are real Skill Masters, and a part of the reason why is because we don’t share our knowledge. Not because we want to keep it from others, but because it is dangerous. People who try to use skills as their focus or even their secondary often find themselves in situations where they don’t have the tools to survive, because the path of skills is a hard one. But...” the warden sighed, giving Zach a long look. “I can see that you have the talent and that you plan to pursue this with without my guidance. And we have a kind of code... we teach those who have the talent, who can reach far. Not because we want to help them, but because you can very easily cripple yourself if you advance your skills improperly.”

Zach nodded his head. He felt like the skills were a good fit for him.

The warden clicked with his beak and then spoke again. “The first thing that is required in order to advance skills is a drive, something that is at the core of who you are, like an inner truth. It can be anything, but it is important, and it needs to be your real core, what your entire being revolved around. Most people have this and can feel it instinctively, so they can advance in skills a bit. The other thing that you need is to be just a little bit... broken.”

Zach blinked at that. “Broken?”

“Yes,” the warden nodded gravely. “Not how you imagine, you don’t need to be a raving maniac that can’t even communicate. What I am referring to is trauma, something that had broken you in the past and changed you. And it needs to be something pretty substantial. This event is something that we Skill users in the know call a Fracture. People who had been fractured in this way have minds that are... more malleable, able to grasp things that those who haven’t experienced a Fracture can’t. They had seen reality conspire to hurt them, to scar them. It makes their defiance toward reality around them more *real*, for the lack of a better word.”

Zach opened his mouth, and then closed it. He had experienced something like what Ferrut had said. He had lived through pain and suffering, and he wasn't a fool enough to think that it hadn't scarred him.

"The secret of skills is that they warp reality around you based on your will. The more you are capable to defy reality the stronger your skills will be. Trauma helps with that, it makes a person's defiance towards reality greater. Even if I don't teach you anything, you will advance far with skills and you will be able to achieve many tier six skills."

"But will you teach me?" Zach asked. He knew that Ferrut was a crafting focused Skill user, but he didn't really know how strong he was. But from what he had learned around the Citadel, Ferrut was one of the best Skill users in the Wardens, so perhaps he could teach him something.

The warden sighed. "I am, because the wardens need more people who are strong and willing to reach for a greater level of power. But in order to teach you about skills properly, I'm going to need to educate you about other things. How much do you know about the balance between different ways of power?"

Zach frowned, he hadn't expected that question. "I know that it is recommended to focus in one area and use another as a supplement, that it is more efficient that way. And I have found some mentions in the library about people who had a more even spread of Essence between a Class and Cultivation, they seemed to be having some mental issues?"

Ferrut nodded. "Yes, that is true, but it is also a lie."

Zach blinked at that. "What do you mean a lie?"

Ferrut looked away, his wings twitched behind his back. "There are secrets that we Skill Masters keep, things that even many of the most powerful don't know. But first, here," he walked over and offered his hand.

Zach took it slowly and immediately a screen popped up in front of him.

<p>Ferrut Breezefall has initiated Master-Student with you for the duration of ten years.</p> <p>While the contract is active, neither one of you will reveal each other's secrets, nor will you reveal the things that Ferrut Breezefall teaches</p>
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you to anyone else until your contract is expired. Breaking these rules will inquire harsh punishment from the Dealmaker.

Do you accept:  
Y/N

Zach had read something about the contracts like this. His joining the Wardens had been similar but not quite. This was a personal contract, and the contents were much different. “You want me to be your student for a period of ten years?” Zach asked.

Ferrut shook his head. “No, that is just a time limit on the knowledge that I will share with you. By the time the ten years are up, I hope that you will understand why we don’t spread our knowledge and will be very careful with whom you share what I will teach you.”

Zach, looked over the contract again, and then accepted it.

“Good,” Ferrut said. “Now, the first thing you need to understand is the tiers of power.”

Zach straightened in his chair, listening intently.

“Tiers of power are generally the way of telling how powerful someone is. They are not an exact measure, because some tiers of power are greater than others. But in most cases you can tell how strong someone is by the number of tiers of power they had attained. This is where the balance comes in. You see, every way of power gives you tiers of power, for Class, a tier of power is gained every sixty levels. For Cultivation it is every Realm, and for the Skills it is gained for every tier 6 skill that you have.”

Zach didn’t quite understand yet, but he let the warden continue.

“Balance between ways of power plays heavily into this, because every way of power influences you the stronger you get. After you hit a combined tier of power of five, you need to start worrying about this. As a Classer levels, the core concept of their Class comes to define them. A Classer will eventually start to see the entire world around them through the lens of their Class. A craftsman will see everything as a craft, as pieces to be put together. A swordsman will see everything as a battle, every interaction a duel to be won.

A farmer will see everything as a field to be cultivated. The more esoteric the core concept of a class the weirder a Classer's mindset will become."

Zach's eyes widened, thinking about his own Class and what it meant.

Ferrut noticed his expression and raised a hand. "You don't need to worry for now. Prior to your third evolution you will see no real effects, and even after it won't change you as a person merely focus you in a direction."

Zach nodded his head, but he was still a bit alarmed at the revelation.

"A Cultivator has a different problem. While a Classer will see the influence come from within, a Cultivator will have it come from the outside. Their Path will slowly start to push them to fulfill the core concept of the Path they are on. A Cultivator on crafting Path will start feeling like they were being pushed to craft more and more to the exclusion of everything else. One on a Path the sword will start being pushed to seek out more and more battles, compulsively so. Think of the difference between a Class and Cultivation influence as a difference between saying "I want to fight more" and someone egging you on, telling you that "You want to fight more.""

Ferrut sighed, his eyes narrowing at Zach. "The issue comes when you are raising both a Class and a Path at the same time. It is understandable why people would want that. Being focused on one might give you power in a single focus, but there is something to be said about having utility. Classers are generally much more adaptable than Cultivators or even Skill users for that matter. They have many abilities and perks that they can use to answer different situations. Someone who is only a Cultivator will be incredibly powerful in their path, but their power is based on changing their body and doing one type of thing the best. A skill user can have adaptability, but they lack stats and a great number of perks that can help in certain situations. None of the three ways of gaining power are equal, each has its weaknesses and strengths."

Ferrut shook his head. "This is why people want to advance in all three, to try and cover those weaknesses. But after you hit a certain point you will start to feel the imbalance, and if it gets out of hand, you will be driven mad by the two conflicting forces trying to influence you. Having complementing Class and Path does help alleviate the problem, but it is still not enough. You will be torn between an inside change and one coming in from the outside,

because they are not the same in the end. One changes how you see the world, the other forces you to spread your truth around you forcing you to act in ways that you might not want to. No matter what, eventually you will go insane. This is why people don't distribute their Essence equally, why they have a focus. The tier of power for your secondary focus can never be more than two thirds as high as your primary, otherwise you will start sensing symptoms. I have mentioned that only tiers of power count as influencing force, which means that you are in the dangerous currents. You have two tiers of power in both a Class and Cultivation, and that means that you might have some problems if you start focusing on a skill. Because if you achieve a tier of power in your skills the limit as to how many tiers of power you can have in the ways that are not your focus becomes less. The combined tiers of your secondary and tertiary focuses can't be more than half of your primary, not if you don't want to slowly go insane."

Zach grimaced, feeling like he had damaged himself without even knowing it. "If it is so dangerous, why doesn't everyone know about it?"

"Because people are stupid, and because they are willing to sacrifice a lot for power. If you think that a prospect of going insane is enough to stop someone from trying to gain more power, you are mistaken. There have been people who had reached high in one way of power only to find themselves stuck, unable to advance further, whether because of the Essence cost or because of something else. And then, they change their focus, raising another way of power that is cheaper than the one that they had been focusing on. They gain power, but go insane in the process. Even some who know about imbalance are willing to sacrifice their minds for power. Letting everyone think that it isn't efficient is better. We still find people that decide on doing it, but at least they don't know enough to truly become monsters."

"What do you mean?" Zach asked.

"And this is where we come to the secret," Ferrut said. "To the lie of imbalance."

"What is it?" Zach asked as he leaned forward.

"A skill can mitigate the effects of that imbalance. I told you that you need to put a part of you in a skill in order to advance it to the sixth tier, and if you manage that you will have effectively frozen a part of yourself, making



it unchanging. No matter what influence comes at you from your Class or Cultivation or even outside powers, it will never be able to change the part of yourself that you've put inside your skill. But, if you put in the wrong part of yourself in the skill you can make the imbalance worse. You can freeze a part of yourself that had been influenced by your power and make yourself more susceptible to the influence. This is why we don't share this knowledge, because everyone who is capable of evolving their skills will eventually try to gain more power by raising both a Class and Cultivation while trying to shield themselves with skills. And if they make a mistake and seal the wrong part of themselves into their skill... They will just make their insanity worse, while in the process gaining great power."

Zach took a moment to take everything in. It made sense to him, but he still wanted to know more.

"Is there a way to make sure that you put the right part of yourself inside your skill?"

Ferrut nodded. "One of the ways is to do it before your Class or Path start influencing you. You are in a good position for that, although the influence of your Class had started to take root in your core. Still, if you gained a skill before you reached the next Class evolution, you wouldn't feel much of the effects of imbalance. Provided that you put in the very core of yourself in the skill. You see, the influence of a Class or a Path comes first at the core of who you are. And if you have sealed that part of yourself in, then it will be unable to change your core values. Instead the effects will be lessened, and will attempt to change the parts of yourself surrounding your core truth. This isn't a foolproof way of getting rid of influences, and it will inevitably make you see the world in a different way. But, if you get a single tier of power in your skill now, you might be able to continue with skills as your secondary. I would still advise against advancing in your cultivation, it is madness trying to balance two forces attempting to influence on your mind. But, if you are serious about advancing your Skill as a secondary, you need to do it now, before you hit the combined fifth tier of power with your Class. You need to build a foundation for your future skills before you are influenced by your Class, otherwise you risk complications. You might

accidentally seal a part of yourself that is influenced by your Class and make it easier for it to influence you.”

“But you said that a Skill can lessen the impact of imbalance, so if I did things correctly could I try to advance in all three ways of power?”

Ferrut shook his head. “The influence of a Class and Path is not so easily avoided. You might make one part of yourself immune, but the influence will attack everything else. And if you have too many Skills you risk crippling your future growth. Balance is the key in all things. I would suggest that you still abide by the rules. If you gain a tier 6 skill, then don’t try to gain another until you’ve reached at least double the tiers of power than the combined amount of your Cultivation and Skill. So, no second skill until you hit level three hundred and sixty, if you ever reach that far. And you need to be very careful about what part of yourself you seal in your Skills.”

“So, how does one evolve skills?” Zach asked finally.

“If you are grinding them out, through repetition, this way the skill will evolve to reflect your actions. But, this is not the only way, as you have learned yourself. Most people think that you only need to understand a skill, to know what an action is and how it is accomplished in order to evolve it. And for most people that is enough, it isn’t even wrong. But, the Skills are the power of will. You can shape evolutions based on your personal understanding of a skill. And it doesn’t need to abide by ordinary rules of reality. If your will is strong enough, you can force reality to accept your understanding of a skill. You can turn an evading skill into something that lets you step through space itself, or you can make a simple punch warp reality in such a manner that it tears space itself. Your stats don’t matter, only your will. The more esoteric the thing you want to do and the more removed from reality it is, the more power of will you need in order to warp the reality around you. Some people have a very hard time of achieving this, while others are geniuses that can do it naturally. We shall see in which category you will fall in. Now, let me explain how skill evolutions work, and show you some tricks and tools for advancing skills in the direction that you want to.”

Zach listened intently. This was what he had been waiting for and hoping for.

Zach spent the next week finishing up his warden training with Nyathulla. They both passed and were cleared for duty. And for their first official investigations as wardens, they had decided on trying to help with the serial killer investigation in the city. Zach had managed to convince Griss to help, so they were preparing to head into the city and stay more permanently. Nyathulla and Griss were in the city at the moment securing living spaces for Zach and Nyathulla in the Griss' sister's inn. Meanwhile, Zach sat in a private training room, Sasaki Kojirō standing next to him. Zach had spent the entire last week training his skills, the only down time he had taken was to attend the last of his lessons with Emirah and some private lessons with Ferrut. Although there wasn't much that the Skill Master could teach. Evolving skills was a private matter, different for every person.

His lessons had taught him a lot about the basics, and how he should start. He knew that he could attempt to evolve a skill directly to tier six, but he wasn't going to even attempt it. From what Ferrut had said, failure could be catastrophic, resulting in a broken skill. Going slowly, tier by tier was better. He could evolve his skill to its perfect state, and use any of the previous tiers as a focus. Depending on what tier he used as a focus it would have a different name, and be slightly different. For example, if he focused his strike on his **|Flurry Strikes|** the perfect version would be different than if it was focused on **|Greater Strike|**. Alternatively, if he had no focus then it would be more generic, containing some of the power of every tier but it wouldn't have a special focus.

Zach wasn't going to focus on that just yet. Now, he needed to evolve one of his skills.

Kojirō stood next to him. His guidance had quickly improved Zach's **|Sword Art|**, and he had reached 10/10. The system of Skills and the **Last Heir of Terra** along with Kojirō had allowed Zach to learn at a much faster pace than any normal person on Earth could have. Kojirō had told him that he had learned faster than anyone he had ever thought. Zach knew that to be true, ever since he had gotten out of the dungeon he had been training every day, with and without his perk. But while he might be learning faster, he

wasn't really a genius at the sword like Kojirō was. He had mastered the basics of Kojirō's style, but being able to change it and use it in different ways depending on the situation was another thing entirely. The skill quest told him that he needed to improve on the sword art that he had learned. Which was... difficult. Kojirō had been a master among masters, one of the best. There was no way in hell that Zach could improve his art. Not in the usual way at least. But there was one thing that Kojirō's art lacked, and that was powers. His art wasn't designed with powers in mind. The martial art was mundane, and even if Zach might not be the most talented, he could still add to it.

**“There isn't much more time,”** Kojirō said.

Zach nodded his head, the perk would run out soon, and he had wanted Kojirō there so that he could offer advice. They had spoken of different ideas on how he could incorporate his powers with the **|Sword Art|**. And now, Zach attempted it. His technique rushed through him, and he adjusted his stance. The stance of Kojirō's art was designed for an ordinary human body, not one that had stats far above that.

Zach's other perks allowed him to move at full speed in an instant, and many of the stances and moves in Kojirō's art were unnecessary when you could move at those speeds. Zach felt his **|Sword Art|** inside him, telling him that he wasn't in the right stance and position, but he ignored it. The lines in the air told him the avenues of attack, but those were for fighting against ordinary opponents. Zach took a deep breath and moved, the **[Ethereal Wing]** sending him forward in a blur, making him look incorporeal, his empty hand moved as if he had a sword in it. And then, he triggered **Ethereal Sword** and it appeared. He could see the lines and his ability following them to attack the training dummy. He forced himself to change his attack trajectory.

The skill was thrumming inside of his head, and then Zach's attack finished. He came out of the ability on the other side of the dummy and he pivoted on one leg, his strength making the floor crack as he stopped his momentum in an instant. His stance was completely different than what Kojirō's art would require, but Zach wasn't a normal person that would need

to bleed off that momentum. He sprang back toward the dummy again, twisting his body faster than any ordinary person could even imagine.

His ethereal sword stabbed forward, hitting the dummy in the center and bursting into pieces as the power of the attack was too much for it to handle. The thrumming in his head reached a crescendo, and then it burst.

Zach saw a notification in his corner, and smiled.

**“Did you do it?”** Kojirō asked.

Zach looked at the spirit of the Earth’s swordsman and nodded his head. “Yes.”

He glanced at his skills and saw that his **|Sword Art|** had evolved into **|Enhanced Sword Art|**. A sword art enhanced with powers. He was sure that this evolution was easier for him than it would be for people in this world. His sword art had been made for humans on Earth, the only thing he needed to do was improve it with powers. The arts in the Infinite Realm would all be taking account powers from the start.

Ferrut didn’t know much about combat mastery skills, but he could tell him that in order to evolve it to the next tier he would need to create his own art based on the arts that he learned. He would need to learn more than just Kojirō’s art. But that was for later, for now he had to meet with Griss and Nyathulla, and a serial killer to catch.