

## Act II - Zach

Zach kept his soul weapon's darkness aspect active, using it to hide. It made him into a moving hole of darkness. He tried to keep to the darkest parts of the prison, and he avoided the wardens as much as possible. They had started grouping up, with as few as three and as many as five moving together. He didn't know if it was because of the yeti's escape, or if that was what they always did and the others were outliers. But he hoped that they assumed that any missing spirits were killed by the yeti. He wasn't even sure if these spirits were smart enough to think of other reasons. From what he knew, some spirits could talk intelligently and were capable of thought, and some were more like primal forces. He felt like he could take three if he was forced to fight, and if he was lucky. He didn't think that he could take five of them at the time.

Based on his **Ethereal Fissure** cooldown he had been hiding down here for about a day. He had figured out a few things. Like the fact that the guards seemed to be patrolling on a schedule. He had seen two groups passing through a corridor in the day. So several hours at least until one corridor was checked again. Not that there was any need for it anyway. The prisoners were comatose, probably held in dreamlike states like the one Zach had experienced.

He could stay hidden until his cooldown returned, but Zach knew that he couldn't let this opportunity pass. He was in a place filled with spirits and shades, and the shades seemed like they were defenseless. So, he made a plan to try and use his soul weapon on one of the prisoners. The issue was that he didn't want to start with one of the shades in the area of the prison he was currently in. All of them had eight or nine concentric rings, and Zach didn't know what would happen if he tried to use his weapon on them. One thing was for certain, if they woke up while he was trying to **Source Drain** them, he was dead.

He didn't even know what would happen once he used it on a living shade. Would it just kill them? Or would it only weaken them? He needed to test things out, but in order to do it he needed to find weaker shades. Which meant finding the area of the prison where they were being held.

His assumption was that the lowest prison cells were reserved for the most powerful. So he was trying to find a way up. The issue was that the prison was a maze of corridors, and stairs that led up weren't anywhere near one another.

He had managed to reach the floor with five circled shades. But the issue now was that when he climbed up to the next floor, it was filled with more five circled shades. That made him think that there might be less of the stronger shades, so they filled only a single floor.

Still, he didn't abandon his plan. He kept walking, searching for a way up while avoiding the spirits. They didn't seem to have any type of a sensory ability, and he using a shroud of darkness seemed enough to fool them. He had one close call when he had to duck into a small room while a patrol passed.

He spent two days searching for a way up, and only managed to climb two floors. He remembered that Gemheart had said that he wouldn't feel hunger or thirst while in the Ethereal Realm, but Zach hadn't even been feeling that tired. He didn't know if it had to do with his stats, although his vitality and endurance hadn't gone up by that much.

Whatever the reason was, he wasn't going to complain about it. He moved slowly, but swiftly when possible. Then he got lucky, and he found stairs leading up three times in quick succession, and finally found the floor where shades with two concentric rings were.

Then it was time for him to find a good target. He couldn't really tell what kind of an aspect the shades had, at least not for all of them. Some had some physical signs that indicated something, but rarely did he see something interesting. He spent most of that day looking through the cells and searching for a good candidate while evading the spirits. He even managed to improve some of his skills, both from previous fights and his skulking around. His |Vulnerability Sense| had gotten to 8/10, his |**Night Eyes**| to 7/10, and his |Spatial Evade| hit 10/10. He didn't have much time to focus on his skills, but it was still a great improvement.

By the end of the day he found someone. A shade sitting in the center of her cell, her race was an unfamiliar one to him, but she had horns and four arms. He had seen her race before in the cells, but all of them had pale skin.

This one's skin was blood red, with markings all over it. Her eyes stared forward unseeing.

Zach decided that it was time to make a risk. He walked to the side wall next to the cell where a large lever was. He had seen them next to every cell so he assumed that those would open them. He summoned his **Ethereal Sword** in the shape of a short sword that he could better utilize in the small room, and then he opened the cell. He waited for a minute making sure that the formation that kept the shade in a dream wasn't going to shut down as well.

Once he saw no change he stepped inside the cell. The shade was sitting on a small raised platform which was covered in formations, so Zach was pretty confident that the dream worked only on the prisoner. It was not like it had been in the yeti's cell where the formations covered every part of the cell. That also made him consider that this dream could be weaker.

Still, he had made a decision to make the attempt. He knelt in front of the shade and focused on his skill—**|Sealing Slash|**. He charged it as much as he could. From his experiments with Naha he knew that a fully charged **|Sealing Slash|** would shut down someone's powers for several minutes.

Keeping the skill active, but not executed seemed easier for him now than it used to be. He didn't dwell on that, but instead placed his right arm on the shade, and then he activated **Source Drain**. Immediately he felt the sensation of the perk activating, and something gathering in the shade, then slowly draining into him. It was far slower than it had been on the dead body, and somehow Zach could feel more power. He kept his focus on three things, with his eyes he watched the shade for any signs of waking up, and his mind he kept focused on his skill and perk.

A minute passed, and he could see the shade's expression changing, her eyes drooped and she looked as if she was weakening. Two minutes later the perk pulled the last of the power out and the shade's eyes closed as it died. Zach stood up immediately and walked out, he used the lever and closed the cell, and then started running down the corridor. He didn't want to stay anywhere near the shade in case that the wardens could tell that it had died.

He ran for what felt like an hour, and then found a quiet and secluded place in one of the side rooms whose purpose he still didn't know. He hid behind a pedestal and then looked at his notification.

<b>Blood Aspect</b>	Blood blade form. Attacking with this form draws and stores blood and life Essence from those you damage equal to 30% of the damage dealt. You may consume all stored Essence to heal yourself or send a <b>Sanguine Burst</b> out of the blade that will deal blood and life damage equal to the amount stored.
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Zach blinked at the description, it was very useful. He didn't know if it would do him much good here. The spirits didn't seem to have blood, nor did the shades for that matter if he remembered correctly. And the power he had gained was a lot stronger than what he got from the dead spirit. He summoned the blood blade and looked at it.

A smooth deep red blade appeared over his hand, looking as if it was made out of blood. He touched it with the finger of his other hand and his skin parted, blood surging out. He pulled back and frowned. The blade hadn't cut him, it felt like it was liquid, although it was appeared as if its form was fixed. Zach pushed it against the stone and instead of cutting it behaved as if it was liquid, spreading over the floor without stabbing through. Or more like some kind of slime since it didn't flow too freely. He pulled the blade back and saw it restore itself to its original form.

*Well, that is interesting.* It seemed like it could cut flesh, or open it up at least, but it didn't do that well against something else. Zach dismissed it and stood. It seemed like he had some searching to do. This time he decided to go a floor down, and see if he could take from a three ringed shade.

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The shade didn't react as Zach pulled power from it. Just like the two ringed shade, the three ringed one died as soon as he was finished. And just like last time Zach ran away to hide before looking at his new power.

This time he had found one of the molten-skin looking shades, only this one had some special body. Instead of an orange glow and black skin, this one had a deep brown skin and green glow beneath the skin.

He pulled up his screens and read through the new one.

<b>Venom Aspect</b>	Venom blade form. Attacking with this form inject Venom Essence into the wounds that eats away at your target and deals damage equal to 5% of the damage you dealt with your attack per second for 5 seconds. The debuff is refreshed with every new attack that deals damage. This debuff can stack up to 50% of the total damage dealt with all attacks per second. You may activate <b>Venom Burst</b> to consume all the venom in your target's body and deal damage equal to 200% of the total damage the ticking debuff has dealt up until that point.
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Zach nearly whistled, this was an incredible power. It seemed like getting powers from shades was better than from spirits. He had five more slots left, and he didn't feel the need to slow down. He headed down again, searching for a four ringed shade.

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His eyes never left the shade that was his next target. Taking power from the shades seemed to be taking around three to four minutes. A long time to do against a living opponent, but the prisoners were all trapped inside their own heads. It was the perfect opportunity for him.

As he felt the last of the shade's power fill him, its eyes fluttered and Zach tensed. For a moment worried that it was going to wake up, but then his **Source Drain** finished and it toppled down, dead.

He grinned and stood up, walking out of the cell and right into a patrol of three **Lower Prison Warden Spirits**. Zach moved immediately, activating **Phantom Avatar** and **Old Heritage** as the three spirits jumped at him. The size of the cell forced them close to each other and their size prevented them from utilizing all four of their limbs. Zach took a step back and swung with his **Ethereal Sword**, releasing the hold on the skill inside his head. **|Sealing Slash|** passed through all three of them, sealing their power.

The attack took them by surprise as they braced to feel the blade but instead felt nothing. Zach took advantage. He pushed himself forward as he summoned his Wind Blade and stabbed the spirit in the middle while lashing out with his **Ethereal Sword** at the one on the right with his **Dazzling Strike**.

His Wind Blade stabbed through the spirit's chest and he picked it up from the floor and carried it forward as charged. The Wind Blade ravaged its torso with a hundred tiny wind blades that surrounded the blade. The spirit moved its arms, trying to grab Zach, but he used his **|Spatial Evade|** and stepped away. The second spirit was blinded, but the third's claw flashed through the space where Zach's head would've been. He focused on his skill and jumped forward, activating **|Flurry Strikes|** and stabbing at its head before it could react. His Wind Blade cut through it and the secondary effect cut up the rest of the head with hundreds of smaller cuts. The spirit died, but Zach didn't have the time to waste as the wounded spirit attacked. Blocked its attacks, his body moving fast enough now that he could match it. Its strikes were still heavy, but with his **Phantom Avatar** and **Phantom Mantle** he was a lot more resistant to such attacks.

The second spirit recovered from its blindness and Zach disengaged by jumping back. Then he activated [**Ethereal Wing**]. He dashed through the two remaining spirits, his blades whirling around him, cutting them up. He ended his dash behind them and turned immediately, using [**Ethereal Chains**] to bind one then pull it toward himself.

He stabbed with his Wind Blade, then cut its head off with his short sword. The last spirit was in a bad condition and Zach jumped forward, [**Evade**]-ing its claws and then pushing the wind behind it to make it stumble forward and impale it on his Wind Blade.

He threw the spirit down to the floor and looked around making sure that there were no more. Seeing none, he stashed their bodies in the room and then ran away. He had gotten four aspect powers, he had five more to go.

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The five ringed shade's eyes seemed to focus on Zach as he drew the last of its power and killed it. It happened so fast that Zach wasn't even sure that it had in fact happened. He left the dead shade and hid again before looking at his new power.

<b>Frost Aspect</b>	Frost blade form. Attacking with this form inflicts freezing damage and a stacking debuff that deals cold damage equal to 5% of total damaged dealt by the attack per second for 5 seconds. The debuff is refreshed with every new attack that deals damage. This debuff can stack up to 50% of the total damage dealt with all the attacks per second. If that occurs the target will become <b>frozen</b> unless it possesses a high enough resistance or powerful enough perk.
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With another powerful power in his soul weapon Zach felt a lot more confident against the wardens. But he still didn't want to get ambushed by more than three of them. His attacks could pierce their skin now, and his Wind Blade had proved capable of inflicting high damage. Still, Zach had Essence for advancement. The three spirits had given him a bit less Essence than he had gotten before, but with the three dead he had gotten around 50,000 Greater Essence. The shades one the other hand had been giving him a lot less. He wasn't sure why that was.

His perk said that **Source Drain** should give him 10% of all the Essence they had ever used to advance. He knew that the number of rings showed how old and therefore how powerful a shade was. But... shades couldn't advance. Their powers were the same as it had been when they were alive, with age and new ring they only gained more raw power. Their abilities became more powerful, they didn't really improve or evolve.

Perhaps the shades that he had been draining hadn't been all that advanced in life, so the Essence he gained wasn't that much. Perhaps they could gain rings even while in prison, the yeti seemed to have implied as much. Zach still didn't know nearly enough about shades, but now was not the time to learn. From the three shades that he had killed, he gained almost 60,000 Essence. About the same as how much he had gained from the one that he killed on the bridge. Was that because he didn't drain that one? Was he only getting the Essence that they had in life and not an Essence reward from the Framework?

The Framework seemed to reward struggle, and he hadn't even fought those shades. He basically killed them in their sleep. Perhaps that was why.

Zach shook his head and stood up, he had four slots left, and he intended to see how high he could go. If he managed to get a power from a nine ringed shade... He couldn't imagine how powerful it would be.

He put all the Essence he had into his Class, leveling to level 233. Just seven away from the next evolution.

He glanced at his perk choices and saw something really interesting.



Plane Blink	Three times per combat, teleport to any place in a twenty meter radius around you.
Phantom Dash	Three times per combat, dash to any place in a twenty meter radius around you. You are invulnerable while you dash.
Ethereal Charge	Three times per combat, charge to any place in a twenty meter radius around you. You accumulate Ethereal energy while you charge, upon arrival at your destination you release a blast of Ethereal energy, dealing damage to all around you.

Every choice was interesting and powerful in its own way. The charge could also deal damage, the dash made him invulnerable, and the blind was... well it was a blink. Being able to teleport without his opponents knowing exactly where he would end up was invaluable. Especially in types of fights that he liked to engage in.

In the end, that was an advantage that he as a close combat specialist couldn't pass over. He picked **Plane Blink**. Then, he continued his search.

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Three days later, Zach's short sword laid on the shoulder of the seven ringed shade, his **|Sealing Slash|** ready to be unleashed at a moment's notice. The six ringed shade had definitely woken up by the end. But his power not only killed it slowly, it also apparently weakened it. He used his **|Sealing Slash|** and then stabbed it through the eye. He had killed it before his **Source Drain** was finished, so he wasn't sure if he had gained its full power. But the Aspect he had gotten was nevertheless a very powerful one. It was a **Fire Aspect**, and only did it burn bright and hot, it let him send blasts of fire as well as have some control over the fire around him. He didn't know

how powerful that was exactly since he didn't really have a way to test it out, but if it was anything like his command over wind it was going to be powerful.

He looked at the seven ringed shade, making sure that it was still under the influence of the dream. He remembered the fight above on the bridge. He was sure that if he had meet that three ringed yeti in better circumstances he could've taken it. With the power he had gained down here, he was sure that he could take a four ringed shade in an even fight. The rest... he wasn't quite sure. From what he had seen of Gemheart fighting the eight ringed one, it hadn't really been his match, Gemheart had just been at a disadvantage with his allies nearby and the battlefield being the bridge. Zach was sure that he could've blasted the shade quickly if he could've fought freely.

Zach didn't think that he could quite match that power, not against fully powered shades. But the ones here were imprisoned and his power was weakening them.

The seventh ringed shade took longer to drain than the others. He didn't know why, but something was probably different about this one. Still, Zach didn't stop. And as he felt his drain reaching close to the end the shade stirred.

Its eyes blinked and the focused on Zach with malevolent hate. Before it could react Zach stabbed with his short sword activating his **|Sealing Slash|**. The silence came at just the right time as his eyes lit up with power. The moment Zach's sword entered the power winked out and shade frowned in confusion. Zach didn't let it get its bearing. He activated **Old Heritage** and **Phantom Avatar**, then pushed the shade down to the ground using his legs to pin its arms, while he still kept his arm on its shoulder, draining and weakening it.

It tried to fight free, but the drain had weakened it too much. Zach stabbed his sword in its shoulder and activated his **Dazzling Strike**, trying to buy time for his drain to finish without killing the shade.

It howled, its voice echoing down the corridors and Zach cursed. He didn't need spirits to come and interrupt him. But as it struggled, the drain pulled the last of its power and it died.

Zach sighed, that had taken almost five minutes. Longer than the others. He didn't know the reason, and he couldn't stay to find out. He stood and ran away, not even having the time to close the cell.

In the distance he heard the spirits howling, heading straight for him.