

Skill Evolution

Zach and Naha sat in their room, both reading from scrolls unfurled in their laps. A lot of the Essence that Zach had gained over the last three years they had spent on equipment, on consumable items, and on instruction manuals. Those were... hard to come by, at least any that were useful for them. Oh, there were plenty that preached one thing or another, that might be useful for someone without any other options, but true secrets were not so easy to obtain.

They had visited the Citadel after the core, after the tournament, and had transcribed some of the guides there, more as references than anything else. But Zach had managed to obtain a few key pieces of information and writings on skill from Ferrut, the Citadel's Skill Master. There was not much that one could do to instruct skill users, not as far as the correct way to evolve skills went. There were things that could help, but ultimately it was all up to the person's will.

But there were a few things that could help. The ways to get the most out of your skills, to get things that could be more useful. Ferrut had given them instructions on the process of creating skills flavored with Essences, in what way that manifested was up to the skill users themselves. Zach was a Classer, his perks and powers had been flavored by many different Essences, but his current Class Evolution focused on three: Soul, Wind, and time. He felt like he had managed to infuse some of his Soul into the [**Phantom Training**], or perhaps Ethereal. He was still unclear just what exactly the connection between Soul and Ethereal was. Clearly there was a connection, after death, souls went to the Ethereal realm.

Today, he was focusing on something else. Improving a skill to tier 6, and then more, pushing it to tier 7. Skills were... different in that way. There was no need for Essence, sometimes no need for time even. All it took was willpower. From Ferrut he had learned a lot, primarily that for skills preparation is what mattered the most. He and Naha had spent years preparing before she had started to improve her skills. She had joined two tier 7 skills, creating a tier 8 one. The two of them knew how to do it, what it

required. Zach might be able to do that step too, but they had agreed that he should wait. Taxing ones will that much in a short period of time would not be smart.

Still, they had a plan. They had mapped up what they wanted from their skills and how to get there. And Zach was following one of three the instruction manuals that Ferrut had procured for them. It was an instruction on how to create a very specific type of tier 8 skill. Zach planned on going for that one, and if Zach was going to get it, he first needed another tier 7 skill.

After a few more minutes of rechecking the scrolls and making sure that they had everything ready, Zach stood up and moved to the center of the room where they had cleared a space.

“You ready?” Naha asked.

Zach nodded his head.

He had been ready to improve this skill for a long time. He changed his hand to his Time Blade and focused on his **|Rending Strikes|**. He activated the skill along with Soul Reaver’s **Rewind**. His will billowed out, at the same moment as his skill activated and time pushed him back. It made things... weird. It was as if he was using his skill twice in a row, though not really. Using his Time Blade often messed with his perceptions, but he didn’t even try to focus on that now. He only focused on his skill. It had been at 10/10 for a while, and he understood it perfectly. He pushed his mind and focused on two things. First on the skill and visualization of what he wanted to happen. Second, he focused on the part of himself that he wanted to seal.

He needed a core part, something that made him who he was. There were many things that could’ve fit that bill. And he had thought about many things. But in the end, his conversation with the spirit of Cyrano de Bergerac had pointed him in the right direction. There was one thing that he had always loved, a thing that was tied to more than one part of his life: his love for the sword. Just because he had suppressed it, because he tried to ignore it, it didn’t mean that it wasn’t there. That it didn’t push him forward.

To be a swordsman meant always seeking to improve oneself, it meant looking for mastery, for self-realization. His teacher on Earth had taught them that their skills should only ever be used for defense, for protecting others. And that was what Zach had always tried to do. He had hidden his

love for fighting with a sword behind layers and layers of other desires. No less true for hiding what he didn't want to admit, but they were not a core driving force.

It was hard to admit it, even now, perhaps especially now. He had lived in this world where he had seen people who loved to fight and saw them using their skills for violence and death. He didn't want to be like them, and so he pushed his love down.

Now he let himself feel it, remembering the joy he felt when he practiced back on Earth. Lessons from that short time being taught Kendo had stuck deep, more deeply than he had thought. Protecting others, fighting against violence, those were the core tenets of what he was taught.

As he felt his skill evolving, that was what he sealed inside of it. The love for the sword, but also all the lessons and tenets that came with it. Improvement, protection, peace, and self-knowledge, things that made great sword masters. It was more than just a part of him, it was a lesson imparted by the spirits inside of him. Something that he wanted to be.

Seconds passed as he felt a part of himself sealing inside of his skill he whispered words inside of his mind, directed to himself but also the spirits, as a promise to both.

I will never stop trying to be better.

It was all that anyone could do.

The skill trembled, the perfect for taking shape, and he pushed further. Shattering what was about to form. He pushed deeper, activating another of his Time Blade's powers. Time froze around him and he let his willpower go wild, pushing all of it into his skill without any restraint. He didn't like to skip evolutions, Ferrut had warned him about it. It wasn't wrong precisely, there were advantages and downsides to both ways. Willpower ruled everything, whether he went through each evolution or skipped it. A skipped evolution would be... faster, perhaps even more guided, while the one evolved regularly would be more... solid.

Zach pushed with all of his might, focusing on his Time Blade and the skill itself. He could feel the smaller parts of himself get drawn into the skill,

things relating to what he had sealed before. He didn't care, he had already made sure that he wouldn't seal anything that he didn't want.

The skill trembled and then... Zach felt something give. His skill evolved again, reaching tier 7.

The skill settled and Zach slumped, then sighed. He glanced at his notifications and then dismissed them. His perfect skill had become **|Perfect Rending Strikes: My Strikes, Rend Time|**. He had managed to do what he had been planning for all these years. For the last three years he had tried this skill with his Time Blade as much as possible, hoping that he would be able to flavor it with Time. That skill had been one of his strongest attacks, and now it was even more so. And he hoped that when he joined his two tier 7 skills, he would get what he had been hoping for. Ferrut's advice and the guide indicated that he was on the right path, but one could never truly know about skills. Will was a strange thing, sometimes it could force skills into directions that no one expected.

Feeling drained and knowing that he needed to rest, he pulled out the notifications and then dismissed most of them, focusing on his new skill perk.

Time Strikes (Skill Perk)	Your My Strikes, Rend Time influence your attacks. Any anticipation and precognition powers of equal or lower tier that could detect and anticipate your attack will not work against you. +10% to dexterity and +10% to intelligence.
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It was another passive perk. He didn't know why he kept getting them, Ferrut had mentioned that it depended on the state of the person and their will but hadn't given any clear answer. Zach assumed that there wasn't really a good answer to his questions. Still, it was a powerful perk that would undoubtedly help him in battles to come.

He glanced at Naha and smiled at her.

"I did it," he said, then stumbled as he took a step in her direction.

Naha caught him as he felt his sight slowly darken, his eyes closing.

“Rest,” Naha whispered, and Zach let himself fall asleep in her arms.