

Fantasy and Reality

Zach woke up suddenly, breathing quickly. He glanced to the side, seeing that it was still night. Next to him Naha stirred, and then sat up next to him.

“What is it?” She asked sleepily, and he glanced at her. She was looking at him in the dark, both of them had skills that allowed them to see in it. She wore her Quell form, as she often did when they were alone.

He took a deep breath and relaxed. “It was nothing, just a dream,” he said and then laid back down.

A moment after she followed, and he felt her weight press on top of him as she shuffled on top of him.

“You want to talk about it?” She asked.

Zach’s first instinct was to say no, but then he realized that there was no point in keeping anything from her.

“It was a dream about Earth, what happened there. I can’t remember everything, mostly the feelings... denial, sadness, rage, acceptance, then responsibility.”

“Ah.”

Zach had shared everything of his past with her, just as she had shared everything about her past with him. She could probably assume what he meant.

He opened his eyes and two dark green stars, her chin was propped up on his chest and her eyes looked at him with a startling intensity, her golden hair framing her face.

“You still feel like you owe them something,” it was not a question.

Zack grimaced. “How could I not? They gave us their lives, and asked only for us to make them a promise. For us not to forget.”

Naha shook her head. “They were cruel.”

Zach blinked as her expression darkened.

“What do you mean?”

“They had no right to push such things on you, it was cruel and selfish,” Naha said.

“They had everything taken from them, they were—”

“—No,” Naha insisted. “I know how you feel Zach. I had felt the same way once, I took the weight of my entire world on my back and it nearly broke me. If it wasn’t for you, I would still be a raving lunatic. You helped me, given me my sanity back.”

Zach could see the sincere emotion in her eyes. Removing her cultivation had helped a lot. She hadn’t had any outbursts, her desires came and went quicker but were less intense, enough that she could suppress them herself. She was getting better by the day.

“I just don’t want you to make the same mistake I made,” she told him

The last conversation he had in a small room flashed through his mind, and he closed his eyes. He wasn’t going to pretend that he hadn’t thought about it. He had, to just forget about everything, but... The pain and the rage were still inside of him.

“Zach,” Naha’s voice brought him out of his head, and he met her eyes again. “I know that it is hard, but... At some point we all must make a decision about what we want to do.”

He didn’t have anything to say to that, and eventually the silence stretched until both of them went back to sleep.

Several days later, Zach and Naha found themselves in the arena. They had been given access to the stands, or rather Zach had been given it as a reward for his performance in the tournament. It was the Free for All match of the High Division, the first qualifiers from that division held in the arena. Zach was actually excited to see it. Naha had told him that people competing in that division, or rather those who will qualify, would be the most promising fighters in the Infinite Realm. The future High Rankers, rulers or great warriors. He wanted to see how he compared to them.

The two of them reached the Warden’s plot, the only other people present in their area were two higher ranking wardens that waved at them as they approached. Zach returned the gesture and then they took their seats.

Zach was quite impressed by the arena itself, the massive mine feeling that he got was still present. The stands were wide, enough that tents and pavilions could be set up against the cliff sides of the step above them, while also leaving enough room in front of them that they could put seats that let them look directly into the arena. And then above them were the massive glass windows, screens that showed the zoomed in pictures of what was happening inside the arena. It was all quite impressive.

“I still can’t get over this,” Naha whispered.

“What do you mean?” Zach asked as a drake wearing armor started to announce the start of the match.

“Those screens, the fact that we can watch something so far away as if we are there... It is incredible,” Naha said.

Zach glanced to her, seeing her face tendrils twitch in excitement. He smiled at her, seeing her so impressed made him realize that while the Infinite Realm had some pretty amazing things, there were some things that Earth had that the Infinite Realm hadn’t yet caught up to. He didn’t doubt that eventually they would.

The match started with white light as the contestants were teleported all over the arena, thousands of lights all appearing at the same time. It took less than a second for the fighting to begin. Big flashy explosions filled the arena, people flew into the air so fast that cracks of thunder reached even them on the stands. Zach’s eyes were glued to the screen as a ten-way fight between people of different races was shown from above. Everything was happening so fast that he could barely keep up. The fight was brutal, and fighters were quickly dropping out. Teleporting out of the arena as they were injured enough that they couldn’t continue. As that fight concluded, the screen changed to show another, and then another. Different weapons, different powers, he saw some impressive feats demonstrated.

So many fights, some ending in a few instances while others lasted for far longer. Some were smaller in scope, between fighters that had less flashy powers compared to the others that could crack the ground and shatter the tall stone pillars in the arena in an instant.

Quickly though, it became apparent to Zach that some of the competitors were teaming up.

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Zach said after one team started hunting solitary targets.

“I thought that you understood by now. The Infinite Realm is not fair,” Naha told him.

“I know but... shouldn’t a tournament at least have some fairness to it?”

“Why? It would only give the winners a false idea about their power. Nothing in the Infinite Realm is free, nothing is fair. People are rarely faced with a fair fight, there is no point pretending that this is supposed to be it.”

Zach sighed; he did know all of that. But he still dreamed of a world where things were fair, where everyone could be free and safe. It was idealistic, he knew, and he had mostly changed his mind about that. The Infinite Realm had shown him what reality here was, and he had mostly accepted it. Still, one could dream.

The fights continued, and they watched for hours, entranced at the displays of power.

“This is who I need to match,” he said after the end of an extremely brutal battle. There were many in the match that Zach felt he could take, who he was stronger than, but some... there were real monsters down there, with incredible powers. The ones at the top were still out of his reach.

“In time, you will eclipse them—we will eclipse them,” she corrected herself. “Few of them truly understand real struggle, what it means to live through horror and pain, as well as loss.”

Zach squeezed her hand in acknowledgment. The two of them were in this together. They would become strong enough that they could do whatever they wanted.

The battles had already tapered off, the ones remaining being those who were smart enough to avoid the early fights and those who were so strong that they had won every encounter they had. The screen changed and they saw a new group. A person wearing some kind of violet and black armor covering every part of their body stood against a group of people that Zach recognized. They had been on screen before, a group that had went around the arena taking down solitary fighters. The one in the strange armor that wisped softly hadn’t been featured on the screens before, so Zach was interested to see what they could do.

The fight started suddenly. The lone fighter closed the distance and then a blast of black and violet energy exploded out of him. Zach leaned forward, his heart starting to beat quickly. Two more blasts followed the first, making him doubt himself. The fight ended as suddenly as it started, with a javelin flying through the air.

“Zach?” Naha whispered, and Zach realized that he had been squeezing her hand hard. He relaxed his grip immediately, and then turned his eyes back to the screen. The winner of the fight walked away, and the view changed to another fight.

A part of him felt that it was impossible. Ryun’s technique hadn’t looked exactly like that, and it hadn’t had three blasts, nor was it that color. Except, they didn’t have aspects on Earth. Everything else about it was the same. He shook his head, it was impossible. There was no way that Ryun would’ve joined a tournament, he cared for nothing and no one.

“Nothing,” he whispered. “I’m seeing things.”

Naha didn’t say anything, and they continued to watch the battles in silence. Zach kept his eyes on the screens, waiting for the armored fighter to be shown again. He saw him again two more times, fighting against two other fighters, both of which had been tired out from their fights before. Both he dispatched quickly and in a way that was completely unlike Ryun. Rods of black and violet grew out of his hands and the ground and pummeled his opponents to unconsciousness. And Zach relaxed, that power wasn’t anything like what Ryun had, which only convinced him that he had been wrong.

The match continued for almost another hour, but then a loud horn blared through the arena, just as the sun above started to dim. The ending of the tournament came, and white light flashed, the remaining 32 fighters were all teleported in the middle of the arena, standing in line with several other people with glowing orbs above their heads standing across from them.

The main arbiter, a drake in crimson crystalline armor moved and his helmet melted away into the rest of his armor. He opened his mouth and his voice echoed through the arena.

“Honored spectators, the qualifiers for the High Division are over and we have our thirty two competitors.”

The drake started naming the winners, saying their names and affiliation then waiting for the cheering of the arena to quiet. Zach's eyes were locked on the armored person half-way down the line. He barely remembered the other names, but then the drake reached him.

“—Ryun Nacht, Sect Head of the Twilight Melody Sect, Ranker of the Seventh Iteration.”

The cheer of the arena was drowned out by the throbbing rush of his blood through his body, the rhythmic pumping of his heart. For a moment he wasn't even sure that he had heard right, but then his mind restarted. It was him, here, fighting in the tournament, within reach. The rest of the drake's words penetrated after. He was a Sect Head, a leader of a faction— Twilight Melody Sect. The name itself almost made his vision go white.

“—Zach!” He realized that Naha had been calling for him. He met her eyes and saw her panic. “Zach, you can't—”

He stood up. She knew, of course she knew. The moment the drake announced his name and that he was a Ranker she knew. He had told her everything. He moved quickly, heading out of the stands and to a warden post beneath them to the teleporters. A part of him could hear Naha calling for him from somewhere behind, but he only had one thought in his mind. He reached the teleporter and stepped on it. His warden's badge was tied to his sash.

“Warden Zacharia,” the warden at the controls said, blinking in surprise. Fame had its perks it seemed. “Where to?”

“Southern station,” he said and the warden nodded, he adjusted the controls just as Naha walked in. The platform flashed before she could say anything, and then he was someplace else.

He didn't even greet the wardens present there, he just walked out of the room. The wardens kept the peace, they guarded the arena, and Zach knew exactly where the sect competitors exit was. He had guarded the arena before, during the Low Division matches. He walked out of the arena, then walked over to the exit. He stood outside of the arena, waiting. He didn't wait for long. The doors opened and the sect fighters, the winners started coming out. The crowd was big as their attendants waited for them congratulated and then led them to their carriages. And then he walked out.

He had changed. He was clean shaven, his hair was cut shorter, his eyes were two pools of endless darkness reflecting nothing. He had scars that bled violet and black over his face, across his eyes. He walked out and turned right, walking away from him. Zach followed, his eyes seeing only his back.

He stopped, freezing as Ryun—the monster that had destroyed Earth stopped in front of a group of people. Two women smiled at him, one of them embracing him. Zach’s ears were filled with the noise of his blood rushing through his body, he couldn’t hear anything. Two ravzors stood behind them, and a group of warriors, all bowing their heads to him. He heard him chuckle.

That... it wasn’t supposed to be like that. They were congratulating him, they were close to him. Ryun didn’t suffer anyone to be close to him, he slaughtered everyone that tried to talk with him. Without mercy, without emotion.

Zach tightened his hands, his Shade Reaver arm throbbed in his mind. He had a chance now, a single strike with all his power. And yet... only immortals were in the High Division, that meant... that meant that he couldn’t—He had had waited for this moment for so long, and now that it was here he froze.

He saw other wardens, approach him, noticing him standing there, saying things to him but he didn’t hear anything.

Then, he noticed one of the women, the redheaded one, glance at him. She blinked, and then her eyes went wide. She stepped forward, almost as if to protect Ryun. And that made him lose his mind. To protect him? Who killed countless innocents? Babes in their mothers’ arms? Who murdered Zach’s family?

Shade Reaver took on a blade form and his body tensed. The woman summoned a golden spear and he—

A hand grabbed his shoulder, massive and clawed bulging with muscle and roughly pulled him back. So suddenly that he nearly lashed out, but then he saw Naha. In Nyathulla’s body, one arm transformed into that of a monster, her eyes blazed as she moved in front of him.

“Zach, stop!” She yelled at him and he froze once more.

“Ah,” a familiar voice said from behind her, and Zach saw Ryun turn around. His empty eyes looked at him. “Zach, you lived. I’m... glad.”

There was... emotion in those eyes, flashes of them changing too fast for Zach to see them all. *Was that guilt? Or is he just mocking me.* It had been so long since he had seen any kind of emotion on that face, it shook him. The warriors behind him spread around him, the two women stood in front of him both holding weapons in their hands. He recognized the red-skinned woman's sword, it was Ryun's. The blade that he had seen him use to kill so many of his friends.

"Zach, the Peace. You can't," Naha whispered as she kept an iron grip on him. He could get away, he could blink attack. But he didn't, he looked at Ryun's eyes over her head.

"You hate me," Ryun said with a nod. "You have every right to."

Zach clenched his jaw. "You don't get to say that to me, not now, not after everything you did."

"Warden Zacharia, is there a problem?" The wardens around them. Those guarding the arena had gathered, they looked to him and to the warriors across from him, their hands on their weapons. He was known to them, part of the team competing for them.

"No," Naha said firmly, trying to calm everyone down. "Nothing is wrong, a misunderstanding."

Zach's face twisted. He was there, in front of him, he could finally fulfill his promise.

Naha leaned close and whispered in his ear. "He is a Sect Head and you are a Warden, if you do something, if you break the Peace, you will start an incident at best and a war between the sects and the other factions at worst."

A war, caused by him. Because of that monster.

Ryun was looking at him with a strange look in his eyes. A look that Zach didn't want to see on his face. He looked around seeing the people around him. He had people that followed him, people that... cared for him. Did they know what he was? The things that he did?

His eyes met those of the red-headed woman, and he realized that she was familiar to him. It was enough of a shock that he stared at her for a long minute.

"You," he said. "I know you. You are the criminal that attacked us."

Everyone turned to look at her.

“You interfered with a Warden investigation, and attacked two wardens with intent to kill,” Zach said, he was filled with impotent rage, he needed to do something. She was with Ryun, if he could take even something small from him, like he had taken from everyone else on Earth.

Zach glanced at the wardens around him. “That woman is a wanted criminal.”

The wardens looked amongst themselves, but before anyone could say anything, the red-skinned woman stepped forward. “She is a Sect Leader of the Twilight Melody Sect, and we do not recognize the Warden law in our territories. This territory is neutral, you cannot prosecute people for crimes committed elsewhere.”

Zach’s hand tightened. One more thing that he couldn’t do anything about.

“Zach,” Naha said urgently. “Come, there is nothing that you can do here.”

Wasn’t there? He wondered. He could attack, perhaps he could even kill him. Ryun was strong, stronger than him. But Zach had his tricks. And then then... then everything would tumble down. He would break the peace as a warden. The Warden Commander would hunt him down, a war, blood and death. Naha... she would be left alone.

She pushed him back, and he let her. His eyes turned back to Ryun, each staring into the other’s soul.

“Go back to your posts,” Naha ordered the other wardens. She didn’t technically have the right to do that, but they listened anyway. He could see how tense; how afraid they all were.

As Naha led him away, he kept his eyes on Ryun, thinking about all the things that he wanted to say. All the rage inside of him that he wanted to let out but couldn’t. And yet, in the end they hadn’t exchanged more than a handful of words. A meeting that he had been seeking for so long, and he did nothing of what he planned. What do you say to someone who killed your family and friends? To someone who killed an entire world?

The thing that made him boil the most, was his expression, his eyes. There was emotion there, a glimpse of a person that he once knew, long ago. And that broke his heart all over again.

He didn't remember how they got back to their room. His head was filled with doubts, with what ifs. If he had just attacked, before he was noticed. But he didn't, he hesitated.

He looked around their room, and grabbed the first thing he could find, a chair set against the wall. He picked it up and smashed it into the ground, it splintered, and he kept smashing it against the ground until it was completely destroyed. He stood there looking at the pieces of wood splattered all across the floor, breathing heavily.

"Zach," Naha's voice brought him back and he met her eyes as she shifted into Quell's form.

"You shouldn't have stopped me," Zach whispered harshly.

"You weren't thinking clearly," she told him.

He couldn't deny that, the rage had overcome him in the moment. "I had him right there, in front of me. Not knowing that I was watching, I could've..." He trailed off, not knowing what to say. Kill him?

Then he remembered something. "You used your shifting, you revealed it to everyone who was there."

"No, you have no right to say that," she said and stepped close. "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that I had finally found the monster that slaughtered my world, who killed my family. And you stopped me from killing him."

"And there you see how you didn't think clearly at all. You were surrounded by people, wardens and his warriors. If you attacked you wouldn't have survived."

"It would've been worth it if I killed him," Zach snapped.

"Ah, but you wouldn't have killed him. He is in the High Division, that means that he is immortal. At best you would've traded your life for a few years of his."

Zach blinked, the rage was churning inside of him still. "I could've found a way," he said, but he knew that it was a weak argument even as he said it.

"Is that what is the most important to you?" She asked.

"I..." It had been, for so long. For years that seemed like an entire lifetime in his head, his only goal had been to kill him in order to protect the few people that had been left. "I made a promise, to myself and to everyone who died because of him. I made a promise to stop him before he did here what he did back there."

"Is he more important to you than me?" Naha whispered.

Zach froze. "I..."

"What do you think would've happened if you had attacked him? You would've broken the Peace, you would've caused an incident between the sects and the Wardens. The sects war amongst themselves, true, but they hate interference by those outside of their structure. You could've caused a war across the entire core."

"I..."

"We heard no stories of atrocities committed, he has people around him, an entire sect. People in the Infinite Realm tolerate a lot, but what you told me about him... That would never have been allowed."

Zach didn't say anything.

"And what do you think would've happened to me? They would've investigated everything about you, about me. I fooled the formations once, but I would not be able to fool any intensive investigation. Are you fine with that? Getting your revenge and losing me, causing a war that could lead to the death of thousands?" Her voice got quiet at the end, just barely above a whisper.

Zach's face twisted. "He killed my family."

"And how many families would've died if you caused a war? Or even just an incident? The Infinite Realm is a brutal place, a small border incident can cause deaths of thousands."

"He is mad," Zach whispered.

"As mad as I was?" Naha whispered back.

“No, you didn’t have a choice in what happened to you. You were twisted by your power. Even then you restrained yourself. He had no such restraint, he slaughtered everyone in his way just because he wanted revenge, because he didn’t care enough for life of anyone other than himself.”

“The way you explained what happened on Earth painted a picture of a mindless killer. That man did not seem like what you described. I got better, with your help.”

Zach closed his eyes, she was right. The look in Ryun’s eyes wasn’t the same. And he couldn’t explain it. Something was wrong. Naha had gotten better. They hadn’t known about imbalance and madness on Earth. Yet, from what he had learned here, madness shouldn’t have happened there, not with their tiers of power. It couldn’t be that, could it?

“He... You don’t understand what kind of a monster he is,” Zach said weakly.

“Or what kind of a monster he used to be?” Naha suggested.

Zach felt weak in his knees, and he fell to the floor, kneeling in front of her. Naha stepped close and pulled his close against her chest.

Had he been wrong? Had the monster just been in their heads? Had Ryun simply wanted what Zach wanted now? Revenge, only taken to such horrible extreme that he murdered everyone. The person he knew before the Framework would not have done that, at least Zach didn’t think so. Ryun had always been callous, but that much? The Framework changed them all.

“Zach, we are all monsters to someone. He to you, me to the families of those I killed. A warden is a monster to those who care nothing for the laws, the criminals that run from them.”

“So what?” Zach whispered. “I should just forgive and forget?”

“No,” Naha said as she ran her hand over his head. “Some things can never be forgiven. But all people can grow, and change. In this world, life can be forever. How do you balance a person’s life when they have the potential to change? To do more good than they had ever done evil?”

“Naha, I...”

“It is hard for you, hard for us, who had come from the old worlds. Because we were raised with the knowledge that eventually our lives would end. We were told to do good while we were alive, so as to leave a great legacy

behind,” she whispered. “We remember how it was there, but here? In this world? Here there are no memories of great and good figures. Legends walk among the rest, they rule on their immortal thrones, their deeds are always accumulating. You know this, it is why you decided to help me. I know that you understand, and I know that it is hard, especially now when you have seen him in person. He is no longer some distant goal in the back of your mind, now he is here. But how can you look at me, love me, believe that he is beyond redemption?”

Zach buried his head in her dress, frustrated, angry at everything, hurt and filled with sadness. Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

“I love you,” he whispered lamely.

“I know,” she said back. “You loved him once too. Can you put a knife through my heart? Because if you want to take your revenge against him, it will be the same as pushing a knife through my heart yourself. I love you enough that if you ask it of me, I’ll help you kill him, even if it means my death. You gave me my life back, and I would gladly give it to you. But you must know what that choice will mean. What the consequences will be. A war, blood and death. Countless will die that have never known us or him, old grudges will come to light and stir the flames until all are consumed. My lie will not survive that, and I will be hunted down. We both will.”

He raised his hands around her, pulling her close squeezing. He knew, back on that rooftop when he first realized who Night Horror was. He had broken himself then, and he was yet to put the pieces back together. He loved her, and he had helped her. She was no longer looking to kill people, no longer needed to satiate her desires. She was no longer mad. And yet, did that erase what she had done before? It did not, what she had done cannot be forgiven, but he understood.

He didn’t truly want to do this, even earlier when he had seen him. He froze, he hesitated. There was too much of his friend in his eyes. It was so much easier when he had been emotionless, a husk that murdered everything in its way.

“I only ever wanted to kill a monster that was threatening my people,” Zach said. “To protect them.”

Naha just held him closer.

“I don’t want to lose you; I don’t want to cause death and suffering. I don’t want to turn into him,” Zach whispered.

“Whatever you decide, I will be by your side. No matter what,” Naha whispered back.

“Why is life so cruel?” Zach asked with his eyes closed. So much hate and anger. They were all broken things.

“We struggle, we hurt, so that the moments of happiness feel more precious,” Naha said. “It is one of the guiding principles of my kind, on our world at least. We live a life of strife, so that we can grab hold of a few precious moments of joy.”

“I can’t forgive him,” Zach said again. “I hate him.” A monster like the one that had caused the end of a world could never be forgiven.

“You can hate him and still not allow him to force your decisions,” Naha said. “What do you want to do?”

“I just want to be at peace, to protect those closest to me.”

“The Infinite Realm is large enough for you both. And if he ever does show himself for what you remember him to be, then I promise you people will not allow him to live.”

“He had people around him, people that cared for him. How does he get to be happy? After all that he had done?”

“The Infinite Realm is not fair. And besides, don’t you have me?”

Zach turned his head up, then stood slowly, keeping his hands around her. He pulled her close and leaned his head against hers.

“You are more important to me than he is,” he said, remembering a conversation in a small room back on Earth.

He felt her shiver in his embrace, and for the he realized that she had been... afraid. Afraid that he would choose his revenge over her. He pulled her closer, hating himself for making her feel that way.

They stood there, embracing each other for a long time. Then, she pulled back, just enough that she could look up in his eyes. He saw tears flowing down her cheeks too. “We need to decide what it is that we want to do, what it is that we want to be.”

He remembered their conversation from before, and he closed his eyes.

“All I’ve ever wanted was to protect people, to keep them safe from the monsters coming to kill us all, him including. I failed in that, because I was not strong enough.”

“And so did I. I was weak, and my people died. Those who looked at me with admiration, who loved me and what I represented. And because of that hate I turned myself into a monster. That is what hate does Zach, it twists us completely. It is what it had done to me, what it had done to him. Don’t let it do the same to you.”

How easy would it be to indulge in it. To decide that he had to make Ryun pay. And what if he decided against that? Would he be betraying everyone back on Earth? Did he owe them this? He wasn’t responsible for what Ryun became; he didn’t do anything to him. Ryun was the one that had taken everything from Zach, not the other way around. He was the same as everyone else on Earth, just a single soul suffering. He could go after him, and that would be the end of his life. Perhaps he could die in peace then, and yet... He deserved to be happy, he deserved more than hate and rage. He opened his eyes and looked into her eyes.

His choice was to abandon Earth, the lives that had ended there, for a chance to be happy in the future. It was selfish, but it was in the end the only choice he could make without breaking himself, without causing more death.

Earth was at this point an old wound, scarred and still painful, but long in the past. If he had seen Ryun a month, perhaps even half a year after he had arrived in the Infinite Realm, he wouldn’t have been able to stop, nothing could’ve prevented him from heading straight for him. But now... He had a new life in the Infinite Realm, a life that was more precious to him than one life, no matter how guilty it was.

“You are right,” Zach said, as his emotions and his thoughts slid into place. “I am not like him, I do not sacrifice everything to achieve my goals, no matter the cost in lives. I am better than that.”

He took a deep breath, and then released it, feeling some of his tension slip away.

“We need to be strong. Stronger than anybody else, strong enough that no one can ever hurt us or those around us again,” Zach told her slowly. It

had always been his goal, but the need to find and kill Ryun had always been there beneath.

Getting to the point where he could make his own rules, where he could protect, that had always been his goal.

Seeing him Ryun changed things. He knew that he was different, he didn't know how or why. And he didn't care to know, he had let his hate for him push him forward for long enough. Ryun didn't deserve to live inside his head. He had something more precious now, and he wasn't about to lose someone he loved again.

"Without making the same mistakes that we made before," Naha said. "Move forward but be better than we were yesterday."

"Yes," Zach said. "Thank you for stopping me. For allowing me time to calm down."

Zach nodded his head, then leaned down and kissed her softly. Tasting her own tears on his lips.

He could never forgive Ryun, and perhaps fate would still put them against each other. But even when all he could think about was how to kill him, he had always only wanted to protect others. He wasn't alone anymore; he couldn't think of his life as something that he could spend in order to kill Ryun. His actions could endanger not only Naha, but millions more in the Infinite Realm.

The rage and the hate didn't leave him. And perhaps, he would lose the battle against them. But he had Naha who was more precious to him than anything else. Perhaps Ryun would slip back to his old ways, perhaps he would get the chance to do this right. In the end, Ryun's life was not worth losing Naha.

A knock on the door behind them startled them, and they froze for a moment. The knock came a second time and she cursed, shifting back into Nyathulla's form.

Zach composed himself, and then walked to the door. He opened it slowly, ready for anything.

A minotaur with glasses met his eyes. Bera, the Warden Commander's assistant stood there alone.

"Warden Commander Yirrel wishes to speak with you, both of you."

Zach looked at her, a strange feeling building up inside of him.

She narrowed her eyes. "Now."

Zach glanced behind at Naha, and then sighed. They really had no choice.