

## **Moonlit Conversation**

The sky was still dark, with only the moon illuminating the ships traveling at speeds that were faster than anything that a modern ship on Earth could ever hope to accomplish. The silence was interrupted by the sounds of the waves as the ships cut through them, and the wind that whispered of things it had seen. The atmosphere itself had weight to it, a deep and dark thing that swallowed a part of the deck.

The part where two figures stood. They had known each other once. Loved each other, had been best of friends. But that was at a time when the world was simpler. When one's path was far easier to choose. When a child had the privilege of being free to choose what it wanted to grow up to be—within limits of course. An entire society designed so that people could only play in the sandbox that was created by others. A set of rules, the manners of expression, laws, and opportunities, all decided by the few who had the will and skill to deceive an entire world into thinking that the rest had a voice. That their ideas could change the world.

It was of course not that simple. Their world might've been constricted, people pushed to grow into neat molds that those above decided were appropriate and normal, but there was still freedom to express! Freedom to dream, worlds to escape to! They lived like that, simply because they never knew that there could be a way that was different.

The two figures came from that kind of a world. Where they grew up in a sandbox, seeing only the constructs made out of sand contained inside of it, never understanding that more could exist outside of the box. One of them was content to play inside the confines that were given to them, not that making such a choice was wrong. The other had never been able to decide what he wanted to do, the knowledge given to him was limited, and he yearned for something that he couldn't even imagine. The sandbox was their reality, all of their universe. They had no choice but to play by those rules.

And then, everything changed. The sandbox was shattered and things other than sand were brought into their world. Many died simply because they couldn't adapt to having their entire universe shattered, others that

were strong and able to adapt died simply because of chance, one day of bad luck. People that had the tools and knowledge to survive died, some died because of the things that they believed in, others because they were betrayed by those they trusted. Regardless, death, had become commonplace.

And the rules changed, and nothing was ever the same.

They were both looking out over the edge of the deck in silence. Neither one speaking. Zach didn't even know what he could say, he had grown... numb almost. Over the years the pain, all the things that had kept him going had turned shallow. The Infinite Realm demanded all that a person had, there was no room for Zach to cling to the past, to feel for what was lost.

He glanced at Ryun, seeing him fully in a long time. The last time they had met, the circumstances hadn't allowed for him to really study him. He was... so much different than the man, boy really, that had been his friend. And he was different than all the other versions of himself that he had been after. The easiest thing to notice, was of course, his body. The cracks in his skin that leaked violet mist, the darkness beneath it. Everything about him was different, he hadn't noticed that before. The way that he walked, that he carried himself. It was as if he was floating on air as he moved. As if steps were simply a formality, as if gravity or the wind don't even touch him. It was... eerie, and inhuman. But then again, none of them were really human in the way that they were when they had been born.

His hair was chin length, a wild and wavy mess of black. His face was free of any hair and smooth. The tips of his fingers were tipped with violet and black, looking almost like small crystal claws. And his eyes... they were two pools of deep blackness that gave Zach a sensation of almost looking into nothingness. It made him seem untouched by anything around him.

His clothes were simple, but obviously well made. It was almost impossible to match the image of the man before him to any of the previous versions of the man. It was a completely different person, in appearance and bearing.

Zach remembered what Ryun had told him the last time, when they had first met after arriving here. His words were... confusing, cruel in a way that Zach doubted Ryun understood. How could he understand? The first thing that he had told him was that he was glad that Zach survived. How could you do the things you did, murder so many and then say something like that? Even if he was not in his right mind, even if... no, Ryun clearly knew what he had done, he had to know the way that Zach felt. He had said that Zach had every right to hate him, and he was right. But hate... sometimes it grew too heavy. Zach had exhausted himself with it, there was nothing inside of him strong enough to hate. Now... now the only thing he felt was weariness.

“What did you want to talk about?” Zach asked, finally deciding to break the silence. “What even is there to say?”

Ryun turned his eyes to meet Zach’s, looking up at him and tilting his head. “We are going to be on the same team. Traveling for a long while and fighting side by side. We should talk about thing that might prove to be an issue.”

“Is that what we are calling our past now? An issue?” Zach asked.

“Perhaps not,” Ryun nodded, then pushed himself from the railing and turned his body to fully face Zach. “I know the gravity of the past; I simply wish for us to understand one another. We cannot afford old matters to interfere with this mission. You know what we face, and what losing would mean for this world.”

Zach turned away, looking over the water. For a long few seconds, he watched the light of the moon break against the waves in ways that it had never done on Earth. Essence, everything in this world was made out of it. In most cases, things emulated Earth, but then there were moments like this, when he saw the tiny differences that indicated to something grander. The Infinite Realm was a beautiful world, but it was filled with monsters.

Zach glanced at Ryun and spoke. “Do you even feel regret? Do you even understand what you’ve done? How many lives you have cut short, and for what? Vengeance? You’ve killed the guilty, and got what you wanted, they you killed the innocent a thousand times over. How can you walk like you do, live like you do, knowing how much evil you’ve done? There was a time when I could never even imagine you doing something like that.”

Ryun's expression turned pensive for a few moments, and then he answered. "What do you want to hear Zacharia? That I am sorry? That I regret it? Maybe you hope that I was not myself, that I was mind controlled. Or perhaps you just want to understand why? Nothing I say will change things."

Ryun shook his head. "I am sorry for some things, not everything. I regret a few deaths, not all. I was influenced, but I was not controlled. All that I did was inside of me already, I just stopped caring to hide it from everyone else. I was born in a world where I didn't fit, a world where I had to follow in the footsteps that others decided that I should follow. The Framework freed me. Melody was the only thing from the old world that I still cling to, the only thing that I cared about enough to still pretend. I loved her, and she loved me. I knew that she understood, but we... We made a mistake. We allowed ourselves to be tricked by the memory of Earth. We still skirted the rules that Earth before the Framework taught us. And we paid a price for that. When she died there was no longer any need for me to follow anything but my own will. I did what I wanted to do, when I wanted to do it. I might have been half a person, but at least I was true to who I am. You see Zach, there is nothing that can change what happened on Earth."

"Then you are just an evil monster," Zach told him. He could hardly imagine a way of thinking like that. "A monster that feels nothing for anyone else."

"I am a monster," Ryun said. "I've accepted that long ago. I do not suffer anyone to stand in my way. That is what makes me monstrous. But... what does that even mean? Being a monster is subjective."

Ryun waved his hand. "Evil and good are such... idiotic concepts. What is evil and what is good? Who decides that? Morality is not a law; it is a construct. A lion isn't evil for killing an antelope calf. It could've gone for the old and infirm, yet it snuffed out a life that was yet to begin. Is that evil? Is it good? It is what it is."

"Philosophy, is that what you wanted to talk with me about?" Zach glared.

"Perhaps that is the only way that we can understand each other. I don't live life based on the rules that Earth had, I've never even wanted to. Earth

before the Framework stifled me, it constricted me into a shape of a *'normal'* member of society. But that is something that I never was.”

“A lion is part of nature, a cycle of life and death,” Zach said. “The things that you did had nothing to do with nature.”

“Perhaps not the nature of the old world, but the moment the Framework arrived, the nature of the universe changed,” Ryun added. “By the virtue of my power, I was able to make the rules by which I lived.”

Ryun chuckled then. “It is ironic in a way. Earth worked the same way. If you had power and influence, you were the one that decided how the world was. I did the same.”

“So, what, we were all fools for trying to help people. For trying to save as many as we could?” Zach asked.

“No,” Ryun shook his head. “It was... it was admirable. You just failed in controlling those beneath you. You lacked power.”

“Yes, you killed an entire world for the crime committed by a handful,” Zach waved his hand. “You could’ve stopped when you punished them. You could’ve helped the others, protected innocent people. Instead, you bathed in their blood. You called them fuel for the strong.”

“I,” Ryun paused, then closed his eyes. “Yes. I did believe that.”

“And now you lead a sect,” Zach said. “How many of them will you harvest to fuel? Or do you no longer think the same?”

“It is different,” Ryun nodded, then opened his eyes. “The people on Earth... yes, some shouldn’t have died. But in the end, it was their own failing that led to what happened. I killed them because they were in my way, because they continued to pursue me. I understand why they did that; I would’ve done the same. But in the end, they—you, did not embrace the Framework. You could’ve gotten so much more powerful, instead of trying to keep what you knew from before you should’ve tried to learn more about what came after. Simply, none of them were powerful enough.”

“What about my family? About children, Linda?” Zach asked. “You act as if you’ve never cared about anyone else but yourself. But now you are supposed to be different. You have a sect. And what about those who are in it? I doubt that all of them are strong. Do you not care about them at all?”

“I... No,” Ryun said. “Earth was the test; this is the reward. Those on Earth failed the test. People here do not live by the same rules. My sect is... it is mine. The people are under my protection because they serve me, because I have made them a promise.”

Zach turned away. “It is all so simple for you, isn’t it? You believe that your way of thinking is right, no matter what.”

“Of course,” Ryun laughed. “As long as I have power. As long as I can defeat anyone who thinks differently, who can say that I am wrong?”

“Yes,” Zach whispered. He saw now what Earth was for Ryun. It was just a step in his path, a moment in his life. It didn’t matter to him. “I’ve seen what the Infinite Realm and the Framework do to people.”

“So, you understand?” Ryun asked.

Zach didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he tried to think. It was cruel in a way, that he could understand. He knew how Ryun viewed the world. It was... the same as when they were young. He remembered them as children, running around the neighborhood. He remembered Ryun questioning the rules that they were all forced to follow. The moment the Framework arrived; Ryun was never going to be anything other than what he was now. Perhaps, if some set of circumstances occurred, he wouldn’t have caused the death of everyone, but this, this was always going to be him. A person who believes in power and might. In living his life in the way that he wants to, unaccountable to anyone else but himself.

Zach shook his head and answered Ryun’s question.

Ryun waited for Zach to answer. It was hard to talk with him this way. It was hard to find the words to explain. How could he? Zach was someone who knew him before. Who had lived through the same ten years on Earth. He was witness to all the things that Ryun had done. Many of them were horrible by the standards of morality that Earth used to keep, but Ryun had never truly fit in it. So how could he tell him that he didn’t remember killing

Linda? That the faces had blurred together so much that he couldn't tell one from another? That the words that they spoke were just noise in his mind.

Ryun was... Earth was something that he had left behind. Abandoned the moment he no longer had a use for it.

Zach was the opposite. Where Ryun had never seen Earth as his home, it was everything to Zach. He could see it now, in his words, in his eyes. Earth had shaped Zach. The notions of good and right. He might've changed and adapted to what the Infinite Realm required, but deep down, he believed in some of the things that Earth stood for.

Ryun could respect that, just as he respected Zach's hatred toward him.

Finally, Zach decided to answer. "I understand that you live a life by a different code. I can never forgive, though. You've done too much for that."

"That is enough," Ryun told him. He knew that time healed almost anything. Ryun had made peace with his past. Now, he could see that Zach wanted to do the same. "Earth was a moment in time. A place where all of us made mistakes, a place where we were put through a grinder where only the strongest could survive. I played a part, yes, I added myself to the gears that ground everything else. But it was still the will of the Framework that led to the end. Ten years were all that we had been given to prepare for the Infinite Realm."

"We could've had more; we could've had peace and..." Zach trailed off and then shook his head. "Nothing about that even matters anymore. They are dead and nothing that I can do will change that."

"What was, was, we still have the future to think about," Ryun said.

"Yes, we do," Zach sighed.

"So, will we have any issues?"

"No," Zach answered. "But I can't do this anymore."

"Do what?" Ryun asked.

"Live my life by chance," he whispered. "Dance between who I was and who I am becoming."

Ryun didn't quite understand, but it wasn't really like he could ask for Zach to elaborate.

"Zach," Ryun spoke. "We view the world through a different lens, on Earth that had caused us to fight, it has caused people to hunt me and me to

kill them. But the Infinite Realm is a new beginning for us both, and it is large enough for all viewpoints to exist at the same time. The world has no end.”

“The Infinite Realm honors only power,” Zach said, his words quiet. “Yes, I know this. Fine then, I am on this mission because I want to help people. Because I want to protect, that is all that I ever wanted. And if I have to stand by your side to do it, I will. Those who are innocent matter more to me than you and your crimes.”

Ryun inclined his head. “Very well then, as long as we are in agreement.”

“We will fight together,” Zach told him. “But do not expect us ever to be friends again. And should you ever turn into the same kind of monster that you were on Earth. I am going to put you down.”

“Understood,” Ryun answered.

There was too much in the past for them to ever be anything more than this. Ryun didn’t need to push for more. This was enough for now. Zach turned around and walked away. Ryun followed him with his eyes and his sense. Their trip would take a while, there would be more chances for them to speak.

Zach walked away from Ryun. He was... he was surprised that he didn’t feel any anger. There was no uncontrollable hate inside his chest. No urge to kill. There was only... apathy. Ryun was... who he was. Just as Zach was who he was. Perhaps in time things would change, but for now... this is enough.

The Dome and its monsters were more important than Zach and Ryun.

He walked back toward his quarters. Somewhere along the way, Naha came out of the shadows and walked next to him.

“Are you alright?” She asked him.

“I am,” Zach said, surprised himself. “I understand him. Which is what makes all of this so hard ”?

“How so?” Naha asked.

“Because he is like every other powerful person that I’ve met in this world. He makes his own rules and doesn’t care for anything else. And it is



hard because I am not like that, but I must stand at his and others side and pretend that I am.”

“In time, we will be powerful enough that you won’t need to pretend,” Naha said.

“I await that moment eagerly,” Zach said. “I know what I want to do now.”

“What is it?” She asked.

“To change the world,” Zach said.

“Really?”

“Yes, really,” he answered. “I know that we can’t change the people in charge, or those that grow up around everything that this world is throwing at them. But perhaps, one day, we will be powerful enough to shape how people view the world.”

“One day,” Naha agreed.

The two of them reached their room and Zach immediately made his way to the corner of the room. He sat down and pulled out an item out of his storage.

“You are going to use it now?” She asked.

“Yes,” Zach nodded. “For him, Earth was a transition. For me... even with all that happened, I loved the security that it provided. It wasn’t perfect, but there were things that Eartha had done better. The Infinite Realm changed me, but I still want to hold true to my ideal of protecting others. In time, we will be strong enough to **protect the innocents**. Even if we **fail, we will never stop trying to do good.**”

Zach looked at the vial filled with liquid.

<b>Elixir of Improved Power</b>	Drinking this elixir will grant the user the ability to upgrade one Class Perk. Based on the Class rarity and level, the perk will be upgraded by 1 to 3 tiers of power.
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It was one of the greatest things that he had gotten in the hoard. Though, both Naha and he had taken a lot of powerful items, and a few more elixirs. This one however was what he had been waiting to use for a long time. One of his plans had been to wait, use it on one of his future perks. Something that might be stronger. But now he felt convinced. Memory of Earth was one of his most important things. He never wanted to lose that. For Ryun Earth was nothing but a step. For Zach it was what had formed him into who he was.

He pulled a perk to the forefront of his mind and drank the Elixir. It burned through his body, then moved away from his stomach area. He could feel it doing something, but then the sensation started to radiate everywhere. Making it hard to think. Then, finally it was done, and he pulled his notification up.

**Congratulations!**

**You've upgraded a perk!**

Last Lord of Terra >> Last Sovereign of Terra

Quickly, Zach navigated to his screens and pulled the window containing his new perk.

Last Sovereign of Terra	Once per week, you may call upon the Spirits of Terra, which grants you the combined knowledge, talent, and expertise of all the sword masters that had ever lived on your Earth. The Spirits of Terra imbues you with heightened senses, doubling your total stats (150%) for the duration and lowers the stamina requirements and cooldowns of your abilities by
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	<p>30%(45%). All sword-based skills level five times faster. You may pull out up to (3) spirits of Terra to fight at your side for a short duration. The Spirits of Terra will have half of your current total stats, and each will be able to use up to three of your perks (Currently designated: 0). While they are using your perks, you are unable to. Upon Spirits of Terra's ending, you will be unable to use abilities for half an hour. Duration and cooldown depend on your highest stat.</p>
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A good upgrade. He couldn't tell how high the upgrade went. But he did know that his spirits being powerful was going to be incredible. Losing the perks might be an issue, so he would need to think about this and make sure to be careful with his selection of perks. He was very glad that they had fought that dragon, that they had gotten the hoard. Both he and Naha had gotten out with a lot of powerful items and a bunch of lower quality ones. Enough that, they had both gotten equipped like true Adventurers of their rank.

He turned to look at Naha, who was waiting patiently for him to finish and made his screen visible to show her.

"That is... good?" Naha asked.

"Very," Zach said. The masters inside his head had been learning alongside him. Getting more and more from every battle. With this, they would be deadly, and able to act as more than just bait. They also learned about his power use. Being able to give them that power would be incredible. He knew that he needed to go and train as soon as possible.

"Are you sure that you are alright fighting by his side," Naha interrupted.

Zach shrugged. "It isn't like I have much of a choice."

“There is always a choice Zach,” she said.

“That is true,” Zach added. “But, at this point in time, he is a lesser evil.”

Zach would fight next to him, because the alternative was far worse. Zach knew Ryun’s strength, and he knew that they were going to need it. He accepted that and made peace with the past. Now, was the time to look for the future.