

PAST – Ryun
A Million on My Soul

The ground around him was covered in blood. So much of it that the ground couldn't even soak it all up. He was treading through red mud, blood sloshing around his ankles. His mind was fuzzy, and he had trouble thinking straight. He couldn't remember how he got here. He looked around, seeing the pieces of bodies, heads rolling down the river of blood. Nothing around him lived.

The sun's rays streaked through the opening between two sides of a canyon. He was on the bottom, surrounded by the dead. Slowly, his mind fed him snippets of memory.

They chased me, they wanted to take me down, to see me crawl. They screamed at me, words that I couldn't comprehend, but I understood them. Their words were filled with hate, with pain. Yes, I understood that. I wanted them to feel that, to know the pain and the hate that I knew and felt. I turned around and the thing inside me that was missing its other half, the thing that knew only pain and hate came out, and it slaughtered them all.

He blinked, remembering slowly. He was... he was Ryun. And these were... no, these were not the people that had chased him. He remembered, that had been somewhere else. He looked around, and then moved. He walked through the blood, and saw a body part at his feet, so he stopped and reached down. He picked up a head, smaller than the rest, and raised it in front of his eyes. It was so hard for him to think, but he realized what it was. A child's head. These people hadn't pursued him, no. These people had... they had been running, hiding down here. From him.

But there was nowhere that they could hide that he couldn't find them. He dropped the head, a part of him wondering if he should feel bad. But he knew that he didn't. It had been a mercy. He spared them the pain and the hate that he felt. These people would not have survived this world. There was no kindness here, only agony and monsters. If they'd lived, they would've lost, the same way that he had lost. Love turned to anguish, nothing but ash on the ground remaining.

He felt something inside of him stirring, threatening to take over. And then Ryun remembered. He had a plan, something that he wanted to do, to take back control. The beast inside was threatening to take over everything again, its pain was so great that it wanted to swallow his. And that was not something that Ryun could allow. Melody was his, her memory was his, she was all of his pain. That agony belonged to him. He needed it, surrendering to the madness of the beast might be easier, but he couldn't let her go.

He tried to think, to remember what he planned in the few moments when he was lucid. He needed to do something. But it was so hard to remember what. His thoughts were shrouded in a fog, he could barely remember what... *What was I thinking about again?*

Everything went black as a roar of anger rose up through his throat and escaped through his lips.

Ryun came to himself again, standing on a rock in the middle of a lake. He was naked, arrows piercing his skin. The pain of it made him grimace, and he started removing them. He... he didn't remember how he got here, but Melody would be worried if he didn't get home soon. A wail sounded inside his head at the thought of Melody, something that spoke of pain beyond measure.

He turned to the sky, almost tempted to howl. The moon rose above him, the stars filled the sky, creating a painting of light and colors. The sight seemed to calm him, and the beast in turn. It took all of his attention. The beauty of it, the glory of what existed beyond the Earth's sky. It was enough to ease his pain, to make him understand that there was more than this wretched world and the agony that it brought.

But, as all things, it couldn't last.

Ryun frowned as the pain hit him, it felt like his own but... He shook his head, trying to remember. Then he saw in his mind's eye; *Melody burned in front of my eyes. Her body turned to ash.* The grief was too much for him to handle. The thing inside rose again, and swallowed him whole.

Lucidity came again, and this time Ryun remembered more. He remembered Melody's death, and he remembered fighting others. Punishing and saving them. They were not strong enough to survive in this world, he knew that. If someone like Melody hadn't been able to survive, then what hope do the children and the weak have? Better that for him to grant them a quick death than for them to suffer.

He was pursued, that much he remembered. He had to teach them that it was futile, that they couldn't stop him. But first he needed to.... To... he needed to do something. Something inside of him was growling, but Ryun focused himself on remembering. He fought against the thing inside of him, and then it came to him.

He needed to fix himself, to get under control. He... he wanted to be the one to punish, to help them find the end. Not something inside of him that he couldn't control. He needed to find himself, the real Ryun, one who wasn't tainted by the beast and the pain.

And he had a plan, he needed to be lucid to do it. He just... And then he knew. Quickly, before he lost his wits, he focused and pulled up his menus, quickly he switched over to the shop and found a button that he had been trying to press for who knew how long.

One moment he was trying to press the button with his mind, and in the next he was elsewhere.

Ryun blinked, in one instant his mind cleared fully, he was whole and he remembered everything. All the things that he had done, all the things that the madness inside him had done. The people that he had slaughtered, the children, the weak and the strong. He closed his eyes. He was... he wasn't sorry. He had gotten his revenge for Melody, and then... Then he was faced with their arrogance, with their sheer fucking hubris. To think that they could survive in this world while being so fucking weak. It made his blood boil, it was such a disgrace. The world had changed, the old rules no longer applied,

and yet they still clung to it. They still thought that they knew better. And the others... they believed them, they went to them and sought safety, hiding behind their walls, doing nothing to gain strength.

The fact that Melody died at the hand of pathetic little worms who even now exploited other humans, the fact that others followed them, it made him hate them all. They didn't deserve to live, not if they were going to cower behind walls, if they were going to ignore the timeline that they had been given. It was a mercy, what he had done, what he was going to do. If humanity was going to survive, they couldn't continue to protect the weak, this world was not meant for them.

"Ah, Ryun, we meet again," the voice said.

Ryun opened his eyes and stared at the deep darkness inside the Dealmaker's cowl. Just like before, they were inside a formless darkness, a table between them. There it sat across from him, a being which appeared to be genderless, a being that he had heard others call a monster that had done this to them. And yet, Ryun didn't hate the Dealmaker, he didn't blame him for what happened to Melody. This world, with all of its horrors, it had saved him. It had rescued him from mediocrity, saved him from a pointless life. The others lamented the death of the old world, they clung to its memory and cursed this new world as a hell inflicted to them. But they were all wrong, the old world was hell, this was what reality was always supposed to be. A place where those who reached out with their hands and embraced it, who struggled and pushed for more, thrived. This was no place for the weak. In the old world, Ryun was aimless. His family the only thing that somehow kept anchored to reality.

When the Framework arrived, he was happy. His life had been nothing, a walk down the streets without a direction. He went through the paces his parents asked of him, because he didn't care for anything enough to make a decision of his own. He had been missing something, a calling, a goal that he could've thrown himself in. He had never found any sign of his family, the parents that loved him, he had never really searched. He loved them, he supposed, but they had been a part of the old world. Something that he had left behind to embrace the new one. The love that he had felt for them was so small compared to what he discovered later. There was no comparison

between them and his soul mate. And how could there be? They had never understood him, no one had. Not even Zach had, even though he'd come the closest. Then Melody came along, and she was everything that he had never known he needed. A partner, a lover, a friend—he had never really understood what people meant when they said that someone was their other half. Yet, that was what she had been to him. And they had taken her from him, he hated them all.

“Do you know what is happening to me?” Ryun asked. He felt more like himself than he had in a long time. But the grief and the anger still battled inside of him. Only now there was no sign of the thing inside him that sometimes took over.

“Ah, straight to business,” the Dealmaker tapped the table with one hand. A moment later Ryun heard chains rattling and then a growl.

He turned around and saw a wolf chained to the floor next to him. It was massive, its body black as night—no, it was almost made out the purest darkness that there is. It resembled the wolf that Ryun and Melody had encountered, the one that had given him his perk. Its eyes were all red, and filled with madness. But Ryun could feel great sorrow from it, as well as the pain that was the mirror of his own.

“It is taking me over, isn't it?” Ryun asked.

“No,” the Dealmaker answered, making Ryun turn around to look at him. “This is nothing but an echo. A remnant of the being that had gifted you its power and purpose. But that power... it is more than you can comprehend, even an echo is still too great for you to understand. This remnant would've disappeared in time, but your other half died, its other half died. It took your sorrow and its own, and that fuels it. It makes it seem like it is real. You can barely handle the power that you have access to, but this... you and this echo are caught in a loop, your sorrow and pain feeds one another in turn, and grows greater with every passing. You cannot handle its power, not without the other half to balance it.”

Ryun looked at the wolf, and truly saw just how ragged it was. It was a copy of the wolf that he had encountered. Even the decaying state of the real thing was so much greater than what was now chained before him.

“What can I do? I want my mind back,” Ryun turned back and gazed into the darkness of the cowl.

“You can give the other half to someone else, reestablish the bond. It will fix things.”

The mere thought of it made him recoil. He couldn’t imagine anyone else inside of his head. No one could ever take her place. “No, I can’t do that. Can’t you help me some other way?”

The Dealmaker didn’t immediately answer, then his cowl turned toward the wolf. “I can seal it inside of your head, for a time. But the cost will be great.”

“I’ll pay it,” Ryun said.

“No, the price that I will require is something else. What I meant is that to seal it in the first place you will lose a part of yourself.”

“What do you mean?” Ryun asked.

“I will need to take all that feeds it, your anger and hate, your pain and sorrow. All the memories you had of your other half, all the feelings you associated with her, and more still. Every connection that your mind has made that leads to memories of her will be sealed as well. You will be... empty.”

“No,” Ryun whispered, he couldn’t imagine not remembering her. To forget her would be to lose who he was. “I can’t do that. I can’t just cut her away. I won’t.”

“It would not be forever. Only until you are strong enough to handle the power,” the Dealmaker said.

Ryun closed his eyes, imagining Melody standing in front of him. He imagined her smiling at him, holding him close. But the knowledge that he would never see her again, never touch her again, tainted everything. It hurt so fucking much.

“How long had I been like this?”

“Almost a year,” the Dealmaker told him.

Ryun almost didn’t believe him. It had felt more like days had passed, a month at most since Melody died.

“How many did I kill?”

The Dealmaker told him.

“So many of them, all on my soul,” Ryun whispered to himself. He didn’t understand them, how they could’ve been so weak as to die to one man. The Framework offered them everything, and they didn’t want to take it. They deserved to die for that alone.

“If I do this, when will I be strong enough? How long until I am myself again?”

“A long time, decades, if you continue to grow in power as you have until now.”

Ryun took a deep breath. “Would I even be able to function like that?”

“You will be an echo of your true self, not a monster acting wildly, but on instincts that you yourself had honed over your life. Your feelings will be diminished, but they will be a sliver of what I will take.”

Ryun considered it. He couldn’t continue as he was, half mad and blacking out. He remembered the people he killed now, but they all blurred inside his mind. Faces melding together, indistinguishable from one another. He cared nothing for them. But he didn’t know what he would do if he wasn’t himself. Would he continue as a monster? Would he seek to punish them more? It didn’t matter in the end. They weren’t his kind, his people were dead. “I... I have the orb, if... If it is still there can you—”

“—No,” the Dealmaker said, but gently. It’s voice dipping low and holding far more compassion than Ryun had ever heard from someone before. For a moment Ryun got the impression that the Dealmaker was about to say something, but the being just shook his head. “She is dead to you. The power of the Aspect of True Death is something else. It cannot die in the same way that beings like you can. It is... it was not meant for this Iteration of the Framework. But True Death exists here as well, only it has no physical form, the Twin Aspect of it has... tapped into that power, and when they gave themselves to you they transformed. They belong here now, and as long as reality exists, so will they. Until everything has died a True Death.”

Ryun nodded, even though he didn’t understand half of what the Dealmaker had said. The thing that mattered to him was that she was gone, that he couldn’t save her.

“How much will I have to pay you for this?” Ryun asked.

“There is no set price, but I am bound by my nature. If you want me to do this, then... you will owe me a favor, one to be named at a moment of my choosing.”

Ryun blinked at the Dealmaker. “That’s it? That’s all?”

“Do not dismiss the gravity of what I can ask of you. I am tasked with protecting the integrity of reality itself. And as you have seen, with the Twin Aspect of True Death, things that don’t belong have made their way here. I might ask you to go and deal with something that is similar.”

“Any reason why you can’t do this yourself?” Ryun asked.

The Dealmaker shrugged. “As I said, I am bound by my nature,” he repeated. “It is not my place to act against such forces, they do not belong, but this reality is yours, not mine.”

Ryun turned his eyes to the wolf, trying to make his decision. “I can’t let you do this to me,” Ryun told the wolf. “I got to be a man, not a beast. To give up would be so easy, but I owe it to Melody to survive. To become greater than anyone else, to achieve our dreams.”

He closed his eyes and imagined Melody, trying to sear her into his mind, so that even if he forgot her, a part of her would always remain there.

Finally, he turned to the Dealmaker with tears in his eyes. “Do it, I agree to your price.”

The Dealmaker nodded. “Goodbye Ryun.”

Ryun woke up in the middle of the forest, and for a long time he remained where he was. Standing in the middle, his mind was clear and he was... feeling odd. He had just killed another group of people that had been chasing him, they had... accused him of a crime, of breaking the law. He had... walked through their lands without permission. As if such things mattered in this world. He shook his head, they hadn’t been a challenge, and killing them brought him no joy. Still, they had deserved it.

They had... Ryun stopped, frowning. He was missing something, some reason for what he had been doing. These people hadn’t been the same ones as those that had killed his people, that had taken him prisoner. But in the

end they were similar enough. People that just wanted to rule others, who wanted to go back to the old ways. They were insignificant, unworthy of living. Only those who were like—

—Ryun blinked as his thoughts came to a halt. It was as if they had hit a wall in his head. He tried to push, but somehow he knew that he would sooner manage to move the moon than to break this wall.

He found his thoughts sliding away from it, and he finally decided to move, the wall quickly forgotten. There were monsters that needed killing, more power to be gained.

And if anyone got in his way, well, if they weren't strong enough, if they weren't worthy of this world, he would walk all over them. If they wanted to live, they had to be strong enough to survive him.