

Essences and Void

The night sky was clear, and the moonlight reflected off the calm ocean around them. The fleet was moving silently across the water, vigilant and on the lookout for any monster attacks. They were about halfway into their trip and had been attacked seven times by monsters that called the ocean their home. Only one of those attacks had been truly dangerous, a young kraken had attacked the fleet and destroyed two ships before they managed to injure it enough that it turned away and disappeared into the depths.

It had attacked in the night, careful not to put itself in the way of the flagship's weapons way. It was smart, far more so than Ryun had expected for a monster that had the appearance of an eldritch horror. It had obviously done this before, attacked ships on the ocean. And it was smart enough to know when it had encountered more than it could handle.

Ryun knew that traveling on the water, or at least seas and oceans, was dangerous in the Infinite Realm. He had overheard gossip about people who were sailors, most called them insane. And Ryun did agree in a way. The monsters that he had seen were the size of the ships that carried them, sometimes larger even. You had to be a certain kind of... a person to love sailing in an environment where a monster could simply open its jaws and swallow you whole, ship and crew whole.

The ocean was a vast and beautiful place, it was also terrifying. Something that its calmness at the moment didn't truly reflect. The trip, aside from the occasional attack, was peaceful. Most of the people kept to themselves, though. Ryun had spoken with Erdania and Selia a few times, thought the things between them were still somewhat awkward. They had left things on getting to know each other, but Ryun didn't know how to approach them. Should he speak with one, then the other? Both at the same time? He was simply not good at things like that, never was. Which was why he hoped that one of them made the first move.

Of the rest, he and Zach avoided each other. He had been introduced to the other members, Naha who was Zach's partner, though she didn't speak

much. Maleatus, the strange ravzor, and Vryull Klaar who Ryun had spent most the time with. Their leader, Eratemus, he hadn't seen yet.

"They say that a Classer has no need to understand the Aspect that is flavoring their Class," Ryun glanced back at Vryull who stood at his side. Out of everyone on the ship, the Void Classer was the one that Ryun had spent the most time with on the ship simply because he liked the man. At first, he had thought that it was because both of them utilized the Void, they naturally had things to talk about. It took him a few days to really understand why they gravitated to one another. Vryull was the same as Ryun. A loner, someone who followed his own set of rules separate from everyone else.

Ryun turned his full attention to the man as he continued to speak.

"They are wrong, you know," Vryull said. "Understanding of one's source of power is just as important for a Classer as it is for a Cultivator or a Skill Master. The way that that understanding is used is different, of course, but it is what separates the average from the great."

"But it doesn't really impact a Class in the same way that it does Cultivation," Ryun commented.

Their talks had become nearly a daily thing. They would meet up after nightfall and talk about a variety of topics, Ryun found that Vryull had an interesting take on things. His opinions differed than those of most others, and Ryun was drawn to that because he was the same. He did have some more... scholarly interests, which Ryun had rarely entertained, he mostly focused inward, on his personal growth and enlightenment in a way. Understanding of self and power that he held.

Vryull was more interested into the true nature of everything around them and how it impacted their power.

"Does it not? A Classer who simply uses his perks and abilities without understanding the underlying nature of his power might miss valuable applications of it. Fire can do more than just burn, it is a... transformation of one kind of Essence into another, those Essences that can catch on fire. There are secrets there that can be used to gain more power."

Ryun grunted. He didn't know much about that, though it was interesting learning about it. "Still, there is only so much time in the world,

devoting oneself to knowledge and mastery of power might mean that you don't reach an understanding of either."

Vryull waved his hand. "That is what immortality means for us," he said firmly. "Some immortals are... content to slow down, to minimize the risks to their life, that is true. They are content to gather riches and live lavishly, to indulge in life without seeking to grow their power. On one side, there is nothing truly wrong with that, not in the core—until a few years ago at least. Safety allows for that, it is why people fight in the first place, most of them, to carve out an area of safety around themselves and those they care about. But there are others, those who gain immortality and go into seclusion, studying on their own, increasing their power, advancing. You don't hear about them because they don't involve themselves in politics and you will not find their names on any High Ranker list that assigns arbitrary numbers. They are out there, living in solitude, or dying in the pursuit of greater power."

"You think that there are many like that out there?" Ryun asked.

"Of course, I've met a few over the years. And I've seen one die in the pursuit of more power. Sometimes I wonder how many powerful and old had died somewhere beyond the borders of our Frontiers. How many had explored beyond the Domes?"

Ryun glanced back at the ocean, to him, there was no night. Only the color of the Essence of the Ocean and the moonlight bouncing off its surface, the Essence of air and wind mixing in front of his eyes. He could see the secrets behind the tapestry of reality, with his eyes he could see the weave. And he had failed in really trying to use that information in a way to gain greater understanding of the nature of the Infinite Realm.

"If there are so many powerful people, then why do you think that none of them helped with the Dome monsters in the core? Or with this mission?" Ryun asked.

Vryull shook his head, his face tendrils twitching as he laughed. "For most? I would say that they don't care, they are not part of whatever it is that the rest of us are. The more powerful you become, the more you advance, the more your power's influence shapes you. It is... a constant battle for most. People that are on this mission are... those who are trusted, those who we

know will not have any ulterior motives. You would be surprised how many of the powerful learn to hide their madness.”

“Hm...” Ryun wondered about that. It was clear to him that the people on this mission were not... not who he would've thought would be the most powerful. Yet they were being tasked with saving the world basically. “There had to have been people who are more powerful, older, who are better than... us?”

It wasn't that Ryun doubted his power. He knew what he could achieve, but he understood that perceptions of others might be different. There was obviously more to all of this than what Ryun understood, what they had told him. Obviously, sending people that had old history with the Third Iteration would be an issue, but... perhaps he was simply over thinking things, perhaps the people that had been gathered were the best choices.

“Power is not always so easily discerned. Advancement is not the only way of knowing how powerful someone is. An Evolved Realm Cultivator could lose to one that is an Immortal. A weaker person with a perk more suitable for the task will be more important than someone who is just more powerful. There are more ways to gain power than just the most apparent three,” Vryull said. “For example, our leader, Eratemus is a perfect example of this.”

Ryun turned more attentive; he didn't know much about the person that was supposed to be leading their mission. Only that he was on the ship, as cargo. It took him a few days to learn that he was actually an undead necromancer and that he was on the High Ranker list.

“Eratemus' power doesn't come from his advancement; it comes from the mastery of his craft. He is a necromancer that has spent centuries building up his power through inscribing every single undead he had ever raised. He improves his undead, turns them into works of art. In fact, his last known advancement was put at the Immortal Realm. No one had seen his real body for nearly five hundred years ago. He had reached his level of power by relying on vessels, undead bodies that he commands remotely. He might have perks and powers that allow him to raise a lot of undead at a moment's notice, but the point is that he didn't use that power. All the undead in his armies are those that he had personally raised through formations and his

knowledge of that art. He traded and bartered, made deals and contracts that had given him the bodies of the dead to turn into his servants. He is someone who doesn't rely on his advancement for real power."

"I guess that I understand what you mean," Ryun said. In this he saw how much he was lacking. He was... brute force. His power came through his might, through overwhelming his opponents. He had an understanding of himself and his path, but his understanding was internalized, it was instinct. He... pushed himself, always. He didn't have a line over which he wouldn't cross in the pursuit of his power. He was willing to suffer pain, destroy his body, to risk his life and his soul in that pursuit. He believed that those reasons were why he had advanced so far so quickly. Because he didn't ever stop. But there were more things that he could do to expand his power.

"And how do you grow your power? You wouldn't be here if you aren't powerful," Ryun asked.

"Understanding and knowledge," Vryull said. "My Class is Void related, so I need to understand the Essence of Void in order to be able to master my influence. But, understanding and knowledge also provide me with more power."

"What do you mean?" Ryun asked.

Vryull tilted his head at Ryun. "We've danced around this topic for a while, haven't we. We speak, and we share, but we don't give out secrets."

Ryun chuckled. "It seems that everyone else does the same. I don't care particularly about revealing secrets. I have a few of them as it is. I value honesty and openness. Others fear revealing secrets and making their enemies stronger, I don't care. What works for me is mine and mine alone, if someone might gain something from that, then that is good for them. I don't care."

"I am similar, though I understand that the rest of the people in the Infinite Realm seek to gain advantages over others in all situations," Vryull sighed, then pulled a pyramid shaped object from his pocket and pressed the top. Something sprang into existence around them, muffling his senses. A privacy screen, and a powerful one.

Ryun raised an eyebrow at the cthul. The two of them had touched upon the topic of their power, of the Void, but never delved deep into it. A

part of it was that Ryun didn't quite know how to broach the subject like that, he was curious. New insights might help him gain more understanding, but while he didn't fear revealing things, doing so without getting something in return would be pointless.

"Let us talk about Void," Vyrull said. Ryun kept quiet, waiting for the man to start. He seemed to gather his thoughts for a few seconds, and then he started to speak. "In my opinion, in order to speak about the core of an Aspect, of power, of Class, of a Path, or a Skill; one first needs to speak about the nature of the universe, the Infinite Realm, itself."

Ryun blinked; he hadn't expected him to go in that direction. "How so?"

"Well, everything around us is Essence," Vyrull said. "We are Essence, everything that happens is Essence. But what does that mean in truth? It is just a set of rules, a guide for actions and reactions, laws. Classes utilize different types of Essence to produce effects based on the Essence that their class is flavored by."

"What about a Class that doesn't have an Essence flavor? Swordsman for example?" Ryun interrupted.

Vyrull waved his hand excitedly. "You think that a simple Swordsman Class doesn't have Essence?"

Obviously, Vyrull thought differently, so Ryun just waved for him to continue.

"What is a sword? A weapon crafted out of different types of Essence. But if think about it, just taking the basic Essences that a sword is made up from and putting them together doesn't make a sword. To make a sword you need to put that Essence into the correct sequence and that then produces more Essence. The rules I spoke about before, come into play now. Put different types of Essence together in a correct way, and you will produce something else. Sometimes, you will simply transform one type of Essence into another. Take Fire, for example, if you burn Wood you will transform its Essence to ash, the air around it will rise in temperature, destroying Cold Essence if the Fire was of great enough quality or quantity. Laws, rules, actions and reactions. Put different types of Metal and Mineral Essences together, and you get a basic sword. If there were no rules, that sword would only be made out of Metal and Mineral Essences, but it is not. A sword has

more than those two Essences; Essence of Sharpness comes into being at the edge, of Piercing at the tip, more. Which means that the combination of all those Essences in that shape gives birth to something new, something that we can call the Sword Essence. Everything around us is a combination of Essences.”

Vryull waved his hand through the air in front of him. Inside his privacy screen the air was still, trapped and moving with the ship. “This is just Air Essence, but if you force it to move, then it changes.”

Ryun watched as Vryull moved the air. Unknown to him, Ryun could actually see the change, the Air Essence was joined with more tiny particles, something else that was pulling the Air with it, trying to change.

“Give Air enough push and it will become Wind,” Vryull told him. “A Sword is the same, it is Essence. When a Class focuses on the Sword it focuses on the application of that Essence. I don’t know what Swordsman Essence would be classed as, perhaps a concept, a warrior that uses the sword. Though, I guess that everything can be thought of the same. It is all just words and classifications for the things that exist in the world.”

“I’ve been taught that there are three big categories of Essence: Elemental, Concept, and Law,” Ryun added.

Vryull grimaced. “That is what the leading experts say, though their knowledge is lacking, or rather they are stubborn, in my opinion at least. The Seekers of Knowledge were the ones who primarily tried to learn more, but... their classifications are, simplified. They try to force things into neat boxes, and they do not share their true findings and theories, they, like so many others in the Infinite Realm are more concerned with hoarding power. They only do it through knowledge. I should know, I used to be one of them.”

“Oh?”

“Knowledge was and still is my primary driving force.”

“So those classifications aren’t true?” Ryun asked.

“They are, but there is so much more. The core belief is that there are three primary laws, I say that there are more. But also that there is... I guess that you can call it the supreme law, something that governs everything and can bend and break all rules.”

“The Framework,” Ryun said.

Vryull's tendrils swayed as he nodded. "Yes, I am not surprised that you understand as you are a Ranker. The Framework is a real, tangible thing to you. You lived in a world without it, you have seen the evidence of it firsthand. People that were born in the Infinite Realm, like me, are different. For us, it is just a natural part of life. We grow up knowing that it is there, we interact with it, we live through it. It takes a significant mental leap for the natives of the Infinite Realm to see it as something outside of everything."

"I understand," Ryun nodded. He had seen the way that the people in the Infinite Realm lived their lives. Ryun had embraced the Framework, but he remembered what the world was like before.

"Yes," Vryull nodded. "Essences are far more diverse than people believe. They come into being and disappear all the time. There are Essences that cross the classifications, that are a combination of elements, concepts, or law, or even all three. Which brings us back to the Void; what do you think that it is?"

Ryun leaned on the railing with his back and looked up at the sky. "The Void had always felt to me like... a concept. Nothingness, something that was empty of everything, yet... it had substance. It is a contradiction in a way."

"Yes," Vryull smiled. "A contradiction, you understand. It isn't something that is supposed to be able to exist in this world in the way that the rules are set up. Essence at its core has substance, the Void is nothing, therefore if it was something then it couldn't exist."

"So, how does it exist then?"

"I believe that you are, at least, partially right. The Void is mostly a concept, though it has some attributes of the law and elemental Essences. In truth, it is... a manifestation of something that doesn't and can't ever exist inside the Framework. True nothingness. People say that there are few Void users in the world because gaining a Void Class has high requirements, gaining a Void Aspect for Cultivators is difficult, obtaining a Void flavored Skill is nearly impossible. But there is a real reason why there are few Void users in the world, you know."

"Understanding?" Ryun guessed.

"Yes. You are young, but you have a great understanding of your Aspect, it is clear from your matches in the tournament. The perks that a person who

understands their power gains are cut tiers above those who do not. Over the centuries, there had been many Void users, but few had ever reached the heights that the two of us have. In fact, from the records I know of only one other. A Ranker crafter that established the way for crafters to gain a Void Class related to crafting. Most people follow that path, with few deviations, and rarely do they rise high because they lack the true understanding of the Essence that they are using.”

“I think that I see what you mean,” Ryun said slowly. “Classers that manage to gain a Void Class but lack understanding would not be able to meet the requirements for higher tiered related Classes, or they would gain weaker ones. A Cultivator without understanding of the Void would be... average.”

“Average, exactly,” Vryull said. “They live and they die without reaching Immortality, or they reach it, but are... average, nothing special. Over time the consciousness of everyone in the world adopts the truth that Void related powers are weak or are only useful in certain areas. And so people stop using it.”

Ryun narrowed his eyes. “You said that there was only one other Void user that had reached as high as we have. The one that did was a Ranker.”

“Do you see it? Why that was?” Vryull leaned forward, his eyes eager.

“What race were they?” Ryun asked.

Vryull’s tendrils shook as he chuckled. “Cthul.”

The only other race that had reached space, that had explored and probably had the technological and scientific advancement to entertain the ideas and theories about the Void. It had many different definitions. On Earth it was a synonym for the vacuum, for the space that contains no matter, for emptiness in between galaxies. But through entertainment, through stories, it was more. Ryun’s understanding of it was influenced by the stories he consumed and sciences he learned.

“They had the knowledge of what it was, what the theories are at least,” Ryun told him.

“Exactly,” Vryull nodded. “It doesn’t really matter what it is in the confines of the Framework. Your personal understanding is what matters.

Essence can embody different things; it changes as your understanding of it changes. It is... malleable.”

Ryun had already felt that, known it. His understanding of himself and his own power, his path. He had changed things. His Path of the Final End was not what it was when he was on Earth, he had changed it through his understanding, through fitting the pieces of different parts of his power.

“You were born in the Infinite Realm,” Ryun commented. Vryull shouldn’t have had any idea about the Void.

Vryull extended his hand and pulled something out of his storage. Ryun glanced down and saw a book, an old book at that. It wasn’t made by a power, but actually written down with ink or something similar because his power and his eyes could distinguish between the surface and what was written. He focused on it and read the title. “Basics of Space Travel, the Mathematics of Celestial Mechanics.”

Ryun read the words out loud, surprised at what he found. He raised his head and looked back at Vryull. “Where did you get that? Where did it even come from?”

“When I was young, and still with the Seekers of Knowledge, I was an assistant to a researcher studying the old worlds sciences. Many Rankers that arrived in the Infinite World were the more... survival-oriented people, the strongest, the most brutal, the luckiest. But among them, were few that were scientists, or those that simply had knowledge of sciences before the Framework arrived. Most of them had adapted, believing that the new rules and the world meant that the past didn’t matter. A fraction of them recorded what they knew.”

He pulled the book back into his storage.

“That... I don’t know if that makes sense,” Ryun said slowly.

“What do you mean?”

“The world did change, the rules here are different. The laws of nature are different. There was no Essence in the old worlds before the Framework arrived.”

“Ah... You see the issue. That was the core of what I helped research, the belief that the universe was somehow different before the Framework.”

Ryun blinked. “But... it was.”

“Was it? Or was there just an aspect of it that was hidden? Yes, the laws of nature in the Infinite Realm are slightly different, the Essence is... perhaps a simplified version of what existed in the old worlds, but... Look at Air, does it not act in the same way that the air on old worlds did? Does Fire not burn?”

“I’ve always thought of it like... it pretends like it is the old world, but it isn’t.”

“In a way that is true. Yet, the theories—No—the ideas behind everything remain the same. That is what I believed, what I based my research on. That the idea of everything in the Infinite Realm was brought in from the old worlds, the old universe. Gravity on the old worlds was complicated, but it boiled down to pulling objects toward something with greater mass. In the Infinite Realm the idea is the same, we are all being pulled down, or pushed down rather. The higher we go, the more mass we have, the stronger the effect. Fire burns and transforms other forms of Essence into something else, it did the same on the old worlds. Do you see what I mean? The underlying ideas are the same, the ways that it is executed is different. But that only means that the knowledge and ideas of the old worlds can still be applied. Sometimes they would not fit, but... the Framework lets us shape our understanding and make it the truth.”

“That...” Ryun had always relied on his knowledge from Earth, at least as far as Void was concerned. He hadn’t learned what it meant for the people in the Infinite Realm. He just only realized that they might not even have the same ideas as he did. “What do you think that Void is?” Ryun asked, a deeper question forming inside his head.

“To me, Void is the Essence that seeks to nullify other influences and acts, it is unforgiving, empty. My Class is Void related, which means that the way that I am influenced by it is tied to the Essence. I... operate under a strict set of rules, that help me manage my Classes influence. I do not forgive, because Void is unforgiving.”

Ryun understood then. There was something wrong with all of this. It seemed like power in the Infinite Realm changed depending on who wielded it. That Essence changed depending on how one believed that it should be. Most believed in what they were taught, what the collective decided, and so

they never discovered more. Their advancement was average because they never added anything of themselves to it.

“I believe that the Void is nothingness, something that seeks to destroy everything that exists. That it is oblivion and... an end. Something that was there before everything and will remain after everything else is gone.”

Verbalizing it like that made Ryun see just how much his understanding of the Void had influenced everything else about him. It had changed his Path; it had given him his Ideal. He... he was being influenced by his power, but his Path, but... it was him who had made it in the first place. He built up the Path of the Final End, step by step, first with the destruction he had unleashed on Earth, accepting of Aspect of True Death, his aspect. Everything was about the ideas, belief.

He was the one who changed himself.

He realized that that was what skills were in a way. Forcing the world around you to bow and change to your will and understanding. He had known it before, but now... now he really understood. If he believed it enough, could he make fire turn cold? Probably yes. But for other focuses it meant similar things. It wasn't about willpower; it was about knowledge and ideas. Essences at their core had rules, but with ideas and knowledge you could nudge them. There were rules that the Framework enforced that already broke the core rules of Essences. His Void could turn into a crystallized form, yet it shouldn't be able to. It was what Vryull was talking about, that there was one law beneath them all. Framework, which worked on something that none of them truly understood.

There had to be a point, a reason to why the Framework was there. It was a way of gaining power, of improving. But it also ruled every part of the world.

Vryull spoke, interrupting his thoughts. “As I said, what we know influences us. If your knowledge is limited, it doesn't mean that you are wrong... I see how you could think that the Void is like that. My understanding grew from the words written by someone who had traveled the stars. I've read his words, his stories about what he had encountered and lived through, and to him the Void was unforgiving. The way that he

explained it had always stuck with me, colored my understanding and my Classes influence.”

Of course, it was all about different perspectives, at least Ryun thought so. “How do you fight that influence, though?”

Vryull turned his eyes on Ryun. “It is not about fighting the influence, it is about understanding and adjusting to it. About making it a part of who you are. It is so with me at least, as the influence of a Class comes from within. I do not know how it is for a Cultivator, I haven’t delved that deeply into the influence of a Path. But I don’t see why it should be too different.”

Ryun wondered about that. His Path was something that he walked, it wasn’t inside of him in the same way. In his mind, he imagined it as steps that he climbed, a literal path. If a Class came from within, changing the person, then the Path would be the steps and the environment. Influencing from the outside, forcing him on a path.

“I see that there is so much more for me to learn,” Ryun sighed.

Vryull chuckled. “There always is my friend. As I said, there are far more ways of gaining power than just the three that everyone can see. Mastery of an art, knowledge, even bonds with an awakened object—like Dracael.”

Ryun tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

“She is high leveled enough, but her tiers of power are not what makes her great. Her perks and abilities are unimpressive, above average for sure, but there are stronger. What she excels at though, is her bond with her awakened object. In that she is without peer,” Vryull said and then tapped the railing of the ship.

“This is her awakened object, a weapon without equal in the world. With it she can level entire territories in a single night, topple factions and fight back the most powerful of monsters.”

Ryun frowned. “The ship is her awakened object? But this...” The ship that they were on was the largest ship he had ever seen, a battleship, dreadnought really of massive proportions.

“It wasn’t this big when she got it, of course. Awakened objects change and grow through their bonds. And this one is one of the strongest in the world.”

Ryun nodded; he had always gotten a strange sense from the ship. The way that it looked to his eyes and felt to his senses was not something that he had encountered before. Now at least he knew why.

“I guess that you are right, I’ve been focused on one avenue of power, not really opening my eyes to everything else that exists. This world... it is filled with so much, and sometimes feel like I am still catching up.”

“And there is still so much more that we haven’t even discovered,” Vryull said, then chuckled. “It is what I love about it.”

“Thank you for the talk, it was... enlightening,” Ryun told him.

“Of course, your ideas on the Void will help me, I have no doubt. And I hope that you will indulge me a few questions about your old world?”

Ryun sighed, then nodded. He could already see that the night was going to be long. But he wasn’t really bothered. There were secrets to be uncovered if one looked closely enough, and now Ryun finally felt like he could at least see them peeking out of the sand.