

Ereclaw

The smell of two-legs had stopped bothering him a long time ago. But there were times when he missed the smells of the forest. It saddened him that he could never return to the simple life that he had in the past. Hunting with his pack, sleeping in the burrows, living a life that was simple. He did not regret his decision, but he did miss his old life at times. He had wanted power and that he had gotten. Yet he still felt like an outsider, and a bit lost. Ereclaw no longer fit with the monsters and he did not fit with the rest. In a way, he wasn't much different than the two-legs. He talked like them, he wore clothes like them, but while he did in some ways think like them—a big part of him was still a wolf.

He had walked through the streets of the city, as he often did, surrounded by people and had barely been spared a glance. The walks were his way of trying to learn more about the two-legs, learn how to adapt to their world. With his change he no longer had a name and tier visible above his head, the qualifier for being a *monster*. But a monster was just a classification by the Framework, and Ereclaw had started to suspect that there were reasons as to why things were like that. He couldn't fathom them, not yet, but perhaps in time he would.

Now, he made his way through the Twilight Melody Sect compound, the warriors and attendants moving out of his way. He was the contracted beast of their Sect Head, that meant that under their complicated law, he had the same standing as Ryun. He passed by them without acknowledging them, mostly because he was still not comfortable enough with them to do something.

He found Ryun inside the main building, in a small room that he had turned into a place for meditation. He entered and knelt in a corner next to him, waiting. Ryun already knew that he was there, of course, there was no need for him to announce himself.

A few minutes later, Ryun sighed and his whole body relaxed. He opened his eyes and glanced in Ereclaw's direction.

“I think that I was close to evolving my **[Mind Shield]**, but... I don't think that I can manage it without a quest if I don't have someone mentally attacking me,” Ryun said.

“You could find someone to train with you,” Ereclaw suggested.

Ryun grimaced and waved his hand. “Everything here costs Essence, I could find someone, sure, but they would require a payment for their service.”

Ereclaw raised one of his eyebrows. “And you don't want to spend Essence?”

“I don't. The Grand Auction will be soon, and I need everything that I have.”

“Hrr,” Ereclaw growled low in his throat. It wasn't like he cared one way or the other.

Still, he had come to see him for a reason. It might not be obvious to the others, but something was bothering Ryun. He had been different, ever since he met with the other Ranker of his world. Well, perhaps Anrosh could tell, but from what Ereclaw had seen she had decided to deal with it by letting Ryun have space. Ereclaw didn't care much about two-legs, but Ryun and he had an understanding. He didn't know if he could help, or even just understand anything about what Ryun was feeling, but he figured that he should at least try. Ryun could not afford to be distracted so close to the tournament matches.

Ereclaw narrowed his eyes on him, and then just spoke, as directly as he could. “You are bothered by something.”

Ryun blinked, then tilted his head at him. “I am,” he said, unsurprisingly. Ryun never lied, and he rarely had the time for avoiding topics. “It is that noticeable?”

Ereclaw shrugged. “I am a wolf; I notice more than most.”

Ryun nodded his head. It was one of the things that Ereclaw liked the most about him. He was direct and didn't waste words in the same manner that the other two-legs often did. “It is about the other Ranker?” Ereclaw asked.

Ryun hesitated for a moment, and then nodded. “It is,” he said, looking down on his hands, closing them into fists. “It... made me remember things.”

Ereclaw rumbled deep in his throat. “You smelled of blood and death when we met, the blood of thousands.”

“Yes...” Ryun whispered, his face turning hard, almost angry. “I was... angry for what I lost, and I slaughtered all in my way. I do not regret the past, it is pointless, and I try not to dwell on it. But I understand that some of those that I killed and those that died as a result of my actions were innocent. When I saw him, Zach, I remembered our past. The times when we fought, when he screamed in my face and I didn’t care. I... I killed his family, or so he said.”

“You don’t remember that?” Ereclaw asked.

Ryun grimaced. “I remember the city where they lived, I remember killing people in it. But... the faces... they all blur together in my mind; the sounds are just noise in my head. I had to have done it, yet I do not remember. I feel as if that is... wrong somehow? That I don’t remember the faces of all that I had killed.”

Ereclaw didn’t understand two-legs, but Ryun had never been much like other two-legs. He didn’t think like them, he thought more like Ereclaw. It was why their contract had been so easy for them both.

“Remembering the prey you hunted is a way to honor them,” Ereclaw said.

“Yes,” Ryun said. “And I don’t remember. It feels disrespectful, not that they would want my respect in the first place. But this is not about them, it is about me. Zach hates me, and for a good reason, I took everything from him.”

“You don’t feel guilty?” Ereclaw asked.

“No,” Ryun said. “In some ways that is wrong, some would say evil even. But... the past is the past, and cannot change it. All actions have consequences, and the actions of all those on Earth led to this conclusion, I can own that.”

“But?” Ereclaw pressed.

“But,” Ryun sighed. “We were friends once. He had been my only friend really. It was... difficult to see the hate in his eyes. Before, I didn’t care about it. I wasn’t prepared for how it would feel, meeting him again, I mean.”

“I cannot understand that, I cannot help you with it. My pack had abandoned me because I am too strange for them now. I am alone, aside from you. I don’t know about him, about your past, about feelings. But I

understand you. You and I seek to grow stronger; I wish to witness great and interesting things. To hunt those who are powerful. What others feel about me, is of no concern to me, I cannot change how they feel.”

Ryun closed his eyes and a sad smile appeared on his face. “You are right, I don’t think that there is anything that I can do to change things. Even if I tried, nothing would ever be enough, and if I am honest with myself, I wouldn’t even want to try. I am sad for the loss someone who was my friend once suffered, but... I do not regret what happened on Earth. Regardless how he feels about me, Earth had made him strong.”

Ereclaw nodded, strength he understood. “The weak perish, and the strong survive and thrive.”

Ryun chuckled. “Thank you for the talk Ereclaw, my path isn’t in the past, it is in the present and in the future. All the way to the end of all things.”

“Of course, Ryun, we are a pack, our fates linked. I will be by your side until the end.”

Ryun opened his eyes and they looked at each other for a long moment. They didn’t need many words; they didn’t need conversations such as this. They understood what the other sought.

Then Ereclaw blinked as a notification appeared in the corner of his eye. He had gained a new contract perk.

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Void Hunter (Contract Perk) | You can draw upon your contracted partner’s power. Once per day you may erase all of your presence from the Real Realm, moving without sound, unseen, and without disturbing any of the Real Realm’s forces. |
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Ereclaw grinned, it was a good perk for him. He had some stealth perks already, but this one would improve his stealth by a large margin. He glanced at Ryun, and saw his eyes moving, reading something in front of his eyes.

“Ah,” Ryun said. “That is interesting, it might come in handy with my cutting skill.”

He had gotten a perk as well. The two of them didn't get the same perks, not always, so far they shared only their **Send Thought** perk. With a wave of his hand, Ryun made his perk visible.

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Wolf Claws (Contract Perk) | You can draw upon your contracted partner's power. Once per day you may summon crystallized blood-claws on your hands. The claws durability depends on your contracted partner's power. |
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Just after Ereclaw read through the window it disappeared, and Ryun tilted his head. "We are about to have a visitor."

Ereclaw strained his ears, hearing a hurried run that he recognized. A few moments later Lesamitrius entered their room.

"Forgiveness, Sect Head, but the... a, I—we have a..."

"I know Lesamitrius," Ryun interrupted the nearly babbling ravzor. "Zenker is here."

Ereclaw blinked, he had heard the name, but one two-legs was the same as any other. He stood up and walked out of the room, this was of no concern to him. Perhaps he should try to practice with his new perk.

* * *

Ryun

Ryun walked out of the building, Lesamitrius just behind him trying to keep up. He could sense the nervousness in Lesamitrius with every step he took. His sense also told him exactly what was happening outside. All of his people had bowed deeply to the drake, even more so than what they do for him. Granted, Ryun didn't particularly care for it, as long as they showed respect. What they did for Zenker though, was a lot more.

Ryun didn't mind. He had learned exactly who the drake was in his time here. Not that he hadn't already known plenty. His reading his screens had been enough to tell him just who he had met. Ryun paused in front of the building, letting the drake walk up to him. Lesamitrius took his position next to Ryun, looking and standing uncomfortably.

Once the drake was close enough, he grinned at Ryun and inclined his head—less than what Ryun usually get, more than Ryun probably deserved from someone like him. Ryun returned the gesture with the exact same motion.

“Zenker,” Ryun greeted him simply, their one conversation making him feel safe with just using his name.

“Sect Head,” Zenker greeted back. Though the tone of his voice was relaxed. “I see that you've taken my advice.”

Next to Ryun, Lesamitrius nearly fainted. Hearing his Sect Head speak in such manner to someone like Zenker was probably too much for the man, the fact that what he just heard meant that Ryun and Zenker knew each other nearly pushed him over the edge.

“I have, on both counts,” Ryun nodded his head. “I had been planning on coming to see you, to thank you for the hint.”

Zenker tilted his head at that. “I've wondered why you haven't come to me.”

“Didn't want to be a bother during the tournament, you seemed to have a lot of work,” Ryun said, if he was being honest, he just didn't know what to say to him.

“You've done well, got qualified, it never happened before you know. For a Ranker to qualify for the High Division during the first tournament after they arrive in the Infinite Realm.”

Ryun hadn't known that, but he suspected. His growth was not the norm.

Zenker glanced around, seeing all of the Twilight Melody Sect people looking and listening to them intently. Ryun's sense had told him that everyone else had found their way out of the building too. Nayra and Anrosh stood behind him with Daria, both nearly in the same state as Lesamitrius.

Zenker coughed, clearing his throat and then gestured to the side where Ryun's people had set up tables and benches. "Could we talk in private?"

Ryun nodded his head and led the way there. Once they had taken their seats at one of the tables, Ryun opened his mouth to offer to close the space off with his Void walls, but Zenker twisted a ring on his finger and suddenly the area around them became blurry and sound cut off.

"There, no one should be able to listen in now," Zenker said.

"So, you did come here for a reason," Ryun commented. "I wondered."

Zenker gave him a grin. "Not really a reason, more like I drew the short straw."

Ryun blinked, not understanding.

Zenker sighed and waved his hand. "Let us just say that I am here to have... a talk."

"What kind of a talk?" Ryun asked.

"Well, I am here representing a small group of people like me," Zenker started slowly. Ryun could imagine what a group of people like him meant. "We are... I guess that we make sure that things don't get too out of hand in the Infinite Realm."

"Ah," Ryun said, he had wondered about what the powerful people in the Infinite Realm did all the time. "And you—they, want to have a talk with me?"

"Not really a talk, we are always on the lookout for talented people. Those that we think could go far. I am just supposed to let you know a few things."

"Things like what?" Ryun asked.

"Things like *don't go around causing great wars* and *don't go on indiscriminate rampages*. This we say to everyone that approaches the power of High Rankers, for you though, we have extra."

Ryun tilted his head. So, it seemed like there were some people that watched over everyone and tried to make sure that civilization endured. "What kind of extra?"

"The pilfering kind, of course. As long as you don't go mad you are good. We don't put down pilferers just because that's what they are. Taking power

from your foes is one thing, manufacturing situations or pilfering everyone in your way is something else, and not something that we can allow.”

“Ah,” Ryun said. “I don’t have any plans to go mad with my thirst for power.”

“Good,” Zenker said. “Next, I want you to know that we, well, mostly me. Can offer you a lot, as long as you... make yourself available when we need you. Resources, access, secrets.”

Ryun looked at the drake for a long few moments. “That sounds a vague,” he said finally.

Zenker sighed. “And it will remain so, for the time being at least.”

Ryun wasn’t sure what all of this was about. Suddenly being sought by people that were at the top of the Infinite Realm did not seem all that coincidental.

“This is not the first such offer I got,” Ryun said slowly, trying to see if perhaps he could learn more.

Zenker frowned. “Someone gave you a similar offer?”

Ryun nodded his head. “Yes, Selia... Jhan? The Spear of Sorrows, she invited me to a party and offered to make my sect a subordinate of Zenshuen, one of the Sects that I took over had been a subordinate of their subordinate. I thought that was the reason why we were invited, but when I refused the offer, she gave another more personal one. To sponsor me.”

Zenker blinked at that, and then rolled his eyes. “No one tells me anything,” he grumbled. “If they had already given the task to Selia they could’ve saved me the hassle.”

Ryun blinked, surprised. “She is part of your... group?”

Zenker shrugged. “She joined recently, or she should have. Not that I have much time to pay attention with the tournament. Still, I guess that it makes sense, if her sect had connections to yours, that they asked her to reach out to you.”

“So, I am guessing that this offer is not something that I can refuse?” Ryun asked.

Zenker waved his head. “You can refuse, of course. And as long as you don’t break the rules, we will leave you alone. I wish that you didn’t refuse

though, we really can offer you a lot. And... we need people like you if we are to keep this world safe.”

Ryun tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. “Why come to me now? I’ve been at the tournament for months.”

Zenker met Ryun’s eyes. “We wanted to see how you and the other Earth Ranker would react when you met.”

Ryun hadn’t expected that answer. But it did make sense in a twisted Infinite Realm-logic. If they had resorted to violence, to trying to kill each other despite all the rules of the tournament... Well, Ryun didn’t think that they would’ve been allowed to fight for long.

“So, you know about him.”

“We keep an eye on all promising individuals,” Zenker told him.

A half-smile appeared on Ryun’s face, of course they had recognized Zach’s strength.

“So, I should just accept Selia’s offer?” Ryun asked.

“Do what you want,” Zenker shrugged. “But at least give her a chance.”

Ryun nodded his head. He had gotten another invitation from her, this one to a restaurant in the Tournament City, a public place. He was yet to reply, but perhaps he should at least hear her out. Although, if Zenker wouldn’t go in specifics, perhaps he wouldn’t get anything from her too. Still, he would give her a chance.

“Well, that was all I came here to say,” Zenker said and stood up.

“Zenker,” Ryun said as the drake reached for his ring.

“Yes?”

“I have an... issue, and I was wondering if perhaps you could point me in the right direction?”

“What kind of an issue?” The drake asked, intrigued.

Ryun met his eyes and spoke. “What do you know about soul damage?”