

To Hate

It was raining when he found them. Seeing them, made all his hope evaporate. In the distance he could hear fighting, the other teams were killing and driving away the monsters that had moved into the city, feeding on the corpses. Blood was being washed away by the rain, rivers of crimson flowed among the cracked stone, seeping from the gore and pieces of people. Some were almost unrecognizable, whether after what the monsters had done to them or because of the cause of their death. The shattered buildings buried a lot of the bodies, but a chewed off hand or a leg could be seen every so often.

Zach was on his knees, looking at the two corpses, what was left of them. One was cut in half, with no sign of the other half, tiny, and it was all he could look at it. The other was mangled mess, half eaten by monsters, only one side of her face still there. She looked ahead, as if accusingly. Inside, he was just numb. He knew who had done this, a few had managed to survive the carnage, those that ran early enough. He didn't know how anyone could do something like this, how anyone could be so heartless and cruel. No matter what was done to a person, no matter the loss they suffered, no matter the pain and the injustice, this... such carnage was never justified.

He closed his eyes, not able to look at them anymore. Tears that streamed down his face were lost in the rain that fell from the gray sky. How could anyone survive this much pain? Their faces flashed in his mind, Raleigh and Linda. One moment smiling and in the next they were the broken pieces that he had found. There was nothing that he could do for them now, not even with all of his strength. He moved slowly, as if through a dream, he could barely remember what he did, but he knew that he gathered their bodies and buried them outside of the city.

The day turned into the night, and still he remained over their graves, looking down at the two mounds. Somewhere in a back of his mind he noticed more people arriving, more teams. Gloria had approached him during the night, she spoke to him but he didn't listen, he couldn't. The only thing he could think about was killing the monster that murdered his wife

and child. Eventually they managed to usher him to a tent, and to cot where dreamless sleep took him.

The next day, Zach was again inside the broken city. People were gathering the dead, sifting through the rubble—there was so many of them, so many dead. And for what? Revenge? A whim? Madness? It didn't matter, there was a point where there was nothing else to be said, a point where there was nothing more to be considered.

Zach gathered his equipment and slipped away.

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It took him months to find him. And when he did, it was in a forest, sitting on a rock surrounded by trees. His face was calm, collected. It did not look like a face of a person that had slaughtered thousands. Gloria and the others had sent teams after him, to apprehend him, none succeeded. He had killed more since New Dallas, travelers, civilians, people that had no connection to the government. Women and children, the old and the young, killed them with such savagery that it looked as if their bodies had been torn apart by monsters.

Seeing the carnage left in his wake, they knew that they were dealing with someone who had to be stopped.

Zach walked into the clearing, his sword in his hands, ready for a fight. The others were behind him, trying to catch up. He didn't have a lot of time, but he needed to be here alone, he needed to know.

"You found me," Ryun said, his head turning slowly so that his eyes could watch Zach.

Zach gritted his teeth, there was no sign of remorse in those eyes, no guilt. His voice was even, disinterested. There was nothing of the man Zach used to know in those eyes.

"You murdered them," Zach managed to say through clenched teeth.

Ryun just tilted his head and shrugged. That made Zach see only red. He charged, his **[Leap]** sending him forward even as he activated **[Piercing Stab]**. His sword was blocked, Ryun moving backward. Zach attacked, but

he couldn't get through Ryun's block. He screamed in rage and frustration, with all of his strength he swung his sword from above with his **|Slash|**. Ryun's sword shattered, but he moved out of the way in a burst of speed, then he kicked out. Zach felt the kick connect with his ribs, felt them crack and break as he flew back and smashed with his back into a tree.

He coughed, blood spilling from his mouth. "How could you—" he coughed up more blood, the pain in his chest making him wince. "—do that? Those people did nothing to you! The government did nothing to you! One monster took something from you, and as a response you slaughter indiscriminately? People that had no connection to what happened to you? People that just wanted to live in peace, to survive this horror."

"They were in my way," Ryun said simply.

Zach looked in his eyes and saw a monster who felt nothing, that cared about nothing, a monster that needed to be stopped.

"You slaughtered children," Zach hissed at him. *You killed my child*, he wanted to say. But he didn't, so many people had lost their families to him, because Zach had cared for his friend. Because he let him go when he killed an entire town. "How could you do that?"

"It is a mercy," Ryun shrugged. "Better that I end them quickly than for them to suffer what this world has turned into. They are too weak to thrive, this world was not meant for those who are like them. They are here only as fertilizer for the rest of us. To die in front of us, to sever us from the old world and teach us what true pain and horror is, to teach us how to hate. To make us stronger, so that we can rise and survive."

Zach closed his eyes, then pushed himself up to his feet, his sword held in front of him. Then he attacked again.

They found him leaning against the tree, his sword broken next to him. Gloria and the others came, ready for a fight.

"What happened?" She asked as they someone knelt next to him and looked at his wounds.

“I...” He didn’t know what to say. That he failed? It seemed somehow too small a word for what happened. There was nothing that he could say. People were dead, murdered, butchered, and Zach had failed to protect them.

Then he remembered, the broken bodies of his family, the city filled with the dead, and the innocent travelers. He had to stop him, he was the only one that could.

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The city was on fire, they had arrived too late. They entered through the shattered gates, and saw the dead. Nothing in the city lived, no one had survived.

Only one thought echoed through Zach’s mind. *Why?* How could someone just change so much, snap and go on such a rampage. Even with the tragedy that had happened, he had never imagined that the Ryun he knew was capable of something like this. He had to know that these people weren’t guilty of anything, and still he killed them.

“We have to stop him,” Gloria said.

John Grisom grimaced. “He moves constantly, we are barely keeping up as it is. And you remember what happened the last time we faced him.”

Zach did remember. Ryun beat them, the more time passed, the more he killed, the stronger he became. In the end, he had let them live, saying that they were strong and therefore worthy.

Zach didn’t know if he could handle this for much longer, seeing so many dead. It was horrible enough when the Framework arrived, seeing the monsters hunting and killing them. Now, they had one of their own people doing the same thing. It was somehow worse even, if Ryun had some goal, perhaps Zach could understand. But this was beyond revenge, beyond hate and anger, this was just pure slaughter. Zach could understand the Warlords that fought and pillaged, they wanted to gain more power to gain more resources. Ryun cared for nothing, he was building nothing, he just destroyed.

Gloria was right, he had to be stopped.

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“We lost another city,” Gloria said as she walked into the small office.

Zach raised his head and looked at her, he couldn't even muster any emotion at the news. Years of living in this new world had taken their toll. None of them were who they had once been.

“What happened?” He asked.

“Monster surge,” She said as she collapsed into a seat across from his desk.

Zach closed his eyes. There were only two ways a monster surge could happen, an event or a monster spawning point being closed. Gloria would have told him if it was an event. Which meant that it could only be the other option.

“He is closing the points again,” Zach said.

“Yes,” Gloria added.

Zach turned and looked at the map behind him. Blue pins marked cities, while red ones marked monster spawn points. Closing a point was in most cases a good thing, it meant that no new monsters would spawn in the area. But sometimes, when the point was closed in the middle of the cluster of other points, the neighboring spawning points would increase their spawn rate, which would trigger a surge. Monsters from nearby areas would invade a single area overwhelming it with monsters. They couldn't fight that, they had tried in the past.

“Damn him,” Zach hit his desk, making everything shake. They had so few people now, any loss was too much. They couldn't survive this way.

They had tried everything to stop him, and all things had failed. After three years of failures, the government had decided to just stop trying to bring him to justice. They moved cities out of his way, relocated people away from him. Zach had helped facilitate that, he had long ago decided that following the will of the people was the only way for him. His own decisions had proven to cause countless deaths. If he had listened to what he had been asked to do, if he had stopped or captured Ryun back when he still had a

chance, none of this would've happened. Law of the majority was the only thing left to him, the only thing that he could cling to.

No matter what they did, in the end it didn't matter. They had a year of peace before the monster surges began. Even with them leaving Ryun alone, he still caused countless deaths. They couldn't just stand by and let him murder them all.

"Do we know where he is now?" Zach asked.

"We have a few tracking teams searching," Gloria said. "But Zach, we can't win, not like this."

Zach knew that she was right. "We need to hunt more monsters, to level. It is the only way."

They had no other choice, they had to stop him or none of them would be left by the time the ten years were up.

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"What?" Zach asked, not quite able to comprehend what they had said.

The others were in a similar state, the other five people sitting behind his side of the table were the same. Zach glanced to the side, saw Gloria blinking at the speaker.

Zach turned his eyes back to the speaker. The woman was old, had been old when the Framework arrived. The years since then had not been kind to her. Her skin was pockmarked and shriveled, lines crisscrossing every part of her face. She was just... old. Everyone knew her, of course, Mrs. Reka had been a major part of the crafters group for years. And a leader of it for a couple of months, since the suicide of the last leader. A few dozen people had filled into the small hall for the city meeting, they were the representatives of the few thousand people living in the city. The last people alive on the planet, as far as they could tell. Not even a half of them had the necessary requirements to be on the Ranker list. And with monsters now being so rare, there was almost no way for them to grow enough. It didn't matter that the list was mostly empty, only a few of them had managed to get on the list. And

they... they were all old or crippled, people who barely had a few years of life left.

Still, Zach couldn't quite believe what he had heard.

"We have talked about it, amongst ourselves," Mrs. Reka said. "Half of us can't get what is required for the list, and the rest... we are old and we are tired. We had lost too much, watched our families die, watched our friends take their own lives. The Framework had taken everything from us, our entire lives, we wish to do something that was our choice."

Zach closed his eyes. He knew that there had been too many suicides amongst them. Most had come a few months ago, when they lost contact with the only other surviving city in the world, as they watched the Ranker list lose names. So much death and destruction, they had lost everything. Years and years of slow attrition against the monsters, always losing a few until the numbers just kept rising. Only six of them remained who could fight, all the other fighters fell as the world crumbled around them. As the monsters surged, as every semblance of order collapsed and cities went to war with each other. As they hunted the monster that had done this to them. Now they were the last, six people capable of fighting, and a few thousands of the weakest. The crafters that had stayed in the safety, who had somehow managed to survive. The elderly, and the crippled who couldn't fight.

Zach knew that he couldn't save them, that he couldn't keep help them in any way. And that hurt more than he could handle. But what they asked, it wasn't something that he could accept.

"No," Zach said finally. "We will not become like he is."

"I agree," Gloria added. "It is... it is abhorrent."

Mrs. Reka shook her head. "It is not your decision to make, we are not going to survive this one way or the other. We are too old and too weak. We either die here on earth, or we day a few years from now in this new reality, if it even exists. If it is anything like what the Framework turned this world into, we don't want to go there. This way at least you will gain something from our deaths."

"You can't ask this of us," Gloria insisted.

But Zach could see the determination in their eyes. They were letting Mrs. Reka speak for them, but all were agreed.

“Of course we can,” Mrs. Reka said. “You can accept or refuse, but we will be going ahead. If you don’t want to take what we can offer, we will do as our friends and family had, and take our own lives. There is nothing here for us and we are too old to survive a new reality, not when we barely managed to survive this one. I suggest that you think it over, there are no more monsters for you to grow strong, this is the last thing we can give you for keeping us safe all these years.”

With that, they left the hall, leaving the six of them to decide.

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The knife was heavy in his hand. It was a reward for clearing an event, what seemed long ago now. They had been sharing it, using it to kill monsters and get stronger. And now... they used it for something much worse. Zach was the last one, the others had all had their turn in the small room, with people coming in and not coming out alive again. He was close to walking out, to refusing to do it. But in the end, it was their decision, and he had vowed to never ignore the will of the people again, to follow the laws that they put in place. He couldn’t refuse. A part of him understood and was grateful for what they did. They were old, people who had lived entire lives in the old world, who hadn’t adapted to the Framework. People who didn’t know how to fight, people who had lost everything. Families, friends, who had watched the world they once knew changed completely and run over by monsters.

The doors opened, and the first person walked in.

One after another they came in, they sat with him and they talked. Some spoke of what the world was like before, so long ago that Zach could barely remember. Some spoke of their families with kindness, others had only hate on their tongues as they told him how monsters took their families from them. The stories were similar, in the way that each had tragedy in it.

He sat with them in silence sometimes, and cried with others. He held an old man's hand as he tried to convince himself that the last 10 years were just a nightmare and that Zach was about to wake him up. He stroked an old woman's head as she bawled like a child. He took their pain, and their hate and impotent rage. Each of them had lost someone because of the greatest monster there was. The human who cared for nothing, the one who ended the world. They were afraid, but they hated him more. Hated him enough that they would come up with something like this.

And then the doors opened for the last time, and Mrs. Reka walked in. She took a seat next to him, and they sat in silence.

"The others made you promise, didn't they?" She asked finally.

Zach nodded, not able to speak. They had asked his word, that he would do everything in his power to make the monster that took everything from them pay for his crimes. And Zach had given it, some crimes could have no forgiveness.

"If you get a chance, you should forget about it," she said.

Zach blinked, not expecting her words.

"I don't know what this Infinite Realm will be," she said slowly. "But... this world, it was soaked in blood. This is... it is not how any of us are supposed to live. We were never meant to be filled with so much hate."

"Then why are you doing this?" Zach asked.

She shrugged. "We had lost our will to live a long time ago, we had just been surviving. What can old and the infirm do? We were just a burden to you and the others."

"It was our duty to protect people, and we failed."

"You did more than anyone else could've," she added.

"I could never forget what happened here," Zach said. "So many innocent lives snuffed out, and for what? Power? Revenge? It... the world, life should not be so cruel."

"You are right," she told him. "It is madness. And in this new world, if you get a chance to find something good and right, then do it. Don't let hate twist you as it had twisted him."

Zach didn't say anything, the words didn't come easily to him anymore. He had lost everything. They sat in silence for a while.

“Well, I guess that we should get to it then, I think that I am ready,” Mrs. Reka said.

Zach closed his eyes and nodded, grabbing the dagger.

“You’ll make it quick?” she asked.

“Yes,” Zach said, looking in her eyes, forcing himself to memorize her face, as he had memorized the faces of the others before her. She was wrong, it was already too late for them. All of them had been twisted long before this moment.

One quick thrust and it was done. He remained in the small room, cradling her body as blood spilled over his hands. Numb to everything.

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“This is our last chance,” Gloria said. “Our last opportunity to stop him. We cannot let him reach the Infinite Realm, we don’t know what we will find there. But... If he gets an opportunity to grow stronger, there will be no stopping him.”

“He is our responsibility, I agree,” Zach added, looking at the others. They were all ready. They had prepared as much as they could, leveled up, bought a power designed to stop Ryun. They had done all that they could’ve.

“We will buy you time,” Gloria said as she turned to look at Zach. “You are the strongest, you have the best chance of winning.”

Not even with all of them together did could they win. Zach knew that they weren’t strong enough, even with their new levels. They hoped that they could match him, but they knew that it was unlikely. It all rested on him and his **|Sealing Slash|** to take his power away, and only then they would have a chance.

“Yes,” Zach nodded. “Let’s go.”

The six of them walked away from the empty city, filled with the dead, and headed toward their target. One way or the other, the end was near.