

Act I – Zach

Zach stood in the center of the abandoned city, looking at the destruction. And it was destruction, he hadn't expected what they found. Their trip took a few months, since this area didn't have established routes. Zach hadn't had much hope that they would find any clues about the person they were looking for here, but he was wrong. The city had been visited by monsters since it was abandoned, that was obvious. Half eaten dead bodies could still be found in the buildings, but even with them coming in after, the signs were still there.

Doors were broken apart, the insides of homes destroyed. Signs of battle everywhere. The front gate was destroyed and the square in front of it filled with ash. It was where the escapees met their end. It made him feel sad, and guilty. His council appointed the person that caused this, but they had believed that they were doing the right thing. They even had a system in place to watch the leaders because they knew that in this world those with power could easily get corrupted. Still, it wasn't enough. But the aftermath... Someone ripped through the town like a storm of death and destruction and killed nearly everyone. Zach couldn't imagine how someone could do that. Most of the people that died were innocents, just civilians that didn't even know what was happening. Zach wasn't naive enough to think that none of them knew, but to kill everyone indiscriminately... It was monstrous. And Zach did understand their point of view, the Governor and his people had done terrible things, and if he could Zach would've killed them all himself. But the others? That was an eye for an eye type of law that Zach didn't agree with.

Humanity was dying, and they couldn't afford to allow these kinds of things to happen. They had a rough estimate of human survivors. The United Government was an agreement between eight Framework upgraded cities, settlements that had upgraded their Interface to allow for communication between other cities of the same level. Among those eight cities they had almost a hundred million people in them alone. But each of those cities had other smaller settlements under their rule. The population of the United

Government was a bit over those hundred million, but not by much, most people wanted to live in the cities where they could be safer.

The cities were spread across the world, but they shared information as they attempted to make a connection over the ground. Only four cities had managed to have any kind of regular traffic, but that alone was a success. Because humanity was in trouble. Their projections put the global population at less than a billion and dropping every single day. They had to do something, to establish some kind of an order, or humanity was going to tear itself apart before the ten years that the Framework gave them were up.

And Zach was one of the strongest people in the United Government, it was up to him to do as much as he could to protect humanity, to make sure that the innocents had a chance in this new cruel world. To give them hope. And the only way that he knew how to do that was show them that there was still law and order, that everyone, no matter how much power they had accumulated would be held accountable. Otherwise, those in power would always exploit those who had none. He knew that they made mistakes, that they weren't perfect, but he just didn't know what else to do. Only that he had to do something.

But seeing this city, the destruction... it reminded him just how much power some people could wield now. They still didn't know the full truth, and probably never would, but even if everything that they suspected was true, killing those who were innocents was crossing the line. Zach still didn't know what he was going to do. He first needed to find the person and evaluate them. The prisons beneath the ground had already told him that probably most of what they suspected about the Governor was true.

This entire situation was horrible and depressing, but sadly not an uncommon occurrence in the new world. Zach had seen too many settlements wiped out in retaliation for slights or just so that someone more powerful could still what wasn't theirs. Zach needed to see who this person was, to see if they could remedy their relationship with them.

Gloria's suggestion that they be brought in for a trial would alleviate the tension of the word getting out about a city being wiped out. But... he didn't think that this person would come willingly, not after what happened. Forcing them would only escalate things. Zach had to balance the hearts and

minds of millions against those of one person, someone who had killed innocents. He didn't know what to do. The interrogation of the survivor had shown that the Governor was at fault, that they had failed in their screening process. And they didn't have any ground to bring this person in.

Zach shook his head, he would have to play it by ear. For now, he knew that they had to add more safeguards to their appointments of Governors, they had to make sure that the law was followed.

Zach and his party spent six days in the ruins of the town. He had patrols exploring the wilderness, looking for the settlement that belonged to the prisoners. They knew the general direction from the survivor, but not the exact location. On the sixth day, one of his patrols returned with the location.

"We found a town, it looks mostly deserted, but there was one person still living there," one of his party-members said.

Zach hadn't expected that exactly, he thought that they would find the town and then some clue as to where the person left. But in truth, he had hoped that they didn't find them, that the person just left. It would've solved his problem of having to decide what to do.

"You didn't approach?" Zach asked.

"No, sir, we watched from afar like you instructed."

Zach nodded his head. He didn't want them making first contact, they knew that this person was powerful, and they needed to proceed with caution. His party all had high levels compared to most people, in between twenty and twenty five, but Zach was almost double that. He was the only one who would be powerful enough to match them in case of something going wrong.

He gathered his team and made his way to the town. It took them only about half a day to get there while moving at a brisk pace. Zach looked at the town in the dusk's light, it was a small settlement, with a couple of buildings and a smaller wall. It reminded him of Safehold, the first settlement that he had lived in, what seemed so long ago when the Framework just arrived. A time that had been filled with constant dangers and issues. Somehow, he still remembered it fondly.

He could hear sounds of hammering coming in from the settlement and as they approached the broken gate he could see someone standing on the other side of the settlement. Their back turned to them and hammering on a simple workbench set up in front of a small house.

Zach turned to his people and gave them a signal, then he started walking forward, alone. They were to stay back and not show themselves until he gave them another signal, if it came to it. Zach made no attempt to hide his presence, so his footsteps had to have alerted the man that he was there. He stopped a couple of steps away from the person and looked at them. They weren't that tall, but he seemed fit. He couldn't see his face, but something about the man made him seem familiar. The man didn't react to Zach's presence, so much so that Zach almost thought that he hadn't heard him. The man just continued hammering at a board, leaned over his workbench. Zach narrowed his eyes and tilted his head, and then he recognized the man.

"... Ryun?" Zach whispered, completely shocked.

His friend glanced over his shoulder, meeting Zach's eyes and then returned back to his board.

"I should've guessed that they would send you. What are you now? Their strongest guard dog?"

Zach was so shocked that he couldn't even answer. He had expected so many things once he found his target, but for it to be Ryun was not one of them.

"They sent you to find who killed your people? Who destroyed your town?" Ryun asked, still not turning around.

For a moment Zach felt hope rise up in him, perhaps they found the wrong person. But then Ryun spoke again.

"You don't need to ask, it was me."

Zach closed his eyes. He had been reunited with his friend after years apart. He knew that their parting hadn't been on the best of terms, but it hadn't been bad either. They just wanted different things. And now... Ryun had killed innocent people that Zach was supposed to protect. But Zach didn't know everything, he didn't know what happened. He knew that he could trust Ryun, he didn't lie, especially not to Zach.

“Why?” Zach asked, seeking the truth, the whole story.

Ryun stopped his hammering. Slowly he put the hammer to the side, then straightened his back and slowly turned. Zach saw Ryun’s eyes and felt something make him shiver. They were so cold, and sad. Ryun’s expression didn’t change as he spoke.

“Why? Well... I could tell you that it was because they had been pressuring the neighboring settlements, forcing them to join under your Governor, to whom you have granted land that did not belong to you.”

Zach opened his mouth to respond, but Ryun spoke again. “Or, I could tell you that it was because they attacked my people once we refused their offer, because they did that too.”

Ryun’s eyes bored into Zach’s, and he saw them harden as his fists clenched. “Or maybe it was because they took us prisoners and threw me into a hole. Where they brought my people to the edge and killed them to make a point, or when I didn’t answer their questions in a satisfactory manner. Perhaps because they threw the bodies down into my hole and then poured boiling water on me, broke my bones with rocks the size of your head. Because they took my people prisoner and did with them things that I do not wish to even repeat.”

With every word Zach felt more and more emotion spilling out of Ryun.

“We didn’t know what he was doing Ryun—” Zach started, but Ryun snorted and interrupted him.

“—But none of that was the reason,” Ryun said taking a step forward. “I killed them because they made Melody their slave. And because then they murdered her in front of my eyes. Because I watched her burn to ash in seconds. I wished that I hadn’t granted them such quick deaths, I wished that I had kept them alive and stuffed them down into the holes where they kept me. I would’ve enjoyed pouring boiling water down on them and watching them burn.”

Zach felt the breath leave his chest, as if he had been physically struck. *They killed Melody?* He couldn’t believe that. The things that Ryun claimed were bad, they had suspected... but to know? It shouldn’t matter that it was Melody, Zach’s friend, any loss of life was tragic. But it did matter. It made everything so much worse.

“Ryun... We didn’t know, believe me.”

“You didn’t know that one of your Governors was doing things like that?” Ryun asked. “Well then, you are more incompetent than I thought this Government was when they first came to Safehold. I told you that the world had changed, that we had to change with it. And you stayed with what was old and felt safe. And you enabled this to happen!”

“We had to keep order,” Zach said slowly. “Everything was thrown into chaos with the Framework’s arrival. We saved lives.”

“And yet, if this happened here, how many times did it happen elsewhere? Where else is it happening right now?” Ryun asked.

“Ryun... I’m so sorry about Melody,” Zach said, he didn’t know what more to say. He couldn’t think. She had been his friend as well.

“And is your sorry going to bring her back? Of course it’s not, it is as worthless as your government, and as your fucking laws.”

“Ryun, I—”

“—Why are you here Zach?”

Zach tried to collect himself, to find the right words, even though they probably don’t exist. “I was sent to investigate the... incident.”

“Incident?” Ryun laughed. “You mean the slaughter of your people?”

Zach saw Ryun’s eyes boring into his, and nodded. “Yes... Ryun, there were innocents in the town.”

“Innocents?” Ryun tilted his head. “You mean like how Melody and my people were? We’ve been living here for years Zacharia, in peace with other settlements in the area, trading, protecting one another. And then your Governor showed up, and brought your Government. You were the ones that brought blood and death, who murdered innocents. You have no right to demand anything from me. You should be ashamed of yourself for even coming here, for standing where she stood while wearing those colors.”

Zach glanced down at his uniform, the United Government crest was on his chest. “We didn’t know Ryun, the Governor was corrupt he broke our laws and did horrible things. I am here... to make things right.”

“And how will you do that? Do you have someone with a Class that can bring people back from the dead perhaps?” Ryun looked at him expectantly, maybe even hopefully, but Zach shook his head.

“No,” Zach said. “I am here to make sure that things like this don’t happen anywhere else. To show the people that there is to be punishment for those who break laws and use their strength to subjugate others.”

“Ah, so are you here to punish me?” Ryun asked, his voice light, but his eyes hardened.

“I... you were not part of our laws... but you still killed innocents Ryun. Hundreds of them, people that were not to blame for what the Governor did. I understand that there were extenuating circumstances, you saw your love die, you weren’t thinking clearly. We can make sure that you are not to blame.”

Zach looked at Ryun, waiting for him to answer. But Ryun just glared at Zach.

“Please Ryun, we need to show the people that there is an order in the world. You don’t know how bad it is out there, how many people are dying every moment. Humanity is dying and it will be wiped out if we don’t do something. If you would just come back with me, you can help me make sure that things like this don’t happen again.”

“Come back with you... Why?”

“Ah... The people need to see you cleared of any wrong doing. But after that... we, you and I, we can keep humanity safe.”

“You want to put me on trial?” Ryun whispered, and Zach recognized his friend getting angry.

“The United Government is a large entity. Many of the people you killed here had relatives still alive somewhere, I understand why you did it. I understand how you could’ve been... driven to do it. But I am tasked with keeping millions safe. If others see that someone could just wipe out a town without consequences, these things will keep happening again. We need to stop it, to show them that we have the power to keep them safe.”

Ryun’s eye twitched, and he shook his head. “I have no interest in humanity, or placating those whose family died. They were evil, monsters that had done terrible things. You are fooling yourself if you think that the civilians didn’t know, that they didn’t at least suspect. And they did nothing, they didn’t alert you and those in power. Instead, they looked the other way. I am done with all of this. I only want to be left alone.”

“Ryun... I don’t know if I can let you do that,” Zach said. He still didn’t know what to do. But he could see that his friend was hurting, that he was grieving. What would happen if he left him alone? Without anyone in the wilderness? Zach didn’t know if Ryun could survive on his own.

“Oh, and are you going to try and make me go by force? You and those weaklings hiding around us?”

Zach blinked in surprise. Ryun laughed a cruel short laugh.

“Yes, I know that they are there, I knew that they found me this morning. They are not as stealthy as they think. No Zach, I will not be coming with you, not without a fight, and trust me, you do not want a fight.”

The look in Ryun’s eyes made Zach believe it. Ryun was a Cultivator, someone who was not supposed to be strong, and yet Zach knew that Ryun was not to be underestimated. He looked at him and thought about what he wanted to do, but then he sighed.

“I’m... I’m not going to force you Ryun. There will be no fighting,” Zach thought that Ryun looked almost disappointed.

Ryun shrugged and turned to look at the setting sun to the left. Zach could see that his friend was tired, and angry. Zach stepped closer, and put a hand on Ryun’s shoulder. “Ryun, I’m so sorry that this happened. I... even if I tell them that the Governor is at fault, if I use my influence to clear this up... The relatives of those that died will want something to be done. They might even send people here on their own to look for you. Please... if you come with me, I promise you that we can clear all of this up.”

Ryun stiffened, and then rounded on Zach, pushing him away. Zach blinked as he nearly stumbled, and he saw Ryun glaring at him, his eyes flashing red. It happened so fast that he wasn’t sure that he hadn’t imagined it. Ryun shook his head and the red in his eyes was gone. Then he turned to look at Zach and spoke.

“No Zacharia, I do not want to be among those kinds of people ever again. I know that you think you are doing something good and noble, but I can see the rot beneath the surface. Humanity is a vile and despicable beast, and I will have no part of it. If you think that they will try to find me, I’ll go somewhere else. But I will not mingle with others again, I have no patience or even desire for it, let alone to help you save it. I used to believe that to

survive in this world you had to be strong, but I see now that all you need to have is support from foolish people and no morals. You should take a better look at your Government Zach, at least if you really want to keep people safe.”

Zach closed his eyes, it pained him to see Ryun speaking like this. To see him so angry and broken. “I am sorry Ryun... Go, I will not tell them anything. Just...” He didn’t have the words to say, to express his feelings. He was not prepared to find his friend and he was still in shock.

For the first time, Ryun’s expression softened a bit. “Goodbye Zacharia, may we never meet again.”

“Be safe Ryun,” Zach said and turned away, walking away from his friend and trying to figure out what he was going to tell the others.