

Stories

Ryun brought down the hammer on the piece of dark blue metal on the anvil, then raised his hand and repeated the motion. Over and over, his mind clear of everything but him and the metal that he was working. It was coming together, how quick... he didn't know. He had abandoned trying to keep track of time, it was pointless. But it did feel like it had been a long time.

Finally, as his hammer came down, he felt that it was done. He stood, and walked over to the forge that blazed with fire of the stars. He took a glance at the blade and then threw it in. The fire flashed, the metal turned to liquid that was swallowed up by the pure white embers. It wasn't real, nothing around him was, as proven by the fact that he saw the colors as his eyes once could. But he hoped that perhaps it could become real.

He was inside *Bright Star's* realm, a... mental world in a way, a place inside his soul, where his awakened forge lay. He had many discussions with *Bright Star* over his plans, he didn't know if it would work, but they would try.

"It wasn't bad," *Bright Star's* voice came from the hammer in Ryun's hand.

"Not good enough either," Ryun said.

His connection to his awakened forged had been repaired as he had healed, and since then *Bright Star* and he had grown a lot closer, being the only other *being* that Ryun could talk and alleviate the boredom meant that they were talking a lot.

Still, Ryun still didn't know how long he had been recovering, time was hard to tell. He spent his time cycling, or he had at least. He had cycled through his core fully several times, too many to count, his core had deepened and his Qi reserves increased. But, as he had come to realize, few things came without a price. Focusing on cycling, using his will to push Qi from around him into his core had a side-effect of slowing down his recovery. The more time he spent cycling the slower his body recovered. So he had to take brakes, during which he spent his time in this starscape.

He had fed many items to Bright Star, their bond was deep enough that he could use this mental forge. He could practice with any material that Bright Star was familiar, that he fed to it or that Ryun himself had used before with the forge. It gave him the time to practice, to hone his craft. He would never be a great smith, he would never create wonders, invent new alloys. He had no skills or perks that could grant him great insight or give his works incredible power. But with Bright Star he could copy, he could create works that were... average.

“Hey,” Ryun said slowly, deciding to ask about something that had been on his mind for a while. One had a lot of time to think while hanging in between life or death. “Can you forge other types of Essence, other than metal I mean.”

“Of course you can,” Bright Star answered. “Forcing Essence into different forms is easy, you do it every day.”

“I do?”

“What do you do when you create those walls of Void?”

Ryun blinked. “Ah,” he understood. He crystallized the Void Qi, changed its form.

“How do you think that all those fancy items get their effects? You can carve formations, true, that allows the item to manipulate Essence in many different ways. Or if you want a fire sword, you forge fire into it, simple.”

Perhaps it was at that, simple. Bright Star had gotten more and more knowledgeable about the forging process as their bond increased. He was even teaching Ryun, their bond was a lot different than it used to be. Though, the forge was still greedy, and still pestered Ryun to get it more items.

He walked over to the racks and looked at the items stored there. He had copies of the four mythic items that the Empire had crafted for him and the original, he had worn one of the copies, as he always did for his important items. No need to risk losing the originals when the copies were exactly the same when used by him. The rest of his five slots were taken by a few weapons, javelins and two swords that he rarely used. Each item could have 12 copies now, which meant that he had a couple dozen javelins to throw.

That had seemed smart to him before, but... in reality getting the chance to use them... Perhaps against weaker opponents, but he had already

come to the conclusion that he had to change things. He had spent a lot of the time thinking about... everything. He had a few ideas for his techniques even. He just needed to heal in order to try them out.

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He could feel it, closer and closer, nearly there. His body, nearly recovered.

He waited patiently, not doing anything to slow it down. It had already taken so long that he was beyond bored, even with Bright Star as company.

And then it was done, he felt himself pushed the Void around him almost ejecting him. It didn't hurt him, his body was now equal to it, had been for a while, the Void felt almost as if it was joined with his body, as he was a part of it.

Then, he was out, the sky and the ground spreading before him as he was falling toward the ground. He had dropped from the Void above the sky, and he closed his eyes. Took in a deep breath, then opened his eyes and looked at all the different Essence as he fell down to earth, naked and with arms spread wide. The feeling of the air on his skin, the scent of the world around him, the heat of the sun. It was all... he had missed it.

The first thing that snapped into place was the bond in his mind, the link he had with Selia. She felt... far away, very far.

"Ryun!?" She asked, her tone relieved.

"Selia," Ryun answered. *"We won then?"*

"Wha—Oh, yes, we won."

"How long was I out?"

"I... around three years. Ryun... there are things that you need to know."

"Where are you?"

"Consequence."

"I'll head back soon," Ryun said. He lessened the pull of gravity on him and bled his momentum to slow down. He pulled out his robes from Bright Star and equipped them. He traveled down slowly, and saw where he was. The same place where he *died*. The Dome Leader's black city.

“Ryun, the world... a lot changed. Where are you?”

“The same place I died,” Ryun answered.

“Oh, it is going to take you so long... Maybe we can send an airship or something to get you.”

“Probably not as long as you think, I can get to the Empire in days. I can't fly, but I can move very fast when I want to,” Ryun smiled to himself. He could lessen the pull of gravity on himself, leap across the sky faster than some could fly. He could hit some pretty high speeds when he had the time and room to achieve them. Faster than the airships that carried them to the Empire from the their borders.

“Ryun, we... I... I'm glad that you are alright.”

“And I am glad that you are alright too, what about the others?”

“All from our team survived the battle. Some split off, but our people are safe, we are all in Twilight Melody Sect, there... a lot changed. The Empire fell Ryun, our trip to Hastur took us three years.”

“Ah,” Ryun simply said, there wasn't much to say. “My sect is safe?”

“It is, Anrosh is still here and... Tali. We've arrived only a couple of months ago, the trip was... hard. Hastur's monsters are still everywhere, they are pushing North, we had to go around them and they will reach the Frontier in several months, a year at most.”

Ryun blinked, then nodded to himself. The others didn't really have many ways of moving that fast, and with the distance... He could see it taking years, especially if the Empire fell and the monsters were still active without a Dome Leader.

“Is there anything that I should know that can't wait until I am back home?”

“I have your rewards and your storage rings, the few other items that survived your... death. Other than that... nothing that you can do anything about now.”

Ryun nodded. *“Thank you, I'll be on my way.”*

“Be safe.”

“You too,” Ryun said. “Tell the others that I am on my way.”

“I will.”

It was going to be a long way down, he pulled out the notifications in the corner of his eyes, and started to read.

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He landed on the stone of the square, the signs of their battle were still there. The corpse of the Dome Leader was still there too. A tower rose in the center of the square, with a glowing portal at the base. He looked around, then walked over to the corpse.

The city was empty, his sense scanned everything and sensed nothing living or moving at all.

The corpse itself was cut in half, from top to bottom. The edges of the wounds were... somehow frayed, unlike anything that he had ever seen before. It was as if he had started to decompose at the wound and then it just stopped a bit away. Ryun looked closely, walking around the corpse, aside from the main wound, the rest didn't seem to have decayed at all. He saw the places where his attacks had injured it, where Selia's techniques had blown holes in its skin. There was no smell of death, just... strange flesh, even to his eyes.

He walked over to one of the tendrils, and knelt next to one to study the talons, claws, and hooks that grew out of the flesh. He touched one, it didn't seem like it was any kind of bone, but it was tough, he remembered them piercing his flesh. He placed a hand on one and pushed out a low void beam, slowly cutting through and taking the entire thing, storing it in his Void Storage. His most precious items were still in there, secured safely, he hadn't lost anything of real worth.

After taking a few more samples from the corpse, materials for crafting or sale, he turned around. He walked over to the tower in the middle, looked at the portal that shone with Spatial Essence for a bit. The notification did mention a gate, and this looked like it had to be it. He walked around the tower, saw images carved into the stone. They were clear even to his eyes, the Essence of the tower the city even, didn't interact much with any other Essence, it made it easier to distinguish.

The images were of Eldritch monsters, like Hastur had been. Abominations of different shapes and sizes, one he was certain was Hastur. Then, Ryun came to an image that was... familiar somehow. It was a monster, tall with tendrils on the face and wings rising behind it.

He frowned, memories of Earth coming back to him slowly...

“Cthulhu?” He whispered to himself, and then it clicked. He had never been a big fan of Lovecraftian monsters, or horror in general, so he hadn’t made the connection before. Now...

He pulled his notification and read through it again. He was pretty sure that R’lyeh was the city where Cthulhu slept. He raised his head and looked at the tower, at other monsters. He realized what it meant. The monsters of this Dome had been based on stories from his world.

He didn’t know what that meant just yet, but... It was information, and that was never ill-welcome.

He looked back at the carvings and saw that the carvings were a story. He walked around the tower again, and saw it for what it was. The story of Eldritch monsters. Their births.

After a while, turned and looked back at the corpse. This being was birthed from the stories of humanity, of his world. Ryun closed his eyes and let his sense sharpen on the city. It was empty, but it... it was large, filled with buildings and rooms, tunnels beneath it. It was telling a story in itself. A city of a monster created on a whim, to do... what? As a test? That was the only thing that Ryun could think of.

He walked through the city, looking at the elaborate carvings on the walls, scanning everything with his sense. Hastur had ended, but Ryun wanted to know the story, to witness what it was before the end.

It was... interesting, it felt good. Walking around and just... looking, witnessing everything, it felt right. Hastur was dead, but Ryun would remember. A monster that could reach into your mind and make you dream. He didn’t remember what Hastur put him through, but... it hadn’t felt bad. Hastur had been trying to do something to him. He had failed, but Ryun didn’t feel like it had been... evil? The word tasted strange to his thoughts. He had thought that such concepts were beyond him, but... No, Hastur wanted something, to show him something that was... alien. The more he

walked, the more certain of that he became. The city itself was a twisted lie. It looked like a real city, but it was not. It was... wrong.

The art carved-in elicited a feeling of the other in him. The city's very layout made his mind hurt. He hadn't noticed that during the fight, but perhaps that too had impacted him. The wrongness made him want to leave the city, to get as far away from it as fast as he could. He nearly did, until something caught his attention. One of the tunnels led to the underground chamber that was bare save for a single slab of stone, with something placed on top of it. He frowned, his sense was having trouble actually touching whatever it was.

Intrigued, he fought the sense of wrongness and walked toward it. Finding the entrance to the tunnel and walking down the stairs into the darkness that mattered nothing to him. He walked for a while, until he finally reached his destination.

His eyes saw what his sense could not. The slab of stone was in the center of the room, and a body was placed on it, as if it was in an honored place. Ryun walked over, and saw the dead... drake. His body destroyed, but... preserved, like Hastur's above only differently. He could feel the power of it, even though the drake was dead. A small glass vial was placed near his feet.

He knew him, of course.

Zenker's eyes were closed, his expression peaceful. He was wearing pieces of damaged armor, clearly no longer functional, though it was well made.

"Eternal items," Bright Star said. Ryun had already assumed as much.

"You died," Ryun spoke to the dead. They had all feared that, but here was confirmation. Ryun knew now where the scars on Hastur came from, even after all the years since Zenker went through the portal, Hastur had been weakened by him. Ryun had studied that battle in his memories for a long time while recovering, there was no doubt in his mind. They won because of him, his sacrifice.

Hastur had brought his body here for some reason though. Ryun looked around, and saw carving around the room. Different than everything else. These were... formations, carved by a master, not part of the city. They

weren't active, or rather they were damaged somehow. He could still see traces of Essence in them though, the Essence of the Ethereal Realm.

Hastur had been trying something with the body, something that involved the Ethereal Realm. He either failed or shelved the project. It didn't matter in the end, but it did add to the story. The end of the Zenker, a High Ranker, a drake, someone who Ryun wished he could call a true friend. Time, if only they had more of it. He shook his head, all things had an end, but he would remember a drake who helped a stranger next to a fire when he didn't need to.

Ryun returned his eyes to the drake, and then slowly and respectfully removed the armor from the body. After that, he took the storage items of his fingers. He looked inside and saw... a treasure.

"Yessss," Bright Star hissed in his head, greed dripping from his tone.

"I doubt that Zenker would mind me taking this," Ryun said, then he pulled out a large cloak from one of the rings. He gently wrapped Zenker in it, then placed the body in his Void Storage. Finally, he reached for the vial that had been placed at the foot of the stone slab. He picked it up and read the window that popped up, his eyebrow rose for a moment, and then he placed it into his storage as well.

With one last glance at the room he turned around and left it and the city that felt like it was grating on his mind.