

Act II - Ryun

The dungeon was hidden in the mountains. It took them a better part of three days to find it, even when they knew the general location. Unfortunately, the people who knew the exact location died with Fier at Ryun's hands, so they had to search for it. Eerv, Anrosh and Ryun had gone into the mountains alone. From what Anrosh told him, Eerv had no way of breaking his contract, since it was being enforced by the Dealmaker. And apparently the Dealmaker didn't appreciate it when someone tried to circumvent the contracts they made by acting within the letter and ignoring the spirit of the contract.

Once someone has made a contract, they could not break it without consequences. The least of which apparently was the loss of all powers, and it went up from there all the way to death. So Ryun had no choice but to look at Eerv's surrender as genuine. But his talks with Eerv had shined some light on his thinking. Apparently, Eerv's advancement had slowed, and he hoped that something that Ryun knew could help him advance again. Ryun wasn't sure about helping the man just yet, even with the contract. But for now he was keeping an eye on him.

The three of them coming was also the only choice. According to Eerv the dungeon was supposed to be populated by powerful monsters, near Monarch Level, too much for an ordinary Lord Realm Cultivator. Anrosh was stronger than average, and he hoped strong enough to be able to survive. Even if she was slightly weaker it would be good, it would force her to improve and give her more Essence for her kills.

Ryun lamented the fact that Ereclaw wasn't with them, but he understood why that was. He had had talks with his contracted partner, or rather exchange of a couple words. Ryun understood how Ereclaw felt, his pack had basically exiled him because he was different, even though he had evolved in order to help them. But the pack didn't seem to be all that appreciative from what Ryun managed to gather. Ereclaw hadn't ever been the most talkative of people, but now he spoke even less. Ryun knew that the wolf was feeling lost, depressed. He could see it, recognize it, because he himself had felt that way. And Ryun made a decision to try and help him work through his issues. But for now he just had no time.

So he did the next best thing and left him with Kri. Asking the wolf to teach the girl how to sneak around the forest better. Anrosh hadn't been all that happy, but Ereclaw had saved Kri's life once before, and the girl liked the wolf. Hopefully some of Kri's cheerfulness would help Ereclaw.

They found the dungeon entrance nestled in a crevice high up the mountain. It was a stone door with strange glyphs carved on its surface. Next to the doors was a round orb, nestled into the stone of the mountain itself, glowing softly. At least according to Anrosh.

"That is the access point," Eerv said. "You will need to grant us access through there. You only need to do it from here the first time. Whenever you want to add permissions to other people to enter, you'll be able to do it through any settlement Interface."

Ryun nodded. The dungeon before him was what was referred to as a re-spawning dungeon, meaning that once it was cleared it would be repopulated after a certain amount of time. Factions fought over such dungeons often because depending on what kind they were, they could provide a source of resources that replenishes itself. But also because they could sell access to adventuring teams or wealthy individuals that want to use them as training grounds for their children or warriors. They could only be accessed once a territory was claimed, which was why the

Black Viper Sect was trying to claim the territory. The other type of dungeons was called a wild dungeon. Meaning that once it was conquered, it didn't replenish, but those generally had better treasures and their locations could then be used as settlements or cities if they were large enough. Plus, they couldn't be claimed.

Being a first to conquer either dungeon would also give you a title, which was another reason why they were fought over.

"We could sell the first clear of this dungeon for enough to set up the sect for a century," Eerv commented, and not for the first time.

"I understand where you are coming from, but you said it yourself that the treasure inside along with any resources we find will be enough to keep the sect afloat. A title for us is far more important, trust me about that," Ryun said.

Eerv turned his head to look at Ryun and sighed. "I think that you are right about that."

Ryun walked over and put his hand on the orb, immediately an interface popped up in his head asking him who he wanted to allow into the Heartstone Dungeon. It gave him a short list, with only Anrosh and Eerv. But he already knew that it would show him only people that were near an interface point he was using or the entrance itself in this case. He gave them access and then pulled his hand back. The stone doors immediately opened up.

"Its name is the Heartstone Core Dungeon," Ryun commented as the doors came to a stop.

"Heartstone?" Eerv asked, his tone surprised. "That can be very useful indeed."

"Why?" Ryun asked, there was no point in keeping his ignorance a secret, the leaders of Wolf's Grove knew about him being from the Seventh Iteration, and even though Anrosh assured him that she spoke with them and asked them to keep it a secret, he knew that such things always came out. So he told Eerv himself, somehow Eerv hadn't seemed surprised, although he tried to act like it. But Ryun had seen through it. The man had known about it before, Ryun just didn't know how. Unless someone told him before, and he was certain that the traitors who tried to sell him out hadn't told him in their reports. They probably thought to keep that information a secret as an additional bargaining chip.

"Heartstone is a type of ore, it has stone like properties, and it has a significant water content which makes it highly malleable, but it is also incredibly durable. It is most commonly used in the construction of golems. There are few factions that work with golems, but there are a few. If we find the right buyer, we can sell them access to the dungeon and anything that they can harvest inside. Based on the name I believe that we are most likely to encounter primitive golems inside as monsters."

Ryun tilted his head. "How strong are golems generally?"

"They are very powerful, tough and strong, but very slow. I will be mostly useless for this, my venom will not work on them," Eerv admitted.

Ryun nodded, he had already thought about that. But his and Anrosh's aspects should be more effective. "You can use your attacks without your Qi techniques," Ryun said.

Eerv shrugged, but Ryun could tell that he was a bit uncomfortable. Ryun took a deep breath, this would be his first real fight since he had all of his memories back. He didn't count his slaughter of the warriors. He had been... unstable then. All of his memories slamming into his head at the same time made him a bit off balance. But now, time has passed. He had had an opportunity to reflect, to remember everything that he had done.

The memories of Melody still filled his mind, and he knew that they would for a while. But for now he could only go on.

There were things that he regretted, but also things that he did not. His war with the government was bloody, and many innocents died, but he wouldn't change it. He knew that what he had done had been revenge, but he still felt justified after everything that they had done. The innocents that he had personally killed were collateral. As for the other things... He caused the death of the world. So many died because of his actions outside of that war. And for them, he was sorry. Other organizations outside of the government that might've survived had fallen under monster swarms, all because of him. People that had no connection to him, who had never known about him. Then he felt regretful about.

But he couldn't change the past, only move forward. He took a step and entered the dungeon feeling Eerv and Anrosh followed. The doors closed behind them.

He couldn't see anything, of course, since he was blind, but the other two didn't seem to have any issues walking. "Is there light?" Ryun asked.

"Yes," Anrosh said, her hands tightening on her sword. "Pale blue light running across the ceiling, like cracks that glow."

Ryun nodded, he could feel the opening up ahead and many moving shapes. Based on the vibrations they made, they were very heavy. They left the long corridor and stepped on a platform, more like a balcony with two sets of stairs to either side leading down onto the lower floor. Down there, Ryun could feel three shapes, almost twice as wide as he was, but only about as tall. They were thick, but he couldn't tell more about them so he whispered to Anrosh.

"What do they look like?" Ryun asked.

"Like grey stone golems, their heads are small and they have no necks. They look heavy, and are very thick. I think that they could probably pulverize heads of weaker opponents quite easily. Level 140, Guardian Golems," Anrosh said.

Eerv nodded and then added. "They have a gemstone in the center of their mass. It is what is powering them. Destroying that will destroy them, but the gemstones are quite valuable, if we can damage their bodies enough they will still go down. And we could then recover the gemstones."

"We'll see about what we can do," Ryun said. "But don't hold back on these ones, we need to see how strong they are."

"Are we going down there?" Anrosh asked.

"Not yet, I want to try something," Ryun sat down on the floor at the edge of the platform. The golems seemed locked in their patrol, moving from one side of the room to the other without paying attention to them. Ryun figured that they would come alert once they came close enough.

He pulled his attention from his skill and back into his mind. He remembered his talk with Tail, remembered her words the first time they met, about inspiration. He remembered what he did when he accepted Eerv's surrender. In his head, he found the remnant of the **Aspect of True Death**, the **Reaper**. It couldn't speak with him, it was just... Intent and emotion. And even that was faint.

Ryun started a breathing form, and then changed it. Pulling his Qi in different directions, he followed his techniques only in its base form, but he wanted to achieve something else now. He allowed his instinct to guide him, his inspiration. He shaped his **{Avatar}**, and the copy of him formed out of Qi next to him, mirroring his stance. Immediately he pulled the **Reaper** out of the

box he put it in, and then pushed it out, guiding it to the construct of Qi that he had just created. He felt like it wanted to go, to disappear, to fade. But Ryun didn't let it. It had given him its power, it had safeguarded his memories, it deserved more. He could feel that the **Reaper** wasn't really the full being, just... a remnant. But that was enough. It flowed into his Qi construct and settled in.

And a technique that was nearly useless to him in combat changed.

Congratulations! Your Path of the Unbreakable Wall technique has evolved! Avatar > Avatar of the Reaper

Ryun smiled and felt something like a faint connection that he had known once before. It made him feel sad again, for he had lost the full version of that connection. This was nothing but a pale imitation created by him based on what he remembered. But it allowed him control over the independent avatar. Ryun stood, as did the avatar. It still looked like a copy of Ryun, as he didn't know enough about how to make a construct shaped like a wolf that had been the remnants original body and that could move properly. But perhaps in the future.

Ryun spoke. "Come."

He stepped off the platform and his avatar followed. He could feel the drain on his Qi from the avatar, but it was less than it used to be. The things that Tali told him about had helped and he had made a more efficient version of the technique.

The golems stopped and came alert immediately. Ryun activated **{Null Mantle}** and then summoned Kagehime. He felt a tiny drain on his Qi as the avatar did the same. Ryun wondered if he could use it to fire of techniques and decided that he would need to test that out as well.

But perhaps not now when there were other people around. He didn't want it to go wrong and have his technique injure someone. Anrosh and Eerv dropped down behind him and he felt them both activate their techniques. The golems charged them, and Ryun jumped forward, heading for the one on the far right, and leaving the other two for Anrosh and Eerv.

He reached the golem and jumped to the side as it tried to swipe at him, his avatar slashed at its leg cracking the stone. Ryun wasn't sure if it was the avatar acting on its own or if he had given a command. But as he danced around the golem, striking at it with his sword the more he realized that it wasn't the Reaper's remnant, but Ryun's own commands. What was left of the Reaper wasn't the real thing, just like the Dealmaker said it was a fragment of a remnant. A thing that had taken on Ryun's memories and had a "personality" but that was just his own reflection, an echo.

It was through the connection with the avatar that he was sending commands, and the avatar obeyed immediately. It was like he was fighting with two bodies. He cracked a leg of the golem and stone ruptured, forcing the golem to the floor. Ryun kept up his attacks on the downed monster and killed it a few moments later.

He felt it die, as the gemstone in its core stopped vibrating. He took a deep breath, satisfied of his experiment. The **{Avatar of the Reaper}** was an incredible weapon, and if he could manage to do what he believed he could through it, it would be even more so. The drain on his Qi was substantial, especially with his **{Null Mantle}** active, but not enough that it was unusable.

He dismissed the avatar and felt something pass through the connection he had made, and flow into his core. He frowned, he had expected it to go back into his head. He tried to feel his core and Qi for anything unusual, but everything seemed fine. He turned his attention to the other two golems and their opponents.

Eerv was dancing around his golem, his spear flashing out to hit its joint every time the golem went in for an attack. He used his abilities, to enhance his strikes, and had already taken one of the golem's arms.

Anrosh held her sword in two hands, her aspect and Qi filling her. She had an empowering technique that increased her strength quite a bit, so she didn't quite dance around the golem. Instead, she would wait for it to attack and then move just enough out of the way. He saw her do just that as the golem attacked again, and she raised her sword, using the **[Crescent]** ability that Ryun was familiar with, she cut downward. Her sword empowered by frost smashed into the golem's shoulder and a wave of frost spread over the golem.

It tried to backhand her, but she was already out of the reach, as she jumped back the moment she finished her attack. He could sense that her **Absolute Cold** was somehow having an effect on the golem, making it move with less speed than before. When Eerv had mentioned that the material the golems are made out of had a higher water content, he had hoped that Anrosh's aspect would be effective.

Eerv finished his golem, by destroying all of its limbs and then finally doing enough damage to the main body while it was on the ground, leaving the gemstone intact.

Anrosh kept fighting for a bit longer. Her attacks were slowing it down, and it had cracks all over its body. But she wasn't strong enough to break through, even with her empowerment technique. In the end she was forced to stab the golem in its gemstone, using one of her perks to enhance the attack. She cracked the gemstone and destroyed the golem that way before her empowerment technique made her too slow to be able to dodge the golem's attacks.

As soon as the last golem was down, a chest appeared at the end of the room near a door that led deeper into the dungeon.

Ryun headed that way immediately, but Eerv stopped him with a hand on Ryun's shoulder.

"Wait, we need to check if it is really treasure," Eerv said.

Ryun blinked. "What?"

"It could be a monster, some dungeons spawn them instead of real treasure," Eerv said.

"A mimic, you are telling me that those things are real?" Ryun shivered. He had read enough stories about murderous boxes to know that they were not fun to deal with if you were unprepared.

"They are," Eerv said then picked up a rock on the ground and threw it at the chest. It hit the top and bounced off. "We should be good."

Ryun narrowed his eyes at the chest, wondering if the treasure inside was worth taking a chance. He could obliterate it at a distance.

In the end, it was a normal chest. Filled with low level healing potions and a few stamina ones. They gathered them and continued on deeper into the dungeon.