

ACT II - Ryun

Ryun found Ereclaw just outside the city, at the edge of the forest. He was sitting on a rock, looking at toward the deeper parts of the forest, in the direction where his pack lived. Ryun saw the wolf-man's ear twitch, probably on purpose, to let him know that he had heard Ryun coming.

Ryun walked over and took a seat next to him. He had given the Ereclaw time to figure things out on his own, but he felt like it was time for them to have a talk.

“So,” Ryun started. “How are things?”

It was as awkward as a start to a conversation could get. But in Ryun's defense, it was hard to find the right words to speak with a wolf monster that was contracted to you as a partner.

Ereclaw didn't answer immediately, then a few moments later he turned around to look at Ryun. “I feel that I am now without a purpose.”

Ryun already knew much about what bothered Ereclaw, but he didn't comment. Even if Ereclaw was human, Ryun wouldn't have really known what to say, but he felt like Ereclaw need just to speak his thoughts out-loud.

The wolf turned his eyes back to the forest, and spoke. “The reason why I made a contract with you was to grow stronger in order to help my pack grow. Now... It is I who have seemingly outgrown them, changed too much. They do not consider me part of the pack anymore, and I know that I could take control by force and perhaps before my change I would've. But now, I have a different mindset, the evolution into this form had changed me more than I realized it would. The pack senses it, they know that I am not really one of them anymore. And I am not one of you either. I do not belong, and that is not something that I have ever felt before.”

“You belong next to me, we are bonded after all. Nothing else really matters. I can't give you any advice about what you should do with your pack. Nor can I tell you should do in general. I know only that my reason for living is simply to grow and be free. To keep my promises, and see interesting things. I don't know how it is among wolves, if you have a reason for living, but mine isn't anything special. Many people, two-legs, would tell you that you need something profound, something inspiring or grand for your

ultimate goal in life. That the value of that goal equals the value of your life,” Ryun shook his head in distaste. “That’s bullshit, nothing matters, and everything matters. You get to do whatever you want, and if you don’t know what you want to do? Well, you have all the time in the world to find out.”

Ereclaw closed his eyes, and then nodded his head. “I guess that I had wallowed in my sadness at what I had lost enough. But these... feelings, are strange. I did not feel this way when I had been just a wolf.”

“Feelings are a blessing and a curse. Probably a curse more often than not. But I guess that you can’t be rid of it now.”

“No, I do not think so,” Ereclaw said, then he hopped off the rock and took a step to stand in front of Ryun, facing him. “You advanced again.”

Ryun nodded his head. “How did you know?”

“I got stronger,” Ereclaw said. “New powers.”

Ryun remembered Ereclaw saying that his advancement was now tied to Ryun’s. The stronger Ryun got, the stronger Ereclaw would get. “Oh? What kind?”

Ereclaw suddenly changed. His fur turned dark red and an aura of blood filled the air. Ereclaw grew by about a head’s height, his claws growing longer and wicked looking. Ryun was impressed, he looked quite intimidating.

“It boosts me, makes me stronger for a shorter period of time,” Ereclaw said. “And, there is this.”

Ereclaw waved his hand and a window appeared in front of Ryun. He blinked, he had known that the wolf had access to the Framework, of course, but it still took him by surprise. Ryun read through the window and then did a double take, reading it again.

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| Blood Bond (Contract Power) | You gain a bonus boost to your stats equal to 20% of any boosts that your contracted partner has applied to their stats, provided that you are nearby. |
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It was a great power for sure. “That’s great,” Ryun said, his mind already thinking ahead. The two of them had made a contract, but they

hadn't really acted that much in concert. Aside from the fights against the scenario bosses. Ryun knew that he needed to change that. "We should test it out, see how it works."

The wolf nodded his head in agreement. But Ryun thought about the future, the challenges that were coming for them.

"Before we start, I think that I should bring you up to speed on everything."

A month passed, and the date for the meeting between Ryun and the Last Ember Sect Head drew near. But Ryun wasn't about to go to the meeting as he was at the moment, first he was going to advance. Eerv had already advanced to the Early Heavenly Realm, and Ryun had to admit that there was something different about the way he felt. There was a weight to him now that hadn't been present before. Ryun and Ereclaw had spent the last month training together, preparing for the swarm which had slowed down somewhat. But not enough to give them that much time. It would reach them by the end of the next month.

Eerv had joined for sparring as much as he could, practicing with them as well. Although Eerv had mostly focused on private training and only sparred with them, and not working on ideas for their powers. Also, Ryun had gouged his eyes out again, deciding to train his senses some more. But not before finding Nayra to look at her, he still remembered her comment about whether or not she was beautiful. And he had to admit that she was, with blue eyes, long red hair and tanned complexion she fit the image of a breathtaking warrior. He had a fun moment, teasing her for a bit before giving her an assignment. Then, after he had removed his eyes. He was still unable to advance his **|Resonance Sense|** but he felt like he was close. Being blind helped him focus on that. They were all back in Ven'oran, for one because that was the place that the swarm was going to hit, and the other because it was closer to the Last Ember territories.

Anrosh and Tali had taken the lead in preparing the city and its surroundings for the fight against the swarm while Nayra trained the warriors in the use of the spear. Neither Ryun nor Eerv were much for tactical thinking, but Tali had some ideas and Ryun had asked Anrosh to help and oversee the preparations. They were yet to find a suitable administrator for the sect, but there wasn't much to do now. The weaker people had been sent to other territories, and the stronger fighters had been transferred to Ven'oran, along with crafters and some farmers.

The entire sect was on a war footing. People had been donating their Essence, and every waking moment of those who didn't have anything important to do was spent cycling. The Essence Crystals were all gathered in Ven'oran to be used for the advancement of people who had promise. Of course, the only reason that the people had agreed to cycle and to donate Essence was because Ryun promised to pay them back tenfold. After the swarm was defeated, of course, and provided that they survived. Not everyone had agreed, and those people had left the sect. Still, the sect had thousands of people in it, and there was enough of them left that they had acquired a lot of Essence.

And they had managed to sell quite a lot of things that they put up for auction. They had undercut the prices by a bit, but it was necessary. They couldn't afford to wait. The swarm was only a month away from reaching their territories and they had to get ready. They had literally emptied the sect, selling everything that they didn't need to survive, hoping that they could earn more by defeating the swarm. Ryun knew full well how much monster parts could be worth. It wasn't just materials, it was meat as well, and from what he had learned here, meat from powerful monsters was more expensive. Apparently it had a strengthening effect on lower powered people, if they ate it slowly over time and in small amounts. He had even been tempted to sell some of the more powerful things from his storage, like the spear. But in the end he couldn't do it.

So, Ryun had spent as much time as he could hunting with Ereclaw, looking for the strongest monsters around. With **[Reave]** he had managed to get a lot of Essence just on his own, but what he had accumulated paled in comparison to what they had earned on the auction, and they hadn't even

sold everything. There were a few more costly items, like the unique potion that Ryun had earned in the scenario, **Vial of Light**, that cost almost 200,000 Greater Essence. It was a rechargeable light source, and small enough that it could be carried everywhere. Apparently there was an area beneath the surface where light sources were always sought after. It didn't sell yet, but they could afford to let it stay on the auction for a bit. They already had enough Essence for Ryun to advance. He had even spent a portion of what he had earned to buy cycled Shadow Essence to use for every stage. A single Essence of cycled Shadow was worth less than a full essence point, since it was of a lesser quality. But Ryun didn't think that he could survive the fight with the lead monster and the swarm if he didn't advance.

They had even put aside some Essence to advance a few promising people, Anrosh included. But they didn't need to focus on them yet, they still had the time to sell things on the auction, maybe buy something to help them defend the city. But Ryun was going to meet the Last Ember Sect Head soon, and he didn't plan on giving some old cultivator a reason to look down on him. He needed to be at least in the same Realm if he was to dissuade him of his plans, if they indeed had plans to attack.

So, Ryun found himself in Tali's old training hall, all alone except for Ereclaw who was sitting in the garden behind the hall. Ryun had spent the last month thinking about what Tali had said about reinforcing his conduits. From his conversations with Eerv he knew that there were different ways to achieve this, that how he reinforced his conduits could change drastically based on the method used.

He didn't ask for details, he didn't want to use someone else's inspiration, he wanted his own. And Cultivation was what he was good at. He looked at his windows, looking through tabs and trying to find something to give him a clue. He had an idea, and he was pursuing it. He knew that cycling improved the core and conduits, depending on how one cycled. But he didn't have a number for the amount of Qi in his core, nor did he have any stat or number for his conduits, their speed and how much they could handle. It was all a bit more nebulous, just a sense inside of him, a feeling. He knew that every cycling increased his core and with that his Qi supply. Some perks did the same thing, but a perk that increased his core capacity worked on the

current size of his core. There wasn't anything like base or boosted core. It was always constant.

But just because he didn't have numbers, didn't mean that there wasn't a way to measure. It was just more of a feeling. Reinforcing of his conduits had happened with his cycling, but he felt like there could be more to it. He knew that this particular inspiration could only be done in the Monarch Realm, which confused him for a bit, since everything else he had done could've been done whenever. Perhaps he could attempt this one before, but based on some things that Tali and Eerv said, he was sure that it wouldn't have the same effect as it would in this Realm.

Ryun started thinking about what was different in this Realm. It had taken him the last month to figure it out, and he had only realized it after sensing Eerv's Qi. It had a different quality to it now that it he was in the Heavenly Realm. That made him look at other people around him. He had found that every Realm had a different feel to the Cultivators Qi. Which made him think that his Qi was somehow only capable of achieving what Tali told him he needed to do now.

He didn't yet know why, but that was unimportant. He had been inspired, he had gotten an idea, and he was going to attempt it.

He focused on his core and filled it with Essence. He used the Shadow Essence Crystals that he had bought, pulling them out of his storage and draining them slowly, filling in his core. He had managed to draw in a bit on his own, but he still had to fill 120,000 Greater Essence inside his core.

Once he was done, he started cycling the Essence quickly, in a short burst that flooded his conduits. But this time, as he pulled out Essence, he also pulled out his Void Qi. The sensation was... like he had boiling or freezing blood in his veins. He felt himself burning and frosting from the inside at the same time. Even as the Essence Crystal appeared in his hand, the pain persisted. Ryun grimaced and forced back a scream. He glanced at the crystal, seeing the 10,000 Void tainted Essence in his hand. He had thought a lot about how he wanted to reinforce his conduits. He could've gone for smaller chunks of Essence, but he figured that that would probably reinforce his conduits for smaller drains. So, he pulled out as much Essence as he could in as short of a period of time, as fast as he could. Hoping to

improve his conduits in such a way that they were able to sustain a large bursts of Qi moving through them at a faster rate.

He took a deep breath and prepared to do it again, eleven more times.

It took him almost the full hour to do it, and by the time he was done, he was soaked in a cold sweat and he felt like his insides were burning. But his pain was rewarded by the notification, and he brought it up immediately.

| Cultivation Bonus |
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| Congratulations! You have improved your conduits, you gain +50% Qi conduit speed and +50% Qi conduit resilience. |

Ryun looked at his other screens immediately, trying to *see* if there was anything change, but he saw nothing unsurprisingly. He could feel the change, knew that once he was recovered, his conduits would be faster and stronger. He was certain that bonuses such as this applied to his current state, so seeing a number with all percentage boosts didn't matter that much. This was a one-time bonus.

He dismissed the windows and then put the Essence Crystals in his storage. They would be used to improve the sect, as they would be sold in the auction house for a lot of profit actually. The Essence Crystals, when sold in the shop gave back a less return per essence sold, but on the auction, Essence Crystals could have different values, depending on the type. His crystals were now tainted by tier 7 Void Qi, which could be quite valuable to people that had the same aspect as he. He had tried to find Void Qi on the auction house, but apparently it was highly sought after. Sadly, there was no one in the sect that used the same Qi as he did so their best return was to sell it. They just didn't know how long finding someone interested to buy would take.

He put in more Essence, filled his core and then triggered the advancement to Peak Monarch. The change washed over him and he relaxed, as he felt his conduits clear up and heal from the advancement. And then, his next perk choice was in front of him.

| Path Perk available: Ruler's Eyes | |
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| Intimidating Eyes | You have achieved a great power, your eyes reflect your achievement. Their appearance reflects your inner spirit, and will passively intimidate anyone who dares meet your eyes. You gain +10% to strength, +10% to endurance, +10% to intelligence |
| Void Eyes | You have achieved a great power, your eyes reflect your achievement. Their appearance reflects your inner spirit, they are the pure emptiness of your aspect and allow you the ability to dispel any vision based powers. You gain +10% to vitality, +10% to endurance, +10% to wisdom. |
| Astral Eyes—Sights Unseen | You have achieved a great power, your eyes reflect your achievement. Their appearance reflects your inner spirit, you are no longer able to see the real world, instead you see a world in between the Ethereal and the Real. Allows you to see Class, Cultivation, and Skill, power currents. You gain +10% to vitality, +10% to intelligence, +10% to wisdom. You thrive in the darkness. And now, your blind eyes see what others cannot. |

Ryun felt his mouth twitch upward in a smile. His blindness had paid off more than he had expected. There was only one choice for his new perk, he never failed to pick the more advanced perks when he got them. He didn't know what would happen if he picked the perk without having his eyes, so he

used **Rapid Regrowth**, and felt them regrow. Once the regeneration process was done, he opened them and picked the perk.

The changed happened over a few seconds, the world dimmed and then disappeared. A moment later he saw his surroundings through a different sight. Everything was painted in a swath of colors that looked like they were presented through a filter. He could still see shapes, walls, the ground, and pillars around the room. But they were somehow faded, almost like they weren't really there. But more interestingly, there were things around him, as if someone had filled everything with a thin mist filled with different colors. It took him a moment to realize that he was seeing Essence in the air, all the different colors representing an Essence type inside the room. Most of it was something almost faded white, which he assumed was Air Essence. Near the walls, pillars, and the ceiling the mist was brownish but intermingled with the white. Probably wood, or something like that.

He blinked as something occurred to him and he looked down at himself. He saw himself, an outline like the walls and everything else that was solid. But he could also see inside of himself, and he saw color. His core was a large sphere in his stomach, filled with violet and black fire. From his core he could see a faded outline of something—his conduits most likely—that was stretching around his body, like an organic network of channels, filling everything. He pulled some of his Qi from his core, and watched as one of the channels was filled with violet and black fire. He grinned, realizing that perhaps this might help him develop his techniques more, if he could see exactly how a technique happened...

But he shook his head and tabled that thought for later, because there was more to see. There was something else inside of him. He saw a fist sized sphere with faded blue color in the center of his chest, with five lines of the same color stretching from it like circuits. One was going up toward his head, so he couldn't see where it ended, but the other four were visible. He had one going to each of his palms, connecting with a smaller blue sphere there, and another two ended up on his feet. He frowned for an instant, and then realized what they were.

The ones on his hands were probably his [**Reave**], the ones on his feet [**Inevitable Step**] which meant that the one going to his head was

[Bringer of Sorrow]. He grinned as he realized that he will probably be able to see the same things on others. He flashed his **[Bringer of Sorrow]** and saw the line going to his head light up. Then, he tried one of his perks, using **Indomitable**. His entire body flashed for a moment, with a gray light. But he couldn't see anything that looked like it was meant for a skill. He frowned, but ultimately decided that he needed a partner to test things out on.

If he could see the same things in others... he would be able to know when they were triggering their powers. And that was going to be a great advantage. Ryun grinned as he stood up and walked out to find Ereclaw, he needed to see if he could see his inner power. But after that, he was finally going to advance to the Heavenly Realm. There was little time before the swarm arrived, and he still had a lot of preparations to do, as well as a meeting to attend.