

## Growing Sect

Ryun raised the hammer and then smashed down with all of his strength. He had his mantle activated and the stats switched fully into strength and endurance. The black hammer in his hand looked as if it was made out of the night sky, but with every strike on the metal it blazed with white light.

With every swing, he was drawing out the metal. It was a relaxing task, at least for Ryun. He settled into a rhythm, not really thinking about anything. It was only when he was doing this that he could rest his mind. In between swings he turned the metal presenting a new side, then struck again. Over and over, he did the same thing, drawing the metal into a longer piece.

The metal was an alloy of dark iron and skystone—which, despite its name was not actually stone. The alloy was called skyiron and it was fairly easy to shape, which was why most beginners used and practiced their craft on it. Ryun, had no skills or perks about blacksmithing, but that did not mean that he couldn't learn anyway. Tali had said that if he ever had an empty slot and wanted to learn a skill related to smithing it would come easier to him if he was already familiar with the craft. Still, without any Framework power related to smithing he was sadly limited in what he could do.

Finally, the shape started to take form, and with a couple more strikes of the hammer, he was done. Ryun pulled the metal from his anvil and placed it into the quenching bath. The stone walls ignited as formations triggered, the sizzling sound filled the room and steam rose from the oil. It was done in less than a few seconds, the formations hardening the metal and controlling the heat transfer perfectly.

Ryun pulled the dark blue blade out and walked over to one of the walls where he opened a door on something that resembled an oven covered in glowing symbols. He placed the blade inside and closed the door for a few seconds before opening it and then taking the blade to a work bench where the handle already sat ready for the blade.

Quickly, he assembled it and then looked at his work. It was a simple blade, straight and without a guard, around the same length as his forearm.

A prompt appeared in front of his eyes with the Framework name for it and an option for him to rename it. He dismissed the window, leaving the name as it was.

The sword was an uncommon rarity, a **Sword of Minor Strength** which was the highest rarity that he could make. Not because of his own expertise and crafting, but because of his awakened item.

*"It's trash,"* Bright Star informed him.

*"Forgive me for not being a master smith,"* Ryun threw back.

*"Haa... I should've never bonded with you. I should've waited for a smith,"* Bright Star said.

*"A smith would've been able to create better things, but I doubt that they would've been able to give you things to dismantle as I have."*

*"True,"* Bright Star said.

Over the years, he had fed a lot of items to the awakened item, and they had developed a solid relationship. He had increased his bond with the forge twice. Both times his original perk and abilities had improved, and on the second time the bond had gotten another ability. He could now pull out the Anvil of the Stars out of the Star Forge's scape. That was the only reason Ryun could even make an uncommon item, anything made on it was granted +5 to a stat based on its material.

In any case, Ryun didn't do this to make some great weapon. It was just a hobby that allowed him to relax and helped deepen his bond with Bright Star. Despite what the Star Forge said, it did appreciate his effort.

He placed the sword he had made in a pile in the corner of the room, then pulled the smithing hammer and the anvil back into his soul. He walked out of the small private forge and into the large room.

*"Thank you for letting me work Forgemaster,"* Ryun said to the soot covered man with bulging muscles wearing a black apron.

*"Of course, Sect Head,"* the man bowed his head, though his eyes barely moved from his underlings rushing around the great forge.

Ryun just shook his head and walked out, leaving the man to his work. The Twilight Melody Sect had grown a lot. They had expanded to another eight territories, and had nearly quadrupled their population. They had filled many different positions that had been empty before, positions that a sect of

their size and standing had to have—like that of a Forgemaster. Recruiting them all had been... interesting. Ryun had gathered a lot of wealth from his trip to the core and he had used his **[Reave]** often over the last three years to supplement the sect's income. Though, the sect was earning a lot now. The chaos in the core meant that there was a demand for all kinds of things. The Twilight Melody Sect exported hearthstone, foodstuffs, monster materials, and weapons, all of which were being bought up as soon as they hit the markets.

The sect was prospering, which made Ryun nervous. He knew what was in the core, and he knew that they had to be ready. They had been fortifying the sect territories since they returned. But Ryun knew that it probably wasn't going to be enough. All that effort will probably serve to defend them against other factions when the core becomes too inhospitable. It was already happening; people were moving toward the Frontiers.

He had been trying to prepare himself. He trained and cycled, he tried to learn how to use his powers better. He tried learning martial arts better, though he knew that he was never going to be some great master. But knowing how to move with the way his body worked was worth the time he put into training.

Ryun shook his head and pushed those thoughts away. He walked out of the forge and into a long corridor that led outside. Lesamitrius stepped up to his side from his position near the door where he had been waiting. The ravzor had become Ryun's shadow over the years, serving at Ryun's side for a long time now.

"Anything pressing?" Ryun asked, getting to know Lesamitrius also meant that with his sense he could tell when he had something to say.

"Nothing too pressing," Lesamitrius answered. "We've gotten another message from the Midnight Reign Sect, they wish to meet with you."

Ryun grimaced. "They know that I don't do meetings."

"They've been told, which is why it isn't pressing."

Ryun sighed as he pushed open the doors that led outside. Immediately upon pushing it open the cold air hit them. The snow covering the mountain was being blasted around by the harsh wind. The fort built on the side of the mountain behind them shielded them from the worst of it, but it did nothing

to prevent the cold. The source of the cold was a shrine just across the courtyard. The Absolute Cold Shrine had been reinforced as it was one of their greatest strategic assets. That the fort housed their main forge was a result of the high tiered Essence that the shrine released. The cooling formations worked a lot better with it as a source.

He saw Cultivators sitting around the shrine, cultivating the Essence. The Sect had opened up the source to their warriors. Only a few were using it so far, those who hadn't picked an aspect yet, or those who had gained access to the Framework recently. Most were pretty far away from the center, but one of them was sitting near the edge of the shrine itself. He recognized her immediately, Kri spent nearly every free moment she had here, sitting and drawing in the Essence. It was... admirable to see.

He did the same. He had spent nearly every free moment he had in the Void plane, expanding his core. It was now nearly double its previous size. He was still at Mid Immortal Stage, though he was thinking about advancing soon enough. He had started to feel like the increases from cycling were getting smaller, but he did feel like his Qi was getting... stronger, he wasn't quite sure what the best word to explain it was.

"Meet me down below," Ryun said. He sensed and heard Lesamitrius' protest, but he was already moving.

He walked toward the cliff, then stepped off, shaping cubes as he leapt down the side of the mountain. He moved quickly, and reached his destination in record time. The city of Wolf's Grove had expanded, it was their capital despite not being the largest city. It was more because of the location of the territory. With the dungeon and the shrine it had become important for them to fortify and develop the territory.

The city had extra walls now, the original town was now the inner city, and the outer walls had been raised around the bottom of the hill. It was still not the largest city that they had, but it was well defended. Ryun made his way to the inner area and landed in a courtyard. The street was cobbled stone, and the buildings had all been expanded on and improved since the first time he had arrived to this world. They were tall and made out of stone. His mansion was still there, surrounded by a smaller stone wall and filled with

activity, people coming and going. It had become the headquarters of the sect, so it was always that way.

He didn't go there, instead he made his way to a large building that hugged the walls. It had stone pillars in front of it in the style that reminded him of old Greek buildings from Earth, with steps leading up to the entrance. The building might've been the most important place in their entire sect. It had three separate wings, one dedicated to scholarly pursuits and learning, another with large training rooms, and the last which held their vault and a few other secrets. The reasons for it being all in the same building was simple. They couldn't afford to build more than one building that was heavily defended with formation wards and arrays, so they put their most important places all into one building. He walked up, and people bowed to him as he passed. Most he recognized, but there were always unfamiliar presences these days. There was no way for him to know everyone.

He entered the building and intended to make his way to the other side of it. But then his sense caught something that drew his attention, and he changed his direction. He turned left and made his way through the building, coming into an area with several closed rooms.

He leaned against the wall next to the closed door and listened to what was spoken inside.

*Be vigilant my yet to be child,  
This is your test now,  
The cold air bites and the sun burns,  
You must hold tight to true form that for our great home yearns,  
The oceans deep wait for thee,  
And in time all will be.*

The woman standing in front of the class finished reciting the poem, and then spoke to the class filled with children.

“This is a song that the caretakers of the Deepfolk Sect sing to the offspring of the sect, or rather the yet to be their offspring. You see, the Deepfolk Sect specializes in True Bodies that allow them to live underwater. But obviously their children are not born with these True Bodies. They hold

a single town on the surface, where they give birth and then leave the offspring in the hands of the caretakers who guide them until they gain their True Bodies. This sect shares their Lord inspiration and raises the children upon them gaining access to the Framework, which does impede their future development. Although no one really knows how much, the Deepfolk Sect doesn't really interact much with the rest of the surface world except through their surface city from which they trade with the rest. Their True Bodies make it hard for them to survive for long on the surface. They live beneath the waves, on the bottom of the ocean. They interact only with the few kreative sects that live the same isolationist existences as they do. The song is sung as a lullaby to the offspring, it is supposed to be a comforting one, something for them to hold until they could finally begin their lives and be accepted by their parents and sect," the woman said.

Ryun was very much interested in what the woman said. It had become something of a thing for him, to come and listen to the lessons given to the children. He didn't grow up in the Infinite Realm, and so his knowledge was lacking. This way he could learn as well. Creating a school system as well as bringing high level tutors in had been one of the best decisions that the sect had made in his opinion.

They had a school in every major city of the sect, with thousands of children being educated. The education didn't reassemble what Ryun knew from Earth, of course. It was focused on advancement and Cultivation, but they did learn history and about other different prominent sects in the world. They also had fighting classes and instructions about how to cultivate. Usually, this kind of training and schooling was reserved for the heirs of great houses, children of Sect Leaders and influential individuals in a sect. But in the Twilight Melody Sect they allowed it for everyone.

A ringing noise snapped him out of his thoughts, and he stepped away from the wall as the woman inside spoke over the noise and the children shuffling around as they stood up.

"Tomorrow we will discuss the different ways that True Bodies impact a Cultivator's development!"

Ryun waited next to the door and looked at the children as they walked out. As soon as they noticed him, they slowed down, bowed and murmured

“*Sect Head*” as they hurried in the opposite direction of him. He scared them, and he understood why, though he didn’t even interact that much with them. The only things that they knew about him were stories and rumors of what happened in the core.

The Settled Territories had named him a High Ranker, with the number 17 on the list, known as the Undying Void. That alone had given him a lot of leverage and influence to expand his sect. Dealing with mid-sized core sects became easier, and because someone thought that he was powerful.

After the room was emptied of the students, Ryun walked inside.

Their teacher sat behind her desk and raised her head once he walked in.

“Sect Head,” she inclined her head respectfully.

“Valthua,” Ryun greeted her back.

She was a cthul, tall with purplish skin and tendrils over her mouth. She had some kind of a scholar class along with skills that helped her disseminate information. She wasn’t really a teacher in the traditional way. He didn’t know much about her, only that she used to be part of a faction in the core that was called the Seekers of Knowledge, and that she was thrown out of it for her beliefs. She had arrived in the frontier after the core turned on its head, seeking for a place to live. She found the Twilight Melody Sect when she heard that they were accepting new members into their faction without them needing to be Cultivators. She was the one that set up their schooling system and was something like a headmaster. Though, the terms of her service were that she was allowed to conduct her research uninterrupted. Ryun didn’t particularly care what one thought or believed in, and as long as she didn’t endanger the sect, she could do whatever she wanted to do.

“What can I do for you?” She asked.

“I’ve finished it,” Ryun said as he pulled out a book from his storage ring that she had lent him out of his storage.

“And how did you like it?” Valthua asked.

Ryun glanced down at the book in his hands. *The History of the Divide Volume 2*, it was a supposedly historical account of the divide between the

First and the Second, and the Third Iterations. Ryun had been trying to learn as much as he could about the conflict and everything surrounding it.

“I think that it is... somewhat biased,” Ryun said.

Valthua nodded her head. “Of course it is, it was written by the victors, all history is biased. Events are twisted to fit narratives that the winners wish them to represent. The enemy is painted in the worst possible light, while they are painted in the best possible one.”

Ryun sighed and shook his head. “Well, that doesn’t help me much.”

“But it does, the truth is still in there, between the lies and fabrications. You just need more pieces to come to your own conclusions,” she stood and walked over to a shelf behind her. She placed a hand on the side of it, and the entire row of books shimmered the books changing. It was a spatial storage of some kind, that could swap entire rows of books in an instant. She looked through the books and pulled an old looking tome tied with strings and monster hide.

“Here,” she offered the other book to him. “This might help a bit.”

Ryun glanced down at it and read the title; *Journal of Hazak Redtail*. He raised his eyebrow at Valthua in question.

“He was a Third Iteration Ranker,” she answered his unspoken question. “He died thirty years before the war started, but... I think that his journey will show you the events and thoughts leading up to what happened.”

Ryun nodded his head. “Thank you, I’ll get it back to you as soon as I am done.”

“No problem, Sect Head,” she pressed her hands together and inclined her head.

Ryun waved and walked out, storing the book inside his storage. There was so much to do, and so little time to do it. He made his way through the building, heading into another wing, his original destination. He reached a guarded hallway leading down beneath the building. The guards inclined their heads as he passed into the stairway that was lit with glowing blue gems.

Once he reached the bottom, he felt the wards test him and then let him through. The room he reached was filled with a dozen guards, six of them standing at attention against the walls while the other six sat around a table and played some kind of a game that he wasn’t familiar with.



They greeted him and he just nodded at them as he walked by the large vault door and entered another room beyond it. His senses were muffled in this place, so he didn't know who was inside. Once he entered, he was surprised to see two people sitting in the brightly lit room, he had expected only one.

Tali sat on the left, her now healed eyes closed. In the center of the room was a large spike shaped item, with a six-pronged base. The item was priceless, and was worth more than their entire sect. He felt its effect as soon as he entered the room. It made him feel refreshed, restored in a way. The item was an incredible thing, and it was also their greatest secret. The **Totem of Spirit and Soul Restoration** was a gift, given in return for a promise. Ryun hadn't been able to fulfill that promise, but he still acted in the spirit of what he had agreed to. Zenker the Wandering Drake had given it to him when he had asked for something that could help heal a soul that was crippled. His first recommendation was the Healer, but after Ryun had explained the extent and the timeframe of the wounded soul the drake had thought about it some more.

Ryun still didn't know exactly why he had given it to him. Though it was never supposed to be permanent, the item was a loan. Something that the drake would come back for later. The only thing that Zenker had said was that it was useless to him and that he didn't like selling such items to others, which Ryun didn't quite understand. It was too much, and the only thing that Zenker asked in return was for Ryun to listen to the offer of his organization in good faith and something else to be named later. Ryun didn't know what the drake wanted, since he died, nothing came out of it. Whatever Zenker's organization was, they had bigger things to deal with than trying to recruit Ryun. But Ryun knew that they sought to help and keep the Infinite Realm secure and peaceful. Ryun alone couldn't do anything against what was happening in the core, but he had done what he could on the Frontier. They had expanded and accepted anyone running from the core to the Frontier that was seeking shelter. They made peace and alliances with other sects, and he put down two sects that had tried to encroach on weaker sects in the region. He felt like he owed it to the drake for his gift.

He took in Tali's appearance, his eyes unable to see the full extent of her scars, but he knew that they were still there. She wasn't healed, not yet at least. She had only regained her eyes a few months ago, and only one of them was able to see though she said that her vision was blurry still. She had gained some of her passive skills and perks, but nothing else yet. But after three years of sitting in the same room as the totem it was progress. She had hope that she would recover.

The other person in the room was Anrosh. Ryun had hoped to delay seeing her for a few more days, until he managed to figure out what he wanted to say.

She turned her head in his direction as soon as he entered, then stood up and limped her way across the room. Ryun debated trying to run, but then sighed. Anrosh's immortality had worked, she had been restored, but... her soul was hurt. Not to the same extent as Tali's was. But she didn't have access to many of her powers. In the beginning she hadn't been able to move her legs or right arm, and she had been covered in burn scars. The totem had helped her faster than Tali—though it seemed that the time the injuries persisted on the soul factored in the amount of time needed for them to heal. Anrosh had been injured for a relatively short period of time. Within a few months she could move her arm and walk, and within a year she had regained her powers. Though she had been quick to tire, still had burn scars and her right leg wasn't back to 100%. Now, most of the scars were gone, but her right leg was still making her limp.

He knew that she was frustrated by all of that, and he had seen her getting more and more impatient over the years.

"Ryun," she spoke, her eyes holding his. "We need to talk."

Ryun already knew what she wanted to talk about, they had gone over it a hundred times, but he had given her a promise. So, he sighed and nodded his head.

"Fine," he said at last. In the back of his head, he felt a tiny thread, a presence leading to someone that he had drawn blood from before. Leading somewhere far in the South. "Let's talk."