

## ACT II - Ryun

The clouds in the distance were looming over the land, thunder could be heard, and lightning could be seen flashing across the sky. To Ryun, everything looked much different than how it probably looked to others. He didn't see like them, instead he saw Essence. It was like looking into a world made out of a countless grains of sand, painted in an impossible amount of colors and of varying densities. Objects, living things, and the ground seemed as if they were made out of a thick grouping of grains, faded in color for most people, although he had seen some that were differently colored, like the Emberhorn. To him the old Cultivator looked like he was made out of faded gray grains with veins of deep red. Ryun had realized what the different colors meant, and he knew that what he was seeing in the Emberhorn's body was some type of Fire based Essence. Most likely the result of his True Body, as the only people that had different colors in their bodies were those who had visible physical changes from their True Body.

Everything around him looked the same, a canvas painted with every color imaginable, grain by grain. Air Essence was gray, almost translucent, allowing him to see into the distance. He saw the slightly more substantial silver grains moving like a stream through the air, the Wind Essence. He could see the monsters in the distance, charging forward, to his eyes they were just a mess of colors, a wave coming forward to swallow them whole. He couldn't see the individual monsters, not at that distance. But his **|Resonance Sense|** did have a large enough range that he could see better. He still hadn't evolved the skill, even though he had tried to push it to tier 6. He felt like he was close, but he failed every time he attempted it, and he was not even half way done with the skill quest to get it to tier 5.

In the end he had managed to level some of his skills, he improved his **|Pounce|** to **|Enhanced Pounce|** giving him the ability to twist his body in the directions which his body would be hard pressed to twist in naturally. And he had picked up a new skill, **|Aim|**. A big part of his decision to pick it up was his plan to deal with the swarm leader, but it was useful overall since it could be used on any of his attacks.

Ryun felt three people walk up to stand next to him. Eerv on his left, Anrosh on his right, and Ereclaw next to her. All three were looking ahead at the swarm in silence. Ryun didn't need to turn and look at them to know what they were feeling. The fear, the anticipation before the battle, he was sure that those emotions were present on their faces now.

The city behind him was silent, the warriors standing on the walls and in the city itself. Both the Last Ember Sect and the Twilight Melody Sect warriors were ready for the swarm. Ryun's sense spread through the city, finding Nayra standing in the courtyard behind the gate with a squadron of warriors. They had put her in charge of them, and they were the group that was supposed to hunt down the monsters that managed to get over the wall and into the city. Kri was somewhere beyond, gripping her spear and waiting along with her squad. It amazed him that Anrosh had even allowed her daughter to fight. But she was an adult now, and she had power. She couldn't grow if she was sheltered.

Ryun turned his head to the right, looking at another wall tower. On it he could see and sense the Emberhorn and his son, surrounded by their warriors. The old man had agreed to all of Ryun's and Eerv's plans, which made Ryun suspicious. But there was nothing that he could do about that. They couldn't survive the swarm alone, they needed the help.

Ryun turned his eyes from the other Sect Head and looked ahead. The storm was a mixture of deep blue, bright yellow, silver and pale white grains to his eyes. He knew already what those colors represented or he could speculate. Deep blue for storm Essence that came into being when the other three were present, yellow for lightning that came into being when the pale white of the cloud's and silver of wind were strong enough. His eyes had given him a glimpse into the rules of this world. He had seen Essence come into being and disappear in an instant, the grains in constant flux. He had seen how the tiny grains of deep black laid over everything, so small that they were almost invisible to him. Gravity Essence that pushed everything down. He had seen it increase and intensify when he jumped into the air, and had seen how his body shrugged the effect off. This world was flat, an infinite plane, it did not work in the same way that Earth had. Nothing worked the same.

Everything was Essence, every element, every law, every concept. The effects just resembled what they had been on Earth.

He hadn't had the time to study everything in depth, he had focused more on training and planning. But, perhaps in the future he would find the time to spend on learning the secrets of this reality.

He turned back his attention to the storm. There was no sign of the swarm leader, but it was inside the storm cloud. Ryun was certain of it. It could be further behind, with the main part of the swarm. But its absence gave them the time to set things up.

"Everyone ready?" Ryun asked.

The three people around him nodded their heads. Ryun took a step forward and then paused, focused his mind and sent a message.

*"You sure about this?"* Ryun asked.

*"Of course, it is a good plan,"* Ereclaw responded, his words echoing in Ryun's head.

Their training had granted them an unexpected boon, their connection had deepened, and they had gained a new bond perk. The ability to send messages with their minds to one another. It was nothing like what he had once shared with Melody, that had been a bond far deeper, where they shared all of their being with each other. This was simply as if they were speaking to one another, sending only words and nothing else.

Ryun jumped on the parapet, getting ready to charge forward when Anrosh stepped forward and grabbed his wrist. He turned around looking down at her. To his eyes, she was a living statue made out of sand, with lines deep inside it. At least he could see her face and expression, but there were no details, he couldn't see the iris of her eyes, only smooth surfaces.

"Promise me that you will come back," she said as she looked him in the eyes.

Ryun smiled, she really was a special woman. Strong and talented, and yet stuck so far behind him. He knew that the cause of that was that she had spent her entire life being told by others that she was unremarkable, that she was nothing. He had tried to make her see her own value, giving her the sect leadership—although he had many reasons for that, like not wanting to be bothered by it—but also putting his trust in her. And she was coming along,

he could see it in the way that she spoke to him, no longer cowed and respectful.

“Of course Anrosh, I have every intention of surviving this,” Ryun said. He knew her reservations about the plan, she had voiced them to him plenty of times. On another wall tower, Ryun sensed Emberhorn watching him and Anrosh. He didn’t know what the Sect Head’s powers were, so he didn’t know if he could also listen in. So he didn’t say anything else, instead he grasped Anrosh’s hand and squeezed once, before letting go and jumping off the wall.

He landed on the ground without a sound, and a moment later Ereclaw followed after him. The swarm was charging, a mass of monsters riled up, desiring only one thing, to destroy anything in its way. It was too bad really, that they were in the way of another monster that was willing to end anything that stood in its way.

“Go,” Ryun sent to Ereclaw, and the wolf leapt, heading away from the wall and the swarm, into the forest. In the beginning his job was to hunt the powerful monsters that weren’t with the main body, cull their alpha monsters a bit. And Ryun’s job was similar. He was to stem the tide, to slaughter as many as he could and let the wall handle the rest. The more monsters he killed, the less the wall would have to contend with. Of course, the range capable warriors on the walls would support him from the afar.

But this was what Ryun was made for, where he shined. One, fighting against the many. The swarm was getting closer and Ryun got ready. He had his **Mantle of the Undying** over his battle robes, rings on his hands and the Vial of Shadow around his neck, tucked into his robe. He reached for his Void Storage, and started pulling out potions. They had bought a few of temporary boost potions on the auction house, and Ryun started drinking them. A potion to keep his mind clear, another to increase his Qi Regeneration and another to increase his body's regeneration, two to increase his strength and a few of the other stats. He took a deep breath, summoned Kagehime, and then entered a breathing form.

**{Avatar of the Reaper}** surged through him and he felt his mind split, a small partition tearing itself away. He put his hand to the side and Qi flowed out of him, shaping itself into a copy of himself. Black with dark violet ascents, the Avatar stood next to him. It was as if he was existing in two places

at once. Without any hesitation, both his bodies jumped forward at the charging swarm.

He couldn't help his mouth turning up into a grin. He loved fighting such odds. He saw the names of the monsters ahead of him, their power level. Most were in between levels 60 and 120, Peak Mortal and Early Mortal. But he saw a few of the bigger ones, probably the alphas, who were around between levels 120 and 180 and Mid Lord to Early Monarch. It was not going to be an easy fight. Most of the monsters ahead of him looked similar in shape and size to bears, only with large horns on their foreheads. There were different types of them as well. Ones that to his eyes looked like to be covered in Earth Essence, others that were more normal faded gray in color that he associated with Flesh Essence. Among them were also some smaller monsters, looking like the cat-like monsters he had faced before.

Ryun shaped his Qi and his **{Qi Armor}** appeared all around him. He hadn't had the chance to change his techniques in the same way that Anrosh had, so that he didn't need to keep them active all the time. He had considered it, but he tended to lose time when he was consumed by a fight, he could easily have the technique run its course at the worst possible moment. So he had decided to keep them as they were.

He could still control three techniques at the same time. With **{Avatar of the Reaper}** and **{Qi Armor}** that left him with one more technique that he could use. And since all but **{Null Mantle}** were not sustained techniques, he had enough room to maneuver, and he had to carefully spend his Qi. In any case he had a plan.

He and his avatar smashed into the front line of the monsters, both releasing a **{Breath of Destruction}** directly in front of them. The front line monsters died under the onslaught that lasted barely a couple of seconds, and Ryun felt his stats rise from **Vampire**. They continued forward, Ryun raised Kagehime and the avatar using its copy made out of Qi.

He cut around him, the endless mass of monsters surging around him, some not even paying him any attention. But the sheer weight of them was enough to make him falter. He nearly got thrown to the ground and trampled, but his true body coupled with his armor made him firm enough to withstand their push. He was cutting all around him, trying to go for kill shots. Using

**|Aim|** to sever spines or cripple the monsters' eyesight when he couldn't. He was jumping around, using the monster's backs when there was no clear ground for him to jump off of. Qi Cubes and walls let him maneuver and keep himself safe, because the front line of the swarm had already surrounded him, and he was in the middle of them.

A cat-like monster swiped its claws at his back, hitting his armor and making Ryun take a step forward, his **|Enhanced Balance|** preventing him from stumbling. He twisted with **|Enhanced Pounce|**, his body curling unnaturally to the side and pirouetting around. He stabbed with Kagehime and cut into the monster's throat. A bear-like monster tried to take advantage and attack Ryun's back, but his **|Resonance Sense|** told him everything that was happening around him. He didn't move his body, instead he moved his avatar. A **{Breath of Destruction}** exploded out of the avatar, disintegrating the monster's head before it could attack him.

Ryun's senses told him that he had been completely surrounded, and that the monsters had reached the wall. He sensed the attacks from the defenders, arrows and spears, techniques and abilities, all hitting the front line of the monsters. And then the Emberhorn stepped to the edge of the wall. He raised both his hands, and fire blossomed across the field. Pillars of fire sprung from among the monsters, reaching up several meters, before they unfurled into something like petals made out of fire. Twisting around and catching any monster near.

Ryun jumped into the air, shaping a Qi cube and coming to a stop above the swarm. His avatar remaining below, killing the monsters and increasing Ryun's stats. But Ryun turned his eyes toward the wall and looked.

The monsters screamed in pain, tried to run away, but they only spread the fire around. The Emberhorn's technique had killed a hundred monsters in a single attack, and set thousands others on fire. The Sect Head lowered one hand and focused, and then Ryun saw a white flash in the center of the Emberhorn's head. A sign that he was now using a skill. The fire had spread across the field, many of the monsters were burning, and in their panic to escape smashing into other monsters setting them on fire as well. The Emberhorn moved his hand and the fire near to the wall *moved*. It intensified

and turned blue, burning the monsters to a crisp in an instant, and then it burned across the ground, moving hunting for other monsters.

*A skill that can control fire*—Ryun thought to himself. Eerv had said that Emberhorn had a simple Fire Aspect and that his path was one that used fire to fight from afar. Ryun wasn't foolish enough to dismiss the Sect Head's power just because his aspect was simple. Fire was plenty strong, as he was seeing first hand.

Ryun turned away from the wall and the defenders, seeing that they had no problems keeping the wall. He jumped from his cube, and into a mass of monsters as he moved his Qi.

He landed on a patch of clear ground and the monsters turned to attack him immediately. Ryun released his technique at the same time that his avatar did. The wave of Void Qi exploded out of him and the avatar as he triggered the **{Darkest End}**. The monsters that were near him and the avatar disintegrated, and the wave spread beyond, splashing across the monsters further away. Their flesh started disintegrating as the Void Qi hit them, their eyes collapsing, their skin disappearing and violet Qi entered their bodies, the overtime damage of the **{Darkest End}** crippling them. Stats surged into Ryun, giving him nearly enough stats as he could have with his **{Null Mantle}**.

Two large circles, empty of monsters were now in the field. The monsters onslaught slowed, but more came, and quickly the tide returned. Ryun readied himself to attack them, when a loud and powerful screech filled the air. Ryun's eyes turned upward, and there among the clouds, far above the ground, he saw the swarm leader. **Avariel, Lord of Lightning**, was heading toward him and Ryun smiled.

He jumped up onto one of his cubes, above the range of the monsters below him, but not high enough that they weren't in the range of him. He dismissed Kagehime, and then he pushed his Qi into his cube, changing it to a large disk that he could stand on and move somewhat. He stopped his **{Qi Armor}**, and the Qi broke away from his body. Then he moved his Qi and **{Null Mantle}** filled him and he moved his bonus to his strength, and a bit less to his dexterity and endurance. And then a wave of red mist exploded out of him, reaching to the ground below him and the monsters there. His

avatar was still killing monsters, his **Vampire** giving him a portion of their highest stats, the **Presence of the Eternal Hunter** sending his stats even higher as there were hundreds of monsters in his range. The stats hit him like a mountain falling down on top of him. He had trained in the city, with a hundred warriors around him to feed his Eternal Hunter perk, with all his other buffs active. But this... he had never had as much stats as he had now. It felt hard to even think, as if so many thoughts were going through his mind that he couldn't even comprehend them. He quickly glanced at his stats.

Strength	847(+20+5+20+725+1592+8046)=11255
Dexterity	791(+20+5+10+301+1053+8024)=9903
Vitality	1013(+20+10+10+50+5246)=6349
Endurance	928(+20+10+10+395+1049+10627)=13039
Intelligence	770(+20+10+10+5108)=5918
Wisdom	1104(+20+10+10+5237)=6381

Even though he had trained for this, the real thing was far greater. His eyes locked on the monster high above him, seeing it far more clearly than he had before, even though it was more than a thousand meters above him.

He gritted his teeth as he focused on his movements, slowly pulling his hand back and getting his body in position. He turned his wrist, and felt a crack spread through his bones. He grimaced, knowing that that shouldn't happen. His endurance was higher than his strength now, but... his body wasn't used to this amount of stats, nothing was operating as it should be. But it was still an incredible boost in power. And he was going to use it as much as he could. He pulled out a javelin out of his storage ring, and it fell into his hand perfectly. He narrowed his eyes on Avariel, and used **|Aim|**.

The monster was readying an attack, he could see the Qi channels in its body flashing with Qi. He didn't have more time. Ryun aimed at the monster, and then twisted his body in a move that he had practiced endlessly the last few months. His hand snapped forward as his hips turned and the javelin flew out of his hand, sending a shockwave that made even him stumble back.

His arm shattered, the bones pulverizing themselves to dust, his muscles ripped apart and broke through his skin, his shoulders cracked and



broke through the skin. His hips fractured and his knees exploded out of their sockets. He dropped to the Qi disk in agony, everything hurting far more than it had ever before, his stats making him feel everything so much more. A loud pain filled cry filled the air above him, but his own pain was too much for him to even realize what that meant. His vision went dark, and then he heard someone shouting.

“—up, do you hear me!” Kagehime’s voice brought him back enough that he realized that he had to have passed out. Everything hurt, so much that he was almost tempted to just close his eyes and go to sleep. But then he gritted his teeth, his strength enough that he broke them and dislocated his jaw. The new surge of pain somehow made everything clearer and he focused on his Qi. He shifted all of his **{Null Mantle}** bonuses to vitality.

“How long?” Ryun asked Kagehime.

“You were out for a few moments only, but you need to get up,” she told him.

His body had already started healing, his **Mantle of the Undying** was increasing all healing effects on him. His avatar had slowed when Ryun lost consciousness, but it could move somewhat independently. It was killing monsters, and **Feast** was healing him further. His bones were reforming from dust, his muscles healing and his skin closing up. He slowly raised his intact arm and pulled a healing potion from his storage. He managed to tip it in his broken mouth and down his throat without too much damage, he just broke three fingers.

He felt the healing potions work, it was the highest grade he had, bought on the auction house just a month ago. Slowly he moved, getting himself up, and looking for the swarm leader.

He found the monster immediately, the javelin sticking out of its shoulder. Qi flashing around it. *Fuck*. It was about to fire its technique at him, and Ryun knew that he needed to get away. The only issue was that he was going to shatter his body again if he did. He wasn’t yet fully healed, but his ordinary stats would have to be enough. He turned off his **Presence of the Eternal Hunter** and moved. He felt his healing slow as he lost the stats of all those monsters below him, but at least he didn’t shatter every bone in his body just by moving. He jumped as the sky flashed.

The attack hit his disk and broke it into pieces, hitting the ground and killing a few dozen of the monsters below. Ryun landed on another Qi construct, another disk, and pulled out another javelin. The monster was readying for another attack, and Ryun activated his perk again. Red mist spread all around him and his stats soared.

A moment later he **|Aim|**—ed and sent another javelin flying. This time, somehow, he managed to keep his knees from breaking. His hand exploded into a mangled mess of flesh and blood. His robe's sleeve was long gone from the last attack. He managed to remain standing, even though it felt like every bone in his body was shattered, and watched as the missile flew so fast that it set the air around it on fire. Avariel tried to evade, but it wasn't fast enough. Ryun saw a skill flash in its head, and something protected its body. It wasn't enough, his javelin hit, even though it was blown slightly off-course, and instead of hitting center mass it nicked its shoulder. That nick alone was enough to tear feathers, skin and bone apart. The monster cried out and started falling down. Ryun grinned through the pain as he drank another potion.

The monster was falling, but Ryun could see it healing, beating its wings as it was trying to keep in the air. Soon, it would manage it. He debated using a javelin again, but he felt like his body might not be able to take another throw like that. He was already feeling tired, the healing alone was exhausting him. He needed to reach the monster, now that it was injured, and finish it quickly. With his body mostly healed, Ryun dismissed his perk and summoned Kagehime as he jumped up into the air, using cubes to soar. Heading straight for the monster.