

Scenario

The red mist filled the glade, with Ryun in the center. He had spent only a few of his javelins to kill the largest groupings of monster, focusing on taking down the queens. It took five days for his forge to create another masterwork item copy, so he didn't want to spend too many. Of course, he had been making copies of this javelin since he had still been in the Empire's territory. He had always used such thrown weapons as a way to reach some enemies. Still, she watched as he focused on using his Void beams to kill the remaining monsters, though many were running back into their burrows. They had hit the monster population hard, but they didn't intend to clear them fully. Having some monsters in the territory could be beneficial if he intended to make this his home in the future. Might deter people from annoying him.

Tali took a deep breath and decided to head down as well and help him out. She shaped a technique and brought down the might of the sky down on the monsters with her descent.

Another few thousand monsters and a little while later, the two of them stood on one of the staircase-like plateaus.

"Here you think?" Tali asked.

In lieu of an answer Ryun plopped a handful of Void crystals into his mouth and hummed.

"Oh, yes Tali, here would be great," she tried to mimic his tone, in a mocking manner.

He glanced in her direction and threw another crystal in his mouth.

"Why are you like this?" She asked him.

"I'm still thinking, don't rush me," he told her. "I want to find the perfect place."

"We've been standing here for the last half an hour, staring at the side of a cliff," Tali said, just a tiny bit annoyed.

Ryun tilted his head in her direction. “Just because I’m standing still, doesn’t mean that I’m not looking,” he waved a hand in a circle next to his head and she grimaced.

“Right,” she said, she still forgot sometimes the insane range that his skill had. “So, do you at least have any ideas?”

“I do,” Ryun said.

She waited, then started tapping her foot against the ground. After another five minutes of silence, she finally broke. “And you are not going to share these thoughts with me?”

Ryun blinked. “I haven’t made a decision yet.”

“And it doesn’t occur to you that perhaps I could help with that?”

He frowned.

“Seriously Ryun, you come to ask me advice about all kinds of nonsensical things, but nothing about this?”

“I ask you about things I know you have knowledge about. I wasn’t aware that you knew anything about the best placements for territory Interfaces,” Ryun said slowly.

Tali sighed in defeat. “Even if I don’t know anything related, you should still ask, it is... courteous,” Tali said.

“Fine,” he waved his hand. “So where should I put it down?”

“Well, since we are not going to be building anything here right now, probably somewhere hidden,” Tali answered.

Ryun nodded. “So, one of those caves?”

“That would probably be a good place,” she answered.

They started walking toward the side of the cliff where two round cave entrances led into the tunnels below. Some connected to the burrows beneath the forest, but Ryun said that he didn’t detect any monsters nearby. It was a good place for a secluded home. They could build a compound on top of the plateaus and buildings over the caves, then expand into them beneath the ground to build some of the things that a Sect Head needed to have—like a vault, a meditation room, and a secure room for the Interface.

They walked through the tunnels for a while until they found a small cavern in the side of one of the tunnels.

“This looks like a good place,” she said.

“Are we ready?” He asked.

“Are you? I’m not the one that has been fighting for the past several hours,” she looked him in the eyes.

Ryun pulled out a potion out of his storage, white with glowing blue particles, and then he downed it. She recognized a Qi regeneration potion, it was the greatest advantage that he now had. Zenker had always had potions and elixirs for everything, and Ryun had gotten a lot of Zenker’s supplies. Some, she knew, Zenker had to have spent in battles, but from what Ryun showed her there was enough battle potions to last him years of constant battle.

“I’m ready,” Ryun said and pulled out the Town Stone.

“Remember,” Tali warned. “We don’t know what to expect. Be ready.”

They didn’t know what the event was going to be. They didn’t have a town already built, but that didn’t really matter. Most did it in order to have some defense in case of an invasion event, or just to have a base of operations while they finished it. The two of them were going to claim the territory on their own. There was danger in that, true, but there was also a chance for a great reward. Ryun nodded and then activated the stone.

The effect was immediate. Everything around them filled with bright light that lasted for a mere moment. She blinked and then... there was nothing, only black. She couldn’t see anything, but she knew that it had worked and that they were somewhere else.

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There was no flash of light like last time, or at least Ryun couldn’t see it. Through his eyes it looked like... as if the essence around him was wiped clean by a curtain of endless black, and then in the same breath the Essence was replaced with other Essence, a different configuration. There was no Light Essence anywhere, but that meant nothing to him. The Essence around them was of Air, and the walls of thick Stone, there was something else in the air that he couldn’t quite identify, an Essence of some kind. What was the most intriguing, was what his sense told him. They

were in the tunnels, similar to the place where he used the stone, with one big difference: his sense couldn't *see* anything behind the walls around them. Oh, he could sense far into the distance, the twisting corridors, even other tunnels intersecting with the one they were in. But he could only sense a meter or so of stone around them and then... nothing. It was as if only the tunnels existed, suspended inside a nothingness that surrounded them.

It wasn't like he was sensing a Void or anything similar. There was no Essence beyond the tunnel walls. And even the walls were strange. It didn't seem to be related to Void, not as he understood it. Void was a force that sought to destroy everything else, it hungered for all other Essence. It wasn't... an emptiness, an absence of Essence in the way that someone might think. It struggled against other Essence, it fought, there was a balance there. This thing beyond was just... nothingness.

Before investigating he pulled up the notification waiting in the corner of his eye.

You've been teleported to the testing area, **The Den of the Ancient One**. Find the *One That Sings Of Stone* and defeat it. You will be given rewards based on your performance.

"It's pitch black," Tali commented, and Ryun turned to look at her. He pushed the notification away and nodded. He could still see, he didn't need light, of course, but he saw no Light Essence which meant that she wouldn't be able to see anything.

"Too bad for the Framework that you and I are probably the best equipped to deal with darkness," she chuckled, and Ryun did too.

Tali had been blind for centuries, and she adapted. Now that she was recovered she could sense her surroundings by the changes in the air. Her range wasn't as large as his was, but her sense wasn't at all weaker than his.

"A boss battle, seems like," Ryun said.

“Yes,” Tali added. “Any ideas? The air is mostly undisturbed. The ripples of our arrival are painting the map of long winding tunnels, leading down into the ground.”

Then he walked up to a wall and studied it for a moment. The Essence was high tiered, and dense, far denser than anything he had ever seen before. He didn't think that he would be able to deal much damage to it if any.

“I don't think that we are underground at all,” Ryun said slowly. “My sense can't see behind the walls.”

Tali frowned, but then shrugged. “Not like it matters, we need to find the boss and kill it.”

Ryun agreed. He focused on his sense, with the amulet he got from Zenker his range was longer and he could tell that there was something deep beneath them that all the tunnels led to. A cavern that he could feel just an edge of. He told Tali and they agreed to head in that direction.

As they walked, neither one of them felt any signs of enemies. Even when the entire cavern filled his sense there was nothing. He could sense that there was a large stone formation of some kind was down there, a spiral that had to be artificial, but nothing else. They hoped that there was a clue down there, as there were no tunnels leading out of the cavern, and nothing above them or in the other tunnels. They were trapped.

“Something is strange here,” Tali added after a while.

“What do you mean?” Ryun asked.

“Don't you feel it? There is something... oppressive in the air,” Tali said.

Ryun frowned. He wasn't really feeling anything, but he closed his eyes and tried to feel it anyway. He used his **|Mental Fortitude|** skill, but he didn't feel anything trying to invade his mind. His sensory skill didn't sense anything amiss either. He glanced at Tali, she was wearing her combat robes, while he was inside his armor. He removed the helmet for a moment, but still he couldn't tell. Was she imagining it? Doubtful, Tali was old and powerful she didn't imagine things. He put his helmet back on, and remained on guard.

“Tell me if you sense something more,” Ryun said.

Tali nodded, and they continued.

It took them a few hours at their pace to reach the bottom and step into the large cavern. It was... massive, the size of a city with a tall ceiling and flat floor. Except for the stone formation in the center of the cavern. It was tall, at least fifty meters high, and rounded. Like a snake curled up on itself in a spiral, a massive and thick snake. The walls of the structure were rough, uneven, but no different in his eyes than the stone all around them. He could feel nothing strange about it.

“It is worse here,” Tali said slowly. “You really don’t feel anything?”

“No,” Ryun said. “What does it feel like?”

“As if... something is pressing down on me, I don’t know how else to explain it. Like we are in a presence of something... great.”

Ryun narrowed his eyes. The only answer that he could see make sense was that the reason he wasn’t feeling it was because their differences. What did Ryun lack that she didn’t? She was in the higher Stage, had more Path perks. She also had **Soulfull** perk, from her Crucible of the Soul—was she just more sensitive than he was? Or did he have something that protected him? **Indomitable, Reaper’s Aura, the Eternal Hunter.** It could be anything, the reason didn’t matter, he trusted Tali.

“Keep watch,” he said slowly. “I’m going to see if there is something about this structure.”

He refused to believe that the structure had nothing to do with this scenario.

He walked up to the stone wall and looked at it closely. The essence was of the highest tier, but it was different than any he had seen before somehow. Denser, and just like the walls around them, he couldn’t sense anything deep inside, only the surface. Were they supposed to break in? He didn’t immediately resort to that, instead he walked around it. The scale of it didn’t really sink in until he started walking. The diameter of the structure was hundreds of meters across. It filled a significant portion of the already large cavern.

“Anything?” Ryun asked as Tali landed. She had scouted the top while he walked the bottom.

“Nothing, but then I can’t really see in the dark. I sent a few blasts of wind over it though, nothing stands out,” Tali answered.

Ryun grimaced and then made a decision. “I’ll try to get through then,” he walked up to the stone and placed his focus against it, then started channeling his technique through it. A moment later he fired a beam of the Void. It hit the stone and slowly, far too slowly, he felt the stone losing out. His void was tier 9, but... the stone was tougher than anything he had ever tried to damage before, he was barely scratching the surface. He kept his hand on it though, in contact with the stone, pushing physically just as much as he was with Qi.

And then, in a single moment, something changed. The ground rumbled, a sound of stone grinding exploded and Ryun screamed as his eardrums exploded, or whatever it was that he had in their stead. He felt his insides tearing themselves apart, the Essence that made up his body shaking and crumbling. Something pulled, through his hand laying on stone.

He was healing, his Qi repairing the damage as it was happening, but then Qi burst through his arm exploding his conduits as it overloaded them. The stone pulled his Qi out of his body and into the stone. His eyes widened and he tried to move back, but something prevented him. With a roar he shaped claws on his other hand and stabbed into his right arm as he dismissed his armor, then he tore the arm from his shoulder. He stumbled back and shaped a pillar beneath his feet, pushing himself up and back. His sense was filled with noise, he could barely sense anything, and his hearing was coming back only to be damaged and healed again. He regrew his arm and put his armor back on as well as another copy of his focus—the last one, he didn’t have the time for Bright Star to make more.

And then the sound and the vibrations stilled, and the structure in the middle of the room moved.

A third of his Qi was just gone, from healing, but mostly from whatever it was that had pulled the Qi out of him.

He saw Tali flying to his side, a sphere of blended Essence around her, Bond and Sky, protecting her. He looked back at the structure and saw what it really was.

Worldstone Worm: The One That Sings Of Stone (Tier 27; Image of Worldstone; Bloodline of the World Worm)

He stopped on a platform of void and looked as the massive creature raised its head up. A round head with no discernible features turned in their direction, and then it opened its mouth showing a gaping maw filled with jagged teeth made of stone. For a split second he could feel inside the creature, but then it roared and everything turned to noise. He tried to use his scanning ring, but it gave him nothing.

He could already tell that this was going to be... difficult.