

## **Territory**

They floated, or at least Tali did while he stood on a disk of Void Qi, above the territory, looking at the landscape. It was a small territory, nested high in the mountains. A valley with a river splitting it in half with a small forest glade surrounded by jutting stones on one side of it and an ascending series of small plateaus covered with vines and shrubbery on the other with large round openings on every cliff side leading into the caves that led deeper into the mountains. Some, they suspected, led into the Under. The main monsters of the territory were spider-types. A queen and a bunch of smaller male spiders, and they nested in the forest, killing and feeding on the birds that nested higher up in the mountains above the valley when they came down to drink from the river.

“You sure we want to test things here,” Tali asked.

Ryun didn't turn his head from the territory below. “The report said that the highest monster the scouts saw was only a tier 18 masterwork hakza-queen.”

He did know that there were dozens of nests of the monsters, he could even feel some of them far down below them in the burrows that covered the forest. Hidden in bushes and beneath tree roots, waiting to ambush their prey, but even if each nest had a masterwork monster he didn't think that they were that dangerous. The male hakza, according to the report, were mostly legendary, but lower tiers. Hakza were spider-like creatures, in the sense that they wove web-like constructs too. Theirs were a bit different though, as they hardened over time and became their nests. They were also a lot more territorial monsters than most. Each nest had a single queen, and hundreds of male spiders that protected the nest and scrounged for food. In a way they were more ant like than spiders, but by sensing them Ryun felt like they looked more like spiders, in a vague sense at least. They had eight legs with their bodies being covered in sensory hairs. The difference was that they were less insect and more mammalian like, with larger muscles and bones instead of the carapace. And their heads were a strange triangular shapes at the front of their squat bodies that had just a single long fang at the tip, which they stabbed into their prey and used to drain them. There was a

lot of them, which was why Ryun thought that this territory was a good testing ground.

Tali shook her head. “Not that,” she said. “I meant the other thing.”

Ryun blinked, and then realized what she was talking about. He pulled out an object out of his storage and looked at it for a few seconds.

“What are you thinking?” Ryun asked at last.

“This is a high tiered territory,” Tali said. “It won’t be easy.”

“I don’t need easy,” Ryun added.

“Sure, but you are not yet as comfortable with your body and fighting style as I would want you to be,” Tali told him.

“I’m not going to that gathering without refining my power, and besides, battles have a way of teaching me more than anything else.”

Tali crossed her arms, over her chest. “We should have more people here, we don’t know what type of scenario it is.”

“Hm...” Ryun didn’t comment. Still looking at the Town Stone in the palm of his hand, he thought about his decision. The scouts had attempted to claim both this and surrounding territories. Three had been scenarios, or at least they thought they were as the scouts never returned. Sometimes a cluster of the territories would have similar claiming quests, so they assumed that this territory was no different. It was though the most dangerous of the territories, which probably meant a more dangerous test.

A shriek made Ryun turn his eyes above, to a mountain towering over them that he couldn’t see. A large bird was flying in circles, probably disturbed by the two of them. The ease and the speed that it flew at made him wonder how strong it was. The territory they were in was a high tiered one, meaning that the Essence it was made out of was of higher quality and tiers. The air was denser, harder to move through, the gravity was stronger too. There was so much Essence that it was hard for him to see far in the distance with his eyes. He often described his sight as looking through a fog or mist, now the mist was much denser. It didn’t matter much as he could still *see* with his skill. Still, the monster above had to have some really high stats to move that fast.

Tali was right in a way, more likely than not this scenario was going to be a difficult one. He remembered the last, and the only, scenario that he was

part of what now seemed so long ago. It had been hard, yes, but the Twilight Woods weren't such a high tiered territory, this one was.

Regardless, he did want the Sect to grow, to expand. And while Anrosh was dealing with the politics and agreements, he had to help somehow. And besides... he had been looking for a new place to call home, somewhere away from other people where he didn't need to constantly hear their spoken words. A remote mountain valley? This was perfect.

And there was still the matter of training, of challenge, both for himself and for Tali.

He glanced in her direction. "I'm still inclined to do it, but for now," he put the Town Stone back into storage. "I should start clearing monsters."

Tali waved her hand in a manner that he had come to understand meant for him to get on with it.

Blue and yellow scales covered him as he equipped the **Armor of the Last Star**. He didn't see the color, of course, Tali had to tell him. To him the Essence was that of a strange metal that he hadn't seen anywhere else before. He was told that the armor looked like a dark black-blue sky filled with stars. Next he equipped his **Focus of Indomitable Might** in his left hand, all the rest of his gear he had already been wearing.

He dismissed his disk and started falling, picking up speed rapidly. Less than a step away from the ground he halted his momentum and came to a full stop, then touched the ground lightly. Already he could feel the spiders react, the webs that were spread all over the forest reacted to his arrival, the tiniest of air vibrations announcing his arrival—hadn't bothered to hide. That disturbed the monsters even more. He felt them moving, thousands of feet, all heading their way.

"They are coming," Ryun said, not raising his voice. Up above, too far for sound to reach, Tali responded.

"I'll watch from up here," she said, and while he didn't hear, he *sensed* her words.

The thousands of monsters stirred as they noticed an intruder in the heart of the forest, and chittering noises filled the air. His sense got... murkier. Too many monsters, more than they had assumed it seemed. *Was this just one hive or several*—he wondered. The range of his skill narrowed

significantly as more and more chaotic movement came to life. He didn't move, didn't try to find a better position, didn't try to gain some distance to lessen the load on his skill, that wasn't the point. He could sense far enough.

The first spiders crawled out of the burrows, dozens of them at a time. They were the size of dogs, with eight legs and tiny hairs covering all of their bodies. Squat, with longer and bent legs that ended up with long claws made for digging through the ground. Ryun prepared himself as they came, and pulled on the Essence around him.

The Air moved, the Essence of Nature, of Shadows, of everything else that surrounded him, moved too. He wasn't reaching for anything particular, he just pulled everything as he settled into a breathing form.

Months spent trying to figure out how to control unbound Essence around him, experiments both alone and with Tali, had borne fruit. He didn't need to breathe, in reality he actually couldn't. It was... more of a mental state that was aided by the motion of him breathing air into his body. It served the same purpose, he opened his mouth and inhaled, his body didn't have lungs, it mimicked a body of a human on the surface and just beneath. He had a throat, but the walls weren't flesh, they were Void and Stillness. He had tested things with Tali and others, to figure out how things worked. He still had mouth and a throat, a hollow going halfway down his chest that held air. When he talked, his body reacted, the walls of Void and Stillness vibrated, affected the Air, somehow it mimicked what vocal cords did to produce sound. It was an Essence reaction that he didn't understand, but it just showed how different things were in the Infinite Realm in reality. The effects weren't the same, they didn't happen in the same way, all was Essence. And reactions could seemingly happen between Essences in ways that wouldn't be possible in his old reality.

Still, he inhaled by pulling in Air Essence into his body through his mouth, more than what he was gathering all around him. He sent it down the hollow in his throat, down into his body where Void tried to consume and Stillness to halt. He expanded his chest in a memory of reaction. It wasn't important what was happening, the breathing, the form was more than that. It was a mantra in a way, to teach a Cultivator how to move Qi. Ryun just applied it to the Essence. It made things easier.

The first of the monsters came out of their hidden burrows, their strange bodies rushing him in an unnatural-looking gait.

### **Hakza Warrior (Tier 13)**

A monster stabbed its hollow fang in his direction, and a line of web-like substance shot out straight at Ryun's back. He sidestepped it, still focusing on the Essence he was pulling in and gathering just at the surface of his body, struggling to keep it there without it entering his body, struggling to make it move in a pattern that he wanted it to move in.

A few more monsters attacked from a distance as dozens more rose from the ground, gathering. He moved, his sense telling him where the attacks were coming from. He was fast, strong, just the armor alone gave him insane stats.

Then, the monsters decided to make a real attack. A dozen of them leapt, their front limbs extended and claws ready. Some fired their web-like substance, while others just keened in eerie tones. This time Ryun didn't move, instead he finished preparing the technique.

As they nearly reached him, he unleashed a **{Final End}**.

Essence of the forest around him blasted out in a sphere. It hit the monsters and sent them flying back. It was mostly air, but there was a lot of other Essence there too. The effect was... unimpressive. It wasn't even close to what he could do with the Void, it was just... a blast of Essence in its natural state. It wasn't like Qi, which was cultivated by his own power, that could change form to be liquid, crystal, or mist. No, it was just a blast of Essence, Air and dirt, shadow and cold. He couldn't reach out to the unbound Essence and order it to do whatever he wanted it to, but he had learned how to do his own techniques, some at least. The monsters recovered and more joined the glade. Hundreds of them were now charging him, while thousands still crawled through the burrows heading for the surface.

His first task was done, he could use Essence quickly enough in combat, not as quickly as techniques, of course, but fast enough that he could make use of it. Now, he turned to his core and pulled on his Void. The monsters attacked again, spraying him with threads that were supposed to bind him.

He triggered his **{Mantle of Gathering Twilight}** and increased his strength and dexterity along with his wisdom. He moved, walking through the air as he shaped steps of stilled Air. It cost him less Qi to use stillness in this way, but the Essence that his Stillness Qi touched didn't stay stilled for long unlike his Void which could remain in a solid state longer. Stillness didn't consume other Essence, it attached itself to it, it robbed it of the ability to move, to react. But it also held Essence stilled for as long as it had the energy to do so.

He ran across the glade, not going too high, but high enough that he could avoid the threads that the monsters shot at him. Then he shaped techniques. He sent three threads of his Void Qi outside of his body, just above his head, and then channeled the fourth into his **Focus of Indomitable Might**.

His perk allowed him to channel as many techniques as he wanted, at a price of increased cost after the third.

Quickly, three orbs of black and violet the size of pearls appeared above his head, a technique charged outside of his body. It was hard to focus on three of them outside of his body but he had practiced. He had other techniques that he could use to create things at a distance, it wasn't anything more complicated than shaping spikes away from his body. Still, he tied off the threads and the links to his conduits and then kept the techniques from activating with his will.

A hawk that was larger than the others leapt, high enough that he could touch him, and Ryun fired his techniques. Three beams of **{Twilight Cutting Void Flicker}** thin as one of his fingers blasted out, splitting the air for just a moment, bisecting the leaping monster. He saw that one of them missed and he cursed. Aiming just with his willpower was harder than he thought. *I should use my |Target Mark| skill next time.* The techniques were short, the amount of Qi that he had tied off tiny compared to what he was channeling inside his body.

He aimed with his hand at the mass of monsters below him and fired a beam through his focus. An older version of his technique, a beam of Void as wide as his spread hand. He cut through dozen of monsters as he swept it

across the glade and moved his Qi out of his body to shape three more *flicker orbs*, as he had come to call them, above his head.

He grinned as he felt the battle finally draw him in. He had... missed this feeling. With a smile behind his armored face, he leapt, moving from step to step and firing attacks at the monsters below.