

## **The One That Sings Of Stone**

### **TALI**

Tali grimaced as her sense disappeared, the air beyond her **{One Bonded Sky}** shook with the power of the monster's roar. The sphere around her kept her safe, she had used both Aspects to strengthen her technique. Bond to keep the Sky together, to hold off any influence from the monster. While the air beyond her sphere shook and trembled, the air around her was calm. There was no real Sky here, but anything above the ground, in the air could be considered the sky. It was all a matter of perspective. But the fact that they were inside a cavern limited the power of what she could bring to bear from outside of her core. She couldn't pull on the vastness of the Sky, but her Qi was still strong.

No, her biggest problems now were sight, or the lack of one. She couldn't see in the dark, and the monster was doing something to the Essence around them. She closed her eyes and pulled on her Qi. It spilled out of her core and she transformed into her **Evolved Form: Grand Minokawa**. Six wings spread around her form as she expanded **{One Bonded Sky}** to still encircle her now much larger form. A cloak made out of Sky shrouded her large form and activated another technique—**{One With the World}**, increasing her stats. This was no time for holding back, she had seen the name of the monster for the split second before it woke.

With an effort of will and mind, she pulled on the deepest part of her being.

### **Domain: Sky Expanse**

The light came back into the world as her Realm came into being in the real world. The expanse of the sky, bright blue landscape, unending, stretching for infinity in all directions. There was no sun, but there was light as it was part of her Sky, the winds and the faint white clouds surrounded them. There ahead, she saw the monster, a massive being the

size of a mountain now that it had uncurled itself. Her domain suppressed the effect of the monster had on the air around it, even the strange sensation that she got from it that she still couldn't quite put her finger on. Now she could both see and sense it. Though her sense got... messy the closer it got to the monster. It floated in her sky, of course, she had expected something like this. She could feel something intruding on her domain, a force that was the opposite of hers. Stone? Something related to the monster. It didn't matter, it was moving somehow, and it sprang into action.

She beat her wings and pushed herself out of the way with her **|Mine Are the Wings, And The Sky|**, as the monster opened its maw and tried to swallow her whole. She just barely managed to get out of the way, and something still hit her. A small vibration pierced through her Qi and made the air around her vibrate so hard that it shook her bones. One of her ribs cracked under the onslaught and she knew that she couldn't afford to be hit, she wasn't like Ryun who could regenerate constantly. She immediately triggered her **Ascended State: Sky Bond Ascendancy** and felt her body healing.

In the distance she saw Ryun in his own evolved form, wearing his armor, with his avatar standing next to him. As the worm flew through the air, they both opened their mouths and fired thin beams of Void. Their attacks hit the worm's side, but... she could tell that they barely scratched the stone.

It was twisting through the air, as if flying only... no, not flying. It was spinning as if it was burrowing through the ground. And that effect around it... Something about it made her think that it was protecting it. Was that... a domain? Or something similar, a domain that only it could see and interact with? It was unimportant, they needed to act. She had learned her lessons from the past. You don't hold back, ever, not against the weakest of ambushers or monsters such as this one.

The air beyond her technique was still vibrating, shaking from the sheer presence of the creature. She needed to speak with Ryun but there was no way that she was going to be able to hear anything that he said.

Thankfully, her domain had probably settled their surrounding enough that he would be able to *hear* her, so she spoke.

“Don’t attack, you can’t damage it enough like that. Be ready, look for a weakness and try to do as much damage as you can. I’ll try to hit it with enough to break whatever it is that protects it.”

He didn’t respond, of course, but she saw him nod. He was firing out waves of his Stillness Qi as a technique, which told her that something in the air outside of her protection was constantly impacting him. He wouldn’t be wasting his Qi otherwise. Her sphere defended her, but he didn’t have anything like that aside from his armor, and that obviously didn’t work for some reason. Vibrations, that was what hit her, perhaps the attack was just bypassing his armor, somehow. She pushed those thoughts away and focused.

The two of them, even in their Evolved Forms were tiny compared to the sheer size of the creature, but they had to find a way. This event was obviously meant to be won by an army, but they were alone. They would have to be enough.

The worm turned and headed in her direction, it opened its maw, showing only darkness within. And then something rent the space and sky in front of it, a spreading wave of destruction headed her way.

She pulled on her will and used her skill perk—**Hold the Sky**. The monsters attack hit and slid around her, and then she went on the offense.

She focused her mind and being.

### —*Empty Sky*—

The Sky expanded outward from her body. The might of what it represented, unbound, infinite, heavy. The blast hit the monster and staggered it, made it turn, and the weight that she had been feeling vanished. She saw and felt the stone of its skin crack in some places. Her blast stifled its power, whatever it was. And then she followed through.

Qi flowed through her conduits; two techniques ready. She reached the monster and beat her wings, sending both techniques out.

**{Empty World}** left her wing, a ball of compressed Qi. It hit the side of the monster, and the technique activated. A sphere of Bond Qi expanded, and all Essence it touched lost its bonds. The stone that covered the monster crumbled and fell away, and still it wasn't enough. The stone was damaged, filled with cracks, but something held it together. Her second technique followed, hitting the same spot. **{Empty Detonation}** struck, and the Essence of Sky seeped into the cracks, a moment later it detonated. A sphere expanded, the concepts of Sky pushing out anything not related to it. A blast of concussive force staggered the monster and it keened, making the air around it shiver as the stone protecting it fell away, leaving a small gaping hole that showed the true flesh beneath, a brown and rough skin texture. A moment later she narrowed her will to a single point and attacked.

### **|I Shatter The Sky|**

The world that she had brought into being trembled and a line tore open. Cracks in reality, in space and Essence itself rushed forward and struck the monster's exposed body. Everything exploded, the stone over its body shuddered as the crack spread from the wound and the flesh beneath sundered. Liquid spilled out, black and silver, the monster's lifeblood. A geyser of blood that floated into the trembling sky.

"Now Ryun!" she yelled, hoping that he could hear her. She had unleashed everything that she was capable of, and still the monster moved. The stone trembled and her domain was tearing itself apart. The sphere protecting her was filled with cracks, it wouldn't last for much longer.

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### **RYUN**

Ryun stayed back as Tali fought, engaged in his own battle. He couldn't speak, couldn't let her know. The way that she spoke made it clear to him that she wasn't aware of what was happening. Ryun was barely holding on. If he had been alone here, he would've been dead a hundred times over. This monster was the worst type of enemy for him. The monster's very presence was doing something to the world. It violently

shook the Essence itself, it was tearing him apart with every passing moment. His body was healing constantly, his vitality was the highest it had ever been, and he pushed more into it just to keep up. He was constantly assaulted from all directions, and even with his body constantly lowering the damage, becoming immune to it... it was as if there was an infinite amount of different attacks coming from all directions. If he didn't have that, he would've died in the first minute, as it was... he wasn't going to last for much longer. His Qi was nearly spent. He had already converted the Essence that he had in his core to replenish his Qi. This was the last of his supplies. He was forced to use Stillness on the air around him to lessen the attacks, or just delay them. A monster that dealt constant damage to its surrounding high enough to kill with each second... He had drawn out nearly 80% of his core already just to keep himself from being torn apart, constantly healing.

Tali wasn't feeling it, he could tell. Her technique protected her, but more than that he believed that it was her Aspect—Bond. Her body was more solid, the bonds between the Essence greater than his. It allowed her to ignore the brunt of the attacks.

Ryun couldn't do much, so he focused on what he could do.

Tali attacked, and he saw her bring to bear her great power. She wounded the monster, got through its powerful stone shell, and then it was time for him.

He sent his avatar forward, and followed a moment behind, running on the platforms made out of the Void. He used only his Void Qi to create the avatar, and he could see it falling apart as it got closer. The void was lessening the monster's attacks, but it was... like an aura around it, and more powerful the closer one got to its body. It was tearing his avatar apart.

Still, it managed to reach the monster, its wound and Ryun activated the ***Presence of the Eternal Hunter***. His stats soared so high that for a moment he lost his mind. His body reformed itself fully, healing in an instant, his mind overloaded and his senses went insane. And then he adjusted, and his body damaged again by the vibrations emanating from the monster.

His avatar bit into the wound of the worm, clawed and pushed itself inside as the monster roared. And then, as its head and upper torso got inside, his avatar released a **{Final End}**. Ryun's Qi dipped again, dangerously low now, but the blast rippled through the monster.

A violet and black sphere blossomed for an instant as his avatar was destroyed in turn, and a large wound in the monster's side appeared. A hole the size of a house, and still... it wasn't nearly enough. His blast should've done more, should've cut the worm in half, and yet... its flesh, its might, it suppressed his attack.

It turned its head somewhere ahead, the world around him trembled and the Sky Essence fled. Stone Essence expanded out from the worm, almost as if it was pushing Tali's domain back. It rushed in his direction and Ryun... He had so little Qi left, he couldn't shape and run, or his body wouldn't be able to heal anymore. The monster opened its maw as it came down on him, fast, too fast. With a **|Pouncing Rush|** he tried to get away, but it was too large, a few meters weren't enough distance.

### **Field of a Thousand Cuts**

It didn't matter. The monster passed through as a thousand cuts attacked its maw, scratching the stone and spilling blood inside its mouth. Not enough.

The worm arrived and swallowed him whole even as it was being cut.

Immediately the maw closed, leaving him surrounded by only Darkness Essence and Stone. The insides constricted and a jagged piece of stone stabbed through his armor, impaling him through his stomach. His Qi attacked the stone and couldn't break it down. His core leaked Qi, healing him and then... He ran out of Qi.

His body was tearing itself apart from the vibrations that were even more intense inside the monster. He couldn't heal, it was... death.

*Again—he thought. Dead again, not even a year after the last time.*

He could feel it now, what Tali had to have felt before, the full brunt of it. It was the monster's soul, the weight of it, the greatness. And he was going to die again.

It would be easy to let it go. He would come back, it was... an inconvenience, a few years taken away from him. He closed his eyes, slowly letting it happen.

And then he stopped, something inside of him rebelled at the mere thought of it.

*Ah... This is what it feels like.* He understood, finally, how they all became like this. The immortals of this world, how they stopped reaching for more. How they became content with their power, how they stopped advancing. He could let it go, stop the struggle and know that he would wake up again. And in doing so he would defeat himself, become... complacent.

*No, there are things that I have to do. Anrosh, Kri, Erdania and Selia... Tali. They were important to me, and they didn't deserve to wait again.*

He focused his will and pushed it all on his skill, **|Greater Restoration|**. It helped his body heal passively, now he made it hold his body together on fumes, on raw willpower.

*Think, think, what can I do?*

He focused on his ring, and then extended his paw. With a thought he used one of the stored instances of damage, when Tali had cut him in half with an axe. He felt the monster tremble, he was wrenched inside the monster, but... the monster wasn't cut in half. He hurt it, but... the damage was supposed to be scaled up to the size of the monster and yet... The effects of its shell, of its entire body, the stifling, oppressive might, it dampened everything that they could do to it.

He spent the other two instances of damage too. Each had an effect, blood spilled from above him and splashed all over him and his armor, and still the monster didn't die. It squeezed, the walls falling down on him and constricting around him. More and more until his armor cracked. He grimaced and dismissed his Evolved Form, ripped himself from the stone spike and fell to the fleshy ground beneath. Inside the hollow of the monster's body, he tried to move, but the monster did something. And then it felt as if the weight of the world was on his back. An oppressive force leaned on him, on his soul. And he realized that now the danger was

greater. It was damaging his soul, it was trying to kill him for real. He lay there, his healing stopped, his body damaged, tearing itself apart. His core was empty. His soul under attack.

He failed.

There was nothing but emptiness inside of him, a hollow. His thoughts slowed, approaching stillness. Still, he struggled, his hand moved, guided more by his will than anything else. What could he do? Force his skills to evolve, but... how? What could save him? He couldn't let it kill him now, there was no hope of resurrection. He didn't know. He reached for his storage, pulled out an elixir and put it entirely into his mouth. He bit down and broke the vial, and the **Eternal Elixir of Pure Willpower** spilled down his throat, absorbed by his body. He focused and found... nothing to grab on to.

The last time he died, it happened in an instant. He didn't have the time to think, to reflect, to even wonder if he would wake up again. This time... his mind had the time to think, his thoughts moving so fast that time might as well be standing still.

He wanted to move, to pull out another of his potions, but... time was standing still. Everything around him was still, his body filled with wounds, torn apart. His soul being pressed down on by one that was as vast as the world made of stone. The monster around him was stopped, frozen, stilled. He couldn't feel anything beyond its body, its stone shell keeping him in the darkness, in this hollow world.

His core was empty, a gaping Void, it was Still.

He turned his will toward it, remembering Kri, hoping for something. He found the deepest parts of his core, the place where two tiny points resided, one next to the other. He realized what they were, tiny gates, conduits to the Void and Stillness.

He bashed his will against them, trying to open them, but... neither budged. They didn't answer his call.

*Why!* He knew Void, he understood Stillness. Why did they deny him?

He pushed his will more and then—



## **—Conclusion Dominance—**

His ideal came into being, and threads surrounded him. His death was written there. He snapped one, his will greater than it had ever been, but two more came into being. He was going to die, not even this ideal could stop it.

He turned his will and ideal back to his core. There were threads there too, and he tried to pull on them, he didn't try to see what they were, what they would do, he just snapped everything in his way.

*Open! Open! Open!!! Give me more!*

He was almost pleading. *This is not how my story ends! I am the Witness of Journey's End! I have to be there to see the last end!*

He pushed against the conduit to the Void, that plane that wanted to end everything, the hunger inside of it, the destruction of it. And then... *the Void consumed all*. Something shifted inside of him, it destroyed, what would there be to witness in the end if it destroyed everything. A part of his was whispering to him, a voice that he recognized, now more in tune with him than ever before. A Wolf of the End, what he became when he accepted that he had changed what the Aspect of True Death used to be. It was not Void, the True Death was not destruction, it had never been. It was an end. It was that which had guided him on the path to his ideal. The Void was a stepping stone... And Stillness... why did he choose that? Because something inside of him had always desired for that... silence, the quiet. The calm of...

The two conduits trembled, but they didn't open. They weren't what he wanted, related, but ultimately, they were not what he had desired. But together they could point the way.

At the edge of his mind, his being, his soul, inside his core, something reached out. Not Void, not Stillness. Something more.

He accepted.