

Cultivation Path

Hiro walked out of the city of Consequence, escorted by a group of sect warriors. The warriors didn't talk with him much, and even if they did Hiro doubted that they would tell him where they were taking him. Zach had told Hiro that they would lead him to his new teachers. He didn't know what to expect. They had told him that they believed that Cultivation would be a better fit for him than skills as a secondary focus. Which he didn't know how to feel about. He was disappointed that he failed them as far as skills were concerned. He didn't even understand what it was that he lacked, though they had tried to explain. He just... couldn't do the thing that they asked of him.

They had given him everything, it felt... wrong, to fail them. He had been fortunate that to have even lived.

The warriors stopped and then one of them turned to him and spoke.

“Go ahead, they are waiting for you in the clearing.”

Hiro blinked, but did as they asked, after a step he stopped as he realized his blunder. Quickly he bowed to them, and they returned the gesture with just as much depth. He didn't know if he had done the right thing or not. He knew nothing about their culture. Knowledge of Cultivation was extremely lacking in the Empire. Or rather it *had* been lacking. It was surreal to come to this strange place, with these strange people, and yet see things that were familiar. He had seen the banners of the Great House Ornn in the palace. As a child in the Empire, he could've never imagined getting within a hundred leagues of someone so high up. And now here he was, as were they.

To have a House that almost represented the Empire be a part of some other faction was strange to him, but it was not stranger than what his life had been since he was rescued. He walked forward through the forest, heading in the direction he was pointed in. It didn't take him long to find the clearing, or at least he thought so. The issue was that there was no one there.

He looked around, but saw no signs of anyone. He leaned on his **|Analysis|** skill and studied the clearing, again seeing nothing amiss. The clearing was empty. It took him only a few moments to realize that it was deeper than that. Zach's lessons came back, and he thought that for a split second he felt something deeper, a glimmer of an Aspect, but it was too fleeting for him to be sure. What he was certain about was that something was wrong. From the moment he entered the clearing the sound stopped, he couldn't smell anything. His **Danger Instinct** was giving him off strange and confusing feedback that he hadn't encountered before, almost as if it the perk wasn't quite sure how to react.

Hiro moved, he knew that hesitation killed. He jumped forward and rolled then turned around as he pulled out a sword and dagger from his storage. He was in the shadow of a tree, so he activated his **Shadowmeld**, and his body turned invisible in the shadows.

He kept his eyes and ears open, but still saw no signs of danger.

"Not bad," a voice spoke from his left, just next to his ear. Hiro whirled and dashed back, not attacking, he didn't know who it was but he had been coming here to meet with someone. He was still not convinced that this wasn't some kind of a test.

He saw no one next to him, though the voice had come so close to his ear.

“A bit twitchy,” another voice said, from just behind him, this one female.

Again Hiro whirled around, but saw no one. He felt his heart start to beat faster, as it always did when he got in situations like this one. When he felt helpless and pushed into a corner, without a path to take.

“As anyone would be,” the male voice said. Then the silence disappeared, and Hiro could hear the world again. “That’s enough of games.”

He whirled his head up in the direction from where the voice was coming from. Up in a tree were two people, a man and a woman, human and a winged demasi.

“Why do you always spoil all of my fun?” The woman asked.

Hiro recognized her, though he had never seen her. He knew of her from the stories he heard the wardens tell. Anatalien Far Solla, she was supposed to be one of the most powerful people in the world.

The man, who Hiro recognized as well, glanced in her direction then shrugged. “We are not here to play.”

That was the Sect Head of the Twilight Melody Sect, their host. He had met him briefly when they arrived yesterday, but Hiro knew about him from the stories of the battle during the war. They said that he and his partner fought the enemy army alone. Two against millions, and that they won.

Hiro swallowed; he didn’t know why he was meeting with them.

“Fine,” Anatalien said, then jumped down from the branch. The Sect Head followed a moment after.

“Greetings, elders,” Hiro said as they approached, bowing deeply.

“Greetings to you too, young Hiro,” Anatalien said. “You may call us teachers, that is what we are here for after all.”

Hiro straightened and blinked. “Pardon?”

“Zach didn’t tell you?” Ryun asked.

Hiro shook his head. “I was told that I would meet my teacher here, but he didn’t mention that it would be... you.”

He reached up to scratch at his beard before speaking again. “Well, we’ve made an agreement, he and I. A part of that agreement is that I will instruct you in Cultivation,” Ryun told him, then glanced at Anatalien. “Tali here just decided to come along.”

Anatalien turned and glowered at him. “I couldn’t very well leave you to teach him alone now could I? The last thing we need is for you to kill the poor boy with your *lessons*.”

Ryun frowned. “I wouldn’t do anything too dangerous.”

Anatalien put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes. “You blinded Kri and threw her in a pit with a monster that was stronger than her.”

“That was dangerous, but it was necessary,” Ryun said.

Hiro swallowed. He didn’t know who Kri was, but he hoped that they were okay.

“Pardon, uh, teachers,” Hiro started. “I don’t know what master Zach told you, but I don’t even have a Path, I don’t know how much you can teach me.”

Ryun nodded. “That is what you are here for, we need to choose the best Path for you.”

Hiro looked at them for a long moment. He didn’t know how to react. These were some of the best Cultivators in the world, to have them not only teach him, but help him pick a path. He didn’t deserve it. He knew that Zach and Naha would disagree, but he just felt like he always came short of their expectations.

“The Lord of Aspects Class,” Anatalien said as she walked around him. “Zacharia said that you have proficiency with Aspects, that you can get a... *feel* for them easily.”

“Yes, teacher,” Hiro said quickly.

She came back into his view from the other side. “Survival, Blade, Shadow, Mind. Which one of these do you think you have the handle on the most? Or would you be interested in a new Aspect? Zach had shared his hopes for your future, you will have room for more Aspects in your attunement, your... arsenal.”

“I... I don’t know,” Hiro said.

“Tsk,” Anatalien glanced at Ryun. “Indecisive too.”

Ryun walked over and looked up at Hiro. He hadn’t realized that he was that much taller than the human. He didn’t seem that way from a distance.

“A Path needs to be compatible with an Aspect,” Ryun said. “Perhaps we should first choose your direction?”

“Whatever you think best, teacher,” Hiro said, trying to keep his wits about him. Being in front of them made him nervous.

“There are many Paths in my Sect, the question is, what kind of Paths do you seek?” Ryun said slowly. “Do you want a Path that will provide you with utility? Movement or perhaps something to hinder your opponents? Or just a supporting Path to help you improve on what you already have. Or do you want a Path that is focused solely on destruction?”

Hiro really didn't know. But he saw their expecting expressions, so he tried to think.

“What is it that you want out of your life, is perhaps a better question,” Anatalien said, and Hiro met her eyes. “A Path is something that you walk your whole life, it is a way of life.”

Hiro blinked, that did seem like an easier question. Hiro did know that much, at least. There was only one thing that he had ever wanted, and that was to never again feel as helpless as he had been before. He wanted to be strong.

He told them as much.

“Hmm...” Anatalien looked him over. “Strength comes in many different forms. Do you want the strength of denying others dominion? Or perhaps the strength and weight of a clear sky?”

“Or maybe the strength to end your enemies,” Ryun added.

Hiro didn't know how to put it into words exactly, the choice seemed... overwhelming. How was he to choose? He had never chosen anything in

his life. He always followed what his instructors told him. Still, he tried. “I want a strength that is... reliable.”

That felt right. Yes, he did want to be someone who could be relied on, who could not only survive but help others survive too.

Anatalien raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps the strength that seeks to be unbreakable then. Could you stand in the face of overwhelming odds and not falter? Not run, but stand as a wall that would take all that they had to throw at you?”

Hiro thought about it seriously, then shook his head. That was not him. He did run away, he survived.

“Perhaps something simpler then,” Anatalien turned to look at Ryun who tilted his head.

“Yes,” Ryun said. “A simple path does not mean a weaker one, besides, there is always the secondary path. Zach tells us that you are good with a blade? That your chosen weapon is a sword?”

Hiro nodded his head. “I am nowhere near the level of my instructors.”

“Naturally,” Anatalien said. “You are young and untested. But they mentioned it because they see something.”

“The Path of the Sword,” Ryun said. “A simple and commonly encountered path, for a good reason. It can be very strong in the right hands, with the right person. You could shape it to fit you. Perhaps one at the Epic Stage, to leave you the room to grow.”

Hiro blinked, the Path of the Sword. He did enjoy training with the sword, fighting and learning a different way of fighting with a blade. And he did think that he understood the Aspect of the Blade the most.

“I... I like the sound of that,” Hiro said.

The two of them exchanged looks then nodded.

“Good,” Ryun said. “Then we can begin.”