Reward

Ryun's return to consciousness came swift, as it always had. His eyes snapped open, his sense took his surroundings in an instant and his mind processed it all in a split second. He relaxed, the Qi moving through his body returned back to his half-filled core. He was in a room, inside a large building filled with beds and people moving about. Obviously, it was the place where competitors were getting healing, Ryun had never been this deep in the building, but he had visited the front after every match.

He was whole, his body healed of all injuries, his core slowly regenerating. It being half full gave him some idea about how much time had passed since the match. With his eyes he could see that the entire room was filled with low grade Void Essence, which intrigued him. He turned his head and looked at what his sense had already discovered. A small orb, the size of a fist floated there, dark with violet streaks flashing through it. It was the source of the Void Essence in the room. He had heard about such things, they used them to create rooms for cultivators to train and draw Essence in. It was too bad that the quality of this Essence was too low to do much for Ryun.

The doors of his room opened suddenly, but he had already expected that.

A karura with wings for arms entered, her eyes meeting his immediately.

"Ah, you are awake," she said and moved closer to the bed, she put her hand over him and then nodded. "Looks like everything is fine. Do you have any idea how much trouble you caused us young man? Reconstituting a body that is made out of the Void Essence is a pain in the ass. We had to have the Healer oversee!"

Ryun inclined his head. "Thank you."

The karura snapped her beak and then spoke again. "What was recovered of your gear is in here," she opened a drawer next to the bed and Ryun looked inside. His robe was just a few pieces that looked more like a collection of rags than anything that had once been worn. Half of his rings were cracked, with many being just a few pieces of the whole. Thankfully

though, his most important rings were still whole. He put on his storage ring, followed by **Megor's Ring of Privacy** and **Lifedrinker**. He pulled out a spare robe out of his ring and put it on.

The karura healer opened her beak to speak, but before she could, the doors opened. Again, Ryun knew of the person approaching long before he reached the room.

Reki stepped into the room, a wide grin on his face.

"You are awake!" He yelled even as two people, wearing healer colors followed after him. He had heard them telling him that he shouldn't be moving yet while he was on the way.

"And so are you," Ryun said slowly. He already knew how the match went, people in the building talked, and he *heard* every word. Then Ryun smiled as well, "it was a good fight."

"Ha!" Reki laughed. "You took my head off! If you'd been just a few moments faster... you would've won. Even with me using my ideal you managed to kill me! Look, you cut off my lower jaw and everything else all the way down to my chest!"

Reki was pointing at his face, trailing a line down his neck. He was healed, just like Ryun was of course, so there wasn't anything there to see.

"Your ideal is powerful," Ryun said. "Did you get it during the fight?"

Reki grinned. "No, got it after my last match. I really wanted to keep it for the finals, but... I would've lost without it. It's too bad that you couldn't use yours. I wanted to try and figure out what it does. You know that people are all wondering about that? And that bastard Tharson isn't telling anybody a thing! I even tried to bribe him. Though, that might just be because I'm sect."

Ryun was surprised that his previous opponent hadn't said anything, though perhaps he was just holding out for a larger payout. Not that Ryun had any enemies willing to pay that.

"And how are you able to heal so much?" Reki asked another question. "I hit you a dozen times at least, and you recovered from everything, it's crazy!"

Ryun shrugged. "You were tough as well."

"Ha, not really, I'm good against physical stuff not things like your attacks. If I don't block it, I don't have a lot of other options on my hands aside from my armor. We need to do this again."

Ryun closed his eyes; it had been a good fight and he didn't feel bad for losing. It was strange, he had given it his all, and perhaps if he was better, he could've won. He had the power, and even with Reki's ideal... he did think that he could overcome it in a different circumstance. "Yeah, perhaps one day."

* * *

The reunion with his sect had gone... well he didn't know exactly how it went. Ever since his first real fight in the tournament his people had been acting strange. They had always been respectful to him, and somewhat fearful, at least those who had seen him fight before. Now they were... proud? Ryun wasn't quite sure what they were. Still, Anrosh and Nayra tried to console him for his loss.

"I am not sad Anrosh," he told her.

"Of course not," she said, and somehow Ryun was sure that she didn't really believe him. "You've done more than anyone had thought you would! You are a Ranker that hadn't been in the Infinite Realm for even a decade! The fact that you are one of the top 8 rising fighters in the entire Infinite Realm is an amazing achievement."

Ryun sighed. "Yeah, it is."

* * *

A day after he had lost his match, he had gotten an invitation from the organizers to come and collect his reward for reaching the top eight fighters. So, he and Lesamitrius, who had turned into something like his shadow, walked up to the large building near the arena. The building resembled a fortress, and it was surrounded by guards of at least three different factions. One side was clearly sects, the other wore white cloaks of the Wardens, and

the last were a mismatched group of people that seemed to come from different factions.

Ryun and Lesamitrius walked in and were immediately met by Selia.

He blinked as she approached. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

Selia smiled. "Rewards are usually given out by High Rankers that are currently on duty, since I sponsored you, I felt that I should be the one to walk you through the vault."

"Ah," Ryun said. Quickly they were escorted deeper in the building. Lesamitrius was forced to stay behind after a certain point, and then Ryun and Selia walked into a large room with a formation and array surrounded door at the end. Guards filled the room, but they didn't even twitch as the two of them entered. Selia manipulated the mechanism on the side while Ryun watched the Essence dance in his sight. The door was surrounded by quite a lot high tiered Space and Void Essence.

The Essence rippled in his sight, and then the door was a portal. They entered and then they were somewhere else.

"This is impressive," Ryun said.

"It is a temporary vault, you should see the one that Zenshuen has," Selia said.

"So, this is where the rewards are being kept?"

"Yes," Selia answered. "Each great faction donates a portion of it."

"Hm... how does that work out usually?"

Selia gave him a look. "I know what you are thinking, it doesn't happen like that. Giving subpar rewards would lose them face. Everyone makes sure that the rewards are up to the highest qualities."

Ryun didn't respond, he had already gotten a lot of Essence and elixirs as rewards. An awakened object is powerful... but Ryun had already given one away. It was not necessary. And he was... unsure as to what he would really need, his understanding was that he could choose.

They walked in silence through the first room, which was filled with closed boxes. Beneath the box lids, they were filled with elixirs and potions. He could only sense the room that he was currently in, which meant that there were some protections.

The second room was filled with items, not awakened ones, but powerful still.

"Your fight with Reki was impressive," she commented as they walked.

"Thank you, he is strong. A credit to his sect."

"Reki had been trained since childhood, it is more a credit to you that you've gotten so close to winning."

Ryun didn't respond to that, even though he did notice the question that she didn't voice. He had gotten to know Selia a lot better over the last couple of months. When he didn't say anything, she slowed then came to a stop. He did the same and turned to look at her.

She tilted her head and studied him for a moment. "Could you have won?"

Ryun blinked at her. "Why do you ask that?"

"Because I have spent time with you, I've seen all of your fights. In each of them… you fought in a different way. Almost as if you were trying different things."

Ryun couldn't prevent a smile from coming to his face. He didn't think that anyone would've noticed. In his first qualifier he had tested and improved his sense and **{Void Shaping}**, in the free for all he had tried to monitor the flow of battle and move so that he was never caught without an advantage. Against the shooter he had tried to be as mobile as possible. With Eari, he had tried to keep one area under his control without moving much. Finally in his match against Reki, he had tried to rely more on his body's regeneration. It was clear to Ryun that he lacked in his combat training. He was good, he knew that. His battle instincts were honed from daily struggle on Earth. He made good decisions in fights, and he adapted quickly. But, if he wanted to match people that were older than him, he needed to find what his niche really was. What his greatest strength was. From his matches, he was leaning toward something like what he had done against Eari. To take and hold a certain position, to rain void on his opponents from the distance and control and devastate when or rather if they managed to get closer.

"Do you think that I could've won?" Ryun asked instead of answering the question.

Selia studied him more intensely, if that was possible. "If you had your ideal—"

"—no, do you think that I could've won without it?"

"There was a moment, near the end of your fight when I thought that you were sure you would win. Not many would've seen it, maybe no one who doesn't know you at least a little," she said. It was funny, she didn't know him as well as Anrosh or even Nayra, yet in a way she did. She understood power, and what it meant to wield it. She had been strong for a long time, and Ryun knew that feeling too. He had been the most powerful being on Earth for a long time. That gave him a different perspective on things. Infinite Realm had... thrown his balance for a while, but in the end, even now with so many powerful people all around him—some even more powerful than him—Ryun didn't feel like he was less than them. He felt it inside, the knowledge that if he used his power well enough, he could win against anything.

"The tournament win was never my goal. Fighting powerful people, seeing what they could do, that was what I was after. And that was what I got."

"You do not care for the prestige that winning the tournament brings?"

"Why should I care about that?"

"It is power," Selia said simply. "Respect, wonder, fear."

Ryun shook his head. He had spoken with her often on their ideas about how to advance, how to sharpen one's search for inspiration. But they had never really talked about what they viewed as power. It was obvious that they had very different upbringings, they'd grown up in totally different realities after all. But Ryun had felt kinship with her, in the way that she too sought to gain more power. To always improve herself.

Ryun wondered for a moment if he should even try to say his piece. He did not care to speak at length, not with people who didn't matter. He needed to decide if she mattered enough for him to make the effort. He enjoyed their talks, and he knew that she would keep her word to him. Of course, she could've done it for her own gain, she obviously wanted something more from him. But Ryun had always judged people on what they did, not what they planned and whispered in the dark alleys or even their own heads. She

had never been anything other than forthright with him, and he could only do the same.

"Prestige means nothing to me," Ryun said at last. "It changes nothing about who I am. But learning from others? Seeing power that others hold? That is far more valuable than winning adoration of others. I do not need them to recognize my power, I know how powerful I am, I know what I am. I did not come to the tournament for that. I came to see what this world is, what the people were, to see if I was lacking. I know now that I am not, that even here with those who had all the advantages and time, I still sit near the top."

"You have not seen a High Ranker fight yet," Selia said slowly.

"I have taken the time to learn what that title means. All talk about it as if it is something great, my own people too. But… it is only perceived power. I know that some of that is real, but then again… These people who stand at the top, they are not that different than Reki, than Eari, or I. They are on the same tiers of power as we, perhaps a bit higher, but nowhere near enough. They are… stagnating, basking in this adoration, in this power that you speak of."

"You should not underestimate us, you are strong, but you are nowhere near the strongest people in the Infinite Realm."

Ryun chuckled at that. "Many had stood in my way, many even that were more powerful than me, and in the end, I am here, and they are less than dust. I do not bend for anything or anyone. I know that this sounds arrogant, but that is who I am. I know that I can reach them, that even now I can strike with blows powerful enough to make even them fear me. It is what this tournament had shown me, what you have shown me."

"Me?" Selia asked.

"Yes," Ryun nodded. "I can see how powerful you are, and I do not need a power to scan your screens to know it. I can see it in the way that you move, how the air parts before you when you make a step. How tight the control of your own Qi is. How your muscles move beneath your skin. In the way that your head turns to scan your surroundings when you remember to pretend that you even need to do that. I learned more at times when you walk without looking, because I know that you can *see* regardless."

"So, you watched me. And how do you think you stack up compared to me?" Selia asked. He didn't detect any sign of a threat in her tone, but he was never that good at that. The half-smile on her face was what told him that she wasn't offended.

"No one is invincible, the strong can fall to the weak. I might not be at the point where you are all the time, but I have forged my path and power into something that allows me to reach far higher."

She nodded at that, apparently not wanting to press him for a more precise answer.

"So, you think that you don't need to show others how powerful you are? I know that you have strengths, but you've gained it fast, perhaps too fast. And you are part of the Sects. And this is how they function. The more visible your power, the less likely it is for someone to try and interfere with your business."

"I do not need them to look on me and think that I am powerful. I have not come here for that. Even these rewards that I have gained, they are good, and I will not refuse them. But you must understand Selia, I have lived a life that to you might appear short, but to me... Even now it seems like an eternity. I was trapped inside my own mind, where time moved at a glacial pace. Even still, I have walked forward, striking down all in my way until I alone stood at the peak of an entire world. I know that you understand power as it is in this world. But you cannot understand what it means for you to stand on top of all. To know that you are the most powerful being that had ever set foot on an entire world. I had that, I knew that I was undisputed, that nothing could touch me. I nearly died because I didn't even bother to block attacks," Ryun chuckled as he remembered Zach's last attack. Even now, he fell back into that habit at times. Breaking old patterns wasn't as easy as people thought it was, but he was getting better at it.

He shook his head and continued. "But I learn from my mistakes, and I grow stronger. I will never stop pushing forward. Your ideas about how long it should take someone to become powerful, those mean nothing to me. Who are you to decide the rate at which I should grow? I will not look at others as examples of how I should gain power. They have knowledge and I respect that. But I've reached this point through my own power, it was not gifted to

me. I had listened to advice, and I have gathered information, but in the end my Path is my own."

Selia narrowed her eyes, almost looking taken aback by his words. Then she nodded at him. "You are a strange man; you know that right?"

"I am who I am," Ryun shrugged. He had always understood and accepted who he was. There was no point not to. What did it mean for him to be strange? He did not live his life for others sake, he did not live in their world, he lived in his one. "Being true to yourself is the first step to living a free life."

Selia blinked at that, her entire expression changing. He couldn't quite tell what her expression meant, but she didn't respond for a few seconds.

"You really think that?" she asked.

"Of course, why should I change to fit what other people want or need? What they think I should be or not? They do not matter to me at all. I am. Just as I accept others and their choices, so I require the same in return. They have no right to question the way I live my life, and if they do, well... If someone disagrees that is fine, it will not change anything. And if they stand in my way then they should already know that I will step through them. I do not apologize for what I have done or what I will do, I own all that I am without repentance."

Selia turned her head away, looking beyond Ryun, thinking. Something about his words had struck her. Then she took a deep breath. "You might be right about that. I think that I knew that once," she whispered. "I advanced fast too, and then I... I let outside influence force me to slow down, that is when I lost my inspiration, when I got stuck."

She shook her head, looked at him and opened her mouth, then closed it immediately after. "We should continue, we don't have all day for you to choose."

A moment later she continued walking, and Ryun followed right behind her.

* * *

The room was filled with awakened objects, but nowhere near what he had expected from seeing the other rooms. He knew that the four winners of the top eight fights had already made their choices, and Ryun was the first of those who had lost.

There were weapons on one side, armors in the middle, and miscellaneous on the other—rings, amulets, stuff like that.

He approached the closest object, a breastplate hung on a rack. It was golden in color and had a small piece of blank paper attached next to it. He leaned down but realized that the paper probably had something written on it.

He turned and glanced at Selia who just studied him quietly.

"You have any advice?" Ryun asked.

Selia blinked, then gave herself a small shake. "I've spent years searching for the right awakened object for me and I've still not found the right match. It should be something that is useful to you, but most importantly something that had a personality you can accept, something that you can get along with. Otherwise, you will not be able to progress your bond, and that is where the true power of an awakened object lies. These are all objects that no longer have wearers and whose bond no one in their faction could progress, or the faction just felt like they could give them away."

Ryun nodded. He had thought the same. It was why he had given Kagehime away, they no longer fit together. "So, how do I tell what the awakened object does?"

Selia blinked then pointed at the note. "All that is known about an object is written there," she said.

"I was afraid of that," Ryun sighed.

"Why?" She tilted her head.

"I can't read that," Ryun said at last.

"But the framework—" She paused, then nodded in understanding. "Your eyes, I had a feeling that they changed the way you saw things."

"Yes," Ryun said simply. He liked her well enough, but perhaps not enough to tell her exactly what his eyes did. Not yet at least. "I'm going to need you to read them out to me."

Selia took a step closer, then leaned down next to him. "This is *Firewrought*," she said. Each awakened object had a... well something like a title, what they actually where. Like how Kagehime was Shadow Princess. They could get names beyond that. "It gives a bond perk on bonding that increases your heat resistance by 40%, its first ability is recorded as an aura of fire and heat that can be turned on or off. Second a blast of fire, third an upgrade to the perk that raises the heat resistance to 80%. No further bond tiers were ever unlocked. The objects personality is recorded as difficult, it enjoys seeing things on fire."

"Huh, well, that is not for me," Ryun said.

Then they started to move from object to object, and she read their notes out loud for him.

* * *

"*Splendor*, perk that increases vitality by 10% when used. Ability that allows the user to appear more impressive. No further bond tiers unlocked. Personality is arrogant, vain, and narcissistic."

Ryun shook his head. They had spent about an hour in the room, going from item to item. Many were something that he wouldn't even consider, like the painting brush or this circlet that she was showing him at the moment.

He sighed. "No."

"I didn't think that it would be the one, no," Selia said.

They had seen some good ones, although only a few had records of anything beyond the second bond tier. There was a reason why these awakened weapon were being given away after all. Only a few had caught his eye, and some of them could end up being useful. There were weapons that gave boosts to stats, but their personalities were... not that comparable. There were three awakened objects however that he had narrowed his choice down to.

 One of those was *Darkwood Cabin.* Its form was just a wooden key, and as its name suggested, it was also a cabin. A small one, barely two rooms. It gave no bonuses or anything else other than... well, being able to summon a cabin. It was assumed that with more bond tiers the cabin would grow, as

it was not the first awakened object of that type that people here had found. But no one knew for sure, the awakened object's personality was described as kind and warm, but no one had managed to deepen the bond.

The second object was basically a wizard staff. Called *Highest,* it was long and made out of something that looked like black bone. On top there was a fist sized orb with no markings, completely smooth. Its perk was simple, it increased any ability and technique effectiveness by 10% if they were channeled through it, though he didn't know how that would work for everything. Already useful. The second thing was its first ability. One that it could store one use of ability or a technique inside of it, similar to Anrosh's anchors. The power of the ability depended on the bond level, which at the start meant that any ability stored would be about the same power level as if the ability was from a second evolution class at most. For techniques, the orb could store only so much Qi, which meant that it couldn't store the more Qi-hungry techniques. Ryun might be able to store a **{Void Beam}** that would be weaker than what he himself could use. Still, it was useful. With the bond level the restrictions should increase, meaning that more and more powerful things could be stored, or at least that was the assumption. No one had ever increased the bond level of that awakened object. Its personality was said to be haughty, with nothing else written down.

The third was one that he was leaning the most toward. An item that even if he wasn't able to progress the bond would be of use to him. As an item it looked like a small blacksmithing hammer, and it was called the *Star Forge.* It gave a bond perk, which increased durability of all the items he wore by 10%. That was not a small increase at all. He remembered the rings that he had lost in the fight, the fact that they had been broken by his opponent. And adding durability to armor would increase its defense as well. And he did go through robes quickly. But it was actually the two unique abilities that interested him the most. The first one allowed him to store common or uncommon items inside of it, and the forge would then replicate them, creating up to 6 additional copies. That alone might be enough for him to consider it, since it could store any type of items, including robes. He didn't rely on items that much, but if he stored even one robe, it would help him a lot. He often destroyed his clothes in battles, and it was annoying having to

buy new ones so often. Also, any item stored inside would gain *equip* and *repair*, which is what would really help him. He could even store javelins and not need to worry about running out of them. Although the rate at which the forge replicated items wasn't quick, at least not at the base bond tier. The second ability gave the items extra stats based on rarity and increased the durability of any item placed inside the forge after a certain amount of time had passed.

And from the note he knew that with increased bond tiers the amount of items that could be stored and their max rarity would increase, as well as bonuses that the forge provided. The most that someone had been able to increase the bond was only a few tiers, but it was enough that they had an idea about what to expect. The personality though was... annoying. It was written as greedy and interested in new things. It would require Ryun to bring it interesting items. And in order for the forge to work he would need to provide it fuel in the form of items on occasion. Although at the base bond tiers it wasn't anything that would be an issue for Ryun.

"What do you think?" Selia asked after a while of Ryun just staring at the three objects in front of him.

He sighed, in the end what he lacked in his kit was long range capability. His javelins were one answer to that issue, and he didn't really see any need to change that so far. He would need to train a bit more with his aiming skill, but with his strength he could deal a lot of damage with thrown weapons. And... he had to admit that he liked the idea of having infinite amount of clothes. He reached down and picked up the blacksmithing hammer.

* * *

A while later Ryun sat on a void platform high in the air, just outside of the Void Plane. He held the hammer in his lap, preparing to make the bond. The hammer was small, its handle and head as dark as night, but from time to time he could see something flicker inside of it. Flashes of light, like stars. He cut his finger and let a drop of his blood touch the hammer, before it turned to mist he focused and reached out.

> You are about to make a permanent bond with the Awakened Forge — Star Forge. Are you sure you want to proceed? Y/N (You can only have one bond with an awakened object)

He accepted and then a voice spoke inside his mind.

"Oh, a new bond," the voice had a strange echo to it.

"Greetings Star Forge, I am Ryun Nacht. Do you have a name?" He asked.

"Ah, greetings to you to Ryun Nacht, I was called different names by different owners, but since you asked... the one I preferred the most was Bright Star."

"It is nice to meet you, Bright Star," Ryun said. *"I hope that we can work well together."*

"We shall see," Bright Star said. *"As long as you provide me with interesting new things to play with, we shall get along just fine. So, do you have a gift for me perhaps?"*

Ryun knew that the personality was described as greedy, so he had prepared some items to give it as fuel. He pulled them out of his storage.

"Here, let me show you how to use me," the forge said.

Then Ryun felt something change and the hammer blazed with stars and nebulas inside. A moment later it was as if he was pulled inside his own mind, and suddenly he was standing on a large platform in the middle of space, with nebulas and stars surrounding him. A large sun loomed nearby, filling one side of the platform.

In the center of the platform in front of him was a simple anvil with a forge made out of starfire. It was the only way that he could describe it, as it blazed with light and colors. Around the forge were racks, each having one place pulled in front and six others behind it.

"Welcome, welcome," Bright Star said.

Ryun knew that it wasn't real, in part because he could see as if he didn't have his astral eyes. It was all in his mind, or wherever it was that the awakened items went when they weren't summoned. But the major part that

told him that it wasn't real was the fact that he could still feel his body in the real world, feel the wind on his face.

"*It is impressive,*" Ryun said.

"*Thank you, I am,*" the forge said.

Ryun shook his head and walked forward, looking around and getting to know his new bonded forge.

A while later once he had given the forge enough items for it to study and eventually destroy, and once he had placed four of his javelins and two robes inside, he found himself sitting and looking through his screens.

Forged in Stars (Bond Perk)	Any item worn by the user gains +10% to their durability.

Bright Star	
Armory of the Stars	Grants the user the ability to store up to **6** items into the Star Forge up to **uncommon** rarity. Each item placed in the forge will be replicated and stored alongside the original, with the maximum of **6** copies. The rate or replication is: Common rarity: 1 per 1 hour. Uncommon rarity: 1 per 4 hours. Any item stored in the forge is granted *equip* and *repair* while used by the user. The item copies will last for 5 minutes outside of the forge if they are not used by the user.
Star Improvement	Any item placed in the forge for longer than **10** days will gain bonuses based on rarity: Common rarity: +5 to all stats and +10% to its durability. Uncommon rarity: +10 to all stats and 12% to its durability.

He felt satisfied with his choice, it wouldn't give him any real increase to power, but he had never been after that. He didn't want to rely on an item for power, he wanted it to be something that would be of use though. And the forge was definitely of use. He closed his screens and finally walked up into the Void, preparing to cycle and improve his core.