

## Improvement

It took him seven days to reach the Empire's border, or at least the first ruins of a village. He had nothing impeding his way as he ran across the sky, following his bond with Selia. They had spoken every night since he returned, and she told him how long it had taken them. Around two and a half years, but that was with them traveling on foot, on the ground, and taking a twisting path that led them to the ruin of the Empire's capital and then north to the sea, all while avoiding large groups of monsters. If Ryun was right, he wouldn't take more than a month, two at most. And that was with him taking breaks. Of course, it also assumed that he didn't run into anything that forced him to go around.

He sat on top of a platform, high in the sky, holding his Stillness Aspect orb in his lap. He was pulling in the Essence, pushing it into his Core, deepening its size. He had been cycling and drawing in Void for all the time he had been *dead*. Now he added Stillness, preparing his core for the next Realm. He already could advance, his core was full, and the next Realm accessible to him. He didn't take that last step, there were still things that he could do in this Realm.

He opened his eyes and stopped drawing in Essence. He took short breaks every day, taking the time to draw and prepare himself for the next step. But, that wasn't all that he was doing. With the Essence draw-in portion of his break done, he turned his mind to his techniques.

He had given them a lot of thought while he had been inside the Void plane, recovering. One thing had occurred to him during those years, regarding technique names. The Framework named things on its own, and yet, he had the option of naming things that he newly created. He had wondered why that wasn't the case with the techniques as well. And he had an idea about it. Though he hadn't been able to test it out just yet.

He focused on his main path's base technique, **{Empowering Null Mantle}**. That technique had started out as a simple **{Empower}** which he was able to use on any part of his body and on objects he was holding. He still could empower just a part of his body, but he had moved away from

empowering objects. In part because he didn't need it on Earth, Kagehime was nigh indestructible—even though he hadn't been aware that he needed to bond with her, no one had been strong enough to destroy a bond-less awakened object on Earth other than him.

Later, when he gained his Aspect, it became even harder. Void did not play well with empowering objects. Its nature didn't lend itself to it. Stillness on the other hand was a different thing. Ever since he had experienced the memories of the mad Eternal Realm Cultivator, he had been trying to exert his will on the Essence around him. So far, he had no success with it. The only thing that he could do was pull it inside, through his conduits and into his core.

But something else occurred to him a while ago, and he had been trying to accomplish it for days now. He started pulling Essence from the orb in his hands again. Stillness flowed through his palms, through the conduits in his arms, to shoulders and his chest, then toward his core. Before it reached the core, he focused and forced it away, through the conduits leading through the rest of his body and not his core. It was... hard, it required all of his concentration, and even after days of trying more than half of the Essence that was coming into his body was pulled into his core regardless of what he wanted. He struggled to push the Essence through his conduits, then... he tried to shape a technique, a simple **{Empower}** on his arm. He couldn't do it, no matter how much he tried, the moment he attempted to shape the technique with that Essence his control slipped and all that Stillness was pulled into his core.

He grimaced as he lost his grip again, though he had managed to almost start the technique this time. He shook his head, and settled in to try again.

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Days later and he still hadn't managed to shape the technique. Not only did it feel... harder to shape Essence compared to Qi, it was as if his body was fighting him too. As if it was so used to Qi or the Void. He didn't think that that was actually the issue, but he didn't have any better ideas. The Essence

was tier 9, but... Essence was not Qi. Qi was... refined Essence, stronger, better, and more importantly, completely under his command. Qi felt as if it was a part of him, Essence was... foreign.

He sat there for a few minutes, resting after another failed attempt, and trying to figure out what else he could try. He had tried it with each of his techniques with no success. He took a deep breath for the first time in days, and then sighed in annoyance. The fact that his body no longer needed to breathe just illustrated the height of his frustration, his body had reacted on impulse, on instinct.

As he felt the air move in front of him, he froze. His eyes narrowed and... a new idea occurred to him. He calmed himself, and took a breath, and then settled into a breathing form. He hadn't used one in a long time. Breathing forms were ways to teach a Cultivator how to utilize the knowledge of techniques that the Framework granted. They weren't necessary, for some at least. Using techniques without a breathing form was harder, but Ryun had trained himself enough that he didn't lose anything by not using a form.

He focused now on an old form, the first one that the Framework taught him, the most basic one. He pulled in Stillness from the orb, pushed it around his core like before, still losing a lot to the pull of his core but he had enough Essence in his conduits. Slowly he settled into the breathing form. Air entered his body, and he felt something in his mind click. A deep intake of breath, followed by slow leveled exhale, the Essence in his conduits moved by his will. It shaped the technique through the conduits on his arm, still it was hard, but the Essence moved. The technique took shape and then... he felt it snap into place. The empowering of his arm by the Stillness Essence. It was a trickle compared to the amount of Qi he usually used in his techniques, and he could feel that the effect was nowhere near as strong as it was when he used the technique with his Qi. But he had done it.

Then, as his attention slipped the technique went with it. He felt... not exhausted per say, but his conduits were strained. It seemed that by using Essence instead of Qi he had other factors to consider. Still, he had managed it, and that was what mattered. Now, he just needed to practice.

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Quickly he realized why people probably didn't do this, or at least none that he knew. The strength of the technique using Essence was always far less than when one was formed with Qi. And not only that, he needed to stay still in order to draw in Essence and then use a breathing form to shape a technique. Not useful in combat at all. Perhaps some Cultivators on different paths might be able to use this, but it would be hard for Ryun. He was limited not only by the quality of Essence but also his drawing speed.

Still, it was another tool in his repertoire, and he did feel like it would help him be able to command unbound Essence around him. He had started using Air and Wind Essences, around him and shaping techniques. He could throw weak blasts of Essence when he used his **{Void Beam}**, though he had only managed to use Essence with the previous iterations of his techniques. It seemed that his current techniques were too advanced for Essence, or perhaps too much dependent on the properties of Qi. Essence wasn't Qi, and he couldn't manipulate it in the same way. He couldn't force Air Essence to crystallize, no matter how he tried. So when he tried to create an Essence Wall in front of himself, it was just... Air, a bit denser, but nothing that would stop anything.

There were secrets here, he suspected, things that he hadn't yet thought of. But he would need time to find them all out.

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It took him around fifteen days to reach the wall. The place he ran over was still intact, the Wall still whole even though it was abandoned. He decided to take a detour. He followed the wall toward the core of the Empire, toward the ruin of their great city. Selia had told him what she knew, the Ornn family had given their account of what happened, and Ryun wanted to see it. He found areas of the Wall that were broken through, leagues of the Wall shattered, others had fallen with just a few small holes. Cities along the Wall were all razed to the ground, but there was no sign of life. No dome monsters, no people.

It took him four days to reach the heart of the Empire, but he had seen the signs of what he expected to find a day out. The sand turned into glass from heat, cracks in the Wall, the closer he got, the worse it was. Until he reached where the city used to be, or the area at least. He couldn't quite tell what he was looking at at first, even from high up in the sky. What he saw was... it nearly boggled the mind.

It was a deep crater, that was the only word he knew that could even come close to what he was seeing, and even it failed to properly describe it. His eyes could see the end of it, so far into the distance, something that he had never been able to do before. Air Essence usually made his sight seem as if he was looking through a fog, the closer something was, the clearer he saw it. But this...

It was as if there was so little Essence in the crater, in the sky above, everywhere. And it was as deep as a mountain inverted. He saw water pooling at the bottom, flowing in from a dozen different sources all around the crater. He knew that the Emperor caused this, but he didn't know how. It was... as if Ryun had used his **{Staggered End}** technique, but on such a scale that it had taken a chunk out of the world itself. As if it had swallowed the Essence and everything around it.

Such power.

Ryun considered himself mighty, but this... he couldn't do this. No matter how perfect the circumstances, how much stats he managed to steal. The scale of it alone was...

He had helped kill Hastur, a being that was greater than anything that Ryun had ever encountered. He was indisputably in the top of the Infinite Realm. But this... It humbled him. Showed him that he still had a lot more to grow.

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Trying to change his techniques was... a tedious process, and time consuming. And he didn't have a lot of time to waste on his trip back. Selia hadn't outright said it, but there were... issues in the sect. Things that were

better left for an in person conversation. Still, he took the time to practice, to prepare himself for the advancement to the next Realm.

He was even trying to improve his Essence drawing. Trying to master drawing in Essence while moving. It was... hard, having to focus on so many different things. But... if he ever was going to be able to use techniques with Essence, he would need to be able to move while he drew it in.

The improvement of his techniques so far consisted of further refinement. Learning how to use less Qi for the same effect, how to shape techniques faster. Changing them was... well, it wasn't really necessary in most cases, as far as his main Path was concerned at least. And those were the techniques that he focused on now.

His techniques were very much colored by his Aspect, the Void. So, he was trying to at least alter them so that they could utilize any type of Qi or Essence. There were subtle differences that he noticed when using different Essences for techniques. Slightly different ways in which he had to execute techniques. It meant that he had to alter even the breathing forms as he went. The one that he struggled the most was **{Void Beam}**. That one was the most reliant on Void, as suggested by its name. The Framework named things with a reason, but now he was trying to... change the technique, to build it up again from the ground up. He didn't know if it was even possible, the Framework was there for a reason. It provided a system that facilitated growth for everyone.

It was... strange in a way. Abilities couldn't be changed in the same manner. The Framework seemed far more rigid with a Class. And it seemed far more relaxed for Skill. The Cultivation was somewhere in between. Perks were dependent on what the Framework believed you deserved, like with the Class. But techniques? They could be altered, tweaked, like skills. Though that was not necessary. The Framework could upgrade them just how it did abilities.

**{Void Beam}** fired a concentrated beam of Void Qi in its natural state. Void seemed to linger in a place that was somewhere between a gas-like state and liquid, perhaps something like plasma in the old universe. The more he studied and tried to learn about Essences, the more he realized just how little

he knew. Still, the technique was simple, he pulled Qi out of his core, compressed then released it in a beam.

But the technique had started with **{Qi Burst}**, a simple ejection of Qi from any part of his body. He still could do that, of course. The current evolution of the technique was just more refined, more sustained, just more of everything it had been. He had managed to use it with Essence he drew in, sending bursts of wind in front of him. He didn't have the drawing speed, nor was he able to keep enough of the Essence that he drew in out of his core to be able to use the current version of the technique.

That wasn't what he was worried about though. Even if he managed it, if he mastered drawing in Essence while moving and gained sufficient control not to let it enter his core, he would never be able to use it with anywhere near the power that his Qi could provide. No, what he was doing was preparing his techniques for his secondary Aspect—Stillness.

Using techniques with Stillness Essence was... strange. He couldn't quite figure out what their ultimate shape would be since he couldn't amass enough Essence to use a technique at full potential, nor was Essence anywhere near the power of his Qi—for some reason.

When he fired a Stillness beam, it just... fizzled out the moment it left his body. It induced stillness into the air around the exit point, freezing it in place for a few moments, but it quickly dissipated. He was trying to figure out what applications that Qi could have. He had decided on it because he believed it to synergize well with the Void, the concept of it at least. And if he decided to mix the two Aspects, he would get something new. But there was still the possibility of keeping them separate. He hadn't decided yet what he was going to do.

He used his technique a few more times with the Stillness Essence, trying to see if he would get some type of insight. When nothing came, he decided that he had taken a long enough break—figuring this out was going to take a bit more time, it seemed. He stood up and jumped from the platform, shaping steps that he used to run across the sky. Following the bond in his mind, heading home.