

Responsibilities and Meanings

Zach

“I should come with you,” Naha said, her hand reaching out to squeeze his.

Zach smiled, then shook his head. “I need someone to look after this place,” he waved his hand around them. The walls of the Castle of Knowledge were still filled with spirits. Less than there had been before, many had left after the death of the Grand Spirit of Knowledge at his hands.

But others had also come to see the new owner. Zach was almost universally accepted by them, the morality and ways of the spirits were not at all like those that Zach had become familiar with in the Real Realm. The spirit accepted him in the new role, and sought him out to give them answers to the questions they had.

At first he had been somewhat apprehensive, as he didn't have the well of knowledge that his predecessor had. It turned out that he didn't need to worry too much. Spirits were a lot more flexible as far as the passage of time was concerned. Zach had the time to research the topics they were interested and come back to them days, weeks, or more later. It didn't matter to them as much as getting the answer eventually.

And there was a lot to learn. He had spent days locked up in the Repository of Knowledge, just soaking up knowledge through his new Knowledge Blade. There was too much for him to take in of course, so he had mostly started storing it in his **Band Of Memory's Hall**. He

had learned how to just siphon knowledge without actually experiencing it, then storing it into his item for easier consumption later. His item had a perk of being able to basically show him what was stored at a much faster rate than what his new blade could. Allowing him the benefit of not losing time when he learned.

“I don’t want to leave you alone again,” Naha stressed.

“I’ve agreed to it,” Zach said.

“So have I,” she countered.

Zach sighed. “Not really, they just... assumed that you would be coming with me.”

Naha gave him a look that he knew very well, and he had to look away.

“You’re right,” he said after a few seconds of silence. “But I also do need you here. I don’t want to leave this place unattended, and you have been learning with the... spirit,” Zach tried not to think of what the Grand Spirit of Horror was teaching her, but they had come to this place for power.

Naha narrowed her eyes at him. “The last time I let you go somewhere alone you got captured.”

“True, but it was a completely different situation. This time I will be surrounded by an entire army. And besides, my job isn’t to fight the Dome at all, I’m just there as backup,” he said.

Naha looked at him for a long minute and then finally asked. “Are you sure?”

Zach tried not to grimace. She knew him very well. There was another reason why he wanted to leave the Ethereal. Ever since he took the Grand Spirit’s power he had been feeling strange. He had a

strange perception of the Ethereal Realm that he hadn't ever experienced before, and it... unnerved him.

"I need to leave, for a little while at least," Zach answered. "And I am being genuine, I need someone here to keep an eye on things. I have plans for this place."

Naha gave him a long look, and then nodded.

"I understand," she said as he knew that she would.

He stood up, a few months had passed in the Real Realm since they came to the Ethereal. They had been lucky, though Zach had also been trying to influence Time with his will. He wasn't quite sure how successful he was, but ever since he defeated the Grand Spirit he had felt like the Ethereal was almost listening to him. As if it had synchronized time to flow as it did in the Real Realm because of him.

He wanted to see what would happen once he left. He took a deep breath, he had enough time to go back to the Sect and gather the Wardens, they should've arrived. The assignment was, after all, for the Warden faction.

He was looking forward to seeing how Bera and the others had grown. He had plans for them too.

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Ryun

The Grand Spirit of Transition wove... whatever it was that it used. Its power swallowed Ryun and Nayra.

“I will place you near the territory that the War Camp is bound to, that should be near enough to your target,” the Grand Spirit of Transition said as the Grand Spirit of Mysteries stood nearby.

“Just remember your promise,” Ryun said to both of them. “Once we are finished in the Real Realm, we’ll come for the knowledge you promised.”

The Grand Spirits didn’t respond, instead Transition activated its power. Then they were moving through the Ethereal, back to the Real Realm.

Ryun felt the moment they left the Ethereal, it was a new sensation, but one that he was getting very accustomed with.

He opened his eyes and saw the breadth of Essence all around him, letting him know that they were no longer in the Ethereal Realm.

“Well, that was, interesting,” Nayra said. “And they dropped us in the middle of nowhere, great.”

Ryun chuckled. “We’ll see,” he said, then unwound his perception, pushing it as far as he could.

Everything came alive in his mind. After keeping himself contained so long, it felt liberating, as if he had just taken in his first breath, it felt like he was whole again.

His **|Enhanced Adaptation|** struggled to help his mind make sense of all the new information that was coming in. He lamented how much he had missed in the Ethereal, he had been in the middle of camp filled by so many spirits, he could’ve learned so much. The smith spirits... how much had he missed by not being able to see everything that they were doing? By being forced to confine himself? His time in the Ethereal had taught him precision and control, but ultimately his perception had always been about seeing everything, about knowing

everything. It resonated with who he was, a Witness. The Oblivion that surrounded everything and watched.

He smiled as he felt his sense hit its range limit, covering the territory around them, then he let his Will flow into the skill, and pushed beyond his limits. His mind was overwhelmed with the scope, with so many things happening. **|Divided Mind|** was there for him to reach out to, lessen the load, but he refused, he pushed his Will into **|Enhanced Adaptation|**. He could've done this years ago, but he held himself back. The reason for it had always been simple to Ryun. There was a part of him that had always felt like advancing when he had a need, granted him greater power. This moment wasn't filled with conflict, it wasn't in the middle of the battle, but it had something.

Spending so much time in the Ethereal had helped him. He had gotten better at control, but also just being exposed to the Realm of the Soul had had an impact on him. The sense of his Soul had expanded. He could almost feel his skills at a deeper level, as he had felt them long ago when Zach had sealed his power.

He remembered the blade sticking out of the shield covering his power, the pillar that was his skill. They were there in him, shaping who he was. He hadn't always locked in pieces that he wanted, not consciously at least. He didn't even know how skills worked, back at the start. And sometimes, he didn't even care. It had taken him some time to figure out what his pillars were, what exactly he had locked into each of his skills. A man that cut down anyone in his way, the monster that was inside of him. A man that wanted to survive anything. A man that always kept his word. A man that wanted to advance. A man that wished to find interesting things. A man that had the desire to understand. A man that loved Cultivation.

These were his building block, the foundations. And Ryun was building toward something greater. Something that Zach had taught

him he should. The meaning of his life. There were other pieces of him that were important too. **The Wolf of the End, The Witness of Journey's End, The Paths of Final End and the Unbreakable Wall, the Aspect of Oblivion.**

Once, he had thought that his meaning could be something like *Enduring in Pursuit of Worth*. He still felt like it was close. But he was also *the End*, that which ushered the last breath. Worth and the End. He still didn't know how to put the feeling into words, but he could place another stone, secure the foundation further.

He felt his two skills pulsing, the quests that had been finished long ago, waiting for him to trigger the evolution, faltered as he pushed his skills in another direction. He focused on the pieces of himself that he wanted to be part of him forever.

The love of smithing, of creation.

|Enhanced Adaptation| >>> |Perfect Enhanced Adaptation|

His mind cleared as his skill helped his sense perceive the world around him. The information sorted itself inside his mind, and existence came alive. He focused on his foundation.

The pursuit of worth.

|Of Targeted Resonance Sense| >>> |I Perceive By My Will|

The skills blossomed inside his being, pillars settling inside of him, expanding his Soul.

“You had to do that now?” Nayra’s voice brought him out of his head, and he glanced in her direction, not surprised that she sensed something.

“It felt like a good moment,” Ryun said, and then glanced at his new perk.

Piercing Perception	Your I Perceived By My Will allows you to sense through most scrying protections. +25% to dexterity and intelligence.
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It was a good perk, he thought. Then something caught his attention and he tilted his head as the information from his perception slid into his conscious mind.

Oblivion spread out of him, a tiny layer that he used to engulf both himself and Nayra. He waited for a few moments, and then grimaced.

“Follow me,” he said and then quickly moved, leaping through the air toward the forest nearby. After a while he stopped and got back

down to the ground, Nayra landing next to him, her wings of fire disappearing.

“What was that about?” She asked.

“Damn,” he said, he had hoped that obscuring them with Oblivion would be enough. “We got incoming.”

Introductions

They settled in to wait for their pursuers. Based on what Ryun had said their pace was, it wouldn't be a long wait.

Nayra leaned on a rock as she waited, neither of them had pulled out any of their weapons or armor, they didn't want to seem threatening, they were guests here after all. At best at least, unwanted intruders at worst.

From what Ryun could sense around them, they had just been dropped in the middle of the a very busy territory. According to him, there were so many people near that he couldn't even attempt to count them. But at least his skill wasn't getting as overwhelmed as it would've in the past. Though, he did say that he noticed that focusing on the areas where there was a lot of stuff happening seemed to sap his willpower more than before. He had expected something like that, a tier nine skill had to have a drawback.

"What's the plan?" Nayra asked after a while.

Ryun kept his eyes on the sky. "We'll see once they get here," he answered. Nayra could still feel his Qi around her, probably preventing most tracking and scrying powers from working.

Somehow they had been detected even with that, it told Nayra that the territory was closely watched.

Ryun's power was great, but there were ways around it, if you knew what to look for. Sometimes taking notice of things missing, or any other slight irregularities, was the easiest way to find him.

"What if they attack?" Nayra asked.

"We aren't here to fight," Ryun answered.

She narrowed her eyes on him. “What if they have orders to kill all intruders on sight?”

He blinked and turned his head to look at her.

“I’m being serious,” Nayra continued. “The Grand Spirit said that it will drop us close to where the ritual is supposed to take place, right?”

Ryun nodded.

“Well, I’m pretty sure that the Triumphant Hive has been keeping their plan with the spirits a secret. Which means that they probably regulate who has access to this territory very tightly.”

He tilted his head.

“You know,” Nayra gestured by drawing a finger across her neck.

Ryun frowned. “Ah, well, they have no way of knowing who we are. I don’t think that their wishes will matter much in the end. They are here.”

He turned his head and Nayra followed after him. Up in the sky she saw a group flying their way. Two of them were larger than the others, even from the distance she could tell that they were Champion Forms. The rest seemed a lot smaller, and as they came closer she could identify the others as the standard skreen forms, though these ones had wings. One of the flying people caught her eye because their wings were larger, and differently shaped, but also because the person was smaller than even the regular skreen forms. For a moment Nayra was stunned, thinking that the Grey Horde herself had come for them, but quickly she realized that it was just another War Queen.

Nayra knew that War Queen’s rarely left the Triumphant Hive’s territories, only when they were needed to command a war. The only widely known War Queen of the Triumphant Hive was the Grey Horde.

This one looked similar, short, with long thin wings stretching behind her, a smooth and thick mane around her neck. Her coloring was different, with a black carapace streaked with blue.

They came in quick, landed with their weapons drawn and pointed at Ryun and Nayra.

“Halt intruders! Do not move or you will be killed,” one of the Champion’s yelled.

“We are, halted,” Ryun said in a tone that conveyed his complete lack of fear.

The skreen started to spread out around them, surrounding them. Nayra didn’t react, but she did keep track of them. One of her gained skills allowed her to get a rough feel for the power of the people around her. They were powerful, if she had to make a guess all were near the peak of their main focuses, probably in the last third of them. Immortals all.

In most circumstances, having eight hostile high tiered people arrayed against you would’ve been enough to make anyone intimidated. But they were not just anyone. Just being powerful was not enough when you dealt in the realms of High Rankers.

“You are trespassing on the Triumphant Hive lands,” the champion said. “You will surrender and come with us.”

He pulled something from his storage, a pair of thick manacles that Nayra could see also had arrays. They probably had some power suppression capabilities.

She was tempted to speak, but if she was being honest she wanted to see how Ryun would react so she just turned to look at him.

Ryun straightened, then spoke.

“We’ve come to speak with Grey Horde, I would appreciate it if you could lead us to her,” Ryun said and Nayra closed her eyes and sighed.

She really had been hoping for too much.

The champion, obviously, didn’t take that the way Ryun thought he would.

“The only place you are going is a cell, where you will tell us who you are, how you’ve arrived and what you are doing here.”

Ryun tilted his head, and for a moment looked like he was confused. Then his eyes widened as if something had just occurred to him.

“I believe that there is a misunderstanding here,” Ryun said slowly. “That, was not a request.”

The champion’s beady eyes bored into Ryun, his antennae twitched as did those of the other skreen present. Their telepathy, Nayra suspected, though she couldn’t detect it directly.

The War Queen stood behind the champion, probably facilitating and giving out orders. At least that was the impression Nayra got from their body language.

“You have trespassed on our lands, you have no right to... request, anything. We are the ones that decide what is going to happen next.”

Ryun’s brow furrowed in confusion again. Then it cleared and he seemed to nod to himself.

“Ah,” he started, then moved making everyone around them tense up and raise their weapons. Ryun simple bowed over his fists in a standard sect greeting. “Apologies, I’ve failed to introduce myself, and I’ve not been clear with my words.”

He cleared his throat as he straightened and looked the champion in the eyes.

“I am Sect Head Ryun Nacht-Woll of the Twilight Melody Sect, with me is my Sect Leader, Nayra Ornn-Dagda. We have come to speak with your queen. You will lead us to her, or inform her that we are here to speak. We can wait.”

The skreen antennae started twitching again, more furiously now. Some of them took a step back, others gripped their weapons tighter. They obviously recognized the names.

“And if we refuse?” The champion asked, and Nayra sighed. That was the wrong thing to say.

Ryun didn't outwardly react, his Qi did. The world around them suddenly became thinner, as if the Essence was smothered, and perhaps it had. She had trained against him often, she recognized it. All Essence surrounding them was drenched in his Qi, half of it just erased. They became lighter as less Gravity fell on them, Light became dimmer as if someone had pulled a curtain over the sun. There were more effects, some barely noticeable for most people, like the fact that there was less Air around them as high tiered people didn't need to breathe that often.

One that Nayra was certain they wouldn't know was Space, Ryun would've weakened it so that a single step could take him next to any one of them in barely an instant.

The effects were intimidating even to Nayra who was familiar with what he was doing. She shuddered to imagine what these people would think and feel. They were not prepared for encountering someone like them here.

“As I said,” Ryun's voice came out slowly, at a leisurely pace. “That was not a request.”

The skreen nodded his head, their antennae twitching as they retreated then moved some distance away without a word spoken. She doubted that they could even speak.

She watched as they stopped, then after a few glances in their direction the group decided to walk a bit further away.

Nayra sighed and turned to look at Ryun. “How much of that was you playing it up?”

Ryun turned to look at her with an innocent look on his face. “Playing it up? I don’t know what you mean.”

She saw the twinkle in the two pools of nothingness that were his eyes and she shook her head.

“I didn’t believe Tali’s stories, but this trip had taught me much,” Nayra said.

“What did she say?” Ryun asked.

“That you are impossible, that you desire only to cause mayhem and that you have no regard for propriety.”

“Every word out of her mouth is a lie,” Ryun said. He even managed to sound half-way insulted.

Nayra just shook her head as the group approached them again. This time it was the War Queen that spoke.

“Undying Void,” she said, her tone respectful. “We humbly request that you remain here, we shall send word to the Triumphant Queen.”

“Of course, we are your guests,” Ryun said with a smile.

The War Queen turned and fled. Somehow, Nayra felt like his smile was the most terrifying thing he had done to them.

Skreen

Ryun leaned his face on his palm as they waited, sitting on the edge of the territory. Nayra had pulled out an open tent out of her storage and set it up, along with chairs and a small table. She had a chess board on top of it that they were lazily playing. It had almost been a day of waiting, and even chess could get old quick.

Of course, while he was paying some attention to what was in front of him, **|Divided Mind|** let the bigger part of his mind focus on everything around him. His skill had sharpened, gotten stronger in every way. **|I Perceive By My Will|** was exactly what it sounded like. He could sense anything that he willed. If he wanted to focus on only a single type of Essence, he could, if he wanted to increase his range he could, if he wanted to narrow it down he could.

The territory around they were in was very interesting, and Ryun was getting a lot of information. The main part of it was a valley, one that appeared to his perception very similar to the one that housed War's army. Which made sense, they knew that the camp location was locked in place with the Real Realm, and the Ethereal was a mirror of the Real Realm, only one that always moved and changed. Places in the Ethereal flowed and could be nowhere near their counterparts in the Real Realm.

What Ryun had gathered so far had given him some idea as to what was actually happening and how the Grey Horde planned on bringing the spirit army through. Though it had taken him a while to figure it out.

"You know a lot about skreen forms, right?" Ryun asked.

Nayra glanced up from the board, then moved a piece before answering. "Yes, why?"

Her family employed a lot of skreen, people that were now part of his sect. But the Third Empire in general had all the hives that had escaped the core.

"There is a hive nearby, a large one," Ryun said slowly as he moved his own piece. "There is a lot of queens birthing new skreen, they don't feel right to me."

Nayra raised an eyebrow, she glanced out of their tent at the group of people some distance away. Their... hosts, had increased in number. There was around two dozen of them now, not all skreen, keeping watch.

"They can't hear," Ryun said, he kept the area around their tent soaked in Oblivion, with his intent he destroyed any Essence that attempted to leave or enter their tent, the only thing he let out was his perception.

"Don't feel right how?" Nayra asked.

"They are smaller, and they don't seem to be doing anything, they just sit there," Ryun answered, then focused his perception on one of the skreen that he hadn't seen before. "They have the same general shape as the basic skreen form, but only a single antennae on top of their head."

Nayra frowned. "Smaller and only one antenna? Hm..."

"You recognize the form?" Ryun asked.

She nodded, a tad bit uncertainty. "How much do you know about the skreen before the Infinite Realm?"

Ryun blinked. "Not much," he answered. "Just what everyone knows, mostly that they shared the homeworld with the krecean."

Nayra glanced out of the tent at their watchers, then back to Ryun.

"You are aware of the common belief that skreen can't use Cultivation? It is somewhat the truth, you don't need just knowledge in order to progress properly. For Cultivation, as you very well know, you need a sense of individuality. Every Path is different, personal. The reason why skreen take up Classes more often than not is because they are easier to obtain, you need only to fulfill certain conditions in order to gain them. As far as that form... I've heard stories, when I was young, I don't know how true they are."

She gave him a long look, and he nodded, indicating for her to keep going.

"When the Framework arrived, the skreen didn't adapt very well. Primarily because they were a hive mind, the bulk of their people were a worker class that had little individuality and agency, they relied on the orders from their queens. From what I heard, they literally couldn't make decisions on their own, so they weren't able to use the Framework to its fullest. Only their Champion forms and their Queens were able to utilize it. And so, they abandoned that form and fashioned new ones, the one that we see in the Infinite Realm was created after the Framework arrived, or so at least the story goes. They

were given more autonomy, an individuality, but that also lessened their hive mind, it turned it more into a loose link of individuals. It robbed the skreen of their biggest strength, their hive mind. But they did what they always do, adapt."

"They did this in every Iteration?" Ryun asked, surprised.

"You've noticed that there are differences between the skreen from different hives? That is because each hive came up with different solutions. The Blue Forest Hive's skreen are very different than those from the Triumphant Hive."

"That is interesting, but what does it have to do with this new form?" Ryun asked.

"Old form," Nayra corrected. "If it is what I think. The description you gave sounds a lot like what the stories of their old worker form looks like. I don't know why they would start birthing that form though. It's not even sentient, not in any real sense."

Ryun blinked, and then things clicked into place. His perception washed over the valley in the distance, the entire place was heavily warded, but he could pierce through it with his new skill perk, Piercing Perception. There were arrays everywhere, even some formations. The hive spread far beyond the ground, with massive caves filled with newborn skreen just sitting there.

There were only a few places in the valley that were so deeply warded that he couldn't see through, but what he could see painted the picture.

"I think that I know," Ryun said slowly. He couldn't tell what the arrays did, but he could identify some of the formations. They were doing something to these new skreen.

"Care to share?" Nayra asked.

Ryun shook his head. "Later, we are about to have company."

He had felt an army surround the entire territory hours ago, scouts had scraped every league of it, searching for anything out of place. Ryun's and Nayra's presence here had not been met with calm, obviously.

And now he could feel a flying castle entering his outer range, heading straight for them. It was warded enough that he couldn't pierce the center chamber, but it didn't matter. Grey Horde was standing on its prow, looking ahead.

Ryun turned his attention back to the board and continued playing until the shadow of the castle moved over them. He didn't react until a small army came down from it, some on ships, others on their own wings.

"So," Nayra started. "What do you think the chances are that they are going to attack us?"

"None," Ryun answered immediately.

"Really?" She raised an eyebrow, then nodded in the direction where a small group had gathered and then headed in their direction. "I'm pretty sure that is Trklak, the Horde Itself, I don't think that she sends him to talk."

Ryun chuckled and made another move. "Check, and I very much doubt that they would bring an army if they really intend to fight, not us," he said. "I don't think that Grey Horde would make that mistake."

Nayra tilted her head. "I guess," she moved her king, and Ryun followed. The group reached their tent and Ryun pulled back his Qi, allowing them through.

Trklak, the Horde Itself, walked up to them.

"Sect Head, Sect Leader," he said bowing over one set of fists.

Ryun glanced in his direction and inclined his head. "Champion," he greeted back.

"My Queen wishes to speak with you, she is waiting above," he pointed at the castle looming above them.

Ryun picked up a piece on the board and made a move. "Checkmate."

Nayra grimaced. "Damn," she said then they both stood up. With a brush of her fingers, she stored the board, the table, and then the chairs into her storage.

"We'll follow," Ryun said, and the skreen lead them to an airship.

The ride was silent, the skreen barely even moving, except for their antennae which twitched constantly. He didn't need to see it in order to know that they were constantly talking. Their telepathy was Essence, Thought, Mind, mixed in with something that he wasn't fully familiar with. The Essence was snapping in between them, visible to

his eyes, but also detectable by his sense. Though he couldn't tell what they were talking about, he could imagine.

They landed in the big corridor, the waiting party already there. Grey Horde stood in the center, surrounded by two more War Queens. There were other skreen a bit farther away, but it seemed like the queen would meet them personally.

Trklak led the way bowed to his queen, then took position to the side.

For a moment Ryun and Grey Horde just looked at each other, and for once Ryun didn't have to look up, as she was about his height.

Then, as he felt the silence stretch he bowed. "Your majesty," he greeted, he was the guest after all, it was proper.

"Sect Head," she inclined her head. "Your... presence here is unexpected."

"Well," Ryun started. "It was not perfectly planned, but it was necessary. We needed to speak with you, it is a matter of some importance."

One of the War Queen's at her side stiffened, her antennae twitching and a rapid fire exchange happened between her and the Grey Horde.

Then, Grey Horde shook her head and spoke.

"It doesn't matter anymore," she said with a sigh.

The War Queen on her shoulder glanced in her direction, almost surprised. "My Queen?"

"I said that it doesn't matter," Grey Horde repeated, probably continuing their conversation out loud. She met Ryun's eyes and spoke. "My commander says that we shouldn't risk you being here for long, that you might discover more than we want you to. But it doesn't matter anymore, doesn't it? It hasn't mattered since you arrived here."

Ryun gave her a weak smile. "It doesn't, there are very few secrets that can be kept from me."

Grey Horde shook her head. "This is a very hard spot you've put me in. Anybody else, would've been dead already. The only reason you are not is because I am not certain I can kill you fast enough, before you kill many of my own people or cause enough noise that this place is revealed. So, I hope that what you need to speak with me is important enough, because risk or not, I am not letting you leave without an oath."

Ryun inclined his head. "That is perfectly reasonable."

Grey Horde tilted her head. "I am very much interested in knowing how exactly you bypassed all of our defenses, how you crossed the border and into the heart of my lands without anyone noticing?"

"Easy," Ryun answered. "We came through the Ethereal."

Grey Horde blinked, then her expression got more guarded. "Why?"

"I think that we should move somewhere more private for that conversation," Ryun told her.

For a moment, she didn't move, and then she gestured and sent orders with her telepathy. "Follow me."