

The Vessel

Ryun stepped through the portal and into the Ethereal, Nayra and Trklak following close behind him. The War Camp was as he remembered it, not that he expected it to change. It had been only a bit over a month since they had last been here, assuming that the passage of time was in sync, and as far as Ryun knew it was.

Spirits walked around them, most not paying much attention to them, except for a small group of spirits that looked like suits of armor. They approached and met with them as the portal closed.

"You've returned," one of the spirits said, Ryun couldn't say with any great certainty if he had already met this spirit, most those who were of the same type appeared identical to him.

"We have," Ryun said. "We have news for the Grand Spirit."

The spirits had obviously been expecting them, and they escorted them through the main camp to the center tent.

As they walked, Ryun saw the area where the shades gathered had changed somewhat. The shades had gathered their camp, almost as if they were getting ready to leave. That worried him.

Shades weren't supposed to be able to leave the Ethereal Realm, yet one had managed it, which meant that it was possible. The part that worried him was that Grey Horde's deal didn't include the shades at all, yet they were here in the service of the Grand Spirit. The only reason why War would have them here was if it had something in mind for them. And

Ryun was worried that War had figured out a way to send shades to the Real World.

From what Zach had explained, what happened to him felt like someone pulling on a tether. Ra'azel had somehow used Zach as that tether, and had crawled through that link.

He pushed those thoughts out of his mind as they reached the main tent and were led inside.

Ryun kept close watch on his surroundings with his perception, noting where every spirit was and what they were doing. He saw no sign of the Grand Spirit of Change. He didn't know if that was good or not.

The Grand Spirit of War awaited them in the center, as always. Elemental Spirits of all kinds flew in a circle above her throne, like a shoal of fish. The Grand Spirit's form was still that of an armored female drake, her gaze following them as they drew closer to her and came to a stop in front of her throne.

"I see you brought another guest," the Grand Spirit started.

Trklak inclined his head. "Grand Spirit, I am Trklak, Champion of the Triumphant Hive."

War turned her eyes back to Ryun. "Can I assume that you've accomplished what I've asked of you?"

Ryun stepped forward then nodded. "We have," he said slowly. This part was tricky, and he had to be careful with his words. The delay had been the skreen inability to make a vessel suitable for a Grand Spirit. From what he had heard, War had little knowledge of anything that was involved with how skreen created new forms, and she didn't care. To her it was a matter beyond her understanding, something that was not part

of her domain. Which had made her frustrated and the relations between the skreen and War tense. She saw an obstacle and simply demanded that it be removed. Ryun was counting on her being frustrated enough that her impatience was able to get the better of her.

War stood immediately, her eyes flashing. "We are ready then?"

"We believe so," Ryun said slowly. "But we would still wish carry out a quick test."

War took a step closer to him, towering over everyone else in the room. "What kind of a test?"

"The vessel that the skreen have prepared for you was still insufficient to hold you in the Real Realm permanently. You've asked me to deal with the issue, and I had done so in the only manner that I knew how. I've crafted a suit of armor that is supposed to bolster the vessel and prevent the degradation. But there is no way for us to test the vessel on our own, not without you doing it yourself," Ryun said.

He leaned into the knowledge that the Grand Spirit should have of him. He had spent time in her camp and had demonstrated his skill in her forges. He wasn't naïve enough to think that she hadn't had him observed and his actions in the camp reported back. She should know that what he was saying was probable. And it wasn't even a lie.

One of the elemental spirits above swooped down to circle around her head. Ryun watched in fascination as their Essences interacted as they communicated. War raised her hand, and the spirits above dispersed, leaving the tent.

"My army will be ready," War said.

"Remember," Ryun started. "We are not certain that this will work, not yet at least."

"I tire of waiting," War's voice dipped low.

"I understand," he nodded. "And I am confident that I can make any alterations to the armor that are needed. I just want you to be prepared for it."

War looked at him, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. "Are you trying to delay me?"

"Ra'azel is both of ours ultimate goal," Ryun responded. "I want him dealt with as much as you do. And every moment we waste here is giving him more free reign in the Real Realm."

War kept her eyes on him for a long moment, and then nodded. "Let's get this test over with then."

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They were led to a different tent, with four spirits standing guard inside. The center of it was an open space with an array carved into the stone floor. Ryun knew this place, he had visited its counterpart in the Real Realm. It was the portal room, the place that led directly into a room in the Real Realm where the vessel for the Grand Spirit was kept.

Ryun focused his sense, his new skill allowed him to perceive in the Ethereal Realm, the backlash that he felt before was mostly gone. Though he had noticed that his willpower was being drained much faster in the Ethereal than it had while in the Real Realm when he focused on something. Still, he could tell that the spirits in the valley were preparing to be summoned in the Real Realm.

Thankfully, War had agreed to first test the vessel.

"Begin," War said, and the spirits in the room activated the arrays.

Ryun felt something at the edge of his perception, on the other side of the camp, a shifting presence. He had wondered if the Grand Spirit of Change would make an appearance. It stayed away, probably not wanting to be noticed. Ryun kept his attention on the Grand Spirit with **|Divided Mind|**.

Half of the arrays lit up, and then a few moments later the second half lit up as well as summoners in the Real Realm activated their side.

A rip in the world appeared in the center, and then a portal opened, showing what was on the other side. The floor of the room was identical, covered with the exact same array. The rest was different, as this room was beneath the ground while the one Ryun was in was in a tent above ground.

"There it is," Ryun said, gesturing at what stood at the end of the room in the Real. On a large upright rack, stood the vessel. A skreen body with two sets of arms and large moth-like wings. The chitin was sleek and black, reflecting the light of the lanterns through the portal. The vessel lacked antennae as it had no need for telepathy of any kind, nor did Grey Horde want it to have it, that part was not engineered into the body. The eyes were sunken into the skull, and filled with hexagons. The mouth was hidden behind a wicked-looking set of mandibles. The body reminded Ryun of skreen champions, except that it was the size of a War Form kreacean, it was taller than even the Grand Spirit herself was. But what really caught the eye was the armor that sheathed the vessel fully. That too was black, and covered in formations.

It was truly Ryun's greatest work, though it had been a collaboration with Triumphant Hive's smiths. It was the hardest thing he had ever

created, and it had rewarded him. A spiritual tool was easier in contrast. It required less skill, and more manipulation of the esoteric forces of his own soul. And Ryun was very good at that. But pushing himself to make the armor had been worth it. The bond between him and Bright Star had advanced to its last level, and he had gained a new Perk ability, **Forged Memory**.

The formations on the armor did exactly what he had said they would, but inside they had copied and altered the measures that had once held Ra'azel in the Felltower. It had taken them a while to figure out what those measures did, as they were unlike the arrays and formations that were used widely now. They felt... older. As if they were written in a different language. But Ryun and the smiths had managed it.

It really was an instrument of war, Ryun could see that it was meant for it.

"At last," War said, her eyes glued to her vessel. With a determined step, the Grand Spirit of War crossed through the portal into the Real Realm.

Ryun followed.

The Betrayal

Ryun stepped through the portal a moment after War, followed closely by Nayra and Trklak. The room in the Real Realm was occupied as well, behind the portal stood a group of summoners, their powers working hard to keep the portal open and prevent it from collapsing as a Grand Spirit passed through. The moment after War fully entered the real realm, her body collapsed, losing its form and becoming what it truly was at its core, the Essence of War. There was no more appearance of a drake woman that the Ethereal shaped around her. Now, War was just a cloud of Essence, and it surged across the room to enter the vessel.

Ryun watched in fascination as the Essence of War spilled into the waiting body, the Essence mingling with what was already present. He kept his perception and eyes on what was happening in front of him, soaking all of it in. It was a unique chance to observe a spirit controlling Essence. From his understanding, a spirit's power was more akin to the Skill focus than anything else, though it had elements of everything.

The room flooded with the War Essence, enough so that even Ryun could feel his soul be affected. He felt on the edge of violence, but also uplifted, and ready for a battle. He could feel Nayra and Trklak experiencing the same.

The summoner in the room shifted their focus, and the portal closed. War, now inside of the vessel opened her eyes, the armor lit up as his formations powered on to keep the body from falling apart. Even with their plan, they had to make sure that the vessel could hold her. Otherwise, she would have just been pulled back into the Ethereal, and that was not their intent. Still, he saw cracks appear on the chitin, spreading from the eyes. And then the armor flared, and the breaking stopped, the vessel stabilized.

Her mandibles clicked, and her body moved slowly, as if she was figuring out its limits.

"Ah, it feels... constrained," War said in a strange tone, probably because she wasn't used to using the vessel's mouth yet.

"Constrained, is an apt word," Ryun said as he took a step closer.

The Grand Spirit of War tilted her head and looked at him as he sharpened his will and reached out to the armor. There was a moment of confusion from her, but it didn't last for long. She sprang into motion just as Ryun activated the armor. It wasn't fast enough, he hadn't expected her to react that fast. In a single instant Essence spilled out of War's vessel and formed a weapon in a hand. He felt and saw Essence of War twist and reality bend to its will, creating a physical sword. It cleaved him from shoulder to hip so fast that Ryun barely had time to react. He felt the Essence in the Sword's path crack open, then shatter in a way that sent ripples through his body. He felt cracks spreading through his Essence and his Regeneration kicked in, soaring high in order to heal. A part of his mind was aware enough to focus on that attack and store the damage into his **Ring of Full Reflection**.

The armor that the Grand Spirit wore activated, and War stumbled as Nayra and Trklak jumped back out of range, pushing the summoners out of the room.

For a moment, Ryun had a sensation as if he existed in two places at once. Two halves of his body, both were him. His body and soul were forged together, the cut hurt him, but he was greater than simply what his physical body represented. He could chose where he regrew from. Ryun's lower half dissipated into nothing and he felt as if the piece of him that was in that part of his body slid through the plane of Oblivion to return to the whole, then he regrew his body and equipped his **Armor of the Last Star**. He pulled out his scepter and then channeled

{Mantle of Gathering Twilight} flowed through his body and his Aura and Qi surged to fill the room with his Essence. He targeted it precisely around the Grand Spirit, not affecting anything else. With an effort of will, he focused on the sword in the spirit's hand and used Marked Essence, then he fired a **{Twilight Shaping Cast}** through his scepter to fill the area around it with Oblivion Qi.

With his will and **Master of Oblivion**, he focused and pushed, obliterating the Essence of the Sword that War had created, destroying the weapon.

He felt the Grand Spirit recoil from that, as he had expected. The weapon was part of her being, and losing it was the same as if losing a limb. Ryun paused as the armor did its work, he saw the Grand Spirit's power being sealed, pulled into itself and constrained.

"You betrayed me," the Grand Spirit of War whispered.

"Is it really a betrayal if you planned on betraying us first?" Ryun asked.

"I didn't plan on betraying my agreement," War answered. "You broke your word to me."

"Did I? You tasked me with dealing with the delay, and I have, I have made certain that this vessel can hold you, and it can as you can see. While you failed to mention that you also planned on staying in the Real Realm after fulfilling your obligation to Grey Horde, and turning our world into fuel for your power," Ryun said. He had skirted very closely to his ideals, but ultimately he had learned a lot over the years. He had grown. He had seen what could happen when one left a cancer to grow.

He felt Nayra and Trklak step into the room behind him, ready for a fight as War struggled against the suppression of the armor, but Ryun was confident that his work would prevail.

"Someone else betrayed me, I see," War's eyes glared at him. "Which one was it? Transition? Or was it Mysteries?"

Ryun didn't reply, instead he kept his focus around War, keeping erasing every attempt she made to send her Essence beyond the confines of her body, and she was trying. Tendrils of War were attempting to do something, but he didn't let them develop enough to do anything. Then War started to move, at first sluggishly then faster and Ryun tilted his head.

The armor was supposed to silence her completely, but also make the body unable to move, she was doing something inside the armor to fight against that. Ryun formed a **{Field of Twilight's Calm}** around her, suppressing her ability to move.

For a moment she froze, her eyes blazing with War Essence. Then Ryun realized what she was doing, a moment too late. He felt the space split apart as she opened herself to the Plane of War, open a direct gate to it within herself. The Essence of War spilled into her, and Ryun realized what they were trying to contain. A being that was linked to War in a way that was beyond comprehension. A being that was War in all the sense of the word.

Before Ryun could react, the Essence of War exploded out of the trapped Grand Spirit. It blasted in a wave that spread all around them, that passed through all the chambers around them and filled the entire valley. And then she made a call to War.

The already thin boundary between the Real and the Ethereal Realm in this place ripped apart and Ryun's perception felt it like a physical thing that made him stagger as the Ethereal spilled into the Real, and with it came spirits.

War's army surged, already ready, and the greater spirits beelined it for their already prepared vessels. Ryun expanded his Aura and pulsed Oblivion on as many of those portals as he could, trying and managing to close some, but no where near enough.

"Nayra!" He yelled, and she immediately moved, realizing what was happening. Trklak followed a moment after her.

Ryun pulled back his perception and his aura, focusing only on War. His creation was suppressing her, but it had slowed as she opened herself to the Plane of War, and he could tell that she was doing something again. Ryun shaped Oblivion Qi around her with one hand immobilizing her, then approached while pulling Qi out of his scepter with the other.

He pulled the Bond Qi from one of the scepter's cores, then formed a **{Twilight Shaping Cast}** technique with it, targeting the gate to the Plane of War within the Grand Spirit.

Before his technique landed, another surge of her power blasted out, the Essence of War. It was so much more, Ryun realized now, War could be all the Essences that could be used in anything that resembled a war. In an instant the room was filled with blades, manifested out of the Essence of War, transformed into a physical form with all the Essences that made up a blade. The blades were real in all the sense of the word.

The cut through the air toward him, but he didn't bother with them. He instead trusted in his armor, and triggered the **Last Will of Kha Yu**. Gravity shifted and impacted everything around him, even the Grand Spirit, dropping War to her knees. The blades wavered in the air, a few hit the ground in front of him as the gravity pulled them down, and a couple struck his armor and shattered, not even moving him. When the armor buff was active, his mass counted as if it was insanely higher than it really was, it would take much more force to move him than a few blade strikes.

With the third cast of his scepter, its ability triggered, increasing the effectiveness of the technique far above its normal. With great precision Ryun stabbed in the core of War and with Bond Qi reinforced the bonds between the Essences of Space within her, repairing the rift between planes. She was fighting it, he could feel the Plane of War resonating with the Grand Spirit of War, as if they were feeding each other, and Ryun feared that he wasn't strong enough to close it. Then, he felt something change in the current of War that flowed through from the plane. The more violent aspects that he detected gave way to aspects of necessity, of protection.

Whatever happened made the Grand Spirit recoil as if she was slapped. Ryun pressed his technique in that moment. One instant the Essence of War was flowing out and into the Grand Spirit, and in the next the spirit was cut off. The suppression built into the armor flared, and a moment later he felt it fully encompass the Grand Spirit, sealing her power and trapping her inside, unable to even move a muscle to speak.

Ryun waited for a moment to see if she would try and break out, then walked over and opened his **Oblivion Territory Gate**, then threw the trapped spirit inside his own soul.

As he closed the door to his territory, he expanded his perception and looked at the carnage happening outside. Narya and Trklak were fighting, killing the vessels before the spirits could fully take hold of them. Some rooms had been caved in by the Grey Horde and the army above, but he knew that they couldn't plan much or risk the spirits learning of their plan. There were still portals open to the Ethereal, and he needed to close them.

Just as he took a step to go and help, a tear opened next to him, and a mass of writhing tendrils slammed into him, carrying him through the wall and into the cavern beyond.

Change

Grey Horde watched from high above the valley, standing on the edge of her flying fortress. Her army stood on top of the cliffs surrounding the valley, firing and fighting the spirits leaving the underground chambers. A part of her wished that she could've collapsed everything on top of them, but she couldn't be sure that would kill all the spirits, or that she wouldn't be harming her allies.

She felt Death Essence building up as the Daughter of Dawn and Death slaughtered thousands with every step, and through Trklak's eyes and mind she watched him follow behind her, keeping her safe from greater spirits that attempted to kill her.

She could feel the Essence of War filling the area as the Grand Spirit empowered and called more of its spirits. She could feel their trap working, but she knew that it wasn't enough.

The Essence of War that now rose to fight her was so much different than her understanding of it. It was all violence and wrath, all reckless abandon and carnage. It made Grey Horde recoil, it was not what War was supposed to be.

A part of her knew that she couldn't allow this blight to infect the Essence that she had taken up and made a part of her entire being.

She understood more now, after talking with the Undying Void. A spirit's entire being might be tied to the nature of an Essence, but it didn't dictate what that Essence was. Not even a Grand Spirit. The ones that dictated the way an Aspect manifested were the chosen, that was a right only they held.

She knew that she had to aid her allies, and with the Grand Spirit connected to the Plane of War, there was only one way for her to do so.

She opened herself to the Plane of War, and dipped into the field of endless conflict. She didn't feel out of place, after all she was the **Sage of War**. But she could feel so many different wills, all of them pulling on the Plane, all of them fueling it and trying to carve out a piece of it for themselves. Most of them didn't even know that they were doing it, they hadn't even grasped the basic nature of their Aspects. But she had.

Still, she knew that her will alone was never going to be enough. But that was fine, Grey Horde didn't fight her battles alone, she was a Queen, and a queen was never alone.

She unleashed her **Ruler's Presence Aura**, pushing it as far as it could go. Then focused on her new item, the spiritual tool, **the Burning Soul of War**. She spread the measure of her connection with War with her army, and then she used her **True Link — Hive**. She focused her will and power, she reached for as many of her people, across her hive, as she could. The ring on her finger was not meant to be used like this, she understood that, but she didn't care.

Little by little she felt their presence in the Plane of War, they were an echo of her, as they held a piece of her understanding of War. But that tiny piece resonated, and it echoed in the Plane of War. Quickly, the foreign wills were pushed aside as her ideas about War grew within the Plane.

A War was supposed to be a last resort, it was supposed to be something done to protect. She had nearly forgotten that, she had nearly started a war out of fear. But it wasn't supposed to be like that.

She found the Grand Spirit of War, and remembered that first meeting, where she had touched it and had their first conversation. She had been

elated to learn from the spirit, to advance her own understanding. Now she understood that the spirit was never her equal in this place.

With an effort of will echoed by her entire army and people of her hive, she forced the Aspect of War to change, and in doing so she made a Way for her understanding.

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Nayra surged through the caverns, her body turned into a cloud that scorched the skreen vessels as she poured through the gaps in their chitin and cooked them from the inside. Her ideal was active, intensifying the power of her body, aura, and techniques.

It had taken her a long time to learn how to effectively use techniques when in this form, but she could now fire them off with relative ease.

Death was gathering all around her, and with every death her power rose.

Greater Spirits tried to get her, ruining their vessels as they used the powers that the bodies were not meant to hold. A Great Water Elemental Spirit of some kind tried to drown her in what felt like an lake, but all it accomplished was to get its water boiled and turned into steam that spread through the corridors underground, cooking more of its allies.

In the distance, Nayra felt something strong tear through the world, coming from the direction Ryun was in. Then there was a twist in the world, and she felt like the world was just turned upside down.

Then, one of the rifts to the Ethereal near her flashed and a being stepped through. Nayra froze for a moment as she saw a human step through, and then she saw his eyes. A shade had just entered the Real Realm.

Before she could snap herself out, the human attacked, and she was forced to react.

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Each of the tendrils had a blade that pierced through his armor, almost as if it wasn't even there, as if it was nothing. The blades entered his body, then changed to wide instruments of tearing and slicing. In an a moment Ryun was torn to pieces and his armor peeled off from him.

His mind split, then coalesced back as he regenerated from the piece that used to be his head. In an instant he was shrouded by another copy of his armor. The whirling mass struck again before he could react. The tips of the tendrils hit his armor and he sensed what happened now. The Essence of his armor changed, turning into some mist-like Essence. The blades stabbed into him again, and tore him apart a second time.

In the time it took Ryun to pull himself back together, the spirit stabbed its limbs widely all around it. He saw its tendrils hit nothing but air and push through space itself. Then, he saw it ripple, and something hit the world all around him. It felt... like Change.

For a moment he felt an alien sensation, as if he was somewhere where he had never been before, a new world. And then it settled, and it was as if this was what reality had always been.

Ryun's perception of time slowed down, as he tried to make sense of it, then he pushed that aside. He had to fight. As the pieces of his body flew in all directions, he used his sense skill and studied his opponent.

The Grand Spirit of Change had come in its real form, it had no vessel. Ryun could feel the Real Realm impacting its body, but he also saw it change every time the effect got any purchase. A spirit couldn't exist in the Real Realm for long, but that didn't mean that it couldn't stay for a

while. And the Grand Spirit of Change seemed far more effective at fighting off the undesirable effects. And it had done something to the Real Realm.

What the Grey Horde had done, what Ryun had done, had weakened the barriers between the Real and the Ethereal enough for it to do whatever it seemingly had. He couldn't let it do anything more.

Ryun regenerated from a piece of his arm behind the spirit. His Qi had dropped a significant amount from the struggle with War and regenerating such severe damage from Change.

Before he even fully regenerated, the Grand Spirit turned and lashed out. This time Ryun was fast enough. He shaped a **{Field of Twilight's Calm}**, destroying its momentum and kinetic force. The spirit flickered, and a monster stood in front of him, a blast of light scorched through the air and blasted a hole in Ryun's chest.

He grimaced as the wound closed up nearly instantly, his vitality was soaring, most that he wore were copies, so he could just equip new ones, but his scepter wasn't. He hadn't had the time to copy it, nor could Bright Star copy the Qi stored in it.

Quickly he formed a technique and the air in front of him filled with the **{Avatar of the Twilight Reaper}** and then he released his **Presence of the Eternal Hunters**. In the back of his mind, he felt Selia notice, and reach out, and with **|Divided Mind|** he filled her in. They were too far away for her to help in any way, and without their aura's overlapping he couldn't use her powers, but he wanted her to know.

His stats soared and as his avatar slowed the Grand Spirit, Ryun jumped back, putting distance between them as he unleashed the full power of his **Oblivion's Mirror**, eroding the space and gaining distance quickly.

The Grand Spirit swatted his avatar away, then went for Ryun, while his avatar followed behind. Ryun released the hold of his meaning, and his body lost its human shape. He grew as he reached a large cavern, and turned into his Wolf Form.

As soon as the Grand Spirit reached the cavern, Ryun fired a beam of Oblivion straight at it. He made a direct hit, and could feel his will and intent erasing a piece of the spirit's body, but then it changed, and was whole again.

Ryun could already tell that this was going to be an annoying fight. Then a thought struck him, *was this what it was like to fight against me?*

Before the Grand Spirit could act, Ryun spoke loudly.

"I have no issue with you, Grand Spirit of Change."

The spirit paused, its body now a trembling blob that resembled a slime. Then mouths started appearing on its body, and it spoke.

"You've captured one of my own," every word came from a different mouth, sometimes overlapping in a way that made the sentence almost come too fast to be understood. Ryun's perception helped him understand clearly, where his ears only heard a jumble of sounds.

"War intended to cause death and destruction to this world, I couldn't let that happen."

"Change is inevitable," the Grand Spirit said, then it surged forward again.

Ryun cursed and dodged, he didn't want to get injured by it again. Somehow, it was taking more to regenerate from its injuries than it should be. What happened to his armor gave him an idea, but he wasn't

sure. He assumed that it was somehow changing Ryun's own Essence when it struck him, which dealt more damage to his being.

His avatar finally caught up, carrying Ryun's scepter as Ryun dashed across the air in the large cavern, firing beams of Oblivion at the Grand Spirit. The space around him was trembling as he ripped holes through it to move, and he could feel more and more rifts to the Ethereal opening up, but also to other planes, the ones that this conflict had been brought closer to the Real Realm. He was weakening the space too much, and he didn't want to see what would happen if space failed fully. One thing he was certain of was that Change would only get stronger if Ethereal spilled through.

He had to end the battle quickly, he didn't know if he could kill it, but an idea formed in his mind. And he didn't see another way to deal with it quickly.

He evaded Change for a few more times, then as it came at him again in the form of writhing tendrils he opened back the door to his territory. He slammed the spirit with a technique made out of Oblivion

With a **|Pouncing Rush|** he slammed into the spirit, and carried it through the door to his territory, inside his Soul.