

## **Ethereal**

The transition was, the same as the last time, a curious thing. Ryun's head spun, less now than before, which was to be expected. His skill was greater now, more evolved, and he had prepared before he entered the gate. He had pulled back his sense, narrowed it only on his own Essence, sensing nothing beyond the confines of his own body. It was... almost a painful experience. He almost did not remember a time when he did not have the sense of his surroundings. Knowing everything that happened around him was integral to who he was. He was that silent watcher, a witness. Not being able to do it made him feel disarmed, naked in a way.

As he passed through and entered the Ethereal fully, the world around him changed. In a blink of an eye the colors of the world were drained from his eyes, leaving a strange scape painted only in a single hue. He had expected it, but it still took him a moment to adjust. He grimaced as he felt a strange sensation wash over him. With the sense of his soul, he could tell that something was different. Ever since his merging of body and soul, what Zach called the soul sense, was a lot easier for Ryun to detect. Now, he felt as if he was at peace. He didn't know how else to explain it. Though, the Ethereal Realm was the home of souls and spirits, perhaps that was all that it was.

He looked around and struggled to tell where they were. His eyes saw Essence, and now everything was made out of the same one. It was as if he was color blind, and as if he couldn't see depth. It was hard to tell what the things he was looking at were. The Ethereal Realm was a world crafted out of the dreams of the real one. Or at least that was what Ryun had learned. It was a reflection, but like a dream it was constantly shifting. Entire areas of it could be created out of nothing, and destroyed a moment later, except that for those within them entire lifetimes could pass. It was strange, operating on logic that was different than that of the Real Realm.

It dawned on him just how much he relied on his other senses in order to craft the image of his surrounding inside his mind. Without his sense taking everything in, his eyes were a lot less capable of helping him distinguish things. The world was monochrome, a mess of a painting.

The last time he had been in a situation anything close to this one was back when he had no eyes. It was a hard thing to adjust to, but that was also the reason why Ryun was here. His last few years had lacked any kind of real struggle to push him further.

Still, not being able to *see* clearly, he risked opening up his sense a bit. His skill was a lot stronger now than it had been the last time he visited the Ethereal.

The moment his sense spread beyond his body he was overcome with a sudden vertigo. He grimaced and stumbled, a strong hand caught him immediately as the world started to spin around him. It was worse now than it had been before. He could feel the foundation of this world. He could sense how it moved, shifted constantly. It was as if they were standing on top of an uneasy sea. The discomfort grew, and he pulled his sense back.

“Ryun?” Nayra asked from next to him. A shape made out of flesh Essence moved into his eyesight as Ereclaw leaned down to look at him.

“I’m fine,” Ryun said, he shifted his hand so that he was holding on to her forearm. “I’ve anticipated this.”

A few steps away, Zach and Naha looked at him, but didn’t comment. Instead, Zach turned to look somewhere in the distance.

“This is the closest I could get us,” Zach said. “He is on top of the mountain.”

Ryun glanced in the same direction. He had to squint and focus, but he did eventually manage to see the mountain towering above them, just barely distinguishable from the sky surrounding it. And only because it had a greater concentration of Essence.

Ryun shaped a technique, crafting a small field of Oblivion to create a step. He frowned as he missed the mark and created his step too far away. He felt imbalanced without his sense, he relied on it for everything it seemed, to place his techniques exactly where he wanted them to go.

He moved forward slowly, Nayra following next to him and offering support still. He felt like he was walking on unstable ground, and he couldn't shake the feeling at all. Everything was the same Essence, his eyes were tricking his brain. He walked over and stepped on top of the field. Oblivion Qi in the technique halted the momentum of his feet, keeping him suspended in the air.

“Well,” Ryun said. “I'm not walking up the mountain.” He started making more steps, taking care to keep his eyes in front of him. Nayra and Ereclaw followed after him, while Naha turned into a shadow and melded with Zach.

That was... interesting. This place didn't have any real Shadow Essence, that he could see at least. There was no light either, yet he knew that everyone could see. Did the Ethereal act as a substitute in some ways? It was an interesting thing that he hoped to find out.

Wind surrounded Zach, bringing new Essence into being around him that Ryun could see. It was a lot more noticeable here where everything else was Ethereal. It almost seemed like he was generating it himself. Another mystery, as he was pretty sure that in the Real Realm Zach just moved Air.

Ryun put those thoughts aside as they started their way up, with Zach flying slowly next to them. He was sure that Nayra could've flown up there quickly, but she stayed by his side as he tried to adjust. Already, he was starting to feel better, using himself as the orientation point for his techniques. He didn't usually need to do that, he just knew where everything in the space around him was. He didn't have that luxury now.

Still, he did want to practice his sense. As they walked straight to the top of the mountain, Ryun slowly leaned on his skill. With care, he let **Of**

**Targeted Resonance Sense** spread, only this time he focused only on a single type of Essence—Soul. Quickly the other four people around him appeared, and he felt no side-effects. That was good, it meant that his sense's weakness had something to do with the Ethereal Essence and this Realm itself. Slowly, he expanded his range while keeping his focus so that he targeted just the Soul Essence.

Then, he felt something, a soul. It made him stumble, and only Nayra's grip prevented him from falling missing a step and falling to the ground far below.

“What is it?” She asked, concern in her tone.

Ryun tilted his head. “Nothing, I'm experimenting,” he said. “Sorry. Let's continue, it is a long way to the top.”

The others exchanged looks, but didn't comment again. Ryun turned his attention to the Soul in the distance, ahead of them, waiting at the place they were headed to. That had to be the Explorer's Soul, the Dragon. Ryun couldn't wait to meet him.

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It took them hours to climb to the top, even at the brisk pace they had managed to settle in eventually. Ryun's control over where his technique went got a lot better, enough that near the end he felt confident enough to go at full speed. He leapt from platform to platform for the last stretch, Ereclaw following behind him the same way, while Nayra flew with her wings of fire.

They landed on the flat summit, a round plateau, with a small cave beneath the actual peak. They were met with a strange sight. Small spirits danced around the cave's entrance, wisps with no real form. Ryun could see them and identified a few by the type of Essence they were made out of, most seemed to be wind related. But there were others that he was

surprised to see, spirits made out of the Essences that Ryun had seen come into being around people often—Essences of emotion. The ones he saw the most here were Wonder and Glory.

Ryun kept his sense on the vast soul in the cave, visible even to his eyes. It was easier for him to see, he assumed, as others hadn't reacted yet. But then again, a massive dragon made out of countless tiny white grains of Essence sleeping inside the cave stood out a lot more when everything else was painted in one color.

The dragon shifted, and Ryun saw eyes open. The others stopped at that, finally noticing him.

“Greetings, Master,” Ereclaw stepped forward and said.

The dragon shifted, then stood and slowly walked out of the cave. He towered over them, but Ryun was more amazed by the intensity of his soul. It was unlike any he had seen before, although... there was something that felt almost familiar to him.

Before he could dwell on that thought, the dragon spoke, his voice loud and clear, commanding.

“Little hunter, you've returned,” the Explorer's Soul said as it looked them over. “And you've brought guests.”

Zach stepped forward, and Naha appeared out of his shadow to stand next to him.

“It has been some time, Zacharia,” the dragon said.

“Greetings, Explorer,” Zach said. “I apologize if we intrude, we come to seek your counsel. And perhaps more.”

“It is no intrusion,” the dragon tilted his head. “My invitation is still open. But first, I would hear if you have any word on the escaped shade?”

Zach sagged, his head turning toward the ground. “There is much that we need to tell you.”

Ryun could tell that what happened still weighed heavily on Zach's shoulders.

The dragon raised a hand and gestured. "Come then, let us sit and speak."