

Arrivals

Stepping into the Afterlife was a strange sensation. To Nayra, it felt like the world was solid again, compared to the always shifting nature of the Ethereal. There was light, of course, it filled her vision as she passed through the entrance, with light so bright that it stabbed through her eyelids.

But just as it came, it quickly went away, and Nayra opened her eyes. The gate led them into a new world. Knee high green grass surrounded the road that they were standing on, swaying in the gentle wind. Before them stretched a *heavenly* view. Mountains rose high into the sky, with snow covering their tips. At the base of the mountain, far in the distance, was a city that shone with a golden light. She could see towers and castles, as well as bridges made out of light that connected them. Her eyes could tell that there were people, tiny specks to her, that moved about them.

She had come here before, when she had escorted souls. But she had never ventured far. This place wasn't meant for the living. Just standing in this place made her feel a sense of wrongness that she couldn't quite shake, despite her perk giving her access to it.

She glanced to the side, and saw that Ryun had a frown on his face, he looked around, squinting.

"What's wrong?" Nayra asked.

Ryun glanced in her direction, then answered.

"My eyes," he said slowly. "I don't see Essence."

Nayra raised her eyebrow at that. "What do you mean?"

"I... my sight is as it was before. I had forgotten what color really looks like when it is... Ah," he just shook his head.

Nayra didn't know what to say, but Ryun seemed to take it all in stride.

"Does this mean that there is no Essence here?" Ryun asked.

"You mean that this," Nayra waved her hand. "Is just... what? An image inside our heads?"

"All reality is an image inside of our heads, Essence interacting with Essence to create a picture. But my eyes were able to see the individual pieces that make up everything."

Ryun knelt and touched the ground. "No, this is still Earth Essence, just... there is something different about it. It is stronger, more tightly packed. It feels... more."

Nayra knelt next to him, and tried to study the dirt beneath them in the same manner. She did agree that the ground was probably a high tier Essence. She could tell that everything around them was.

Ryun tilted his head. "Hm, Essence that is stronger than tier nine perhaps?"

Nayra didn't have an answer. What she knew of the afterlife was little, stories that she had heard from her mother.

"Well, perhaps you can ask once we find someone," Nayra said. "We should get going."

Ryun nodded, they stood and started walking down the dirt road toward the city. Quickly, they reached a river, with an elaborate and

ornate wooden bridge built over it. The other side of the river was covered in a thick fog that obscured everything. In the middle of the bridge stood a figure dressed in armor, with a large two handed axe planted on the planks below, hilt first, and their hands leaned on top of the axe.

"Our welcome?" Ryun whispered.

Nayra nodded. "Mother mentioned something like this," she said.

They approached slowly, and the figure didn't move. Now that they were closer, she could tell that the person was a humanoid, but wasn't of any race that she was familiar with. Their skin looked like it was made out of white marble, streaked with gold. At the first glance, the figure resembled a human male, but she had no way to be certain. The only thing that she could tell was that they were a warrior, that much at least was certain.

As they reached the warrior, Nayra stepped forward and bowed. "Greeting," she said slowly. "I am Nayra Ornn-Dagda, we--"

The warrior raised an arm, interrupting her. "This is known," he said, his voice deep and gravelly. "Daughter of Dawn and Death, you are expected. By the grace of your power, you are granted one month of passage. Overstay your welcome, and the hounds of the afterlife will drag you out."

Nayra blinked, but then inclined her head. The warrior turned to look at Ryun.

"The Final Witness," he said. "Last Death, you may walk where you wish. Even though it is yours to choose, know that this is the place of the first transition, do not rob those who live here of their chance to be chosen by the great wheel."

Nayra frowned, and before she had the chance to ask what that meant, he raised his axe then slammed the pommel into the ground.

The sound echoed all around them, and the mist on the other side of the bridge moved, opening a way through.

"You may pass," the warrior said, then its eyes turned to look beyond the two of them.

Nayra and Ryun exchanged looks, then walked by the warrior and to the other side of the bridge in silence. Somehow, the demeanor of the warrior made them both understand that there would be no more words spoken.

Once they reached the end of the bridge, the mist rolled back in, closing the way behind them.

"What was that? What he called you?" Nayra asked.

Ryun shook his head. "I don't know, it is close to my Ideal, and it is part of the name of one of my Perks."

She narrowed her eyes at him, she could tell that he wasn't saying everything. He had to have a suspicion. Still, she didn't press. They had been allowed through, and that was all that mattered.

"What do you think he meant by the second part, the one about you not robbing people of chance, something about a wheel?"

"Selia mentioned something about that," he answered. "She didn't know what exactly it was though. And the rest... I think that he was referring to True Death."

Nayra blinked, but then nodded as it did make sense. "Wow, you got to be flattered huh? Even people in the afterlife have to warn you off from killing people."

Ryun turned and glared at her.

"What?" Nayra said. "It's the truth."

He narrowed his eyes at her.

"You literally just killed a Grand Spirit, I don't know why you are glaring at me."

"You spend too much time with Tali, she is rubbing off on you," Ryun muttered then started walking, leaving her to hurry and catch up with him.

"No, I only tell you the truth, Tali is probably the only one that isn't afraid to actually make fun of you about it," Nayra said.

"And this isn't making fun of me?" Ryun asked.

"Do you really think that it is?" Nayra asked in return.

Ryun turned his head away. "Maybe not."

Nayra smiled. At least he was willing to admit it.

They walked down the road, and the mist around them slowly dissipated, revealing again the sight of the golden city above them. Though, now it looked a lot closer than before.

Ryun stopped, making Nayra do the same.

"What is it?" She asked.

Ryun raised his chin, gesturing in front of him. Nayra turned around and saw that there were two people in front of them. One was sitting on a rock nearby, looking at them with a smile on his face, and the other stood nearby. Nayra had eyes only for the one sitting.

For a moment, she froze, seeing a familiar face. She took a step forward, and he stood up, started walking toward her.

For a moment, Nayra froze, but then her head caught up to her feelings.

"Nathan?" She asked, and his smile widened. Erik's twin brother walked over then took a quick step to close the distance and grab Nayra beneath her arms. He picked her up and spun her around.

"Little sister!" He yelled as he spun her around, then put her down and smiled down on her. He reached up and pulled a strand of Nayra's hair, as red as his own.

"Mother said that you would be coming," he said.

Nayra had never met him, but everything about her older brother was familiar. Erik had been one of the few of her siblings who actually interacted with the younger generations.

Nayra couldn't help but smile.

"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner," she said. She had the opportunity to come before, she had just never done it. There had always been something else that was more pressing. And a part of her was, if she was being honest with herself, afraid. This was the place where all souls

went, where she led them to. She hadn't been sure if she wanted to know what exactly it was.

Nathan took a step back. "You are here now, and we have much to catch up on."

He then turned and Nayra saw that Ryun was walking toward the other person who had been waiting for them. He stopped just in front of the tall demasi, and Nayra's eyes widened as she recognized him too.

"Hello, old friend," Eerv Ji Van said.

Ryun waited for a moment, and then he reached up and pulled the demasi into an embrace.

The Return

Zach watched the training courtyard from the parapet. Down below, Hiro was fighting an opponent wielding a large two handed hammer. Hiro was being quick, running around his opponent and trying to strike from odd angles. The minotaur with the hammer didn't bother with trying to catch him, instead he stomped the ground and shook it, making Hiro lose a step, then in that moment of vulnerability he attacked.

The bout was finished quickly, with Hiro on his back and a hammer pressed against his chest, pinning him to the ground.

The minotaur laughed, and the two of them exchanged words.

Zach made his way down as Hiro and Okim left the training field. Hiro noticed him first.

"Zach, you're back!" He yelled, then made his way over, stopping just a step before running straight into him. He seemed to collect himself and then he smiled and bowed over his fist as Cultivators did.

Zach returned his smile, then put a hand on his shoulder. The moment he made contact with the young man, he experienced a flash of thoughts blasting through his mind. He grimaced, then focused and pushed them aside as he tried not to let them overwhelm him. He had gotten a lot better at controlling it, but it still slipped through sometimes.

Thankfully, Hiro didn't notice.

"Where's Naha?" Hiro asked.

"She stayed in the Ethereal," he answered. "There were a few things she had to take care of."

Hiro nodded, but Zach could tell that he was a bit disappointed.

"She's not coming with us?" Okim said as he walked over and offered his hand.

Zach took it, making sure to block out the bout of knowledge insight that tried to enter his head.

"No," Zach said. "You've been well?"

Okim nodded. "As well as we can be at least," he said. "The Exalted Empire is pressuring everyone, but so far we're good."

Knowledge was a strange thing to experience. It came to him as raw data, just knowledge of things that weren't always coherent. His new Blade ability allowed him to siphon knowledge from sources of it, things like books or data orbs, and pull it all directly into his head. He of course was using his **Band of Memory's Hall** in order to sift through that knowledge with greater ease. But, there was more, ever since he had taken the core of who Knowledge was, he had felt strange. And now, it felt like how that core idea behind the Grand Spirit's being was seeping into him from the blade. It was getting worse. When he touched anyone living, he got insights into them. For example, he knew that Hiro was nervous and that he felt resolute. And he knew that Okim didn't tell the entire truth, that he was feeling stressed.

He got the knowledge, but without context. And it had been happening with things other than people. Not individual Essences, otherwise he wouldn't have even been able to walk as Air was constantly in touch with his skin.

But if he touched something that had an idea, an Essence that was more than just the basest material, if it was concentrated and elevated. Then it gave him an insight too. For example if he touched a sword, he would gain knowledge of what it was. Of course, he already knew that, but it gave him a deeper insight into what that sword was made for. It didn't give him knowledge about how to use it though.

Though just standing above the courtyard as others trained had given him flashes of insight about the styles they were using. But he had already realized just how much knowledge was useless without understanding. The Grand Spirit of Knowledge had proven that. It had known a lot, but it didn't know how to properly use that knowledge. It lacked understanding and mastery. And

there was a lot that he didn't quite understand about this power that was now part of him, and he didn't know if he wanted to continue using it.

But, he didn't have a choice. The Grand Spirit of Horror had made it clear to Zach that losing a Grand Spirit would spell a change for the Ethereal Realm, and right now, Zach was fulfilling that role. If he was being honest, he didn't even know if he could remove it. The power that his soul weapon had taken felt a lot more solid than the others were.

Zach focused back on Okim, then spoke. "Did Bera come?"

The minotaur nodded. "Of course, we brought the strongest squad we have, as you've requested. We are honored for this chance," he inclined his head to him.

Zach nodded, but he did feel slightly uncomfortable with it. He had agreed to be... he didn't even know what, a leader of kind, for the Wardens. And he did have ideas, but all of it would require for them to change, and he hadn't yet shared all his plans with them.

"Good," Zach said. "Just being a part of a Dome attack should give you some value for your next Class up."

"Yes," Okim added. "We are all looking forward to it."

Zach needed them to be strong, to become a force that could stand up to the monsters of this world, both literal and those wearing faces.

Hiro opened his mouth, then paused.

"Not yet," Zach said before Hiro could. The prior insight made what he wanted to say easy enough to figure out.

Hiro grimaced. "I am ready," he said. "I have my pillars set already, and I..." he trailed off as he looked up at him.

Zach took a deep breath, then opened his mouth to refuse him again. Then, he paused. There was so much happening, and there were so many things that they had to do. He wanted to teach the newer generations to be good. To value virtue and a certain morality more than just power.

Hiro, like many in this world, sought power. And Zach remembered Ryun's training of him, and how that had ended up. Sometimes, people had to be given a chance to rise on their own.

"I'll speak with Bera, and then we'll see," he said, they would be on the perimeter of the battle anyway, unlikely to even see a Dome monster.

Hiro's expression brightened, but then Zach spoke again.

"Actually, let's have you earn it," he said with a smile, trying to channel Ryun and failing spectacularly. "I want you to fight with Okim here, if you manage to defeat him, then you can come."

Hiro turned to look at the much older minotaur and narrowed his eyes. Okim burst into laughter, then patted Hiro's shoulder with such force that the young man nearly toppled. "Ha, do you need some time to prepare young'un?"

Zach turned around and left them as they started talking about their upcoming fight, he went looking for Bera. They needed to talk.

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"The Castle of Knowledge?" Bera asked.

Zach nodded. "I am thinking about finding a territory of our own, then link it with the Castle. Use it as our base of operations."

Bera pushed her glasses up her snout then tilted her head. "That is a lot more than what we have the numbers and honestly the power to do right now," she said slowly, then continued. "This is about what you talked about before, your school?"

Zach nodded. "Wardens as a group can no longer operate. After all these wars, factions will not let strangers arbitrate on their lands. Sects have their own laws, and most of the smaller factions beyond are under the influence of other big factions," he said. "Our purpose has to change."

Bera nodded, they had talked about this many times. "I'm still telling you that we are not strong enough for what you want."

And that had been the crux of their issue. Bera didn't think that Wardens had enough influence and power to be able to keep something like a school Zach had in mind safe and free for all.

Her concern was that inevitably outside influences would try and come in. Zach was powerful, but one person couldn't do everything alone.

"I'll get you there," Zach said. "This Dome is a step in the right direction. I need as many Wardens as possible to get better Classes, to advance."

Bera was the only one among them that had hit tier nine in her Class. And she was very powerful, it was just that her skillset didn't lend itself to direct combat. She could support a faction, she could prop up their weaknesses, but she couldn't make them stronger on her own.

Which was why Zach had been pushing her to get her secondary focus up as well.

"We'll try, as much as we can at least," Bera sighed.

They had already agreed on this, but Zach knew that she wanted the best for her people. And she had put her trust in Zach to make it happen.

He didn't intend to fail.

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Their group numbered twelve Wardens, with Hiro and Zach making it fourteen. Okim led them, while Bera oversaw the loading of their supplies. Zach had to borrow an airship from Anrosh, as his couldn't hold that many people, and he also wanted a ship that could be used in combat. His was fast, but not really durable.

The airship that Anrosh gave to them was one of the warships they purchased from Dragon Heart Sect. It was one of their older models, but it was in good condition, and had solid barrier formations that could protect them. Like most Sect flying vessels, it resembled a flying piece of a fortification. From afar, it looked like a piece of a wide and long defensive wall with a tower in the middle flying on top of green clouds. It was fairly large, almost the size

of the entire training yard in the Consequence inner Palace, which was about a hundred meters across. The walls were made out of stone, and had windows open every few meters. On top of the wall was a wooden railing, with opening made to allow four turrets on each side to peak through. The formations on the turrets allowed the crew to fire focused beams based on their own power, as they fueled them with their own Qi. As most of the Warden's weren't actually Cultivators, Anrosh had let a group of Twilight Melody Sect warriors to come with them as support, the young Kri included among them.

Once everyone was ready, Zach boarded the ship. He let Bera lead the way, and soon enough she ordered them to set out.

Zach took a deep breath, and then released it slowly, getting ready for another Dome fight.