

The Mind

“What are you worried about?” Selia asked as he prepared to bite into the fruit.

“Many things,” Ryun said. “On the top of the list is that it will drive me mad. If it does, I am going to need you to stop me.”

Both Selia and Erdania nodded and took positions around him.

He settled on the ground and then he ate the fruit.

For a few moments he didn't feel anything different, and then suddenly as if someone flipped a switch, he was somewhere else.

He knew that this place wasn't real immediately. The clue was obvious, he could see how he used to be before he got his new eyes. He was on a plain, tall green grass swayed up to his knees, and above him was a sky filled with colors and stars. There was no sight quite like this in the Infinite Realm, not for anyone who had normal eyes. The sky could change color, but there was no great tapestry like this one.

His powers didn't work either, which was another clue. A noise made him turn around and he was met face to face with his deepest self.

He raised his head to look at the eyes of a wolf, a copy of the Reaper that he had met so long ago back on Earth. But... this couldn't be the Reaper, it died, he had felt the last of it fade away. What remained was just the perk and... and what Ryun believed to be just the last vestiges of power that the Framework had been unable to bundle up into a perk.

“The Reaper is dead,” the wolf said, answering his thoughts. “But did you really think that that was going to be it? That you could inherit a power from the Aspect of True Death and remain unchanged?”

“You are... my deepest self?” Ryun asked, confused.

The wolf chuckled. “Who do you think that you are is a better question?”

Ryun opened his mouth, but then closed it. He remembered what Jiharuud had told him, what he had called him.

*You are **He Who Is Feared, He Who Is Underestimated, He Who Reaches Beyond, and He Who Fears Himself. The Liar and***

The Mad. You are Echo of True Death and Wolf of the End and Harbinger of the Final End, The Witness of the Journey's End, the half of one whole that once was and always will be, a law of all things. You are He Who Sees and He Who Knows. You are Loved and Loving, Honest and Deceiving, Enduring and Broken, Arrogant Above All.

Some of those names he understood. He was feared by some, he was often underestimated, and he did reach beyond. He... didn't know if he feared himself, though, or why he was the liar and the mad. The true death and the end names seemed more clear now that he could see what his deepest self looks like. He who sees and he who knows were obvious, his sense gave him great knowledge. Loved and loving, he had a family, people that loved him and who he loved in return. Honest, he didn't lie and he kept his word. Deceiving... he didn't know what that meant. The last three he agreed and knew as well.

So why was his deepest self the wolf? He had put what remained of the Reaper into his technique, gave it autonomy.

The wolf laughed.

"You put nothing into that technique," it—he, said.

Ryun blinked, but before he could ask the question the wolf answered it.

"The reaper died, but what remained was the mantle of the Reaper, one part of True Death. You cannot destroy something that was a law of an universe. The reaper that reached his end, and the mantle was filled by a new one. You. There is nothing left of the old, all that remains, all that you think is remnant is just... you. Every time you use that technique you pull me out, and let me—the subconscious part of your mind—take control of it."

Ryun had worried that this might make him lose his mind, that the fruit would reveal something that he kept so suppressed that not even he realized. This was not that, but it was a matter of perspective.

"So," the wolf started again. "Who do you think you are?"

"I... I understand," Ryun whispered. He was this from the moment he and Melody walked into that cave. It was so easy to see, all that he was, his focuses, his Path, his power. It's all tied to an end, a finality, True Death. He

had taken its place, and even though the Framework tried to contain it inside a perk, it... didn't contain everything. He was the Wolf of the End.

The things that he put inside his skills, that he locked in.

A monster that went through anyone who stood in his way. Like the Reaper hunting his marks, those who ran from death.

He didn't break his word, like the Aspects of True Death, that never strayed from their purpose.

But that still left a few of the things that Jikharuud called him unclear to him.

"Do you want to see?" The wolf asked.

"See what?" Ryun frowned.

"What you lie about, of course," the wolf grinned at him, which made him hesitate.

"Tell me," Ryun said finally.

The wolf leaned down at him and then spoke. "It has to do with Earth," the wolf said slowly as if giving him the chance to turn away. "You say that you don't regret what you did, how you killed them all. You say that you did them a favor, or that you punished them. But deep down you feel like... perhaps you are wrong, perhaps you shouldn't have done it."

Ryun closed his eyes, he had started to feel... It was strange, the past was the past, you couldn't change it. He had killed or caused the death of the entire world. Perhaps he had been mad, perhaps it wasn't really his fault.

The moment he said that to himself, the wolf's expression changed. It lowered its head further, until its snout was almost touching Ryun.

"Hey," the wolf whispered. "I wanna know if I tell you a secret, will you keep it?"

Ryun blinked in confusion. And then memories flashed before his eyes. The blood, the death, the rage of one part of the Twin Aspect of True Death inside of him, the pain that they both felt at the death of their other half. All of it coming back. The faces of everyone that he killed, that he convinced himself he forgot in the haze. In an instant he lived through it all again.

"And this is the most important part," the wolf said, his voice piercing through the memories. Ryun met the wolf's eyes. "The voice, the madness in

your head that you thought was the Reaper? That is the biggest lie you told yourself, a lie within a lie, even though you never wanted to admit it.”

Ryun frowned, not understanding.

“You think that it drove you mad?” The wolf said. “It did not. That madness? It wasn’t the Reaper losing its mind. That was you. And that rage? That pain? That was the Reaper crying out in agony for what you made it do. It was all you, just you. You killed them before it was their time, and the Twin Aspect of True Death could no more do that than it could change its nature. True Death comes only when it is time. The Dealmaker sealed the Aspect behind the wall inside your head, and still you murdered them by the thousands. That is who we are. A monstrous being wearing the mantle of True Death.”

Ryun shook his head, took a step back, and then the wolf surged forward. And the memories came back again.

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Atonement, forgiveness, change.

There was never going to be atonement for what happened on Earth. Ryun had always known that, he didn’t want it. There was no forgiveness for it. And now he understood, he had never really cared about it, even when he had tried to convince himself that perhaps it wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t he that was changing, it was the people around him. He had seen Anrosh, seen Nayra, Eerv, others. He saw them living a different kind of life and he thought, perhaps he could, or should, be more like them. To change.

But he survived, he grew, he became stronger, and he changed. The memories from before the Framework had put things into perspective. He had always hated Earth, hated that life that was so... controlled. Afterward, he only needed an excuse. Something to let him throw it all away.

He did change in the Infinite Realm, but it was more of a clean slate. A world that had the promise to let him live freely. In contrast, he loved this world, and he loved these people. Most of them at least. They were different than what people of Earth had been.

The memories... he remembered their faces now. He remembered Linda and the child. Knew why they hated him so. And they were right to. But that was the past, what was he supposed to do? Cut his head off? Kill himself? There was nothing that could change things.

If someone stood in his way, if they crossed him, he was going to fight or try to remedy the situation the only way he could. He was not a creature of the past, he was of the present, of the future. That was all that mattered. Seeing the ends of stories. It was in a way liberating, there had been something beneath the surface that had held him back, he understood now. Something that had made him hold himself back.

No more.

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Ryun opened his eyes.

Selia and Erdania stood in front of him, studying him.

“Ryun, you still there?” Erdania asked.

Ryun nodded his head. “Yes,” he said slowly. There wasn’t much of a change that he could tell. He did feel freer in a way.

“How long?” He asked.

“Half an hour, maybe,” Erdania answered.

Ryun hummed to himself, then noticed that a notification was flashing in the corner of his eye so he brought it forward.

Congratulations! You have gone through a Crucible!

**Fruit of Jikharuud’s Insight — +100 to base intelligence and wisdom;
+500 to intelligence and wisdom
New title available—Crucible of the Mind**

Lesser Crucible of the Mind	Go through a mental experience to improve your mind by forging it under unusual conditions based on your mind state.	+200 to intelligence and wisdom, +1% to all stats, Lesser Enlightened (Mind Perk), 20 000 Greater Essence
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Lesser Enlightened (Title Perk)	Your mind is resistant to mind effects and can function at moderate condition in all states, even after it was damaged beyond the point where most would falter.
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He wanted more mental protection, and he got it. He would need to test it out and see how it worked later. The experience of the fruit had left him feeling calm, understanding. He didn't change how he was, it was just that all those tiny little voices in the back of his head were now gone.

"I'm advancing," he said then raised his eyes to meet Selia's. "Watch closely, it might give you a bout of inspiration."

She nodded seriously and he closed his eyes.

To advance to the Ascended Realm, one needed to cleanse their body of all impurities. Of any Essence that was of a lesser tier. Ryun had done that easily, well, not easily, but it was a natural step for him. His body was made out of tier 9 Qi. He did believe that tier 8 was sufficient though. But there was also the inspiration part of it. For him it was... a realization about the lengths he was willing to go to achieve that power. He pushed through pain, cut his own body up, something that most would shy away from.

He looked at his Path, and then advanced.

Congratulations, you have reached Early Ascended Realm Stage on the Path of the Final End!

Reward—Secondary Aspect available! You have stepped into the Realm of the

Ascended, as such you now begin to manifest the power over Aspects. You may choose in which way that power manifests.

Merged Aspects	Merge the secondary Aspect with your primary. The result will depend on the compatibility between the Aspects. The resulting Qi will be generated from your current Core.
Secondary Core	Split your core in two, each new core will retain 40% of your current size. One core will continue producing Void, and the other will produce your secondary chosen Aspect.
Dual Core	Your core will become capable of producing your secondary chosen Aspect. You will keep the two different Aspects inside and will be able to control the ratio of Aspects inside.

He was already prepared. He pulled out the Aspect Orb that he had filled with tier 9 Stillness and crushed it in his hand, pulling the Essence into himself.

He had given thought to how he was going to proceed from here on out. He had considered every option, but in the end he had decided on Dual Core. It was risky, his regeneration relied on Void Qi, which Stillness wasn't. If he split his core he would have a lot lesser Void to regenerate. If he merged them, it might not even work until he managed to upgrade his body, and his techniques might be more limited. With the Dual he would at least be able to control the amount of Void that he had. And he believed that he could cover that weakness once he advanced his second Path and improved his body. Or when he used the elixir for perk improvement.

He made his choice.

Stillness Qi (9)(Aspect Perk)	Your Qi passively enhances your body with the Essence of the Stillness. Any forces or objects approaching you lose their momentum depending on their power. While Stillness Qi is moving
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	through your body all Essence seeking to influence you is 20% less effective and you are influenced by slowing down toward stillness. Any techniques you use that utilize Stillness Qi will seek to bring any Essence they touch to stillness. Gain +25% to endurance and +25% to wisdom.
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He stood up and felt his core. It was filled with Void so there was no Stillness inside of it. But he could tell that it was different. He put his hand to the side and fired a technique, spending Void. Then he felt it; both Void and Stillness were regenerating inside his core. He even felt like he could stop one and focus only on the other. The Framework gave him the knowledge of how to cycle his Qi inside his core to keep the two Aspects separated. He didn't use that, but instead used the cycling technique that Tali taught him.

Now, he needed to practice, figure out everything that he could. And then he would advance his secondary path and use the resources he had set aside for himself from Zenker. He had a lot of things to figure out.