

## **Return**

“They’ll be here soon, Sect Leader,” Lesamitrius said from next to her.

Anrosh grimaced, and glanced at the ravzor, looking very impressive in his full regalia which matched her own. The black and violet of his robes resplendent, but the gold trim on the hems announced his high position in the Sect. The only difference between their robes was that his gold trim was not embroidered, while hers was. Only Sect Leaders had patterns on their trim, but anyone who saw Lesamitrius’s clothes would know that he was just a step beneath the leadership of the Sect. He had been raised to the high command of the Sect after he advanced to Immortal, and now ran most day-to-day affairs of House Woll.

“They should’ve just flown over, I could’ve sent a skiff,” Anrosh said. The sect had bought a dozen small air-ships—skiffs—just so that they could transport important people from the city walls to the palace without the need to go through the abysmal state of the city streets. At least they had started the reconstruction of the city, so that problem should be fixed in the next few years, hopefully.

“It wouldn’t be proper,” Lesamitrius added, and she grimaced, resigned to waiting.

Anrosh was starting to get nervous as finally she saw movement at the entrance to palace yard. Then a carriage wheeled into the courtyard. A part of her wished that they could’ve just made their way here directly, instead of going through the city. Even without a skiff the trip that shouldn’t have taken more than an hour had taken them almost double that amount. She knew that it was only going to get worse, now that the work had started.

She understood that part of the reason why she was feeling this way was her own nervousness. She had known that they were back for almost the entire day, a message was sent ahead when they entered the territory, and she had been a nervous wreck since then. It had been a long time since she had seen them last. She had tried to focus on work, but quickly discovered that it was impossible to focus while knowing that they were back. Sometimes she hated the Sect culture, and the fact that it was expected of them to go through the city, the conquering heroes returning home.

The carriage stopped and the doors opened, and two people stepped out. They both gave her quick smiles that immediately pushed all her worries and nervousness away. She smiled back as Kri and Nayra walked over to meet her.

They made a show, first bowing deeply and greeting her.

“Sect Leader, we are returned,” Nayra said with a mischievous grin on her face that made Anrosh’s own come out.

“Sect Leader, you are welcomed back,” Anrosh said, and then stepped down a step. She took them both in their arms and hugged them close. “I’ve missed you.”

They returned their embrace, and then Kri stepped back, letting her mothers have a moment. She pulled Nayra in a deep kiss that promised more to come later, losing herself in her touch for a few moments.

Kri cleared her throat, which made them finally separate. Anrosh raised an eyebrow at her daughter.

“Mother, please,” Kri gestured at all the people around them, watching their reunion.

Anrosh grinned, then pulled Nayra in for another quick kiss, which made Nayra giggle, before stepping back. She always felt so much younger when they were together. As if all her worries were insignificant.

Lesamitrius stepped forward from behind them and bowed in greeting. “I’ve taken the liberty of preparing the House baths for your arrival if you wish to relax after your trip. A banquet is scheduled for later this week.”

Anrosh saw Nayra give him a grateful look. Their arrival also meant that they would need to meet with a lot of other highly placed members of the sect. Lesamitrius knew them enough to know that they wouldn’t want to do it immediately.

With that, they retreated back into the palace. Anrosh was eager to hear all about their trip.

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There was more chaos in Consequence than usual, even at night. The city never seemed to sleep these days. And while the activities did slow down at night, there was enough that it was good practice for Ryun. He sat on top of the palace roof, his eyes closed, focusing his skill on the world around. His sense was one of his greatest weapons, and he never stopped honing it. It also allowed him to stay in touch with his Sect, without actually having to talk with anyone. Sure, intruding on people’s privacy might seem wrong by some standards, but they all had to sacrifice things.

The chaos in the city was mostly caused by the new construction. It's been three months since they had started the efforts to rebuild the city,

and while it was necessary, it was also going to cause a lot of... discomfort for some people. The outer wall was in the process of being torn down, which meant that the entrance to the city was reduced to three gates from the usual twelve. Pushing that much traffic through so few gates caused lines stretching far outside the city.

A nearby hill, outside the limits of the city, had a new makeshift city on top of it. Made out of stone, filled with ugly buildings that had been raised out of the ground itself. The temporary housing was now occupied by the people whose homes in one of the city's residential buildings were being taken down and new ones built. It was a big process, one that would take years, but would see Consequence transformed into something incredible.

The people would have to live with some inconveniences for a while. Ryun pulled his thoughts away from those thoughts and cleared his mind. Letting the sense of the world around him wash over him. He let the tens of thousands of conversations fade into the background and simply tracked the movements of every person in his range. It was a struggle, even with **|Enhanced Adaptation|** helping him. It was too much even for him. He felt his willpower being drained just from attempting to hold so much inside his mind.

He was long overdue an advancement. He had spent a decade sharpening his skills, his mastery of his power, and had achieved what he believed to be enough. What came next would be Eternal and improving his skills to higher tiers after. He could advance his skills now, he could feel them swell beneath his skin, wanting to grow. They had been ready for a long while, he had to hold himself back as he had even finished a few quests simply by living.

But he was waiting on something, or rather someone. He was not beyond asking for guidance, not now after all that he had seen, and knowing what they would have to face. He had less than two years since

that someone arrived for the deal they made. Instruction for instruction, he hoped that it would offer him more insights into skills and help him push them beyond what heights they currently could reach.

For now, he focused and trained. A while later, he felt someone approaching him, then coming and sitting down next to him.

“Welcome back,” Ryun greeted.

Kri didn’t say anything for a few minutes, and Ryun allowed the silence to stretch.

“It changed so much,” she whispered after a while.

“You’ve been gone for six years,” Ryun told her. But he could see what she meant; the city had been growing at an alarming rate. The Sect was growing, everything was changing. But Ryun had been born on a world much different than this one, he knew change and how fast it could come.

“Yeah,” Kri said at last. They settled into a silence again, and then Ryun turned to face her, and put a hand in between them, pulling out a small shah table.

Without speaking, they put the pieces in their starting positions and started to play.

“So,” Ryun started as he moved his pawn forward. “What did you learn?”

Kri looked at the board, then made her own move. “That there is a lot of dangerous things out there.”

“Didn’t you already know that?” Ryun asked then moved his rook.

“I did, I guess,” Kri said slowly. “I meant, danger for others.”

“Ah,” Ryun nodded. “How many?”

“Sixty-three, directly under my command,” Kri said slowly.

“You blame yourself?” Ryun asked.

“Isn’t it my fault?” She asked.

“I don’t know, is it?”

She didn’t answer. “If I was stronger, I could’ve kept them alive.”

Ryun hummed to himself and moved his bishop to take Kri’s pawn.  
“Then, isn’t it my fault?”

Kri blinked. “You weren’t there.”

“I lead the Sect, I made the decision to expand our borders, and I ultimately placed you in the position you are in.”

“It’s not the same,” Kri said.

“Hmm,” Ryun moved another piece in response to Kri. “Or perhaps it was Nayra’s fault? She was the strongest one there, I assume that she would’ve been able to do something?”

“Her job was to watch for bigger threats,” Kri added. “I know what you are trying to do, it isn’t helping.”

“Well,” Ryun reached for a piece, then paused as he considered his next move. “Then, I don’t really know what to say. I am a firm believer in people being given opportunities to grow stronger, not all survive. You

can't blame yourself. I protect them from things that they can't protect themselves, but they are free to make their choices. They chose to be there with you."

"I know," Kri said, then moved another piece. "Check."

Ryun frowned. "You've gotten better," he said, then moved his knight to cover his king. "If you know it, then why are you feeling as you are?"

"It is one thing to know something," Kri said. "Another to feel."

"Is it? You should change that. Letting your feelings use you is a path that will get you killed. Feelings, emotions, they are there for you to use them, not the other way around," Ryun moved his queen. "Checkmate."

Kri sighed, then turned away too, and looked at the city. Ryun put the board away and they sat there in silence, looking at the city.

After a while, she spoke again. "I should've been Immortal by now."

"Do you want to?"

"Of course, I want to!" Kri said. "If I was..."

"So, you want to be stronger to keep them safe," Ryun said. "It is a good enough drive, I suppose. But you haven't advanced, and you could've. No one is stopping you."

Kri glanced in his direction. "You are the ones that are stopping me."

"Are we really?" Ryun asked. "I've told you that you can advance to Immortal whenever you wish, as long as you've found your drive. Or at least you think that you have. The fact that you haven't advanced means that you don't think what you have now is enough. You don't believe in it

enough. Wanting to protect your people might be a part of who you are, but you are missing more.”

Kri closed her eyes. “An ideal,” she murmured. “You do know that you and Tali are insane, right? People don’t start thinking about such things before they turn hundred years old, I am not even fifty.”

“We are not like everyone else,” Ryun told her.

“Yeah,” Kri murmured, then after a bit she continued. “I think that there is something wrong with me.”

“In what way?” Ryun asked.

“I look around and I see that everyone has someone, mother and Nayra, you, Selia and Erdania, even Tali keeps flying off to see Sigmund. I’m just... alone. I don’t think that I was ever in love. Shouldn’t I have been? I am almost forty years old, I should’ve. Maybe that’s why I can’t find my real drive.”

“You’ve made other things your focus, there is nothing wrong about that. Do you want to find love?” Ryun asked.

Kri didn’t answer immediately. “I don’t know. No one in the Sect ever really caught my attention, but then again, they all see me as an extension of mother or you. Maybe, I just don’t know.”

“If it comes, it comes, if not, well,” Ryun didn’t know what exactly to say. He didn’t believe that living a life without such connections was bad... but his life was very much defined by his loves. Melody and the consequences of that love had shaped him. Selia and Erdania grounded him.

“Tell me again what your ideal is,” Kri said, interrupting his thoughts.



“Look at this city, look at the world. I see beauty in it all, in their lives, in what is achieved. But to me, it is only beautiful because it won’t last. All things shall meet their end. And that is what my ideal is about. I am the Witness of Journey’s End, I live and watch it all, until such a time when it all comes to an end.”

Kri grew quiet, hugging her knees close to her chest, looking out at the city. He remained quiet, recognizing that she was contemplating things and he didn’t want to interrupt. Then he felt a lone shape flying through the sky, heading for the city. He recognized who it was immediately. He sighed; it looked like the time for his training was coming to an end.