

Private Talks

Ryun sat in the small private office next to the throne room. The inside of it was unfamiliar to him, since he had never really used it before. But when he asked for a private room for his meeting, he was led here. He sat behind a wide wooden table, Tali standing at his side. Anrosh was in the city, making sure that Selia's people were settled. He did wonder if they were going to have issues. Selia's people were from a core sect, he couldn't imagine that they would be happy to take orders from people that were from the frontier.

"What do you think happened?" Ryun asked.

Tali thought about it for a long few seconds, her hands crossed and one finger tapping over her elbow. "The state of their people, the fact that they came so far... I can only assume that they lost their sect in some way. If what we've been hearing about the core is the truth, then I am not surprised. Chaos like that is always filled with disruptions. Sects rise and sects fall."

Perhaps she was right. Selia's emotions did feel conflicted and defeated. Still, he was going to find out soon enough. They didn't have to wait for long before Selia and Erdania were escorted into the room. The guards let them in and then closed the doors, the soundproofing formations activating a moment later.

Both of them glanced at Tali then back at Ryun.

"We were hoping to have a... private talk," Selia said slowly.

Ryun waved to his side and spoke. "This is Tali, she is... my adviser, I guess you could say. I do not hold secrets from her."

The two glanced at each other, and Ryun took a moment to inspect them more closely. It was clear that there were things on their minds, he could tell from the way that they stood, though perhaps the fact that Ryun could feel Selia's emotions contributed to him being able to tell. It gave him context to what he was seeing, he wasn't usually that good at reading people.

Finally, Selia sighed and turned back to look at Ryun.

"Fine then," she said. "We... we'd like to talk to you about a few things."

"Like why are you here, and what happened?" Ryun suggested.

Selia nodded her head. "Yes, things like that."

Ryun gestured for them to take seats and once they had he leaned back in his chair and gestured for them to speak.

“The things in the core went bad quickly. So fast that I, we, were barely able to keep up,” Selia started. “Our allies switched sides, and old enemies came for us. A lot of what holds the peace in between the sects are the connections between the Sect Heads. Without my grandfather, those who had debts and obligations to him no longer felt like they had anything to hold them back. We lost.”

“I am sorry that you had to go through that,” Ryun told her. For a moment he debated saying that he would’ve helped if she had asked. But... perhaps that was not appropriate to say at the moment. He might not even had been able to, he had his own sect to deal with.

Selia nodded. “We came here because... If I am being honest, we had no choice. Most of the core is consumed by war, and I needed a safe place where I could recover. The people that had followed me are... the most loyal of those who had served in my branch of the sect, with a few others. They came with me instead of going to one of the many factions that had split up my sect. For that I am thankful for them beyond imagining, and I want to make sure that they will be taken care of.”

Ryun tilted his head. “That depends on what you and they want. Is your plan to return to your sect and take it back?”

Selia sighed, then glanced at Erdania. “At the start, that was our plan, yes,” she turned back to look at Ryun. “Now, there are... things that might take precedent. Regardless, I want to ask permission for my people to live in your sect until I we are ready to take our sect back.”

“As long as they follow my laws, they are welcome. That being said, many of your people are more powerful, perhaps used to a certain way of living and acting. The way that things are done in my sect is different. If they make trouble for my citizens, they will be punished.”

“I will make sure that they understand,” Selia said.

“There is more,” Ryun said, her emotions told her there was.

“There is,” she said, then glanced at Tali. “These things are... concerning matters that you might want to keep private.”

Ryun almost smiled. Tali and he had gotten a lot closer over the last three years. She had opened up about many things that had happened in her life. He knew now that she used to be part of the organization that Zenker and Selia had wanted to recruit him to. He could imagine what Selia wanted to talk about, and he did want Tali's opinion on that.

"As I said, I keep no secrets from Tali," Ryun shrugged.

He knew that she was confused by Tali's presence. Obviously, her injuries were apparent. Ryun wondered what she was thinking about it. A crippled Cultivator, acting as his adviser? That had to be confusing.

"Oh fuck off already," Erdania said, waving her hand around. "Why are we just beating around everything so much. We nearly died together in the core, and the two of you can literally sense what each other is feeling."

Ryun sensed Tali turn around and glance him. He gave her a small smile. No secrets, but perhaps a few small ones. She didn't know that he had the other part of the Aspect of True Death or that he had given it to Selia. It hadn't seemed important at the time.

"Right," Ryun turned to look at Erdania. "You are right, of course. I guess that I shouldn't be surprised, you do have a knack for going to the heart of the matter."

A flash of emotions came from Selia, too fast for him to fully identify, but one of them was... jealousy? Perhaps, he didn't have much experience with that particular emotion.

"What is it that you want to talk with me about?" Ryun asked.

Selia took a deep breath and then answered. "It is about the dome, about the monsters that we faced in the core. I... I am a part of a group that tries to help keep the core safe."

Ryun could almost feel Tali trying not to react. "The same group that you and Zenker wished to invite me to?"

Selia paused for just a moment before answering. "Yes."

There was something there that made him slightly suspicious, but he pushed it aside for now as she continued to talk.

"We've tried to gather the core, to take back the Tournament Territories and end the threat of those monsters. We failed. Whatever is in there is too entrenched and dangerous for smaller armies, and we've been

unable to unite the others. We couldn't convince them of the level of threat. We failed, perhaps too much, enough that we suspect foul play. Though we have no real proof other than a string of suspicious actions. But we have people trying to deal with that, there is more."

She took a deep breath and gathered herself before continuing. "The place beyond the portal that we closed, the location of the Dome that was opened is... I don't know how much you are aware of our history, but... the exiles of the Third Iteration have built an Empire far in the south near where the Dome's location is."

Both Erdania and Selia looked at Ryun and Tali with expectation, and when they didn't see what they expected they frowned.

"You don't seem surprised about that, neither one of you," Selia said.

"I have known that for a while," Ryun said. "I've had dealings with this Empire, or their agents at least. One of my Sect Leaders came from there."

"What?" Erdania asked.

"Yes, Nayra Ornn, she fought in the Tournament. She had... disappeared after the attack, but I have reason to believe that she had been taken by the agents of the third Empire and brought to her previous home."

"Agents of the Third Empire at the Tournament? Are you certain?" Selia asked.

"I am," Ryun nodded. "I believe that they had something planned for the Tournament as well. An attack. It is my suspicion that they were the ones that blew up the side of the cliff and killed all those present there."

Selia blinked. "But it was the Speaker for..." She trailed off. "We just assumed that it was him who had done that as well."

Ryun shrugged. "He might've just taken advantage of the situation."

Selia shook her head. "It doesn't matter now, but... this will change things. Regardless, I came here because I have an offer for you, my organization does. The Empire has been fighting the bulk of the Dome's forces. They are holding them off for now, but... they can't keep this up for long. The monsters from the Dome are powerful and unrelenting. We've been in talks with their leadership and have agreed to send them aid. We are... we are sending a team to the Empire, with the goal of getting behind the enemy

lines and killing the Dome leader. We hope that that would make the rest of the monsters weaker.”

Ryun blinked, that hadn't been what he had expected. But... he could see how such a plan might work. What he was surprised with was the fact that the Third Empire had been fighting against the Dome's forces. He wondered what Nayra had been doing. She hadn't moved much in the last three years, and he hoped that she was safe.

“And what does this have to do with me?” Ryun asked.

“We want you to be part of that team,” Selia answered.

Ryun tilted his head. He was strong, he was a High Ranker, but he was... young by the reckoning of most people in the core. He was surprised that they would want him. Then he realized why they would want him.

“Ah,” Ryun said. “Because of our perks.”

It did make sense, together, their power was much greater. Even if his presence only increased Selia's power, it would've been worth it.

“Yes, but also because the history between the Third Iteration and everyone else is... difficult. You have no part in it, and we are only sending people like you—us, who hadn't taken part in what happened long ago. We will of course compensate you in any way that we can.”

Ryun wondered about that. He did have an issue with the Third Iteration.

“Compensate me... There is little that I want or need. But perhaps...” Ryun tapped his finger on the table, the crystallized void on his fingertips making a loud sound with each tap. “I've been planning to go to their Empire for a while now. As I said, I have reasons to believe that my Sect Leader is there. I intend to bring her home. Promise me that you will help me accomplish that, and I will go with you.”

Selia glanced at Erdania then back at Ryun. “Are you sure that is all that you want?”

“I have no need of anything else. And my word is the thing that is most important to me. Going with you means that I protect my sect. I feel your fear Selia, I know that you think that things are getting bad. This Dome... the things that I've seen in the core make me understand the danger. If there is a force larger than what we've faced, with a monster that none of us even

know anything about leading them... Then I would rather fight them away from my territory and people than wait until they reach me, and it is too late.”

Ryun knew all about the Domes now, Tali had informed him of everything following his return to the sect. He did understand the danger, and he did understand what Tali’s group had been trying to do. He didn’t really agree with their methods, but... Who knows, if this hadn’t happened, they might’ve even succeeded.

“Thank you, your presence will help our efforts greatly,” Selia said.

“Who else is coming?” Ryun asked.

“Including us three, we are sending eight people. We don’t know anything about who the Empire will choose, but... I don’t know everyone who is coming, we are to meet them at a port on the Golden Coast as soon as able. The more we delay, the more time we give the enemy to get stronger.”

“Well then, I guess that I need to get my affairs in order.”

“This will be dangerous,” Tali told him a couple minutes later when they were alone.

“Most things are,” Ryun said. “But I’ve been putting off going after Narya because I felt like I lacked the strength. Now... I might have some leverage to get her back. And if they are too occupied by the dome and weakened, I can demonstrate why taking what is mine, is... ill-advised.”

“I am all for demonstrations of power,” Tali smiled. “They’ve showed our sect disrespect, that needs to be remedied, but... Once I would’ve done as you now plan to do. I’ve tried to learn from my past, promise me that you will at least try not to do anything too stupid.”

Ryun laughed. “I promise. You will help Anrosh keep things here in check I assume?”

“Of course,” Tali said. “I wished that I could go with you, but if the Third’s old Rankers are still alive... I will be recognized.”

“Yes, we shouldn’t complicate things,” Ryun agreed. He knew that Tali had been on the front lines of the war between the Third Iteration and everyone else.

“Though, perhaps you might look for someone there, who knows, they might even help you out,” Tali said.

“You have friends among them?” Ryun asked, surprised.

“Things are always more complicated than the history remembers them to be. I had... a close friend among them. Her name is Karya. Karya Ó Cionaoith, she was a Ranker of the Third Iteration, one of their leaders. If she still lives, perhaps she could help you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Ryun told her. There was so much that he needed to do. Both Selia and Erdania were in a rush to start their journey, and Ryun understood their haste. They didn’t have the time to waste. He wished that they could talk more about everything, but they would have enough time during their trip.

“Ryun,” Tali brought his attention back to her. “You are powerful, and arrogant or perhaps confident is a better word. Such things often go hand in hand. But you are going to a place that is at war, that is filled with people who hate those who live in the core. Even in my time, we knew about the Empire, and their customs and beliefs are very different than the core. I know that you usually don’t care for such things as long as they don’t impact you. But I urge you to at least try. A wrong word at a wrong time can earn you an enemy for life. And everyone can die in an ambush, no matter how powerful they are.”

Ryun knew that she spoke from experience. She told him that she had been betrayed by someone she considered a friend, someone who was mad and who she tried to help.

“How did it happen?” Ryun asked, he had always held back, not wanting to intrude on something that was probably painful. But now she was healing, perhaps it was time.

Tali looked away for a second, then turned back.

“At that time, I was the most powerful Cultivator in the world. I had reached the Ascended Realm first, and I was... arrogant,” she smiled at him. “My friend was... focus mad. We didn’t understand such things fully back

then, the limits of it. Her madness had built up over the years and she developed a... it doesn't matter. Suffice to say she hated me for being able to fly. I wanted to help her, but she was stuck in the Immortal Realm. I hoped that advancement might help alleviate her madness, so I shared my inspiration with her. I raised her to Evolved, and she stabbed me in the back."

She closed her eyes, then continued to speak. "I came to her alone, and she brought an army. Formations, arrays, everything and anything that she could think of. I was more powerful than them, I killed so many of them. But in the end... no amount of power can defeat numbers and a well thought out plan. They wore me down and defeated me. She... she burned me, crippling me. She intended to kill me, she thought that she did. But I had secrets of my own. Soul protections that allowed me to cling to life. She threw me off a cliff into a river, when she thought that I was dead. The rest you know."

Ryun didn't say anything to that, there wasn't really much to say.

"Don't make the same mistake I did."

"Do you think that You will be able to get her back?" Anrosh asked.

"I fully intend to," Ryun answered. "I've told you that I care about Nayra as well. She is... a friend, my Sect Leader. You had been patient, we both have, but I didn't go because I did not understand or know anything about what I was going into. Now... now I have people that can fill in those gaps, and leverage. If they refuse... well, they are at war, and a lot of things can get lost in the chaos."

Anrosh nodded her head, looking frustrated.

"I know that you want to come, but you still need to heal, and I need someone to run the Sect."

"Yeah, drop a dozen immortals in my lap and a thousand core sect members in my lap and then leave. That is about right," she shook her head.

"I am certain that you can handle it," Ryun put a hand on her shoulder. "You'll have Tali, and I am leaving Lesamitrius with you. He had advanced far, and he is strong."

“He isn’t an Immortal,” Anrosh said.

“Not yet,” Ryun said. “I’ve had Selia and Erdania instruct them of our laws and what will happen if they push things. And... I know that you feel like you failed, but you’ve done a lot of training over the last three years. You’ve gotten stronger Anrosh, you just can’t see it yet. Once your leg is healed, you’ll see it for yourself. Don’t let anyone push you around, you are a Sect Leader of the Twilight Melody Sect.”

“Right,” Anrosh sighed. “Just... just bring her back.”

“I promise.”