

## Assignment

Ryun met Tali as she came in for a landing in the palace courtyard. The warriors on the walls kept careful watch, but relaxed once she was recognized. They had learned long ago that Ryun's presence usually meant that there was no trouble, they knew that he could sense far, and that if he stood there calmly it was likely that there was no issue.

Tali's wings beat near the ground, sending dust in all directions as her feet landed gently on the ground.

"Oh, coming out to meet me?" She smiled. "You shouldn't have."

"Welcome back," Ryun said as she walked up to him.

She glanced around, saw the warriors on the walls and some palace staff nearby, then rolled her eyes and gave him a small bow. "Sect Head."

That made Ryun's smile grow. "How was your visit?" Ryun asked.

"It was... satisfying," she said.

Not it was his turn to roll his eyes. "I assume that Sigmund is well."

"He is, he sends his regards. Another kingdom joined with his, they have enough now that they can resist the Empire, or at least make it more... irritating for them to keep pressuring," Tali told him.

"That's good, anything that annoys him is good in my book." Ryun added as he gestured and then led them inside.

“Really Ryun? Still?” Tali said.

“What?”

“You do realize that everybody knows about your... quarrels,” Tali said.

Ryun frowned. “How?”

Tali rolled her eyes. “What? You think that High Rankers don’t gossip? Please, and this is the biggest gossip of the century. The Herald of the Machine and The Undying Void’s rivalry, they make songs about you.”

“They don’t,” Ryun turned his head to look at her. “You are messing with me, I would’ve heard them sung in the taverns, they can’t hide that from me.”

Tali snorted. “Anrosh banned the songs featuring you from being sung in Consequence years ago.”

Ryun blinked. “No, she... You *are* messing with me, right Tali?”

She laughed.

“Right?” Ryun insisted, which only made Tali laugh harder.

“Damn,” Ryun said to himself after she started calming down.

She shook her head. “You really have no idea the lengths that woman goes to manage you.”

“I am not that bad,” Ryun defended.

“Sure you’re not,” Tali patted his shoulder, which just made him feel... worse.

They walked through the palace corridors in silence after that, him trying to reflect on just how much work he was making for Anrosh. “You are back earlier than expected,” Ryun commented after a while.

Tali nodded, now sober. “I am.”

“Does that mean...?” Ryun let his question trail off, it wouldn’t be prudent to speak openly, not yet anyway.

“Yes, they made the decision,” Tali answered with a nod.

Ryun grunted; it was finally happening it seemed. He had been expecting it for the last few years, but to know definitively... A part of him was excited, it had been a long time since he pushed himself. But there were still issues that he couldn’t ignore.

“Selia is not back yet,” he said. Both he and Erdania had hoped that she would return before the decision was made. In part because they missed her, and in part because she was a big part of their strength. Ryun’s capabilities were lessened without her.

“She has three more years,” Tali said with a sigh. “Otherwise, we go without her.”

Ryun nodded, then focused on his bond with her, trying to get a sense of what Selia could be thinking. As before, it was muted to the point that he could only tell that she was still there and nothing else.

“So, I am guessing that the rough plan remains the same?” Ryun asked.

“It does, the dome that was chosen is one suited for us,” Tali said.

Ryun nodded, then spoke. “Do you need rest? Or should we gather for a meeting?”

“Is everybody here?” Tali asked.

“Nayra arrived yesterday, but Ender and Karya are at their home. But I can send a fast airship, they can arrive by morning.”

“No then, send word for them to come, we aren’t in a rush.”

“We aren’t?” Ryun asked. “Three years isn’t a lot of time.”

“It is enough,” Tali said. “We’ve spent the last decade training for this Ryun, we are ready.”

Ryun didn’t really disagree, but there were things that he wished he had more time for. It would mean that he would have barely two years to advance to Eternal, and a year to train his skills before facing a dome.

“Very well,” he said finally. “I’ll send word for everyone to gather.”

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The meeting room that they gathered in the Consequence palace was a smaller one, there wasn’t a lot of them to take one of the larger ones. Ryun and Erdania sat at the head of the table, with Tali on their right and Anrosh on their left. Next to Tali was Karya, Nayra, and Ender Ornn-Dagda, with Embesh across from them. The leaders of the Twilight Melody Sect gathered.

“So, which straw did we draw?” Karya asked once they were all seated.

Tali glanced around the table, then spoke. “A dome to the Northeast, the 2nd Dome of the Reckoning, Dome of the Blighted Horde. In three years.”

“A swarm type then,” Ender asked.

Tali nodded. “It was decided that considering our... capabilities, we are most suited for such a dome. Ryun and Selia’s display during the war and the Tournament were taken as proof that they alone could handle such a threat, with Nayra there to offset the loss of power they gained as the threat’s numbers were culled.”

Ryun nodded, it made sense, and it was what they had thought it would be.

“Hitor will lend us a fleet to keep watch over the surroundings and to hunt down any stragglers, but most of the fighting is supposed to be done with our elites, no armies.”

“That does make sense,” Erdania said. “We are less effective when fighting in armies.”

“So,” Karya started. “Ryun, Selia—assuming she returns by then—Nayra, who else?”

Tali tapped the table. “I suggest that I go in case there are any areal threats, though the report doesn’t think there are. The monsters are all on the ground, the dome is a hill of small insect light beings. Erdania to cover Ryun and Selia as they fight. Nayra in reserve once the death on the field grows enough for her to join. With the fleet in the supporting position behind us. If you wish,” Tali met Karya’s eyes. “You can go as well, as a precaution.”

Karya looked thoughtful but didn't give a definitive answer one way or the other.

“What do we know about the dome,” Anrosh asked.

Tali turned to look at her. “It is a skreen Dome,” she answered. “Their records are... spotty at best, few of their Rankers survive for long. The only thing we have is a vague story about a plague of creatures that invaded skreen hives and decimated their crops, poisoning the land in the process. Another reason why we were given the task. In case that the Dome monsters utilize any kind of poison or disease, Ryun is probably the best bet against it.”

Ryun nodded, his body was Oblivion, no other Essence survived inside him if he didn't want it to. Poison or disease would get disintegrated long before it could do anything.

“How certain are the analysts that we are going to counter the dome?” Erdania asked.

The decisions on who went after what dome were made by the best and the brightest that the world had to offer, from all factions. Scholars and trainers, planners, and researchers. They looked at a Dome, seeing what was inside and attempted to make projections of what the Dome's power was and what would counter it. They had been doing analysis for the past decade. Ryun just hoped that their findings were right. They were supposed to hard counter the Domes, and not allow another Hastur situation to happen. Hastur had done too much damage, his skillset had been a hard counter for an already divided world. Mental powers that widened the gaps and an army that had managed to take advantage of it. They hoped that other Domes would not go down the same way.

“Fairly certain, the number I was given was at seventy-eight percent. Take in mind that they only had a few sources for what the Dome can contain,” Tali answered.

“Did they check with the kreacean?” Embesh asked. “They shared the homeworld.”

Tali nodded. “They did, but it there wasn’t much that they could learn. They had mentions of the stories, but what the skreen viewed as a blight, the kreacean viewed as a gift of the heavens. Nothing in there to suggest any kind of weaknesses.”

“You said in three years?” Nayra asked. “The first dome is supposed to open in another six. Are we cutting it close?”

“We aren’t the first,” Tali said. “The first dome will be opened this year, in a couple of months. Another reason why I came back early. We need to be ready, just in case that anything goes wrong.”

“Who is fighting it?” Ryun asked.

Tali glanced at him. “The Herald.”

Ryun grimaced. “Ah,” Ryun just said. “His Empire is fighting alone?”

Tali shrugged. “He couldn’t well push for the united effort against the Domes then insist on doing everything alone. No, a few smaller kingdoms will provide support. They are going against the 3rd, Dome of Render Queen, the first three are skreen Domes. His fleet is already on the way.”

“I am surprised that Grey Horde wasn’t sent against them,” Karya mentioned.

“It was discussed, but ultimately the analysts decided that any creatures inside the Dome would know more about the native races than others,” Tali said.

Ryun did agree with that at least.

“Grey Horde has the honor of fighting against the 4th Dome, a single monster Dome.”

Ryun blinked, he knew that there were some Domes that held only a single, or a smaller group of monsters inside. He wondered just how strong they had to be in order to be considered a threat.

“Well then,” Ryun said. “Are we agreed with the plan?”

After a round of agreements, Ryun nodded. “Three years, until then... we train.”

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A few months later the notification about the opening of the dome arrived.

**Warning! The 3rd, Dome of Reckoning - Dome of the Render Queen has been opened! The Render Queen wakes. Defeat the Queen and her armies in order to stop her blighted touch.**



**Fight, prevail, prove that you are worthy.**

**Defeating the Render Queen will bring new opportunities and rewards for those brave enough.**

Ryun had the Sect put on alert, waiting, ready in case that things go wrong. It was three days later when the notification announcing the victory arrived. Ryun was on the roof of the palace, staring at the names of those with the biggest contribution, of which the Herald of the Machine was at the top.

An hour later a messenger from the Empire arrived, carrying a personal message for Ryun. He read it, then stiffened and sent a pulse of Oblivion through the paper, destroying it.

“Who was it from, what did it say?” Tali asked from next to him.

Ryun grimaced, then glanced in her direction. “From the Herald.”

She blinked. “He... he sent you a message before going?”

Ryun nodded. “He timed it, the bastard.”

Tali tilted her head at him. “What did it say?”

Ryun scowled, then answered. “It said: “one to one”.”

Tali frowned. “I assume that you know what that means?”

“It is score,” Ryun said. “One dome for me, one for him.”

Tali looked at him with a blank expression, and then she started to laugh. Ryun was already plotting his revenge.