

War Council

Tali followed a Dragon Heart escort through the corridors of the Fah Storrah Peak, with Ryun walking beside her.

“So,” he started. “Any idea why we are being called this time?”

Tali shook her head, then whispered. “Not at all, unless you did something again.”

Ryun turned his eyes to the ceiling, in thought. “I don’t think that I did,” he said. “But I could be wrong.”

“You can’t possibly not remember doing something that would warrant us being summoned by the Sect Head,” she said, looking at him askance.

“Oh, I know everything that I did, of course,” he nodded. “I just don’t know if normal people would consider any of those things something out of the ordinary.”

“I hate you,” she hissed at him.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, before he broke it by humming softly.

“Maybe this is about the training room,” Ryun scratched at his beard.

Tali turned her head to look at him, slowly. “What training room?”

“I asked for a room to train in, I insisted that they give me the one that had the most powerful defenses on it. I mean, they said that it was their strongest one, but... I think that they lied.”

“What did you do?” Tali asked, trying not to sound exasperated. And failing magnificently.

“Ah... I broke it? I think that I broke it, the attendant was crying when I left.”

“Yeah, of course he did,” Tali added, her tone dull.

“He was saying something about cascading failure, but I didn’t really get what he was trying to say.”

“What were you doing in there?”

“Practicing my techniques and getting familiar with my Aspect, of course,” Ryun said. “I think that I got a hang of it now.”

Yeah, figure out a completely new aspect in a few months, no big deal. “Ugh, I despise you.”

“No, you don’t.”

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They were escorted into a medium sized room, with a large table in the middle filled with colorful sand. There were a few people already inside. Hitor Fah Storrah and his brother Vitor, a drake with metal dark metal scales that she had seen around the two before. Ikras she believed his name to be. Eratemus and Sigmund were the last two people inside.

“Ah,” Hitor greeted them with a smile. “Thank you for coming.”

“Of course, Sect Head, we are but your humble guests,” Tali said and inclined her head. “We are, however, confused as to why we were summoned? We were in the middle of preparations for our departure.”

“Yes, I apologize for that, I had only recently been made aware of certain... things,” he glanced at Eratemus.

Tali and Ryun both tilted their heads, in the exact same manner. Once she realized she quickly straightened her head, but Hitor already continued.

“We are just about to start our war strategy meeting; I believe that you should attend.”

Tali frowned at that. “Why?” She was truly confused.

They might be members of the Sect Council, and the Twilight Melody Sect had some influence, but there was no reason for them to be included in the planning itself, they didn’t have anything to really offer.

“We have no great army,” Tali continued. “Nor do we have any great commanders or masters of war. Power itself does not mean a great strategist.”

Besides, that wasn’t how Sects fought. They had no united armies, they didn’t even have career soldiers, they had warriors. They fought with smaller armies and groups with powerful individuals that acted independently of each other. They might have a unified strategy, but they had no tactics, it would be pointless. They weren’t Classers, they didn’t have powers that benefited them in groups, helped them fight like a unit. They were irregulars, pure and simple.

She had assumed that some, like Hitor and Eratemus, would set the overall strategy, and then... they would just march.

Ryun hummed. Then spoke. “I could contribute, I know how to fight armies.”

Tali glared at him.

“Of course,” Hitor said. “Any input shall be considered. Though, why I asked you here today is... I’ve recently learned that some of the Third Iteration’s refugees had joined your Sect, is that true?”

“It is,” Ryun said. “They are part of my Sect the same as any other member.”

Tali rolled her eyes, he probably didn’t even realize that his tone was threatening.

“Of course,” Hitor said again. “The war had ended long ago, and with their Empire gone, they are no longer a threat,” he waved his hand. “No, what interests me is that I’ve been told that one of those who joined your sect is a woman who matches the description of Karya Ó Cionaoith, is this true?”

Ryun nodded. “Karya Ornn now,” he answered. “She and her family are the ones that joined.”

“And they would be part of the troops your Sect sends?”

Immediately Tali realized why he wanted them here. Karya had been one of the most powerful of her people’s generation, a great leader.

“I will take anyone that I feel will be able to contribute to the war,” Ryun said.

“Of course,” Hitor said. Then the other doors opened, and more people entered. Awirren, then Velorn Thorntail of the World Tree Sect, followed by Ipali Ba Geu of the Crimson Tide Sect and Weir Fo Fol of the Reges Ahn Sect, the last two were people that she didn’t recognize.

“We can talk about it later,” Hitor said as he turned and greeted the others.

Awirren paused when she saw Tali, but then turned her head and acted like she wasn’t there. Tali saw Sigmund straighten, and she signed at him quickly. Ryun and Tali walked over to the table, and were approached by the two people that she didn’t recognize. A tall black human, and a woman that seemed to have a strange mismatch True Body of different races, yet she didn’t feel like a Cultivator at all.

“Zach,” Ryun said slowly. It took Tali a moment to remember the name. The other Ranker from Earth.

“Ryun,” the man—Zach—said slowly, almost hesitantly. “I am glad that you’ve... returned.”

“As am I,” Ryun said. “I need to thank you; without you we wouldn’t have been able to defeat Hastur.”

Zach waved his hand. “There is no need for gratitude, it was what we were there to do. Still, I would like a moment of your time, after this meeting.”

Ryun looked at him for a few seconds, and then nodded in agreement.

“Good,” Zach said and then turned, walking to the other side of the table with the woman to stand next to Vitor Fah Storrah.

“What was that about?” Tali asked.

“I have no idea,” Ryun said slowly. “But I guess that I’ll find out.”

But then her attention was turned away as Hitor started to speak.

“Thank you for coming everyone, this meeting is to set our broad strategy for our attack on the core. We are waiting on one more person and then we will start—Ah,” he said as another door opened and a tall crimson skreen entered the room. “And here he is, the emissary of the Triumphant Hive who has agreed to join our war.”

Tali blinked as Trklak, the Horde Itself, walked into the room.

He bowed to the room, then spoke. “I greet you in the name of the Triumphant Hive,” he said. “My Queen apologizes for not being able to attend. Matters in our lands still require her presence.”

Tali was impressed that they had managed to bring the Grey Horde, or at least her voice, to the table.

“No problem,” Hitor said then looked around the room. With a tap of his fingers on the solid part of the sand table he changed it. In a few second the colorful sand arranged itself into a map of the Settled Territories. “Now we may begin. Eratemus if you will,” he gestured at the undead drake vessel.

“The taken and the dome monsters have taken a large swath of territories in the core,” a large part of the inner core turned red. “They are not actually occupying all of it, though they do have monster patrols going through territories, as well as larger groups that are, I believe, harvesting resources.”

“How do you know this?” Awirren asked. “I was led to believe that getting any information out of those lands is extremely hard.”

“It is,” Eratemus nodded his head. “I’ve been using undead rodents and birds to observe them. And I still can’t enter their cities, or any place that has a high concentration of them. I suspect that some of the dome monsters can detect the undead, or at least anything that doesn’t belong to them, and they purge it all.”

“Tell us what you know,” Hitor said.

“There are two large concentrations of them, with several smaller ones scattered over a vast territory. The biggest are the Tournament City, which had been turned into a fortress filled with monsters. I’ve not been able to get close, but most of the monsters come from there, and they always return there. I believe that they had been growing more monsters in there, and I have seen several General type monsters around the area. There are no taken there, most of them hold the cities that they had taken, though the largest concentration of them is here,” he pointed South, at the city of Emaros. “I’ve not been able to get inside, but I’ve observed people transported out. Most of the population had been collared, and are put to work in various areas, mostly resource gathering. The slaves are operating out of here, three territories away from Emaros,” he pointed at another city, one that Tali wasn’t familiar with.

“The city of Helse,” Eratemus said. “There are taken there, as well as some who are working for them of their own free will.”

Everyone around the table grimaced at that.

“Right,” Hitor said. “Our primary targets are Emaros and the Tournament City. We should attempt to execute both attacks as fast and as closely timed as possible to prevent them from reinforcing any of their positions. But prior to that,” he turned to look at Ipali Ba Geu and Weir Fo Fol. “I was hoping that you would agree to take your troops and strike at another of their cities, here,” Hitor pointed at the southernmost point of the taken territory. “It is one of their staging points, where they usually gather forces, it also supplies their raids into the core. We’ve already gotten the support of Dracael Brownscale, her fleet can escort yours upriver to within striking distance of the city. We might not have much information about their closed cities, but they don’t have any information about us and our movements. Neither the taken nor the monsters can

hide from us. If you strike them there before us, you might draw a lot of their forces there, letting us strike their most important holdings easier.”

The two Sect Heads exchanged looks, and then nodded.

“Trklak,” Hitor started, but the skreen interrupted him.

“We will strike at the Tournament City,” the skreen said. “The taken had pushed too close to our lands, my Queen does not wish to see them reach our borders.”

Hitor nodded. “The rest of us will then hit Emaros. Warden Zacharia,” he turned to Zach. “You know the city; it would be useful if you could come with us. Or if you could reach out to the rest of the Wardens, I am sure that they would want their Citadel back.”

Zach didn’t answer, instead it was the woman next to him, who Tali assumed was Nahamassa—she remembered the name from the Dome Leader kill notification, and what she had overheard Erdania and Selia say.

“The Wardens are fractured,” Nahamassa said. “But perhaps we can see about gathering some of them.”

“It would help us a lot to have people who know the inner layout of the city and the citadel intimately,” Hitor added.

It was a sound strategy. Things would change, of course, they always did in war. But it was a good first step.

“What about the slaves,” this time, it was Zach who spoke.

Everyone turned to look at him. “We will attempt to free them,” Hitor said slowly. “But if they were enslaved by the taken... It will depend on the manner in which their collars were made. Usually only those attuned to the collars can remove them without killing them.”

Zach narrowed his eyes but didn’t speak again.

“Now,” Hitor started. “If anyone has any more questions or concerns, now is the time for them.”

The meeting lasted for another two hours.