

Council of Sects

Tali walked next to Ryun as they were escorted through the narrow corridors to a secret meeting place. The great gathering of Sects was a public affair, but before the gathering sets off in truth, those with the most influence came together to make the big decisions. Their escorts left them at the double-sided doors, and the two of them entered alone. The meeting place was a room illuminated by white gemstones, a round table with eleven chairs spread around it. There had only been 7 members when Tali had attended last. They all entered the room at the same time, from different entrances it seemed.

Eleven Sect Heads were present, at least she assumed, with Tali herself being the only exception—as a former Sect Head. Looks were thrown around the room, and Tali saw that no one was confused when they looked at Ryun—of course, these people were the ones that decided that he should be invited to join. But there were a lot of strange looks when they looked at her, a few recognized her and she saw their shock—Hitor apparently didn't let everybody know that she still lived.

Tali's eyes looked for a single person among the eleven, and she found her standing only a step away from the door she entered the room through. Awirren stared at her, her body frozen stiff, but her eyes and the mind behind them moving at speed. Tali just grinned at her.

She had spent many years, century at least, imagining all the ways that she was going to make her former friend suffer. She had dreamed of revenge, of the things she was going to do to Awirren. But if there was one thing that her time spent as a prisoner taught her, it was patience. A part of her still wanted to jump on her, to rip and tear, but... Oh, she had plans for her old friend, and a quick revenge was not part of them.

She turned away, intent on ignoring Awirren from now on. Let her stew and spiral, trying to imagine all the reasons why she could be ignoring her. Let her try to figure out how Tali survived in the first place. She noticed Ryun talking with someone, Repesh—the Midnight Reign Sect Head—but her attention on Awirren made her miss the start of the conversation.

“We should take our seats,” Repesh told Ryun, who nodded, then glanced at Tali and gestured with his head.

Tali walked with him and took a seat next to him, with Repesh taking the one on his other side. Other Sect Heads did the same, some she knew, most of the old ones, though there were a few that had sect colors and crests that were familiar to her, but the Sect Heads were new—replacements most likely, just like how Ryun was one of the replacements for the losses at the Tournament. Some Sect Heads that she knew before had died long ago, others had simply stepped down. But their Sects remained powerful influences.

As everyone took their seats, Hitor alone remained standing. He inclined his toward everyone, then spoke.

“I greet you, fellow Sect Heads. As the host of this Council gathering, I offer the welcome of my Sect and people. Since this will be the first Council gathering for some of you, I will introduce everyone.”

Hitor started on his right. “Joining us for the first time, Liana Con Diegn, Sect Head of the Iron Fist Sect,” he gestured at the demasi woman.

Tali glanced at her, she was unfamiliar to her as was her Sect. What she could see and sense was that the Qi the woman possessed had a taste of metal, her robes were gray with black edges. None of them had any weapons on them, of course, Cultivators were weapons themselves.

Hitor gestured to the person sitting next to Liana, a black furred minotaur. “Weir Fo Fol, Sect Head of the Reges Ahn Sect.”

Tali smiled at the man. He hadn’t been the Sect Head when she saw him last, but he had been one of Reges Ahn Sect’s best commanders, the right hand of the man that had led many of the Sects armies during the war with the Third Iteration. Tali didn’t know what happened to him, she was yet to catch up on three hundred years of history.

“Henna Rai Tarun, Sect Head of the Starlight Call Sect,” Hitor introduced the human woman.

Her hair was white, and each of her eyes had four stars in it, surrounded by blue. Tali met those eyes, remembering the woman that had been one of the first to support and advocate for the Tali’s idea that the Sects separate themselves from other factions. They went a long way back.

“Joining us for the first time, Jeuk Usho, Sect Head of the Breaking Wave Sect,” Hitor introduced the the orange colored krecean.

The bulky form barely fit in the chair, but he wasn’t a warform, just an unusually large krecean it seemed. Tali had heard of the sect, it had been a mid-sized sect on the southern coast, focusing on exploring the oceans of this world.

Another new member, with Ryun that added up to three. Tali couldn’t imagine that was normal. They had to have lost a lot of members during the attack.

“Awirren Goldenfeather, Sect Head of the Golden Sky Sect,” Hitor introduced.

Tali met her old friend’s gaze, held it for a long minute. Her feathers were even more resplendent than they used to be. She had always been beautiful, her coloring, the way that she carried herself. It evoked regality. Tali used to envy her that, long ago.

It almost didn’t seem real to her that she was sitting in the same room as her without trying to kill her. It just went to show how much she had grown over the centuries. Though, if she was being honest, most of her growth happened in the last decade, interacting with those who should’ve been as children to her, but ended up being peers.

She pulled her eyes away as Hitor spoke again.

“Velorn Thorntail, Sect Head of the World Tree Sect.”

Tali looked at the green scaled drake. Another person that she knew from before. She and Velorn had never seen eye to eye. His sect kept to itself, holding the territories around the great world tree, the first that they had found in the Infinite Realm. Later, they would encounter another, but she still remembered seeing the first one, long ago. Velorn had brought his people and laid claim to it before anyone else could, he fought and killed anyone who tried to take it from him. Their Cultivation came from the Essence that the World Tree itself possessed. She knew that it gave them some great powers. The robe that he wore was woven from the silk threads harvested from the giant spiders that lived between the World Tree’s roots.

“Ipali Ba Geu, Sect Head of the Crimson Tide Sect,” Hitor introduced the next member.

Tali didn't know them, nor had she heard about their sect. This wasn't their first time, so the demasi had to have been added sometime in the last three hundred years. The Sect could've existed before, but Tali hadn't really paid attention to every little sect that came into existence. And a lot could change in centuries.

"Repesh Emsis, Sect Head of the Midnight Reign Sect," he introduced the draugr.

"Joining us for the first time, Ryun Nacht, Sect Head of the Twilight Melody Sect. And..." Hitor glanced at Tali. "Some of you might remember our old member, now returned to us: Anatalien Far Solla, former Sect Head of the Grasping Sky Sect, now of the Twilight Melody Sect."

She noticed people look up at that, interested.

"There will be opportunities for catching up later," Hitor preempted anyone asking questions as he took his seat. "We have important matters to discuss."

"Yes," Weir Fo Fol said. "Why did you call us? Why did you call the Gathering of the Sects?"

"The reason for both is the same," Hitor answered the minotaur, then paused. "The threat of the Dome monsters and the Taken in the core."

Velorn tilted his head. "I've heard no news about them moving in our direction," the drake said.

"They aren't," Hitor said, then his voice dipped. "That doesn't mean that they are not a threat."

Velorn waved his hand. "The Dome Leader is dead, what possible threat could they pose now?"

"What threat? The fact that none of us have done anything to counter this threat is, if I am being honest, disappointing. The world collapsed into chaos, wars, and they all forgot or ignored the threat that was announced by the Framework," Hitor said slowly. "I've also had confirmation that the Dome Leader was responsible for much of that. It was a mental focused monster, who could reach the minds of anyone across the world. It probably touched your minds as well. I would recommend meeting with a mental expert—discreetly, of course—to check for any lingering damage. Though I am led to believe that the Dome Leader simply... nudged things along."

Tali saw everyone start at that. Having one's mind messed with was terrifying, especially for people that were powerful.

"That..." Velorn started. "Might explain the events of the recent years. It doesn't explain why you brought us here to talk about a threat that isn't anywhere near our territories."

Hitor met the other drake's eyes. "The Third Iteration's Empire had fallen to these monsters; the refugees are still spilling into the frontier and others moving beyond our borders to the north. You've all heard about them, I am sure. They were not weak, you all know that. And they fell to these monsters and the taken. If the Dome Leader hadn't been killed, the scattered monster waves that now follow after them would've crashed down upon us. And we did nothing to try and stop a threat that should've united the whole of the Settled Territories. Only one person here had done what had to be done," Hitor turned to look at Ryun. "Sect Head, you've seen the threat with your own eyes, tell us what you think. Why did you go, when the threat wasn't anywhere near your Sect?"

Tali grimaced. Hitor probably thought that asking Ryun was smart, that hearing his words might sway the others. He didn't understand Ryun, he was just as likely to say that the monsters and taken in the core didn't matter.

Ryun looked around the room, then spoke. "It is a simple question for me. If something is a threat to what is mine, then I will act to end it. If it isn't, then I don't care. The Dome Leader was... Perhaps it is because I am a new Ranker, because my homeworld is so close in my mind, but the Framework doesn't do things that aren't meant to push us, that aren't meant to force us to struggle. I understood that the Dome Leader was a threat to what is mine, it was as simple as that. I have also seen what those monsters are capable of. I walked through the ruins of the Empire, even without the Dome Leader, the taken and the monsters are a threat, no matter where they are."

At least he didn't say that they weren't a threat. He was right, of course, Tali agreed with both Ryun and Hitor. She wouldn't have before her imprisonment. But she had gained a different perspective since. The others

were the ones that had to be convinced. She understood that Sects were by their very nature isolationist. They looked after themselves first.

“He is right,” Hitor said. “I’ve received news that the taken and the monsters have stopped expanding, they are fortifying their positions. There have been no people turned into taken since the Dome Leader died, but they have been taking... slaves. Collaring the captured populations and forcing them to work for them. The monsters seem to be obeying the taken, and the greater General Monster, and worse... I’ve received reports indicating that some people are serving them willingly. The taken and the monsters are a blight in the heart of the core.”

“And what do you want us to do about it?” Velorn asked.

Hitor narrowed his eyes. “If the others won’t deal with it, then we should. I am not going to sit silently as an enemy grows strong enough to eventually take us.”

He looked around the room, meeting everyone's eyes. Then, finally, he looked back at Velorn.

“I want us to go to war.”