

## Nayra

Nayra sat across from Anrosh at the table in the meeting room. Embesh sat at the head, looking uncomfortable, and Ryun stood in the corner, looking through the window. Poor Embesh had tried to get Ryun to take his spot at the head of the table, with no success. Nayra knew that it didn't matter much to Ryun, but Embesh clearly felt like it wasn't appropriate.

Seeing him back made Nayra feel a lot of different things. She remembered her foolish feelings when she just met him. She liked to think that she had grown a lot in the last year.

"Send a message back, we will attend," Ryun said.

"Why?" Anrosh asked, looking at the back of his head.

"What do you mean?" Ryun asked as he turned around and met her eyes.

"Why would we want to go? What would we gain? We don't have many people capable of participating, and we will be spending Sect's resources, both on the trip and to pay the fees. I am sure that we will have many opportunities there, we might make connections with other sects. But... In reality, our sect doesn't need that now, we don't have much that we can offer there, aside from the ore from our dungeon. And that is not enough to warrant us attending."

Nayra was surprised, she had thought that Anrosh wanted to go. Then she realized that Anrosh just wanted to hear Ryun's reasons for wanting to go.

"I was... invited," Ryun said.

"Invited?" Anrosh frowned. "By who?"

"A stranger I met a year ago. He was... strong. I want to go and find him again. To talk with him," he hesitated, his face turning into a grimace. He looked turned his palms up, and looked at them, closing his fists and opening them slowly. "I am lost in a way. Without a purpose. I have tried to find it, to discover what it is that I want to do, what I want to be. He... he is someone who is old and powerful. If he had survived for this long, he must have a purpose. Perhaps he can enlighten me."

Nayra blinked at that. It was more of a reason that she had thought Ryun would have. “Why not ask Tali? I am sure that she is old as well. Immortal at least, since even crippled she doesn’t age.”

Ryun shook his head. “I asked her already. She doesn’t want to tell me anything. Doesn’t want to “taint” me, as she says. She believes that it is something that everyone needs to find out on their own.”

Nayra tried to think about what her purpose was, what she wanted to be. She didn’t have an answer, aside from advancing. And helping the sect, helping Ryun and Anrosh. Her thoughts paused as she realized that she did have a few things that she wanted to do.

“As long as you are sure,” Anrosh told him. “ We might benefit from it, if we prepare enough.”

“I am sure,” Ryun answered. “How does the Tournament work?”

“The Tournament is separated in several events. Each holds its own cost to attend, as a spectator at least,” Anrosh answered. “I do agree that we should go, it will be a great opportunity for us to trade and make meaningful connections. But we can accomplish that by only attending one event.”

“Without participating in the fights?” Ryun asked.

She watched the two of them, how they spoke to one another. It was as if Ryun hadn’t spent a year away. They just settled in like they had spoken to each other every day for the past year. Nayra felt a pang of jealousy, but she dismissed it. Anrosh had told her that she did care for Ryun, that they were as close as family in some ways.

“Well,” Anrosh cleared her throat. “The Tournament is divided into several events, as I’ve said. There are three major divisions: the four to five tiers of power division, the six to eight tiers of power division, and the nine tiers of power division. They call these three divisions the Low, Mid, and High division. The rewards and types of competition differ between the three divisions.”

Ryun nodded with interest.

“I don’t know what exactly they are, since they change from Tournament to Tournament, and all that I know comes from stories I heard in the past. But I am certain that the reward for reaching the top eight of the High Division is a choice of an awakened object.”

Ryun's eyebrow rose. "Well, that is very interesting. I wonder what my chances are to get that far," he mused to himself.

It took Nayra a few moments to realize what his words meant. "You reached the ninth tier?"

Everyone at the table looked at Ryun with wide eyes.

He just smiled in response.

Anrosh mumbled something to herself, and then spoke. "There is a requirement for that division, I believe that it is for the participants to have at least six tiers of power in one focus."

"Then I will have no issues," Ryun grinned.

This time it was Embesh who voiced what all of them were feeling. "You've reached the Immortal Realm Honored Sect Head?"

His respectful words made Nayra realize just what kind of an achievement that was. He was in the same realm as some High Rankers, he was immortal, would never age. Immortals were valuable, rare, at least on the scale of every person in the world. To be one meant prestige, it usually meant wealth, power. And she was in the same room as him, was on the first name basis with him. It was... strange.

"Ryun," Anrosh started. "Most of the people that will be competing in that category will be older than you. Probably more powerful as well."

"I know," Ryun's eyes flashed with anticipation. "I can't wait."

"The High Division is the most watched event in the world. It will bring a lot of attention on you," Anrosh told him. "It is watched by millions of people. You sure that you want that?"

"The arena can't be that large?" Ryun tilted his head.

"It is larger than you think. It can and will house tens of millions, it is... the stands will be turned into a city that surrounds the stage that will span a field so large that standing on one end, a person could barely see the other side. The stands are where most of the dealings will be done, in between the matches. But even the outside of the arena will become a city that fills the territory as other factions set up temporary buildings and establish their presence. There will be... everything. The Tournament will last for a year, maybe more."

"That long?" Ryun asked.

“The qualifications for the Divisions alone, last between a month and three, depending on the amount of people that enter. There will be teams and solo participants for the Low and Mid Divisions, there will be different types of competitions, fights certainly, which are the main events in the arena, but also formation making, alchemy brewing battles, puzzle solving, tests of endurance. There will be special events as well. This will last for the first three months, then, the main event starts—the High Division combat. These are all one on one matches. The people in this category are the future High Rankers, or those close enough to that power. Depending on the number of the participants, there will be one or more free for all battles that will narrow down the participants to thirty two. Then, the matches will begin, five rounds, the matches held over a week with a week rest in between them.”

“Interesting, that means that one might be forced to reveal more of their power in order to qualify, or they might try to hide and just survive until the number is low enough and they qualify anyway,” Ryun said.

“Yes, it is not going to be easy either way,” Anrosh told him. “Do you think that you are better than the hundreds of others in the core?”

“I guess that we’ll see,” Ryun said.

Anrosh sighed. “If we are going to attend, then we need to prepare. And we don’t have a lot of time. We need to decide how many people are we going to take, we are allowed only ten in the arena itself, but we can bring as many as we want. They will just need to camp outside it.”

“We can send a caravan with Heartstone from the dungeon,” Embesh said. “And we still have some of the monster hides and materials from the swarm. We agreed to keep the bulk in our vaults and only sell as we needed. Selling at the tournament might net us more value than through the auction, if we find the right buyers.”

“Yes, a caravan might be a good investment. Get on that,” she told him. “If we want to reach the Tournament in time we need to leave before the next month ends.”

“How far away is it?” Ryun asked.

“A long way, but we’ll use a teleporter to get there. There is one about a month away at the caravan speed,” Anrosh answered.

Nayra scratched at her palms. She had kept quiet, but she... she didn't know if she should say anything. For all she knew, what the Empire planned would fail. Or if it did succeed... She needed to warn them, but she didn't know how to get the words out. It would mean breaking away completely with her past, her family. More than that, it would mean... it would mean betraying them completely.

She knew that Ryun wasn't aligned with anyone, but... if she told him, all it would take was for him to speak to the wrong person and everything that her people had worked for might collapse.

"Good," Ryun said, and she forced herself to focus on him. "But you said that we can only bring ten people in the arena?"

"Yes," Anrosh answered. "It is a small area, so we might want to go with less. It isn't like we have many people that could even go."

"How do we decide who will go?" Ryun asked.

"Well, if we set up there, then we will probably be dealing with all the factions that have their own plots. So Sect Leaders, and people who were strong enough to make an impression," Anrosh said.

"You mean you," Ryun smiled.

"It's not like we have anyone else," Anrosh shrugged.

"You would want to come?" Ryun asked.

"It is an opportunity that I never thought I would have," Anrosh whispered.

"What about Kri?" Ryun tilted his head.

"She... it would benefit her, but she is too young. She should stay, focus on her training with Tail," Anrosh answered.

"Tali... I promised her that I would find a way to fix what happened to her. Perhaps we should bring her along?" Ryun asked.

Anrosh shook her head immediately. "This will be the first time that our sects will interact with other people, the first impression. We cannot afford to appear weak. And Tali's state will be seen as a weakness."

Ryun grimaced but nodded. "Well, I can still search for something to help her." He turned his head to look in Nayra's direction. "What about you?"

"I..." Nayra hesitated, unsure of what she could say. On one side, she knew that she couldn't keep her past from them for much longer. Ryun had

agreed that he didn't need to know, under the condition that she gave her loyalty completely to the sect. And she had done so, but now, her past interfered with the safety of the sect. She needed to tell them. "I'd like to go," she said instead of the truth.

Ryun tilted his head, perhaps wondering why she had hesitated. But then he nodded. "That is three, Ereclaw will probably be the fourth. Is that enough?"

"As a Sect Head, you should have some attendants, guards at least," Anrosh said.

Ryun grimaced. "Well, find them then, no more than two. We are going to have limited space. As for the caravan, how many were you thinking?"

Anrosh glanced at Embesh who cleared his throat. "I would suggest no more than fifty warriors, enough to protect the caravan and not leave the sect weakened, and no more than twice that in support personnel."

"I agree," Anrosh said.

"Good, then start the preparations," Ryun clapped his hands.

Hearing the dismissal, everyone stood and moved toward the exit. Nayra saw Anrosh pause and turn back. "I'm glad that you're back," she told him.

"As am I," Ryun answered.

"Make sure to go and find Kri, she missed you," Anrosh said and then turned around, walking out with Nayra.

"Oh," Ryun called out, making them turn around. "I remember the Black Viper Sect using some strong bindings to tie me up when I was their prisoner. Do we have something strong like that? Something that could hold someone like me?"

Nayra and Anrosh exchanged a look. "Well, no, not something that could hold you if you wanted to break out."

"Without my boosts?" Ryun asked.

"Maybe, the Last Ember sect had some pretty strong chains," Anrosh said.

"Good enough, I guess. Where can I find them? I'd like to borrow some."

"They are in the armory I guess," Anrosh answered.

“Thanks,” Ryun said, his face clearly telling them that he wasn’t going to elaborate.

Anrosh just shook her head, the look on her face told Nayra that it wasn’t nearly the strangest thing that he had asked from her. They left the room together.

As they walked, the only thing that Nayra was thinking was how she was going to tell them everything.

\* \* \*

## **Ryun**

Ryun watched the others leave the meeting room, his eyes looking at their backs, while he focused on his peripheral vision. A bundle of Essence was moving along with them. He had noticed it immediately after he had arrived in Consequence. A person shaped area filled with Essence that he was unfamiliar with, standing next to Nayra. He hadn’t looked at it directly, and he couldn’t sense it with his **|Perfect Resonance Sense|**. It followed after Nayra as she left the room, and Ryun frowned.

At first he had thought that it was some aspect of her power. A new perk perhaps, but the more time he spent near it the more he became convinced that that wasn’t the case. The bundle also had a faint tether, stretching through the walls and leading... somewhere. As Nayra and Anrosh got far enough away, Ryun walked out of the room. He left the building and headed to the armor, ignoring the people bowing to him with wide and terror filled eyes.

A part of his mind knew that these were former Last Ember people, that they had seen him when he attacked their city, that they were afraid of him.

Inside the armory he was met with warriors, some which tried to bar his path until they realized who he was. Not all had seen him, probably, but he was somewhat memorable. His eyes were two pools of void, and the cracks in his face that covered his eyes and misted with Void Qi were hard to miss. He asked them for the strongest chains they had and put them into his storage. Then, he walked out and headed back toward the palace. As he

walked into the courtyard, he saw the tether leaving the building, going through the air and out of the city.

He jumped and followed it, soaring through the sky with his cubes. He moved as fast as he could, using his sense to monitor his surrounding. A few hours later, he finally found something interesting. He stopped in the air, high above the ground, looking at the tether as it disappeared through the side of a mountain. But the reason why he had stopped was that he could see unnatural Essence in the air. It was a thin layer of it, shaped into a globe.

He sat on his cube and focused on his **|Perfect Resonance Sense|**. As he scanned the mountain and its surrounding he kept his eyes on the Essence that he was pretty sure wasn't really Essence. It didn't quite look like Qi, but it was... not natural at least.

Then, he found a cave just a bit below him at the base of the mountain, one that was occupied by three people. One, a woman, was lying on a small bed, to his sense apparently asleep. The other two, both men, sat on chairs with a table between them, playing some kind of a game. Based on her shape, the woman was a human, the other two were demasi.

He focused further and sensed the words coming out of their mouths.

One of them was apparently complaining. *“—Can't handle this anymore. We've been here for months! We were supposed to be preparing for the war, not—”*

*“—Please stop,”* the other interrupted. *“I can't listen to you whine again.”*

*“Whine?”* The man leaned back. *“You can't think that this is a good use of our time.”*

*“We are Knights, we go where we are ordered.”*

*“That is bullshit, we are here because the Ornn Family wants to keep an eye on the traitor. We should just kill her and be done with it.”*

*“Don't,”* the other one warned.

The first one, raised his hands in frustration. *“What? She can't hear me,”* he gestured at the bed. *“And you know that I am right. The only reason that traitor is still alive is because of who she is.”*

*“We were not sent here to assassinate anyone, we were sent to watch and evaluate what kind of a threat she is to our plans.”*



*“And kill her if she talks, I know the mission Faris. It doesn’t change the fact that the Ornn Family bullied the Order to get their way. They sent family, and we have no idea what she—”* he gestured in the sleeping woman’s direction. *“—sees or hears. For all we know she is protecting her sister.”*

*“We are here to protect her while she watches, not to make decisions,”* the other one said.

Ryun frowned, if he understood what he had overheard, then there were some very interesting things happening. He could stay here and listen in some more, but for once he did want some answers.

He stood up on his cube and jumped forward, creating steps and heading straight for the mountain. His sense told him where the entrance to their cave was, and he headed straight for it.

He reached the strange globe and entered it. As soon as he passed through one of the people inside stood up fast, toppling his chair.

*“Someone passed through my perimeter,”* the whiner said, his hand going to the bow and arrow leaned next to him on the table. *“Coming in fast!”* The other reacted as well, but it was too late.

**{Null Mantle}** spread through him, and he boosted his strength and dexterity in an instant. He landed on solid ground at the entrance of the cave, and jumped in. **[Inevitable Step]** brought him deeper in, between the two people. He saw the flashes inside their bodies as they tried to activate their perks and abilities.

**[Bringer of Sorrow]** billowed out of him, targeting the two of them. Immediately they heaved, sobs shaking their bodies. They fell to their knees, tears flowing from their eyes, their weapons tumbling from their hands. Ryun kicked the whiner in the head, sending him flying into the wall. He lost consciousness and tumbled to the floor.

He turned on the other one, looking down at him as he struggled to do anything but was unable from the sudden emotional attack. Ryun reached down, grabbed him by the throat and pulled him up. He dangled him in the air and squeezed. He tried to fight, kicking and punching, surprising Ryun with his strength. Ryun was forced to spend his Qi to nullify the physical

force of his punches. Ryun would put the man at a high tier of power. Seven, or perhaps even eight.

Finally, his struggle slowed and he lost consciousness. Ryun let him drop to the ground, then he turned toward the bed. He walked over and looked down. The woman lying on it seemed to be asleep, but to his eyes she glowed. Essence flashed around her, and the tether that he had been following was connected to her. He leaned down and looked at her face. He could still see the shape of it, if not anything that was in actual color. If he wasn't mistaken, she did somewhat look like Nayra, they shared the same cheeks and chin.

He tilted his head and wondered what he wanted to do. He glanced back, wondering if perhaps killing the two would be easier. Then he sighed. His sense had picked up one of Twilight Melody Sect patrols nearby. This was their territory after all. He tied the two warriors up, and then he left to find the patrol.

It didn't take him long to find them, and terrify them by dropping silently from the sky. He informed them that he had found and imprisoned two intruders and that they were to take them to Consequence.

He didn't stay long enough to see their reactions, but with his sense he felt them moving in the right direction.

He returned to the cave and grabbed the woman picking her up from the bed while making sure that there were no signs of her waking up. He left the cave and headed into the forest. He found a secluded spot and leaned the woman against a tree. Then he sat across from her on the ground, settling in to wait.