

NAYRA

Nayra stood on top of a large crate, overseeing the work being done around her. They had arrived at their destination only a few hours ago, and had immediately started the preparations to make a small compound. They were in the South District, along with all the other sects. Since their sect wasn't prominent and powerful, and they had only just arrived, they had found a spot at the edge of the district, next to the cliffs on top of which sat the great palaces of the top three sects.

Even here at the edge of the district, people were running around in great numbers. The geomancers that Anrosh had hired from the organizers had already raised a small wall that surrounded a one acre plot of land, and were in the process of creating support structures on the other side of the courtyard.

Nayra was overseeing the storing of mounts and their wagons, which were being placed beneath simple overhangs in one corner of the compound. They had brought tents and beddings with them, but after seeing that everyone had built their own compounds from stone, Anrosh decided that they couldn't do anything else.

Ryun had listened to her suggestion, and paid for it. Although they hadn't gone with any of the more complicated options. The geomancers raised simple two meter walls that were one meter thick, with simple overhangs that could house their wagons and mounts, and two large rectangular buildings that had only one story. Everything inside was empty of course, but the organizers did sell and rent furniture and other commodities. That, Ryun had refused to pay for, so they would furnish the buildings with what they had brought with them.

Nayra glanced at the entrance, a large and round hole in the wall. The geomancers also sold doors as an extra, but again, Ryun didn't think that it was necessary. Anrosh had tried to convince him that it was about appearances, but Ryun seemed set on his stance—he didn't particularly care for such things. People were walking in front of their compound, and a lot of them.

“So many of them,” Daria commented from Nayra’s left. Her eyes looking at the throngs of people walking down the streets. And they weren’t even in the middle of the district. “I don’t think that I’ve ever seen so many people in the same place at the same time.”

Nayra shared her sister’s sentiment. She had never seen so many people either. Not even the capital in the Empire had this many of them, and all packed so close. It was... intimidating to say the least. There was so much power here, that it nearly boggled the mind. She glanced behind her at the great cliff above them and the three palaces built there. Then she looked around, seeing the temporary headquarters of the largest factions in the Settled Territories. Temporary buildings, raised out of stone, that looked like the grandest of palaces in the Empire.

“I never really understood,” Nayra whispered.

Her sister glanced in her direction, but Nayra could see that she didn’t quite have the same awed look in her eyes. “You need to see it to know. This... event, I’ve heard that it was like this, but... You are right, I didn’t understand either.”

To think that this was what the Empire planned on fighting. She shook her head, turning her attention back to work. She saw Anrosh on the other side of the compound, talking with the geomancers as they finished with the buildings. Lesamitrius and Riodan guided the last of the wagons inside and had the warriors and workers store them. They won’t have enough room in the buildings for everyone, so the two of them were putting up tents near the area that they were turning into the stable.

“Daria,” a voice said from behind her, and Nayra turned to see Ryun standing there. His eyes were turned toward the work being done, but she knew that it didn’t mean that he wasn’t observing them. Nayra saw her sister wince as she realized that he was behind her and so close.

“Sect Head,” Daria mumbled. Nayra hadn’t learned exactly what Ryun had done to her, but it was clear that she was frightened.

“I want you to set up protections around the compound, a detection net,” Ryun said.

Daria blinked, but then inclined her head. Ryun hadn’t forced her to show him her screens, in truth the oath that he had forced her to take hadn’t

been that bad. But he had ask her to tell him what she could do, in more general terms. It wasn't really a forcing, Ryun had given her an option of being his prisoner for five years or serving him for one. One couldn't really force contracts, you needed to give people a way out, even if it was a bad way out. Such was the nature of the Dealmaker.

“Good,” Ryun said at Daria’s head bow, still not looking at her. “Nayra, gather Anrosh and the rest of our leaders, we shouldn’t waste time.”

With that he walked over toward the center of the compound and sat on the ground.

Nayra exchanged a look with her sister, but then sighed and went to do her Sect Head’s bidding.

A few minutes later, Nayra sat on the ground surrounded by walls made out of Void. In the center was a light gem, illuminating the small makeshift room. Next to her was Anrosh, with Lesamitrius and Riodan standing to the side. Next to Ryun sat Likos Ji Rev, their scout commander and third in command of the warriors for this expedition. Ereclaw stood behind Ryun, looming over everyone.

“Now that we are gathered, we can discuss how we are going to proceed,” Ryun said.

“Didn’t we already make a plan, Ryun?” Anrosh asked.

Nayra looked between the two of them, trying to see if there was any tension. Anrosh had told her all about their conversation without going into details, but the fact that she had suggested that he went out and... well, she wouldn’t have the courage to tell him something like that. The fact that he had listened to her was shocking to say the least.

“We did plan a bit,” Ryun nodded. “But the main events don’t start for a while. The first division to fight will be the Low Division, we have a few months until the other divisions start. We need to know exactly what we are going to do until then.”

“Pardon, Sect Head,” Riodan chimed in. “The qualifiers for the higher divisions will take place before the end of the Low Division.”

Ryun tilted his head. “I still don’t know what these qualifiers will even look like.”

Riodan glanced at Lesamitrius, and then continued. “Well, it changes from tournament to tournament, depending on how many people there are. Usually there is one free for all fight where the top one hundred are picked. If there are a lot of registered fighters, they might split it into several such fights.”

“Hmm...” Ryun nodded. “That does make sense. Then, we need to start selling our materials as soon as possible. I want to have enough that we can buy some equipment. We also haven’t decided if some of you will enter or not.”

Nayra grimaced, she was torn on that topic. On one hand, she did want to test herself against people on her level, on the other...

“I will not,” Anrosh said firmly.

Nayra glanced at her and saw Anrosh’s eyes locked with Ryun’s. “I know that I am not powerful enough, and I will not embarrass our Sect’s name. In any case someone needs to manage this compound and make sure that we are selling everything.”

Ryun kept her gaze for a few moments, and then nodded. His eyes moved to Nayra and he raised an eyebrow. “Did you make a decision?”

“I... I’ll enter,” Nayra said. She met the requirements for the Mid Division, and while she did know that she probably won’t reach far, she did want to try. Her power set wasn’t quite geared toward tournaments, but she could put up a fight. Thankfully, the Mid Division had both the team and solo categories.

Lesamitrius cleared his throat. “Sect Head,” he started. “I would like permission to enter the Mid Division as well.”

Ryun turned his eyes at the ravzor and he tilted his head at him, but didn’t speak.

“I...” Lesamitrius continued, almost withering under Ryun’s gaze. “I know that my showing to the Sect wasn’t the best. But I am eager to prove myself. I had been training in my previous sect to join the team category, but since we don’t have a full team, I wish to join the solo category. I am confident that I will not embarrass the sect.”

“Very well. You may join. But,” Ryun’s face turned up into a smile that chilled her to the bones, he looked at Lesamitrius and then at Nayra. “This means that we will be... training more. I need some target practice.”

Nayra shivered, she had seen his beating of Lesamitrius, and Anrosh had told her of her own duel with Ryun.

“With that taken care of, we should go and register, then I want to visit the auction house,” Ryun said.

Nayra knew that he planned on selling and buying Essence. She wanted to do that as well. She had quite a bit of cycled Essence, and she had reached Peak Lord on the trip. Selling her Essence wouldn’t give her much since it wasn’t of any rare aspect, but Ryun had Void Essence that he wanted to trade for the same type, although finding such Essence would be hard. Void was almost always bought up immediately since some crafters used it in creating spatial storages. Still, he would be able to get a premium on his cycled Essence.

Nayra wondered if she would be able to find and buy some better gear.

“Alright,” Anrosh said. “And I’ll go and register our Sect as being present, and let them know where our compound is.”

“Ereclaw,” Ryun turned. “Can you keep her company?”

The wolf looked down at Ryun and then grunted. Nayra didn’t know what that meant, but Ryun apparently did. With that, the walls around them started to collapse.

Nayra walked into the registration hall, Lesamitrius following behind her. The hall was separated into three sections, one for each division and the two of them made their way to the Mid Division one, as Ryun headed to the High Division hall. The looming stone walls were decorated by the banners of the Association of Guilds, and the inner walls were lined with wood planks, giving the room a cozy look. The group that hosted the tournament was a large gathering of factions from all across the Settled Territories, and their members changed from tournament to tournament, as far as she understood.

Riodan and Lesamitrius had been invaluable in instructing them in the basics.

There were a lot of people inside, and lines were long, but they did move fast. Quickly it was their turn. Nayra stepped up first and looked at the person sitting behind a hole in the wall. It was a ravzor with sleek fur and wearing a tight shirt, she glanced at Nayra and smiled, showing off fangs.

“Are you here to register?”

“Yes, I am here to register for the tournament.”

“What category?”

“Solo category,” Nayra answered.

The woman nodded her head and filled in the information. Then she pushed a small metal plate with formations on it toward her. “Put your hand on this please.”

“What is it?” Nayra asked.

“It will detect how many tiers of power you have. You needn’t worry, we won’t read your screens.”

Nayra put her hand on it and the formations activated, light danced above her hand and a number 8 wrote itself out of it. Nayra pulled her hand back and pushed the metal plate back.

The woman nodded then pulled up a piece of paper and placed it in front of her. “Name and affiliation?”

“Nayra Ornn, Sect Leader of the Twilight Melody Sect,” Nayra said.

“Alright, you are registered, you will be notified about when your first match is.”

The entire process was done in barely a minute. Nayra stepped aside and then Lesamitrius took her place, doing the same thing.

As they walked out of the building, she wondered if Ryun was finished yet.

RYUN

Ryun walked into the registration hall. People walked around him, heading toward the windows in the wall on the other side of the hall. There were some lines, but not as many people as he had seen in other halls. Still, there were dozens of people waiting.

Most seemed to know each other, and were speaking softly with one another. The great majority of them also seemed to be from factions, he saw only a few people that looked like they were from the sects. He saw one person with what looked like a monstrous bird on his shoulder, which made him think about Ereclaw. It was a shame that he couldn't join Ryun, contracted partners were allowed, but only those who had a bond contract. According to what Lesamitrius found out, blood contract partners were not eligible. Since they were more independent and were in some cases considered more civilized and smarter. As far as the rules went, it would be like contestants were bringing two people against one. Ryun did agree that Ereclaw was smarter than most monsters, and that he was like another person fighting on his side. He didn't know if he would've let such partners fight. But he couldn't change the rules so he pushed that out of his head.

As Ryun waited for his turn, he focused his sense on the different conversations, training. He felt like he was close to evolving the skill to tier 7, he just needed one small push.

The conversations were mostly uninteresting. People talking about their chances, about who else had joined, which didn't mean anything to Ryun since he didn't know any of the names that they spoke about. A couple of minutes later, it was his turn.

He stepped up to the window, and a drake man looked him over.

"Hello, are you here to register?" The drake asked.

"I am," Ryun said.

"In order to register, you need to fulfill some conditions, I assume that you are aware of that?"

"I am, no ideal title?" Ryun asked.

The drake nodded. "I will need to check your titles, I will make a contract that forbids me from speaking about your titles to anyone else for as long as I live. If you will please give me your hand?"

Ryun placed his hand on top of the drake's and a contract window popped up in his vision. He read it over, and then accepted.

“Good, now you can make your windows visible to me mentally.”

Ryun did as the man asked, he knew that he didn't need to make the screens visible in the real world, he could just show them to the man mentally. As he had done when he didn't have eyes.

The man closed his eyes as he read through, and then Ryun felt him stiffen. He opened his eyes and gaped at him. Ryun had expected some kind of a reaction.

“This...” The drake whispered, his voice almost shaking. “You can't have these titles.”

Ryun tilted his head, but didn't speak.

“Are you using a power to change your titles?”

“No,” Ryun said. He almost debated keeping silent, but then he decided to put the man out of his misery. He made another of his windows visible, showing him his name and Iteration. “I am from the Seventh Iteration.”

“Seventh Iteration Earth?!” The man yelled out in surprise and shock.

His words brought a hush on the room. Immediately Ryun could hear whispers from all around him.

Seventh Iteration?

Didn't they all die?

I heard that Skreen slaughtered them when they arrived.

It's impossible, a Seventh Iteration Ranker can't have nine tiers.

And a dozen other variations on the same thing. Ryun pulled his hand back and looked the man in the eyes.

“But, they say that no humans arrived this time,” the drake said dumbfounded.

“Obviously, they are wrong,” he said slowly. “What more is required of me to register?”

The drake blinked, and then seemed to catch himself. Everyone else around them was staring at him and whispering.

The drake swallowed audibly and then pushed a small metal plate his way. “This will confirm that you have nine tiers of power.”

Ryun placed his hand on the plate, and the number nine appeared above his hand.

“Uh... good, now;” the man cleared his throat. “Name and affiliation?”

“Ryun Nacht, Sect Head of the Twilight Melody Sect.”

The drake wrote his information down and then, looked back up at Ryun.

“You are, uh, registered. We will contact you once we know when exactly the qualifiers will take place.”

Ryun inclined his head and then turned around, walking away. His sense followed the people watching him go, and he listened in on their whispers. The news that there was a human from the Seventh Iteration seemed to intrigue them more than the fact that he had nine tiers of power.

That suited Ryun just fine. He walked outside and headed toward the other hall to find Nayra and Lesamitrius. Now, came the fun part, shopping.