

Who Are You?

Once docked, they were greeted by people wearing what Ryun presumed to be Dragon Heart Sect uniforms. The docks were filled with people, as was the city, so much of them that he was having trouble focusing and had to pull his attention to the smallest sphere he could. There were millions of people in the city, too many conversations, too much movement, too much... noise.

Lesamitrius took the lead, acting as their voice. The moment he introduced them as the Twilight Melody Sect though, the welcome committee went from bored people doing the same thing for the hundredth time a day, to attentive and far more respectful. Ryun and Tali exchanged looks, she had told him to expect a lengthy process. Instead, they had been rushed out of the crowded docks, then transported through the city to one of the tall peaks. From Tali he knew that those were the headquarters of the Sect's three largest families. Which was... confusing. What he overheard on the docks and on the way, told him that most of the sects were given places in the city itself. Ryun didn't think that Twilight Melody Sect had enough renown to be treated as they were.

Something was up, that much was obvious. Neither he nor the others said anything, of course. So, in less than half an hour, they were led across the city and escorted to the rooms given to them. The walls of the structure they entered were made out of crystal, seamlessly connected as if it was made out of a single piece. It was interesting, and he imagined how such a thing could be achieved. Carving the inside of a truly massive piece of crystal, or perhaps growing it somehow.

Their rooms were lavishly decorated, with art on the walls, thick and soft carpets, furniture that was carved out of single pieces of wood of the highest tiered Essence. There were refreshments on the tables, servants bringing in food as their escorts gave them a short tour. Their quarters were the size of his entire palace in Consequence. Two floors, two kitchens, two toilets and one large bathroom connected to a room that had a hot-spring pool. Six rooms, each larger than the last, with massive beds

covered in pillows and covers made from the finest silks. There was so much wealth and treasure in these rooms alone that it was all probably worth more than most Frontier Sects.

Their escorts, or rather minders—Ryun assumed—apologized for no higher up meeting with them, which Ryun understood and was far less bothered by than they seemed to be. Organizing a gathering of this scale probably required a lot of people. Still, there was something off about everything, the others sensed it too, though no one said anything.

They were allowed time to bathe and relax after their journey and then food was served to them by the Dragon Heart servants. Ryun had to admit that the food was some of the best that he had ever eaten. Only after the meal were they left alone. The four of them gathered in the living room, taking seats on the couches and armchairs.

“So,” Ryun started. “Any idea why we had such a... reception?”

Everyone was frowning, but Tali was the one that answered first. “Even before, at the height of my Sect’s power, I wouldn’t have been received like this.”

Ryun raised an eyebrow, then glanced at Erdania.

“Don’t look at me, I was a Sect Head, I was treated with respect, but this... This is a reception worthy of only the most powerful Sect Heads.”

“Not us,” Ryun added.

“Well,” Tali started. “You did help kill the Dome Leader, and if Hitor hadn’t changed much, he would respect that more than most. So, I guess that could be it. I doubt it though, this reeks of Sect politics.”

“What do we do?” Ryun asked.

Tali shrugged. “Nothing, we enjoy it and see what comes out of it. Not like we can really do anything, we are treated with respect and like honored guests. It wouldn’t be courteous of us to complain or demand answers.”

Ryun grunted. He really hated sect stuff. He wished he brought Anrosh, then he could’ve just pushed her in front and let her deal with it all.

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Ryun and Tali were escorted through the building. A Sect Leader arrived, a strong drake with metal scales, and asked if they would meet with the Sect Head of Dragon Heart Sect. Just the two of them, or rather at first it was just Tali, but neither of them agreed to that. But it didn't seem like they wanted to push it. And after a day spent in the large quarters all of them were eager to get some answers.

They were led to one of the rooms that Ryun couldn't sense anything from, just like how the entire peak seemed to keep anything from the outside from getting in, even restricting his sense to just the crystal walls. Once they entered, they were met with a single person inside. A winged drake, with the scales similar to the Sect Leader that escorted them, but so much different. The scales and the body were made out of a strange Essence that he hadn't seen before, somehow related to the Essences of the Sect Leader, but far greater. There was a sense of power coming from the man, of greatness. It was not just something that he could see in the man's Essence, but... a sensation that filled the air around him, that made him fill the room with his presence.

Ryun couldn't feel the man's Qi, but somehow he was sure that the drake was in the Eternal Realm.

Tali and Ryun greeted him. He bowed his head and pressed his fists together as he was taught, showing just a bit more deference to the man. The man returned the bow, slightly shallower. And then he looked at Tali, and smiled.

“Old friend,” he said and stepped forward.

Tali's perpetual frown grew softer and she met him halfway in an embrace.

“I am so glad that you are alive,” Sect Head of the Dragon Heart Sect, Hitor Fah Storrah said.

“As am I,” she said.

“You must tell me everything, when we have the time, of course.”

Tali stepped back and looked at Ryun. “This is Ryun Nacht, Sect Head of the Twilight Melody Sect, a sect that I am part of.”

Hitor tilted his head. "I've only heard rumors, I barely allowed myself to believe it was really you," he inclined his head to Ryun again. "Welcome to my city, Sect Head. I am familiar with your name and accomplishments. You are an honored guest, and always will be for as long as the Dragon Heart Sect remains."

Ryun was surprised. "I only did what was needed to protect my own," he said.

"Perhaps, it still doesn't change that you a Seventh Iteration Ranker acted when the rest of the world turned their eyes away from the threat," Hitor said, then stopped himself. Then glanced at Tali. "There will be enough time to talk about that. This... I was hoping to speak with Tali alone, but I understand if you wish to be safe. I can only imagine what happened to force you to disappear for three hundred years."

"You can say anything you want in front of Ryun," Tali said.

Hitor nodded slowly, then spoke. "There is more than a single thing. For one, I hope that you will attend the gatherings, both the public and the Council one."

"It was my intention, it is time that I step back into the light," Tali added.

"Good," the drake said. "The other thing is more... delicate. I hope that you won't begrudge me my games," he gave her a weak smile. "But sometimes they are necessary to push people in the right direction."

Tali's eyes narrowed, but before she could speak there was a knock at the door.

"Enter!" Hitor yelled.

The doors opened, letting Ryun sense beyond them. Three people walked in, a scaleless drake led them, with a tall human and a female drake that was undead trailing behind. Ryun recognized the human, though he couldn't quite recall from where.

Tali went rigid, her back turned toward the new arrivals and Ryun narrowed his eyes. He reached for his Qi, wary and stepped in front of her. He turned and stared at the new arrivals.

The two behind the scaleless drake stopped, seeming just as surprised as Tali was. Then, after what felt like an hour, but was probably no more than a second, Tali turned around.

The human's face went through a myriad of emotions, and then finally settled on one—anger. His eyes glared over Ryun's shoulder, staring at Tali. His expression twisted, darkened, and then he opened his mouth.

“WHO ARE YOU?”

The words boomed like thunder. A wave of willpower, so vast and powerful that Ryun felt small. The force of it moved through the world, it was not directed at him. The question was for someone behind him, for Tali. The force of it blasted by him, the edge of it hit him regardless. Ryun was too slow to marshal his own willpower, to defend, his mental skill barely held for a moment as the edge of the words wormed its way in.

WHO ARE YOU?

The words forced him to answer. His mouth opened not of his own volition and—

Nothing came out.

The words had a grasp on him, on his very soul, they twisted and demanded an answer. He heard voices around him, but he couldn't quite understand them. Everything went dark, his sight, his skill, his hearing muted and his world narrowed down. He fell to one knee.

Ryun knew who he was, and he tried to offer it.

I am Ryun Nacht, Sect Head of the Twilight Melody Sect.

It was not what the words demanded. It was... a simple question, so simple, and yet... so deep. The willpower guided the question's intent, and they demanded something more. Something deeper that Ryun didn't understand.

I am the Witness of Journey's End!

He cried out, now feeling... panic? He couldn't ever remember feeling quite like this. He was at the mercy of this power that he didn't understand. He reached for everything that he had, his Qi thrummed through him, Oblivion trying to remove the influence of everything that was holding him. He couldn't find it, willpower wasn't an Essence, it was... he didn't know what it was. How could he destroy that which he didn't know?

Then he pulled deeper as the words demanded of him. To the part of him that had become the core of who he was, and ancient piece that he had absorbed that was now at the center of who he was.

He felt the **Presence of the Eternal Hunter** unfurl itself around him.

I am the Wolf of the End!

The words weakened, for a moment, the might of the Incarnation of the Aspect of True Death was greater than paltry words. And yet... the words remained. Not because they were stronger, but because they were not searching for what Ryun gave them. It wanted something else, something that Ryun didn't know how to give.

He searched, deep inside. Looking for something that could encompass all that he was. Who are you? An answer that was more than a name, more than a title, more than nature.

He felt his soul tremble, pulsing in rhythm of his Qi moving through his body. The core of himself was shaking.

He opened his mouth, words coming without knowledge or understanding, from somewhere within that he hadn't quite yet grasped.

“I... AM... HE... THAT... STANDS... A—”

The effort nearly broke him, the last words were too large for him to pull out, to know. He was going to tear himself apart, he realized.

And then, as he nearly said another word something took it all away. And he slumped down to the floor, the effort robbing him of everything. He slipped into sleep, and knew no more.