

PRESENT – Anrosh  
Third

Anrosh grimaced at the sound of a fist hitting flesh. Lesamitrius went flying, again. He rolled across the ground, then once he halted he got back up to his feet. His scimitar had been thrown from his hands a while ago, and the man hadn't tried to retrieve it. It was almost enough for her to actually feel some respect for him. In fact, she had to admit that the way she looked at him was changing. Mostly because he was yet to surrender.

Many of the sect's warriors, including Odrek, the former Green Rain Sect emissary, were standing around the training yard, looking at the fight. Anrosh had to admit that Lesamitrius was strong, maybe stronger than her and Nayra. He used some type of Acid Qi, which would be incredibly difficult to handle by most. Unfortunately, Ryun was... well Ryun. His Void devoured any acid that came his way.

Lesamitrius was now fighting with claws glowing with green, almost liquid like Qi. Just one strike with them would be able to deal a lot of damage. But he never got near Ryun. The way that Ryun was fighting was so different than it used to be. Before, he would charge in, get in close and just overwhelm opponents with his physical stats. Now, he wasn't even moving from his spot in the center of the sparring ground. He stood with one hand behind his back moving only his other, every time Lesamitrius came at him, Ryun moved his hand, pointed the tips of his two fingers in Lesamitrius' direction and sent a growing rod barely the width of two fingers, and made out black Qi, flying at the Monarch.

The speed of growth was so fast that Lesamitrius couldn't exactly evade. But he had learned to take the blow and twist away, managing to stay on his feet. Lesamitrius jumped forward again, the way his Qi flared inside his body told everyone that he was using a technique. He had used it often enough that Anrosh now knew that it increased his stats for a short interval. Ryun pointed his fingers, and a rod with a blunted end speared through the air. Lesamitrius used his increased speed to jump to the side, the rod hit him in the shoulder, but he managed to twist away and only stumble as he charged. He recovered quickly, but Ryun had already moved his hand, a new rod

speared through and hit his foot mid step. Lesamitrius fell, but managed to catch himself with his hands. Then he pushed himself off the ground as another rod nearly hit his head.

He jumped to the side, close to the ground, his stance that of a predator, on all four. He rolled and scurried across the floor until he was behind Ryun, who hadn't moved at all.

The rods had all disappeared, he didn't leave them to linger for more than a moment after they hit or missed their target. Now, Lesamitrius surged forward, he lunged, both of his hands raised high and two larger images of claws appeared around them. He was using a skill, hoping to reach Ryun. It didn't really matter, even when he was turned around, Ryun could still see everything. A rod grew out of the back of his neck, and Anrosh had to admire his Qi control—being able to use technique from every part of your body was indicative of a great mastery.

The rod grew faster than any of them had before, the Monarch couldn't even react before it hit him in the chest and sent him flying. Everyone winced as he was hit and then as he crashed to the ground and didn't move. Odrek moved immediately, walking over to him and kneeling down. He pulled out a potion, but then hesitated as Ryun's shadow fell over him. He looked up and said something that Anrosh was too far away to catch among the whispers of everyone else.

Ryun nodded and the man bowed, then gave Lesamitrius the potion.

"I know that he is arrogant," Nayra whispered to her, she had arrived halfway through the fight. "But that was brutal."

Anrosh could only nod, she knew exactly what it felt like to be put through the grinder by Ryun. He had done it to her as well. The fact that the man hadn't surrendered, and kept coming would serve him well. Both with the Sect and with Ryun himself.

Then Ryun turned around and his eyes found Anrosh. He walked over to Anrosh and Nayra spoke.

"He is good," Ryun said. "But he really needs to lose that arrogance."

"He grew up as the son of a Sect Leader," Anrosh said, not even knowing why she was defending him. "He looks down on everyone who isn't like him."

“Well, we can change that,” Ryun shrugged. “He can come with us.”  
Anrosh blinked at him. “Really?”

“You said that we need to show what our sect can do. He is strong enough, and I assume that he knows more about other sects than we do?”

“Probably,” Anrosh agreed.

“Well then,” Ryun said as Lesamitrius started to wake up behind him. “You can go and let him know, I think that I’ll go and set the prisoners in the dungeon free.”

Nayra frowned. “What? You are letting them go?”

“No need to keep them,” Ryun said. “But I will send a message to your people. You are part of this faction, and no longer a part of theirs. I will not tolerate them spying or plotting to kill you.”

Nayra looked away, and took a deep breath. “Before you do that, we need to have a talk.”

Ryun looked at her for a long moment. “Are you sure? I don’t need to know, not if you can’t tell me.”

“You are right, I am a part of this faction and I need to tell you everything.”

Ryun nodded, he looked at Nayra and then at Anrosh, then he started walking away. The two of them followed him back into the palace.

He led them to his room, it used to belong to Emberhorn, and it hadn’t been changed since then. Not that Ryun cared much about what his room looked like, Anrosh didn’t think that he had spent even a single night in here. It was lavish, filled with art and carefully carved wooden furniture. Made out of some pretty expensive material. The wood it was carved from was probably stronger than iron, Anrosh had seen a few pieces of furniture in other parts of the palace that seemed to be made from the same wood.

Ryun gestured, and Anrosh took the couch with Nayra. Ryun looked around his room, then he placed his hand in the air. He crafted a wall of Qi, and then did it again until he closed a small area in his room in a box made out of Qi. A moment later he pulled out a glowing stone from his storage and

put in on the table in front of the couch—giving light to the Qi surrounded room. He sat in the chair across from them, and then gestured to Nayra.

“Your sister isn’t watching now. Nor do I think that anyone else can listen in,” he said. “You can speak freely.”

Nayra looked around at the walls, and then she met their eyes.

“I don’t even know how to start this,” Nayra said.

“Probably from the beginning,” Ryun added.

Nayra chuckled, then nodded. “Yes, the beginning. Well, I am about to tell you who I am, where I came from. I know that it doesn’t seem like a big deal now, but you will see why it is.”

Anrosh reached over and took her hand in hers, squeezing softly. Nayra smiled at her then continued.

“I need you to promise me that you won’t reveal to anyone about what I am about to tell you,” Nayra said.

Ryun spoke first. “I will keep your secret.”

“Of course,” Anrosh said after.

Nayra looked at them and then continued. “By telling you, I will betray everything that I was raised to believe in. But... the truth is that I feel like I belong here, more than I ever did back there. And I don’t want to be a part of their plan and I most certainly don’t want to keep their secrets. I don’t know what to do with what I know, granted, I know very little, but I... I am not someone who can make such big decisions.”

She shook her head. Anrosh could see how hard it was for her to say it, and she started to wonder what it could be. She had known that Nayra was holding some things back, but it had never mattered to her before.

Nayra took a deep breath and then seemed to resolve herself. “I was born in an Empire, one that exists beyond the settled territories. This Empire was created by people that had been exiled out of the core long ago—the Third Iteration Rankers and their families.”

Anrosh blinked, for a moment not really understanding. Then slowly she looked at Nayra, seeing her for what appeared like the first time. Anrosh had always heard rumors, whispers that the Third Iteration had survived, that they went beyond even the Frontier. But those were just legends, stories

told by people because they had nothing better to do. Now, she sat next to someone who was related to them. It was almost too much to believe.

“My parents are Rankers, they are in fact very prominent figures in the Empire,” Nayra continued, speaking quickly now. Almost as if she wanted to get it all out as fast as possible before she changed her mind. “I was sent to an organization inside the Empire, along with my sister, to train and to help with the efforts of the Empire. They... they had been planning their return for a long time. And the people in charge, they have a long memory. And a big grudge with the First and the Second Iteration.”

For a few moments there was only silence. Anrosh glanced at Ryun, saw that his expression barely changed. She wasn't even sure that he understood what all of this meant. “They are planning a war?” Anrosh asked.

Nayra nodded her head. “Their grudge is against the core, mainly. But getting to them will mean getting through everyone else. Even those who are innocents. Being here, in the Sect, I realized just how stupid what they are planning is. And I don't want to be a part of that.”

Then, Ryun spoke. “This war, will it impact the sect?”

Nayra shook her head. “They know that you are from the Seventh Iteration by now. Reyla reported it. You aren't their enemy, but if you interfere with their plans you will become.”

Ryun leaned back in his chair, and looked thoughtful. “You are right, I am not their enemy. Nor do I really want to get involved with this.”

Nayra grimaced. “I don't know much, I don't know the timeline, I don't know how or what they have planned. Reyla had always been trusted more than me, but I do know that they have something planned for the tournament.”

“Ah,” Ryun said. “But you don't know what?”

“Uh... No, not really,” Nayra answered.

Anrosh frowned. “The tournament will be attended by the most powerful beings in this world. I don't think that anyone would be foolish enough to try and attack them there. It... it would be suicide.”

“Perhaps they aren't planning an attack, then,” Ryun said. “Regardless, I think that we should still go.”

“Why?” Anrosh asked. “Wouldn't it be smarter to stay away?”

“I want to see what the core is like, to see how powerful those on top are. This is a chance to do that. I don’t really understand half of what Nayra had said. I remember that you told me once that there was a war between the Third Iteration and the others, but that doesn’t impact me or concern me really. If someone attacks me, I will attack back, that is all there is to it. Yet,” He turned to look at Nayra. “They did send people to spy on us, and they did plan on killing you. That I cannot overlook. I will send the two warriors back with a message for your people. But your sister, I will keep here, she was the instrument of your people, as such she owes us a debt. One that she will pay with service.”

Nayra blinked. “I don’t think that they will like that. And Ryun... you are strong, but they have people who are stronger, much stronger.”

“And yet they must keep hidden, do they not? They cannot act in any way that would reveal them. And I will most certainly not go down quietly. So if they want to make their displeasure known, let them come,” he shrugged.

Nayra opened her mouth to speak, but he continued before she could. “Don’t worry, I won’t reveal anything that you told us. I will deal with them as the secret faction that they had presented themselves as. The prisoners will report that I have not tried to get information out of them, and that their secret is safe. But they will understand that you are mine, that you belong to this sect and that any attempt to harm you will be retaliated against.”

“You can’t really retaliate against them,” Nayra said, although she did sound pleased. “Not unless you want to threaten them with knowledge that you have now.”

“And they can’t reveal who they really are,” Ryun said. “We balance out that way.”

“What about my sister? She is strong, the only reason she is staying here is because she thinks that she can get away at any moment.”

“She isn’t stronger than me,” Ryun said. “You may speak with her, make her understand that it would be in her best interest to stay and pay her debt.”

“I don’t know if she will agree to that,” Nayra said.

“How close are you with her,” Ryun asked evenly.

Anrosh felt her hearts skip a beat. The way that he said it almost seemed like he was asking about something mundane, but underneath, those who knew him could detect the edge.

Nayra swallowed audibly. "I, uh... I will convince her."

"Do so," Ryun said. "Maybe you could even send a message back to your people, your parents perhaps?"

Nayra blinked. "What kind of a message?"

"Tell them to stay away, that their secret is safe and that I am not a man to be pushed lightly. You can write a letter, or tell the two warriors to pass on your words."

"No, I think that I know a faster way," Nayra sighed, then looked away. "I'll... I have a perk that can let me talk with my sister. I'll talk with her."

Anrosh immediately had questions, but the expression on Nayra's face made her pause.

"Good, don't speak about this when I am not around," Ryun said and stood up. The walls around them dissipated into nothing and he looked down on them. "Go and prepare for the trip to the core."

With that Ryun left the room, leaving them alone.

Anrosh looked at Nayra, trying to come up with something to say.

"So," Anrosh said, stupidly. She couldn't think of anything better.

Nayra grimaced. "So," she agreed. There was a lot that they needed to talk about, but they couldn't speak openly. They never knew when someone could be watching or listening, without Ryun present at least.

"Well, we should continue planning, as he said."

Nayra looked up at her words, trying to see something in Anrosh's eyes. Then, she relaxed and turned her hand in Anrosh's.

Before Anrosh could speak again, the doors through which Ryun left opened and a warrior rushed in.

"Sect Leader Ornn! We need you!"

Nayra stood immediately. "What happened?" She asked.

The warrior looked pained but he spoke. "One of the warriors on the patrol fell. He is nearby."

Anrosh met Nayra's wide eyes and nodded. "Are you sure that you are ready? You didn't level up yet," Anrosh said quickly.

Nayra gave a hesitant nod. "I think that I can do it without leveling. And it will bring me more benefits that way."

Anrosh wanted to say so many more things, but time was of the essence. So she only nodded. "Go then," she said.

Nayra and the warrior rushed out of the room, leaving her alone.

Anrosh closed her eyes, wondering if she would see Nayra again. One of their warriors was dead, and ever since a few months ago, when Nayra had revealed her power to the warriors a new procedure was arranged. In case of a death, Nayra was to be alerted as soon as possible. And all warriors were that died were instructed to stay near their body, for a short period of time, if they weren't in danger. Because Nayra could escort them to the afterlife, and gain power in return.

Three people had died since then, but Nayra hadn't been able to reach them in time. When she crossed over into the Ethereal Realm she found no sign of their souls.

A part of her wished that she again found no one, but another hoped that she did. Both for the warrior that had died, and for Nayra's growth.

Anrosh looked around the empty room, and then walked out, heading down to start organizing the convoy for the trip to the core.