

## Talking

Ryun sat inside a tree, his feet dangling over the edge. Kilometers away, Anrosh approached the city of Consequence. Her trip had been successful, it seemed, at least that is what he gathered from her conversation with Lesamitrius. Good for her, he knew that he could trust her. Before they entered the city, she did remind them not to reveal anything about their advancement to anyone in the sect. So, they had seen her fight, enough that they knew she was now in the Evolved Realm. Her body's changes could easily be attributed to something else, of course, but he did wonder why she was keeping it hidden. He didn't particularly care though, it was more of a passing thought. She had to have her reasons, and information was valuable.

He didn't move from his spot as Anrosh made her way through the city, her first stop the training grounds where Nayra trained with Kri. Tali stood near them, and he overheard their short conversation. Tali was very much interested in how Anrosh's body had changed. It was obvious that she was suspicious about something, but she didn't press, instead she left Nayra and Anrosh alone. She flew out of the palace and headed out of the city.

Ryun kept his attention on Nayra and Anrosh. He listened in on the reunion, he was pretty sure that she would tell Nayra about her advancement this evening. He had only asked her to keep his return a secret until she returned. He had had a few weeks to get a feel for the sect, he had visited all of their territories, and made sure to learn more about their guests. And he had learned a lot. Now that Anrosh was back, they were going to need to come up with ways to deal with all of them.

He listened for a few more minutes until a person walked toward him, coming near his tree. He didn't acknowledge her presence, he had known that she was on her way since she headed in his direction. Her wings were folded on her back, and her hands crossed on her chest as she glared up into the tree where he sat.

"How long have you been back," Tali asked.

Ryun turned his eyes in her direction, then tossed the orb in his hand gently as he tilted his head and thought about it. "A few weeks, I think."

He caught the source of Stillness Essence, and then put it into his storage. He had learned how to draw in Essence without having to be focused on only that.

"You think?" Tali asked as he slid from the branch and floated to the ground.

He turned and met her eyes. "I didn't keep track."

She narrowed her eyes at him, for a moment looking confused, she opened her mouth as if she was going to say something, but then seemingly thought better of it. She looked him up and down, studying his appearance.

Ryun, pulled back the hood of his black cloak and his features shimmered, his body shrunk to its usual height.

"That is a powerful item, I couldn't even tell that it was a glamour," Tali said.

Ryun shrugged, then tilted his head at her. "When did you catch me?"

She grimaced, but answered. "Three days ago."

Ryun felt his lips curve into a small smile.

"Yeah, yeah," Tali said. "Not everyone can sense people leagues away."

"How?" Ryun asked.

"You walked through one of the air currents I set up near the palace. Where no one should've been."

"Ah," Ryun just said. There are a myriad of ways for one to be detected. He had found a cloak inside Zenker's storage that could make him look like someone else. He had used it to walk through his territories without being recognized. Still, somehow Tali had known. True, it didn't obscure his Qi or his core. He had to have slipped up and she sensed him.

"I assume that you are the reason why Anrosh has a new body? Why I can't sense her core despite her being incompetent at veiling it?"

Ryun just nodded.

She sighed. "So, when are you planning on revealing yourself?" Tali asked.

“Soon,” Ryun answered. “I was actually going to find you soon, I wanted to talk with you first.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” Ryun gestured and started to walk through the forest. “I have a gift for you.”

“A gift?” Tali said as she started to walk next to him.

“To celebrate your return to power,” Ryun told her.

He felt her face soften at that. “Thank you. Without I would’ve still been crippled.”

He waved his hand. “You’ve done a lot for me too. Your advice has helped me a lot.”

“You don’t follow my advice,” Tali added.

Ryun chuckled. “I follow it more than you think, but it isn’t just following it that helps. Your insights, your thoughts, they matter more than you think, even if I don’t agree.”

Tali didn’t respond, but he could tell that she was pensive.

They reached a small clearing that was somewhat hidden from sight, the place where he had spent most of his time. He took a seat on a stone slab nearby and then gestured for Tali to sit next to him. She climbed on top and mirrored his cross-legged position.

Ryun pulled out a small chest and placed it between them.

“Here,” he said. “This is for everything that you have done for me.”

Tali reached for the chest and opened it. He already knew what she would find inside; he had picked three elixirs from Zenker’s treasures. He hadn’t picked any stat increasing ones, as he believed that she had already used many of those in her life. Instead, he picked three that he thought would help her become stronger. One was a potion that would improve her core, another that would increase her body’s passive resistances, and the last which was supposed to sharpen her senses. He had taken the last two as well, and while the effects were small, everything added up.

The last thing in the box was a ring, an Eternal rarity one. He saw her reach for it, then raise the ornate ring to her eyes.

“It is supposed to give your soul additional protections,” the ring boosted soul defenses, and completely nullified first instance of damage

sufficient to critically injure a soul once every three months. It should prevent any kind of ambush to deal enough soul damage to cripple her again.

She looked at it for a long while, before she raised her eyes and met his. “Thank you,” she said as she slipped it on her finger and put the potions in her storage. “Where did you get it? Your reward for the Dome Leader kill?”

“No,” Ryun shook his head. “My reward is with Selia. I died before we killed Hastur. But I did travel through the ruins of the Empire. I have scavenged quite a few things.”

And he had. The ravaged cities had been left in a hurry, and not all valuables had been taken away. Ryun had taken everything that he found, from furniture to materials, art and clothes. He had filled six storage items with all of it, plus some he had put in Zenker’s giant space. He had even found several vaults, sealed by the people that ran away. He hadn’t even managed to get into all of them. He had items of rare, epic, legendary, and mythic, only a few higher, though what he found paled in comparison to what Zenker had.

Tali narrowed her eyes at him, but before she could voice her skepticism he spoke.

“But no,” Ryun said. “That ring came from this.”

He pulled Zenker’s ring from his Void Storage and showed it to her.

“It was—”

“—Zenker’s,” Tali whispered as she took it.

“You recognize it?”

“Of course,” Tali said as she looked at the ring in awe. “I was there when he got it. A perfect reward for a hoarder like him.” The last part had some affection slipping into her tone.

“I found him, his body,” Ryun said. “He’s dead,” he added uncomfortably.

Tali closed her eyes for a few seconds, and then spoke. “He used to say that we were all insane for trying to... that he would rather explore the world than get himself killed for stupidity.”

“Hastur was injured, an old injury, probably from their fight,” Ryun voiced his belief. “If Zenker hadn’t fought him, I doubt that we could win.”

Tali just nodded her head.

After a few more seconds of silence, Ryun cleared his throat and spoke again. “I have his body; I didn’t think that it would be... I didn’t want to leave it there. If you know what he would have wanted.”

“It is just a husk,” Tali shrugged. “If his soul survived, he is somewhere else. If not... well. You could sell it to a necromancer, though I don’t know if there is anyone who could afford to buy it. Eratemus perhaps. Or to an alchemist, high tiered Essence is worth a lot no matter the focus. His body will be weaker than an Eternal Cultivator, but the passive effects of his skills will remain.”

Ryun blinked, that hadn’t even occurred to him. Before he could say anything she spoke again.

“How did you even get into this?” She pointed at the ring.

Ryun tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

“This storage has protections, you shouldn’t have been able to access it unless you fit certain conditions,” Tali said.

“I just picked it up, it was open for me,” Ryun said.

“Here,” Tali handed it back. “You see the small gem at the bottom? Press it for a few seconds.”

Ryun frowned but did as she said, three seconds after a window popped up in his vision.

<b>Storage Ring Ownership Protection</b>
If the current owner is alive—no one other than the owner can access the storage.
If the current owner is dead—the new owner will be the first person not aligned with the previous owner’s killer and allied with the owner’s faction/if dead by monster, other, the new owner will be the first person that picks up the ring.

Ryun wondered if the Dome Leader was considered a faction. It probably was, otherwise anyone, even Hastur’s taken could’ve picked it up

and used it. He saw that he could change the conditions, but he left that aside. He showed the window to Tali who read through it.

“Quite like him,” she just said. “You’ve gotten probably the largest treasury in the world, just from what I know about it.”

“It does seem like it,” Ryun said. “I am hoping that with all of this we can turn our sect into something... powerful.”

“If used well,” Tali added.

“I am going to need your help with it. A lot of things have changed,” Ryun looked away, in the direction of Consequence. “I have many thoughts, plans, though I don’t know how to implement nearly any of them. My... outlook has changed, I died,” he turned to look back at her. “Did you ever die?”

Tali nodded. “Once, long ago,” she said. “It does change you.”

“What did you do after?”

“I sequestered myself for fifty years, until I reached Ascended.”

Ryun couldn’t quite understand that. How it took some of them so long to advance. He doubted that he ever would really understand. “I think that we made some mistakes, that I made mistakes.”

“Regarding?” Tali asked.

“Everything,” Ryun chuckled. “But one that is the most pressing on my mind is Kri. I wanted her to be... to advance far. To advance right. But the Dome monsters, Hastur... We don’t have the luxury, the time.”

“I know,” Tali agreed with him, surprisingly. “It is hard, we want to spare them the struggle, to teach them what we had to learn the hard way. And... yes, many people in our world are raised like that. Taught right, and they are strong, but they are... they are not monsters like we are.”

And that was why Ryun liked Tali, why he trusted her from the moment he came to know her. He could see it in her. She was a monster just like him. “I can advance to Ascended,” he told her.

Tali sighed. “Of course you can.”

“I’m going to do it soon, I need to talk with Selia and Erdania before, get my rewards,” Ryun said. “I’ve picked through Zenker’s treasury, found some things that might help me. Like this.”

He showed her the path removing potion, and told her about his plan with the Stillness Aspect. Then, he asked her about her opinion.

She sighed. "It could be good," she started. "Your secondary path is defense, though you've managed to gain utility and control from it... but you are a regenerator. Those techniques drain too much of your Qi, that avatar one especially. It hampers your ability to heal. Even your main path is a Qi sink. People like you... they don't rely on defense, in the traditional sense. You take what would be critical damage for someone else in order to get an advantage. Often surprising your opponents."

Ryun agreed on all points. He even had some ideas about how to change both path's techniques, he was just trying to decide what to do. His core was large, and he did have ways of effectively doubling his capacity by burning Essence. He also had a core that would only get deeper with cycling.

"Some Cultivators do as you have done. Spreading out, if their main path is offensive, they pick a defensive one as their secondary. That you've managed to get some utility out of it is impressive. Others would double down, increase their power by taking another offensive path. Both sides have their strengths."

"What did you do?"

"Offense and control, kind of like you."

Ryun frowned. "I've taken this path far; I think that I could take it farther still."

"Have you decided if you will merge your aspects or keep them separate?" Tali asked.

"I was thinking about merging them," Ryun said.

Tali got thoughtful then. "Maybe you shouldn't. Your Void is already one of the most destructive Aspects, it fits your main Path. You don't know what Stillness will do with it, though I suspect that the aspects are compatible. Still, your secondary path if you chose to keep it, will benefit a lot from just the Stillness Aspect. It is a bit unorthodox for a pure defense, but I am sure you can figure out a way to make it work."

Ryun was for the first time in his life, truly undecided. He was going to need to think about it a lot. It was true what she said. His secondary

path allowed him great utility. Speed, flight, control. Without his secondary path he would've never made it back in such a short time. There were items that could grant him flight in Zenker's treasury, and Ryun had considered them. But... he didn't like to rely on them. Unless he took another similar path that could provide him with flight... but why change it then? With the way that his body worked, he was often far more maneuverable in the air than all but the most powerful fliers. And he bet that he could do things that not even they could.

"I'm going to think about it," Ryun said finally. Now, he needed to make one more stop before he advanced. "I have one more thing for you," Ryun told her.

"Another gift? You spoil me," she smiled, but she didn't protest. Of course, she didn't, she was a cultivator.

"This is just a story, a memory," Ryun said. "Words, that might help you with something."

She tilted her head inquisitively.

"While in the Empire, I was granted a payment for... doesn't matter. I was given a fruit that allowed me to see memories of someone else."

Tali frowned. "Whose memories?"

Ryun smiled. "An Eternal Realm Cultivator, an insane one."

Tali's eyes widened, and he cursed his vision for not letting him read expressions better, but he thought that it was both amazement, shock, and incredulity all wrapped up into one expression. "What?"

"Yes, and perhaps you can help me find more insight from them. Perhaps, together we can get a step closer to the Eternal Realm."