

Politics

Ryun followed Grey Horde through the castle, silently observing his surroundings as they went. The interior was dark and cavernous, carved from the rock of the mountain itself. Skreen servants scurried about in the shadows, their movements quick and efficient as they went about their work.

As they walked, Ryun couldn't help but feel a sense of unease coming from Grey Horde. It was a subtle thing, but he had been trained to pick up on such things. She was worried about something, and he suspected that it had little to do with his unexpected appearance in her territory.

Eventually, they reached a small chamber far from the bustle of the castle's main corridors, a room that was heavily warded. The room was lit by softly glowing gems embedded in the walls, casting what Ryun assumed to be an eerie light over everything, based on the amount of Light Essence in the air. Grey Horde motioned for Ryun and Nayra to take a seat as she took the one across from them behind the wooden table. Another queen-form skreen followed her and took a standing position next to her, Trklak, stood guard at the door leaving five of them inside the room.

"Speak," Grey Horde said.

Ryun glanced at Nayra next to him, then turned to Grey Horde and spoke. "That is difficult to explain."

"Try," Grey Horde said evenly, her eyes never leaving his.

Ryun couldn't feel anything beyond the room they were in, it was perfectly warded. Though somehow he was sure that she had given orders to the people outside. He could feel the tension in the air, his answers would dictate how this conversation ended. He was certain that their departure was not going to be easy if she did not like what they said.

He might not be able to sense anything on the outside, but his skill did work on everything inside. With |Divided Mind| he put one part of his mind to inspecting the arrays that surrounded him. Most were ones that warded against perception based powers, but he could also detect some that weren't active yet. He assumed that there were ones that would suppress powers or outright silence when activated.

It was going to be troublesome if she decided that she didn't like what he had to say.

"We came from the Ethereal, from the Grand Spirit of War's camp," Ryun started.

He sensed a change in Grey Horde, surprise perhaps, he wasn't certain. He wasn't that good with skreen body language. When she didn't speak, he continued.

"We came there seeking War, looking for aid against the yeti, Ra'azel. War's terms for aid were to come here and help deal with the delay on your side," Ryun said, and this time her reaction was clear. She did not like that. Ryun understood, someone had so carelessly revealed parts of her plans. But Spirits were not chosen, the things that they considered important were not the same. Ryun wasn't one for politics, or trying to maneuver through interactions by twisting words. Being direct was part of him, and he saw no reason to change that now.

"We know much about your plans, we know that you intend to bring War and its army into the Real Realm to fight for you, though we don't know your target."

Nayra turned her head and stared at him, he could imagine the expression on her face looked something very much akin to disbelief.

"We also know things about War's plans that you do not. War entering the Real Realm will be a threat on the same level as Ra'azel, and we cannot allow that to happen. We are here to stop your plan from going through."

"Are you now?" Grey Horde asked, her tone turning hostile.

Nayra covered her face with her hand, and Ryun continued.

"After honoring your agreement, War intends to remain in the Real Realm along with her spirit army. She intends to turn our world into a realm filled with constant war in order to fuel her own power. War draws power from such conflict, war in the Real Realm makes her stronger, and there is no way of knowing just how much strength she could eventually gather if she succeeds in her plans."

Grey Horde took a long look at him, her antennae twitched as did those of the war queen form by her side. Ryun detected the almost imperceivable shake of the other skreen's head.

Grey Horde narrowed her eyes at Ryun. "And I am just supposed to take your word for it?"

Ryun tilted his head, as what he had been seeing clicked into place for him. He could see Essence spreading from the other queen and interacting with the Essence that carried his voice. It was also trailing around his body, trying to gain purchase on his body. He was pretty sure

that it was a perk of some kind, but he hadn't known what it was actually doing. Now, he was fairly certain that it was supposed to somehow verify the truth of his words.

Ryun glanced at the other war queen, then spoke. "Those things don't work on me," then he turned back to Grey Horde. "I can give you a contract though, if that would suffice?"

Grey Horde looked surprised. As an answer Ryun made a quick contract through his interface, one stating that he would speak the truth for the duration of their conversation. Then he sent it over.

She leaned forward, her eyes looking at the screen in between them for a few seconds before she accepted.

"Repeat everything that you said since you arrived," she ordered.

Ryun did as he was asked. He told her why they had gone to the Ethereal, and then how they had reached War's camp. He told her what War has asked of them, then he told her about the two other Grand Spirits and what they had told him about War and her plans. Finishing his story with how they had arrived in her kingdom.

Grey Horde remained silent for a long minute after Ryun was finished. Then, finally, she tilted her head and spoke. "Just because another Grand Spirit told you something, doesn't mean that it is true. Transition and Mysteries could be lying."

Ryun shrugged. "That is a possibility, though I don't believe it is. I am fairly certain that War is working with Change, and that they do intend to stay in the Real Realm. But even if Transition and Mysteries had lied, I would've still come to stop you from bringing War here."

Her beady eyes bore into him, her antennae twitching. He could sense Trklak shifting his weight behind him.

"What right do you think you have, to dictate such things to me? What reason would you have to interfere?" She asked.

"The right that all people in this world have. The reason of past mistakes," he leaned forward, looking her in the eyes. "We've already done this once before. We allowed a force to remain at the core of our civilization. We allowed Hastur to fester and for that an Empire fell and countless millions died in the core."

He saw her mandibles click in a manner that he associated with a skreen grimacing, and he continued. "Would you make the same mistake again? Allow an army that has little care for our lives to freely enter our Realm?"

She didn't answer immediately, then as the silence started to stretch she broke it. "I can't think about everyone, my duty is to my people, I need to protect them."

The words were simple, but Ryun could detect the underlying conviction beneath them. Her desire was the same as his, she wanted to protect her people. He could understand that.

"You are the leader of one of the most powerful factions in the world," Ryun said. "We are at peace. What threat could possibly threaten you."

She shook her head. "Don't pretend like you don't see it. The only reason we have peace is because we are focused on removing the Domes, the moment that is done, we will turn on each other again."

"I don't know if I believe that," Ryun told her. "We've seen the result of such actions."

"It is in our nature, everyone is already placing their pieces. You have united your Sects, you have swallowed up refugees and expanded beyond just Cultivation. And then there is the Exalted Empire, the Herald has been strong-arming other factions under the guise of his alliance. Half he has swallowed up into his Empire, and it is only a matter of time until the rest feel too isolated to do anything but join. He is pushing their enlightenment, spreading their beliefs even where it is unwanted. They will force down their Road of Technology down everyone's throats the moment they see an opportunity for it. Already he is putting pressure on my borders."

Ryun blinked, he hadn't involved himself with the politics that much, he didn't know if what she said was true, but he could tell that she believed it.

"You want War's army to protect your people against the Exalted Empire?" Ryun asked.

Grey Horde's mandibles twitched. "You said that we learned from our mistakes? Well, you are right, I have. Once, I allowed issues time to grow on my borders, and their betrayal caused the death of my people. I will not make the same mistake again."

Her words held the measure of her conviction. He could feel it in her soul. The words carried the full meaning of her entire being. She was not going to change her mind. Just like Ryun, she too had locked in a part of herself that desired to protect her people.

He had to find another way.

Offer

Ryun looked at Grey Horde as the silence stretched in between them. Her eyes were unmoving, and he could tell that despite the outward appearance of waiting for his answer, the skreen in the room were talking.

He could feel the tension in the room rising, everyone was getting ready. Nayra had tensed next to him, her Qi stood almost frozen inside of her body, just waiting to move. Aspects were being born in front his eyes, an anticipation of violence. That was not something that Ryun wanted this to devolve into.

"You will do anything to keep your people safe, I can understand that," Ryun spoke, breaking the silence. "But even you must see that this can only lead to a repeat of what happened with Hastur's armies."

"What I can see is that my people will suffer regardless." Grey Horde said.

Ryun closed his eyes and shook his head. "We've all gathered together, we made an agreement."

Grey Horde's voice made him open back his eyes. "It was always naïve to think that so many different voices could live alongside each other, that we could keep to those agreements. We are all in this for ourselves and our interests. The only reason we are at peace now is because we are focused on the Domes."

Ryun narrowed his eyes at her. "Yet you are the one actively preparing to break that agreement."

"I won't let the Exalted Empire be the ones to strike first," she said.

"And what if I can guarantee you help that you need, in case that the Exalted Empire makes a move?" Ryun asked.

The Grey Horde leaned back in her seat. "You can't guarantee that," she said.

"When the entire world ignored the threat in the core, allowed the Dome monsters and the taken to grow, the sects acted. We are the ones that marched on the core. That should be enough to tell you all that you need to know. But beyond that, I personally can guarantee you that the sects that we will not tolerate anyone that breaks the agreement," Ryun said slowly, his tone even and low. "Even if you refuse now, even if you somehow manage to kill us and prevent the knowledge from coming out, eventually the sects will learn that you have summoned a spirit army into the Real Realm. They will not allow that to stand."

Ryun didn't mean it as a threat, it was simply what he believed to be the truth. War's intentions beyond what its agreement with the Triumphant Hive contained were not important. The sects couldn't allow the past to repeat itself. Ryun hadn't kept up with the politics of the entire Settled Territories, but he did know about the Sects internal politics. They had taken the mantle of preventing threats from becoming large enough to threaten everyone. Even with Ra'azel, they might not think that the threat was as great as Zach did, but they did keep their eyes and ears open for any sign of him. It was more than what he could say about the rest of the world, though he understood. They had no evidence of the yeti's threat, they hadn't felt it on their own skin.

Grey Horde looked at him for a long time before answering. "You really believe that?" She asked.

"I do," Ryun said. "And even if the Sects fail me, I will come, I can promise you that. At some point, we must truly come together, or eventually something will tear us all down. Your people included. All I

ask is that you do the same in return, help me deal with things that threaten us all."

He couldn't read her body language, so he couldn't tell what she was thinking, but her conversation with the others in the room stopped. He knew that she was thinking by herself. Ryun didn't have much to offer besides his word, but there was one thing he had that no one else did.

"I can offer you something, to make your decision easier," Ryun said.

Grey Horde leaned forward, listening.

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"Do you really think that the yeti is such a great threat?" Grey Horde asked. Ryun had spoken more about it and the fact that even the Grand Spirits wanted Ra'azel taken care off.

"Yes," Ryun confirmed. "From everything that I know, he is probably the greatest threat to us all at the moment."

Grey Horde didn't comment further, but he could tell that she was thinking about it. Ryun knew that it was hard to grasp a threat from just words. Even he had trouble with it, but he had felt the impact of Ra'azel's power on, he had lost people.

"Will this work?" Grey Horde said as they arrived at their destination and she led Nayra and him into an open part of the hive. The entire valley she brought them to was the mirror image of the one in the Ethereal, except that this one wasn't filled with an army. The surface was covered

in buildings, ones that seemed to have been raised from a strange living material, like a resin of some kind. Skreen moved in between them constantly, but the real Hive was beneath them, where the strange old forms of the skreen were stored. Though the Grey Horde had stopped more of them from being spawned. They had come to an agreement. Though they still didn't have a real plan for how they would deal with War.

Grey Horde couldn't just break their agreement with no consequences. But that was a topic for later. Now he focused on the open style forge in front of him. It was built into the side of the cliff that surrounded the valley, and many different kinds of skreen were in the process of gathering their equipment and leaving. The smithy was focused on the giant forge in the center, with strange crane like structures built around it that seemed to be used to lower things into the fire.

Ryun looked around in awe at the intricate designs and patterns that adorned the simple building. The skreen had a talent for craftsmanship, and it was on full display in this forge despite its more organic appearance.

"This is truly impressive," Ryun said, admiring the sheer size of the forge, especially when noting the fact that it was probably a temporary one.

"Yes, it is," Grey Horde agreed, standing next to him.

"Will it suit your purpose?"

He glanced at Nayra who had agreed to help him with it, then nodded. "It will do," he said.

A skreen smith approached and bowed deeply to his queen, then spoke. "We've brought what you've asked for, my Queen."

Grey Horde gestured, and they were led to the center of the forge where a box filled with material sat on top of a table. The metals inside were made out of high quality, but it also contained pieces of the Dome that Grey Horde had defeated.

Ryun was already familiar with the bones of the Helshou, the Mountain God Dome Leader, he had used them to craft Zach's armor.

"Have you decided which of your smiths will watch?" He asked as he moved closer, using his perception to familiarize himself with the forge.

Grey Horde gestured to the three smiths that remained behind as the others left the forge. Ryun could tell that each of them were at the peak of their focuses.

"And the base?" He asked.

Grey Horde produced a ring from her storage and offered it to him.

Ryun took it and inspected it.

Ultimate Ring of Bolstering Allies	+1000 to Endurance +2000 to Intelligence Activate the ring to infuse your allies with the portion of your willpower, bolstering morale
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	and increasing mental resistance.
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"This will do nicely," Ryun said. "We can start."

Grey Horde tilted her head. "You don't need more time to prepare?"

Ryun shook his head. "No, just do as I have instructed," he said as he walked over to the forge and pulled out the black anvil that was part of Bright Star.

He had taught himself much, and most of his works had been experimental. Now, he knew what to do. With Bright Star in his hand, he started making a spiritual tool for Grey Horde.

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Grey Horde watched the Cultivator work, not really understanding what was happening. She didn't know what it was that he had offered to make for her, but his contract meant that every word he spoke to her was the truth. She was... intrigued. And while she wasn't quite sure about this new deal she had made, it did feel better than what she had planned. She had to protect her people, and being offered another path to do so had allowed her to turn from her previous path.

The smithing process was one part familiar, one part alien. She could tell that the Undying Void was manipulating Essence in ways that she had never experienced before. Then, when he asked, she did as he had

instructed and opened herself to the Plane of War. She could feel it pulse inside of her, and she knew all of its parts. She was a Sage of War, and she could feel all the other influences within the plane, each tugging in a different direction. The biggest of them was familiar to her, the Grand Spirit of War.

She ignored the spirit as it tried to get her attention, and focused on what was happening in the Real Realm. Somehow she felt the Cultivator reach toward her, and take the Essence of War, pull it into the item on the anvil. Then came a tiny pang of pain, more like an echo of it really. As if for a moment she was somehow diminished.

She could feel a lot of power from the other Cultivator, the Daughter of Dawn and Death, as well. Black Fire surrounded them, and projected into the hammer every time Ryun raised it to strike the item.

And then it slowly came to an end, and everything settled.

Ryun picked up the item which was now black and white, as if half of the bone had been charred completely. Then, he offered it to her.

Slowly, she picked up the item and looked at it as she sensed the chatter from her smiths in the background. Just allowing them to watch was certainly going to help them improve their own craft.

Spiritual Tool — Burning Soul of War	Requirements: Mastery of War; Immortality; High Mental Resistance: High Mental Stats; High Willpower
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Trait: Soulbound; Bodybound;
Linked;

Stats:

+200 to base mental stats

+5,000 to Intelligence

Effects: The ring allows the user to infuse its allies with the sliver of the meaning of War, improving all War related powers and transferring a measure of the user's capability. Amount infused depends on the user and their connection with War.

When anyone affected by these effects dies, their death will burn through the space between the plane they are on and the plane of War, allowing a small amount of War Essence to pass through.

It was a vague description, but she knew just how powerful being able to touch an Aspect was. Most of her people couldn't do that, but with this she could allow them to do that. She would have to test it, but she suspected that the effects would be... significant. She didn't even know what to think about the death part yet.

"Now," Ryun started. "We should probably decide on what to do about the Grand Spirit of War."

Preparations

"We are close to the point of no return," Grey Horde said. "My Summoners and Array Masters have thinned the barrier between the Real Realm and the Ethereal significantly in this valley."

Ryun grimaced, everything that she said made it seem like dealing with this was going to be a headache.

"It has come to the point where we can easily open gates into the Ethereal without needing much power. And the spirits can cross over just as easily, those that don't require vessels to exist for long," she continued.

Ryun knew about spirits like that. The Fire spirits that the Last Ember Sect used to utilize were like that.

"I fear that if the spirits wanted to, they could force their way through to the Real Realm," Grey Horde added.

And the vessels prepared for them were already here. The old form skreen had been changed, made to be mindless so that they could serve the spirits. He now knew that the delay was the crafting of a single vessel for War. Apparently the skreen had some issues breeding a form that could handle something on the power scale of the Grand Spirit. "Can you move the vessels?" Nayra asked.

Grey Horde shook her head. "Not without them noticing. The barrier is thin enough that small spirits keep crossing over. Most of those are mindless, but some have a childlike intelligence. War will learn of it."

"And you are worried that War would force her way through if she finds out that you changed the deal?" Ryun asked.

"Spirits need a vessel to survive in the Real Realm for a long period of time," Grey Horde said. "But my Summoners have told me that powerful spirits can cross over without a vessel and survive for some time. Enough to do damage at least."

Ryun frowned. Having War come through and go on a rampage would not be a good thing. It seemed like Transition and Mysteries were right, their plan could be their only way forward. Though he would need time.

"I have something that might help us, but I will need a few things to prepare," Ryun said as he made a plan in his head. He only hoped that it would work.

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Berion stood on top of the tower of their fortress hideout, monitoring the space around them. Making sure that nothing intruded. They were in the final days of their preparation for the operation at the Dome. He felt space like an extension of his own body, and all the people around them like imprints on his skin. He could track them and know them, but his attention was only on one of them.

Ra'azel was in the small workshop, working on creating items, weapons for them all to use. Berion didn't know how to feel about that. His creations were... powerful, but they also came with threads of obligations attached.

Kael had grown more and more... zealous, in the last few years. He wanted to change the world, but at every step he had been met with resistance, with failure. Berion knew that what they were doing cause pain and suffering, of course he did. But he had always seen the vision that Kael had. Except that that vision had gotten soaked more and more in blood as the years went by.

Now they were doing things for Ra'azel, hunting on his behalf. And that Berion did not like at all. The yeti had avoided Berion ever since that day when he had touched his plane and did something that he had never even dreamed of before. He crafted a Way, and had achieved something that only two people had before him. It was an achievement beyond any

other. For the first time in his life, it made him feel like he was worth something. For the first time he had forgotten that once he was a slave.

Yet, when he closed his eyes, he could still see the ringed eyes of the yeti, his hand reaching for him. It had frightened him. He had seen greed in those eyes, and a complete disregard of anything beyond it. Berion now had something that Ra'azel desired, and he had become so paranoid that the yeti would come after him. But he never did.

It wasn't until recently that Berion realized why. Ra'azel had been avoiding him, because what Berion had achieved, that power frightened him.

He didn't know how to feel about that. If he could have his way, the yeti would've been thrown out already, but Kael would never agree to that. Nor would the others. All of them had been taken by what the yeti taught them. The Runes.

Berion knew and agreed that they were useful, but there were other ways for one to gain power, what he had achieved was the proof of that. They didn't need the yeti.

He glanced down at the box next to his feet. Inside was an item, a gift from Ra'azel. Berion could feel the power coming from the bracer, yet he didn't pull it out. Others had accepted their gifts open heartedly, but Berion couldn't bring himself to trust anything that Ra'azel had touched.

With a small effort of will, he bent space and the box was gone, sent across the world to the bottom of the ocean, never to be found again.

He didn't need Ra'azel's power. He was strong enough on his own. The others didn't see how dangerous Ra'azel was, but that was just one more reason why Ber had to be there for them. He had to watch over and make sure that this coming mission doesn't end up being their last.

He kept his perception focused on the yeti, as the others slept, worrying about what exactly he was scheming. Somehow, he couldn't get

the thought out of his head that the Ra'azel knew exactly what Berion was doing.

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Tali looked out from the balcony, seeing the fleet being assembled outside the gates. The forces that they were gathering here would serve as the perimeter of the Dome that Awirren was meant to deal with.

They were still waiting for a few factions to arrive. Sigmund's faction was powerful, but it wasn't one of the largest ones. The force that he would be commanding was going to consist out of several factions, like the Wardens. Though, if Tali was being honest, Zacharia by himself would probably be enough to hold the perimeter, perhaps even to take down the Dome, especially if his partner was with him.

But the war against Domes wasn't just about power, it was about perception and politics too. Just being invited to participate in an attack on a Dome held prestige, it signified to other factions in the world that those who were called were powerful.

It was also about connections. Many factions had bought their way into the attacks. It was an opportunity, to test their people, to gain better Classes and sharpen Cultivation. And while only the team directly responsible for the attack on the Dome got the rewards from it, the perimeter factions were allowed a piece of the harvested materials. Which by itself was a fortune.

She felt a hand come to rest on her back and turned to see Sigmund standing next to her. With his other hand he signed, and she smiled.

"I'm fine," she answered.

He nodded, the signed again. "*Are you ready for this?*"

Tali took in a deep breath, then nodded. "I've waited for a long time. I've dreamed of this every night I wore that collar around my neck," she answered.

Sigmund reached over and took her hand in his, then squeezed. With his other, he signed.

"We've prepared for this, justice will come for her."

Tali turned to look back at the force they were assembling. She didn't doubt in their plan, she just hoped that they would be able to time it perfectly. They didn't want to start a war between all those assembled. And despite everything, she didn't want to harm the warriors of Awirren's sect, if at all possible. They were innocent in this.

But she had chosen her path, and she would see it through to the end, no matter what.