

The Price of Power

“Why are we here?” Kri asked her mother. A couple of days ago, her mother had just picked her up and without any explanation taken her out of the city. They rode out, across the territories, just the two of them. Kri would have to be blind to not notice that something was up. She was... far more motherly with her than she had been before. She talked with her about the most mundane of things, and she caught her looking at her when she thought Kri couldn't notice.

One of her skills was |**Enhanced Vibration Sense**|, and Tali had forced her to train it to the extreme. She had made her wear blindfolds and ear plugs for hours while she trained with the spear, relying just on her skill to take in the world around her. She could tell that her mother was acting... weird.

But now they stopped, her mother walked their mounts away and tied them to a tree, then returned to the small cliff-side.

“We are here because we are going to have a very important conversation,” her mother said while looking out in the distance.

Kri followed her gaze and saw what she expected to see. The ruined city of Ven'oran stood in the distance, covered by nature now, the green vines covering the walls and trees growing from inside the buildings. There was some talk about rebuilding it, but there was just never any time.

She turned her eyes back on her mother, studying her skin. The white snowflake patterns on her skin were a clear indication that her body had changed. Most people thought that she had advanced her second Path and improved her body. But Kri knew that her mother had gotten her second Path past that point long ago.

“We had to go all the way here for a conversation?” Kri asked.

Her mother smiled, but she couldn't help but think that it was a sad smile, a worried smile. “Not for the conversation, for what comes after.”

Kri blinked, she had questions, but her mother shook her head and spoke again.

“You told me that you wanted to advance,” she said.

Kri immediately straightened, hope blossoming inside of her. "I do."

Her mother nodded. "I don't think that you really understand what that means."

"Mother," Kri started, but she raised her hand to stop her.

"No Kri, you listen now. We could raise you, all the way to Immortal even, today. In a day you could be like me, is that what you want?"

Kri frowned. "I mean, I do want to advance," she said slowly. She knew that there was a difference between being raised and doing as much as you could on your own. But she had never really seen that difference. They all talk about it, but her mother was still strong. Kri had seen her fight against the undead, it was amazing.

"There is a difference," her mother continued. "The way that we, our sect works, is that we do not grant power freely. All power has to be paid for. I pay it through my service, by putting myself between Ryun, the sect, and everybody else. Others struggle, they fight, they prove themselves in combat, or they prove their talents and craft, they create something of worth. And we reward them. And we will rework that part of the way that the sect is run, new rules will be put into place, but the bottom line is going to be that everyone will contribute if they want to be supported."

Kri nodded, that did make sense to her.

"You are going to have a choice now daughter," her mother turned to face her. "Three choices actually. You can remain as you are, train, master each Realm and each of your powers slowly. When Tali thinks that you are ready she will grant you permission to advance. You will advance slowly, but you will be safe and you will do it right. Next, you can decide to abandon that path and follow mine. We can advance you, but you will sacrifice your future potential. You can stand by my side and learn how to run the sect. You will fight, but you will never be someone that shakes the world."

Kri looked unsure, she... this wasn't what she expected. Had she overstepped when she pushed her mother before? Was this the result of that?

"And the last choice?" Kri asked slowly.

“You can do what Ryun does,” her mother answered softly. “Take a shorter path, one that isn’t perfect, and one filled with a lot more danger. One that could get you killed in the process.”

Kri shifted as that set in. Her mother stepped up to her and placed a hand on her cheek.

“I love you Kri. You are my everything, but you are also a grown woman now, I was younger than you are now when I had you. I wish that I could keep you safe, keep you away from the dangers. But we live in this world that is filled with danger. I understand that you need to be able to protect yourself. So, even if it might lead to your death, I know that I can’t keep trying to keep you safe, that it is ultimately your decision to make.”

Kri opened her mouth, but then closed it and thought about it. She had been getting frustrated with the way things were now. She knew, at least intellectually, that she would advance eventually. And that when she reached higher Realms she would be better than those she now felt were passing her by. But it was... frustrating. Always placed in the safest place possible in combat, always held back. Yes, she had seen fighting, she fought monsters, undead, and other Cultivators, but it never pushed her to her limits. She didn’t even know what those were.

Her mother was... she ruled their sect. Kri knew that she had been raised, that she depended on Ryun for advancement. But she had seen her mother’s life. Staying in the sect, helping run everything, being a presence. She didn’t want that, she understood and appreciated her mother for all that she did.

But she... she had dreams of her own. She wanted to be out there in the wild, fighting, surviving, exploring and finding treasure. Pushing herself as far as she could go and more. There was one moment in her past that had always been so clear to her, a shining moment that she wanted so hard to reach for. When Ryun arrived in the Infinite Realm, when he found them. She remembered him fighting against dozens, and just... the effortless strength that he displayed. That was who she wanted to be.

She made her decision.

Her mother sighed, already understanding without her even having to say anything. She leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

“Okay then,” her mother said slowly. “I hope that you don’t come to regret it.”

Kri frowned but her mother spoke again before she could ask her to clarify.

She pointed at Ven’oran. “Go to the mountains above the city, through the pass.”

Kri tilted her head, but felt like she shouldn’t ask any questions.

Her mother walked away, leaving her alone and confused. After a while she turned to look at Ven’oran and the two mountain peaks stretching above it.

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She climbed the mountain as her mother told her, going through the pass, wondering why she was sent here. But while she did wonder, she wasn’t really worried. This felt like... like the things from the stories, when a young Cultivator was sent on a quest to prove themselves.

So, she was ready for anything. She held her **Piercing Spear of Speed** in one hand and wore her epic armor on her body. She kept her sense alert, looking for any signs of monsters. Once she got through the pass she stepped onto a small stone plateau, with a person standing at the edge with their back turned toward her.

She approached slowly, until her skill got into range that she could sense them, which was just over fifteen meters. They didn’t move, didn’t breathe even as they stood next to a crack, a crevice in the stone that seemingly led to a cave below. She tried to move silently, as to not alert them.

“If you only try to move silently once you are aware of someone who can observe you, you most likely already failed.”

She froze, but then recognized the voice. Ryun turned around and tilted his head at her, and she ran up to him. As soon as she was close enough, she threw her arms around him, hugging him.

“I didn’t know that you were back!”

“Not many people know,” Ryun said as he returned her embrace.

She took a step back and looked at him. He was the same as she remembered, and it had been years since he went away to fight the Dome Leader. So much had happened since then, there was so much that she wanted to say, but she just couldn't get the words out.

"So," Ryun spoke first. "You made a decision."

Kri sobered immediately. She should've known that he was involved in whatever just happened with her mother. A part of her was elated at that.

"I did," Kri said.

"You don't think that you were taught enough, in all these years?" He asked.

Kri shifted her weight. It wasn't that she was ungrateful, she just... she felt like she could do more.

"Tali's way would've taught you a lot. You would've seen a large payoff in the future, and with a lot less pain and suffering for it."

Kri grimaced. She could take some pain and suffering, she didn't need or liked that everyone wanted to coddle her so much.

"Tell me," Ryun interrupted her thoughts. "Did you make friends in the sect?"

Kri blinked at the sudden change of topic.

"I... I guess?"

Ryun narrowed his eyes at her.

"Okay it's not... I... it's hard," she said lamely.

"Why?"

She didn't know why he was asking her all these questions, but... no one else had ever really asked her that.

"I'm the daughter of the Sect Leader," she shrugged. "I am trained personally by an Ascended of the sect. They all know about our... I don't even know what we are, but they know that we are close."

Ryun nodded. "We are family, your mother is as a sister to me, you like a... niece I guess."

To hear him say it clearly like that, it made her feel so many things that she couldn't even explain.

Before she could say anything he continued. "I understand, it is hard to get close to people when they want something from you."

She nodded. “Yeah, and I... I always wanted something more. Their worries, their goals, they just seem so...”

“Small?” Ryun asked.

“Yes.”

“I am not sorry for the time you spent training slowly, for the peace that you had.”

Kri tilted her head.

“It will give you perspective,” Ryun just said. “It will make you realize just how different everyone else is from you. If you survive that is.”

Kri frowned. “Survive?” She asked slowly.

“I think that you have talent Kri, but... doing things my way requires something more. An inner drive that few others have. You need to be a bit... unhinged. I saw glimpses of it in you before, when you and your mother ran from the sect. But you can never truly know if you have what it takes until you try. And if you are wrong, well, death is the price.”

Kri swallowed, tried to hide the stab of fear that flashed inside her chest.

Ryun nodded. “Tali told me that you were exceptional with the spear.” Changing the topic once more.

She blinked, Tali had never said that to her, but... She was good, better than anyone else that had started to train at the same time as she had. She had even improved her skill to |**Spear Art**|. It was her highest skill, the one that she was the most proud of.

“I am,” she didn’t feel the need to be humble, not with Ryun.

“And you have |**Vibration Sense**|?”

“|**Enhanced Vibration Sense**|, yes.”

“What is your range?”

“Around fifteen meters, depending on what is around me,” Kri answered.

“Fifteen,” Ryun mulled it over. “It will be close.”

She was about to ask him what it would be close for, when he extended his hand. “Give me your spear.”

Kri did as he asked. He looked it over then made it disappear, probably inside his storage. Then, a different spear appeared in his hand. “Here, you can have this one.”

She took it from his slowly.

Spear of Cold Thrust	+5 to Dexterity +5 to Strength +10 to Wisdom Any attack with this weapon inflicts cold damage equal to 5% your wisdom, the damage will tick every 5 seconds, dealing 1% less damage for the next 5 intervals.
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It was a better weapon than the rare one that was given to her. She looked up at him, confused.

He placed a hand on her robes and frowned. “These will work, I guess.”

She was completely confused, but he again spoke, not letting her question anything. “Show me your screens, all of them.”

Kri frowned but did what he asked.

“Hm...” Ryun hummed. “Tali gave you a few more stat potions, and you have a couple of titles I see.”

Kri nodded. She had gotten the **One Against Many, Lord**—obviously, and **Apprentice Warrior: Twilight Melody Sect** titles. And Tali had given her one more bath to increase her stats.

“It’ll be hard,” Ryun said. “But that is the point.”

“What is?” Kri asked finally.

“I’ll give you one last chance Kri,” Ryun said, his face serious and his black eyes holding hers. “This is your last opportunity to choose another path. If you stay, I will push you more than you have ever been pushed. It will hurt, and you will hate me, you will curse yourself for wanting this. But, if you survive, you will get what you want.”

Kri frowned, she felt like this was a crossroad. A part of her was terrified, but another wanted to advance more than anything. She wanted to be like him.

“I made my choice,” Kri said.

Ryun nodded, and for a moment she could've sworn that she saw some expression on his face... sympathy?

Then the world went black, the pain followed a moment later. She fell to the ground and screamed; her face was on fire. She put her hands on her face and felt blood, felt... her eyes were gone. She was in so much pain that she couldn't even think.

“Focus on your skill,” a voice said, and she realized that it was Ryun, standing next to her. He had done this. For a moment she felt hurt beyond anything that she had ever felt before, betrayed. But then she remembered, he had gouged his own eyes out, had trained himself while blind. He was doing this for her, she tried to calm herself and pushed up to her knees, then up.

She was shaking, but she tried to keep a strong front.

“Hm...” Ryun hummed. “Now the real test begins, try not to die.”

She frowned, but before she could even register what his words meant she felt herself thrown to the side then... down. She was falling, her heart beating in her chest like crazy. She smashed into something on her way down, a stone, a wall? She didn't know, and she didn't have the time to wonder. She hit the ground hard and groaned. He... he had thrown her down the crevice they had been standing next to. She scrambled, tried to get to her feet and felt her leg hurting, she had to have injured in on her way down. She reached for the bag of potions on her waist, but found it missing. She didn't know if she had lost it on the way down or if Ryun snatched it away from her.

Then, she heard a sound and something hit the stone next to her, rattling against it. She focused her sense and realized that it was her spear, he had to have thrown it down after her. She moved toward it, but then froze. Her sense caught something else at the edge of her range. And then there was a sound, a grinding of something against the stone. A moment

after a deep noise, like a growl, filled the air, and she felt an aura of something fill the cave.

She wasn't alone down here.

It moved, and she threw herself to the side, her sense alerting her of the attack. One of her hands trailed behind her and she felt her palm slid across something hard. The contact was enough for the identification window to appear.

**Black Viper King (Tier
5)**

She was going to die.