

Playing Dress-up, Again

Anrosh looked Ryun over, trying not to lose her temper at him. He was in the process of getting dressed for his dinner with the High Ranker—Spear of Sorrow. And she was guiding the attendants in their task of wrangling him into cleaning up to look like something respectful. She didn't know when she had become responsible for him, but thankfully she had plenty of experience with this type of things from the time when Kri had been younger. It almost made her laugh just how similar the experience of trying to get a child to dress up was to having Ryun do the same thing. Nayra was sitting in one corner, looking at what was happening with wide eyes. She hadn't been present for the other times when Anrosh had to deal with this side of Ryun.

Seeing her so engrossed with what was happening, looking only slightly horrified, made Anrosh smile. She had been down ever since she had lost her match. Anrosh understood that, but Nayra had nothing to really feel down about, she had reached qualified for the tournament, and had ranked as one of the top in the tournament, it was no small feat. But everyone had been giving her time and space, both her and Lesamitrius. Her reward for the tournament was significant as well—two hundred and fifty thousand Celestial Essence. It was a fortune, and Anrosh for one hoped that Nayra realized that she hadn't failed.

Anrosh gestured at one of the attendants holding scissors and the woman swallowed in fear, but then approached. Ryun met her eyes, then scowled at the scissors in her hand, making the woman freeze just a few steps away from him.

Anrosh sighed and walked up, took the scissors from her hands and turned her own glare on him.

“My hair is fine,” Ryun said.

“Your hair is not fine,” Anrosh shot back.

He scowled at her with an incredulous look on his face. “I don't even know how you convinced me that I need to... clean up,” Ryun grumbled.

He was sitting on a chair in the center of the room, his torso bare, the Void slowly leaking from the cracks in his skin. She approached and brandished her scissors at him. Ryun leaned back glaring at them and her.

“Don’t be a child,” Anrosh told him.

“I like having a beard,” Ryun told her.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine, I’ll just... trim it, I guess, and your hair too. You can’t go to meet a High Ranker looking like that.”

He narrowed his eyes, and Anrosh started working on his beard, not letting him grumble more about it.

A few minutes later she finished and stepped back, then she grabbed his chin and moved his head left and right looking down on him. “I guess that this is acceptable,” she sighed. She had trimmed his beard close to his face and cut his hair so that it was chin-length again. He still looked wild, but at least he was cleaned up wild now.

Ryun’s glare didn’t lessen at all, but by now she knew him well enough to know that it meant nothing. At least not when it was turned toward her. In any case, Ryun didn’t glare at those he wanted to kill, he barely even looked at them. She had seen him give his enemies enough of his indifferent looks to recognize when exactly he was dangerous.

She nodded and walked a few steps back, gesturing at the attendants to clean him up. Brushes pushed hair off his shoulders and wet towels cleaned up the rest. Then they tried to coax him into the bath. Unfortunately, that ended up being Ryun’s limit. His Qi blazed through his body and then he triggered his technique. A tiny version of his **{Staggered End}** whiffed out of his skin. It was an impressive demonstration of control. Most people couldn’t control their techniques in that way, lowering its output. The attendants jumped back in fear as the **Void** disintegrated his clothes and everything else that was in contact with his skin, including the chair he was sitting on. She knew that he could control enough of his Qi to push it out and manifest the effect on the outside of his clothes. He had been wearing the trousers from one of the outfits she got for him.

“Really,” she told him. “Even Kri knows better than do something so petty.”

He had the audacity to grin at her. On the other side of the room, Nayra had turned her head away, trying not to look at him standing there naked in the center of the room. The attendants did the same, or at least pretended. She narrowed her eyes at them when they cast glances at his bare body.

Anrsoh sighed and wondered when she had gotten so comfortable with him. She shook her head and told the attendants to bring out his outfit. One of them opened a small ornate chest that had been placed in the corner of the room and started pulling out pieces of clothing.

They started to dress him as he looked extremely uncomfortable. She tried to hide her grin at the fact that the outfit came with an equip function. But seeing him squirm as others dressed him felt like a good enough payback. It was his own fault for not wanting to learn how to dress properly.

“This is ridiculous,” Ryun grumbled as two attendants fastened a sash across his dark violet robe. “I simple battle robe should suffice. I am not... this,” he gestured at the fancy outfit.

Anrosh rolled her eyes. She had nearly strangled him when he mentioned that he planned to accept the dinner invitation from a High Ranker. They were completely unprepared for that. The clothes that she had purchased for him were completely inadequate for something like this, and he most certainly couldn't go in the outfit that he wore to the party. Thankfully, he had told her early enough that she had been able to get a custom order for an outfit. It had required her squeezing Essence from him, but in the end, she felt that it was worth it.

His outfit was spun from soft Essence Spider silk, tinged with the Essence of the Void. It was a Legendary set that when worn together increased his Void draw in rate by 5% and it was capable of surviving up to tier 5 in the Void plane and gave a modest boost to wisdom. It had cost them a fortune, nearly one hundred and fifty thousand Celestial Essence. It cost that much because of the rarity of the silk, and the fact that it did a specific and niche thing. When looking at the whole of the Infinite Realm, there were few Void users overall. Ryun had grumbled at the price, but in the end, he had paid it. Anrosh knew that it was worth it, nice materials weren't everything that made a good outfit, how it fit its wearer mattered just as

much. A Sect Head wearing such quality clothes that matched his Aspect? Well, that would bring prestige all on its own.

The outfit was classic sect style. On his feet he had black soft silk shoes, black silk trousers that were bound by violet bands all the way up to his knees—leaving the trousers wider and looser around his upper thighs. A black sash tightened his violet upper robe. His hands, similar to his knees were bound with black bands of silk around his forearms. The outfit had *equip* and *restricted*—which prevented its Void tinged strands from damaging anything that it touched. It gave Ryun a clean and dignified look.

Too bad that his face ruined the illusion. His unruly hair coupled with the cracks over his eyes that leaked Void made him look intimidating, but that was only proper for a Sect Head. But it was her job to make sure that he represented their sect well. Ryun was not someone who could do it. He was powerful, and that brought a lot to the sect, but actually leading it had fallen down on her. She had spent days locked up with Lesamitrius and Riodan, learning more about the core, about sects, about the ways in which they needed to act. With Lesamitrius and Riodan she had started the foundation of an information network. Lesamitrius had made connections with a few other smaller sects scattered around the core, those that had been interested in the Twilight Melody Sect after everyone had learned who Ryun was and seen him in the tournament. She had even granted them a budget, which was an added headache to Anrosh.

“None of this was necessary,” Ryun said once they were done.

“Of course it was,” Anrosh told him. “You are a Sect Head; you need to look like one. Perhaps in time you will be strong enough that you wouldn’t need to care, but not yet. Regardless, you are meeting with the Spear of Sorrow, you cannot afford to look like a beggar. You cannot afford to be seen in the company of a High Ranker in anything less than your best.”

“We are just going to talk,” Ryun said.

“It doesn’t matter, she is a High Ranker. One of the best in the entire world. You need to show her the respect,” Anrosh said, though she knew that her words were probably wasted on him. She was yet to recover from the knowledge that Ryun somehow knew the fucking Wandering Drake. When asked his response had been that they just met one day a year ago. As if that

somehow explained anything; but getting information out of Ryun was harder than turning a mountain into a castle. The mood in the sect had changed. Not only had Ryun qualified for the tournament, two High Rankers had shown interest in him. One had come to visit, as if they were friends even. It was... frankly Anrosh couldn't let herself dwell on the fact, or her brain would turn to mush.

But she would force Ryun to take advantage of all his connections for the sect. They had to get as much as they could if they were to survive and grow. For some reason people were interested in Ryun, a part of her understood. He was a monster, talented and powerful, but there were those who were stronger. The biggest reason she could imagine someone wanting to get him on their side was his growth.

Ryun grimaced. "I shouldn't have accepted the invitation."

Anrosh waved the attendants out of the room, then put her hands on her hips. "You promised that you would hear her out. And this is not just about you, it is about the whole sect."

He sighed. "Fine. Why is she that big of a deal, even?"

Anrosh opened her mouth but then closed it, she glanced at Nayra in the corner and realized that neither of them knew. Nayra because she grew up in a place so far away from here, and Ryun because he was a Ranker.

She took in a deep breath. Anrosh, like any other child in the sects had grown up hearing stories about the High Rankers, the Cultivators at least. And the Spear of Sorrow's was one of those that the people talk most often about. "Spear of Sorrow," Anrosh started. "She is important, because she is strong, and at the end of the day that is what most people in the sects care about. She had also become a High Ranker at a relatively young age, when she had been just over one hundred years old. She follows a path that utilizes blood and silver Qi, a unique path that is one of the three main paths of the Zenshuen sect. Her Class is rumored to be some kind of object copying class. She is a great fighter, and one of the great leaders of her sect. She had been made a Sect Leader of one of the oldest Sects in the world. She is... in all possible metrics, impressive."

"Blood and silver aspect?" Ryun said. Anrosh sighed, of course that part would be the thing that interested him the most.

“Yes,” Anrosh answered.

“Why is she called the Spear of Sorrow then?” Ryun asked.

Anrosh wondered how to explain it best. It was a famous story in the sects. She was sure that the truth was nothing like what people shared, and yet... It was a story of loss, sorrow, and blood.

“I don’t know how it really happened; she got her name more than two hundred years ago. But the story is this: A long time ago, Selia Ha Jhan and her lover lived happily in the Zenshuen Sect. But then, the two of them fell in love with a man. He was weaker than them, but it didn’t matter to the two women. They decided to open their hearts and their lives to him, making the three of them a closed triad. They were together for years, but the man didn’t advance and he refused the offers of power from his two lovers. He wished to advance on his own, to be worthy of the two of them. It is said that he searched far and wide for something to help him, for he himself wasn’t talented enough. In the end, he turned to dark powers. He made a deal with a monster living deep in the Under, but when the time came for him to pay, the monster wanted only his soul. It grabbed him from his home, and dragged him down into the Under, never to be heard from again,” Anrosh paused, looking at Ryun, trying to see what he thought about the story so far, but she could see nothing in his expression. She knew that the story was probably not true, yet it was the version that she had heard.

“Selia was angered the disappearance of her love, so she asked the Dealmaker to tell her where he was. She paid with everything that she had, and more that she borrowed from others. She learned that her love was deep beneath the ground, in the Under. At that time, for her level of power, going in the Under was the same as a death sentence. But still she and her remaining lover went after him. They fought through the monsters in the dark and painted the cave walls with their blood. For one hundred days and nights they searched, but they found no trace of him. In the end Selia lost all hope that they would ever find him, and she turned to grief. She wandered the Under for fifty years, fighting every day, her spear made of blood and silver soaked with the death of monsters. They say, that when she finally walked out of the Under, she dragged her spear on the ground behind her, and that she was covered in dried blood. That from her eyes trailed lines of

bloody tears, showing all her sorrow at having failed to find what she had lost. They say, that even now, every dozen or so years, she goes down again and searches for the man that she loved. And every time she returns with bloody tears trailing down her cheeks.”

Ryun tilted his head, not saying anything for a moment. “That is not what I expected.”

“Not all High Rankers are named for the ways in which they fight, or some great feat that they had accomplished,” Anrosh told him.

Ryun grunted at that.

“Who knows what they’ll call you,” Anrosh added with a smile. There were already rumors about the Seventh Iteration Ranker who had entered the High Division. Everyone knew that it was impressive to rise so high in such a short period of time. Even the other Seventh Iteration Ranker had been the topic of talks, perhaps even more so than Ryun in the recent weeks. He had already fought in his division and had shown incredible power. Anrosh wondered what they would think and say once Ryun finally had the chance to fight in his matches.

“What do you mean?”

“You are in the tournament; how do you think that names such as these come to be? If you prove yourself, the people will need something to call you.”

He didn’t look all that enamored by that idea. Then, he shook his head. “It doesn’t matter, I don’t care that much really. What I do care about is why this Spear of Sorrow actually wants me. Zenker told me that she was a part of his group, whoever they are. But neither one of them had given me any details. I don’t know enough about either of them to really make a decision. Besides, I like doing things on my own.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, aside that they are some of the most powerful people in the world. I don’t know anything about any groups, but then again I grew up in the sects and we mostly only care about our own. At least the smaller sects like the one in which I grew up in. If there is a group that rules from behind the scenes, those two would probably be good candidates for it. Still, Ryun, you need to decided what it is that you want. They can help both you and the sect a lot.”

“I dislike tying myself to people that I don’t know,” Ryun said.

“That is easy to fix, isn’t it?” Nayra said, speaking up for the first time since they started this conversation. Anrosh glanced at her, seeing that she looked about as lost in that conversation as he was.

Ryun tilted his head and raised an eyebrow.

“Obviously,” Nayra started. “You need to get to know her, or them.”

Ryun blinked, as if that hadn’t occurred to him. Then he grimaced. “I am not the best person around at social interactions.”

Anrosh snorted and Nayra chuckled. Anrosh took a deep breath, what he said was the truth, but she also thought that perhaps his personality might be of use now.

“The Spear of Sorrow has people bowing and scraping before her all the time. You are... In a way you are her equal. You are a Ranker, that holds weight in our world. You have an honored spot. It is true that most recent Rankers hadn’t amounted to much, and that the title has suffered because of it. But you,” she pointed at his chest. “You have advanced to the Immortal Realm in only the few years that you have been here, you’ve risen and entered the Tournament. People have heard about you, they speak about you. Perhaps, your more direct approach would be better. Don’t hide who you are, ask what you want to know of her, and make your decision. Even if she doesn’t tell you anything, the way she answers will tell you a lot.”

Ryun’s eyes narrowed, then he seemed to come to a decision. He nodded and took a deep breath.

“Well then, I should get going. Don’t want to leave a High Ranker waiting on me.”

With that he turned and headed out of the room. Near the doorway he paused and glanced back.

“Thank you, Anrosh, for all the things that you do for me,” before she could answer, he was already out of the room. Anrosh smiled to herself and glanced at Nayra.

“So, fifty Greater on him making a scene,” Nayra said.

Anrosh narrowed her eyes on Nayra, but the redhead just grinned at her. Finally, she sagged. Nayra was probably right. At least Lesamitrius would be accompanying him as a bodyguard. She hoped that the man could keep Ryun out of too much trouble.