

## Present – Ryun

Ryun sat on the bed in a small Inn, Anrosh standing above him. The incident with the thugs had been quickly taken care of. The guards arrived and one of their truthseers asked questions. It was quickly concluded that Ryun and Lesamitrius had acted in self-defense. The guards had no grounds to keep them, they hadn't broken any laws.

It had been a few hours since then. He and Lesamitrius had returned back to their inn where they found Nayra and Anrosh, and Lesamitrius filled them in while Ryun went up to his room. He had hoped to try and think on his ideal some more, but as the conversation beneath his feet unfolded he knew that it was unlikely that he would have any time for that.

Anrosh made her way up the stairs and to his room. He stood up and opened the door just as she was about to knock. She looked at him without any surprise and he sighed, stepping aside and allowing her to enter.

Which brought him to now, him sitting on the bed and her glaring at him from above.

“So, Nayra told me some of what you spoke about,” she said.

Ryun didn't react, he had known that the two of them would talk. It was inevitable.

“You have been in a... difficult mood since you came back. Before even. I didn't quite see it then, but you changed how you acted. I thought that it was a good thing, but now, you went overboard with those thugs, you do know that?”

“They attacked first,” Ryun said simply.

“Yes, and you could've handled them without breaking half of their bones. Not everyone has Essence for strong healing potions, it will be weeks, months for some until they are healed fully.”

“They were the ones that made a choice,” Ryun told her.

Anrosh sighed. “I thought... that you retaliating with overwhelming force was a thing of the past.”

Ryun didn't say anything. She was right, he didn't need to do that to them. He had just been so frustrated.

Anrosh shook her head. "I think that you should tell me about your past. I think that I deserve to know."

Ryun sighed, he did owe her that at least.

"Are you sure that you want to? It will change what you think about me," Ryun met her eyes.

"You have no idea what I think about you," she told him.

Ryun nodded, then he focused on his titles and made them visible for her in full.

Anrosh blinked, her eyes met his and then she turned and started to read. He sensed the moment when she reached the titles that spoke the most. Her breath stopped for a moment, and then she tried to pretend like it didn't bother her. But it was done, she knew now.

"Nayra said that you lost someone," Anrosh said as she turned to look him in the eyes again.

Ryun held her gaze, waiting to see if she would flinch. When she didn't, he responded. "Yes, her name was Melody. She died... well, more than half a decade ago now."

Anrosh's eye widened for a moment, and then she nodded as if in understanding. "You did that," she waved at his screens. "Because she died?"

"Yes. They killed her, and so I killed them in return," Ryun said. "I killed both the guilty and the innocents. I wasn't quite right in my head for most of it. For some, I was just angry. She and I shared more than just love, we had a perk, a power that bonded us. When she was gone, I was left without that power's other half. Some I killed in rage, others in madness, but I do not regret it now. I would've probably done the same even if the perk hadn't driven me mad. I was filled with rage, and I hated them. I hate them still. I might not have killed as many, but I would've made them suffer regardless."

"And you think that because of what happened on Earth you are a monster, that you don't deserve to find love again?" Anrosh asked.

"I don't know," he shrugged. "I am a monster, that is not in question. I don't think like other people. I see a child that has no future and I don't see the point in prolonging their suffering. I see people who are just... getting by, and I have no respect for them. If someone attacks me, I will retaliate. Whether I deserve to find love... that is for others to decide."

“You killed children?” She asked, her voice calm.

“I did, those that were fortunate enough to survive the arrival of the Framework, but unfortunate enough that they were too young to ever gain access to it. What was the point of their lives? Trying to survive without Essence, never to even touch it before the world ended? It was needless cruelty to let them live.”

Anrosh looked away, and he wondered just how much he had changed her opinion with the truth.

“I knew that you were a Ranker, but I didn’t really understand until know just how different that made you,” Anrosh said slowly.

“How so?” Ryun asked.

“You still think with the mentality of your old world, even when you pretend you don’t. But nothing that was true there is true here. Right and wrong, good and evil, those things don’t exist in the same way here. The people who are powerful here cannot be put in such simple boxes,” She got closer, leaning down to look in his eyes. “Let’s take Nayra’s mother as an example, to her people she is the hero, their protector. If you asked them they would call her good, but to others, she is evil, a monster that had killed as many people as you have. The same is true of the greatest people here in the core, of the heads of great guilds, kingdoms, and sects. Most are good to their people, and evil to their enemies. That is the reality of this world. We are not raised to believe in such absolutes, good and evil are only a matter of perspective.”

“You think that it is that simple?” Ryun asked.

“It is that simple,” Anrosh insisted. “And you are wallowing in self pity by over-thinking it.”

Ryun blinked, her tone had turned harsh. She had never spoken to him that way. “I am not wallowing in self-pity,” Ryun told her.

“Oh really?” Anrosh leaned back crossing her arms across her chest and raising an eyebrow. “You are running around aimless, putting all these stupid thoughts in your head. As if you are the only person in the world that had ever lost something or someone. You, are not unique Ryun. Your pain is not greater than the pain of others. Your *‘crimes’* pale in comparison to those who are hailed as heroes in this world. You are the same as everyone else.”

Ryun blinked as she berated him, then anger started to rise up inside of him. “What do you know of my pain? You are just—”

“—A what?” she interrupted him. “Did you forget how we met? I lost the same thing that you had. My husband died, the same way that your love did. But I didn’t go on a murderous rampage, true I had no power, but I could’ve sought my death. And I didn’t go into depression after. Because I had Kri, who depended on me. I understand, you had no one on Earth. But here and now, you have us. You have the sect, me, Kri, Nayra, thousands who depend on you. You don’t have the luxury to be like this.”

Ryun hadn’t realized that he had gotten off the bed until he was just in front of her, staring up at her. He reached for the chair near the table and flung it across the room, shattering it against the wall on the other side. She didn’t flinch, and there was no fear in her eyes. He took a few moments to get himself under control, to settle his breathing. And then he spoke. “And what would you have me do? Have I not done enough already? If they stand behind me, I protect them. If they stand beside me, I respect them, and if they stand in my way, I show them no mercy. That is all that I know, all that I have ever known. I don’t know how to deal with this. I can barely hold a real conversation with people, what do I need to do Anrosh?”

“First, you need to get all of this... frustration, this stress, out of yourself. Go find an Inn, get drunk, get laid, I don’t know! But just going up into the sky and brooding is not helping you.”

Ryun blinked, then his eyes darkened. “Laid?”

Anrosh had the presence of mind to look ashamed. “Go, do things just for fun. Stop brooding all alone.”

Ryun closed his eyes, his anger disappearing. He knew that she only wanted to help. And perhaps there was some truth to what she was saying.

“Maybe,” he just said.

It wasn’t the answer that she wanted to hear, and he sensed her nearly opening her mouth to speak, but then she sighed, and shook her head. “Think about it, and know that I am here for you Ryun. Aside from Kri, you are the closest thing I have to family.”

With that she turned around and left him alone to his thoughts.

A few hours later, Ryun decided that he should take some of Anrosh's advice. So, instead of staying in a stuffy and small room, he headed down the stairs, intent on heading out for a walk. Anrosh and Nayra were already in their rooms, asleep, even though it wasn't yet night. At least Ryun didn't think it was. It was hard to tell inside the mountain where there was always light. Lesamitrius however, was down in the common room, drinking with other patrons.

Ryun tried to slip by, but somehow, the man saw him and immediately made his way across the room, intercepting Ryun near the exit.

"Sect Head!" he whispered in a tone that was heard by all. "Are you leaving? Allow me to keep you company, you should not walk alone in this city."

Ryun looked at the man, it was clear that he had been drinking, but he was sure on his feet. Perhaps not drunk, but buzzed at least.

"There is no need Lesamitrius, I am capable of protecting myself," Ryun told him.

The man looked conflicted, the ears on top of his head twitched and he reached up and ran a hand through his mane. "If the Sect Leaders wake and you are not here... they will not be happy with me for letting you go alone."

Ryun glanced up at the ceiling, his sense knowing exactly where Nayra and Anrosh were, lying in bed in each other's arms. Just sensing that hurt him. "I need some time alone," Ryun told him.

The man looked down at Ryun, and then sighed. "At least tell me where you plan on going, so that I may have something to tell them."

"I don't have a destination in mind, I'll just wander around," Ryun shrugged, then he remembered Anrosh's advice. "I might get drunk."

Lesamitrius lips twitched. "Ah, well, there are only a few places in the city that would allow someone like you to do that."

Ryun glanced at the man, then at the tables behind him filled with people in the process of drinking. "What do you mean?"

Lesamitrius blinked, then tilted his head. “I mean your stats? You would need some pretty strong spirits if you plan on them having an effect on you.”

Ryun grimaced, that hadn’t even occurred to him. He had never really drank that much. “Well, do you know where the closest such place is?”

Lesamitrius nodded his head. “Of course, I’ve been spending the day talking with the locals, gathering information. It did come up. There is an Inn that caters to people with high stats nearby. A few streets down south. *The Old Brew House*, is its name. It should be easy to find.”

Ryun nodded. “Thanks,” he said and turned to leave. After a few steps he paused and looked over his shoulder at Lesamitrius. “You did well today, with the thugs and the guards I mean.”

Lesamitrius looked taken a back, and Ryun walked out of the inn before he could respond. The man had been an asset since his duel with him, it felt... appropriate to let him know that.

Ryun headed out of the inn and followed Lesamitrius’ instructions. His senses picked up on the four people that had been watching the inn from across the street. He had noticed them a long while ago, they had followed him and Lesamitrius after they dealt with the guards. The four were in fact from the guard, sent there to make sure that they don’t make any more trouble. Ryun had heard their orders, so he didn’t worry over much about them, and he made no attempt to evade them.

A few minutes of walking brought him to the inn Lesamitrius told him about. It was a large two story building, with a big sign in front with its name and a picture of a barrel displayed beneath it. He had been right, it was easy to spot.

He looked at it for a moment, his sense could tell him that there weren’t many patrons inside. Four were scattered around the room, sitting alone at their tables, drinking or in one case passed out. One table in the middle of the room was occupied by another seven people, two were sitting one across the other, while the others were standing around them. Some drinking game was in the process of playing out.

For a moment, Ryun almost turned around and left. And then, he forced himself forward. Anrosh was right, he was... frustrated, stressed, and

he was too wrapped up inside his own head. He needed to release all that tension, to do something to take his mind of things.

He stepped inside the inn and looked around. The light essence curtain told him that the room was well lit. The tables were arranged to the right, and the bar was to the left, stairs were across the room at the far wall, leading up to the inn's rooms. He glanced around and immediately saw and heard the group in the middle. The five that cheered the two seating people on were clapping their hands and chanting "Drink" in something that didn't even approach being synchronized. The two that were competing were glaring at one another. One was a drake that looked more like a humanoid crocodile coupled with a crest on top of his head, and the other was a human woman, with slightly pointed ears—an elf variant.

She wore bandages around her hands and forearms that resembled what Ryun remembered some fighters wearing back on Earth. The same type of bandages was around her chest too. Her hair was braided and trailed behind her back. His sense detected something weird about her skin, but his eyes couldn't see it. His eyesight wasn't that precise. There were... irregularities all over her body that reminded him of how scars felt to his sense. Only these were more... orderly? Then it clicked and he realized that they were probably tattoos.

Half of their table was covered in empty mugs, and each had two full ones in front of them. At the same time they reached out and grabbed their mugs, then raised them and started drinking while everyone else howled with cheers.

Ryun shook his head and walked over to the bar, the woman standing behind it was a ravzor, wearing a shirt, pants and an apron over that. She saw him approaching and spoke.

"What can I get you?" she asked.

Ryun took a seat, his back turned toward the noise and hummed. "Don't know. I haven't really done this before."

The woman blinked. "You haven't done drinking before?"

"No," Ryun said. "Didn't even know that most stuff won't affect me."

The woman hummed to herself, then shook her head. She reached to the side of the bar and pulled out a piece of paper. “Here, this is the menu, minimum stats required for it to affect you are written on the right.”

Ryun took the menu and blinked, there was quite a lot of different drinks on there. After a cursory look he realized that most of it wouldn’t affect him at all. His vitality and endurance were too high for it. And he had no idea what the drinks that he could consume even were, the names were alien to him, and nothing gave him any hint as to what they could be.

He was about to ask, when he heard a loud noise behind him. His sense had taken everything in of course, so he wasn’t surprised by it. The woman and the drake had drunk their last mugs, and the drake had collapsed from his chair, flipping backwards and to the floor, unconscious. The woman screamed her victory and stood up, Ryun’s sense told him that her stance was sure and he sensed no sign of her being unsteady.

The others around the table howled in laughter and slapped her back. Then Essence Crystals exchanged hands, it looked like they had bet on the winner. Ryun shook his head, and turned his attention back to the menu.

The woman laughed along with the others and then turned and walked over to the bar, next to Ryun. She grabbed what looked to be a simple disk and then called out to the barkeep. “Hey Kersa! I paid for the drinks, and a little extra for my friends back there, make sure that they can drink for the end of the night,” she nodded with her head back toward the table where the others were carefully picking up the unconscious drake from the floor and placing him in a chair.

“I should kick you out, you do this every time! They’ll puke all over my floor, and who’s going to have to clean it up, huh? Not you, that’s who!”

“Aw, don’t be like that Kersa, here, I’ll pay double,” she waved the disk around. Ryun assumed that it was something that allowed one to deposit Essence. He had heard of such stuff from his listening in on his people.

The barkeep—Kersa mumbled something too low for anyone to hear, but Ryun caught it with his sense. He was surprised by the creativity of her swears.

Then, the woman noticed him for the first time and blinked, her eyes looking down over his clothes. Probably realizing that he was from a sect, the



manner of dress was distinctive from what he had seen. Ryun hadn't turned his head toward her, he could see her just fine with his sense. And he was too busy trying to figure out what he was going to order as drink to make the effort. It was his first real drink in the Infinite Realm, he wanted to make the right choice.

"Well hellooo there handsome," she said as she leaned toward him. Ryun blinked at her slightly slurring her words. It was an act, she had just spoken clearly a moment ago. "I don't see many sect people like me in these parts."

The fact that she said she was from a sect as well, intrigued him enough to turn his head in her direction. Like all other people, she appeared like a moving sculpture made out of grey sand to his eyes. No color, and no detail. Her eyes were just the surface level, blank globes in between her eyelashes. He could see her general shape, but nothing more. She did look attractive, or at least he thought she did. Now that he was more focused on her, his sense did catch a better image of her skin. She definitely had either scars or tattoos covering her skin.

"Wow," she said as her eyes widened. "That is some True Body you have there, I like the lines, they make you look... dangerous. Wait, is it something more? Huh, I see. And your eyes... very Dark Lord of you."

Ryun didn't quite know what to say to that, so he stayed silent. She tilted her head, and then frowned and spoke again. "You have quite a good control over your core, I can barely even tell that you are a cultivator."

Just the fact that she could sense something told him that she was powerful, he couldn't get anything from her. And she had to be a powerful Cultivator if she could sense his Qi despite his control.

"Your control is impressive as well," Ryun responded and she grinned at him. Then he felt a flash of her Qi, just for an instant. She probably knew that he couldn't get anything from her on his own, so she showed him. He had never felt Qi quite like it. The Aspect was foreign to him, and it held a great quality, more than his did. It was not any Realm that he was familiar with, not Immortal Realm, but most likely a higher one.

"So, what is a Cultivator doing among all these big bad Classers?" she asked.

He didn't quite know how to respond to that question, but he did try to live his life without lying. "Right now, I am attempting to figure out what these drinks are, I've never had one before, and I would like my first experience to be... pleasurable."

She snorted, then when he didn't say anything else spoke. "Wait, you are serious?"

"Very," Ryun nodded his head. "It feels like it is a big decision."

She took a seat next to him and peered at the menu in front of him. "Well, I can help you with that. I myself am something of an expert on such things."

Ryun heard the barkeep snort as she was washing some mugs.

"Any input is welcome," Ryun said. "But as far as the real intent behind your question goes. I am just passing through the city on my way to the tournament," Ryun said after a moment.

"Oh? Are you participating, or just watching?" she asked.

"Both," he answered.

"Well, that is interesting."

"What about you? Why are you here?"

"Well, I had some business down in the Under. Sadly, it didn't turn out in the manner that I expected. So I came up here to drown my sorrows in spirits."

Ryun chuckled. "I'm sorry that your business didn't work out."

She shrugged, then spoke again. "Might I ask what sect you hail from?"

"I doubt you heard about it, it is a frontier sect and a new one at that, Twilight Melody," Ryun told her.

She tilted her head. "The frontier you say? You must be quite an asset for your sect then," she said.

Ryun shrugged. "I lead it."

"A Sect Head? Oh, this is a privilege then, it is not often that I get to meet new Sect Heads from the frontier. May I have the honor of hearing your name?"

Ryun inclined his head. "I am Ryun Nacht," he said, then met her eyes. "And you are?"

The woman blinked, she glanced down at herself, then looked behind him at the barkeep who just shrugged. Then, she turned back to him with a puzzled look on her face. “You don’t know who I am?”

Ryun tilted his head. “Should I know you?” he asked.

“Huh,” she said, then cleared her throat and straightened. “I am Erdania Xi Jhan, at your service.”

Ryun blinked blankly at her, and stayed silent. She was obviously waiting for something, but he still didn’t know her.

“Hm... So you really don’t know me?” she asked.

“As I said, I am from the frontier, I don’t follow what happens in the core,” Ryun answered.

“Well, there goes my ego I guess,” she dropped her head and smacked it several times against the bar, making it shake.

“Hey!” the barkeep yelled and Erdania groaned.

“Sorry,” she mumbled and then looked at Ryun. “Now I am embarrassed, I thought that one look at my tattoos would give it away.”

So they were tattoos, unfortunately for her Ryun couldn’t really see them. Still, he wondered if perhaps she was actually drunk, her movements didn’t indicate that, but he didn’t know what kind of perks she had. For all he knew she didn’t feel the effects in exact same way.

“No need to feel embarrassed, I don’t really know much about the core at all.”

She looked up at him, her head still on top of the bar. “How about I buy you that drink and we forget about me making a fool out of myself?”

Ryun frowned, his first instinct was to refuse, but again Anrosh’s words came back and made him think. He did need to get out of his comfort zone.

“Sure,” Ryun said and she rewarded his answer with a smile.