

## Pleasant Conversation

Ryun climbed out of the carriage, followed by Lesamitrius a few steps behind. He was the one person in his sect that at least knew some of how the core worked. The two of them had arrived at the restaurant in the Eastern District of the city. It was a large building, with three gardens arranged in three steps. Hanging plants fell from the edge of each balcony, a few trees were scattered around the first floor, the second had no trees, but water flowed through small paths raised out of the floor. The last floor was... hidden from his sense, which surprised him. He glanced up with his eyes and saw Essence swirling around it like a dome. A formation or an array of some kind, perhaps.

Ryun turned and took a look at Lesamitrius, standing nervously behind him. Sure, he didn't appear that way outwardly, but Ryun could tell with his sense. Lesamitrius wore a combat robe, an official looking one true, but still a combat robe. Ryun wished he could've worn something like that, but if he was being honest, he did understand Anrosh's point.

He started walking toward the entrance, observing the people around him. There was a long line in front the building, groups of people waiting anxiously. He overheard people whispering their hopes about getting in, others promised retribution if they weren't let in. Ryun ignored them and walked past them all. They glared at him, whispering again. Some recognized him from the tournament, but that didn't seem to make them stop glaring. He heard a few comment on his arrogance for thinking that he could cut the line, some even laughed and made bets with their friends about how long it would take for him to be turned away.

Ryun and Lesamitrius arrived at the entrance, a single attendant stood with a book opened up in front of him on a small podium. Ryun approached and without a word spoken handed him the small plate that had the invitation written on it. Anrosh had told him that it was beautifully made, but it like a few other things had been made so that it had a smooth surface. He couldn't sense anything about it, to his eyes it was just a jumble of different kind of Essence, and to his sense just a small plate.

The man took it and seemed to freeze for a moment. Then he respectfully offered the plate back to Ryun as he bowed over it.

“Greeting, young master. We’ve been told to expect you,” with a gesture he summoned another attendant. “Please escort our guests to the Blue Room.”

At his words the whispers behind Ryun silenced, and then only a few seconds later started again. By then Ryun and Lesamitrius had already followed the ravzor attendant inside. He pulled his attention away from the outside of the building and focusing on the inside. He could still sense the people outside, of course. But it was more in the back of his mind now.

They were led to the stairs and then up. They passed the first two floors and reached the third one. Ryun could sense the hole in his sense more clearly now, it was definitely placed around the entire balcony. They walked outside and his sense of the outside disappeared, replaced only by the small section they were in. Low walls split the balcony, with smaller sections being surrounded by tall and rich plants that obscured the view inside. He could now only sense the straight corridor that stretches to the end of the balcony. They were led to the end and then the attendant bowed and gestured toward the entrance of the section on the right. A curtain of light separated it from the corridor, probably for privacy concerns.

Ryun walked in followed by Lesamitrius a moment later. His sense came alive before his eyes. In the moment a part of him breached the boundary, he could sense everything in the room. He knew that there were only three occupants, one standing at attention on the other side of the room with his back turned to the room, looking over the edge of the balcony—a warrior by his bearing. The other stood closer to the entrance and was dressed in a similar garb as that of the restaurant attendants. Plants grew all around the edge, closing up around the small room like walls. Four torches were placed along the low walls, in order to provide light. The room was mostly bare of any other furnishing. There was a small table to the side with some bottles placed alongside it and another next to it with covered plates. In the center was a small table, just large enough for two people to sit comfortably. The Spear of Sorrow was already sitting at the table, both of her hands in her lap and her back straight. She appeared composed and relaxed;

her head turned in the direction of the door as if she had known that he was entering.

A moment later, his step took the rest of his body inside. He didn't know if she planned on playing some kind of games with him or not, but he in general didn't play at all. His eyes met hers the moment his face passed through the curtain. She didn't show any sign that she was taken off guard by that, but perhaps her face or eyes showed something that he couldn't see. To him she looked like any other person, albeit one with horns, a sculpture made out of fine sand without any real color. In his sight her skin had a silver sheen, and something red and silver, thick and powerful moved through her body, through her veins. She was one of the few people that he had seen that in. For most, he only saw the surface Essence of their flesh or whatever they had for skin. But the Essence beneath her flesh was stronger than it, and so somehow showed through.

The attendant bowed to him as he entered, but Ryun didn't move his attention from his host.

"Welcome, Sect Head," she said with a small incline of her head. Despite her standing, Ryun was technically above her, at least in titles. Anrosh had told him that he should show respect regardless of what she did, so he inclined his head the same amount. Even though he wasn't required to do that.

"Sect Leader," he greeted her in turn.

She raised her hand and gestured at the table. "Please, take a seat, I've taken the liberty of ordering a meal for us both."

Ryun didn't really get much from normal food, but he could still taste it at least. His stomach just disintegrated everything that entered it. He gestured with one hand and a glance at Lesamitrius and the man walked over to join the warrior standing guard on the other side of the room taking the same position with his back turned to the room.

Ryun took a seat and forced himself to bear through the dance. Anrosh and Lesamitrius had instructed him in how these things went. First, they would eat, the attendant would serve them, and they could converse lightly. Without touching on any more important or pointed topics. Only after they

were finished with eating would they turn to speak about the reason why they were here.

As the attendant started serving them, Selia spoke. “This is a demasi dish, a specialty from the homeworld. There are few in the Infinite Realm that still know how to make it, thankfully the Reino Sect is one of them. It is one of my favorite dishes, sadly I don’t get to indulge in it often. The way that it crunches beneath my teeth and the juices it releases... It is as near to bliss as I have ever gotten.”

Ryun nodded, the Reino Sect were the owners of the restaurant. They were a sect that focused on fine dining, which Ryun wasn’t quite sure how that worked.

“I am sure that it will be delicious,” Ryun said uncomfortably. Small talk wasn’t one of his strengths, and he was already debating why he even played along. In the end, he forced himself to do it. He understood that the people in the Infinite Realm had their customs, and it cost him little but time to honor them.

“Do you have any favorite meals? I am sure that the chef would be able to recreate it just from your description, and if not fully, I am sure that they could get pretty close.”

Ryun shifted. “Not really, I eat whatever I have available to me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, her expression looking regretful. “I forgot that you spent the last decade on a dying homeworld, food was probably the last thing on your mind.”

“There were... other concerns, yes.”

They ate their meal in silence after that, without talking beyond the few short exchanges about the food itself. Once they were finished, the attendant gathered everything, making it disappear into a storage space and then left, leaving only a bottle of something that vaguely resembled wine and two filled glasses.

Once they were alone, aside from their bodyguards, she turned her head in his direction and met his eyes. “I know that you probably didn’t have the chance on the old world, but I can see that you didn’t take advantage since you arrived here either.”

Ryun tilted his head, somewhat confused.

“You don’t do this often, do you?” She gestured at the table.

“Do what?”

“Enjoy things,” she answered.

Ryun paused, then thought about it for a few seconds. She waited patiently for him to gather his thoughts, keeping her eyes on him. “I guess that I don’t,” Ryun shrugged. “Things like these have never been that important to me. Even this; I can tell that it was tasty that it was well made, but it doesn’t really add anything to me. Food is food. I find enjoyment in my Cultivation, in introspection.”

“Hm... Perhaps this had been a bad idea then,” Selia commented.

Ryun tilted his head. “What was?”

“Inviting you here,” she answered. “This establishment is run by one of the most highly sought-after chef masters. Just being allowed on the first floor is considered fortunate. People curry favors and pay exuberant amounts just for a chance at an evening being served by them. I didn’t take into account the fact that you probably don’t know anything about this,” she waved her hand at the room.

Ryun glanced around, more for show than any real need. “It is interesting, but... no, this will not influence me. Displays of wealth and influence do appeal to me, I do not care for them.”

“What do you care about then?” Selia asked.

“Truth and respect,” Ryun said immediately.

She raised an eyebrow, then leaned forward placing her elbows on the table. One hand reached up and pulled one errant lock of hair back behind her ear. Ryun wondered if she was trying to flirt or seduce him. He knew that he wasn’t that good at recognizing the signs. Not that it would really matter, the attraction was more than just a physical thing for Ryun. And it wasn’t like her looks mattered when he didn’t see the world in the same manner. From what his eyes could see, her face was pleasantly shaped, but he couldn’t see more than that. Her dress was in sect style and elaborate with several tightly packed layers. His sense told him everything there was about her.

Beneath her dress he could sense her figure, every curve of her body. She was lean and fit, as most people here were. Not as much as some people he had seen before, but that didn’t mean a lot. A person’s physical

appearance depended on many factors; like what they did in their daily life, how many of physical stats they had and what ratio those stats were in, but also perks. Everything shaped a person's body into the best shape for who they were.

“Just truth and respect? And nothing else?” She asked softly.

“Some things are more important than others.”

\* \* \*

## **Selia**

She looked at the man across from her, seemingly oblivious to all her charms. She had worn a dress that accentuated her more attractive features. She did not enjoy doing that, but some men and women were easier to handle that way. She wasn't naive enough not to know that others desired her. She wasn't some great beauty, but she was strong, prominent, influential, when all those things were put together it made people want her. It was normal, it happened to everyone who was in a similar position as her. True, she was never as comfortable with it as Erdania was, but... Command had sent another message, insisting that she manage to tie the man to them or at least to her, somehow.

Surprisingly, the man's eyes hadn't wandered. She was a bit at a loss as to what to do. She knew how to tempt people that wanted power or wealth, but none of that had worked on him. She didn't know how to get him to accept her offer. Her plan had been to get him to accept sponsorship, then perhaps over time as she learned more about him, she could guide him in the direction that her group would prefer. Culminating in him joining up.

Now... *Truth* and *respect*, he had said. She didn't know what that meant to him. She knew little about him in truth. Her perk was pulsing inside of her, telling her that he held great sorrow inside of him. It was rare, but perhaps not for a Ranker who had lost everyone on his world. She pushed the perk down, not wanting it to cloud her judgment.

“Alright then,” he wanted the truth, so perhaps she could give it to him, at least a version of it. “What would it take then, for you to consider accepting my offer?”

Ryun tilted his head and thought about it. She had to admit that she was impressed by that. He always took the time to think about his responses. It was refreshing, in a way, to speak with someone who seemingly didn't want anything from her. She was surrounded by people in her own sect that all vied for her attention, who wanted something from her. The only people that didn't want anything were Erdania and her grandfather—but he was a Sect Head of one of the most powerful factions in the Infinite Realm and a Ranker, there was little that he really needed from anyone.

“I will be honest, I do not know you, there is little chance for me to accept anything that you can offer,” Ryun told her.

Selia blinked. It was startling, again, to hear him say something like that. Everyone in the Core knew her, it had been so long since she had been in a room with someone who didn't know her. Then it truly dawned on her what it all meant. He was... a Ranker that knew little about the Infinite Realm and its history, about her history. To him, she was just some random person that had approached him out of the blue. For everyone else this entire thing would be something else entirely. For him it was just... strange.

“I see,” Selia said. “And if we changed that? Got to know each other? Would you change your opinion then?”

“That would depend on who you are as a person,” Ryun said.

To be measured against her real self, not the image of what the people had about her. She knew that he couldn't really know or understand what that meant for her.

“What? You would only accept if you think that I am a good person?” Selia asked.

He waved his hand. “No, I don't particularly care one way or another. Good or evil, those words mean little to me, and apparently less in this world. What I care about is trust, and can I give it to you. Can I count on you keeping your word and telling me the truth, always.”

“Well, you are right. For that we would need to know each other very well. How would we go about getting to around that?” Selia asked.

He shifted in his seat, looking almost uncomfortable. “You want something from me, I would say that it is up to you to decide how that is to happen.”

She looked at him, trying to piece together who he was as a person from the information she had available. Prior to this meeting she had her people ask around and learn more. Surprisingly, his people were unwilling to divulge any secrets, even to someone from a Great Sect. It spoke much of the love his people had for him, or fear. But, after her people had made it clear that they don’t want in depth information that might hurt the sect, they had started talking a bit.

She knew that he was direct and blunt, that he was often not around the sect but out hunting monsters and training. She heard that he and his sect fought off a swarm, which might explain how he got so strong in such a short period of time. People in the Infinite Realm advanced fast when faced with adversity. His people told rumors about him and his Sect Leader, some said that he was in a relationship with her, others said that he was in a relationship with both of his Sect Leaders—which was why she thought that her dress might work.

What all of them agreed upon was that he was powerful, and that he ended all those who stood in his path. His fights in the tournament hadn’t been impressive compared to what Selia had seen in her life, but it was impressive that he had managed to qualify. Perhaps he was more skilled than she had first given him credit for and had just managed to hide what he was truly capable of. Command had to have a reason for wanting him recruited.

She realized that she had grown quiet, and the two of them had just been staring at each other for a while. Anybody else would’ve tried to fill the silence, but he had just waited patiently for her to think things through. That rarely happened to her, even Erdania couldn’t handle more than a few seconds of quiet.

“You are a Ranker,” Selia said finally. “You know, I’ve never really had an opportunity to talk with one of you. My grandfather is a Ranker, but he... he is old. Only a fraction of his life had been spent on the homeworld compared to the Infinite Realm. This is his home now. And the other Rankers... they rarely move in my circles.” She tried to put it delicately, the



truth was that few of the newer Rankers ever come to approach her level of power. There was a power difference there that made things more difficult, if she wanted to just talk. She didn't feel that from Ryun, despite her being stronger and older they could talk as if they were equal. She wondered why that was. Perhaps it was because he was advancing so fast, or because he himself simply didn't care for it. Perhaps it was because of the things he had experienced on the old world, that made him different than everyone else. Whatever the reason was, she realized that this was the best opportunity for her to learn more about what existence was like before. "But for you... it had to have been hard."

Ryun blinked his black eyes, then waved with his hand. "Yes and no. In the world before the Framework arrived, I was... an outcast I guess you can say. I had few friends, and I lived life day to day, searching for something to make it seem worthwhile. When the Framework arrived, I found it, and I've never looked back since."

"I know that Earths usually have high technology, how was it losing access to it?" Selia asked, leaned forward and interested in hearing his answer.

"I miss some things, of course. The entertainment mostly. But I've seen that the Infinite Realm has many analogues, I plan to live long enough that I'll see things I once enjoyed be invented again in a new way."

Selia shook her head with a small smile. "Most of the advancement has happened in the last hundred years. Before that the Infinite Realm had been a lot different."

"I guess that I arrived in the right time then," Ryun added a small smile appearing on his face to match hers. "You know, this will take a lot longer than one conversation."

Selia blinked. "What will?"

"Getting to know each other," Ryun told her.

"Well, we have a few weeks until the Grand Auction, I think that we'll know each other well enough for you to make a decision about the sponsorship."

"And what about the other thing?" Ryun asked.

Selia blinked, she hadn't revealed that she was trying to recruit him for something bigger. But she had come to realize that while Ryun was a lot more than he appeared to be. He had to have figured out that it was unlikely that a Great Sect would bother with someone like him, or that she would keep trying even when he refused her. She couldn't really reveal the existence of the League, especially not now when she had been accepted into the Cabal. But she could let him know that she had a more personal interest in him than what she had previously said.

"You said that you value the truth, so I will not lie. I do have more than one reason for wanting you to accept my offer. But I cannot talk about it yet," she tried to find the right words, but then she smiled as she got them. "I guess that we will need to get to know each other better before we can talk about that."

He nodded his head seriously and switched the topic of the conversation to other things.

"What does a Sect Leader of a Great Sect even really do?" Ryun asked.

"Well, I am mostly needed as a visible presence for my sect. A deterrent if you will," Selia answered. "That means that I spend most of the time training, when I am not dealing with important issues with the management of my holdings. Getting stronger is my full-time job."

"Ah, that I can understand. It is the same thing that I do," Ryun said.

"I bet," Selia said. "You've advanced incredibly fast for someone who had arrived in the Infinite Realm just a couple of years ago."

Selia knew about how there had been only two people from his Earth, and how strong they had been before arriving. She wondered what happened on Earth, what she knew was sketchy at best, but that wasn't a conversation about just getting to know one another.

"I don't know about that," Ryun said. "Cultivation, or rather advancement in it, had always come easy to me. I understand that Essence is risky to come by, but sometimes I look at everyone around me and wonder just how they could be wasting their opportunities so much. Cultivation is for me, a way of life. It is the foundation upon I build all that I am, my path is my guiding principle in life."

Selia blinked, and then nodded. "I understand," she said getting drawn in. It was so rare to hear someone talk that way, to understand it the same way that she did. "A Path is a way of life."

He smiled at her then, and she couldn't help but do the same.

"Not many can even grasp at that," he told her.

She had a similar belief. She was young when compared to most of the Infinite Realm's elite. But she knew that power came when one was in constant struggle, when one's life was at risk. Many did think like her, they only lost their lives in the attempts. But there was also something else that she could see now. His advancement through the Cultivation Realms was incredible, and she was pretty sure that he hadn't had inspiration shared with him. That meant that he was beyond talented in it. She had seen it before, some people just had everything come so easily to them that they couldn't comprehend the struggles of others. Erdania was like that, while Selia had plenty of talent, she had to work twice as hard as her partner in order to get just as strong. But in the end, they were the same in that way. She had often wondered about the same thing that he did. She only had the advantage of living in the Infinite Realm for longer and realizing the truth.

"Not everyone is the same," Selia started. "And putting one's life at risk is not something that everyone is willing to do. Still, there are crafters, people on non-combat paths. They too required risk, if perhaps not risks that were tied to combat. Struggle and adversity unravels all the secrets of who one is."

Ryun's eyes held hers for a moment, and then he nodded in agreement. "You are right. I didn't think much about that," he said. "Perhaps I am wrong, I started to believe that getting inspiration had something to do with being in life-or-death situations."

"It is not so simple," Selia shook her head. She was surprised how easy it was to talk with him about this topic, how easy she had been drawn in. There were few Cultivators willing to talk about it at all, and few of those that were had anything smart to say. "Many people have different ideas about what it is, how to best gain it. In the early stages it is tied to the Cultivation directly, improvement of Qi system and Path. And then, starting with immortal it switches to a more internal and personal concept. Most agree

that the inner revelation is a current state of your evolving soul. A snapshot of who you are.”

Ryun listened and then grimaced. “I would not agree with it completely, I achieved my Immortal inspiration by molding myself as I tried to achieve my ideal. It was not who I was, but who I wanted to be,” she looked at him with wide eyes, listening to every word that he said. Before she could say anything, he continued. “Perhaps, for some people, who they want to be is who they currently are, so it is easier for them.”

Selia blinked, shocked. “An ideal? You knew what ideals were before you reached a combined tier of nine?”

“I had the good fortune of meeting a good teacher,” Ryun said.

She looked at him in disbelief. She knew that it was impossible for people to gain an ideal before having nine tiers. And she also knew that no one even tried. It was just... something that was known. Why waste time and willpower on something that you couldn’t achieve. Then she froze and looked at him. She twisted a ring on her finger, but she saw nothing—He had to have protections against it now. Yet, the way he spoke made her suspicious.

“You already have an ideal, don’t you?” She asked.

His expression changed, became more guarded. “I thought that one was only not supposed to have an ideal before they started in the tournament.”

Selia blinked, and then chuckled. He was right of course, because the Tournament was made to help the promising young warriors who were close but couldn’t quite gain their own ideal. Some would manage to break through their blocks in the battles they fought, and others, if they were lucky would gain a public ideal—Perhaps not something that was internal, but it could still be powerful.

“Yes, of course, you don’t need to worry,” Selia said. This would make the Tournament a lot more interesting. Now, she really wanted to see him fight with Reki, to see how a Ranker would match against someone who had been trained by the best that the Infinite Realm had. Reki wasn’t much older than Ryun, few of the people in the Tournament were. The older ones either had managed to achieve their own ideals through notoriety by themselves or had managed to break through their blocks. Still, Reki was close to seventy years old.

“Ah,” Ryun sighed. “That is good. I do not care that much myself, but my... subordinates are excited.”

Selia could imagine. A small sect having someone fight in the High Division? It was the stuff that stories were made out of.

“Still, your thoughts on inspiration are... interesting. I haven’t heard it be said that way before,” Selia said slowly, thinking. She had always been taught that inspiration was an internal snapshot of who a person was. That to progress beyond the Immortal Realm a Cultivator had to understand the deeper meanings of who they were and how their power related to people around them.

But what he had said, his understanding... It was different.

“It is not how you achieved your inspiration?” Ryun asked.

Selia shook her head, intent on changing the topic. She had been taught her whole life never to share it with anyone else, other than those she considered worthy enough to follow in her footsteps. During her life, she had never shared her inspiration with another. Yet... this felt like an opportunity to her.

“My Immortal inspiration had boiled down to a simple sentence, the last words were this: ***I spill lifeblood, to shape my Path,***” she said it softly, almost in a whisper. She was aware of the two bodyguards behind her, but inspiration was more than just words. Perhaps it would help them some, even a few words could give them insight, but right now it wasn’t important to her.

Ryun looked at her for a long moment and then spoke.

“I came to this world aimless. I did not have a goal beyond survival. When I needed to advance to Immortal... I did not even know that I had achieved this inspiration at first. I believed that just improving my body was what had done it. It was only later that I understood. For me, it is instinct. My words were: ***My word, is my bond. My power, is my right. My word grants me a purpose. My power grants me means.***”

Selia mulled over the words for a moment, thinking them over. She could see why he respected the truth just by the first part of his inspiration. It did not resonate with her, of course. Aside from her being in the Evolved Realm, it was nothing like her inspiration.

She knew that he didn't understand what he had shared when he told her how he achieved his immortal inspiration. To gain it through an ideal? She had never heard anything about that before. Did that mean that he had somehow shaped his own ideal too? An ideal as well should've been who a person was, beyond just Cultivation, but all of their power, all of their actions and thoughts put together.

He didn't know what he had given her so freely and without asking for anything in return. She had been stuck on her Ascended inspiration for decades, and now... this could be the thing that would finally push her to the next realm.

She stood up, startling him. Then she bowed at her waist over her fists. "Thank you for sharing that with me," she told him.

He blinked in surprise, but then stood and did the same. "And thank you for sharing as well."

The silence grew again, but neither one of them felt the need to fill it as they took their seats. Now, she could see what Command saw, even though she didn't understand how he could've known. The man sitting in front of her was impressive, and talented. His advancement would continue, and they would have someone who could stand at their level soon enough.

They spent a few minutes in the silence, each gathering their own thoughts. Only later, did they start talking again, continuing their conversation and getting to know each other better.