

Council

Repeh Emsis was old by most standards. His life had never been too violent. In almost seven hundred years that he had been alive, he had fought in only two wars, three border skirmishes, and he had been in combat a handful of times outside of those situations. He was not one of those who thrived in combat and conflict, who advanced through adversity. No, he was like most other people in the world, he advanced through prolonged periods of meditation, cycling, introspection, and contemplation. It was a slow advancement. But, if you were lucky, if you managed to survive, if you persisted, you could reach far.

He was an Ascended Realm Cultivator, one of the most powerful beings in the world. And he did not reach so high by being reckless. His power relied on preparation, long, long preparation, centuries of it. But if he was to rate himself, he would place his power near the top of the world, not based on some arbitrary list, but just understanding of where he fit into the realms of power. Of course, his power had a big drawback: once it was spent it required centuries to once again reach that realm of power. His protections had been layered on top of him over hundreds of years. It would take someone extremely powerful to manage to break through centuries of layered power.

And he could admit, he shied away from fights, he didn't want to risk losing his layers. One could never know what the future would bring. He was already annoyed at himself for allowing a lowly raised Cultivator to break two of his outer layers. True, he had grossly underestimated the Sect Leader from the Twilight Melody Sect. But in his defense, he hadn't known that she had some very powerful items that obscured her power. He had not known that she was in the Evolved Realm, or that she had a full set of Eternal items. He had nearly been tempted to kill her and take it, but... He didn't know where those treasures came from.

In hindsight, that should've been his first clue that what he believed was wrong.

The two Sect Leaders, the two Ascended Realm Cultivators, stood before him in his throne room. They've been discovered, or rather they had

revealed themselves, at the entrance to his city. His warriors had dropped down on their knees before him, offering their lives for their failure, for failing to notice them before. His patrols, the defenses of his realm, something should've seen them approach, but... There was nothing that he could do about it now. Their arrival was both fortuitous and alarming. At least they had not shown any signs of aggression since arriving. They had followed his people and waited to be seen, they had bowed to him as equals, and shown respect. Offered greetings. Called at the invitation he gave as the reason for their arrival.

And now, he waited for them to answer his simple question. *Why did you hide your arrival?*

He looked at them closely, trying to figure out what was not going to be said. The great Ruler of the Empty Sky rolled her eyes, which made him blink, and then she did something that he never expected her to. She... *slapped*, yes—slapped—the hand of the young Ranker on her right.

“It was his foolish idea,” she said with a sigh.

The Ranker shrugged. “It seemed like a good way to train, both my control and a different way of moving stealthily. I assumed that your territories would be up to the challenge. We almost got caught, twice.”

Repesh blinked, slowly. There wasn't anything else that he could do. In that one instant, in that one exchange, he realized his mistake. He, like many, had assumed that the Ranker was in service to Anatalien Far Solla. His exploits at the Tournament City had spread, but by now, most believed them overblown. Still, he had become a leader of a sizable Sect in the Frontier, and as such qualified. Repesh had reached out, as was his duty, but there had been no hurry. The Twilight Melody Sect had delayed the meeting, but there had been time, years. When the reappearance of Anatalien Far Solla, the Ruler of the Empty Sky, occurred, it all made sense to Repesh. A Ranker who reached the Immortal Realm on his own in just a handful of years? There was no way that such a monster existed. But the one could be raised that fast, and with the Ruler of the Empty Sky conveniently a part of that sect? It made perfect sense. Anatalien had probably gone into seclusion, her disappearance had birthed hundreds of rumors, from her just running off with a lover to her dying or just disappearing. Taking a few hundreds of years to seek

inspiration? Especially for Eternal Realm was not unheard of. Though... many had given more credence to her being dead, especially since her sect collapsed without her.

But seeing them right now, together... He had made a mistake. He had known that something was wrong when everyone got the notification that the Dome Leader was dead. Some of the names on that list he was familiar with, others not, but Ryun Nacht? He had known that name. And here he stood now, not an Immortal, or even an Evolved, but Ascended Realm Cultivator. Talking with Anatalien Far Solla not as student talks to a master but... something else entirely.

“Training?” Repesh said at last, not knowing what else he could say.

Anatalien turned her head in his direction. “Don’t take it personally,” she said. “He does this to everyone.”

Ryun Nacht expression turned almost... insulted, but he didn’t argue, or even turn his head in her direction.

Repesh couldn’t quite tell if they were just... trying to insult him or if they were just so sure of themselves that they didn’t care. He could believe it of Anatalien Far Solla, but the Ranker... A lot of people were going to be surprised. His own pride mattered, but he wasn’t a fool enough to pick a fight with two Ascended, even in his own domain. There was no need for him to spend his painstakingly layered defenses—and he would lose most of them, even if he somehow managed to win. No, he had gotten what he wanted, what his oaths required of him. He had already sent all of his attendants away. They were alone in the throne room, just the three of them. His formations were active, no one could scry or listen in to this room.

Repesh stood and walked down his steps so that he stood in front of them. He towered over both of them, but the gesture was what mattered.

“I have invited you here to speak on a delicate matter. Before I can say anything, you will need to agree to this,” Repesh sent over a contract. It was a simple one, as simple as things such as this could be. It would prevent him from sharing any information that he learned here with anybody else who wasn’t part of the contract as well.

Ryun Nacht tilted his head as he read the contract. “Why would I agree to this?”

Repesh grimaced, he glanced at Anatalien. When he heard that she had resurfaced, he had assumed that she was in charge, it was why he had asked after her too.

“If you don’t, I will not be able to speak with you here, only with Ascended Far Solla alone,” Repesh inclined his head.

Ryun frowned, but Anatalien’s mouth made an *oh* expression.

“The... *it* is still around?” Anatalien asked, surprised.

Repesh blinked, but... He had assumed that she had kept in touch, aware of developments, but perhaps not.

“You know what this is about?” Ryun asked.

“Yes,” Anatalien said slowly. “Might as well agree to the contract, we can’t talk about it otherwise.”

The Ranker glanced in Repesh’s direction, then accepted the contract. Repesh felt it settle, then spoke.

“The reason I’ve been wanting to speak with you is because I wanted to extend an invitation,” Repesh paused for a moment. “To the Council of Sects.”

The Ranker blinked. “The Council of Sects?”

Repesh glanced at Anatalien, thinking that perhaps it would be better for her to explain. She seemed to understand his look. She turned and looked the Ranker in the eyes.

“Some four hundred years ago, just after our last big war with the... other factions, we realized just how close to defeat we came. We were outnumbered, and we were disorganized. Even though, in principle, we created the Sects to keep us all safe, we created the culture that would focus us on advancement. On creating powerhouses. But, in the beginning, even though we were all allied, we... didn’t mesh together. That war... we nearly lost, because we didn’t have a united rule. A dozen sects would cross their borders and raid guilds, towns, kingdoms, another dozen would fight only in defense, never reaching beyond their territories, and a dozen more would hold their forces back, thinking that they could take advantage after the war was over. It was chaos,” Anatalien said.

Repesh remembered that time, he had to look away, he had been part of a sect that lost their territory to an invading kingdom. They split apart, and Repesh came to the Frontier.

“After that war, a few of us gathered together, and we agreed that that could never happen again. We made... a Council, a way for us to deal with issues that threaten us, sects as a whole, without losing our independence.”

The Ranker tilted his head, then turned to look at Repesh. “And why am I getting an invitation?”

“The Council had grown since Ascended Far Solla was around. Any Sect Head deemed to hold... substantial influence, is invited. Your actions in the Tournament City as well as the growth of your Sect in the Frontier were enough. Your name being on the list of people that have killed the Dome Leader? And you now being an Ascended? That is more than enough.”

The Ranker turned back to look at Anatalien. “You are a part of this Council?”

“All of the top Sect Heads are, the sects follow the strong, so there are not many—or rather there weren’t many—when I led a sect I was part of it, yes. Though I guess that losing a sect didn’t lose you membership, the oaths were... specific. It allows us to invite powerful non-aligned Cultivators as well.”

Repesh nodded his head. “Yes, I am tasked with watching over this part of the Frontier, reporting on the influence and power of the Sects around the Midnight Reign Sect. Your Sect’s rapid ascent was... noted,” Repesh paused, looked at the man’s eyes, then spoke again. “Will you accept?”

“What does this even entail?” Ryun asked.

“That you will work with other sects in case that we are ever attacked, that you will attend Council meetings and give your opinions on issues. Giving an oath doesn’t limit you in the ways you can act, you are still free to war on other sects as long as you keep within the rules.”

Anatalien spoke right after him. “You might as well agree,” she told the Ranker. “Having more influence is never a bad thing.”

The Ranker didn’t look all that convinced, but eventually he asked to see the oath. Repesh showed it to him.

“And if I don’t accept this?” He asked.

“Nothing,” Repesh answered. “The contract you agreed on forbids you from speaking with anyone who isn’t in the know.”

The Ranker thought about it for a while, and then agreed. Repesh shared the oath with him again, and the man accepted.

“Good,” Repesh said. “A summit has been called by the Dragon Heart Sect, and both of you are invited.”

They blinked, then exchanged looks with one another.

“Of course we are,” Anatalien said.

The Ranker just dipped his head. “I am going to have to talk with people again, aren’t I?”

Repesh wondered what he meant by that, but then Anatalien spoke.

“And I am going to need to face everyone I knew three hundred years ago, including Awirren.”

Ryun raised his head and met her eyes. “Yeah, yours is worse.”

* * *

The two Ascended Cultivators left his throne room, heading back to their sect to prepare for the trip. Repesh... if he was alive, he would’ve breathed a sigh of relief. They were... they put him on edge. The casual way that they spoke, unconcerned in another’s domain. And he had tried to put them of balance from the moment he had learned that they just appeared on his doorstep.

He looked around; his eyes adapted to darkness, seeing everything in the dark room. He didn’t think that they even noticed that there had been not even a flicker of light in the throne room.

“I hate monsters like them,” he shook his head. Now he had to prepare for his own departure.