

## Reprimands

She walked through the corridors of the sect headquarters, the palace in the heart of the city. She had grown up in the sects that preferred compounds, homes surrounded by walls. The palace was not a home, it was far colder than that. She didn't understand why Emberhorn had it built, why he lived there, not at the beginning. Over the years, though, she had learned from the people who remained, who knew him.

Emberhorn was a man who feared his own weakness, who wanted so badly to be great and just... didn't have what it took. So he built for himself a city in the image of the kingdoms and empires in the core. In the styles of the people who needed tall towers and castles to demonstrate their greatness, who wanted all who gazed on their homes to believe that they were less.

It had always felt... overbearing to Anrosh. She had never seen anything other than the homes of the sects, of course. But, she had heard stories. The other factions liked to remind others that they were better by building taller and larger, structures that instilled fear or demanded respect. The Cultivators didn't do that. They demonstrated their greatness through art. The art of personal power and skill, the art of the craft and beauty.

She had never really seen it as it was meant to be seen. The Frontier Sects never had the resources, expertise, and time, to properly demonstrate their skills. Twilight Melody never had the time to do it either, at least it didn't use to. But a lot had changed over the years. They had the freedom for people to practice their crafts, not just for advancement, but for the sake of it. For art.

That was what mattered in the sects. Not if you could do something, but how you did it. A warrior defeating another without drawing blood was considered far more respectful than if he simply killed. Defeating multiple opponents on your own, without getting injured. Using your skills to create something that would last, or something that was beautiful even for a moment. A memory that would stick in peoples heads.

The outside of the palace was cold, but they had changed the inside drastically.

The walls were covered with intricate carpets and banners. The dominant colors were violet and black, the corridors now held more intricate art. Compared to the sculptures and vases of the previous owner, Anrosh had instead filled the palace with woodcarvings. They had a lot of forests around them, and many of their people knew how to work it, few among them had taken up the more artistic crafts alongside their jobs. The second reason for why she chose to make the primary art of the sect carvings, was Ryun. He couldn't see paintings, or at least not well, it was easier for him to appreciate things that had depth.

She walked steadily, with Lesamitrius and Nayra following two steps behind her. She wore a dress, not something that she usually did. But each occasion was different. Her dress was in sect style, of course, meaning it didn't reveal much. Long and wide sleeves, with a sash tightly woven around her waist. Her white hair was pulled up in an elaborate bun with two red needles holding it together. The dress that looked more like a battle robe, and could of course function in that role, as much as she played at being an administrator, she wasn't really. No Sect Leaders or Sect Heads were, they had people who did all the things that she took care of, and she had Embesh. But neither of them were made for that role, so they had to help each other. A Sect Leader and a Sect Head had only one job. To be strong, to push the power of the sect's main paths.

And they were lacking in that area. Anrosh had ideas, she had plans, but she needed Ryun to enact all of them. So for now, she sat on the throne of the sect, and she played all the roles that she wasn't supposed to be playing.

She entered the throne room and walked down the length of it. There was ten warriors wearing sect colors in the room, each in the Heavenly Realm—like Lesamitrius, five on each side in between the pillars. The Twilight Melody Sect had a couple of Immortal Realm Cultivators, but none of them were technically fully in the sect. They were refugees from the core, or the rulers of the smaller sects that Twilight Melody Sect had swallowed up in their expansion. Most of which were autonomous, Anrosh ruled, but they were really here because they wanted protection. And the word of Tali's power had spread far. The core of the Twilight Melody Sect, the former

members of the Black Viper Sect and The Last Ember, they had no Immortals aside from Anrosh and Nayra.

The walls behind the pillars were covered with carvings in black and brown wood, important moments in the sect history. She still didn't know how exactly to feel about it all. She glanced at one particular piece, depicting the fight against the monster swarm. The city of Ven'oran that was no more, still whole on the carving, depicting the moment the monsters attack started. Ryun running on steps toward a giant monster in the sky. She saw herself on the walls next to Nayra, and Eerv nearby his spear raised high. It was an amazing carving, full of detail. She could barely believe that it was made by someone in her sect, but it had. They had talent, they just lacked many of the resources and knowledge that the other, older sects had.

She walked up the steps and then took a seat on the throne. She had replaced the previous one with one that was a lot more ornate. It was still a backless and wide throne-like chair, but now it was elaborately carved, with vipers coiling on one side, and fire on the other. She had tried to include as much of their sect's cultures into the art presented in this room. Their sect wasn't old, but it had a history.

She settled on the throne, her back straight and her head held high. Nayra and Lesamitrius walked over behind her, and stopped one on either side. Anrosh gestured and one of the warriors at the end of the room moved. He left the throne room and she waited for her visitors.

"Are you sure that Tali shouldn't be here," Nayra whispered.

Anrosh didn't move her eyes from the doors on the other end of the room. "She gives me... looks, when I use her influence to deal with problems."

"Still," Nayra said.

"I prepared for this," Anrosh said.

Nayra didn't get the chance to say anything else as the doors opened. Two people walked in, escorted by one of Anrosh's assistants and the warrior that had left before. The two immortals walked through the long stretch of the throne room, casting glances around them.

One of them was a Zenshuen Cultivator, demasi with two horns that grew straight up from his forehead and dark brown hair. His face was that of a middle-aged man, meaning that he had no perk to revert his appearance

after he gained immortality. Judging by his face, he had been at least a hundred years old when he became immortal. She didn't know what Path he was on, but she knew that he was a warrior. And the main Paths of Zenshuen were known. He wore a combat robe with leather armor pieces, as if he expected to go to battle at any moment. Which, of course, he did. All people raised in the sects understood that you needed to be ready at all times.

The other person was a Classer, human, and a servant of House Ornn. Immortal just like the Cultivator. Compared to the other person, he was... plain. He wore simple clothes of a style that was strange to Anrosh, brown pants and a tunic. Simple looking, but well made, filled with power. He had red hair, different than the blood red of Nayra, more the color of the sun's light. He did have green eyes that Anrosh recognized. She had been surprised when she had learned that from Nayra that the man was actually a farmer. But then again, most of the Ornn's people were in fact farmers. It was what her family was good at. An Immortal Farmer Class, Anrosh didn't want to underestimate anyone but that would not have seemed so powerful to her before this incident.

After reading the report, though, she knew that the man shouldn't be underestimated. He fought with a warrior and didn't lose. They were lucky that people interfered before their fight escalated further.

Once they reached the base steps in front of the throne, their guide spoke.

"Sect Leader, I greet you," he started formally. "With me are Villerin Xi Jhan and Frador of House Ornn. As requested."

No real titles, no respect given. She saw that the Cultivator understood, and did not like that. The Classer had no idea about what passed through.

Frador Ornn glanced at Nayra and Anrosh felt her incline her head. The man then bowed deeply. The Cultivator grimaced, but didn't show any respect. Instead he glared at Anrosh.

"I did not come here to be lectured by a child," he spat. "If your real leader doesn't want to speak with me, then I will leave this place."

Of course. Anrosh had expected it. Two Immortals, neither one of them willing to show respect to what they considered a child. She was Immortal, but she was younger. Even Frador had shown disrespect, though he probably

didn't realize. The only reason he bowed was Nayra, she commanded that respect, probably because of the things she had accomplished in the Empire. Anrosh was a stranger to them, her feats unknown or less impressive than what they themselves had achieved.

Now she had a choice on how to deal with them, or at least Villerin. She could fight him, it was the quickest way to gain someone's respect in the sects, just defeat them. But that would run the risk of her losing, and she very well could.

She had never really entertained the idea of fighting. She had prepared. Anrosh leaned in her seat and looked at the man who had spoken.

"I am the acting Sect Head, the leader of this sect as you put it," Anrosh said. "The two of you have caused damages to the property of my people. You are not here to be lectured at, you are here for punishment."

"And I am supposed to take punishment from you?" Villerin laughed.

Anrosh waited for a beat, then spoke. "Your respective peoples are guests of my sect. I respect your leaders greatly, we have an understanding. You can stay and enjoy our territories, in return we ask only that you hold to the rules of guests. Now, you have broken those rules, and you will give reparations."

"And if I refuse?" Villerin asked.

Anrosh tilted her head. "As I said, I am someone who has a lot of respect for your leaders. Do you really think that I would've called you here without their knowledge and agreement? I do not overstep my authority, unlike you."

Villerin Xi Jhan blinked, looking a bit unsure of himself now. Bravado and arrogance, looking down on those you considered weaker, those were ingrained in the peoples of the sects. And with good reason, reaching high required a drive. They were in most cases right, they were better than those beneath them. But there was a place for everything. The man had overstepped, believing that Anrosh was not really in charge, that Tali was the one that pulled the strings. Most thought that. It wasn't the truth.

Still, Anrosh knew her place. She ruled the sect, but their "guests" were not ordinary, they were not some Frontier Sect that she could order around as she wished. The respect that she had from them was both earned and

freely given. She would never overstep and try to punish their people without them knowing.

“Ever word out of your mouth, lowers your people in my sects eyes,” Anrosh added.

There were few things that people in the sects truly cared about. But appearances? Those mattered. Losing respect of your leaders was...

Villerin froze, even Frador noticed the change in him and straightened.

“The two of you will provide Essence equal to half as much as will be needed for repairs. You will deliver it personally to the Tavern Keeper, and convey your deepest apologies. Do you understand.”

Villerin hesitated for a moment, and then he got down to his knees and touch the floor with his head, bowing. Fredor looked at him then got to one knee and bowed his head. A bit of understanding from them, the most that she was going to get she felt.

“I expect this matter to be settled within the week,” Anrosh said. “And it will not repeat again.”

They grumbled their agreements and Anrosh waved her hand. Her assistant escorted them out, and she kept her back straight until the doors closed. Only then she let herself sigh and relax.

“That was good,” Nayra said softly. “Better than I would’ve done.”

Anrosh glanced at her and smiled. She wasn’t that good at this, intimidation and demanding respect. It wasn’t what she had ever wanted to do.

A notification appeared in the corner of her eyes and she blinked, then pulled it forward. She read through the reward slowly.

“What is it?” Nayra asked.

“A new title, faction related,” Anrosh said. “I need to find Tali and then go to the archives.”

A title that she hadn’t seen before, it had to be recorded, as they have done for all new titles now. They kept an archive of everything and their thoughts on which requirements were fulfilled for it to appear.

She stood up and started walking, Nayra and Lesamitrius followed behind her.