

Honor

They were led through the territories that only ever saw the light of the moon. Anrosh kept her cloak's hood up, obscuring her features in the same ways as their escorts did. Not that he really needed to anymore, Lesamitrius and her other warriors had noticed, of course, her red skin was covered with white patterns now and all of them were Cultivators, they understood what such change meant. Though they couldn't know the specifics. She had told them that she had upgraded her body, and in that she had not lied to them. Though, she hadn't spoken plainly at all.

That morning after she met with Ryun, weeks ago now, after he had given her gifts, she had gone back to the city and found Lesamitrius and her warriors ready for their trip. They had planned on leaving that morning already, and she hurried them along. She only left a few words with the palace guards for Nayra, and then she was off. No one had the chance to even see her change.

She wished that she had spoken with Nayra, at the very least, but Ryun had asked her not to. He wanted to... he said that there was something that he wanted to see develop, and snoop some more. She was alarmed when he told her, but he assured her that the danger was minimal. The only thing that Anrosh could imagine were the relations with either the Zenshuen remnants or the House Ornn. She knew that some of them were having issues with following the orders from someone like her, that the only reason they did was because Tali was there. Regardless, no one was going to be suspicious about anything, the trip had already been planned, she just skipped the goodbyes.

It wasn't that she wanted to keep her advancement a secret. It was just that people would ask questions, and then she would have to avoid giving the answers. Ryun wanted to sneak around the sect for a bit, and answers would reveal his return.

There was no hiding anything from Lesamitrius and their warriors, of course. They could see the changes plainly even though she hid herself under her big coat. She could tell that they were curious, but they had been picked for this mission for their loyalty, none of them would say anything.

Lesamitrius too, he cast glances, but never did he outright ask why she was hiding herself.

And if she was being honest with herself, she didn't know the answer. Her ring hid her core, her Qi, the sense of her advancement, all in a way that she never could've achieved on her own. She was proficient in shrouding her core, when she was focusing on it, not otherwise. Now, though, she appeared as if she was a master, she knew.

The ring was... a great gift, but it was also a crutch. She understood what Ryun told her that night after he tried to teach her how to move naturally in her Evolved Form—these gifts would not make her great, they were tools, and like any tool she would need to master them if she wanted to use them to their full potential.

Perhaps that was a part of it then. Some small part of her was... feeling ashamed perhaps. Ashamed at the fortune she had been given. She loved Ryun, and he loved her, they were a family, and she appreciated what he had done. After their conversation she felt better, she did know that she deserved this, that she did a lot of work for the sect, for him. But... knowing and feeling something was two different things.

They were led through the territory, into a cave, the passage into the Under. She heard Lesamitrius' account of the city below, but words didn't give it justice. It was... glorious, the greatest thing that she had ever laid eyes on. The Tournament City was grand, but it was a thing that was built for a purpose. Raised and razed based on need. It was a feat of power, of wealth, of skill. But it was not beautiful.

This city, though, this was... beauty. It was everything that she loved about the sects. Craft raised to perfection. Oh, she could see what Lesamitrius saw, that the city had once been a dungeon. It was clear based on the layout, the pyramids and monoliths were probably remnants of that stage in the city's life. Now, though, it was all brought together by... art. Resplendent plates of gold and black on the walls of buildings, jewels embedded into the ground—worthless gems that had been worked by masters, carved into shapes so that they seamlessly fit in between the stones. Mosaics, tiny colored stones that painted beautiful pictures.

And the people too. Undead, mindless but bound, walked the streets, and she tried hard to suppress a shiver. She remembered fighting the horde of undead, the necromancer's dead body. It had been years ago, but she still couldn't get over it. Fighting the undead was unlike fighting anything else. They just... never stopped, no matter their injuries.

Here, at least, they were not like the grotesque and gruesome undead that she had fought before. She saw no zombies with their flesh falling apart. These were mostly skeletons, and always fulfilling some task—pulling a cart, working on buildings. But, there were others too. Cultivators on the Paths that brought them to undeath. She could see that their bodies looked different, more muscular, dark in color, but also... dry in a way, the skin pulled taut. Tali's best guess based on what Lesamitrius told them was that their True Bodies turned them into a draugr type undead. From what Tali knew, draugr had incredible physical strength, and tough skin. Though, there was no way of knowing what exactly their True Bodies granted them. There were countless types of undead, and so countless types of draugr.

Their escorts didn't let them sightsee for long, and they reached the palace—or what she thought was a palace—a large pyramid. The inside was equally as grand, tall ceilings and wide corridors. Countless images on the walls, depicting battles, landscapes, and some that were just abstract art. She admired them as they passed, but as soon as they reached the grand ornate doors, she focused her mind on the task before her.

One of their escorts turned to her and spoke.

“Only you,” he told her.

She gave him a look, she knew that Lesamitrius was forced to enter alone. She wasn't an emissary though, and Tali's teachings had taught her that politics between sects were a dance.

“I am a Sect Leader of the Twilight Melody Sect, I do not go unaccompanied.”

The man looked like he wanted to argue, but then he tilted his head and waved her in. The doors opened and she pulled down her cloak and stored it, revealing her robes. Her robes were as well made as her sect could craft them, and they had improved a lot over the years. It was black and violet, the sect

colors, with elaborate embroidery over the hems. She took a deep breath and then stepped inside.

She walked the long room, saw the undead guards around the room much the same as the guards in Consequence's throne room. At the end of it was their Sect Head, just as Lesamitrius had described him. He was undead and was wearing a golden headdress. Golden robe-like garment covered his torso, but left his arms bare. He was muscled the same as the undead she had seen in the city, but to a greater degree. Even sitting she could tell that he was tall, probably taller than her, but not by much. His skin was the color of a bruise, with black armbands around his biceps. An armored dress hung beneath his waist, one hand rested on his throne while the other was on his knee, holding a golden scepter. His blue eye glowed and bored into hers. She didn't look away, even though she could feel the weight of his eyes as if it was a physical thing. Whether that were his **Ruler's Eyes** or if she was just imagining it didn't matter. She walked up to the steps leading to the throne, her warriors behind her. Once she stopped, one of the guards next to the throne spoke.

"You are in the presence of the Repesh Emsis, Sect Head of the Midnight Reign Sect, Lord of All Under Night, Keeper of the Tide, Great Judge, Holder of Scepter of Nisha."

Anrosh bowed while Lesamitrius and the others knelt to one knee. Her bow was one of respect, of an inferior, but not one coming in supplication. It was intended to convey her respect for the sect she stood in, while retaining her own honor and the honor of her sect. She held the position for a few seconds, and then straightened. Lesamitrius stood and stepped up next to her, then spoke.

"Arriving, Anrosh Kesh, Sect Leader, acting Sect Head of the Twilight Melody Sect. She who carries the will of the Sect."

Short, and to the point. She had titles too, but they had decided against using them. It wouldn't seem... appropriate for him to call her Slayer of the Undead to the Sect Head that is one. Still, she felt that it was enough. Once she was announced she stepped forward, and spoke.

"Great Sect Head, Ascended Master Emsis," she started, her voice calm and respectful. Even though she felt anything but calm inside. "You've asked

to speak with the Sect Head of the Twilight Melody Sect, and here I am, acting in that capacity. I am here to ask after the fate of my subjects, and their crimes against your sect. May we find a solution, to preserve respect and honor of both sects.”

For a few moments, there was no sound in the throne room but the breathing of her side. The undead didn't move, didn't even twitch. Then, just as she felt the overbearing weight of the silence nearly crush her, he spoke.

“Respect, honor,” the Sect Head Repesh Emsis said slowly. His voice deep and echoing off the walls of the room. It sounded like a mountain moving, it sounded like... strength. “You do not know of these things, I asked to speak with your Sect Head, or with Anatalien Far Solla. Not you.”

Anrosh knew that, but this was about the perception of the sect. And if she was going to rule, to be the Face of their sect, they couldn't let others dictate who they spoke with. “Respectfully, Sect Head, you asked to speak with the Sect Head. And I am serving in that capacity. My word is the same as Ryun's word. Anatalien does not involve herself in the rule of our sect, no matter what others might believe.”

She said slowly. In his eyes she could see his disbelief. An Ascended Realm Cultivator taking orders from an Immortal? It was laughable. True, Tali didn't take orders, but Anrosh knew better than to try and give them to her. Tali advised, she didn't make decisions.

“You come to my home, uninvited, and tell me in my own home who it is that I should be speaking with?”

Anrosh suppressed her desire to grimace. Tali had warned her that old Sect Heads were beasts of their own, that they were used to not just their power, but the sanctity that they enjoy in their seats of power.

He leaned forward, his eyes never blinking. “Does your sect have so little respect for its neighbors that you come here and try to deceive me?”

“I do not deceive, and if that is how I am perceived, it is not my intention,” Anrosh answered, dipping her head.

“I know of you, they say you are a raised Immortal, relying on others strength. The things I have to speak with are for a Sect Head's ears only. Anatalien Far Solla was an Ascended Realm Cultivator and a Sect Head before her death was announced across the world. That she is here, in your

sect is a mystery, but she at least is someone worthy enough to hear that which I have to say. Your Sect Head's deeds have spread wide. He stood and held the tide of monsters in the Tournament City until the portal was closed. He acted when others saw only to the matters of their greed, and defeated the Dome Leader. His honor is undisputed. Yours, Anrosh Kesh, is honor by association, not your own."

That made Anrosh angry. Yes, her name wasn't known, but she didn't sit behind Ryun and hide. Who was he to decide that she didn't have honor? Deserved no respect? "I was there too, *Sect Head*," some of her scorn seeped into her tone despite her trying to hold herself back. "I fought those same monsters in the Tournament City, fought to give others time to run, to escape their deaths. I died there my first death. And I fought for my sect, I protected her. Where were you when the Necromancer rose on the frontier? When sects fell and innocents died, where was your honor then? I stood at the head of the army that stopped him, while you hid in your palace of gold."

She shouldn't have said that, her anger got the better of her. She knew why they hadn't come, or at least why Tali thought they hadn't. Because they were undead, and a powerful Necromancer was their greatest weakness. One could never know what kind of perks a necromancer had. It would take only one powerful perk to give him control of an undead he hadn't raised himself. The Midnight Reign Sect couldn't risk it.

Sect Head Repesh Emsis looked at her without a change in his stony expression. And then, he waved his hand, and it took her a moment to realize that it was a gesture that meant he conceded to her point. Emboldened, she continued speaking.

"Sect Head," she said calmly, getting herself under control. "We've found your message, we've investigated, and we know what they had done. At least let me see them, confirm that they are safe."

"Your people are whole," Repesh told her. "They are criminal who have stolen from my sect. Their fate can and will be dealt with when I get to speak with other Anatalien Far Solla or Ryun Nacht."

"Anything you wish to say to them, you can say to me."

"No."

Her anger rose again, but this time she didn't let it out. Why was it always like this? She gained a measure of respect, but never enough. She always failed in some way. She knew that there had to be words that could get him to speak with her, to tell her what he so desperately wanted to tell them. But she didn't know, Tali had taught her well, it was not her failing but Anrosh's. She was not worthy enough, but she wanted to be.

Fine then, she thought to herself. The Sect Head might not want to talk to her about whatever it was that he hid, but she would not leave his city without knowing the fate of her people. She knew that she couldn't. Ryun's words echoed in her head.

*I would look for a reason to bring him to an **end**.*

A part of Ryun that he had sealed inside of himself, the part that always kept his word, and he had promised to protect his people. That he trusted Anrosh was the only reason why he could stay away. He trusted that she would do everything in her power to protect them as he had promised. But if she failed, if she returned without knowing anything... Repesh would not get his conversation with Ryun. He would get to meet the Undying Void as he smashed through the earth above their city, as he came for their people. Ryun did not compromise, that was what he had her for.

"I am the Twilight Melody Sect," Anrosh said slowly, her voice carrying across the room. "You have taken our people, when words could've done more. You've taken it upon yourself to punish those who were not yours to punish. You speak of honor and respect, but you showed none to us. Your emissaries come and demand to speak with our Sect Head as if they have the right. You overstepped," she could see his expression changing now, the stony blank turning to anger and disbelief. "The Twilight Melody Sect has taken offense, you will show me to my people, and this matter will be settled."

His eyes narrowed, and then he spoke, his voice like the thunder. "You dare to disrespect me in my own home?"

"I gave you respect and you gave none in return. You listened and assumed, based on what others told you. I don't know you, I never heard about you, and I came here with all the respect that I could muster. But all things have limits. I understand, you think that this is the way to get what you want, to speak with those you think I answer to. It is not. My Sect Head

would often say something to me that I didn't quite understand, but I see it now. He says that respect is earned, never given."

"Respect is earned..." His eyes looked over her, studying her, and she felt a deep hole opening up inside her chest where her two hearts started beating faster and faster as an uneasy sensation settled inside her mind. "You want to demand things of an Ascended, in his own home. You, an Immortal child. Very well. Your Sect Head might have the right of it. You will earn my respect."

She felt as if the room was suddenly smaller, as if he was sitting right in front of her, towering and filling her entire vision. She made a mistake.

"I will meet you in the arena, and we shall see how much respect you are owed."

She closed her eyes, as she realized where she made her mistake. She gave him a way to take what he wanted, to punish her without insulting the sect further. It was her own words that doomed her.

She opened her eyes and saw the undead Sect Head looking at her, a smile on his face.

She was fucked.