

Face

“Tell me again how the conversation went,” Anrosh said.

She was sitting inside her office, Lesamitrius was in the chair in front of her desk. Nayra sat on the couch behind him, and Anatalien was leaning on the wall in the corner—listening but not commenting on anything.

Lesamitrius had already informed them about everything that he had seen and what he believed. The Midnight Reign Sect was not just a small insignificant sect. Their leader was an Ascended Realm Cultivator. Someone who was so close to the end of a Path that it might not even matter. She had never even heard about anyone who was in the Eternal Realm. She heard rumors, stories that might as well be legends, but no real accounting of anything. Tali was the first person she met who was what she considered truly powerful, in the ways that she had imagined when she was a child. Ryun was different, she had watched him climb, the effect was not the same.

“Their Sect Head didn’t speak with me for a week after the initial greeting, where he just confirmed that our people were alive,” Lesamitrius said slowly. “Then... he said that he would only speak with our Sect Head or with... Anatalien Far Solla.”

He glanced behind him at Tali, but quickly looked away.

“That was his message for you. That was all that he said.”

Anrosh grimaced, a part of her feeling insulted, another... wary. “Thank you Lesamitrius, you can leave us now.”

He nodded, stood and bowed to each of them, then he left the room.

After a few moments of silence, Anrosh turned to Tali and spoke. “He asked to see you, do you know him?”

Tali walked over and sat down in the chair across from her, then she responded.

“No.”

Nayra cleared her throat. “What Lesamitrius said suggests that this sect was very old, hundreds of years, maybe more.”

“It is still a no.”

Anrosh continued. “Why would he want to talk with you then? he—”

“He is Ascended, so I should know him?” Tali interrupted, then continued talking. “I was crippled three hundred years ago Anrosh. Three hundred years of knowing nothing but what I was allowed to. And back before that I was a Sect Head, and I ruled in the Core. I did not concern myself with the backwater Frontiers. I had far more important things to do, keeping the borders of the Sect lands safe meant that we had to show strength to the other factions. At the time, I knew only a handful of Ascended Realm Cultivators of note, three hundred years is enough for another to rise. Perhaps he was one of the children running around a sect I once passed through, perhaps he is as old as I am, just smarter. Perhaps he just remembers my name and who I am. Or perhaps he just knows that I am Ascended, and that was enough. Though why he didn’t reach out when I regained my power years ago, I do not know.”

“Sorry,” Anrosh said. “But then... it is about power. Even years ago when he first reached out with his messengers, he only wanted to talk with Ryun, even though he is at the same Realm as I am.”

Tali shook her head. “Ryun was known across the world, his battles in the tournament shown and his ability recognized. How many Immortal Realm Cultivators do you think there are on the High Ranker list? There were not many before the others died, and not many even now. He did not gain that ranking because of his tournament battles, but because of the fight against the Dome monsters, and that was not seen by many. Perhaps this man was simply curious and wanted to see if what rumors said was true. You—”

“—I am not the same, I understand,” Anrosh finished for her. She knew that, yes. It didn’t sting any less. She would never get the respect of someone whose name was known across the world, especially not now, when everyone saw that he was part of the group that killed the Dome Leader.

Anatalien’s name had to have spread on the Frontier, an Ascended Realm Cultivator? Of course it had. Though she didn’t know how far and wide it could’ve reached. Far enough for a reclusive sect to hear it. A sect that was somehow a lot stronger than anyone knew. How and why didn’t matter now.

“Maybe you should go and meet with him,” Anrosh said, resigned. “There doesn’t seem to be any point in me trying to posture.”

Tali straightened and then sighed. “It is as if every single thing I try to teach you just... slips through that head of yours.”

Anrosh leaned back, a tiny bit hurt by that. She had thought that they were beyond such things.

“But,” Tali continued. “Perhaps it is my fault too. The Frontier is obviously not... the right place for you to learn this. Perhaps it is the fault of the way we set everything up when we first created the sects. Your situation was not one that we anticipated.”

Anrosh blinked, she created the sects? Sometimes, she forgot who Tali really was. She had been around her for so long, had seen her in such a vulnerable state... But the woman in front of her was a Ranker, someone who had been here since the beginning, who had seen how civilizations in this world started, someone who helped build them up.

“Honor, obligation, and respect,” Tali started. “These are the pillars of the sects. Tell me what do you think they are?”

Anrosh glanced at Nayra, confused by the question.

“Don’t look at her,” Tali snapped, making her turn around to face the woman. “She understands less than you. She was not born in the sects. Tell me what have you learned as you grew up. Then tell me what you learned from me.”

Anrosh gulped, then started slowly. “I don’t know how to start, I... My parents died when I was young, and I joined my sect’s warriors. There I learned that I should always seek to protect the honor of my sect’s name, that I had an obligation to my Sect Leaders and Sect Head, that I had to show respect to those whose station was greater than mine. After... when I left with my husband and joined the Black Viper Sect, I tried to embody that as best as I could. Fier... he was not a good leader, but I did my duty and was loyal, as far as I could. After Ryun, and you. I know that I need to project strength, that I need to keep the image of our sect. That I should conduct myself with honor. Show respect to others of equal or greater station, but to be aware of how much I am worth. That by doing this I keep our sect protected.”

Tali sighed. “We never considered this, back when we established the sects. The Frontier... this is where those who feel like they have no place in the core go. Some who are adventurous, or those who want to look for

opportunities to grow powerful. But... in truth, this is where families that felt unable to rise went, and they went alone. All sects here, or most of them at least, are made out of a single family branch, with lesser families around them. Sects were never intended to be that. There should always be at least three main families, three branches of a mighty tree. They are there to be checks on each other, to keep what happened with Fier from happening in the first place. Honor, obligation, and respect. A sect's primary concern is growing its people, getting more powerful. A person born in a main family will have more resources given to them since birth, but they would have a greater obligation to the sect. A person born in a lesser family would have less resources, but also less obligation. Their talents, or their drives, or their hard work, is rewarded by resources, by gaining station. By growth of power, by demonstration of the craft or fighting capability a member of the sect rises. They get noticed by schools and get resources invested into them, they rise, and if they prove themselves, they get adopted into main families. They gain more obligation; they learn what it means to lead a sect. Their children are born into the family and know it from birth."

She met Anrosh's eyes. "You did not have that. You know what any person in the lesser family knows. What people in the Frontier know. But you were elevated into a position of a main sect family... in a sect that doesn't even have those. I was lax, I wanted to teach you by letting you fumble and discover things on your own. I thought that because Ryun seemed to understand, or at least act in the spirit that it was meant, that what we are as a sect didn't matter. I was wrong."

"What is it that I should know then?" Anrosh asked.

"You know already, but you don't *know*. You know the words, the way of life, but you don't grasp the intricacies behind them. Face, honor, respect, obligation. They are words to you, and you parrot what you had seen around you as you grew up. Examples that were not the best," Tali answered. "We created this culture, to keep us safe. All parts of sect culture ultimately serve that goal."

"Why?" Nayra asked. Anrosh had an idea, but it was obvious that she didn't understand many of the things that Tali took for granted. Sometimes

she felt older than she really was. Compared to many, even those in her sect, Anrosh was a child.

Tali glanced at Nayra, then answered her. “Because we are weak.”

Nayra blinked, and Anrosh did too. She did not expect that. “What do you mean?”

“On average, Cultivators are weaker than people who follow other focuses. It is just the truth. For the same amount of Essence, a Classer will reach higher. They will have more perks, more tools in their arsenals. It is not the same across the board, of course. Circumstances matter. A Lord Realm Cultivator might be able to defeat a Classer on the same tier, but the outcome would depend on many factors. The quality of the Cultivator, how good their techniques are. How much they had cycled, what their Aspect was. And even then, if then, they might encounter someone who just counters them. Of course, combat isn’t the only reason. We can get stronger if we do things right, just like they can. But we take longer and need more resources to reach those points. Our crafters need decades to become proficient, and even then we can never achieve what they can. A Classer could get a perk that allowed them to just create a product, once a day, for what might as well be free. They become useful much earlier in their advancement. Our industries could never match those of Classer factions. We cannot produce as much as they can. Look at your father, at your family,” she waved at Nayra. “They can grow an entire field in a day, in an hour, do it over and over as long as their perks allow it. A Cultivator doesn’t have the perks that affect things in the same way. We improve ourselves and our bodies. Our techniques might be able to mimic that, but it takes us more time, more resources. Embesh can improve the soil, make the plants grow faster, but it takes a dozen just like him to do the same job that a Classer of a similar tier could do. That is why we turned to art, to crafting unique pieces, why it is valued so much for us. The other factions by it because it is worth more than the cheaply produced stuff that they can create. We were people who wanted to pursue Cultivation, who didn’t want to compromise on that. And so we made the sects, those of us that saw what was coming while the rest remained.”

“I thought that Sects are any factions that are Cultivators,” Nayra said.

“No,” Tali shook her head. “There are a few Cultivating Kingdoms in the core, people who know how to do it properly. But they are small, poor. They don’t have what we have.”

“And what do we have?” Anrosh asked.

“We have a culture that venerates advancement. That is focused on power and the desire to gain more of it, that values protecting your own and overcoming without bloodshed,” Tali answered. “Back then, so long ago that I can barely remember. When... our *issues* with the Third Iteration began, some of us saw what was going to happen. There were too many different people, too many different ideas. After the war with the Third Iteration ended, we knew. More wars would come. And in such conflicts, we Cultivators, would lose. There was less of us, and only a few with any real power. Sure, in a war, we could raise ten thousand Heavenly warriors, but for the same amount of resources they could raise five times as many Classers. Even if they were weaker, it didn’t matter. They had numbers. And if we somehow won, well, we were left with people who were raised and would need help getting higher, who might be stuck where they are. A Classer would still be able to advance on their own. So, we went on our own, separated ourselves from them. We split into families, then sects. And we took territories, grew. We weren’t united, there was no way that we could unite so many different ideas. Each Path was unique, each shaped different mentality. But we trade, we fight, and we war. But we never go so far as to fight wars like how they do. We cannot afford to lose our champions, those who had reached high, and we cannot afford to lose potential of those who might reach that high. That is what obligation means; we have an obligation toward all of the sects, every Cultivator, our people. To foster those who are great, those who alone could stand against armies. The other factions are fractured, they have fleeting alliances, but we have always stood together. When a faction beyond our borders tries to make war on a sect, we all answer no matter the issues between us. Because we know, if enough of them unite, they could overwhelm us.”

Anrosh started to see it. She had never thought about it that way. She... how could she? She grew up in a small territory, a small sect. She had never seen the city the size of Consequence before she arrived at it. The world was

a thing she knew about, but didn't truly grasp. Now, though... now she knew. She had seen the Tournament City. Seen the world and how terrible it was.

"Honor," Tali continued. "That is the agreement between us. Never to cross the lines that would make us weaker. Some of us hold to that, others try to hide and maneuver in the shadows. But others are there to keep them in check, which is why Face and respect is so important. If you have respect, your word is trusted in the other sects. We fight each other when we think that others don't deserve or are failing in their obligation. Or at least that is how it is supposed to be. Eerv understood this, it is why he didn't seek vengeance for the death of his nephew. Why he surrendered to Ryun. His obligation to his people came above all else. Emberhorn was an example of someone who failed his duty, and people who just like you didn't understand the obligation of those who lead. His sect was just like Eerv's, a sect with a single family, and people loyal only to it, as I have seen most on the Frontier to be. But, he was someone who understood how much Face mattered beyond his own sect. His sect had more warriors, stronger ones. Ryun was just one man, if he wanted to, Emberhorn could've attacked our sect and won, if he had a sufficiently great reason—which didn't exist. He didn't attack that way, because that would have told everyone who he really was. And sect laws did not allow for those kinds of wars. His betrayal came when the monster swarm attacked. If he had succeeded, if the swarm had killed everyone, he could've claimed the territories and survivors in neighboring territories with only those loyal to him knowing his dishonor. He failed, and paid for his crime. People followed Ryun because the sects follow the strong, it is the only way we can survive."

"I think that I understand," Anrosh said.

Tali shook her head. "You don't need to understand, you need to live it. But, we shall see. Now, we have an old sect, an Ascended Realm Cultivator, asking to speak with Ryun or me. We know that he had tried to contact Ryun before, and that it was related to the mining, the theft that people we took in—our people—did. It obviously wasn't a big deal for them, as they could've dealt with it or accepted to talk with you years ago. They didn't, so that tell us that the incident was used as an excuse then. Now, they had taken our

people. So, one of two things, they could no longer wait, the thieves did something stupid, or something else entirely.”

Anrosh thought about, tried to think about it while taking into account everything that Tali just told her, everything that she knew. “He asked to speak with Ryun or you... He doesn’t know that Ryun isn’t still here, or that he hadn’t arrived yet from his trip. But he didn’t ask to speak with you before, of course they didn’t know about you then. If he is Ascended, if he knows you, he might think that you rule the sect when Ryun isn’t around, no matter what I say. It could just be that. Our people stole from them, and even if it wasn’t a big matter for them, it had been going on for a while. They might just want the matter settled now,” Anrosh knew now that war was probably never on the table, not with how they took everyone. “So, it could just be a matter of respect. He believes that this requires the leader of the sect to rectify. Me going would be an insult.”

“But you sending me would be an insult to you, and the sect. Ryun put you in charge,” Tali said. “So, what do we do?”

“My... my Face, perception of me, is not great enough for someone like him. He doesn’t consider me worthy of respect,” Anrosh said.

Tali leaned forward, a small smile on her face. “But we are a sect,” she said. “Our culture is made to push us to be greater. If you don’t go, you will not change his mind. If he learns the truth, that you do lead, he might think you unworthy of leading a sect like ours, might think that Ryun is unworthy because he left you in-charge and you are not up to par. You cannot protect your people, nor keep them in line. They had done something dishonorable, and you failed to punish them, failed to even notice. We might not have wars like other factions, but we do have them. This is how we prune the tree, how we keep ourselves strong and remove weakness. A single Ascended could take offense, and he could take this sect from you.”

Anrosh saw her mistake, their mistake, both hers and Ryun’s. They had taken in sects and people, but they... they hadn’t bound them to them. They were not a real sect, just a collection of Cultivators. No different than the Factions in the core. But they were not supposed to be that. They were supposed to be more.

The Midnight Reign Sect had every right to be angry, to call for a meeting with Ryun. This wasn't a small matter; it wasn't even about the theft. It was about leading a sect, and they hadn't presented a good image of themselves to others. The Face of their Sect was... it was not what she thought it was. The sect hanged on Ryun's Face, on his accomplishments, even in his absence. She had failed in her duty.

"I will go," Anrosh said.

Tali smiled at her.

Anrosh had to keep the honor of the Twilight Melody Sect intact. Appearances mattered. She didn't know what she was going to do, but she knew that she had to do something.