

Interlude – Emissary

Riodan Odrek, Emissary of the Green Rain Sect, stood in the hallway of the small palace. His claws gently scratched at the fur on his forearm as he kept he tucked his hands in each other's sleeve. The seat of the frontier sect was... rustic and bare to his eyes. Oh, there were canvases of different colors, paintings, and decorative vases placed around the hallways, but it was all so bland.

Riodan had served his sect for decades, he had the pleasure of visiting many sects in the core. There was little comparison between the sects in the core and those here. Everything here was of a lower quality, from the clothes that people wore to the materials their buildings were made of. There were no great works of art created by advanced masters, no unique sculptures that by their very presence could instill emotion.

But he tried to push the state of the place he was in out of his mind, and focus on his mission. The fact that he was here in the first place made him feel annoyed and he had to remind himself to keep his emotions to himself, otherwise he would sneer at everyone he saw.

The servants of the palace had been respectful at least, bowing deeper than was required by norms. Which made him feel at least a bit better, they obviously knew their place and he hoped that their Sect Head would be the same. But one could never know with these frontier sects. Being so far away from civilized society sometimes made them think that they were greater than they were.

He shook his head and went through his mental checklist, preparing himself for the meeting. He didn't know much about this sect, only that it was young, that it had conquered another and expanded enough that it could now be considered a mid sized sect, at least by frontier standards. The war had apparently also robbed them of many of their greatest warriors, including one old Heavenly Realm Cultivator who used to rule one of the sects. Riodan didn't know which sect the Heavenly Cultivator belonged, and in the end it didn't matter. Riodan had no intention of learning about politics and history of insignificant sects.

The Green Rain Sect had tasked him with bringing the sects in this area of the frontier under the fold and he was going to do just that. The settlers and hunting teams would need a place to stay and operate from, and while this palace wasn't really up to standards, Riodan didn't think that Sect Leader Danos would mind. The Peak Heavenly Cultivator had always been one of the more laid back of the Sect Leaders.

Riodan didn't really know why the sect had decided to expand into the frontier now, but he had heard some whispers that Danos had fallen out of favor of the Sect Head and was sent here as punishment. Whether that was true or not, Riodan didn't know. But one of the rumors said that Danos was close to breaking into the Immortal Realm, at one hundred and forty years of age that was a great accomplishment. And Riodan was pretty sure that that rumor was in fact true. Serving an Immortal Realm Cultivator would provide Riodan with much more influence in the sect, so he wanted to do well on his mission.

He had been given a team of seven Peak Monarchs, including himself. Old Monarchs, who were all at the top ranks within the Green Rain Sect for their Realm. Together, they had raided a few of the frontier sect's trading caravans, and captured a few of their hunting teams. It had been harder than he had thought, as most of their hunting teams were in the Lord Realm and they moved in large numbers. But he had learned from the prisoners that a monster swarm had recently come through these territories, which explained why they were moving in larger groups and why there were so many Lord Realm Cultivators.

All of them had been recently raised, so Riodan didn't think that they would have any problems from them. He had been surprised however by the prisoner's refusal to reveal information about their leaders, their Sect Head in particular. And the very few spies that the Green Rain Sect had sent a few months ago hadn't been able to find out much.

For a while Riodan had believed that the warriors were just extremely loyal, but afterward he had realized that it was fear. The only thing that Riodan knew about the Sect Head was that he hadn't been seen in a long while, which isn't that odd for Cultivators. Seclusion and training were what most of the Sect Head did.

Still, Riodan hoped that the Sect Head would understand his position. There was no way that a frontier sect could stand against one from the core. Especially one that had been ravaged by a swarm and had so many newly raised warriors.

So far Riodan had only spoken with one of the Sect Leaders, a Monarch that used to be a farmer. He shook his head at that, making a farmer a Sect Head, it was almost quaint. The Sect Leader clearly knew what the arrival of the Green Rain sect would mean, and Riodan had thought that his mission would be quick and easy. To his surprise, that didn't happen. The Sect Leader hadn't even allowed him to speak with the Sect Head.

Riodan didn't know the reason for the refusal, but he had seen that the Sect Leader was slowly bending. Riodan didn't really need a Sect Head if he could turn enough of the Sect Leader's to his side. A majority of Sect Leaders could make decisions for the entire Sect, and bind it to a contract. And he knew that the Sect had only three. So he stayed in the palace and suffered as he tried to pretend like their home was somehow impressive.

But now he had been summoned to a meeting, and not in one of the rooms which he had been received in before. The only reason for that would be that the Sect Head had finally come out of their seclusion. And Riodan started to feel nervous for the first time since he arrived here. He assumed that the Sect Head had to be at least in the Early Heavenly Realm, which could complicate things if they were one of the more arrogant Sect Heads. But he had confidence in himself and the other Monarchs on his side. They might not be Heavenly Realm, but they could all fight on equal footing as a newly raised one.

No, the only real choice the Sect Head had was for him to agree to a contract of servitude. The Green Rain Sect would gain another subordinate sect, and this Twilight Melody Sect would gain protection and access to wealth from the core.

Finally, the doors next to him opened and a servant stepped out.

"The Sect Leader is ready to receive you, Monarch, if you will please follow me," the man said as he bowed at the waist.

Riodan frowned, he had expected to meet with the Sect Head, but he said that the Sect Leader was ready to see him. He put that aside and then

walked in, flanked by two of his Monarchs. The four remaining ones were still in their hidden camp with the prisoners.

He entered a large room, decorated with emblems of fire and torches hanging from the pillars. At the end of the room was a raised platform and then a wide backless throne in the style that demasi most often used.

Riodan suppressed a scowl as he walked closer. He saw Sect Leader Embesh, the one that he had interacted so far, standing on the throne's left side, looking uncomfortable. On the right of the throne stood a human woman dressed in a well made gold and red armor, her head left bare. Her redhead was eye catching, and Riodan remembered seeing her in the city, usually with the warriors.

The throne was occupied by another human, this one with white hair and red skin, it told him that she had a True Body but he was familiar with that type. A physical improvement, nothing like his own **Bone Spikes**, which gave him retractable spikes inside his forearms.

He reached the respectable distance and bowed his head not a hair more than was required.

"Emissary," Sect Leader Embesh said as Riodan raised his head to meet his eyes. "Thank you for coming."

"Of course, Sect Leader, I am at your disposal," Riodan said with a false smile that revealed his fangs.

Embesh shifted and turned to his right, gesturing at the redheaded woman.

"Allow me to introduce you to Sect Leader Nayra Ornn, she is in charge of our warriors."

Riodan turned and bowed, using the time to think and hide his surprise. He hadn't even suspected the woman to be a Sect Leader, the primary reason for it being that he hadn't even thought that she was all that powerful. Even now, he could barely feel any kind of Qi presence from her, and she obviously had no True Body, at least not one that was easily visible. If he was to guess, he would put her in the Foundation Realm at best. Which didn't make sense at all. He had seen her walking around the city with Lord Realm Cultivators, and no Cultivator would allow someone weaker than them to lead them.

Unless... she wasn't weaker. Which in this case could only be if Cultivation wasn't her main focus.

Sects focused in Cultivation, it was what set them apart from every other faction in the core. They used other ways of power sometimes to round their builds off, the extent of it changing from sect to sect. Having someone who was not a Cultivator in a sect was rare, and having them in such a high position was unheard of. Riodan didn't know what to think, but suddenly things changed. He had no real way of estimating how powerful the woman was, and... If the people of the sect were content to let someone who was not a Cultivator lead them, then... were there more people like her in the sect?

That made things more difficult, it made him unable to tell how powerful their warriors were, which was a problem.

Riodan schooled his face as he raised his head. Embesh then gestured to the second woman, the one sitting on the throne.

"And this is Sect Leader Anrosh Kesh," Embesh said. "She is second in command of our Sect."

Riodan bowed again. He assumed that this woman was in the Mid to High Monarch Realm, but now... questions came to him, could she also have a high leveled Class? Cultivators rarely raised their Classes, they focused more on skills, and if they did choose to go with a class, they rarely raised it beyond their second evolution, and that was from the top ranked Cultivators. Those in the Immortal Realm.

This woman was the second in command, beneath only the Sect Head himself.

"It is a pleasure to meet you," Riodan managed to say. "I am Emissary Riodan Odrek, from the Green Rain Sect."

"I apologize for not meeting with you sooner, Emissary," Sect Leader Kesh said. "I was visiting our other territories."

"Understandable," Riodan said, trying to regain his composure. "May I assume that Sect Leader Embesh has told you why I have come?"

The woman tilted her head and looked at him for a moment. It allowed Riodan the time to study her. He didn't know anything about her, their research of this sect hadn't been... thorough. Riodan had seen no need. There was no Frontier sect that could stand to the sect the size of Green Rain.

The woman didn't appear old, but that didn't mean much, she was a Monarch and her appearance could hide her age. She seemed confident, and calm, almost cold as she looked at him. He saw none of the uncertainty that he saw in Sect Leader Embesh. One thing was immediately clear to Riodan, this woman didn't fear him.

That could mean a lot of things. She could be stupid, of course. Riodan was a Peak Monarch who had been at that stage for decades, he was powerful. But he also had the backing of a core sect, a Frontier Sect Leader should fear that at least. It could also mean that she was used to fighting strong people. Riodan's eyes slipped to the redheaded woman, seeing that her expression was much the same.

Finally, she decided to speak. "Yes, I was informed of why you came. Your sect seeks to expand in the frontier. We are glad that you've decided to come beforehand, we are happy to meet our new neighbors and establish peaceful relations."

Riodan blinked, he hadn't expected that at all. The woman had to know that his people had been taking their goods and that they have their people. It was a clear as open sky, at least in between sects. Her words told him much. And Riodan found himself confused. He didn't know what to do, Sect Leader Kesh had with one sentence let him know that the Twilight Melody Sect was not going to agree to become a subordinate sect to Green Rain Sect.

Riodan glanced at Sect Leader Embesh and saw that the man was trying to hide his nervousness. That was the type of a response that he had expected. Riodan turned then to look at the last Sect Leader, and saw that she too was looking calm and collected. Two out of three Sect Leaders that weren't afraid.

That was... bad. Usually, it would mean that Riodan would try to pressure them or threaten with the sect's warriors. But... The reality was that he didn't have much to threaten with. Seven Monarchs could intimidate, but not fight an entire sect. Sect Leader Danos was expecting to come into an already established territory, and the quickest way to do that was to make a frontier sect subordinate.

Riodan wondered if he should try and threaten, regardless. He doubted that these two Sect Leaders were insane enough to risk war. That wasn't

something that the Green Rain Sect wanted, wars were costly, which was why sects rarely fought them. Instead they pressured, fought small skirmishes, and used their influence to gain territory. Honor demanded that the weaker side bows down and agrees to the terms.

Except that Riodan just realized that he didn't really know how powerful this sect was. His eyes slid to the woman on his left. Now he was convinced that she wasn't a Cultivator. Which left him unable to tell how strong she was. And if there were more people like that in the sect than he realized... He didn't know how a sect could even function like that. No person in the core would've ever agreed to allow a Classer or even a pure Skill user into their sect, especially not into the inner circle. It went against everything that they knew. The sects abhorred the easy way to power, at least most of them did. Riodan knew that some liked to raise people, to give them Essence and pass on paths. But such things had a price, a raised Cultivator would always be weaker. And they wouldn't be able to advance further unless they gained inspiration on their own.

But even then, raising someone was not done without cause. Such honor had to be earned. Whether by loyalty, or through acts for the sect.

This sect was... strange. And only now he had realized just how much. Ever since he had arrived, he had known that something was amiss. His people could rarely get anyone to speak with them. They barely managed to get any information out of them, even from their prisoners. Everyone inside this sect was loyal. And such loyalty did not come from fear. He didn't know what the Sect Leaders and the Sect Head had promised or given to their people, but it was enough for them not to be swayed by some Essence or an offer of a place in a core sect.

Riodan realized then why that was. They thought that this sect had more to offer to them than a core sect could. Which was... ludicrous. He had picked this sect because it was young, and in his mind probably still fractured since some of its territories were conquered. It seemed that he didn't know nearly enough.

Riodan cleared his throat uncomfortably as he realized that he had been staring.

“Pardon, Sect Leaders. I had been hoping to speak with your Sect Head, the Green Rain Sect has... an offer that I am sure your Sect Head would wish to hear.” Riodan said.

“Our Sect Head is secluded in training,” Sect Leader Kesh said. “But you need not worry. He doesn’t bother himself with Sect matters, all decisions of that kind are left in my hands, with Sect Leader Embesh dealing with day to day. I am the one that can deal on behalf of the sect, if your sect wishes to trade or simply exchange information, I can make that happen. There are some good territories nearby that could suit your sect’s needs. If you plan to expand here, of course.”

Riodan inclined his head. “Ah, thank you for the offer. I would like to hear more about them, and perhaps see the territories myself.”

Riodan knew about Sect Heads that don’t involve themselves in any sect matters. Those who are completely hands off were rare, but they existed. A Sect Head was in many ways the pillar of a Sect, a deterrent simply by existing. And Riodan realized that he knew precious little about the Sect Head of this sect. He would need to learn more.

“Of course, Emissary,” Sect Leader Kesh said.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Sect Leader, I will speak of it to my superiors,” Riodan said, hoping to bring the meeting to the end. He needed to try and learn more, his efforts so far had clearly been insufficient.

“Ah, there is one thing that I am hoping you can help me with, Emissary,” Sect Leader Kesh said.

“Of course, I will strive to help in any way that is within my power,” Riodan added.

“Some of my people have gone missing,” she said, her eyes looking so cold that it almost made Riodan shiver. “I wonder if perhaps you and your people hadn’t come upon anything on your journey here.”

Riodan blinked, trying to understand what she wanted to gain from that. She had to suspect that his people had them, or that they had perhaps killed them. Some sects would do that, Riodan knew, those that were more barbaric.

He tried to think if there was anything to gain from releasing the prisoners now instead later once the sect agreed to become subordinate.

Different sects had different temperaments, but most didn't care if they lost a few warriors.

From the look in the Sect Leader's eyes, he could tell that this sect was different in one more way. It seemed that their people were very important to them.

"I don't know, Sect Leader," Riodan said. "But I can send a message back to camp, and see... if my people have seen anything."

"Please do so," she said. "I would be very pleased to have my people back home."

Riodan bowed his head, and then she dismissed him.

The walk back to his suite passed in a blur as Riodan tried to think on what just happened. He looked around, and for the first time tried to see beyond what was on the walls. Then, he decided to write a few messages. It seemed that the expansion in the Frontier was going to be a bit more complicated than he had assumed.