

Dressing Up

Anrosh stepped out of the Association headquarters, and sighed in relief. The process of registering their sect's presence was easy enough, but the waiting in line with all the others intending to do the same wasn't. Most of the other factions had sent their subordinates to do the job for them. Most of them knew each other, and were talking with each other while they waited. Anrosh didn't feel... right in the situation. So she tried to keep her head down as much as possible. Her sect was not influential compared to most that had a big presence here, Ryun had kept their compound smaller than what a sect of their size should have. Of course, Ryun didn't care about such things, but perception was important to sects. Already Anrosh had noticed that the sects that neighbored their compound gave them condescending looks. Most of the sects around them were small to mid-sized, and Twilight Melody was mid-sized only just barely. They didn't have the people to be too high on that list.

She shook her head, and decided that there was no point in lamenting such things. She had always known that Ryun was different, he had adopted some of the sect culture easily enough, but others he cared nothing about.

Stepping outside the hall, she was again struck by the magnitude of where she was. The Centennial Tournament, an event that she had never thought she would attend, let alone in her role. The buildings that were all around her were simple, for the most part. Each looking as if it had just melted out of the ground and into shape, which she knew was in a way the truth. There were no seams between blocks, there were no blocks at all. Each building looked as if it was made out of one piece. Only a few looked like traditional buildings, and those were buildings that belonged to those who were powerful, who could pay to have them made that way and then decorate them properly. It was amazing to see, and she still had to pinch herself every now and then to make sure that all of it was true, that she wasn't dreaming. She noticed her people standing next to a pillar and waiting for her. She walked over to them and spoke as she approached.

"I hope that you weren't too bored waiting for me," Anrosh said.

The two Lords straightened quickly and bowed. Likos Ji Rev shook his head.

“Of course not, Sect Leader,” he said. “It is our duty.”

Anrosh smiled at the Scout Leader, he had been invaluable to her as a Sect Leader. She hated to take him away from the sect, but his second was competent enough, and with Embesh leading the sect there shouldn't be any issues that they couldn't handle.

They were her escort, even if they weren't a traditional sect, she knew that there were some things that they needed to do. She glanced at the person, or monster, standing a few steps away. Ereclaw was standing straight, wearing a robe with sect colors, black and violet, his hands were crossed over his chest, but his eyes were scanning the people on the street.

It unnerved her a bit to see him do it. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was standing next to a monster. Which made her feel bad. Ereclaw had done nothing but help her and the sect. He had saved Kri, something for which she would be forever grateful to him.

“Ereclaw? Everything alright?” Anrosh asked.

The wolf glanced at her for a second, and then turned back to looking at people. “Many powerful people around,” he said softly.

Anrosh turned in the direction he was looking in. She saw a lot of different people, all walking around minding their own business. They were in the central ring that surrounded the arena, which doubled as a fifth district. There weren't just people from the sects walking around, there were people from every part of the Infinite Realm. She saw people sitting on top of flying carpets, others inside palanquins carried by slaves. A few moved around on top of walking constructs, others on mounts. But the division between the factions was clear. Sect people preferred to wear elaborate robes painted in their sect's colors, while most of the other factions made do with whatever they could find. The sects were the ones that put more value on visual perception. Aside from a few exceptions. She saw a group of people walk down the street, wearing white cloaks, and recognized them as wardens. They were providing security for the city, so it wasn't that odd to see them.

They had a lesser presence in the other districts, only a few patrols, they were more focused on the ring and the Northern and Eastern Districts.

The Western was... well, just letting in the wardens go in there would cause issues. And the sects in the south didn't particularly care for them.

There were a few other factions that she could recognize by the way they were dressed, mostly from stories, she had never really seen them with her own eyes before.

The black robed group walking by with their heads bowed and hoods over their heads clearly belonged to a Dealmaker cult, the mark of the eye on their backs made that clear if someone somehow managed to miss the fact that their robes were made to look like those of the Dealmaker.

A small gathering of karura was kneeling on the street, annoying everyone as they prayed to the sky. One of them, a white feathered karura with bells and strips attached to his wings, and who wore black robes, chanted as he stood in the middle of them, preaching. The cult of Ranheda, who believed that the Framework was just a test from their great goddess, to separate those corrupted by Firekin from the true believers. They believed that in time, they would be proven righteous and sent back to Aegos, their home. At least they weren't the racist jerks, like some of the winged karura that still followed the path of the Ever Rising Currents.

Anrosh shook her head, not really understanding how someone could believe that after they met the Dealmaker. But it was not on her to judge. She turned her eyes away from the cultists, and back to her people.

She noticed Ereclaw staring at a group that had monsters chained and walking next to them. They were most likely breeders or perhaps beast-trainers. She wondered what he was thinking about that. In reality, Ereclaw was no longer just a monster. He was intelligent, far more than most monsters. He was no longer bound by the Framework in the same way that other monsters were.

"We should head back," Anrosh said. "The others should've returned by now."

Everyone nodded at that and they started walking. Anrosh walked in the lead, with Ereclaw next to her, and her warriors walking behind her.

As they walked in silence, Anrosh tried not to glance at Ereclaw. She had things on her mind, but she didn't know how or if she even should bring them up. A part of her wanted to know, but another was content with the way

things were now. She hadn't asked before, since she had been in a difficult place, she didn't need something else to think about. Now, she had started a relationship with Nayra, she felt like she was ready to know.

"Ereclaw?" Anrosh turned to look at him as they walked.

The wolf glanced at her and twitched his ear.

Anrosh didn't know what that meant exactly, but she figured that he was listening. She opened her mouth to ask a question, but then decided against it, instead of asking what she wanted to know she asked about something else.

"What do you think about all of this?" she asked him.

Ereclaw's head swiveled, looking at the people walking around them. "It is... very different than what I have known before. Different than everything I have expected to see."

"How so?" Anrosh asked.

"There are many different people, and many who are strong," the wolf said. "Hunters and prey, walking together."

"Ah," Anrosh didn't quite know what to say to that. But it was to be expected, the way that he saw the world was different than the way she did. She wondered if that is why he and Ryun managed to form their contract. Both were different. She cleared her throat as the silence stretched. "You've been living in the Twilight Woods, before meeting Ryun I mean?"

The wolf glanced at her, and then sighed. "Yes," he said his eyes meeting Anrosh's and holding them. She hadn't noticed before, but they were the same as Ryun's, two black pools of the void. She wondered if he saw the world the same way his contracted partner did.

"I know what you wish to ask," the wolf said.

Anrosh nearly lost a step, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. "You do?"

"Yes," Ereclaw said. "Ask, if you wish to know."

Anrosh wondered if perhaps it would be best not to ask, but in the end she wanted to know. "You... before you met Ryun, you led the wolf pack?"

"I did," Ereclaw said.

"And your pack hunted, killed our sect patrols," Anrosh continued.

"Some," Ereclaw said.

She turned her eyes away from him, and looked straight ahead. “Did you kill my husband?”

The silence around them became a physical thing, an island among the noise that surrounded them.

“I’ve hunted and killed your kind before, yes. My pack kept the intruders out of the forest. I’ve killed many two-legs over my life, but my pack were not the only beings hunting and killing in our territory. Before Ryun, I did not make a distinction between one two-leg and another. You were all the same to me. The answer to your question is that I do not know. I could’ve, and I could’ve easily have not killed him.”

Anrosh nodded, it was... not the answer she had expected. And she didn’t know what to do with it. Ereclaw didn’t know, and that meant... she didn’t know what it meant. She had made peace with her husband’s death. It was the reality of the life in the sects, and she had moved on. But a part of her wished that she knew the truth.

Yet, real life rarely cared for what people wanted. They continued walking in silence until they reached their compound.

The first thing that Anrosh saw when they entered was chaos. Lesamitrius and Nayra were running around the small courtyard, trying to escape from the rods that were stabbing toward them. Ryun was sitting on top of a pillar, his feet dangling, his hands moving and creating rods that he used to... well, throw Nayra and Lesamitrius around. It was quite the sight, none of them were using all of their powers, of course, but... she could see that both Lesamitrius and Nayra were tired, and covered in sweat and dirt.

As she came near, she saw Ryun extend his hands wide to his sides, and then rods exploded out of every part of his arms, stabbing at the two. They were too surprised to react in time, and both were struck. She saw them hit the ground hard, and then Ryun’s pillar crumbled along with all the rods, and he floated down to the ground.

“Enough,” he said. “Well, at least you are both persistent.”

Anrosh heard Nayra groan as she got up to her feet. “That technique is so not fair.”

Lesamitrius shook his head, then climbed up to his feet too. “Thank you for your guidance, Sect Head,” he bowed shakily.

Ryun tilted his head. “We will continue with these... spars, every day until your matches start. Now,” he turned to look at Anrosh. “We should head over to the auction house.”

Anrosh narrowed her eyes as she walked over to him. “Not like that you are not,” she told him.

Ryun frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I understand that you don’t particularly care for appearances Ryun. But we will be going to a place where many of the other sects will have a presence. You can’t go like that,” Anrosh waved her hand at him. “In battle robes, and with that hair and beard of yours. I’m not letting you, the Twilight Melody Sect deserves for its Sect Head to at least look presentable.”

Ryun frowned and reached up, pulling on his hair. It was almost always long, and unkempt, billowing widely unless he decided to tie it behind his back. Or it was chin length and uneven.

“I guess that I can cut it a bit,” Ryun said.

“Oh no,” Anrosh shook her head. “I’ve seen how you cut your hair, we are doing this my way. You will go and bathe, and then I’ll cut your hair, and shave that ridiculous beard.”

His idea of cutting hair was to take a knife or a sword, gather a bunch of hair and then cut it off, resulting in an uneven mess.

Ryun blinked, almost looking offended. “What’s wrong with my beard?”

Anrosh narrowed her eyes at him. “Ryun, please, just trust me.”

Finally, he shrugged. It didn’t mean anything to him, she knew. But she wasn’t going to let his first outing as a Sect Head pass with him looking like a savage. A Sect Head needed to look impressive.

One bath, haircut, a shave, and a clothes change later, Ryun looked at least somewhat presentable. Anrosh shook her head, in truth he looked impressive. She had ordered a robe made for him a while back, she had just never had an opportunity to try and convince him to wear it.

“Do I really need to wear this?” Ryun complained, pulling at the outer robe.

Anrosh slapped his hand away. “Yes, you do.”

It was a simple outfit, she knew that he wouldn't agree to wear anything too elaborate. But it did look impressive. It was in the colors of their sect, meaning black and violet, the emblem of the Twilight Melody Sect, a wolf's head, was embroidered on his breast. The outer robe was black, while his undershirt was violet. It resembled a combat robe, mostly because Anrosh thought that she would have a greater chance to convince him to wear something like that than a proper outfit, although she had another one made which was more formal.

His sleeves were wide enough that he could put both his hands inside. The seams were sewn with violet thread and a violet sash was wrapped around his waist.

Since Ryun was completely hopeless about putting elaborate clothes on, and they hadn't brought any of the servants with them, she had enlisted Lesamitrius' and Riodan's help with him. They at least knew how to do it.

Looking at him now, with a clean shaved face and somewhat styled hair, he did look like a leader. His hair was pulled back, but it was still wild which gave him a rebellious look. But it was his eyes and the violet and black cracks in his skin that completed the effect. He looked dangerous, and like a proper Sect Head, for the first time ever.

Anrosh was very satisfied with the result.

“Yes,” she nodded. “This is what you needed.”

“Really? So not only did I need to get laid, I needed to start dressing up like a clown.”

Anrosh narrowed her eyes at him. She still couldn't believe that he had followed her advice and... She almost believed that he was making fun of her, probably would believe that, if she knew that he never lied to her. She wondered who and how he managed to find someone, and she was afraid to

ask. Regardless, she had noticed that he was... different since then. More relaxed, more... stable in a way. It was why she felt confident enough to order him around and make him clean up.

As a Sect Leader, it was her duty to make sure that her Sect Head was seen in the best possible light. Even if it wasn't exactly what he himself wanted.

"You are at least presentable like this. Now, we can go to the auction without me fearing that we will embarrass our sect."

Ryun grimaced, but he consented to wearing the outfit. Now she only had to hope that he doesn't do anything to draw attention to them. But knowing Ryun... it was unlikely.

They exited the small building that they as the Sect Leaders shared and stepped into the courtyard. The Sect's warriors and the others were standing there, waiting. Lesamitrius and Riodan had obviously warned the others about what they were about to see, but Anrosh saw that they were still taken aback.

Nayra whistled as she took Ryun in. "Wow, you clean up nice," she told him with a grin.

Ryun grunted, stating his dissatisfaction with the entire situation.

Anrosh patted his shoulder. "See?"

He didn't answer.

The auction house was in the Eastern District, and it was a large and sprawling tower. Dozens of floors tall, built to look like it was spiraling toward the sky. They approached among the throngs of others who did the same. The entire base floor ring was an entrance, and she saw some sectioned off parts where more important people entered without having to wait.

The Twilight Melody party was small, compared to some others. Anrosh and Nayra flanked Ryun, both dressed in elaborate black and violet dresses. Unlike Ryun's robes, which were predominantly black, theirs were

predominantly violet. Lesamitrius walked behind them with two Lord Realm warriors as an escort. They had left Likos and Riodan at the compound to watch over it.

The auction house was run by a merchant conglomerate, Bright Moon, and they held daily auctions, a new auction held every hour. There was always something on offer, something being sold off, but nothing really impressive would be put on auction until the tournament started in truth. The Grand Auction was an invite only event, where things worth entire sects would be sold.

But they were unlikely to secure an invitation for that.

As they approached the guards looked them over. Both were drakes, and looked intimidating in their plate armor.

“Faction name?” one of the guards asked, almost disinterestedly.

Anrosh stepped forward and spoke. “Twilight Melody Sect.”

The man nodded and wrote something on a pad he held in his hands, then waved them through.

They entered and were immediately met with a lavish display of wealth. Golden pillars and plants of deep red surrounded everything. Art and displays filled with statues or busts were arranged along the walls with paintings in between them.

Before they took more than two steps, one of the people inside, a karura wearing an elaborate suit that kept his arm wings free, approached them. His style of dress wasn't that of the sects, still he bowed to them over his hands in a sect manner. Probably recognizing their origin.

“I greet you valued patrons. Welcome to the Auction House of the Bright Moon. I will be your host for today. My name is Reviell, anything that you need, you may ask of me. May I know who you are?”

Anrosh inclined her head, a bow of a superior to an inferior, and then spoke. “We are members of the Twilight Melody Sect. I am Sect Leader Anrosh Kesh, accompanied by Sect Leader Nayra Ornn,” Anrosh gestured toward Nayra, and then toward Ryun. “And our Sect Head, Ryun Nacht.”

She didn't introduce their escort, as was only proper.

“I greet you, Sect Head,” he bowed to Ryun again, as was protocol.

Anrosh had barely enough time to instruct Ryun in basics, but as he stood and glared at the man, she started to fear that he hadn't been listening. Then, he finally nodded, and she sighed in relief.

"May I know what it is that you are looking for today? To buy or sell?"

"Both," Anrosh said.

The karura snapped his beak a few times, then pulled out a small round disk—an interface. He tilted his head as he started using it and a list appeared in front of him. Anrosh could see that it was an incredibly long list of faction names. Quickly the names moved until they stopped on the name of their sect.

Their host inclined his head and met Anrosh's eyes. "Your sect is cleared for the auction's first floor," he said and then stepped to the side, gesturing with his hand.

"If you will follow me please, I will lead you to your berth. The next auction will start soon."

The six of them followed behind their host, as he led them deeper into the auction house. Anrosh couldn't help but look forward to what she was about to see. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity.