

## Death Approaching

The village burned; the villagers screamed. Those that were still alive at least. Kyill watched the carnage from a nearby hill, surrounded by his minions, feeling the Essence just flow into him. He had always known that it could be this easy, had always known that he could be this. And yet he had always been forced to limit himself, to be lesser. Now, there was nothing stopping him.

The core was too consumed with their petty wars to notice, and who of them would even care about a few Frontier Sects?

Kyill had free reign here. The last villager died, and with his **|Dominate Lesser Minds|** he recalled his minions, ordering them to carry the corpses to him. And with that small raid, his army grew again. He smiled to himself, there were no limits on him now. No one to enforce the rules. He had no need to ask for permission to take a corpse of a sentient. Contracts and deals, stupidity. He was a necromancer; he shouldn't need to hold himself back from practicing his craft.

He knew why they limited his kind, while they pretended like they didn't. Because they feared what they could do, with no resources, with no support. Kyill had in less than two years done what it took others a decade. He had an army, vast and expendable, he could topple a city in a night, and with the death his army only grew larger.

Kyill wondered how many cities he had already reaped; he had lost count after the first few dozen. And it was all so easy, especially with all the chaos in the core. He had been able to raise so many corpses under everyone's noses, enough that he had an army that could rival the strongest factions—in numbers at least.

His zombies shuffled over, dragging the corpses from the village. Kyill knelt next to them and looked the corpses over. As he had suspected most were weak, though he did find a handful of ones that had true bodies, which made his gamble worth it. It was why he had come here in the first place. In the sect-controlled Frontier. His Class was great at raising a lot of bodies, but

he had few tools that would let him empower his undead. They would be as physically strong as they had been in life, only without any of their perks and powers. Which was why he had come here, to find and raise Cultivators. Their bodies were permanently changed and improved by their advancement. A Cultivator with a True Body was at least a tier more valuable as an undead than a Class or Skill user that had been the same tier of power in life.

This particular Cultivator's True Body seemed to make his skin as tough as stone—making it another great addition to his army. Sadly, he couldn't give precise commands to his undead, which meant that in most cases the people they killed were savaged, covered in wounds, bite marks and claw marks. Their skin hanging open, but that didn't matter, not for his type of necromancy.

He didn't have the mastery of the Lord of Death. He couldn't carve formations into the bones of his undead to make them stronger and better. He couldn't infuse souls into them, he couldn't raise great and powerful monsters. What Kyill could do however was raise more weaker undead in a shorter period of time. Raising the recently departed with his perks turned them into zombies, which were the core of his build. He couldn't make them stronger, but their decomposition released putrid clouds that would poison anything in their immediate area. He did have one perk that allowed him to raise a corpse with some of the power it had in life, but it was limited in the way that he could only have a small number of such undead—and they were as unthinking as the rest of his undead. He had to control them directly in order for them to be any better than the rest.

Those undead surrounded him now, his ever-present guards. Out of the six of them, one was far above the others in terms of power. The gem in his undead army filled with pebbles. The undead was a former High Ranker, and Kyill had been lucky to have found him. Redagatt the Wall Breaker, stood in silence with the eerie pale gaze of an undead. Kyill himself had reached the ninth tier of power, but he wasn't as powerful as a High Ranker. He could've never been able to kill someone like Redagatt.

He had found his corpse in the aftermath of a battle. Several factions had clashed in a mighty display of power and violence. Most of the participants died, Redagatt among them. Kyill had taken advantage of the

abandoned battlefield. It was where he had started his army, and where he obtained Redagatt.

He glanced to the side at the strongest of his undead. A tall minotaur carrying two large hammers. He still wore the armor he had worn in life, enchanted with arrays that made him nearly invulnerable to physical damage. Though, the minotaur's face and body were covered with burns. It was how he had died, cooked inside his armor. His horns were blackened from it too—the undead was not a pretty sight. Still, he served his purpose.

Kyill started raising the corpses from the village, adding them to his army. It took a few minutes, but when he was done, he turned back and returned to where his main army was staying, silent and unmoving. The entire valley filled with unmoving shapes, a faint cloud of green mist covering them. Kyill smiled at his creations. He had enough now to begin, to do what he had always wanted to. To rule and hold the territory of his own. No longer would he be forced to use his zombies for menial tasks, to clear pests. No, now when everyone was occupied with something else, now was the time when he would be the one on top.

With a mental command, he ordered his army to march.

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Tali sat in the chamber, letting the power of the totem infuse and heal her. The sensation was strange. She could almost feel her soul being healed, parts of it that had been burned out growing back. And then, her body healed a step after, once her soul was healed enough. She could tell that she was close to regaining access to all of her power. Her core had been recreated, her conduits regrown, though she couldn't touch them quite yet. It all made her feel... impatient. It had been such a long time since she had last felt anything like this.

She wasn't quite sure what she was going to do once she had her power back. Before, she would've wanted only revenge. She would've left and sought out her former friend and killed her. But her time in the Twilight Melody Sect

had changed things. She saw her younger self in Ryun, herself before she let her Path fall to the side. Once, she lived for advancement. She felt her Path as intuitively as she drew breath. And then she had let herself be drawn into other matters, politics, rule, friendships and love. All of that had made her lose sight of what had always made her truly happy.

Her book was another thing that had led her astray. She had relied on what she had seen, on doing things that the book told her to do, to the extent that she never even entertained the idea that perhaps she never needed it in the first place. All the things that the book told her, Tali had done herself. The visions that she had been granted had only confirmed that she was on the right path, but in the end Tali was the one that had to do all of those things.

It was amusing to her now, to remember her old self. Losing power had humbled her in some ways. But meeting Ryun had done the opposite. It was inspiring to see someone who followed his Path with such conviction. How many times he had taken what she had taught him and done something else, how many times had he proven her wrong? He understood what his greatest strength was, and what his talent was. He blazed a Path through the unknown on his own, disregarding the well traveled paths of others. And by now Tali was used to that, and she missed doing the exact same thing.

Once she had been like him, walking through a fog on her own, lighting a path for those that came after her. She had no teachers, all that she knew and had accomplished, she had done on her own. She resolved herself to do that again. To follow **her** Path. It wouldn't do for her to be eclipsed by someone hundreds of years her junior.

Though, if she was being honest with herself, Ryun was a real monster. There was no way around that. She had met others who were like him in some ways. Perhaps not such talents in Cultivation, but she had stood side by side with monsters that were unmatched in the mastery of their weapons. And those who advanced fast and seemingly without any bottlenecks. And most of them had died. In the beginning they didn't know anything about the dangers of the Infinite Realm or about focus and madness that could come from advancement.

She wondered how many Ryun's had died in the early days of their arrival. How many had died in their sleep because they didn't know that certain monsters could enter dreams? How many had died exploring new and strange territories, not knowing that the monsters in them were several tiers of power higher than them?

So many had lost their lives in those first few years, simply because they lacked knowledge.

And those that came after, came into a world that was already tamed. A place where they didn't have to fight and struggle in the same way. How many of those who had the same talent as Ryun had chosen to become merchants or bakers?

It was something to think about.

She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. Both of them worked now, as did most of her body. She still had scars covering her skin, but that was surface damage that she didn't really care about. Once perhaps, she would've been bothered by it. But physical appearance had stopped mattering to her a while ago.

She stood and walked out of the room. The totem healed, but it also... drained. It made her soul feel sore, which manifested in her body feeling heavy and hard to control. Thankfully that didn't last for long, a couple of hours after a session, she usually felt like she was back to normal.

Tali walked through the corridors of the building. She was in Wolf's Grove, which in her mind, she considered the private home of the Sect Head. She knew that Ryun and Anrosh preferred to think of it as the main hub of their sect, but such titles weren't really important. The heart of a sect was wherever its leadership was in a given moment.

With that, her thoughts turned to Ryun. He had left around a week ago, heading for the Empire of the Third Iteration. Tali didn't know if she really agreed with his decision, but she knew that no matter what she said Ryun would always do what he thought was right. She respected that and knew that his philosophy had gotten him far in life. She also understood the danger that the Dome posed. It was obvious from what she had learned about the core in the last three years that no one else was going to bother to deal with it.

It was... insanity. They were playing with the lives of everyone. But, even just based on her own history, she knew how things could've reached this point. It was a failing of the people in the Infinite Realm, that they always sought to gain more personal power. She understood how that way of thinking developed, and she did partially agree that it was important, but they had to be better.

She wondered what the Cabal was doing, if they even existed still. From Ryun she knew that Yirrel and Zenker were probably dead, and she heard nothing about Eratemus and others. Sometimes, she wondered if she should reach out to Sigmund, but she always lost her nerve in the end.

Though, she hadn't even been able to contact anyone during her time as a slave. And after Ryun set her free... It was hard. Too much time had passed, and then there were her other fears.

A part of her was worried about him seeing her as crippled, of seeing pity in his eyes. She knew that he would take care of her, but she didn't want that, didn't want to be a burden. And now... now she was going to be whole again, so she pushed her decision off until then. Tali knew that time was quickly running out, she could almost taste her power now. It wouldn't take long. A few days, weeks maybe, and she would at least be able to use her Cultivation.

As she walked through the building, people inclined their heads to her, knowing that she was an important part of the sect. Few really knew who she was, but they all understood that she had the ear of their Sect Head. She was an adviser, a trainer, a confidant, a friend. It was a strange position for her to be in, especially with her past. But she had grown accustomed to it. She had no real responsibilities, other than training Kri, but that she could do in her sleep. The girl did have talent and potential, which made Tali eager to see how far she could go. Ryun had made it clear that he wanted her advancement to be tough, that Tali was to push her to accomplish as much as possible on her own. But that was... hard to do with the sons and daughters of those who were powerful. Kri had access to things her mother and Ryun didn't, and it didn't make sense for them not to use them.

Tali had seen how that could turn the young heirs arrogant and entitled. So far Kri seemed to have been able to avoid most of the worst attributes that one could develop.

She walked out of the building and into the courtyard, only to see a frantic movement all around her. Warriors carrying crates and loading carts, others tightening up their armor and checking their weapons. She saw one of the sect Monarchs standing nearby giving out orders and made her way to him.

“What is happening?” She asked immediately.

The man turned to look at her, his mouth open and ready for a rebuke when he recognized her. His expression calmed immediately, and he pulled out a rolled piece of paper.

“Just got word from Consequence, from the Sect Leader,” he said, not offering her the scroll probably because people still thought that she was blind. “One of the neighboring sects is under attack by the undead. An entire army of them. Refugees have crossed into our lands, harried by small packs of zombies. The Sect Leader is mobilizing all of our warriors. It... it seems like the undead army is substantial.”

Tali blinked, then tilted her head. “Do we know if the undead are wild or if they are being controlled?”

“There have been some unconfirmed reports about necromancer sightings, but based on their choice of targets we assume that they are under someone’s control,” the warrior said.

Tali grimaced. Necromancers were powerful, though their craft was often hard to advance. It required death and bodies, and few in the Infinite Realm would allow them to practice it freely. There were only a few factions that were predominantly ruled by necromancers and all of them had strict rules. A necromancer could quickly spiral out of control if allowed to use their power without restriction. What bothered Tali was the fact that they hadn’t heard anything about this until now. Necromancers that decide to go on conquest sprees were easy to see from leagues away. You couldn’t hide disappearances and death on such a scale. Then she understood. You couldn’t hide it unless the entire world was consumed in war and chaos. She cursed their idiocy; all that chaos would allow many of the darker elements

of the Infinite Realm's population to act freely. Who knew what else would crawl out of their hiding places?

"What does the Sect Leader plan to do?" Tali asked. She wondered what Anrosh planned to do. The undead were generally weak, especially zombies, but over time they could grow to be a threat that could not be easily overcome. And if there was a necromancer behind them, then that meant that they had a goal. Leaving them alone to do and grow their army as they wanted was always a bad idea.

"Our orders are to gather as many warriors as possible at Consequence, I don't know anything beyond that," the warrior answered.

Tali looked over the warriors gathering and getting ready to set out. She doubted that anyone in the Twilight Sect knew how to deal with the undead. She closed her eyes and reached down, hoping to be able to touch her Qi. It was... almost there, she could feel it, but she couldn't touch it. She needed just a bit more time.

"I'm coming with you," Tali said. "And I'm going to need your best warriors as escort."

Transporting an Eternal item would be a risk, but she could put it in her storage ring. If no one knew that it was there, perhaps the danger would be minimal.