

The Midnight Reign

The territories of the Midnight Reign Sect were... eerie. Dark and depressing. The roads were cobbled stone, a wooden fence running on both ends of the road along it, and every ten or so meters a wooden pole was placed with a lantern hanging from it. Shining a dim light that barely illuminated anything and only made the shadows beyond the road look worse. The moon above was barely showing, a mist covered the ground, tinting everything in a red sheen. He couldn't even see the stars around the moon, the crest of the Midnight Reign Sect.

Everything about this place made Lesamitrius's hairs to stand up. He was on top of his mount, his four guards behind him on their own. The dark furred boar beneath him was as anxious as he was, though probably not because of the atmosphere itself. Their mounts were inching away, trying to avoid the mounts of their escorts. The Midnight Reign Sect escorts were riding pale worm-like creatures, with bulbous heads that had terrifying looking pincers. Something about them was upsetting their mounts, which was... surprising. The Twilight Melody Sect had hired trainers, their mounts were reared from a young age to not shy away from battle and monsters.

The riders themselves were mysterious, wrapped in black cloth with large hoods and their faces wrapped, wearing gloves, not showing any skin. He assumed that most of them were human, since he couldn't see any tails or other easily identifiable body parts. Though, a demasi or a ravzor could easily hide their tail beneath their big cloaks. Not even his scent was giving him anything, all of them had the same scent—that of earth and stone, and... something else that he couldn't quite grasp.

They had been escorted through two territories, passed through two towns, each was small with no people anywhere he looked. As if they were hiding, or as if there weren't any people there in the first place. The Midnight Reign Sect was an enigma. More so than he had ever known.

He remembered their emissaries. They had come to the sect, wearing the same things as his escorts did. Their bodies completely covered. He knew that their territories were those of constant night, so that hadn't been too

strange to him. But, they had also asked to meet with his Sect Head, insisted on it. After the Tournament, everyone had wanted to talk with Ryun, mostly about things that he didn't care about. Some simply wanted to give him gifts, or to actively curry favor with a High Ranker. Others wanted to try and speak with him to learn about him more, to try and find any advantage or leverage that they could use against or for him. It wasn't anything that Lesamitrius was unfamiliar with. It was the same with his previous Sect Head. It always went that way with powerful Sect Heads.

Their mysteriousness was a part of their power. If people didn't know much about them, they were feared more, their allies would tread lightly, and their enemies would think twice before trying anything. A Sect Head was a symbol more than a leader, a looming threat that no one should want to come down on you. Ryun embodied that part of the Sect Head's job well.

To him, the Midnight Reign Sect had been just one of the hundreds of sects that had been seeking his Sect Head's attention. His job had been to make sure that none of them reach him. Anrosh was the one who dealt with everything regarding the sect, there wasn't anything that they could gain from talking with Ryun. And most of them probably knew that, most had went on to meet with Anrosh. Perhaps that should've been the first clue that something was different.

When asked, the Midnight Reign Sect would say that the issue they wished to bring to Ryun related to mining. It was not anything of great importance, not to him and not to Ryun. They hadn't told anyone the specifics, which... Lesamitrius had to admit was to their credit. Now, the sect knew that people that they had taken in had been stealing from the Midnight Reign Sect, but they hadn't declared that to everyone, when doing so could've embarrassed the Twilight Melody Sect and got them what they wanted. They were honorable.

He didn't know why they did that, or why they just insisted on speaking with Ryun directly. Still, if he could do things again... He probably would do the same thing. One sect among hundreds that had asked for his Sect Head's time? There was no reason to believe that it was something important.

And even now... what they had done had crossed lines. The Twilight Melody Sect was larger, and they had done something to their people.

Lesamitrius knew the intricacies of sect relationships, so he also knew that any sect could see the power that Twilight Melody Sect held. They were one of the largest on the Frontier, they had an Ascended Realm Cultivator. Their leader was a High Ranker, one that had defeated the Dome Leader, everyone had seen the notification when it died.

The Midnight Reign knew that, which made their decision to do this... strange. Enough so, that Lesamitrius reached out to his father, and asked for all the information that the Green Rain Sect had on them. What his father sent him was... alarming.

The Midnight Reign Sect was old. Really old, and not just Frontier old. They had been there before the Green Rain Sect was established, and they had been there when the outer edge of the Frontier had ended with their borders. They had always been the same size, had always traded their ore with surrounding sects. They never tried to expand or encroach on territories of others. Always isolationists, but always respectful of others. They never made war, never joined other's wars, never gave cause for one.

When war was made on them... well. Their warriors defeated those that were sent to their territories, and they never pushed beyond theirs to punish. When sects abandoned reason and marched armies on them, those armies were never heard from again. And in time, people learned not to interfere with them.

Lesamitrius could understand how he didn't know about them, how the younger generations didn't know. The last time someone tried to bring war to the Midnight Reign Sect was two hundred years ago. And since they never made problems for those beyond their borders, there was no reason for people to be wary of them. Traders that passed through spoke of small towns, of unimpressive buildings. Of holdings in the Under that no one was allowed in. Most believed that they were mining the Under

Obligation and responsibility, honor and respect. These were the things that the sects were built on. From the times of their founding, they had been built in a way that protected their people. Each Sect was often smaller than the grand factions that spread in the core, but in the end, while sects might disagree with each other, they were at the end of the day all still

sects. All one in the pursuit of survival. That was why their wars didn't get nearly as bloody as those of other factions.

Lesamitrius knew that all out war was unlikely. That was clear just from the way that the Midnight Sect had acted. He knew that his Sect Leader was afraid of it, but... she wasn't yet quite as experienced at the dance of sects as the older leaders were. And if what his father told him was true, the Midnight Reign Sect was one of the oldest ones. No, they didn't want war. But they did want something. The mining stuff, the theft... that was a ruse. They could've dealt with it, but they haven't. Lesamitrius suspected that the theft and breach of their borders gave them an excuse, a reason to reach out. That was a very old sect thinking, ways that weren't really practiced in the younger sects and in the frontier overall.

If Ryun wanted something from another sect, he would just go there and ask. The Green Rain Sect would be a little less direct, like how they sent him to conquer while never really thinking that it would work—though Lesamitrius knew that if he had succeeded they wouldn't be saddened.

This was... a very different situation. If his belief proved to be true, then the Midnight Reign Sect wanted something, and it required them to meet with their Sect Head directly. Ryun was still not in the sect, and they had to know it.

They hadn't done anything in years, so why now? While Ryun was still away? Something changed, and Lesamitrius needed to gather as much information as possible.

As they reached the base of a hill, he could see the town in the distance on top of it, the lanterns on the walls lighting a beacon through the mist. He saw caravans moving past the gates, others on the slope going out—traders. Then when they reached a crossroad, their guides turned them away from the path toward the town.

Lesamitrius frowned. "Are we not headed to the town?" He had thought that this place was their seat of power.

One of the escorts glanced at him, then spoke in a rough voice. "No."

As if that was any type of real answer. Still, he remained respectful, and followed along. They led them down off the road, into the forest. And after a hour on the dirt road they reached a cave opening. Large enough for all of

them to fit. Torches lit the way down, and they started making their way. Lesamitrius wondered if this was one of their mines.

They followed a winding corridor for what felt like hours, without encountering another soul.

Finally, after coming around another bend, he saw the end. A wall filled his vision. Smooth stone with a large opening that led deeper. There were two more corridors, splitting on either side of the gate. But what drew his eyes were the two guards. Both tall, one demasi, one human. They wore cloth armor that left their arms bare, and he could see bulging muscle. Their skin was dark blue, almost purple, identical, which told him that they had the same True Body. And their eyes were blue and glowing. It clicked inside his head, the scent that had filled these territories. It was death. The two and his escorts, they were all undead. Not the kind that a Necromancer might raise, but the ones that were born, that chose this path through their True Bodies. That was rare.

He was led through the opening, and then into a massive cavern... a city.

Lesamitrius could barely believe his eyes. What he saw down there was... a city filled with pyramids, with monoliths. With wide streets and people walking, thousands, tens of thousands. The city was easily several times the size of Consequence. The light was dim, but it illuminated enough. The white stone, the golden plates, the ornate towers and monoliths carved with symbols. This was... power.

And then he realized what this place was. A conquered wild dungeon, one turned into a city. How had no one known that it was here? How had they kept it hidden?

The undead guards led him down into the city. He saw more undead, the mindless kind pulling carts or cleaning the streets, and the others—Cultivators, walking around. Not all were undead, but many were that he could see.

His escort led him down the streets, not letting him take the time to look around much. They dismounted when they arrived at one of the main looking pyramids, and were then led on foot through a giant entrance. He walked in, admiring the art hung on the walls. It was mostly mosaics, filled

with colors, depicting strange battles underground. They arrived at large ornate doors, wrought out of gold and black metal.

“Only you,” one of his still shrouded escorts said. Lesamitrius glanced at his people, then nodded, he had expected that.

The doors opened and he was let inside.

The room was long, and reminded him of the throne room in Consequence, only far grander. Undead guards stood in between the pillars, holding halberds in their hands. Lesamitrius kept his head down as he approached the end, where a large throne sat on top of a dais, with a figure sitting on it.

He stopped a few steps from the stairs, and one of the guards on either side of 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.”

When the man was done, Lesamitrius immediately dropped down. A bow in the sects had a lot of different meanings, and he made sure to do this right. He dropped to his right knee, a show of deep respect, but not a full kneel, he did not want to present himself as someone who had come to plead. His left hand, he placed over his chest, a warrior greeting to make them know why he was here and the possibility of what could happen. His right fist he placed on the floor, a show of strength and dominance of his sect. The Midnight Reign Sect was more than they had believed, but Twilight Melody Sect was no small Frontier sect, they had their own honor to consider.

“I am Lesamitrius Danos, Emissary of the Twilight Melody Sect. I speak with the voice of my Sect Leader, Anrosh Kesh, who sent me here, and I carry the will of my Sect Head, Ryun Nacht, the Witness of the Journey’s End, the Undying Void.”

He said, then raised his head and looked at the Sect Head of the Midnight Reign Sect. The man was undead, wearing a golden headdress, golden robes that left his arms bare. Just like the other undead, he was muscled, but he was at least twice their size, almost a giant. His skin was dark, the color of a bruise, he had two black armbands on each arm. An armored

dress beneath his waist, his hands rested on his throne, and his blue eyes stared at him from above, without saying a word.

Then, only for a moment, Lesamitrius felt him unveil his core. The power of the man washed over him, and he bowed his head. He steeled himself, trying to keep any expression off his face. He had been sent to find out what had happened to their people, but now... Now he had to tread lightly.

Because the Sect Head of the Midnight Reign Sect was in the Ascended Cultivation Realm.