

Balance

“The food production increase is going according to schedule, we should be able to produce all of our foodstuff needs within the year,” Embesh offered a piece of paper.

“That’s good,” Anrosh responded as she picked the paper up and skimmed over it. The numbers and projections clearly shown through graphs. “We can’t sustain purchasing what we need for much longer than that.”

“Is it really that bad?” Nayra asked.

Anrosh met Nayra’s eyes. Just having her here after so long had been incredible. She had missed her a lot, and if she could, she would’ve dropped everything and just spent months alone with her. But her responsibilities meant that she couldn’t be away from the sect, from Consequence, especially not now.

She had been in every meeting since she returned, trying to catch up on all the sect matters. And after a few months of daily they had barely scratched the surface of all the things that the sect dealt with now. It had been years since she was home.

“It is,” Embesh said with a sigh. He was a Territory Leader, had been the leader of their primary food production territory and branch. Anrosh had moved him to Consequence out of necessity, she needed someone she could trust to be her right hand. He still used his expertise in farming, though now only in the Territory surrounding Consequence, while his family took over his former job. “Our production was never intended for... this many people. We’ve expanded rapidly, taken dozens of territories over the years, and with all of the refugees from the core and your people... We have almost ten million people spread out across our entire sect, too many to feed with what we can produce. We’ve been forced to import food from surrounding sects, and we’ve been paying a premium because of all the wars happening everywhere. Though, thankfully, sect wars are not like the wars of other factions.”

The sect wars had calmed down, only the few border clashes remained. Sect wars rarely lasted for long. The strong demonstrate their strength with

as little blood as possible, and the losing side accepts the defeat. Few sect wars devolve into the monstrous butchering of the core factions, and it is always frowned down on by the rest. If you are stronger, then you don't need to spill that much blood.

"I could ask my family," Nayra said slowly. "We have a lot, my father can help you produce—"

Anrosh shook her head immediately. With the corner of her eyes she glanced at Tali who was sitting in the corner, not at the main table, quiet. "No," she responded. "We cannot get into debt to foreign factions Nayra, I understand what you mean. But if we do that, I might as well just hand over the entire Sect to your family, or the Zenshuen people. Ether could help us, but they are guests. We are already buying food from your family, we can't show... We cannot accept help or a gift, or we will show weakness."

It was so hard to balance all these powerful people. Anrosh herself was nothing compared to some of them, and yet she was in charge. She knew that she had much respect from those who had been part of their core sect, the Twilight Melody Sect, former Black Viper Sect and The Last Ember Sect, the smaller sects that they had conquered over the years. But two guest factions had a lot of people too. Zenshuen and the House of Ornn.

Either of those factions could've pushed and tried to take over the sect, the Ornns had the numbers and the strengths, Zenshuen had the name and influence. The only reason neither of them had tried anything visible was because of Nayra for the Ornns and Ryun for the Zenshuen. And Tali, she couldn't forget her, though Anrosh was sure that Tali wouldn't lift a finger to help Anrosh keep the sect under her control. Not out of malice or disloyalty, no, she would see it as a teaching moment. Anrosh cursed the day when Tali had decided to give Anrosh her attention.

Before Ryun left, Tali had seen her as a bellow average Cultivator unworthy of her attentions. She had focused all of her attention on Kri and probably only because Ryun asked that of her. Now, though... the woman was her constant shadow. She never said her piece, she never told Anrosh what to do. Oh, she scolded and she "*advised*" but never in public. The other saw Tali behind Anrosh and thought that she ruled.

Her actions against the Necromancer had granted her a lot of influence and respect, she would've been well regarded even if people didn't know who she really was. And most didn't, only those who mattered. The Ornn family had some history with her, or at least Nayra's mother did. The two Zenshuen High Rankers knew of her, but only in passing, they had been children when Tali had supposedly died. Still, they respected her. None of them respected Anrosh.

And that was one of her biggest issues. She couldn't show even a trace of weakness. She needed to hold the sect together until Ryun returned. She knew that he was on his way, Selia Ha Jhan had told her that he had contacted her through some secret means. The woman was obviously not aware of the fact that Anrosh knew about Ryun and hers bond. Ryun didn't keep secrets from her, but she didn't tell the woman that of course. Knowing that he was coming was enough.

"Anything else on the list?" Anrosh asked.

Embesh glanced at Nayra then back at her, he opened his mouth then quickly closed them. Then, he cleared his throat and spoke. "Another incident in the city."

Anrosh closed her eyes and sighed. He didn't even need to tell her what actually happened, she could guess. Still, she asked. "What happened?"

"Two immortals got drunk on one of those new brews, Zenshuen and Ornn, they... words were said, and it turned to violence. They demolished the tavern, blew out a wall and collapsed part of the first floor. The owner petitioned the sect, for punishment and restitution."

"Which Ornn?" Nayra asked.

"Uh..." Embesh picked up a piece of paper and quickly skimmed through it. "Fri—dor Ornn? Fridor? Fredor?"

"Frador," Nayra corrected as she grimaced. "My nephew, my sister Vanessa's son."

A main house member then, that could be... bad. Anrosh turned to Embesh. "And Zenshuen?" she asked.

"Villerin Xi Jhan," Embesh said. "One of the sect warrior trainers. They are both hundreds of years old."

And that was the crux of their issues. People in the sects knew about the Third Iteration, they knew that there was a war and that they were exiled. Most believed them to be dead. Anrosh and her people knew better. But they.. They didn't have any issues with them, they were people born on the Frontier, young. They didn't remember the war, their parents didn't remember it either. They had no involvement with what happened in the past only stories, no bad blood.

The people from Zenshuen and the Ornn family were a different story. Their old immortals remembered, there were no immortals in the people from Zenshuen who had been alive back then, but several of them had parents who had been in the war. They grew up on first hand accounts. This wasn't the first time something like this had happened between them.

And yet... Anrosh glanced at Tali, saw her sitting there and judging. Karya Ornn clearly had some kind of a relationship with Tali, and obviously not a hostile one. Which was... confusing everyone. The stories, the history, says that the two of them were enemies. The Third hated Tali for attacking their Citadel, for killing their leader. And the old sect warriors hate Karya for doing the same in return. But the two of them? They were seen walking through the city together, talking. Granted, if it wasn't for that, the two sides would've probably torn each other to pieces. Classers and Cultivators, sect and an empire, Third Iteration and the rest.

She was thankful that most of their people weren't anywhere near each other. The Zenshuen people had made Wolf's Grove as their main territory, their people were spread out in their southern territories, while the Ornns had taken the northern ones. But each had representatives in the capital—Consequence. The Twilight Melody had expanded a lot, both further into the wild and along the Frontier borders. They had absorbed the smaller sects that had been surrounding them, absorbed the refugees from the core—those that had accepted the Twilight Melody Sects rule at least. They still had pressures on their Eastern borders, their neighbors had for the most part been absorbed by the greater sects that had moved there from the inner sect territories. The losers of the wars, branches of sect families, those who didn't want to serve, but just moved away, like Zenshuen people. Often, a single

family or just a branch of a main sect family, was enough to conquer a small or mid sized sect in the frontier. They just had... old people, powerful people.

The Twilight Melody Sect was surrounded on all sides by threats. People escaping from the south and the Empire were still coming, some stayed with the Orns, others moved further North. She had heard word of an army attacking a sect to the far south. The Third Iteration people did not all come to the Frontier peacefully, in fact of those that hadn't decided to try and take unclaimed territories, most had not.

Anrosh was the one that had to deal with them all. She had some influence with the sect people, not as much as Tali, but she had fought against the necromancer and his armies. She was seen and she had demonstrated her power. But recently she was always put against people far older and stronger than her. She survived by trying to balance them all, by appearing bigger than she actually was.

"I can talk with mother," Nayra offered.

Anrosh met her eyes. She loved her, and she knew that she only wanted to help, that she felt she hadn't been doing enough as a Sect Leader. But this was not something that she could help with. "I'll talk with her first," Anrosh said. "Regarding the punishment of her family member. This is a sect, he destroyed another's property and engaged in unsanctioned violence in our capital. You understand that he needs to be punished by us, right?"

Narya nodded reluctantly. Anrosh could see that she struggled with it.

"Vanessa isn't going to like that," Narya added.

"She doesn't have to like it. But," Anrosh's voice softened. "I would appreciate it if you talked with your mother afterward. Something has to be done about this, we can't have them fighting like that, they are here as guests."

Narya nodded. "I know."

Anrosh held her eyes for a moment and then looked at Embesh. "And I will need to speak with someone from Zenshuen. Erdania would be best."

The Zenshuen people were led by Selia and Erdania, and of the two Anrosh much preferred to talk with Erdania. She was... easy going, a warrior at heart who understood the order of such things. Selia was... more political. She would have a harder time convincing Selia to allow her to punish one of her own people. She was more interested in appearances than Erdania was.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Embesh told her.

“See to it,” Anrosh said and brought the meeting to an end.

Embesh left the room, Nayra paused and glanced at her then at Tali. Anrosh waved her away and after a moment she walked out. Anrosh leaned her head on the back of her chair, closed her eyes and sighed.

“Our vaults are nearly empty, what we salvaged from the monster swarm is gone, and we don’t produce enough to sustain our needs,” she said.

“And whose fault is that?” Tali asked.

“I know,” Anrosh answered.

“You should never have accepted as many people as you have into the sect,” Tali continued.

“I know.”

“Too many mouths to feed, too many people that have no worth. Raising them up, teaching them, it all costs Anrosh, but you didn’t think about that did you?”

“I know! But it was either that or fight them and kill them. They were desperate, those that were left homeless by the Necromancer were starving, would’ve died in weeks. And those that come from the core... if I refused them... they were desperate enough that they would’ve tried something stupid, like fighting us.”

When she lowered her head and looked at Tali, she saw her glaring at her. “Your heart is too soft, but... I guess that there is quality in that too. You aren’t too bad.”

It was always like this with her, compliments that she wasn’t sure were compliments, disappointment and lectures. In the end Anrosh did appreciate it.

“I could hire more blacksmiths, or spare some Essence to raise a few,” Anrosh said. Ryun had started a blacksmithing industry in the sect, when he had started to learn. He gave Essence and support to the best smiths that their sect had. They weren’t... great. The quality of their work was solid, but it wasn’t anything amazing. They mostly mass-produced low-grade weapons and armor, which the sect sold to the surrounding sects and the core factions. With their wars even low-grade weapons and armor were needed. They were making most of their profits from what they produced, plus the materials

that they sold from their Hearthstone Dungeon as well as the rights for dungeon runs.

“You could,” Tali said.

“You are not going to tell me if that is a good idea, aren’t you,” Anrosh sighed again.

“No.”

Anrosh shook her head, a part of her appreciated her teaching even though it was unconventional. Tali didn’t interfere, but she was there to bail her out. She had done it in the past, when Sects that were stronger than she could handle came knocking. She had fought and defeated the would-be conquerors. But she never interfered when she thought that Anrosh could handle something on her own. And often, Tali’s idea of what Anrosh could handle exceeded reality. True, it always forced Anrosh to push herself, to grow, for which she was thankful. She knew that it was making her stronger.

That was Tali’s teaching style, she did it with all of her students, Kri included.

“I could take Nayra’s offer,” Anrosh said slowly.

“Ender Ornn could feed the sect, within a week he could produce what we might consume in a year,” Tali said. The Ornns had transformed one of the Twilight Melody Territories into farmland, they were producing their own food, for the most part, and selling the rest to the neighboring sects and to Twilight Melody. “But you know what that will mean.”

“I do,” Anrosh said. It would tip the balance between Zenshuen and the Ornns. If one side provided more, then the other would feel obligated to do the same. And in the end, Anrosh would just lose her authority to them over time. “I guess that I need to talk with them then, convince them somehow to let me punish their immortals and get them to pay restitution. Joy.”

“Remember, project strength, you are the acting Head of Twilight Melody Sect. We are no longer a small Frontier faction. We are on the cusp of being a large sect. Despite your age, you have done well, and what you’ve achieved must be respected.”

Anrosh nodded her head, then stood and walked out. She needed to prepare for those meetings, which meant going into a full Sect Head mode. Colorful and quality spun dresses, an entourage. She just couldn’t wait.