

## Party

Anrosh sat nervously inside a carriage. They had to rent one, since theirs was nowhere near appropriate for the occasion. Even their clothes were pushing it. She had spent an ungodly amount of Essence on her and Ryun's clothes, and on their masks. They couldn't afford to make their first appearance in high society looking like beggars, this was a stage on which all great sects played.

Their masks had been a rush job, so they were probably not going to hold up next to those of other attendees. Ryun's was a wolf's mask, made out of a monster that he had killed and had been keeping in his storage. She didn't even want to think about that. He said that it was just a habit from when he needed to eat food, but she was thankful for him keeping it. Immortal monster meat was incredibly expensive, and it was the only thing that could sustain her now. She hadn't thought about that before she advanced, she had known that she needed to eat food of higher tiers as she increased in power, but it seemed that the immortal realm required a substantially more for her to keep going.

His mask, was made out of black bone, the skull of a tier 9 wolf he had killed during his travel. It was shaped so that it covered his upper face, leaving his mouth free. The crafter had mounted fabric on it, violet strips that gave it a more fearsome look. Through the empty sockets she could see his pitch black eyes staring ahead. He was pulling at the collar of his robe.

Anrosh reached over and slapped his hand away from it. "Stop that, it isn't as strong as you are, you'll rip it," the robe that he was wearing wasn't the one that she bought him before, they had to find a new one. The downside was that they couldn't have one made in their sect colors, but the tailor had been able to add a violet sash to the all-black robe. It was simple, but it was at least masterfully made. The crest of their sect, the wolf's head, was masterfully placed on his breast, drawn with violet thread.

"It itches," Ryun complained.

"Really?" Anrosh glared at him. He could handle having his eyes gouged out, but a formal robe was too much. She was already annoyed from

having to convince him to shave again, his beard had started to come back in. At least she managed that, he didn't let her cut his hair, so it was currently a wild mess blowing backward. At least it gave him a kind of wild look, which was why she didn't press him too much.

"Fine," Ryun said. "But I must say that I feel targeted, you didn't force Lesamitrius to wear something... like this."

He pointed at his outfit, it was gorgeous, which was probably why he had a problem with it. It was also not made for fighting, the sleeves were too wide, the fabric around the knees bulky and wrapped around his knees. The sash was tight, which probably limited his hip movement to an extent. She understood where he was coming from though.

Her outfit was picked to match his. An all violet strapless dress, that was far too revealing if she was being honest, but they couldn't find a quality made dress in a sect fashion for her so Nayra convinced her to go in a different direction. Her hair had been pulled up and tied in an elaborate bun that had one black and one violet hair stick holding it in place. Nayra had even applied makeup to her face, putting on black eyeliner and mascara on her, with a violet lipstick. She wasn't sure how it matched with her red skin and white hair, but Nayra assured her that she looked... hot. Her mask prevented most of her face to be seen anyway, which was why she allowed Nayra to do what she wanted. Her mask was made out of the same black bones, but hers had white-blue accents. Her dress was incredibly smooth and tight, letting even the muscles on her abdomen show. Her hands and shoulders were bare, and the dress had a long back area that covered up to the back of her knees, while the front ended at her upper thighs, leaving everything else completely visible. She was uncomfortable with the amount it showed, but she couldn't let her feelings rule her. The cap of her outfit was a long shawl that she carried on her forearms with its center being behind her back, the edges of the black shawl had the same crest as Ryun drawn with the same violet thread.

This was both an opportunity and a danger. They couldn't offend anyone, which was why she needed to keep her eyes on Ryun at all times. The party will be filled with powerful individuals, people far stronger than him, but that was unlikely to stop him. He would only see someone more powerful

than him as a challenge. And she knew all of his perks, he might not be as strong as most that would attend, but in a room filled with so many people with so many stats, all packed in together. All it would take was an instant and he could do some real damage.

Thankfully, she doubted that he was that crazy, but still. She needed to mind him.

“I should’ve brought Ereclaw,” Ryun grumbled.

“Ereclaw knows nothing about what we are about to walk into. Lesamitrius at least knows enough not to make a mistake that could cost our Sect everything,” Anrosh told him.

“You really think that some small mistake can be that dangerous?”

Anrosh fought the impulse to shake him furiously. “Depending on how and to whom it happened, yes. There are people here that will not think twice about wiping a sect for the smallest of slights. These people are old, arrogant, and powerful.”

Ryun sighed. “I understand Anrosh. Don’t worry, I’ll be... restrained. I cannot promise that I will give respect to those I do not think deserve it, but...”

Anrosh knew that it was the best she could get out of him. And at least it was a masked party, those were thrown for the exact reason to avoid the constant social requirements. It was probably the best that their first exposure to such events was this one, at least he won’t need to bow to everyone.

The carriage came to a stop as they arrived at their destination, Ryun moved to exit but Anrosh put her hand on his. “Wait.”

He tilted his head and then sat back down, a few moments later the doors opened as Lesamitrius came down from his spot near the driver. He wore his own ceremonial robe, which was already done in sect colors, he also had his scimitar at his waist. His mask was also that of a wolf, they were going for a theme here after all, but his was simpler, without any adornments.

He put his hand out and Anrosh placed hers in it, allowing him to help her out. Ryun followed behind her and looked around. They were in front of the Zenshuen compound, which looked more like a palace. It was resplendent in the dim light of the evening. The majesty of it was a testament to their power, that they had been able to build something like this in such a

short period of time. It was also a testament to their wealth. To do something like this they had to have burned through resources, Essence, and cooldowns of great powers. But it was all for a purpose, everyone who saw this knew their might. It was why the Tournament City was always destroyed when it was done, because every time it was held again, the factions could compete, could show how much more powerful they had become.

There were a few other carriages around them, other guests walking toward the entrance. Anrosh grabbed Ryun's hand, linked their elbows and looked down at him. "You remember what we talked about?" She asked him.

Ryun nodded his head. She kept her eyes on him for a moment longer, but then copied his gesture. Afterward she glanced at Lesamitrius who took his position two steps behind them. With a deep breath she started walking, leading them to the entrance.

They didn't have to wait in line for long before they reached the entrance. The large round opening in a wall made out of yellow stone, there were plates of quartz and opal alternating in a circle around the edges of the opening. The colors of the Zenshuen sect, white and dark blue were everywhere. The gates were open wide, and attendants welcomed guests inside. A big demasi warrior stood to the side, next to a smaller woman dressed in a resplendent all white sect style dress.

"Welcome, honored guests," she said as she bowed deeply. "May I see your invitation?"

Anrosh pulled the scroll from her storage and offered it with one hand. The attendant took it with both hands, bowing her torso.

"Gratitude," she said, then passed one of her hands over it, a ring flashed and she smiled.

"Enjoy your evening, honored guests," she said as she gestured toward the courtyard.

The three of them walked in, and Anrosh couldn't help but stare at everything around them. She couldn't imagine what their headquarters looked like, if a temporary building was so grand. The roofs were in sect style, square and curved, tiles were dark blue with most of the walls painted white. There were several buildings in the courtyard, towers at the edges of the walls looking out. Some were low with only ground floors, while others had several.

But the main building was what took her breath, it was a pagoda of at least seven floors, with a wider base and shorter upper floors. Lanterns were attached to the beams, with colorful flames fluttering inside, making the walls look as if they were covered in the dancing shadows.

An attendant walked up to them and led them inside. The walls of the building were covered with wood planks, and great and colorful tapestries lined the entire corridor. She didn't have the chance to take a closer look before they reached their destination, two warriors opened the door in front of them and immediately they she felt a rush of several things, the first was the bright lights, blue and red, painting the entire room inside into an intimate atmosphere. Next was the music, strings and deep sounds that she couldn't identify collided into a fascinating and pleasing melody that tugged at her heart. The next was the sound of people talking, of shuffling feet, of plates and glasses clinking together.

Anrosh shook her head and then took a step forward, only to stop when she realized that Ryun wasn't moving.

"What is it?" She asked.

Ryun closed his eyes and took a deep breath, she felt his hands nearly shake. "The music," he whispered. "It's been so long since I heard something like this."

Anrosh blinked, but he shook his head and opened his eyes. "Let's go."

They walked in, followed closely behind by Lesamitrius. The hall they entered was large, and filled comfortably with hundreds of people. If she was being honest she didn't quite know what to do now, people were mingling together and talking, and the three of them were standing there, sticking out.

"Perhaps we could grab some drinks?" Ryun offered after a minute.

Anrosh smiled in gratitude, both of them were unprepared for this, but that only meant that they were in this together. They walked through the crowd and reached the bar where the kreative bartender filled their glasses with something pink. Anrosh took a sip and found it to have a fruity kind of taste that was very appealing.

They stood there for a moment and watched the crowds, seeing people interacting.

"Why does it seem like they all know each other?" Ryun asked suddenly.

Anrosh blinked and realized that he was right, something had been bothering her since the start. The way that people talked and stood clearly showed that they were familiar with the people beneath the masks.

“Because they do,” Lesamitrius whispered from the side.

Both of them glanced at him, and the ravzor shifted uncomfortably.

“The boy is right,” a new voice said from the other side, startling them.

“How so?” Ryun asked before Anrosh could even turn her head. She saw a tall demasi, dressed in emerald and white robe and wearing a blank white mask over the top of his head, standing next to Ryun peering down on him.

“Ah, so you are new,” he chuckled to himself. “I knew it,” he tapped his nose with a gloved finger. “I have a knack for finding out fresh blood.”

Ryun just tilted his head, to her obviously waiting for an answer to his question. Before she had a chance to worry, the man started speaking again.

“You see, the mask are there so that we can pretend,” the man whispered as he leaned in. “So that we don’t need to worry about all the bowing and scraping crap. So that we can just talk with each other freely.”

Anrosh was surprised at that, Ryun just nodded his head as if it made sense. Then he spoke again.

“How do you know who is who with the masks?” Ryun asked.

“They are all wearing their sect colors aren’t they,” the man pointed back at the party. “And well, when you are as powerful as we all are, a simple mask isn’t going to be enough to hide someone’s identity.”

That part did make sense to Anrosh. Now she had to reevaluate all that she knew. It seemed that the knowledge from the frontiers was not everything that there was. She wondered if Lesamitrius knew, if that was why he suggested that they wear sect colors, they had talked about the party for a while. But there was only so much that they he could teach when he didn’t know what exactly they didn’t know.

“Well,” the demasi smiled then inclined his head. “I am Reki Ra Jhan, of Zenshuen of course. Future Champion of the tournament, at your service.”

Ryun glanced tilted his head at the man, then turned to look at her, obviously asking if he should tell him. A part of her was wary, but in the end Ryun’s way of always speaking the truth was rubbing off on her. Sometimes

it might not be the best option, but there was something to be said about never wavering in one's belief.

"We are from the Twilight Melody Sect, I am Sect Leader Anrosh Kesh, and this is Sect Head Ryun Nacht," she said.

"Two immortals, from a sect I've never heard off? Curious," Reki tilted his head. "May I ask how it came that you were invited?"

"We don't know exactly," Anrosh said slowly. "We think that it has something to do with the fact that our sect, or rather the sect we... conquered, used to be subordinate to the Onyx Fang sect."

"Oh," Reki whistled. "Conquerers huh? Well, I guess that the man himself might know why you are here," Reki turned around looking at the people in the hall.

By the time Anrosh realized what he was doing, he started yelling.

"Hey! Eari! Come here!" He waved his hands at a man wearing black and green robes, just a shade off from the old Black Viper Sect colors.

A demasi with a viper's head mask over the top of his face walked over, looking inquisitively at Reki.

Once he reached them he glared at Reki. "You do know that we are supposed to pretend that we don't know who everyone else is?"

"Bah," Reki waved his hand. "It's a stupid rule."

Anrosh kept her eyes on the man, recognizing his name immediately. Even with the mask there was little chance of her not knowing who he was. Eari Ji Van, Eerv's son. Like his father, he had two long tails, his horns twisted up and then back. She didn't know what to do, and Ryun had obviously not put things together.

"What is it then?" Eari asked.

Reki turned at Ryun and Anrosh, grinning at them. "I was wondering if perhaps you knew why my new friends here were invited to this party. They come from the sect that conquered one that that was subordinate to your uncle," he turned back to Ryun and Anrosh. "What was it called again?"

Before they could respond, Eari figured it out, he turned his eyes on them and spoke. "Black Viper Sect."

Ryun tilted his head, and Anrosh took a step forward and inclined her head. "Honored brother," she said, falling back on the customary honorific.

Technically she should call him nephew, since she was close with his father, but she didn't know how well that would go over since they were close in age. "I do not know if you got my letters—"

"—I got them," Eari said his body stiffening.

"I am so sorry for your loss. Eerv Ji Van was a great warrior, and a greater man, our sect still mourns his loss," Anrosh said.

Eari grimaced. "He was a fool."

Anrosh froze, she had known that their relationship wasn't the best but... Ryun stepped forward, his dark eyes staring at Eari through his mask.

"Eerv was... a friend to me. For my memory of him, I will allow you this one chance to apologize for disrespecting him in my presence," Ryun said calmly.

Anrosh closed her eyes, wishing that she had been able to stop him. If this turned violent...

"And who are you to speak that way to me?" Eari asked.

"I am Ryun Nacht, I was your father's friend," Ryun answered.

Eari returned Ryun's glare, but then Reki put his hand on Eari's shoulder.

"No matter what happened in the past, family is still family my friend," Reki told him.

Anrosh saw Eari's lower face turn into a grimace as he met Reki's eyes. Then, he turned back to Ryun and inclined his head. "Apologizes."

Ryun waited until Eari turned his head back up and then nodded.

Eari took a moment to study Ryun, who was at least a head shorter than him. "You are the one that killed my aunt and cousin, who defeated my father and took the sect from him."

Reki blinked at that, then met Anrosh's eyes, mouthing something that to her appeared to be "shit". She closed her eyes, wondering if they weren't yet out of the danger of violence.

"I am," Ryun said.

"My father wrote me about you," Eari said finally. "He said that you were... strong."

Ryun didn't answer, because there was no question. Anrosh had noticed how he always changed his words and expression to more formal and



cold when he was uncomfortable or speaking with strangers. He had gotten better at talking with her and Nayra, and was probably the best with Kri. But to anybody else he spoke in a weird way that made him seem arrogant. She didn't even know how to bring it up to him.

So she decide to interrupt, she turned to Reki and spoke. "You said that you are the future Champion of the Tournament? You are a contestant then?"

Reki thankfully realized what she was trying to do and cleared his throat. "High Division, I've been preparing for this for a long time," he glanced at Eari then placed his hand on his shoulder again. "Eari is competing in the High Division too. Got through the first qualifier as well, which I doubted he would."

Eari glanced at Reki. "We shall see what you say if we meet in the tournament proper."

"Or perhaps I'll hunt you down in the next qualifier," Reki laughed.

"I am competing as well," Ryun said. "Perhaps we will have a chance to fight one another."

Both Eari and Reki blinked at that.

Reki then laughed and hit Ryun's shoulder with his hand. "I'll be looking forward to that, always a pleasure fighting new and interesting people."

Eari shuffled and pulled Reki's hand from his shoulder. "It was... a pleasure meeting you two," he said slowly. "But I must leave you, I am supposed to be by my uncle's side."

With that he left, and Anrosh sighed in relief as she watched him go. That could've gone a lot worse.

"Whew," Reki said after Eari was gone. "People always tell me that I should think more before I act, I guess that when they say that, they mean about things like this huh?"

Anrosh closed her eyes and shook her head. "Probably," she whispered.

"Uh... were did he go?" Reki's voice made her open her eyes and look around.

Ryun was gone. She turned around looking and saw Lesamitrius eating a snack at the bar, he noticed the attention and when she narrowed her eyes at him had the decency to look embarrassed.

She took her eyes off him for one second and now he was gone. “Damn it Ryun,” she whispered to herself. She only hoped that he doesn’t do something stupid.