

## PRESENT – Nayra Plans

Nayra attacked with her blunted spear, pushing her opponent back. Her spear was deflected, sloppily, and she raised her shield as she jumped forward. Her opponent's eyes widened, and she used her **|Dodge|** skill to get out of the way. Unfortunately for her, Nayra's charge was a faint, she pirouetted in place and shot out with her leg, sweeping the floor.

A yelp of surprise came from her opponent as her feet were swiped from under her and she tumbled to the floor. Nayra stepped forward and put the tip of her spear at her opponent's throat.

"You lose," Nayra said.

"Again," Kri mumbled.

"What?" Nayra tilted her head. "Did you expect to win anytime soon?"

The look in the child's eyes told her all that she needed to know. She did think that she had a chance to win. Nayra stepped back and let her get back up. She glanced to the side where Anrosh was smiling affectionately at her daughter. Nayra liked seeing her like that, with obvious care for her daughter in her eyes.

Anrosh caught her looking and raised an eyebrow. It had been a few days since their kiss, and things had been progressing well enough. Although not much had really changed. They still met every morning when they weren't busy to train together, then Nayra had her session with Kri while Anrosh had a meeting with Embesh. After that, they went about their own duties, Nayra with the warriors, listening to the reports from the patrols, and going out on hunts if there were things that would be an appropriate challenge for her. Anrosh spent her time cultivating and just being visible in the city.

The only thing that had changed was that they tried to have lunch together every day and that they looked for opportunities to be affectionate where no one would notice.

Nayra turned her attention back to Kri who was looking at her with a look that was somewhere between angry and embarrassed. Nayra smiled at her and took a step closer.

“You still have a long way to go, there is no shame in that. Do you think that I got good with the spear in a few months? No, it took me years,” Nayra said.

Kri took a deep breath and then deflated. “I know, I just... If I had more skills, perhaps I could’ve done something.”

Nayra nodded her head. “Yes, if you had them you would’ve been better. But there is a reason why we are having you learn this way. Do you not agree with those reasons?”

She watched the girl struggle through her emotions. Nayra understood, she had been young once. Kri wanted to advance fast, as everyone around her was. She could see them all getting stronger and she wanted that too. But she didn’t yet understand that those were extremely unique circumstances, that their advancement was paid for in blood.

“I understand,” Kri said, trying—and failing—to keep her disappointment from her face.

Nayra gave her a long look, and then nodded. The way that they were teaching her was different than what she had gone through. Her instructors rarely explained themselves, or told her why something was better. Kri had everything explained to her, she even had some say in it. She might complain to Nayra or Anrosh, but she didn’t let her feelings be seen by others. She did understand.

They had taught her only two skills, **|Combat Mastery|** and **|Dodge|**. The reasons for that were simple, and something that Nayra had suggested, the way that she had been taught. It had taken Nayra years to realize why she had been taught in that way, but she knew now that it was valid. She wasn’t allowed any more skills, because people that used skills from the young age, understandably, relied on them more.

Kri was being taught how to fight with a spear, a martial art. And while what Nayra was teaching her was created with powers in mind, the basics should be learned without them. Kri needed to learn how to do every movement by herself, in order to better understand her skills and know when it was appropriate to use them. It was better if she knew how and when to use a swipe or a thrust with her spear before she came to rely on skills. A skill

would make her attack more powerful, but using it at the wrong time could mean the difference between life and death.

“So, what did you do wrong?” Nayra asked.

Kri’s expression turned thoughtful. “I was too slow?”

Nayra shook her head. “No, you weren’t paying attention. Your eyes were looking at my upper body, looking at my weapon and shield, which were distracting you.”

“Well, I don’t have the skills that allow me to look at more than one place at the same time,” Kri complained.

“This isn’t about skills, and you will gain one once you prove that you don’t need it to follow the flow of battle,” Nayra told her. “The most basic and the most important part of any martial art, is footwork. By looking at my feet you could’ve figured out that my charge was just a feint. You could’ve figured out my movements.”

Kri tilted her head. “But how can I see that just from your feet?”

“It is something that is better not taught, but learned by yourself. Next time, try to keep my eyes on your opponent's feet as well as everything else.”

“If I try to do that, I’ll probably get a true body with three sets of eyes,” Kri joked.

“You first need to survive to get there,” Nayra warned, and Kri’s expression turned serious and she nodded.

“Girl!” A voice rang out in the training room, and Nayra turned to see Kri’s other instructor, Tali, standing at the entrance. “Come, it is time for another lesson.”

Kri bowed to Nayra and then ran off, forgetting to leave her spear and having to run back to place it on the rack. Nayra shook her head as she followed the blind woman to her little garden. It was the one requirement that the woman had, the only thing that she asked was to have a training room with a garden attached.

Tali was teaching Kri more about Cultivation, planning her future path and what kind of perks she should be going for. How to draw in more Essence, and how to do it more efficiently. And how to cycle properly.

Anrosh walked over as Nayra put her weapon and shield on the rack. She put her hand on Nayra’s back.

“You are good with her,” Anrosh said. “She rarely shows respect to anyone. Well, there was this one time, when Ryun asked her to do it.”

“She is a good kid,” Nayra added with a smile as she leaned in and gave her a quick kiss. They were in the beginning stages of their relationship, going slow, but also enjoying it.

Anrosh’s expression turned hesitant. “I don’t know how I’ll tell her, about us I mean.”

“There is no need to rush, everything is still new,” Nayra said.

“I know, but I would rather it come from me than from someone else.”

“No one else knows,” Nayra said.

“Someone is bound to see us eventually,” Anrosh shrugged.

“Well, we can be more careful,” Nayra said. They weren’t really hiding, but... things weren’t that simple.

They walked out of the training area and out into the courtyard, where they were beset by a truly unpleasant person. Lesamitrius Danos, former Monarch of the Green Rain Sect, currently of the Twilight Melody Sect, saw them and started to approach. Former Emissary Riodan Odrek of the Green Rain Sect, and now just a member of the Twilight Melody Sect, followed behind him with a complicated expression on his face.

His attempts to halt his former master seemed not to have worked. Nayra braced herself as he approached her.

“I demand a rematch!” He yelled out loud.

Nayra heard Anrosh sigh, but then she spoke calmly. “Monarch Danos, is this how you greet your Sect Leaders? I see that the standards of your former sect are low indeed if you don’t even know how to address those you serve.”

Lesamitrius’ expression turned dark, but before he could answer, Odrek stepped forward and bowed, pulling Lesamitrius down with him.

“Apologizes, Sect Leaders, Ma—my friend is just eager to prove himself to our new sect.”

Nayra raised an eyebrow as she looked at Anrosh. They didn’t know much about the reasons why Odrek was here, but they could guess. Following his loss, Lesamitrius left Consequence for his home, unwilling to hold to his

end of the bargain and change sects. Spouting obscenities and vowing his revenge. He probably intended to come back and conquer them by force.

Then, a few weeks after his departure, he came back, with only Odrek in tow. Both had been wearing far simpler clothes, and Lesamitrius' expression was beyond angry. He didn't address any of the words he had spoken before he left, and only said that he was here to keep his obligation, his word.

They didn't know for sure, but apparently his family, or Sect, did not appreciate him not honoring it in the first place. They knew that much because Odrek brought with him a letter from the Sect Leader Veratius Danos, where he personally apologized for his son's behavior and asked Anrosh as a personal favor, Sect Leader to Sect Leader, for her to forgive his son's slight and take him in as it had been agreed. He had also sent a proposition of expanded trade and a draft of an agreement that would allow Green Rain Sect's expeditions to pass through Twilight Melody Sect lands on their way to unclaimed territories.

It was... A lot. The trade agreement alone would be worth more than twice what the sect earned from trade at the moment, in a year or two. It was a great win for the sect, and so Anrosh didn't really have a choice. The issue was that Lesamitrius was... he was a classic sect heir. Arrogant and nearly useless. Anrosh had no place to really put him in. All of the Twilight Melody Monarchs were out on hunts for powerful monsters or in other territories, protecting them. And putting Lesamitrius with Lord Realm warriors would mean putting him in charge. And that wouldn't work either, he had sworn the sect oath, and became an official member, both Riodan and Lesamitrius were, but they weren't trusted yet.

That only left one choice, he was attached as a personal aide to Anrosh. Which he did not appreciate. The man was... a lot.

"Monarch Lesamitrius," Anrosh started. "We went over this once already."

"Respectfully," Lesamitrius said in a tone that was anything but. "This is the sect way. The strong lead, and the weak follow. I am challenging Sect Leader Ornn for her spot in the sect."

Nayra was about to answer, when Anrosh raised her hand and spoke.

“Lesamitrius,” Anrosh said, leaving out the respectful prefix of his Realm. The man’s eyes narrowed at that, but he didn’t speak, for once. “You have been a part of this sect long enough to know that we do things differently. Also, you have been here for only a short time, you have not proven yourself nearly enough to demand something like that. In time, once you have proven yourself, you will get the chance to challenge others.”

Nayra knew that she had taken him by surprise during their fight, that he had underestimated her and had been arrogant enough to think that he was stronger. The truth was that he was very strong, Nayra had seen him training in the yards. A second fight would not go the same way, and while Nayra was confident that she was still stronger, he would not be underestimating her again.

“Prove myself?” The man asked in an incredulous tone. “I am a Monarch of the Green Rain Sect! Son of a Sect Leader, I—”

“You are a Monarch of the Twilight Melody Sect,” Anrosh corrected, seeing the man’s expression twitch. “And your father had made it very clear to me his thoughts concerning you, he had already had to lower himself to asking a favor of me in order to make sure that I do not punish the way you spoke to us last time. And for breaking your word.”

Hearing that made the man’s expression change to one of pain, and Odrek stepped up. “Apologies, again, Sect Leaders. Danos is only eager to prove his worth, to serve the sect in the best way possible.”

Anrosh met Odrek’s eyes holding them for a moment, and then nodded. “Very well, I will forget this conversation. Please make sure that it doesn’t happen again.”

Odrek pulled Lesamitrius away, and the two of them walked out of the training yards. As soon as they were out of sight, Anrosh sighed in relief. Nayra reached over and squeezed her hand.

“You did well, better than I would have. I was tempted to slap the bastard,” Nayra said through gritted teeth.

Anrosh shook her head. “He is a... handful. But he is powerful. The strongest of any of our Monarchs at the moment, with the exceptions of the two of us perhaps. It is causing problems. He demands respect in the manner of how the other sects work, not how Twilight Melody Sect does. Odrek is

keeping him controlled somewhat, but I fear that it is only a matter of time before he does something... rash.”

“Why had you even accepted him then? I don’t even know why you made that a condition.”

“It... it is hard to explain, but I knew his type. It made me... angry. I wanted to humiliate him, and I counted on his honor being important enough to him that he would’ve felt humiliated when he lost and was forced to serve us. I did not count on him thinking that he was so much better than us.”

“His father apparently agrees with you. I don’t know why he sent him back.”

“To teach him a lesson, probably. It happens often in the sects, sending problematic sons and daughters away to either learn or die,” Anrosh answered.

Nayra shook her head. She had thought that her family was cruel and cold, but at least she wasn’t sent to survive on her own. They joined an order, true, but they had support, both of their family and the order. Lesamitrius had lost everything, he had no wealth, no support. He had only himself to rely on.

Nayra was had been the same a year ago, but the difference was that it had been her choice.

“Well, if you really can’t control him, maybe allowing him to challenge me wouldn’t be too bad?”

“No, he needs to learn his place. Having him fight you would just make him feel more important than he is, regardless of who won,” Anrosh shook her head, then added. “Not that I think that you would lose.”

Nayra laughed. “Of course not.”

Anrosh released a weary sigh. “There is so much stuff to do, I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Did you make a decision about the tournament?” Nayra asked.

Anrosh grimaced. “Not yet.”

“We have only five more days to send back a message,” Nayra said, trying to sound casual. She was trying not to think of the things she knew, about the secrets that she held. She didn’t know the details, only that

something big was supposed to happen at the tournament. A part of her wanted to keep quiet and just ignore it. Another part of her was conflicted. She had lived with these people for a year, she understood now that they weren't quite what the Empire painted them as.

The core wasn't filled with the people that had done horrible things in the past, it was filled with innocents that hadn't even been born then. She just didn't know what to do.

"The Tournament would be... an insanely great opportunity for us. We could make connections with other sects, and just seeing the fights is a dream of a lifetime. I want to go and see the splendor of the Grand Arena," her voice got wistful. She turned to look at Nayra with wide eyes. "Can you imagine it? Seeing so many people in the same place? Millions upon millions, all there to trade everything from items to secrets. The Grand Auction? And then the few among them that compete? To see a birth of a new High Ranker? It was something that I never imagined I would be able to experience."

Nayra's heart dropped in her chest. She opened her mouth, and then closed it. She didn't know what to say. Finally, she managed to speak. "Why haven't you responded then?"

"I... I keep hoping that Ryun would come back," Anrosh whispered. "This is the kind of a decision that a Sect Head needs to make. And well... I don't think that we have any really impressive people capable of competing, even in the lower tier categories. Maybe you for the tier 7 or 8 when you level, but... Ryun might have been interested."

Nayra nodded her head. She didn't think that she could compete with the best of the best. She had gotten better, but she wasn't there quite yet. Ryun on the other hand... He might be able to compete. A part of her was interested to see how far he could reach.

"I agree, that does sound interesting."

For a moment, Nayra was confused as to who had spoken, but then she raised her head and saw him.

Ryun sat on top of one of his cubes, his feet dangling in the air. His eyes were still bottomless pits of the void surrounded by white. The cracks in his skin that went over his eyes misted with black and violet wisps.



Nayra hadn't even noticed him. She looked at him and felt nothing. No sense of his Qi, or presence at all. The sensation reminded her of some of her siblings, the older ones who had a tight control of their bodies and power. It was as if he had erased his presence completely. Now that she knew he was there, she could sense him with her **|Heat Sense|**, but she was still shocked.

Both of them were too startled to say anything.

"I'm back," Ryun said simply. "Now, what is this about a tournament?"