

## **Interlude – Skills and Aspects**

Kri walked through the hallways of the palace, trying to keep her annoyance to a minimum. She had been in isolation, trying to focus on introspection. Hoping that she would gain some glimmer of understanding of herself, and cross over the task that Ryun and Tali set up for her, so that she could finally advance to the Immortal Realm. She did not appreciate being interrupted, though, she had to admit that it wasn't like she was making much progress.

They had asked her to go to one of the warded rooms, and only told her that she was going there to meet someone. Kri didn't know what or who was so important, but she complied. It didn't take her long to reach her destination and she paused in front of the closed door.

The wards were already active, so she couldn't feel anything. There was no way to tell who was inside or even how many. She steeled herself and then entered. The room was small, it had just a table and chairs around it. To the side was a small bookcase and on the far side was a window that had a person standing in front of it.

He was tall, his dreads pulled back and tied in a knot. He wore simple clothes, brown tunic and trousers. His hands were behind his back, one cradling the closed fist of the other. He didn't seem to react when she entered, but instead kept his back turned to her as he was looking out of the window.

“Greetings,” Kri said, then bowed over her fists. Many people had ways of sensing their surroundings, even without sight, she couldn't afford to be disrespectful. “I am Kri Woll, I was told to come here.”

The man didn't respond. Kri waited patiently, then just as she was about to clear her throat, the man spoke.

"Your Sect is interesting, so many different people, so much different Essence wielded. There is something being born in the air, an Aspect," he paused for a few seconds, then continued. "I've felt it before, in Dragon's Peak, though there it was old and steady, this is still new."

Kri blinked, she didn't know what he was talking about. Before she could ask however, he turned.

He was a dark-skinned human, with eyes that chilled her to the bones. They looked like they could see through everything. He studied her for a few moments, and then nodded to himself.

"Greetings to you, Kri Woll," he said, then Kri blinked as for a moment she thought that she saw his shadow deepen, but it was gone too quickly for her to be sure. Her thoughts were interrupted as he inclined his head. "I am Zacharia Gardner."

Kri frowned, that name was familiar to her... then she remembered. It was the Warden, the man that had fought Hastur with Ryun and the others. She was... taken aback, she couldn't find a reason why he was here, or why she was told to meet with him.

"You are, of course, wondering why you are here," he said.

Kri nodded carefully. "Yes, sir."

"You are here because of a deal that I've made with your Sect Head. I am here to offer you instruction."

Kri blinked. "Instruction?"

He nodded. "In skills and Aspects."

So it was for training. Kri didn't know how to feel about it. Did they think that she was failing? That she wasn't learning everything that they had to teach her, so they found someone else to do it.

"You don't approve?" He asked.

Kri snapped her head to his eyes immediately, pushing her thoughts aside. "No, no, I would be honored to learn anything that you have to teach," she bowed over her fist again.

He didn't respond, instead he walked around the table, all the while studying her. "I'm told that you have a glimpse of Aspect, correct?"

Kri blinked, immediately feeling defensive. Someone who she didn't know being aware of her build was... foreign to her.

"You needn't worry," he said with a kind smile. "We've both made oaths. But I had to know in order to provide the best instruction I could."

Kri wasn't convinced, but... ultimately this was what Ryun and Anatalien wanted.

"Ryun told me that he has started you on the road toward an ideal, yes?" He asked.

Kri nodded. She hesitated, not really willing to share so much with a stranger. But then she felt the weight of her failures. She hadn't learned as well as Ryun and Tali expected, it was obvious now. Perhaps she wasn't worthy enough of their instruction. "They have, I... haven't been having much success."

He nodded, then grew quiet again. She started to feel... stuffy. As if it was getting harder to breathe. He tilted his head at her then spoke.

“You’ve been trying to figure out who you are? To understand what drives you?”

It was the same questions that Ryun had been asking her, which... annoyed her. But she wasn’t stupid enough to say something. So, she just answered. “I’ve been trying. I just... feel like I am lacking.”

He didn’t respond, and she felt the silence stretch. After a while she couldn’t take it anymore, so she just started talking. “I want to be stronger,” Kri said. “I want to be strong enough to protect the people who follow me. I need to be good enough to keep them safe.”

Again he didn’t say anything. She started to feel pressure, and... sweat on her brow? His attention was something that stifled. It was the complete opposite of Ryun, who had almost no presence at all. Sometimes, you didn’t even know that he was there. Though she had felt it when he truly let go, in those times he felt like a gaping maw that swallowed everything. This was... a lot different, it was like she was surrounded by... everything, as if the world itself was pressing down on her. She didn’t even know if he was doing it on purpose.

Her breath became harder and harder to take. “Are you... doing something?”

He tilted his head and for a moment the corner of his mouth raised. But he didn’t answer the question. Instead, he ignored it. “I am hearing the things that you want and need,” he said slowly. “Ideal is not about those things. Ideal is what **is**.”

She knew that, of course she did. She was supposed to figure out who she was at this moment. Didn't what she want and need matter? Ryun had always said that those things matter.

"Well, that is what I am."

"Are you now?" He asked.

"Of course I am," Kri narrowed her eyes on him, the atmosphere in the room was getting heavier. Was the light from the window getting dimmer? She couldn't tell, it was as if all of her senses were being strangled. "What are you doing?"

"Am I doing something?"

"Why am I feeling like this?" Kri managed to say slowly, but she was feeling... tired.

"You should know already," Zach said slowly.

"What do you mean?" Kri asked.

He didn't answer. It was getting harder to think, but... it was around her, all-encompassing and alien, but... familiar? He was right, now that he said it she did remember feeling like this before. It was the sensation of her soul being frozen over, the Aspect of the Absolute Cold seeping into her.

Kri raised her heavy head up and looked at him. She marshaled her willpower and pushed out of her body. Immediately she felt lighter, not by much, but enough that she could detect the difference. He was doing something to her. This felt nothing like Absolute Cold, it was more fleeting almost, and yet felt firmer. The sensation made her feel as if she

was nothing but a tiny speck of sand on a beach, insignificant, and yet still a part of the greater whole.

It was an Aspect, though one she hadn't ever felt this way, even though it was familiar. She focused on her skills, her **|Enhanced Resonance Sense|** attempting to grasp at whatever it was. Her sense was narrowed only to this room, the wards preventing her from sensing anything more. It was sharpened, and she could tell that something was happening. She had to get more room to breathe so she focused on **|Deflect|** hoping to push some of it away.

Then, as her willpower started flowing into her skills and the heaviness around her lessened, it winked out, and she fell to her knees. Her body suddenly shaking from the effort and feeling more tired than she had ever felt in her entire life.

"I see now," the man above her said, and Kri raised her head to look up at him. "You have a lot of willpower, but you are not using it properly, it is as if you are trying to use it for the wrong reasons. Perhaps that is why you are also struggling to walk down the road of your ideal."

Kri didn't respond as she tried to get her breathing under control.

"Who are you?"

"I'm... Kri Woll," she managed to answer.

"Are you now," he tilted his head then knelt. "Is Kri Woll someone who seeks power to protect others then?"

"Of course I am," Kri answered.

"Hm... you don't believe those words," he said.

Kri blinked, then opened her mouth to rebut him, but then paused. She felt so tired that her mouth spoke before her mind could catch up. “I want to be worthy.”

“Ah, of what?”

Kri’s head was turning, she was feeling as if her carefully constructed world was tumbling down. She felt... raw. “Of my mother, of Ryun and Tali, of the sect.”

Yes, that felt right. “They made me their *heir*.”

And that was when she realized it, she had always thought that she wanted to be stronger so that she could protect the sect. She was wrong. It had never been about that; it was about living up to the example she had in front of her. Being worthy of the Sect.

*I am the heir of Twilight Melody Sect.*

She heard what they spoke about her where they thought she couldn’t hear. But with her skill that had stopped working a long time ago. She knew now that they all thought that she was just a stand in. They were giving her respect, but it wasn’t real. Not even fighting in the war had really changed that. They expected more out of someone who was going to be the heir to the sect. They wanted someone like Ryun.

And that was who she wanted to be.

“Good,” the man above her said, then stood up. “That is enough for now, I think. I’ll have someone arrange for our next lesson. For now, try to remember the sensation that you felt before. Try to feel the Aspects around you more, open up your soul.”

With that, he left the room. She took a few more minutes to compose herself, going over everything that she experienced, it all seemed foggy to her, as if she wasn't remembering everything. Still, when she closed her eyes and focused, she could feel... something. Like a sense of her core when it sensed another's, but deeper. It was as if she was sensing the Aspects around her.

She stood and left the room, heading to her rooms to rest. She was so tired and hungry that she was barely standing up. She walked into her rooms ate what felt like three meals put together, then collapsed in bed. It was the next day, after she woke up from a long sleep that she learned that what she had thought was at best an hour of conversation, was in fact four days.