

## **Expansion**

It stood there, far in the distance, black stone sticking out of the land. The Tower of Five Orders had once, long ago, been her home. A place where she expected to spend the rest of her life. It was funny how things change, yet still remain the same. Nayra studied the tower in the distance, seeing how the forest had spread and taken over in the absence of civilization. The tower was covered in vines, in foliage, the nature was taking the land back. In a few more years, the tower might just seem like a piece of black rock sticking out of the ground.

But that would not happen, the nature would not expand any more. Nayra glanced to the side as a warrior approached. She wore black and violet combat robes, representing the colors of the Twilight Melody Main House—Woll. The trim of her robes was adorned with silver, denoting her command rank in the sect. On her right shoulder, she had a single black pauldron with a neck guard protecting her side. On her arms, she had bracers of the same color. The rest of her armor were boots and shin guards. A light armor, made more for speed than protection.

Kri saluted Nayra as she walked up, giving respect to Nayra both for her rank and as the matriarch of their family. Nayra and Anrosh had formed their own little family, with Kri being formally adopted by her. Their little family was unique, in that both matriarchs were leaders of a House, Nayra—Dagda and Anrosh—Woll. It was why Nayra's colors differed than Kri's. She wore black and red, which were the colors of Dagda House, with the gold embroidered trim that announced her high rank. A simple scarf around her neck, in the colors of the Sect showed her loyalty to the Sect.

Kri could technically now choose which House she wished to be part of, though that choice had never been in question. The Sect knew that Ryun looked on her as his heir, though most thought that she was a temporary stand in. That once Ryun had children of his own, they would

supplant her. Few understood Ryun if they thought that. Any children that he and his lovers had would need to earn their place.

“Report,” Nayra said.

“Something is definitely nesting at the base of the tower,” Kri said.

“Any signs of dome monsters?” Nayra asked. They had won the war, but they still found remnants from time to time. Monsters that had managed to hide away. They had been encountering lone remnants more often since they started expanding south, toward their old lands. One of the main goals of the Twilight Melody Sect was to expand and take back the Empire territory. Most of it was ruined, but there would be pockets that could be recovered. They hadn’t been able to take everything with them as they retreated, so they had no doubt that they would find things that were recoverable. Their main enemy were monsters that had moved back in to retake the lands that had once been civilized.

It nearly boggled Nayra’s mind, to know that the Twilight Melody Sect was now nearly half the size of what the Empire was at its peak. They had absorbed many other Sects and expanded aggressively on all fronts. Smaller Sects joined and became smaller Houses, pledging their allegiance to one of the three main Houses of the Sect.

“Not yet,” Kri answered.

“How are you feeling about it?” Nayra asked.

Kri looked around, almost as if trying to see if there was someone around to overhear. Nayra knew that she could probably tell with her sense, but Kri was yet to break the habit of actually looking, unlike Ryun. She didn’t doubt that she would lose it eventually.

“The scouts say that the monsters are all around tier 7 or 8, we should be fine,” Kri said.

Nayra raised an eyebrow. “Should? I would appreciate it if you are more certain than that, your mother would not take it well if I brought you back crippled or dead.”

Kri grimaced then gave her a small pout. “Not everything is about her.”

“It is for me,” Nayra grinned at her.

Kri rolled her eyes, then sobered. “Fine, yes I am confident that we can take them, unless there is something stronger hiding where we can’t see.”

“What does your sense tell you?”

“I haven’t felt anything amiss,” Kri answered.

Nayra nodded. Kri had the tendency to lack confidence in her abilities, even though she tried to present a strong and stalwart outward persona. Nayra knew that there was a lot that Kri kept inside. She was hoping that Kri would open up, but Nayra knew just how hard it could be to talk to family, and that is what they were now.

“Be vigilant,” Nayra told her and Kri saluted back. Nayra held the young woman’s eyes for a few seconds, then spoke. “You have permission to proceed.”

Kri nodded, then turned and walked away, heading downhill and toward the rest of their forces. Nayra remained where she was. She had been on the front for years now, expanding the Sect borders. This had become a routine for them. Kri lead their forces through the forest, heading for the tower, and Nayra watched. Her job wasn’t to cut through their enemies, to have them follow behind her. No, the Sect warriors fought so that they could grow stronger. She was there only in case that something too strong for them appeared.

Kri’s attack force made its way slowly, clearing monsters in the forest as they went. She was Mid Heavenly Realm and powerful for her tier, very much so, even though sometimes she doubted it herself. She could’ve advanced, even to Immortal, they were pretty sure that Ryun had her do her Immortal inspiration in Monarch, or even before then. Though he and Tali were... very tight lipped about all the things they had been teaching her. Regardless, there had to be a reason as to why they hadn’t pushed her to Immortal yet.

Nayra didn't know it, though she suspected. Kri had been asking Nayra some very poignant questions about Death, Ethereal, and Souls. If she had to guess, they were having her decide on her Second Aspect before hitting Immortal. She wondered if they were trying to influence her Forging of Body and Aspect in some way, since she hadn't yet advanced to Peak Heavenly. Nor had she upgraded her skills even though Nayra knew that she could. Nayra had assumed that Kri would take after Ryun and take either Void, Oblivion, or Stillness, for her second Aspect, but perhaps she was wrong. Sometimes plans don't work out, and people walked their own paths. No matter how those who teach them wished otherwise. Nayra knew that intimately; she had stepped off the path intended for her.

Still, a decade of fighting on the Frontier had sharpened Kri immensely, and Nayra looked forward to seeing what she would achieve.

An hour later, the fighting reached the base of the tower, and an earsplitting shriek filled the air. Nayra saw the trees in the distance stop their swaying in the wind, the leaves frosting over and becoming still. The fighting continued for a while longer while Nayra watched from a distance. The ground shook, and she heard the cracks of stone, saw trees toppling down and then... quiet. It didn't take long for a runner to reach her and inform her that the base of the tower was secured.

Nayra nodded and was about to head that way when another shriek echoed all around them. This one much louder, and far more powerful. She looked up and saw a coiling shape breach the clouds, heading straight for the tower. A feathered wyrm, a large and powerful one. Kri had been right, something had been nesting at the base of the Tower. They probably fought the young, and now the mother was coming.

Nayra sprang into motion, wings of fire appearing on her back as she was engulfed in flames and turned into her Avatar form. The great wyrm noticed her and turned its attention away from the tower. As Nayra got close, she blinked through space, her arrival bringing a blast of dawnfire that burned the wyrm's side and set its feathers on fire. She stabbed her

spear in its back, then cut out and beat her wings to get above it. With Valkyrie's Descent, she smashed down on top of the wyrm, stabbing it in the back and pushing it down. She rode it all the way to the ground, where they smashed through the treeline and hit the ground hard.

She beat her wings as the wyrm coiled, attempting to hit her with her tail, and evaded with **[Augury's Dash]**, knowing exactly where to go to get out of the way. It reared its head up, roaring and spewing yellow flames in her direction. Nayra blurred around it with **{Mist Burst}** sending a **{Mesmerizing Mirage}** to distract it.

She landed beneath its head, and then swung her weapon with **[Death's Slash]**, opening its throat. Blood burst forth, and the monster's death throes made it twitch widely on the ground, destroying everything it hit. Nayra flew above it and watched as it died, feeling moment its death came.

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The base of the tower was in the process of being defrosted. Signs of Kri's battle were everywhere, and she saw the woman standing near the corpse of a smaller wyrm. Warriors around her inclined their head as Nayra passed, some murmuring "Sect Leader" greetings at her.

The courtyard of the Tower had been completely overgrown, and the cobblestone beneath her feet could barely be seen. She walked up to the large double sided door that led inside the tower. Once there she pulled out a small black talisman from her storage and leaned it against the doors. The protections on the Tower flared and then disarmed.

They had been in a hurry when they left, most of the people staffing the tower had been evacuated long before the true retreat came. But the final sealing of the Tower happened after the remnants retreated way past it. A small team had remained and was supposed to retrieve some of

the more sensitive items that the Tower's vault stored. They hadn't returned.

Seeing that the Tower was sealed, she assumed that they had at least managed to reach it. The question now was whether they had died on the way back, or if they hadn't been able to leave the Tower.

She had her people search the Tower as she walked through it slowly, taking in the familiar sights. It seemed like an age ago that she had walked these halls, a member of the order. So much had changed since then.

She found the office of her former Lord Commander, looked at the now bare wall where a great painting once hung. It had been taken in one of the first waves of retreat, she knew. Though, the painting had been lost along with the Lord Commander in the fighting. The orders had held off a large swarm of monster in order to allow non-combatants to escape.

Nayra wondered if she would've been there, with them, if she had remained in the Order.

A warrior approached her, a former soldier of the Empire who had taken up Cultivation and truly embraced the Sect ways, as many of the former Empire people had, though mostly those affiliated with the Ornn family.

She followed the warrior, and he led her to the sleeping quarters, where they found the team. It appeared like they died in their sleep, open vials next to them. She couldn't know exactly what led them to that, but... At the time, it must've felt like the world was ending around them. Perhaps the enemy found the Tower before they could leave, keeping them locked inside. It was pointless to theorize.

Instead, she made her way to the vault and used her key to open it. Inside, she found what they had come here looking for. Potions, weapons, Essence Crystals, and the scrolls filled texts. Class requirements, training regiments, secrets of the Orders. Once they were supposed to help the

Empire gain strength, now they would do the same for the Twilight Melody Sect.

She ordered it all packed up. With this expansion her job in the frontier ended. Someone else would replace her, Vanessa probably, and keep expanding South, while Nayra retook her place back in the Sect. Preparing for what was to come.