

PRESENT – Nayra
Oh Really?

Nayra sat with her legs crossed in her cycling room. Her eyes were closed as she drew in Essence from all around her. She wasn't all that good at it, but she had gotten better. Finally, she reached the amount she had decided on drawing in for the day and stopped, she relaxed and opened her eyes.

Anrosh sat across from her, studying her intently. Nayra gave her a weak smile as she stretched.

"I don't know how you people can do this for your entire lives," Nayra complained.

Anrosh chuckled. "It allows for time that we can spend contemplating many different things."

"I can barely keep my focus on drawing Essence in, I don't think that I'll ever be able to focus on more than that," Nayra shook her head.

She wasn't much of a cultivator, but she didn't need to be one. Her path was there to support her Class. The small room that they were in was made just for her, newly sharpened blades filled every wall and some were even hanged on long chains from the ceiling. It filled the room with Sharpness Essence, among some other things. It wasn't as pure of a source as what Anrosh had, but it was good enough for Nayra's purpose.

She got to her feet slowly, and Anrosh followed. It meant a lot to Nayra that Anrosh was helping her with all of this. It wasn't something that she had ever had before. When she and Reyla had been young, their instructors had always been comparing them, trying to push them to be better by using the other as an example. It made Nayra hate training sessions. But in the sects, advancement was individual, a personal thing. And the Twilight Melody Sect differed in the fact that it made knowledge free for everyone, but advancement was still on the individual.

Anrosh wasn't here to try and push her to be better, she was only there to instruct and provide support. Nayra had never had a relationship like that in her life. She liked Anrosh a lot, and her daughter too. Kri reminded her so much of how she used to be when she was that age. Eager to prove herself, to

get stronger. In many ways even their circumstances were similar, Kri had been given a lot too.

As the two of them walked toward the exit of the room, she couldn't help but glance at her. She had, of course, noticed Anrosh's looks. The woman was many things, but discrete wasn't one of them. Nayra could admit that Anrosh was attractive, smart, and strong. And while Nayra had been with both men and women before, her choices of lovers weren't at all like Anrosh was. She had always gravitated toward the more... mysterious personalities. Like Ryun perhaps.

But over the last year she had come to like Anrosh quite a bit, surprising even herself. She had grown a lot since she decided to leave her former life behind. Changed in ways that she hadn't expected. She was... happier than she had ever been before. And she was interested in trying something new. Yet she hesitated, she pretended that she didn't see Anrosh's looks. In great part because she was certain that the woman didn't quite know what to do about her feelings herself.

Nayra knew only a little about her past, about the loss of her husband and the life that she had before. Anrosh shared enough that Nayra knew that she didn't have an easy life. So she had decided to leave any first step in her hands, she wasn't going to push. But she had decided that several months ago, and was now feeling... impatient. She wondered if perhaps she should make the first move.

She put those thoughts aside as they entered the training room and were met by Tali, who stood in the center of the room.

"Are you finally done, Classer?" The woman asked.

Nayra bit down a retort, the crippled woman didn't like her, which she understood. From what she knew about her, she was a true Cultivator. One that had been crippled and enslaved. She didn't know where she came from, but she was one of the reasons why the Twilight Melody Sect people advanced better. She had held classes for a few people in the beginning, but these days she only focused on Kri, Anrosh, and by extension Nayra. She knew that the woman didn't like it, but she didn't withhold her knowledge from Nayra.

"I am Master," Nayra said respectfully.

“Good, then you are ready to advance?” Tali asked.

“Yes, Master,” Nayra responded.

“Anrosh told me that you managed to change your techniques? Yes?”

“That is correct,” Nayra glanced at Anrosh who just gave her a quick smile.

“Good, that will help you if you ever decide to climb higher than Lord, not that you will ever be anything but mediocre in Cultivation,” Tali nodded. “You’ve done as I have asked? Cycled to improve your conduits?”

“Yes.”

“Good, then you may advance,” Tali said.

Nayra glanced at Anrosh and then sat down. She focused on her core and then started pulling out Essence and creating a crystal. She had done this six times, as Tali had advised. Cycling once on every stage with Sharpness Essence. She knew that she wouldn’t get nearly the same benefits as a true Cultivator would. The quality of her Aspect and the Essence that she cycled was low, but she should get something at least.

Once she was finished, she put the crystal away, it would go to the Sect Vault, to be used for the advancement of other people in the sect—those who earn it—or it would be traded through the auction.

She took a deep breath, then put in more of her Essence into her core and advanced.

Congratulations, you have reached Early Lord Realm Stage on the Path of the Lotus Dance!

Reward—New Path Perk available

Cultivation Bonus

Gain plus 15% effectiveness to all of your technique effects.

Nayra looked at her notifications, seeing that her cycling did pay off in the end. It was a very small increase, at least compared to what everyone else could get. But it was enough that she couldn’t keep the smile from her face.

She pulled up her perk choices and read through them.

Qi manipulation perk available!	
Quick Qi	Your Qi speed through your conduits is improved, +25% to Qi speed when using techniques.
Precise Qi	Your Qi control through your conduits is precise, technique cost is reduced by 25%.
Bursting Qi	Your Qi conduits are developed for short bursts of Qi. Able to use burst techniques without the need for a breathing form.

She looked at the three choices with great interest, trying to decide which one would suit her best.

“Well,” Tali’s voice interrupted her thoughts. She extended her hand and tilted her scared head. “Show me.”

Nayra blinked, but then feeling sheepish, she took the woman’s hand and made the perk choice visible to her.

Tali didn’t react for a few seconds, and then Nayra saw her lips turn into a frown. “Pathetic, but I expected that.”

Nayra felt her heart drop a bit when she heard that.

“Tali,” Anrosh spoke. “You don’t need to be cruel.”

Nayra gave her a thankful smile.

“I only speak the truth. But you are right, for a non-Cultivator it is... passable. Now, considering your build and fighting style, if what you’ve told me is the truth,” Tali warned. “Then, the best perk for you would be the **Bursting Qi** one. It would mean that you would always be able to use two of your techniques in almost all situations. It is a good perk for you.”

Nayra glanced back at her screens. “Not the one that increases my Qi speed?”

“No,” Tali shook her head. “You are not a Cultivator, techniques are an afterthought for you. You will not use your techniques nearly enough to warrant that.”

Nayra took a deep breath and then glanced at Anrosh.

“She is rude, but she knows a lot. Still, in the end it is your decision,” Anrosh reached out and squeezed her shoulder in support.

Nayra nodded and then made her choice. “Bursting Qi it is then.”

“Good, now you remember what I told you?” Tali asked.

“I do, I need to advance my class as quickly as possible,” Nayra said.

“You will not feel the effects immediately, you have a month or a few, your Class and Path are not particularly dangerous. Still, do not try to wait for longer than that. You had the time to get more feats before now. With this you put yourself against the clock.”

“I understand, thank you for your guidance,” Nayra bowed, even though the woman couldn’t see her. Somehow, Nayra always got the sense that she could sense what was happening around her.

“Try not to embarrass me,” Tali said as she turned around and walked away.

Nayra watched her go. She was such a font of knowledge, even more than the instructors she had back home. Knowing about imbalance, about madness, was invaluable. She had known some things, her instructors had mentioned it, but only in terms of rules. She was never supposed to advance without them.

Here, she learned a lot more. By advancing her Path to Lord, she had achieved one more feat that would improve her Class choice, and she had been preparing for her next Class leveling for the last year. She had spent only around 300,000 GE to get to that level, and she couldn’t even believe it, but that was nothing compared to the amounts of Essence that she dealt with now. That was around how much she had gained from one battle against the swarm, what she used to reach level 180. She had earned more than that in the last year just from her monthly contributions.

As a Sect Leader, she was entitled to a pretty substantial amount of Essence, almost 20,000 GE a month. Some months she had gotten more, some less, based on her contribution. Aside from that, she had engaged in constant monster hunting. She led the teams that dealt with the remnants of the swarm, she retook Ven’oran, she had done a dozen runs through the dungeon. She had gained items and potions, some that she had sold for even

more Essence. She had been preparing for this for the entire year. For every 1 Greater Essence that she had cycled and given to the sect, she had gained 800 Essence. With everything together, she had almost 950 Celestial Essence accumulated.

And now she was so close to leveling again, to evolving again.

A part of her knew that she wanted to level in order to outshine Reyla. She hadn't reached out to her sister, in part because she was unsure what to say. They had been close once, but the weight of responsibility, of their family name had sullied anything that had once been good between them. They didn't agree on how to live their lives, and Nayra didn't know how they could ever get over that.

She shook her head and pushed those thoughts aside. She turned around and found Anrosh looking at her. Again, the woman's feelings were quite clear to her, and watching her startle when Nayra caught her looking and trying to cover up her embarrassment was quite adorable.

"Uh... are you going to level now?" Anrosh asked uncomfortably.

Nayra shook her head. "I want to reach at least Mid Lord, get a True Body before I evolve my Class."

"Do you have the time for that?" Anrosh asked, worry seeping into her tone. It made Nayra's heart warm to hear that from her. "Tali just said that—"

"Don't worry," Nayra interrupted her. "I don't plan on drawing in all that Essence, I'm too slow at it. I'll buy some from the auction."

"Ah," Anrosh said, her expression calming down.

Nayra took a moment to look at Anrosh, to study her. Her red skin and white hair had been strange to Anrosh when she first met her. There are not many people in the Empire that had True Bodies, and only a fraction of them had any kind of drastic changes. Here in the sects she had seen a lot more. Most had some physical change. She had seen demasi with two tails, with four horns, kracean with spikes growing out of the carapace, and many more. It was just... accepted.

By now she was used to it. And Anrosh was quite appealing to her. She had a warrior's body, fit, and defined. Her skin was soft, with just a few freckles on her cheeks that made her look far more innocent than she really was. Nayra had seen her fight in real battles, and knew that she was powerful.

“What is it?” Anrosh asked, snapping her back to reality.

Nayra didn’t answer, instead, on a whim, she stepped closer. Then, before she could think better of it, she leaned forward and kissed her.

Her lips were as soft as she imagined, and tasted sweet, which surprised her. For a moment Anrosh didn’t respond, but then she moved her lips. Before she had the chance to truly enjoy it, the kiss was over. She kept her eyes closed, and sighed.

“I should have done that a long time ago,” Nayra whispered.

She opened her eyes and looked at Anrosh. The look on her face wasn’t what she expected.

“I...” Anrosh started, her eyes open wide and startled.

Nayra felt her heart drop. “Oh, I made a mistake, didn’t I?”

For a moment, Anrosh didn’t say anything and Nayra wanted to crawl down a hole and never come up. She had been stupid, read more into things that were just in her head. She opened her mouth to apologize.

“No, I,” Anrosh said, interrupting her. “I was just surprised.”

“Pleasantly or?”

Anrosh shook her head. “I don’t know.”

She could see that she was confused and taken aback. She realized that she should’ve probably spoken with her before doing something like that, but she had acted on impulse. And now she had messed things up, like she always did.

“I’m sorry,” Nayra whispered.

Then Anrosh reached out and grabbed her shoulders. “No, don’t be. I’m... It’s just...”

Nayra bowed her head at her words, she knew that Anrosh was just trying to spare her feelings now. Then she spoke, voicing one of the suspicions that she had over the last year, the reason why she hadn’t done anything sooner.

“It’s Ryun isn’t it. You and him are... I heard the rumors, of course, I should’ve known. I mean he is strong and—”

“No,” Anrosh interrupted her. “No this has nothing to do with him.”

“So you are not..?” Nayra asked the question that she had wanted to ask for a long time. Even with everything that she and Anrosh talked about, she still didn’t quite believe that there was nothing between them.

“We were never together,” Anrosh answered.

“But you want to be?”

Anrosh hesitated, and then shook her head. “No, I don’t. Once, perhaps, I had thought about it. He saved Kri and me, gave us... gave us everything, a future. And I had been grieving the death of my husband. It was... Of course I thought about it. But he terrified me, and then... we became close, but not like that. Friends—no. More than that, a family. I do care for him, love him perhaps. But not in any romantic sense.”

“Then?” Nayra asked hopefully.

“You surprised me,” Anrosh said, a small smile tugging at the edge of her lips. “I’ve been thinking about what you thought about me for months. I just never had the courage to do anything about it. When you kissed me I... you shocked me.”

Nayra let her own lips turn up into a smile as she put a hand on Anrosh’s hip and pulled her close. “Oh really?”

They smiled at one another and she leaned forward, intending to kiss her again. Then, a notification flashed across her vision and she blinked.

“What the?” Nayra said as the notification got through her filters and appeared in her vision. She read through the title and frowned. “Message from the Invitation Committee? What is this?”

“I see it too,” Anrosh said. “The Sect Interface just received a message.”

It took Nayra a moment to realize what it meant. As a Sect Leader they were connected to the Faction Interface. A while ago, Anrosh had sent a registration request to the core, to register the Twilight Melody Sect as well as their holdings. It wasn’t anything special, it just connected them with every other faction. They could send messages through the Interface, or get news. Although all of that cost Essence, a lot of Essence seeing as they were all the way on the Frontier, so they hadn’t really used it.

“What do you think it is about?” Nayra asked.

“We should go and find out,” Anrosh said.

Nayra grimaced at the timing of it, but nodded. They made their way to the palace and the chamber beneath it. When Ven'oran fell, and they got the Last Ember territories, they had switched the Main Interface to Consequence. It made sense, since it was the largest city in their sect.

They entered the guarded room and approached the interface, an obelisk-like object in the center of the room. Anrosh touched it and then a window popped up in front of it.

*Congratulations, as a registered entity your faction —**Twilight Melody Sect**— is eligible for participation in the Centennial Tournament. You've been allotted the plot —**325570-GH**— in the arena stands. Size: **twenty square meters**. The price of admission to the arena stands per group of 10, is 100 Celestial Essence for the qualifications of all categories, 200 CE for the semi-finals of all categories, 500 CE for the finals of all categories. You have 10 days to notify us of your attendance, otherwise your slot will be sold on the auction.*

Regards,

Association of Centennial Tournament Affairs

Nayra blinked at the message, then glanced at Anrosh. Then she remembered who she was, and what her people planned for the tournament.