

## **The Difference Between Us, Sister**

The battle on the Wall seemed to slow as everyone became aware of the General walking toward them. The taken were still trying to take the Wall, but the soldiers on top were holding them off. With one of the stronger taken dead, the others weren't that much of a threat. Most of them were the low tiered soldiers that had been captured. If it was only them, they would've been able to hold the wall. The General changed everything. It wasn't the same as the one that had broken the Wall days ago, this one was larger. Towering over the Wall and walking on four legs. Its body was spindly, its limbs gangling and overly long. Its front legs were longer than its back and looked like long tentacular appendages without any joints, which made it move in a slow and awkward gait.

Its skin was gray and smooth. Its neck was long and ended in a wide toothless maw that was open to show nothing but darkness within. Like a head of a worm, it had no eyes. A low wail left its maw that brought a chill to Reyla's bones. It walked slowly, a titan dwarfing everything else, coming in from behind the army attacking the Wall.

Emrys climbed back on top of the wall, a couple of house soldiers following behind him. He walked over and looked at the General in the distance. She saw the fear in his eyes, the realization of what the General's arrival meant. Reyla had seen one fight with a General before, it had taken Erik and Vanessa working together with an army of thousands to kill it. She knew that the Generals had vastly different levels of powers, that not all were suited for combat, but they were all powerful. After that one General had died, the enemy had stopped sending their Generals against them freely. They struck when they were certain that they couldn't be defeated. Just looking at it made Reyla's spirits fall. They couldn't fight that, not without someone stronger on their side, like Erik or Vanessa. Even with their new power, they just weren't strong enough. The only reason they managed to fight off the last General that arrived was because it was weaker and because the head of House Ornn Guard gave his life to deal a blow that turned it away. Still, they hadn't been fully successful. The Wall was damaged, and now a weak point

in their defense. The soldiers on top of the Wall were tired, and the enemies seemingly without end.

There was nothing that they could do now. Fighting against such odds was futile. They would lose, and every soldier taken prisoner would join the enemy side. Everyone that fell would be one less soul ready to fight. She couldn't let that happen. Yet having the Wall fall was... no matter what she chose the result was going to be terrible. She turned to the side where her brother and sister stood, looking at the General with two different expressions.

She opened her mouth to speak when Nayra moved.

She climbed on top of the parapet, her shield in one hand and her oversized golden spear in the other.

"We should hit it before it reaches the Wall," Nayra said as she reached up with her shield hand and adjusted the helmet on top of her head. "Emrys and the rest of the soldiers on the Wall can provide support from the distance."

She turned around and looked at Reyla who was so shocked that she forgot to close her mouth.

"C'mon, hurry, the closer it gets the more damage it will be able to do to the Wall."

Reyla glanced at Emrys who had a dumbfounded look on his face that was a mirror of how Reyla herself felt.

"Nayra," Reyla started. "We can't fight that."

Nayra frowned. "What? There is no choice, we must."

Reyla shook her head. "That is a General Nayra, we don't have anyone powerful enough to stop it."

Emrys stepped forward, looking at Nayra. "And with it here, the Far-link Orb isn't going to work," Emrys said. "We can't call for help. Even if we could hold it off for a while, it isn't going to matter in the end."

"Emrys is right," Reyla said as she joined him to stand in front of Nayra, looking up at her. "We need to retreat to the Fort, it is small enough that we should be able to defend it. The enemy will take this part of the Wall, it is unavoidable, but we might be able to force them to turn away from the Fort."

If we call for a full retreat and get everyone behind the Fort walls, we might have a chance.”

Emrys nodded, and Nayra lowered her hands as she sagged. Reyla was glad that her sister saw some sense, they couldn't afford to act foolishly now. Their orders were to keep the Wall for as long as possible, but there was no holding it against a General. She glanced to the side, in the distance where the Wall stretched without ending. Other Houses were holding the other parts of the Wall. Some of them might even be engaged with this army at their edge, but they couldn't help them. If they weakened their part of the Wall the enemy would sense it and strike, opening another avenue for them to cross.

If they saw that this part of the Wall had fallen, they would at least relay a message, though it would be too late by then, they could at least try to keep the broken line as small as possible. Give the rest of the Empire time to gather a force strong enough to plug the hole. There were fortresses beyond the Wall, checkpoints that will slow the enemy's advance. Reyla nodded to herself, there was no reason for them to die pointlessly, without being able to accomplish anything. She was given this responsibility by her mother, she had to make decisions that would influence their entire House, everyone working for it. She couldn't afford to lose.

“Emrys,” Reyla started. “You stay and hold the Wall, me and Nayra will fly around and relay the orders for the retreat. We can also support their retreat.”

“Yesterday, I was reminded of who we used to be,” Nayra said softly. Reyla turned her eyes to look at her sister. Before she could even open her mouth, Nayra continued. “We grew up together, we fought together, but along the way I... we drifted apart. Because you excelled at what the family asked of you. You fit in this place, you are one piece of the whole, you live to serve. And that is not who I am anymore.”

Reyla frowned. “Nayra, we don't have the time for this, what are you—”

Nayra cut the air in front of her with her golden spear as the sounds of battle surrounded them, and the heavy footsteps of the General shook the ground. “No Reyla. You need to hear this; you need to understand. I left the Empire because I don't want what it offers, because here you are only valued

for what you can contribute to the Empire as a whole. I joined a sect because they care only about power, about climbing one step above those around them. They are backstabbing in a way; they care more about pride and face than they do anything else. In a sect you climb based on what you yourself can accomplish; the sect might support you, but the amount of support that you gain is based on what you reach for. They are brutal, and end conflicts with overwhelming might. At least my Sect Head does.”

She glanced to the side, in the direction of the enemy General. “Do you know what my Sect Head would see if he looked at that monster? What I see now when I look at it?” Nayra didn’t give Reyla enough time to answer, not that she even had an answer for her questions. She was still confused and taken off-guard.

Nayra pointed her spear in the General’s direction. “Power to be taken. That is what we see, what the greatest in the Core Sects would see. What real Rankers see, those who survived and climbed high. How powerful that monster right there is doesn’t matter, what matters is crawling, scraping, clinging to life as you climb that mountain of power. I don’t want to be like you two, I don’t want to follow someone else’s path for me. I want to grab for power on my own, to advance on my own terms, and make my own choices.”

“Nayra... that is suicide,” Reyla argued. “That General might be as strong as Erik or mother, as strong as High Rankers in the Core. You just barely reach immortality; you can’t do anything against that.”

Nayra gave her a sad smile. “Tiers of power are not absolute; power is not absolute. Even the mighty can fall. I don’t need to be stronger than a monster to kill it. Do you think that the first Rankers that arrived here survived by only fighting things weaker than them? Do you think that Ryun Nacht advanced so far in such a short time by doing things as you are now? I do not disparage our family’s methods Reyla, our siblings are powerful, but aside from the oldest—those like Erik and Vanessa—those who had lived through the struggle and war, none can even come close to our parents. And that is who I want to reach. You have a choice to make sister,” Nayra’s eyes bored into hers. “Who do you want to be?”

Nayra dismissed her spear and then pulled out a potion that Reyla recognized. It was one of the boosting potions crafted by their family, she had

given it to Nayra yesterday when they've come to an agreement. It would boost her stats by 40% for a short duration. She downed it quickly, then turned to look at the General stumbling in their direction.

"Nayra, don't be reckless, please," Reyla took a step forward, but then immediately had to take two back as Nayra burst into fire and grew. The avatar made out of golden fire turned its head as the golden spear appeared back in her arms and then was immediately consumed by the flames.

"This is the difference between us," Nayra told her. "Make your choice sister."

Wings sprung from her back and she flew off, straight for the General in the distance.

\* \* \*

Nayra

Seeing and listening to her siblings talk about the retreat, about losing the battle, made her realize just how much she had changed over the years she spent in the Twilight Melody Sect. She had lived a much different life there, a life that had made her happy. Training other sect members, practicing her spear, listening to advice from Tali—despite the woman being difficult— and watching the way that Ryun lived his life. At first she had thought that he was unique, that there was something about him that made him just better than others. And perhaps in some ways he was. He had a talent for Cultivation and personal understanding that few could match, not even Tali. He was a Ranker, who had lived on a different timeline than anyone else. Nayra and her family lived on a timeline of the immortals, for them power was only a matter of time. Ryun clawed for every scrap of power he could get, and he didn't delay any more than he needed to. He didn't follow in another's footsteps; he carved his own way.

Nayra had admired that, she had dreamed of being like that, but had resigned herself to never being able to be the same. The tournament was what had changed that for her, seeing Anrosh decide to gain power through Ryun had shaken her. A part of her had been worried about that being borrowed power, and perhaps it was. But Anrosh was not like Nayra, her

goals and priorities were not the same. That was the start, but seeing the other contestants, and fighting some that were powerful made her realize what they all had in common. They loved the struggle, and they were willing to gamble with their lives on the line to get more power.

She looked at the behemoth of a General in the distance, seeing it getting larger and larger as she approached. It had to be at least five stories tall, and while it looked as if a strong wind could topple it, there was a sense of strength to it. She might die, but then again, she might not. If she was smart, if she got lucky enough, she could live and defeat a monster far stronger than her. A part of her was scared, even with immortality she might not survive, not against these opponents. And yet, three years spent imprisoned, three years spent on the battlefield honing her powers, thinking about what her sect was doing and if they even knew that she was alive. Three years of helping souls reach the afterlife, often failing. She was tired of it all. She realized that Ryun had always been right, if you want something, you had to take it. To survive in this world on your own terms, you had to have enough power.

And she had chosen the way that she was going to gain that power. By fighting and struggling, by growing in battle.

This was the difference between her and her sister.

She had used her **{Mantle of Rising Mists}** on the Wall and the cycling part of the technique had gone through all of her stat pairs, now the full boost had hit her first pair and she knew that she had only a few seconds with her strength and dexterity boosted. She activated a second technique as well, her **{Mesmerizing Mirage}**, which surrounded her by a haze that mentally influenced her opponents. She didn't know if it would work on the General, but it would protect her from the taken on the ground at least. She saw the effects immediately as their attacks from the ground missed her.

She wasn't stupid, she knew how dangerous the General was. But fighting was not all about power, it was about how you used it and what opponent you faced. The moment she saw the General she started making her plan. It was a reckless one, she admitted, but from everything she knew about these monsters it could work. They died like anything else.

“**It can work,**” Er’ishi Resav told her in her mind. The plan was both of theirs. True to his nature, slide through and strike where the enemy was weakest.

“**If we get close enough,**” Nayra added.

The General raised its worm-like head and pointed it in her direction, a faint sound announced it doing something, and then the wide-open toothless maw released a screech. The air in front of the mouth shimmered as something moved at the speed of sound. Her mirage technique obviously didn’t work on the General as it had fired straight at her. Quickly she switched her technique to **{Mist Burst}** and moved out of the way with a burst of **Scorching Mist** Qi exploding around her.

The edge of the attack still hit her, the air itself was shaking and a sharp pain hit her head and her ears despite her **Greater Steel Mind** perk. The General’s attack was some kind of sound-based attack that shook the air, creating a physical blast but also carrying a mental portion. The mental part made her wince, which probably meant that the edge of the attack was far weaker than the main part. It only inflicted pain, and that she could handle, her **|Enhanced Toughness|** skill let her take pain without losing focus. It didn’t matter, she didn’t intend to get hit by it.

She saw the General ready to attack again, the same faint sound repeating—sounding as if a thousand tiny icicles were hit with a soft wind. She twisted in the air, then get out of the way with **[Shimmering Burst]**. The attack cracked the air above her as she got lower, closer to the ground. The taken took advantage of her position and sent attacks her way. Without her technique their attacks were spot on. She raised her shield and focused her will and a shimmering wall appeared in front of her. With the **|Shield Wall|** she blocked their attacks.

The General attacked again, the blast coming out of its mouth wasn’t precisely targeted, so she managed to get away just with a beat of her wings. It hit the ground, smashing the stone and earth and burrowing deep enough that she couldn’t even see the bottom, sending cracks all around the battlefield. The Taken that were on the ground burst apart into a shower of blood and gore. The attack was so powerful that she knew she couldn’t survive a head on hit.

She beat her wings, gaining altitude again. The General was getting ready for another attack, so she raised her spear and focused her will. Before it could attack again, she used **|Hurl|** and threw her spear at it while activating **Valkyrie's Might** and **Battle Trance**. The attack flew through the air, the spear glimmering with her willpower. It struck the General on top of its featureless head and made its head dip slightly, the awakened spear cutting a shallow scratch on top of its head before glancing off. It barely did anything, the General's skin was too strong to pierce.

It readjusted its maw and attacked again. The air cracked again as a wave of sound twisted it up in her direction. With all the death on the Wall her **Death Empowerment** made her strong, with all her other perks and technique she was fast, but not fast enough to avoid the attack with pure stats. She burned one more of her abilities, using **Dawn Dash** to get away. She was close now, and she knew that she didn't have enough time to wait for her cooldowns, but she needed to get closer still.

She flew at the monster again, now ignoring the attacks from the taken on the ground. Her avatar form burned up many of their attacks before they could touch her, but a few still hit her. She didn't care, she pushed forward. The monster prepared to attack again, and she recalled her spear and pointed it forward. She used her **Death Maelstrom** perk, pulling on all the death on the battlefield. A small sphere left her hand, traveling along her spear and then out, too fast to be seen. It hit the General at the spot where its long neck met its torso and it exploded into a dark whirlwind, a maelstrom of **Death Essence**. It expanded, ripping gashes into the General's skin, but still shallow. The General walked through it, as if it could barely feel it, and perhaps it couldn't. The maelstrom expanded and ravaged the ground, killing the taken around the General's feet.

It released another attack, and Nayra barely managed to get away with another **{Mist Burst}**. She was getting tired, the battle from before had already drained her stamina and Qi, and she was quickly running out. But she was close now, close enough that she could see down the darkness of the monster's wide maw. Its mouth was the size of a house, a massive cave that spit out destruction and mental agony.



She saw its head turn in her direction again as she flew higher above it. Then, instead of firing another attack it rose up toward her, her front limbs reaching up into the air toward her as it balanced on its hind legs. The two tentacle-like limbs split into dozens each, with wicked hooks at the ends and all reached toward her faster than she could evade, ready to grab her.

And then bolts of fire hit them, slapping them out of the way just enough for her to slip through and get higher. She glanced back and far behind her saw Emrys on the Wall with his staff pointed in her direction, spewing fire. The soldiers on the Wall did the same, ignoring the taken trying to climb up for one moment to release a full salvo of powers at the General. The attack hit the General's tentacles, but only succeeded in throwing them off-course, not really harming any of them beyond Emrys' attack that slightly scorched them.

**“Get back Nayra, run!”** Reyla's voice yelled inside her head.

She had stayed, they hadn't retreated. It made her feel so many conflicting things, but she didn't have the time to process them. The soldiers stood on the Wall, wearing the colors of House Ornn, pointing their weapons in the direction of Nayra's opponent. They had her back; they were there for her. A part of her that had tried to abandon her family, to do something that was her own felt ashamed. They had loyalty for her despite everything, she didn't think that they would. The people serving the House Ornn were... they didn't serve her, they served something more—what her family represented in the Empire. She didn't understand that, if she was honest, she never truly did, it was why she was more at home in the sect. But she did accept their loyalty and she respected it, now. They had stayed, and that meant more than she could put into words.

She felt something from them, as if she could somehow taste their awe at what she was doing. The respect. It was everything that she had ever wanted. To be looked at like that, like someone who mattered, who was brave and powerful.

**“No!”** Nayra sent back. **“Hit it again, in the head. I need to get closer.”**

Along with words she tried to send her complete confidence, she knew that she could do this, she just needed one moment.

People often misunderstood what battle was, how it went. Great battles were not those from stories, they were not epic encounters that lasted for hours or days. Great battles ended in moments. One instant where the right power hit the right target and changed everything. And Nayra knew that it existed, she knew that it could be done, otherwise what was even the point of the Infinite Realm? What was the point if they could never go against things that were stronger than them?

Reyla didn't respond, and Nayra hoped that she would listen. She dove back down again, the General turned its head in her direction and its tendrils heading toward her. She activated **Valkyrie's Swiftiness** and used **{Mist Burst}** to evade in between the tendrils as she flew toward the General's mouth.

It was readying another of its attacks, and she knew that she was committed now, she wouldn't be able to dodge again. Then, as it was about to release its attack, a wave of fire hit its head moving it off course. Nayra didn't even see what it was that hit it, she only noticed fire and heat. The side of its face had faint scorch marks, but the attack had hit part of its open mouth too and she saw bigger burns on the inside.

She prepared another technique, charging it as she reached the wide toothless maw of the General. The faint sound that announced the attack blossomed again, but there was no going back now. She entered the General's mouth.

**"Now," Er'ishi Resav** told her.

Nayra used her **Great Lunge**, lurching forward through the massive mouth and down the throat. She reset her **[Dawn Dash]** and used it immediately to get farther down. She could feel the monster preparing its attack and knew that she had to pass the point where it was being generated before it was fired, or she was dead.

She triggered **[Dawnfire Immolation]**, her already fiery avatar form burst with more intense fire, burning the flesh inside the General's throat. Then she activated **Dawnfire Blink**. She blinked deeper down and released a burst of dawnfire at her arrival point, burning even more of the monster's flesh.

She wasn't fast enough; the sound reached a crescendo and it fired its attack. The howling sound and shaking air came from deeper inside the monster and she knew that she had nowhere to dodge. Except one place.

Quickly she used her **[Ethereal Cross]**. The world around her turned and twisted, for a moment making her feel as if she was falling, and then she was someplace else—the Ethereal Realm. A part of the attack somehow followed her through, and she was thrown back as she raised her shield to defend. Her mind nearly split in two and her shield shattered, her hand with it. It took a moment for her **|Enhanced Toughness|** to help her get through the pain, and she glanced down to see that her left hand was a mangled mess with nothing below the elbow. She activated **Rapid Recovery** to close the wound and prevent more blood loss, and then she beat her wings forward. She reached the place where she crossed over quickly, not wanting to allow the difference between the two realm's to take hold. The more she stayed in the Ethereal Realm the more time went haywire, and she couldn't allow the General to move too much from the spot where she crossed. She reached the entrance and returned to the Real Realm, straight into the depths of the monster's body.

She moved immediately, getting deeper. Her **|Enhanced Thermoception|** telling her that there were things around her that might've been the organs that generated the sound attack. Finally, she reached what looked like a wide cavern in the light cast by her fire. The General was a strange monster, it didn't have anything really resembling normal anatomy inside, but it did have an open space resembling a stomach inside. Perhaps it had more abilities that it didn't use, or perhaps this place was used for something else, it didn't matter. Nayra used her **Valkyrie's Stamina**, recovering it to its full state in a single moment. Then she burned the rest of her boosting perks and activated her aura.

Nayra landed on the floor with **Valkyrie's Descent**, burrowing her spear deep into the General's flesh, the heat of it sizzled the wound immediately and her immolation and avatar burned the flesh all around her further. Then, she released the technique that had been charging since she started the dive.

The fully charged **{Mist of the Scorching End}** billowed out of her, in less than a second it filled the area completely. The sound and the stench of burning flesh filled her senses. She heard a roar of agony coming down from the opening above her. Then, her entire world went sideways, and she clung to Er'ishi Resav to stay upright. Everything was rolling, and she realized that the General was thrashing about, and heaving, trying to get her and the mist out. She could see that her attack was working, it was burning it from the inside, but not fast enough. She wasn't strong enough to finish it in an instant, this was going to take time.

She felt strong, stronger than she had ever been. She knew that Reyla, Emrys, and the soldiers on the outside were fighting the General too. They had to be doing damage on it from the outside, and together she knew that they could take it down.

Then, the wall of the monster's stomach parted beneath her and three tendrils burst in through, sizzling as they were burned by the mist filling the stomach. Nayra was so taken aback that she failed to act fast enough. One of the tendrils grabbed her and pulled her down, smashing her against the side of the stomach. Her head was ringing as it pulled her toward the gash where it had come from, and she realized that the General had punched through its own body from the outside to get to her. The realization that she was hurting her emboldened her and she summoned her spear back and stabbed the tendril, pinning it to the wall of the stomach. She pulled her storage ring off her finger with her mouth as she stored everything in it and then slid the ring on a small hook at the end of her spear. Then the other two tendrils went after her and she turned into her **Scorching Mist Form**. The tendrils passed through her, hurting her some but not enough. She moved, as the heat around them increased with her perk. The mist was leaking upward through the opening as the technique reached its end, but it couldn't dissipate that fast with the fact that it was mostly in a closed area.

The thrashing returned, and even in her mist form she could sense everything rolling around. More tendrils punched through the stomach walls, opening more holes for the steam to escape through and she knew that it wasn't going to be enough. Despite the realization, she still felt inspired,

strong, as if something was pushing her to do more, to be better. She couldn't explain it, as she had never felt anything like it before.

Then, the tendrils started lashing at everything inside the mist, hitting her on accident. Her mist form gave her resistance to physical attacks, but there were limits to everything. She felt her form being dissipated, she felt it slipping as the monster thrashed in a panic, trying to kill her before she could kill it.

And then something changed. She felt it inside of her, something had happened. She didn't know what it was, but she could sense something new inside of her. And so, she reached for it, and a moment later it answered and she knew.

### *—Fragment of Dawn—*

The mist changed color, and the monster's inside caught on fire. It burst into flames that devoured the tendrils in seconds, turning them to ash. The stomach walls burned away, twisting and churning as they were evaporated, leaving only bones that quickly turned to darkened and cracked pieces of crumbling dust. She felt the monster fall and still, and then the mist escaped through the holes in the monster's body, and Nayra could see outside of it.

Her mist form condensed into her body, and she looked around and then limped over to Er'ishi Resav. She grabbed her ring and pulled her armor back on.

**“We did it,”** he told her.

**“Yes,”** Nayra said slowly. Feeling more tired than she had ever felt before. She removed the filters on her HUD that she kept on in battles and looked at two notifications that she had.

The Daughter of Dawn	Reach at least a combined power level of nine tiers. And embody an ideal.	+1200 to intelligence and wisdom stats, +5% to all stats, Fragment of
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		Dawn, 100 000 Greater Essence
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Bane of Hastur	Kill a General of Hastur.	+100 to all stats, +1% to all stats, Hastur's Bane (Perk), 500 Celestial Essence
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Fragment of Dawn (Title Perk)	Once per three months, for one minute, all your heat and light related powers have their effectiveness increased by 30x, burning all in your way.
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Hastur's Bane (Unique Perk)	You've proven yourself against the hordes of Hastur, all your powers are now 10% more effective against any 11th Dome monsters.
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She had gained an Ideal, something that Ryun had told her about. But... she hadn't done anything that he had. Quickly she realized that this was not her own ideal, and while a part of her was excited, another was disappointed. This ideal came from the people watching her fight a General of the Dome monsters from the Wall. The soldiers and her siblings, all loyal to her family. They had believed so much, had been inspired by what they had seen, and they had given her this gift. But even its name told her what it was that they believed. **The Daughter of Dawn**, that was how they saw her, the daughter of Karya Ornn.

She pushed that out of her mind, nothing that she did could change things now. She made her way through the gaping wounds burned in the General's side and climbed out of the corpse. Once outside, she looked around and saw the taken and the rest of the Dome monsters retreating.

She glanced back toward the Wall and saw people standing on top of them in the distance, a flying shape heading her way.

Reyla dropped down on the corpse next to her, looking at her as if she had seen her for the first time in her life. Nayra opened her mouth to say something, but her mind betrayed her, and everything turned sideways. The last thing she remembered before falling asleep was her sister grabbing her in her arms.