

## Interlude – Nayra I

“You should get ready, the monsters have found us.”

Nayra heard the Sect Head say and blinked. Somehow she had managed to forget why they were even out here. She raised her spear and buckler and looked around. She was, frankly grateful for the interruption of the conversation. *Am I attractive or not?* She wished she could’ve just dropped into the ground. Especially since she did it in front of Reyla, who couldn’t help but berate her with their link. It was enough that she already felt inferior to her sister, she didn’t need to have Reyla see her make a fool out of herself.

“*Be ready!*” Her sister’s voice sounded in her head.

*I’m ready!* Nayra said in her mind, but didn’t respond to her sister. Didn’t want to give her the satisfaction. It wasn’t like they hadn’t had the exact same training, Nayra knew what to do when dealing with monsters.

Her **|Heat Sense|** told her the direction the monsters were coming from and she turned to meet them. Reyla stepped up next to her, her eyes focused in the same direction. Behind them, the Sect Head stood quietly and watched without eyes. He unnerved her, but also fascinated her. She remembered seeing him fight against the Black Viper Sect warriors, seeing him decimate a small army. He had the power like what she dreamed about one day having.

The monsters appeared from among the trees, charging at them. With the ease of lifelong training, she removed the filter on the Framework’s notification and saw their names and power.

<p><b>Rock Bear (LVL 75 - Mid Foundation)</b></p>
-------------------------------------------------------

It wasn’t a really high level, although it was strong. The problem was its rarity, it meant that this type of a monster could have special powers. But she was familiar with its type, and knew its strengths and weaknesses. Rock type monsters usually had passive powers that made their skin harder to pierce. And from what she could see these two bears fit full into their category.

Immediately, she felt Reyla use the base technique of their path, **{Flow}**, which let her move with greater fluidity, made their movements flow from one to the other. Nayra instead used the branch technique, **{Haste}**. Reyla was a good commander and fighter, she was better than Nayra in many ways. Especially when fighting other people. But Nayra had spent a lot of her free time studying monsters and best ways to fight them. Her branch technique gave her a boost of 40% to total speed, and when fighting big and slow monsters that had stone for skin. Moving perfectly might be more important against people, but what did that technique matter against monsters?

The two bears were large, their shoulder at the same height as Nayra's head, and they were charging fast, scoring the earth with their big claws. Their skin was covered with large plates of stone that were covered in moss, and some sparse fur between them. Reyla dashed to the side, but Nayra waited for the monsters to come closer. Both of the monsters were now charging at Nayra as Reyla tried to flank them. *Always going for the tactical advantage*—Nayra thought. Her sister thought things through too much sometimes. It made her a good commander and leader, but there was something to be said for just being aggressive and unpredictable. Nayra dashed forward toward the two charging monsters. She activated **[Mirage Double]** and a red form, looking like a scaled up and spectral version of her superimposed itself over her and stabbed forward with the spear in its hand.

Nayra then activated **[Haze Burst]** and dodged to the side. The bear on the right roared and rose up, then threw itself forward clawing through the illusion. Nayra stabbed her spear into its side as it tried to understand why it hit only air. Her spear stabbed between the plates and into its flesh. The bear roared, and the second one tried to get around it and get to her. But Nayra dashed away and kept the first bear in between them at all times. Her speed with **{Haste}** was great enough that she didn't have issues.

She saw Reyla engage the second bear from behind, and then the two bears split their focus, one for each of them.

Nayra danced away as the bear tried to swipe its claws at her head. And noticed the Sect Head walking around them, in between the fight. It was such an insane thing, that she almost got hit by the monster. She raised her shield,

using **[Greater Block]** her buckler shone with white light and a translucent copy of it appeared over it, only slightly larger. The bear's claw struck her shield, its strength considerable, but her buckler stopped the attack. Even if she was thrown slightly to the side. She stumbled, but recovered quickly.

She tried to ignore the insane Sect Head walking in between them, but she saw Reyla's bear try to hit him. He just jumped into the air and landed on a dark spot, that looked almost like a cube, that she was sure wasn't there just a moment ago. Her bear tried roared again, and Nayra dodged again, then **[Swipe]** scoured a gash on the bear's shoulder.

She saw Reyla using her **[Immolation]** and shook her head. It was a waste of stamina, the heat wouldn't hurt these monsters that much, and it was a constant drain. Reyla was too used fighting people against whom that would work. Nayra looked at her bear, saw it bleeding profusely from the gash in its side and the stab wound she made earlier. Her **Thousand Cuts** perk preventing the wounds from clotting and making them bleed more. For a perk that she never wanted to take, it ended up being useful, she could admit. But she still wished that she didn't need to follow the path her family laid out for her. They were following a build of a spear wielding Class that wasn't anything like the Class that they had gained. Of course, their Class was unique, a reward they won. There was no build for it. But their parents and tutors had made them follow the build of other powerful spear based builds that were proven. It meant that she couldn't choose any unique perk her Class provided her unless the tutors approved of it.

The bear attacked again, and she evaded once more. It was dead, she could just dance around it and it would bleed out eventually. It was not a powerful monster, she didn't really know if really was a good show of their power. Not that it mattered much to Nayra. It was Reyla who wanted to do everything in her power to get in the Sect Head's good graces.

Him wanting to know more about Classers was just a way in. Nayra decided to end the fight quickly. She dashed in, close to the bear, knowing that her combat ability would come from cooldown. As soon as she was in its range, she activated **[Mirage Double]** again, and then dodge to the side as her mirage attacked and confused the bear.

Then, she activated **Goddess of Speed** perk, her dexterity doubling. Her speed didn't technically increase, but her precision, her reactions, the speed at which she could get to her top speed did. She stabbed forward between the plate and into its neck twice in quick succession. One of her stabs severed its spine, and it fell to the ground, dead.

Nayra turned around, and saw that Reyla had dealt with her monster as well. She gained some Essence from the kill, a small amount. She looked at her Essence, seeing how much she had. She could level, but she had been taught from a young age to never do that. That she should always have Essence in reserve and level when she had extra, and do it in bursts of 5 at the minimum. It was because you could never know what might happen, what opportunities you might get that require Essence.

She had never liked that rule, but she had always followed the rules. And she had fallen behind her sister. Reyla smiled at her, from across the corpse of the bear monster.

"*Good job,*" Reyla said. Nayra suppressed the desire to lash out. But she could see just how condescending her sister was, how much she believed she was superior than her. Even though Nayra knew that she was better in some things than her. Fighting monsters wasn't like fighting other people, and Reyla made mistakes when fighting them. But of course, Reyla would never accept Nayra's advice. Nayra was the loser sister, the incompetent one. But Nayra had decided to make an effort to mend their relationship, and she was trying. She sighed and smiled back at her sister.

"That was an interesting display," a voice from above said and Nayra looked up.

She had almost forgotten that he was there. The Sect Head of the newly formed Twilight Melody Sect, Ryun Nacht. He was sitting in the air, on top of what she could now identify as some kind of object that drew in even light itself.

"*It has to be a Qi construct of some kind,*" Reyla's voice spoke in her head.

Nayra agreed. The man's style was still unknown to them, even after seeing him decimate an entire warrior group. It was a destructive power, but he had to have more techniques than just that. She didn't know what to make

of the man, but she couldn't deny that he intrigued her. And made her uncomfortable, she said things that she didn't intend to when she was around him. But there was something about him that was wild and unbound. She doubted that he had to follow any rules that he didn't want to. And he was close to her age, a Ranker from the Seventh Iteration. She almost couldn't believe it, but she didn't know why anyone would lie about something like that.

She couldn't wrap her head around someone getting so strong in such a short period of time. He was... what she wanted to be. To be free of obligations and rules, and to just follow her own path. She would've loved nothing more than to be able to spend all her days hunting monsters.

"Did you get to see what you were looking for?" Nayra asked.

*"Please, try not to flirt with him again,"* Reyla told her mentally.

Nayra rolled her eyes. It wasn't like it was hurting anybody, and she could admit that she did find him attractive. If only he had eyes. But even the lack of them made him striking. He was willing to sacrifice his vision in order to gain more power, she didn't know if she would be able to do the same.

"You fight very well, practiced movements. You were trained?" Ryun asked as he dropped from his sitting spot. His body actually slowing down as it got closer to the ground and then landing gently without making any sound.

Nayra wondered if that was a perk or an ability. She couldn't put her finger on him exactly, his build seemed so lackluster, and yet his power couldn't be denied. Compared to her who had everything planned out for her and still didn't feel powerful.

"Yes, our Guild has good tutors," Reyla answered before Nayra could.

It was almost as if she didn't trust her to answer, as if she was going to betray something if she opened her mouth. Nayra wasn't even sure if they should continue their plan. This man was from the Seventh Iteration, and he led a sect that didn't have anyone from the First or the Second. He wasn't their enemy, they shouldn't have any plans for him and his sect. Fighting against others who served those who started the war was one thing, but someone unrelated? It didn't sit well with Nyara.

But Reyla wanted to get back into the good graces of the Order, and she was prepared to do anything to do it. Nayra knew that there were things that

Reyla didn't share with the Order about this sect, that she was waiting trying to get something that would give them influence. Perhaps she wanted to turn Ryun to their side, but Nayra wasn't comfortable with it. This wasn't his conflict, and dragging him in wasn't right.

"Well," Ryun tilted his head. It made her shiver, the fact that he wasn't facing either of them but could *see* them. "You tutors had done well. I am always surprised by the Classers way of using abilities, I can't sense them attempting to do it until they start using it. It is annoying to say the least."

Nayra saw the corner of his mouth rise into a small smile.

"So, now that we've shown you ours, maybe you could show us yours?" Nayra couldn't help herself.

*"Nayra! I told you to stop! We don't want to offend him,"* Reyla thundered in her mind.

It was like she hadn't figured out by now that Ryun was nothing like what they've been taught a Cultivator was. That he was unlike anyone else in a position of power that they had ever met. Nayra could see that he wasn't easily offended.

Ryun laughed. "I think that we can arrange for something like that," he turned his head to face her. It made her shiver, knowing that he didn't need to do that in order to see her. And the way he said it made it clear that he was playing along with the double meaning. Nayra wondered if he would be interested in—She shook her head, not letting her mind take her deeper into that particular direction.

"There are a couple more of those bears, higher up in the mountains. Let us see if I can show you mine," he said then started walking.

*"Up in the mountains? If he can sense monsters so far away then he has to have an incredible range of his power,"* Reyla told her through their link.

Nayra agreed. They still didn't know what exactly he was using to sense things around himself, but it was most likely a skill. The issue was that they didn't know what it did. Was he listening with his ears? Or detecting something else?

But he had just shown them that he was very powerful indeed.

They walked in silence, following behind him, until finally he stopped. A roar came from up ahead, and then a bear charged out from behind the trees.

**Greater Rock Bear (LVL 120 -  
Peak Foundation)**

Nayra looked at the monster in surprise, this one was much more powerful, and she realized that the other two had to be cubs. Because this one was almost three times their size. Its skin was all stone, without any room between the plates. It was an armored monstrosity.

*“Pull back!”* Reyla sent her, but Nayra was frozen.

Ryun was walking toward it as if he wasn't even worried. She could see a faint sheen over his skin, and then he disappeared. She blinked and saw him standing next to the charging monster, his hand on its neck. The next moment he pushed it into the ground, shaking everything and cracking the plate on its neck.

The monster growled and whined, trying to move, but his strength was so much greater than its. He reached with his other hand twisted the monster's head to the side and up so that it looked at his face. Then with both hands on its snout he pried it free and opened his mouth.

A plume of violet and black Qi exploded out of it and into that of the monster. The bear started thrashing, the stone over its chest disintegrating from the inside and flashes of Qi bursting out. It stilled and then died.

Ryun dropped the head to the ground and turned to face Nayra.

“So, I hope that mine... satisfies,” his lips quirked up, and Nayra swallowed her response.

A while later, she sat in her room. The events of the day still shaking her up. Reyla spent the entire trip back telling her that they needed to learn all that they could about the new Sect Head, even suggesting that Nayra tried to get closer to him since he seemed receptive.

But Nayra couldn't get the image of him killing that powerful monster out of her head. It was as if it was nothing to him. She wanted that kind of power, and to be free to use it however she wished.

She glanced at her Essence, at her Class. She was level 85, but she had enough Essence to level to the level 90, she would be left without Essence after but she could do it. All her life she had tried to obey the rules that her family made, to be a good daughter and sister. Even when she didn't feel like it was the right path for her. But seeing him... It made her want to try something on her own.

Reyla would kill her if she knew that she planned on doing this, that she planned to do something against the plan, against what she was taught. But she couldn't bear it anymore. Couldn't bear to be the other sister, the one that was a failure, who was in Reyla's shadow. Nayra knew that as long as she followed the same build as her sister, she would always be second best, always be compared to her. And she no longer wanted that.

She took a deep breath and put her Essence into her Class, then leveled.