

PRESENT – Nayra
Light

Nayra stood above the body of the dead Twilight Melody warrior. He was young, or at least he looked that way to her. In truth, he was close to her in age. Human, and only in the Mid Foundation Realm, and just over level 30. Nayra knew him, as she knew almost every warrior in the sect, which meant that she only remembered his face. He had attended one of her spear training sessions. She had tried to have everyone attend at least one, and then she spent more time training the squad and team leaders, so that they could teach their people.

She hadn't even known his name, until his squad told her. He had been killed by a monster, it had skewered him through the heart and destroyed it. He didn't have nearly high enough vitality to survive something like that, and not even a potion could've helped him.

She raised her eyes and saw a pale ball, only just barely discernible to her eyes. Her attunement—Shepard for the Souls—allowed her to see souls, or at least those that were in the Ethereal. She hadn't known that part, at least not until Ryun revealed that Daria had been spying on her. Nayra didn't know if what her sister did made her soul leave her body or if it was something else, but regardless, Nayra's power only worked on the souls of the deceased.

Seeing the pale ball meant that the dead warrior—Tio—was still near his body. She glanced at the people around her and spoke.

"I'll make sure that he reaches the afterlife," Nayra said.

His squad looked at her with grief in their eyes, and then nodded. She took a deep breath and stepped closer to the body. Then she activated her **[Ethereal Cross]**.

The world around her twisted, for a moment she felt as if she was spinning and then she was someplace else. The world around her was still a forest, but one much different than the one in the real world. Everything was tinted in gray and green, looking as if it was all covered in a faint mist. The immediate area around her was the same, the grass and the stone that stood on the ground next to the body. There was no body here now, of course, but

instead a young man stood there, his eyes looking around fearfully at the strange landscape. Everything beyond just a few steps around them was different. There was no grass, only flat dirt that was cracked. The trees were bare and their branches twisted upwards pointing toward the sky. Everything was so depressing.

“Tio,” Nayra said.

The man turned around, startled. Then a moment after he recognized her and bowed his head.

“Sect Leader!” He greeted, his voice filled with relief. He looked as if he was insubstantial, as if his body was see through, even though she couldn’t really see through it. He was pale, and wore a simple white robe that his body hadn’t.

“I’m glad that you are okay, and that you waited,” Nayra said, awkwardly. She didn’t know what to say to the man, what she even could say? He was dead.

“How are you feeling?” She asked at last.

“I... I don’t feel anything,” he said slowly, his eyes blinking rapidly. “I can’t use my powers.”

Nayra nodded her head. She heard his confusion, which was only natural. But he seemed to be aware that he was dead.

“Do you want to make a contract?” Nayra asked. Almost every warrior had agreed to do it, but that was before.

Tio blinked at her, and then nodded his head rapidly. “Yes, Sect Leader. I... I don’t know if I can reach it,” he turned to look in the distance. Nayra followed his gaze, but saw nothing.

Not that she could see it, only the soul could see where the entrance to the afterlife was. It was not meant for her.

Nayra walked over to him and extended her hand. Tio reached over and took her hand. It felt cold, but she could touch him. She activated her perk, **Ferry the Soul** and felt a contract with him form. “Lead the way, we shouldn’t stay here more than necessary.”

“Right,” he nodded his head, trying to sound brave, but she could hear his fear.

They started to walk in a direction, heading toward a large mountain that seemed to pierce the sky. Nayra had her armor on, and her awakened spear and shield already out and ready. She looked around for any signs of danger, but there was little to see other than eerie trees that surrounded them. She knew that it was unlikely that they would encounter danger, souls were meant to reach the afterlife, as far as she knew. But there had to be exceptions. The Ethereal Realm was a dangerous place, but it was also infinite in a greater sense than the real world. It was every changing, filled with things that didn't really make sense. She had read some of the accounts of people who had explored it. Not nearly as much as she wished she had read, but she had been young, and wasn't supposed to gain an ability to enter the Ethereal Realm for a long while.

Her training regarding it was lacking, she did understand that. But she also wanted to make her own path. Figure out things on her own, achieve something for herself.

"What does it look like?" Nayra asked after a while.

Tio glanced back at her, looking almost as if he had forgotten that she was there. Then he turned to look back ahead of them. "It is a pillar of light to my eyes. And... it sings, but without a sound. It says that if I can only reach it, all will be well."

Nayra looked at the bleak sky, trying to imagine what it was that he was seeing. No one knew much about the afterlife, it was... a mystery to everyone, but something that they all knew about. The only reason they did know was because of perks similar to hers. Those that told them that it existed, the only way to reach it was to die. To lose your tether to the real world. Death in the Infinite Realm wasn't the end, but it was something to be feared nevertheless. Because it was an unknown, something that they could never find and never know without first losing their life.

As they walked, Nayra wondered what purpose denying the dead their power had. A soul without any of its perks, abilities, techniques, and skills could scarcely protect itself if it encountered something dangerous. Nayra remembered the texts she read as a child describe it as the last pilgrimage. A test for the soul.

"Your friends were sad that you died," Nayra said.

Tio's face fell. "I was stupid, got over confident."

Nayra didn't know what to say. Nothing that she could say could make him feel any better. "Do you want me to carry a message back to someone?"

"Didn't have a family," Tio shrugged. "My friends... tell them that I'm sorry I wasn't better."

Nayra told him that she would do so.

They walked for a long time in silence after that, and eventually Nayra started to feel odd. The mountain in the distance that they were walking towards, didn't seem to grow any bigger. It was as if they weren't even moving. She looked around, trying to see if anything looked familiar, but the terrain and the bare trees all looked the same. She glanced behind them, she could sense the place where she entered the Ethereal Realm, and it didn't seem like it had gotten any farther away from her in a while.

"Do you think that we are getting closer?" Nayra asked.

Tio startled, and looked back at her blankly. He blinked, then tilted his head. "Getting closer?"

"To your doorway," Nayra said slowly.

Understanding slowly seeped into the man, and he nodded. "Right, right, I'm dead... but I... I wanted to see her again."

"See who?" Nayra asked. Tio seemed more... lost. As if he couldn't quite focus.

"Her, she is so beautiful, but I... I am just a lowly warrior in the sect. I mean, what can I offer someone like her?" Tio wondered.

"Tio," Nayra called as he stopped moving.

"I... I should stay. I can get back, can't I? You came here, you can take me back. I have to tell her!" Tio argued, his tone slowly getting louder.

Nayra looked at him for a long moment, not really understanding what was happening to him. Everything around them trembled, almost as if it was responding. The shadows grew darker. The area around them flowed as if it was about to change into something else.

Nayra stepped closer, caught his shoulder and shook him.

"Tio!" She said firmly, his eyes settled on hers. "You need to calm yourself, you can't stay here."

"Why not?" His eyes narrowed at her and he asked in a whisper.

Nayra tried to remember everything that she had learned in the past, from books that she had only half paid attention to. “If you stay, you will turn into a shade. You will lose who you are,” she told him. She started to realize that the real danger to the souls in the Ethereal Realm weren’t shades and spirits. It was this. The regret, the denial, it was how and why souls stayed in the Ethereal Realm, clinging to something that they could no longer have.

“A shade?” Tio asked, his eyes growing unfocused and trailed away, looking at something behind her.

Nayra shook him, forcing him to look at her. “Yes, a shade. A twisted caricature of who you are! Is that who you want to be?”

“I want to be alive. Take me back?” He pleaded with her.

Nayra closed her eyes, his words were filled with so much emotion, and the Ethereal world around her responded. She could feel his need to stay here, to deny the truth.

“I can’t take you back,” Nayra said. She was too weak, she didn’t have the power to bring someone back from the dead. Perhaps one day, but now... now she could only help him pass to the next life. “And you can’t stay here.”

“I don’t want to be alone,” Tio whispered. “I... need to go back.”

“No, you don’t,” Nayra insisted. “You want to see your friends again, to see her again? Don’t you?”

His eyes fluttered at that, gaining more focus. “I... yes?”

“They you need to go toward that pillar of light, you can go to the afterlife and wait for them. They will join you in time, you won’t be alone forever.”

“They... they will?” Tio asked.

“Yes, eventually,” Nayra added.

Tio looked at her, his eyes boring into hers. Then they closed. “I’m dead,” he sighed.

“I’m sorry,” Nayra said.

“I... remember now. For a while I... it all seemed like a dream,” Tio said, he looked around then down at himself. He touched his chest, and his face fell. “My heart doesn’t beat.”

Nayra didn't know what she could say, she had prepared herself for a fight, to kill spirits and perhaps even shades. But not this. Not to help a soul come to terms with its death. This wasn't what she had expected at all.

"This isn't the end Tio," Nayra told him. "There is something that comes next, something that you will see before any of us back in the real world. I know that it probably isn't any consolation. But you will be there waiting for us all."

Tio's mouth turned up for a moment. "Yes, you are right, Sect Leader."

"Call me Nayra," she said.

"Nayra," Tio said hesitantly, then he shook his head and took a deep breath. "I guess that I should go, then."

"How far away is it?" Nayra asked.

Tio looked behind him and then chuckled. "It is as far away as it needs to be."

Before Nayra could ask any questions, the view in front of her changed. They were suddenly standing in front of an arc bathed in a pillar of light.

"I can see it," Nayra said with words full of wonder. She didn't remember anything about that from the books. It was... marvelous. The light seemed so inviting and warm.

Tio turned around and met her eyes. "Thank you for walking with me, for helping me gather myself. I... I think that I needed the time."

Nayra gave him a sad smile. "I'm sorry that you died," and she truly was.

"Me too, but that doesn't mean that it is the end, right?" He smiled at her. "I owe you a perk, don't I?"

"It is the contract that we made," Nayra said.

Tio extended his hand, and Nayra started to do the same, but then she paused. "Pick something that you won't miss," she told him. There had to be a reason why souls could still see their powers. Shades could use them, perhaps he would have need of them in the afterlife. Nayra didn't want to take something important from him.

He could only give her his class perks, but he didn't have many of them anyway. She hoped that he wouldn't need to part with something important.

He smiled. “Thank you, but my class wasn’t that high level. I don’t think that either of my perks would be that useful to you, they are weak, but I think that one of them would suit you better.”

“Anything that you can offer will be useful,” Nayra said. No matter what he gave her, it would increase her power. She grasped his hand and then a window popped up in front of her.

You’ve gained a new perk.	
Quick Steps (Bonus Perk)	You gain 10% bonus speed when in combat.

She read the simple perk. He was right when he said that it was weak perk. And yet, it would help her, 10% bonus speed meant both her physical speed, and the speed at which her abilities recharged. It would lower her cooldowns by 10%, which might not be that much, but in combat every second mattered.

She looked at him for a long moment. “Thank you.”

“No, thank you Nayra. I think that I might never have arrived here if you hadn’t been with me,” Tio said. “I... I hope that we meet again, but not for a long time.”

“I hope so as well,” Nayra said.

Tio smiled one last time and then turned around. He walked into the light and passed through the arc. In an instant it disappeared, as if it had never been there in the first place.

Nayra sighed, then glanced at her screens to see if the new perk was added.

Name	Nayra Ornn
Race	Human (Infinite Realm)

Titles		
Third Heritage	Was born to the High Rankers of the Third Iteration	+5% to all stats, 500 Greater Essence
Great Feat	Kill a level 15 monster without	Choose a Legendary

	help from someone with Essence before obtaining a Class, Path, or Skill	Class, Path, or Skill. Gain a Unique Perk.
Adventurer	Hunted more than 100 monsters	+5 to all stats, 5 Greater Essence
Hero of Promise	Save more than 10 people with a single action	+5 to all stats, 5 Greater Essence
One Against Many	Fight against more than 10 opponents alone and win	+5 to all stats, 200 Greater Essence
Third Heritage	Was born to the Rankers of the Third Iteration	+5% to all stats, 500 Greater Essence
One Against Horde	Fight against more than 100 opponents alone and win	+10 to all stats, 1000 Greater Essence
Class Evolution II	Evolved your class for the third time.	+15 to all stats, 20 000 Greater Essence (all evolutions total)

Perks	
Twin Link (Unique Perk)	Your mind is linked with that of your twin, allowing you to speak to one another regardless of distance.

Valkyrie's Descent (Class Perk)	Once per combat, jump high into the air and then descend toward targeted area and stab your weapon into the ground, releasing a shockwave around you. Strength of effect depends on strength stat.
Flame Resistance (Class Perk)	Your body is resistant to fire. 20% passive fire resistance, gain additional 1% fire resistance for every fifteen points of endurance. (current 32.8%)
Goddess of Speed (Class Perk)	Once per combat, double your dexterity for two strikes.
Body of the Wolf (Path Perk)	Your body utilizes your endurance more efficiently. Your stamina is counted as if your endurance is doubled. All stamina draining ability costs are reduced by half.
Sharpness (Aspect Perk)	When using techniques, your movements are sharper. Any weapon you hold has its edges sharpened. Gain a passive ten percent piercing bonus to your attacks while any technique is active.
Thousand Cuts (Class Perk)	Every injury you inflict that draws blood heals 20% slower and bleeds for 10% more.
Rapid Recovery (Class Perk)	Once per combat, heal a non-lethal injury. Speed of recovery equals twice your vitality.
Valkyrie's Avatar of Fire (Class Perk)	Transform into an avatar of fire. Doubles your size and doubles your total stats. Every kill you make while in

	<p>this form, grants you double Essence. Lasts until your mental stamina is drained completely or canceled.</p>
Valkyrie's Swiftmess (Class Perk)	<p>Once per combat double your speed for thirty seconds.</p>
Ferry the Soul (Class Perk)	<p>Create a contract with a recently departed soul, carry it to the Ethereal Realm and provide protection until it reaches the afterlife. Fulfillment of the contract will permanently grant you a boon in the form of one of the Soul's perks. The perk gained depends on the soul, as the soul will lose the perk it offers.</p>
Valkyrie's Shout (Class Perk)	<p>Once per combat release a powerful shout that stuns nearby enemies. The effectiveness of the stun depends on your opponent's resistances.</p>
Valkyrie's Stamina (Class Perk)	<p>Once per day recover your stamina to its full capacity.</p>
Valkyrie's Might (Class Perk)	<p>Once per combat double your strength for thirty seconds.</p>
Dawnfire Wings (Class Perk)	<p>Wings made out of dawnfire grow out of your back, allowing you flight. The wings last for a maximum of three hours, and will stay on cooldown for the same amount of time that they have been used.</p>
Dawnfire Blink (Class Perk)	<p>Once per combat, teleport to any place in a twenty meter radius around you. Upon arrival at your destination</p>

	release a blast of Dawnfire that hits everything in a three meter radius.
Valkyrie's Call (Class Perk)	While in the Ethereal Realm, summon any recently departed soul to your location. The soul is not required to answer.
Vaporizing Cuts (Class Perk)	Every attack that draws blood, sends a blast of heat into the wound, vaporizing a tiny portion of your opponent's blood.
Steel Mind (Path Perk)	In combat your mind is additionally focused. Reading your opponent's movements comes easier to you. Effect depends on your intelligence stat.
Strengthened Core (Path Perk)	Your core is strengthened. Increased core capacity by 15%, +10% to Qi speed.
Bursting Qi (Path Perk)	Your Qi conduits are developed for short bursts of Qi. Able to use burst techniques without the need for a breathing form.
Quick Steps (Bonus Perk)	You gain 10% bonus speed when in combat.

Class	Twin Dawnwrought Valkyrie (L)
Level	227
Combat Ability	Dawnfire Mirage
Movement Ability	Shimmering Burst
Movement Ability	Dawn Dash

Support Ability	Dawnfire Immolation
Support Ability	Ethereal Cross

EVOLUTION ATTUNEMENT BONUS:	
Shepard for the Souls	You are able to see souls. All Ethereal based powers are 20% more effective. All special attacks deal 1.5% of total damage dealt as soul damage. Gain +10% to strength and wisdom.
Dawnfire	All fire based powers now create dawnfire, an intense fire that is extremely hard to put out and burns more intensely during the day. All fire based powers are 20% more effective. All special attacks deal 1% of total damage dealt as soul damage. Gain +10% to strength and wisdom.

Cultivation	The Path of the Lotus Dance (C)
Stage	Early Lord
Aspect	Sharpness
Base technique	Sharpened Movements
Branch technique	Hastened Burst
Fruit technique	Curtain of Petals

Passive Skills	Active Skills
Combat Mastery >> Spear and Buckler Mastery (6/10)	Block >> Greater Block (8/10)
Heat Sense >> Greater Heat Sense (2/10)	Swipe >> Greater Swipe (3/10)
Pain Tolerance (9/10)	Throw >> Greater Throw (6/10)

Strength	766
Dexterity	538
Vitality	194
Endurance	193
Intelligence	235
Wisdom	306

She had gotten just a bit stronger, and even though the perk she had gained wasn't the strongest, taking **Ferry the Soul** had already paid off. She had helped someone from the sect, a warrior that had served under her. Just that feeling made it worth it in her eyes. It was something unique that she could offer them. The knowledge that if they died, there was a chance that she could help them. Of course, she couldn't be everywhere at once, but... it was enough.

Helping Tio had felt... beyond satisfying. It was an emotion that she wasn't quite familiar, and she didn't really know what it was. But she felt... proud? Perhaps that was a way to describe it.

She turned around and started walking back, toward the place where she entered into the Ethereal Realm. She barely took several steps before she found herself on the familiar patch of grass. She frowned at it, she was certain that they had walked for hours, and yet...

The Ethereal Realm truly was strange, especially in the wilderness like the area where Tio had died. There were no people here to anchor it, to keep it from changing.

Nayra reached the place where she entered, and used her **[Ethereal Cross]**.

The world twisted again, and the bleakness and the strangeness of the Ethereal Realm seeped away. In an instant she was in the real world. The sun was dim in the sky and she looked around. There was no sign of Tio's body or the other warriors.

"Sect Leader! You are back!" Someone exclaimed behind her.

She turned and saw one of the warriors from a patrol squad. He had a table and a chair set up next to a tree. Two boar mounts, were sleeping next to it.

Nayra sighed, she had known that this could happen. "How long was I in there?"

"Three days, Sect Leader," he answered. "The Sect Head has delayed the departure for the core, waiting for you."

Nayra took a deep breath. "Well, I shouldn't keep them waiting now, should I?"

With that the two of them mounted up and headed back to Consequence. While riding, Nayra looked at her screens and planned, she would need to advance before they left. Reach Mid Lord and then level as much as she could. With the amount of Essence she had, she could reach her fifth evolution with her Class.

Enough to make her balanced according to Tali and hopefully keep her ahead of her sister still. Nayra knew that she should call her, especially now that Ryun had come in conflict with the Orders. And she knew that she was

delaying, but... perhaps it was time. She made a decision and nodded to herself. First advancement, then Reyla. She only hoped that she could convince the family to leave her and the sect alone.