

PRESENT – Reyla
Dinner

Reyla twirled her spear, blocking an arrow flying at her face. The howling apes stood on the hanging bridge above them, that connected the two sides of the canyon's walls. Each side was littered with round cave entrances, and Reyla could hear more of the monsters running to get at them.

"We need to clear them fast!" Emrys yelled as he pointed his staff at one of the bridges above them and incinerated it with a ball of fire.

"I can see that!" Reyla yelled right back at her brother. "Isn't that your job?!"

The moment she took to yell at him nearly cost her an eye. She managed to twist her head out of the way of an arrow. She locked eyes with the monster peeking out of the hole in the wall that had fired the arrow, and she extended her hand back. Then she focused on her skill, and a moment later she snapped forward. She used **|Flaming Spear Throw|**, her spear flew forward at such speed that it ignited. The fire blazed orange for a second and then her attunement kicked in and the fire turned golden. The spear pierced the monster straight through the chest, the fire bursting around it as its fur was consumed and then hit the surrounding monsters catching them on fire too.

"I need a moment!" Emrys yelled back.

"Reyla!" Fifth Antler yelled, his big champion form protecting their front where a dozen monsters were attempting to charge down the bridge they were all standing on.

Reyla glanced at him as she pulled another spear out of her storage. Fifth Antler didn't look at her, instead he raised his two-form shield, two halves attached to each of his two left hands. He brought the two halves together, forming one big tower shield and placed it in front of himself then he activated an ability. A spectral form, identical to his own charged out of him, and bulldozed through monsters, trampling some and throwing others over the side of the wooden bridge. Only then did he turn and speak to her.

"Protect your brother," the skreen ordered, then raised the oversized hammer he carried in his other two hands. "Ven, Gilsa, keep our back clear."

The two drakes conferred among themselves quickly, and then Ven turned back his armored form around just as three larger apes dropped from a bridge above them. He raised his axe and swung. Gilsa gripped her wand tighter as she raised the storm filled orb in her other hand high. A moment later a small cloud flew out of it and then lightning struck the nearby monsters.

Reyla had already reached her brother, and put herself between him as he focused on activating his ability. It had a channeling period, during which he was mostly defenseless. Usually he could use perks to get enough time and shield himself, but he had spent them during the fight with the last boss.

Reyla focused inward and activated **|Inner Strength|**, immediately she felt warmth spread through her as her tired body felt renewed. It wasn't, not really, but she could perform at her peak for a short time.

Arrows flew at them, and she settled into her **Perfect Fire Dance of Dawning Light**. She danced around her brother, her spear whirling around him and batting the arrows away. A monster jumped from the wall, flying straight for Emrys. Reyla pulled her two-handed spear back then swiped as she activated **|Perfect Flaming Crescent|**. Flames burst around her spear and then they turned golden as the tip of her spear made a crescent. She hit the monster, slicing through its torso and setting it on fire and making it fall down into the river at the bottom of the gorge.

“Ready!” Emrys announced and everyone pulled back near him.

Her brother raised his staff, the pure red wood of it gleaming in the light of the sun that shined on them from high above. The carved symbols were glowing like embers, and the eyes of the dragon's head on the top of the staff shined with eerie orange light. Then, Emrys made a circle with his staff and a ring of fire trailed behind it.

For a moment it floated there above them, and then the ring of fire turned into a raging tempest of circling flames. It expanded and flew up, like a cyclone of orange fire it consumed everything above them. The bridges with monsters on them were turned to ash in an instant, the fire reached the walls of the gorge and blasted down the tunnels. The howling and screams of the monsters were engulfed by the roaring of the fire.

And then it was over, the fire winked out, leaving nothing but a rain of ash falling down on them and glowing stone surrounding them.

“Good job Emrys,” Fifth Antler said, his black chitin was marred with claw marks in a few places, but his torso was protected by a layer of thin armor. Skreen only rarely wore armor, as the curve on which their chitin got stronger with stats was higher than for other races. Drakes and krecean were close behind, with the other races that only had soft skin being on the bottom.

They didn’t pause for long, instead they headed down the bridge, reaching a large circular platform nestled in the side of the gorge. A large cavern that was opened on one side stretched in front of them, and an altar stood at the end of it.

As soon as all five of them had stepped off the bridge a loud roar echoed all around them. Then a monster dropped from the opening in the ceiling of the cavern. An ape shaped boss that was at least four times as tall as the regular monsters had been. It wore an ornamental armor with feathers and jewelry adorning it, and in its hands it had a large club that had pieces of black glass—obsidian—pushed through the middle. The sharp edges of the obsidian pieces gleamed in the light of the torches that were placed all around the cavern.

Tribal Chief (Tier 9)

Reyla’s |**Enhanced Appraisal**| gave her a sense of its power, as well as its focus.

“It is strength focused, few abilities, mostly stats,” she whispered.

“Alright,” Fifth Antler said. “You all know what to do.”

They assumed the formation, Fifth Antler in front with Reyla and Ven flanking him. Emrys and Gilsa stood behind them and prepared their abilities.

Reyla activated her **Spear Trance**, then settled in a low stance, her spear held in both hands in front of her, with its end over her head and the tip pointed to the ground.

A moment later, Fifth Antler yelled. “Charge!”

Reyla stumbled out of the dungeon, wincing as her still healing leg sent a sharp pain running straight through it. The potions that they had were extremely effective, but having her leg crushed did extend the healing process somewhat.

“Cheer up little red, we did it!” Ven grinned as he kept his hand around her and helped her walk.

Reyla glanced at him and narrowed her eyes, annoyed at the nickname, but she was too excited to complain. It wouldn't help anyway, the more she protested about the nickname, the more people seemed to use it. Her eyes passed over her brother, Emrys, who chatted with Gilsa and the Fifth Antler ahead of them. He was just five years older, and obviously just as powerful as she was, yet he didn't have to suffer through such nicknames. True, the main reason for why they called her that was down at the main camp, and had little to do with her personally.

“You are right,” Reyla sighed finally. “We did it.”

“The third one! I couldn't believe it when we won the right. But I guess that having two Ornns in our party did make things slightly unfair,” Ven said.

Reyla rolled her eyes. The right to get the first crack at an uncleared dungeon was won in team battles. And her team had won the right to try and get the title for three of the twelve dungeons. They had gotten all of them, but while the titles were amazing, the real reason why she was excited was that by finishing this dungeon she would finally be allowed to level again. Her mother had a strict plan regarding leveling for both Reyla and Emrys. Neither of them had been allowed to get past level 260, since they had been attempting a dungeon that was at least a tier above them. They had always been encouraged to enter with a disadvantage. It had nearly proven deadly a few months when they had entered a dungeon filled with spirits.

Thankfully, they had prevailed and had earned the right to level to 240. Now, Reyla couldn't wait to see what her next evolution was going to be.

They walked down the mountain and into the valley, aptly named the Valley of Dungeons. There were twelve dungeons around them, each

somewhere in one of the tall mountains around them. Twelve distinct shapes rose to create the valley that was covered in thick jungle and filled with powerful monsters all on its own.

As they walked down the road that had been carved through the jungle only a few weeks ago, they were greeted by patrols who couldn't help themselves but ask how it went. Their questions were followed by cheers and congratulations, both from her team and others, but Reyla was too tired to join in. The only thing that she wanted was to get home and rest.

Finally the walls made out of granite came into her vision, and she pushed herself a bit more. They entered the gates and into a bustling little town. It was hard to imagine that the town hadn't existed a year ago, but now it was a home to several thousand people, and thousands more visitors. It had a bustling market where people sold the stuff looted from the dungeons. A crafter district where the useful materials and loot were refined, and of course, the representatives of the various factions of the Empire who had won the right to use the dungeons.

Many different families were present, as well as organizations such as the Orders. It was a tense situation as everyone tried to maneuver to get more time for their own people. The dungeons were quite rich, and they respawned quickly. And because of that they were greatly sought after. Not to mention the fact that clearing them first would gain the team that did it a lot of power.

Reyla hadn't expected to be able to get more than one of them, but thankfully she had a great and balanced team. She remembered arriving here more than a year ago, being surprised to find that Emrys had been brought as well, training under her mother and her best soldiers. Both she and Emrys had spent three months without even thinking about the dungeons, spending every waking moment in grueling training.

Emrys was the closest in age to her of her siblings, aside from her twin, of course. And they had been closer when they had been very young, but by the time he was old enough to train they had grown apart. He had spent all of his time training for his test, just as Reyla and Nayra had spent all of their time training for theirs.

He had followed in the footsteps of Father Olem, going for a fire caster build. Frankly, having him around had been incredible. They had

reconnected and become quite close. It made Reyla feel guilty, but in many ways she had filled the hole that was left by the rift between her and Nayra.

They walked through the main street and reached the residential area.

“Alright, we’ll see you tomorrow at the debrief, we need to go over everything we did and see what we could’ve done better,” Fifth Antler said.

Everyone nodded at that, and Ven left Reyla’s side as Emrys approached. The three of them had a small room in one of the dorms, while the Reyla and Emrys stayed with their mother, in the town manor.

They said their goodbyes and separated.

Emrys helped Reyla along. “How’s the leg?”

“It’s getting better, it doesn’t send a spike of pain through me every time I take a step, so that is an improvement,” Reyla answered.

Emrys shook his head. “You really should learn when to retreat, you stayed in the melee for too long.”

Reyla grimaced, she knew that he was right. But she had really thought that the monster would react differently than it did. She had her spear piercing its stomach, any person would’ve tried to, at least reflexively, get away. She had forgotten that it was a beast, a monster. It kept coming, and it even though she had done more damage to it, the monster still managed to wreck her leg.

“I knew that my big brother would be there to keep me safe,” Reyla grinned up at him.

Emrys shook his head, making his long blond hair sway around his head. “You are a pest, I should convince mother to send you away somewhere. Perhaps put you on a ship to some unknown parts of the Infinite Realm?”

“She would send you before she sent me,” Reyla chuckled. “She likes me more than you.”

“Pfft,” Emrys snorted. “Only because you are a spear maniac like she is. Refined gentlemen stay away from all that blood,” he grimaced and waved his hand in front of his chest.

Reyla nudged him with her elbow, and he smiled at her.

They reached the large manor that had been their home for more than a year and entered. They had barely stepped foot inside before the servants accosted them.

“Master Emrys! Mistress Reyla! Oh, you are in such a wretched state, I’ll have the staff draw you baths at once! And you must get out of those dirty things,” the head maid, Jikasa, an old-looking demasi woman said with distaste in her voice.

Reyla tried to argue, but the old woman didn’t let her get a word in. Barely a few minutes later, the two of them were separated, disrobed and put into the baths. Reyla sighed in her tub, the warm water making her feel relaxed. She hated to admit it, but the old woman was right—she did need this.

Jikasa had been serving as her mother’s head maid for a long time. Since before Reyla had been born. And she had always looked old. Reyla didn’t know how strong the woman was, but she had to have high vitality since she had barely changed since Reyla was a child. She remembered asking about what level she was once, when she had been very young, and the old woman had just laughed at her question and told her that it was impolite to ask. Now, with her skill she could tell that the woman was strong, or at least high level. But since her class wasn’t combat one, Reyla had trouble telling the exact level of her power. For all she knew the woman was immortal.

Reyla let herself settle into her **|Meditation|** as the servants washed her, rubbing in oils and potions into her muscles. A lot had changed in the last year. She had gotten stronger, but she had also gotten a lot closer to her family. Her mother and fathers, her brother and a few other siblings that came often to confer with mother on family matters. She couldn’t help but feel like everything was going well, and that she missed Nayra.

Again she almost reached out to her with their perk, but she stopped herself. It was the same thing as always that stopped her, pride, hurt, insecurity. She could identify all of the reasons why she didn’t do it, but that didn’t mean that she was strong enough to do anything about it. And the more time passed, the more she felt uncomfortable with reaching out. After all, Nayra hadn’t reached out either.

Finally, her bath came to an end and the servants dried her body with soft towels and then dressed her in a long and loose red dress. Reyla blinked at the attire, then looked at one of the servants.

“Am I going somewhere?” Reyla asked.

The servant girl bowed her head, not looking in her eyes as she answered. “Your mother has requested yours and Master Emrys’ presence at dinner.”

“Ah,” Reyla said simply. She knew that her mother liked to have things be neat and composed, elegant. Even when it was just family present.

As soon as she was dressed, she was escorted out of her rooms and into one of the smaller dining rooms. That meant that tonight only family would be present. Her mother usually had meals set up in the larger dining room when they had guests. And that was more often than Reyla had imagined before she came here. She had set through dozens of dinners with powerful and influential people while staying here.

She entered the room, only to see her brother and mother already there.

Reyla bowed her head. “Mother,” she said, then straightened and smiled.

Karya Ornn’s face was hard, but when she smiled it made it seem inviting and warm. Her golden red hair, almost blond, much lighter than Reyla’s blood red, was pulled up into an elaborate bun on top of her head, with two needles pushed through it that held it up. Her dress was a mirror of Reyla’s, only where Reyla’s was red, hers was orange. Her mother quite enjoyed fashion, and she would often look for new and up and coming designers in the Empire. She was considered something of a trendsetter. With most of the ladies of the Empire rushing to copy any of the new dresses that Karya wore to court. Reyla had to admit that she had gotten interested as well. A year ago, she could’ve never imagined spending hours talking with her mother about anything really, let alone fashion. Now, they spent at least several hours every week lounging in comfortable chairs as models wore new dresses for them to look at. Even here, at the edge of the empire, designers had followed in the hope of getting Karya Ornn to wear one of their new inventions.

It was quite amusing to Karya and Reyla both.

“Come daughter, sit,” her mom said.

Reyla sat across from Emrys, who had a golden goblet in his hand and was in the process of downing its contents.

“Couldn’t have waited for me, huh?” Reyla shot across the table that was filled with all kinds of different foods. There was a wide assortment of meats, and vegetables. All of it was high tiered, the meat coming from the monsters that were at least a tier above Reyla and Emrys’ so that they could gain benefits from eating them. Consuming such meat for several months would give them some bonus stats, and each one helped. The vegetables probably came straight from Ornn Family orchards, which meant that they were worth a fortune and would give them benefits as well.

“Not my fault that you like to be pampered sis. Some of us don’t like to have a dozen servants rubbing them all over,” Emrys shot back.

Reyla narrowed her eyes at him. She knew fairly well that he did in fact enjoy all the things he had accused her off. She opened her mouth to tell him off, when her mom spoke.

“Children, please. Can you not bicker every time?” Karya Ornn asked.

Reyla looked at her shamefaced, and noticed Emrys do the same. “Sorry,” their apology echoed each other’s, and both of them turned to glare at one another at the same time.

“Tonight,” their mom said, bringing their attention back to her. “Is a special occasion.”

“A special occasion?” Emrys asked, but both of them knew what their mother was talking about.

Reyla took in a short breath, but kept quiet, waiting for her mother to answer.

“Yes, it is time,” Karya said. “You have cleared the dungeon, and we can’t risk you staying imbalanced for much longer.”

Karya raised her hand and two servants entered, each carrying a small box that they placed in front of Emrys and Reyla. They hesitated, but once their mom gestured both of them opened their box quickly.

Reyla looked down at the fruit sitting on a velvet pillow, the glowing inside of the box lined with formations barely catching her eye. The fruit looked simple, it was round, and the half the size of her palm. Green with one blue line around the middle.

“This is..?” Reyla glanced at her mother.

“It is, the fruit of expunging,” Karya nodded. “You need to understand just how big of an honor this is. It takes your father one hundred years to grow just six of these. We do not give them to others lightly. But being our children has its benefits.”

Reyla nodded gravely at her mother’s warm smile. She did understand just how great of an honor this was. True, her family had always planned to give this to her, and most of her siblings had probably gained one. But it was still unreal to even look at it. If she ate the fruit, it would erase one of her focuses. And today she would use it to remove her cultivation. True, she would lose all the Essence that she had used on it, but that was a small price to pay for her being able to focus more deeply on her skills.

The only reason why she had been instructed to take her Path was to help her in the early stages, to give her quick power and give her achievements that would improve her Class. But it was no longer necessary, after today she would level again, and the power tiers that she would lose wouldn’t matter.

“Go ahead,” Karya urged with a proud smile on her face. “Eat up!”

Reyla reached for the fruit and then stopped as a voice sounded inside her head.

“Reyla? Are you there?”

For a moment every part of her froze. Her mother noticed and spoke up.

“Reyla? What’s wrong?” Karya Ornn asked, concerned.

Reyla blinked and turned to look at her mother. “Uh... Nayra just spoke to me.”

She heard the intake of breath from Emrys and saw her mother’s expression change, become more guarded. But for a moment, Reyla could’ve sworn that she saw a pained expression on her face.

“Well, it was time. So, what is she saying?” Her mom asked.

Reyla focused inward, she put her fears and shock aside, then took a deep breath and answered her sister.