

## THREE YEARS AGO

Reyla walked on top of the wall. It was a great honor being here, standing on top of these walls, protecting the heart of the Empire. It was something that she dreamed of when she was young. That one day she would become strong enough that she could be given enough trust to protect places like these. And now she was here, and all that she could feel was... resentment. She knew that it was wrong of her, that she shouldn't feel this way, but she couldn't help it. She wasn't here because she earned it, she was here to support someone else. A footnote in someone else's story.

She glanced ahead at one of the command centers on a wider section of the wall. Her sister stood there, others looking up at her, waiting on her word and commands. She had an ideal now, she had power. All that Reyla had ever wanted.

She turned her eyes away and looked over the walls, at the desert beyond the shield protecting the city. There were no monsters coming, only the mountains of the dead ones that came before. She saw torch lights moving around, harvesting the monsters that had been piled up there for years.

The atmosphere on the wall was... relaxed. People had hope for the first time in years. The wall hadn't been attacked in six months. She heard the whispers, the rumors, people believing that it was all over. Reyla knew that a team was sent to try and kill the Dome Leader a few weeks before the attacks stopped. She also knew that the Empire's leaders were nervous. She had overheard that the team was yet to report back. She had seen the worry on her parents faces, and it wasn't hard to figure out that Erik had been the one to go.

Their family had been tasked with protecting a piece of the wall on their western border, but the Emperor had called her mother to the city only a few days ago. Only a few family members had accompanied her, while the rest remained back home.

Reyla saw Nayra talking with the few of the royal guards, gesturing and sending them away. Reyla envied her that, and resented the fact that Nayra

didn't even care for it. She acted as if it bothered her. The trust that their mother had given her, that the Emperor had given her. To be in command of the wall protecting the heart of the Empire, even if only during the night, it was a grand honor.

Perhaps it was the fact that Reyla had done everything right. That she had stayed and taken the punishment meant for her. That she had been thrown out of the Order, that she had lost respect and hurt the family, by doing what she had always been taught to do. While her sister disobeyed, and gained everything that Reyla had ever wanted.

Nayra walked over the edge of the wall, and leaned on the parapet, her blood red armor reflecting the light of the gemstones around her. A masterwork armor, a gift for what she had done in battle. As if such a thing should be given so lightly. Reyla shook her head, she was being petty. Her sister had earned it, had done... Had done more than Reyla ever could.

Reyla had seen the guides and instructors gushing over what Nayra could achieve. She had seen the projections. In the right circumstances, Nayra could touch the levels of their mother, of the greatest in the Empire. Hold the same power as they did. That was... And with the new perk that they had her take from the dead, she could even survive holding that much power.

They called Nayra the Daughter of Dawn now, the name of her ideal, and seeing her twitch every time they gave her honors made Reyla want to scream. As if gaining power that few ever managed to gain was something bothersome.

On the other hand... Power meant that Nayra could do whatever she wanted to, act however she wished to act.

Her words still echoed in Reyla's head every time she went to sleep. Every time she tried to do something, to show her family that she too could live up to the family name.

### **Who do you want to be?**

Reyla feared the answer. She hesitated for a moment, but then she walked over to her sister. As always, just seeing her armor up close made her filled with envy. Red plates covered her upper torso and back, and black

chain mail peeked from beneath, the dress hanging from her waist was a mix of long bent plates, hide strips, and chain link. One arm was fully armored in plate, with a tall shoulder guard, while the other was almost bare.

It was an armor that the family had given her from their vaults, worn previously by some of the old House Ornn family members.

She turned her head away, looking in the same direction as Nayra did.

“Do you think that it is over?” Reyla asked.

Nayra turned her head, and Reyla felt her gaze.

“No,” Nayra answered.

“They haven’t attacked in months,” Reyla added. She knew that Nayra had more information, she had been spending more time with their parents, taking the role that Reyla had always dreamed of having.

“They are still out there, I know it,” Nayra said.

Reyla didn’t say anything after. A part of her was relieved that there hadn’t been any more attacks. She didn’t like the fighting, seeing people around her dying. So many had lost their lives, people that she had known growing up. And she couldn’t do anything to prevent it, she wasn’t strong enough to stop the monsters, not like how Nayra was.

“This waiting... Everyone on edge, it reminds me of back when we first joined the Order, do you remember?” Reyla said, then turned her eyes to meet Nayra’s.

Nayra tilted her head golden eyes narrowed. She had advanced her Cultivation, gained new eyes. They had no pupil, but were just orbs surrounded by white. Hers changed color, at night they were golden, and as the sun grew brighter they started to glow until they had an orange gleam to them. They were just one more thing that separated them now.

“Our first mission?” Nayra asked.

Reyla nodded. “We were stuck on a hill, watching a town of a small Frontier Kingdom,” Reyla closed her eyes. “And I remember feeling the same as now. Just this overwhelming anticipation, fear that we could be discovered and attacked at any moment.”

“We were children,” Nayra said, not in a bad way. Reyla could almost see a hint of a smile on her face.

“Do you remember how close we were back then? Not even half a day could pass without us speaking with one another,” Reyla reminisced.

“We were children,” Nayra repeated, and it was an answer that told her what Nayra thought about the two of them.

Reyla closed her eyes. She missed what they had, and she knew that it was in part her fault that it happened. Neither one of them was without blame.

“I never meant to force you away,” Reyla told her. “I never meant to make you feel like you were less worthy, to make you feel like you had to run away because you weren’t the perfect daughter.”

Nayra laughed. “And look at me now,” she gestured at herself, at the armor she was wearing. “*The Daughter of Dawn*. I tried so hard to escape that and here I am, standing on the walls that protect the Empire.”

Reyla shook her head. “You were always that Nayra, we... I am sorry, I know that it was hard seeing me pull ahead, that it made you resent me, but... What you’ve achieved now is the testament to what I’ve always known.”

Nayra shrugged. “I don’t... I used to resent you, for being better than me. For being the golden child, for our superiors and trainers at the Tower taking me aside and pointing at you, telling me that I should be more like you. And it only grew, because no matter how much I tried I was never able to catch up. And they never let me do more, and I felt like I had to do something big, to prove myself. That is why I started making mistakes,” she chuckled to herself. “Why I messed up on that mission, so long ago. It is almost enough to make you think about fate, the fact that I ended up in the sect of the other Seventh Iteration Ranker, that both of them came here.”

Reyla saw Nayra’s smile turn sad. “I resented you even more after that, when I decided to stay. I resented you and the family and the Empire because the moment I was on my own, the moment I had the opportunity to grab for more power, I succeeded. True, the sect helped me, Ryun helped me. But in the end, I burned my way through a monster swarm, I survived where too many others died. And it all made me think about how everyone here was...stifling me, preventing me from gaining strength because they wanted to mold me into what they wanted me to be. I have no doubt that what they had envisioned would’ve been powerful, but it wouldn’t have been mine. I would’ve been like you,” Nayra met Reyla’s eyes. “The perfect daughter,

following the instructions of others and letting them choose who I am supposed to be. And you, I resented you for... for staying with the family, for being weak when you could've been strong. But time is a healer of all wounds, it seems. I don't resent you anymore Reyla, I understand, in part at least. Duty, loyalty. I am here after all, even when I could leave whenever I wanted."

Nayra turned around and looked at the city. "These people here are... they oh so weak, many of them. I can protect them, I have that power. I... it is what Anrosh would've done, what Ryun does, though... he is not a good man. He protects what is his, and perhaps that is enough. A good man might've died long ago. The Empire is not my home, House Ornn is not my family, but I stay because I know that I can do good here. Because they need me, and because this here will let my home be safe."

Reyla glanced in the same direction that Nayra was looking at, seeing the city filled with light, and the citadel at the center of it all. A towering structure that was the symbol of the Empire, made out of yellow and brown stone, adorned with plates of gold that reflected the light of the city. It shone, the beacon in the night, the symbol of perseverance, a monument to the people that survived in the desert, people that endured.

She glanced at her sister and saw her people reflected in her face, in her eyes. Nayra didn't see it, she didn't understand. No matter what she said, the Empire and House Ornn were her people. She was the blood of survivors, and she inspired them. Reyla wanted to tell her all of that, but could find a way to get the words past her lips.

How could she tell her? It was so hard after so long, they've become strangers to one another. How could she say that she loved how she stood on her own? How could she tell her that she admired that she didn't bow to anyone, that she was willing to fight against great odds? How she didn't stop, and kept fighting on.

She wanted to say that and so many different things. She wished that she was li—

The ground shook, and night turned into day.

Reyla turned her eyes back at the city and saw rising clouds of red fire. Entire sections of the city blown up. A piece of the citadel exploded outward

showering the city with debris. And then the great barrier surrounding the city fell.

Sounds of horns filled the air, alarms and calls to arms.

“Oh no,” Nayra whispered, and Reyla turned, saw that her sister wasn’t looking at the city but over the walls.

She followed her sight and didn’t see anything but darkness, and then she realized that the shadows on the ground were moving, a wave crossing the ground and a cloud across the sky.

The dome monsters were back.

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Karya looked out at the city from one of the citadel’s balconies.

The lights were shining brightly, in every imaginable color. It was a sight that inspired, that kept the Empire together. They had endured much, had sacrificed a lot, made deals and compromises where they had no choice. She herself had done things that she wasn’t proud of, but in the end it was all worth it. They had built something that would last. Or at least that was what she had thought before. Now...

She looked at the city, the people living their lives without a care in the world, or at least pretending to. They all knew, just beyond the walls were monsters. Their dead, scourged land and fallen cities. The Wall was now the border of their once great Empire.

And just as they had prepared for the fall, prepared for their final stand, the monsters stopped coming. And somehow, the only thing that she could feel was dread.

“They failed, didn’t they,” Erakael said as he joined her on the balcony, placing his clawed hands on the railing and looking over his city with her.

“We can’t know that,” Karya said, but her words rang hollow. Her son... “The Ethereal is a fickle thing, it could’ve taken them longer even with Anashi’s perks.”

Erakael didn’t answer, he knew how unlikely that was to happen. A few moments later he spoke again. “Our scouts haven’t returned, not through

Ethereal or through the desert. You know as well as I do, this is all just the calm before the storm.”

It was her turn to remain silent.

“I am so tired Karya,” Erakael said. “I never wanted to rule, this... So many years spent trying to build an Empire that could take on the Core. So many years spent in hate.”

“Hate helped us survive,” Karya said. They had needed something to cling to, something to aspire to. And hate was a powerful emotion. She had made them hate, she knew that, but the alternative was worse. She remembered how bad things were, and where they had headed. Anatalien and she had done what they did to save them from a war of madness. They had caused the deaths of many, perhaps too many, but she still believed that it was better than what would’ve happened if they hadn’t killed off those who were truly mad.

“Hate,” Erakael whispered. “It is because of hate that the world is fractured. It is the reason why we hadn’t been able to defeat the forces of this Dome. If the world was united... A fool’s dream.”

“We gotten a reprieve at least. And... we really can’t know for sure. They could’ve succeeded.”

Erakeal gave her a long look. “I know that you worry for your child, that you wish that... No, I am sorry, you are right. We shouldn’t lose hope.”

The ground shook and light filled the sky.

Karya saw parts of the city explode, immediately knew that those were city garrisons, where most of the defenders were resting. Horror gripped her heart. Something deeper shook the citadel, and she saw a part of it explode outward, then... the barrier protecting the city fell.

“Heavens,” Erakael whispered, then his wings unfurled and he was up in the air. A moment after Karya followed.

She looked from the sky, saw the burning, the garrisons, the hangars with their airships—only a few of those were currently in the air, their defense was crippled. They flew, heading toward one of the explosions while horns sounded and alarms were being raised. The defenders, those that had been on the streets mustered.

They saw fighting, and Karya realized.

“Taken,” she said as she saw her own people fighting against the defenders, those who fell to the enemy.

“It came, finally,” Erakael said. His tone was almost grateful. And she understood. Months of waiting, of anticipation, of having no eyes on the enemy.

Karya heard a specific call, a two long sounds of the horn, an incoming attack, and she turned to the Wall. Far in the distance, she saw the monsters coming. More than any time before.

“Black glass,” Erakael told her.

She met his eyes. “I... we are the only high tiered people in the city, the only ones that can do anything... If we do that...”

“No choice, we stop that army. If there is more... We are doomed anyway,” Erakael kept his eyes looking beyond the wall.

Karya nodded her head, and they flew toward the Wall.

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Nayra was yelling orders, having people man the lower walls. The communication from the city was pure chaos, the garrisons had been hit, the walls weren't fully manned. There was nothing that they could do about it now. The enemy was coming. Reyla stayed close to her sister, waiting for her orders. She was in her element, not commanding like the generals of the Empire, no. She was like a... a Sect Leader. Send people in small groups, each given a broad mission and left on their own.

The monsters were coming, the people outside of the walls were running back inside. It was... a tide of darkness, a cover that was being dragged across the sand. It had to be hundreds of thousands, millions maybe. Too many for them to stop, not when they were caught off-guard, not when the barrier was down.

She saw a dozen airships open fire from above, blazing lines of light hit the areal monsters, and didn't slow the tide at all. Too few, too little firepower.

Nayra yelled, and the walls defenses opened fire. It was as if a wall of light was suddenly falling on the monsters. It was blinding.



And when it was over, the mountains of corpses were gone, toppled and burned. And over the remains, the monsters were still coming. She could see it already, a wave that was going to crash against the walls. They were about to die.

Then, the ground rumbled, the sand beyond the wall flowed like water, rising up in front of the wall. Rising up like a wall, higher and higher above them. She looked up and saw two figures, the Emperor, his armor glowing with lines, and her mother at his side.

### ***/Oath of the Dunes: Beloved of the Sands/***

The sand moved with his will and it was terrifying. It looked as if all the sand from the ground had risen, up so high that it covered the sky.

And then she saw the Emperor gesture. The wall of sand moved forward, like a tsunami, a wave that crashed down on the monsters, catching even the flying ones and taking them down from the sky. She saw the sand fall, covering all, as far as the eye could see. Burying the monsters beneath the weight of the dunes. For a moment it settled, and all was quiet.

Then she saw a head break the surface of the sand, a massive maw of a General, roaring with tones that vibrated the sand around it. They were burrowing to the surface.

A sun blossomed in the sky. A painting of red hues. Reyla raised her eyes to the sky and saw a wave of red fire coming down.

### ***—Red Dawn—***

Her mother's Ideal. The fire moved like liquid, splashing over the sand. The heat wave exploded in all directions, hitting the wall and forcing Reyla to turn her face away, feeling her skin burning.

The sound of it was... unlike anything she had ever heard before. A crackling of glass and fire, an ocean hitting the shore.

It lasted for a long minute, and then it was over.

Reyla looked back and saw a scarlet plain. The sand turned to melted glass rapidly cooling, cracks filled the scape, and the sound of breaking filled the air.

She lost her breath, seeing that, an army of... gone in an instant. Buried beneath scorching sand turned to glass.

“Oh no,” Reyla heard her sister whisper and frowned. And then she saw it too. More of the monsters coming in the distance. An endless wave.

The sound of breaking glass intensified, and then, the glassed ground straight in front of them buckled, then broke. A General, its skin was smoking, mangled, but it pointed an arm at the wall, a glowing ball of the deepest blue growing in the center of his palm. And then—Nayra grabbed her.

She was wrenched up, wings of fire carrying them up just as the General fired. The ball of light smashed into the first wall, its protections not activating. It exploded, continued, smashed through all three walls. And then the shockwave hit them and they were falling down.

Reyla closed her eyes and gripped her sister tightly as they crashed to the ground.

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Karya saw the General destroy the Wall. The defenses had been turned off, that... Taken or cultists? It didn't matter now.

An army was marching. More attacks against the walls came, breaking more holes in their defense. The city behind them was in flames.

“Erakeal we need to—”

“—Retreat,” he said.

Karya paused. “What?”

He pulled out a white orb, twisted it and then spoke. “To every soul that can hear this, retreat, abandon the city.”

“Erakael what are you doing?” She grabbed his shoulder. He didn't move his eyes from the death that was marching against them, the clouds of monsters flying.

“It is no use,” he whispered. “What can we do, they've finally come to end it.”

Karya opened her mouth, and then closed it. He was right.

“Go Karya, lead them to safety. I’ll buy you time.”

“I can do it just as well as you can,” she told him. “You are the Emperor.”

“No, no,” Erakael shook his head. “I am tired. You will do a better job than me anyway.”

He closed his eyes and sighed, as explosions shook the city walls beneath them.

“I always mess up. If only I had more courage to do what was needed. If I stopped my brother before...”

Karya’s heart stopped in her chest. *He couldn’t have...*

“You knew,” she whispered.

Erakael shrugged. “I figured it out, later. It was too late by then. I saw what you had seen, I understood. So much could’ve been different. The things that could’ve been.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Karya told him. “We can retreat and fight, survive, as we always had.”

“A thousand years Karya, I am tired. I was never meant to sit on a throne. This here, is the heart of my power. Here I am the greatest I can ever be. Here, I can hurt them. They can replace their monsters, but they cannot replace their Generals. And look, they’ve sent most of them here. And this is where I will bury them.”

Karya closed her eyes, then flew to stand in front of him. “I am sorry, for all that I had to do.”

“Goodbye, old friend,” Erakael said.

“Goodbye,” Karya said as she flew away.

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Erakael looked at his enemies, he knew that his death was near. The monsters were coming, some were breaking through the glass, the few generals that survived and some monsters that had been protected by them. Most of the horde had been killed. He saw some enter the city, too few for him to bother with. He needed to stop the main body, the wave that was now marching across the glass.

The fliers were getting close and he beat his wings. A gust of wind, powerful enough to shear bones flew across the sky, hitting the monsters and sending them flying back.

He reached out, his skills and perks, the sand sang to him.

*—Glorious Army of the Dunes—*

The glass broke, soldiers of glass forming and rising. From beneath, the sand surged up, into shapes of giants. The air twisted among them, dust and sand forming shapes of drakes and humans, of cthul and skreen, demasi and minotaurs, every race that he ruled over. Worms made out of dirt and rock, and monsters that flew through the sky.

An army of hundreds of thousands, more even.

He looked at his enemy, and sent them on their way.

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They hit the ground hard, and Nayra barely felt it. Her armor absorbed all the force of it. They landed on top of collapsed building debris showering all around them. She held her sister close, shielding her with her body. And once the shaking stopped, she stood up, and looked around. The death was... her power rose, with every death around her, but she saw no bodies. She realized then that they were beneath her, the building that had collapsed. How many? Hundreds at least. Her stats had skyrocketed to over 15000 for her main one. Almost 500% for every stat. If her family hadn't insisted on her taking **Adaptable** perk from a dead soldier she would've had some issues handling that. Now, she could barely feel it.

Then a voice spoke inside her head, the Emperor.

"Retreat," Reyla whispered after he was finished.

"Come," Nayra said, leading them down the street. She could hear screams, sense people running. They had already been moving away from the wall, ever since the initial explosions. The two of them were behind them, and they needed to catch up, she could sense monsters coming from behind

them. She moved her Qi, used her **{Mantle of the Rising Mists}** to increase her stats, and prepared her **{Scorching Blast}**.

They ran down the streets, heading away from the battle and the wall. It was lost, if the Emperor called for a retreat... She couldn't imagine how dire things were.

Her **Battle Knowledge** saved them.

She pushed Reyla away, just as a claw swiped through the air. She evaded, then moved and attacked with **|Arc Swipe|**. Resav sang through the air, and caught the monster across the shoulder, barely making a scratch. It dashed away, and glared at her. A dome monster, the size of a large lion. Prowling, with violet claws on its front paws. Black leathery skin, and thorns along its back. She recognized it immediately.

It was a General, the smallest type ever reported. She hadn't seen it herself, but they had reports on all the Generals that were encountered. Small, and with less strength, but... in some ways far more deadly than the others. They called it the Soulrender. Its claws burned the soul directly with every attack. Only people with the strongest resistances could resist, and still they usually suffered some form of soul damage anyway. A single strike against her flesh, even a scratch, would do too much damage to her soul. It was described as a corrosive effect, that burned the soul directly.

It excelled at getting ahead of the other monsters and killing the Empire's generals. Now, it came for her. Three of this type had been seen, and two had been killed. This... this could be the last one. She needed to kill it.

All around her was death, some in the range of her perk. Her stats were greater than its were.

"Run Reyla," she told her sister, she wouldn't stand a chance against a general.

"I can't leave you to fight it alone," Reyla said. A sentiment that might've warmed her heart once.

Nayra saw Reyla use her perks, everything that she had. Her **Soul Sanctuary**—creating a field around them that healed and protected souls, **Wings of a Phoenix**, **Dawnspirit Aegis**—to protect her own soul, other perks that increased her stats. Nayra knew that none of it was going to be

enough. She changed into her avatar form and charged the General. The quicker she killed it, the faster they could get to safety.

She unleashed her perks. **Battle Trance, Lady of Battle, Dawnspirit Cry, Valkyrie's Might, Valkyrie's Swiftiness.** Then she used her abilities.

**[Dawnfire Mirage]** into **[Dawn Dash]**, and she was in front of it. **[Dawnfire Immolation]** had her already fiery form surrounded by golden flames. She swung with her spear, Resav connecting as the General attacked her mirage. Her strength pushed the spear through, piercing the monster's side. It screeched, swiped at her, but her armor absorbed the attack, then reflected and sent a concussive blast back that staggered the general.

It recovered and attacked again, and she took the swipe on her shield. The death around her fueled her **Death Empowerment.** The power of it filled her, and she knew that there was little that could stand against her now. In moments like these, on the battlefield filled with the dead, there were few that could match her in stats—Ryun perhaps, though where he gained strength with more opponents, she gained it with the death.

**Great Lunge** and she scoured the monster's side, then used **[Shimmering Burst]** again to stab it in the side. It tried to move her, its violet claws trying to pierce through her armor. They were unable, and she was so much stronger than it now. She pushed it to the ground, and twisted her spear, the fire of her abilities and avatar, burned everything around them. A wave of dark energy exploded out of the General, sending her stumbling back. She pushed forward with her shield hand and unleashed her **{Scorching Blast}**. A wave of mist blasted forward, scorching the monster's side.

It dashed away, as the light shone from somewhere behind her, the light of dawn. Then a large pillar of light fell on top of the General, bathing it in dawnfire. Her sisters perk. The ground cracked, then a pillar of light fell on top of it.

Nayra saw that it did nothing. Her sister, she didn't have enough power to injure it.

The General stood and glared at Reyla. It jumped forward, flashed through space.

“No!” Nayra blinked. Golden fire exploding out of her as she arrived. The General stabbed its claws forward, Reyla tried to block. Her willpower shimmering around her, perks activating. Not enough. The claw pierced her chest. And then Nayra’s fire washed over them both, she stabbed the General through the midsection, her wings beat and she picked it up, pushed it away from Reyla and across the street in a second, pinned it against the wall. Her Qi moved as she let her aura out. **Death Empowerment** made her strong, as strong as High Rankers, the General was almost as strong, just not quite.

She cycled her technique and then let out a charged **{Mist of the Scorching End}**. Her Qi washed over the General, burning and destroying its body. It tried to escape, but her spear held it in place. Finally it stopped moving, and she turned around, flying back to her sister.

She let her avatar go and knelt next to her. “Reyla?”

Her sister was pale, dark lines rising from beneath her chest armor, up her neck to disappear beneath her helmet. She pulled it off, and saw it spreading up. It was attacking her soul. Quickly, Nayra pulled out potions to help regenerate the soul and poured them down her sister’s throat. The lines slowed, but didn’t stop.

She heard monsters approaching, dozens of them charging at her.

“Hey, Reyla, do you hear me? Sister? Please, you need to focus, you have skills to help your soul, focus.”

Reyla’s eyes opened, two emeralds staring back at her. Once their eyes had been identical, her face was Nayra’s face. How much they had changed, both of them.

She put her palm over Reyla’s cheek. “Hey, try, for me?”

But she already knew. Reyla was...

Her sister smiled at her.

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Everything hurt. Through the pain, through the burning agony that was spreading from her chest, she raised her eyes to meet those of her sister. Her golden eyes looked down on her, so beautiful. She envied that Cultivators, that they could have such a visible mark to demonstrate their power.

Her sister's eyes were wild, afraid. Tears were streaming down her cheeks, she could see them through the hole in her helmet. Nayra had killed the monster. She should've run, but... In the end, she wished that she was... like Nayra. She wished that she could've fought a monster like that and won.

Her sister shone so brightly it almost hurt Reyla's eyes.

"I... I wish... that... I wish that I was like you. My sister, so strong. I—" Her voice cut off, her throat cutting off. Everything hurt. But she wanted her to know. Nayra was everything that Reyla had ever wanted to be. She stumbled, she lost herself and made mistakes. But in the end, all those things were her own.

She tried to smile at her, to tell her somehow that it was alright. That this was not her fault. Some souls shone brightly, and some were snuffed out before it was their time.

**"I love you,"** Reyla reached out through their bond, spoke directly in her sister's mind.

Then she felt the last piece of her soul give out, and then there was nothing.

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The perk inside her head went silent. The place where she always used to be, since they had been children, the power of their bond, of their perk.

Her sister's body didn't turn to ash, as her Immortality required. It remained, marred with black lines and her eyes staring ahead.

Her sister was dead.

She screamed, and unleashed death, as monsters drew near.

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Karya flew over the city, killing the monsters as they came in. Searching for people and helping them move and escape. Erakeal was holding the bulk of them, but some still managed to get through.

A monstrous wail caught her attention, and she turned and saw an area of the city near the Wall with a sight that was... A black maelstrom was twisting around, a storm of death that was swallowing up the monsters that were coming in, feeding on the death around it. She recognized the perk, Nayra's **Death Maelstrom**. It ripped apart buildings, it destroyed the ground and the air and everything else it touched. It moved, forward, toward the wall, swallowing the monsters that were trying to get away. Thousands of them, dying every moment as the storm of death spun. She flew toward it, saw souls, warriors standing, as if they were a honor guard. And Nayra, sitting on the ground, holding a body in her hands.

Karya landed and knew.

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Erekael fought alongside his creations, killing monsters, Generals, everything. He moved into the city, letting them think that they were pushing him back. He made sure that he moved after most of the people had left that part of the city. He couldn't account for everyone, he couldn't save everyone. But their lives were the bait, the Dome Monsters were coming and killing everything in their way, and he let them.

At last, he reached the citadel, the seat of his power. Most of it had been evacuated, but not all. He could feel them moving, their feet hitting the sandstone. He wept for them, but he had no choice.

The enemy Generals had moved into the city, the bulk of the force had followed them. Millions of them. And they had entered their tomb.

He took a deep breath and reached out with his will and perks. Touched the stone that he himself had placed on the foundation of the city.

### **From Stone to Sand**

The stone crumbled, the citadel turned into a giant pillar of sand, the buildings around it followed. He was in the center of it all, no other place to

be. As it all crumbled down, drowning the enemy army, he focused on his greatest perk and turned it on all of that sand.

### **Destroy Essence**

\* \* \*

Narya flew after her mother, still holding her sister in her arms. They flew over the fleeing people, across the farms that stretched behind the city. They were so far away now that they could barely see it.

A bright light shone from behind and she turned around. A blinding sun rose, a dome of white light that grew until it filled the horizon, rising above the dunes, above the tallest mountain ranges that Narya had ever seen. The sound of it crashed over them, an explosion that shook the world and rattled her bones.

The Heart of the Empire had fallen.