

## The Wall

It was the middle of the night, but everything was painted in an orange light. The shadows danced in the firelight, playing tricks on the already weary defenders. Even Reyla had trouble keeping her eyes on the shadows in the distance, because every once in a while, the shadows would move in a way that would make her see something that wasn't there. It made her remember the endless tide of monsters, the fighting and the stench of blood, of scents she had never smelled before but now couldn't help but smell all the damn time.

The monsters from the dome had been grinding the empire to fine dust for years, the only reason they had survived was because of their preparations, and even then, it had been a close thing. The army had been away when they first struck at the cities in the south, when they rolled over them like it was nothing. What few defenders were left tried to fight back, but the most they managed to achieve was a fighting retreat.

Reyla wasn't there to see it, but she had heard the stories. Everyone was forced to fight, strong or weak, they had no choice. So many had died, that Reyla didn't know if the Empire could recover from it. By the time the army returned, the monster tide had nearly reached the Wall. Their last defense against possible invasion by the Settled Territories, in case that they were discovered to soon, or if their attack didn't go according to plan.

The Wall had never been meant to protect against the attack that came from the Southern direction. Nearly all of their food production had been in the south, behind the wall. Most of their greatest mining and crafting houses. They had everything that they needed to survive an invasion. And now it was all lost, taken over by an enemy that they were unable to defeat.

The tide seemed endless, no matter how many they killed, their numbers didn't seem to decrease, there were always more coming, relentlessly. They had barely held the Wall before the army arrived, and

since then they've been fighting a battle that was draining them every day.

Her father was somewhere behind the wall, replanting and expanding the few farms that they had in the north, making sure that the Empire could survive. The war itself was eating their resources, and they were reaching the point where they would deplete everything, what they consumed outstripped what they could produce. Nearly all of the survivors in the north that weren't at the Wall were working toward expanding their production, in one way or another.

Their biggest issue had been the Wall. Their great forts had been placed on the southern side and were all hugging the Wall from the southern side, they had lost nearly a third of them before they had been able to raise new walls to protect them, but they couldn't match the hundreds of years of preparation and protections that the Wall itself held.

"A long night," a voice from her side said, and Reyla glanced at her brother.

Emrys stood next to her, holding his red staff in his hands, leaning on it. The two of them had been through a lot, had gotten very close.

"Yes," she said. They had spent every night for the past week on this wall, standing guard. The Wall was under constant siege, but not always the same part of it. The enemy was testing it, they sent armies against different parts of the wall in an unpredictable order. It had been five days since the last attack on this part of the wall.

"You heard the news?" Emrys asked.

"No, I was training with mother today," Reyla answered.

"Well, the word around the mess hall is that the coast was hit pretty bad yesterday. A couple thousand managed to get through before the head of the Vyzer family arrived to help."

Reyla grimaced. They had been struggling to hold the walls, their strongest warriors, the Empire's High Ranker equivalents, were moving constantly from one side of the wall to the other. Going where they were needed and where the attacks were the hardest. Of course,

they couldn't be everywhere, and the wall was nearly twelve thousand kilometers long. So, they were spread out, always rushing to the nearest place where the enemy pushed a stronger attack.

The Wall stretched from the coast in the West, all the way to the mountain range that was the Empire's Eastern border. And those two points was what worried the Empire the most. The mountain range was hard to traverse, and it stretched all the way up to the Northern border of the Empire, which made that side pretty safe. They had patrols in the mountains, and while they had seen some monster scouts, there hadn't been any real push for them to try and circumvent the wall that way. The mountains were filled with powerful monsters and narrow paths, an army would have a hard time getting through there.

The coast was a much greater concern. There had been some fears that the monsters could go around the Wall by going over the ocean. Fortunately, they were yet to see them even attempt to go through the water. But they were still attacking the fort at the end of the Wall. The fort was half in the water, and one of the largest ones on the Wall, and it had already been hit hard three times, each time to the point of nearly falling. For some reason the enemy was interested in passing through there.

They had been sending their flying scouts over to map the Empire's territory, though the Orders had done a good job of keeping their eyes open and taking those scouts down.

"Mother left for Fort Kelos," Reyla added. "There had been some increase in attacks on the Western front."

Reyla and her brother were currently protecting the piece of the Wall a short distance away from the Fort Oasis, it was a fort protected by the Ornn family and their guards. The army was spread thin, they had lost to many over the years. Each family was forced to add to the defense effort, many taking larger roles—like Reyla's family.

"I don't know for how long we can hold here," Emrys said after a beat. "We keep losing people, and nothing we do seems to even be slowing down the attacks. Their numbers aren't decreasing."

Reyla knew that the enemy had a way of growing more monsters, their scouts had found their breeding grounds. Former cities, corrupted and turned into fortresses where they bred more horrors. So far, it seemed like the Empire was able to kill the enemy at about the same rate that they were breeding replacements, but the opposite wasn't true. The Empire was losing high tiered people with every attack. More than one billion people had died, or worse, in the initial attack and subsequent retreat beyond the Wall.

Not to mention the rest of the Empire which was struggling just to stay alive. They were not going to last for much longer.

"I've heard some rumors," Reyla said slowly as she looked around, seeing that the nearest other guard on the wall was sufficiently away that they wouldn't be overheard. She wasn't sure if she should speak, she was pretty sure that she wasn't supposed to know what she knew. But... the war had made everyone tired; her mother hadn't kept as tight lid on things as she should've. On the rare occasion that her mother returned and trained with her, Reyla had managed to glimpse at and overhear a few things.

"What kind of rumors?" Emrys asked.

"I think that the higher ups might be thinking about making a counter offensive," Reyla whispered back to him.

"Again? The last one didn't end all that well," Emrys questioned.

Reyla closed her eyes, remembering. The last attempt had been made nearly a year and a half ago. An army was assembled with the intent of taking back one of the cities beyond the Wall. The plan had been to take back a large area of land directly in front of the Wall, create a buffer zone, then slowly push and retake more and more ground. It succeeded in its first objective, they managed to take back one of the cities, and killed a general in the process. They burned the breeding monster to ash and purged the black growths that overtook the city. In the end it didn't matter. Within two weeks, the monsters retaliated and butchered the army, barely a fifth of it managed to escape back behind the Wall.

“The plan is different this time around,” Reyla said. “I think that they want to go after the leader, Hastur.”

Emrys blinked. “No way, we haven’t even seen it since the strike at Sandstorm City,” he said.

“I caught glimpse of some reports that suggest that some of our scouts might’ve been able to locate Hastur’s hiding place.”

“That... We don’t know what that will do though.”

“From what I gathered, the hope is that without its leader, the monsters would lose cohesion, that instead of one synchronized force, we would be fighting a hundred smaller ones led by the generals.”

Emrys nodded his head. “That could work. But I don’t see how we can get an army through all of this,” he waved his hand beyond the wall.

Reyla shrugged. “I don’t know what they have planned, not really, I just gathered bits and pieces.”

“Still,” Emrys said. “We do need to do something. This is unsustainable, we are losing slowly, but we are losing.”

Reyla grunted in agreement. The last three years had served to teach her a lot. She had seen horrors and battle nearly daily. She had been forged in the conflict, surrounded by battle and death. Trained with her mother every time she had the time. And still, she feared fighting these monsters.

“I’m sure that the higher ups know that too,” Reyla answered.

“Right,” Emrys said.

They settled into a comfortable silence, both keeping their eyes on the darkness in front of them.

Then, she frowned. Something in the distance caught her eye, but she wasn’t sure what exactly. Her **|Greater Night Vision|** let her see better in the dark, so she tried to focus, leveraging her will to make her sight even better.

Emrys saw the same thing at the same time. He turned and slapped his hand at the array plate on the side of the wall. Immediately an alarm sounded across the wall. Reyla placed one hand on a medallion hanging around her neck and spoke, her voice amplified.

“Taken incoming! Everyone, to the walls!”

The sound of the camp behind the wall waking up was immediate, people ran for the stairs leading up to the four-meter-tall Wall. Putting their equipment on quickly and readying themselves for the battle.

In front of her, Reyla could see the horde of people running for the wall. She recognized them quickly, their bare bodies and simple weapons meant that these people used to be slaves before. The black lines traveling all over their body identified them immediately as the taken, those who were unlucky enough to be captured and corrupted instead of killed. They didn't know how many of the people in the South had been turned into the taken, the enemy threw them at the Wall from time to time. There were several different types of the taken; most were mindless puppets that just rushed at anything in front of them. Their stats were the same as in life, but they felt no pain, knew no fear, and could survive wounds that would kill them before, but they couldn't use any of the powers that they had in life. The second were those who had retained their previous powers and intelligence, these were the worst to fight, since they still resembled people. They spoke, and they fought smartly, but they were fully under the command of the enemy. The last and the rarest of the taken were seldom seen and were called the empowered. They retained all of their power and gained more than what they had in life.

Reyla had never seen an empowered before, only a few people had. And they were as tough to take down as a general.

From the look of the taken rushing toward the wall, these were only the mindless ones. She glanced to the sky, trying to see if they had brought any of their flying monsters—and found none.

The Wall filled up with soldiers wearing Ornn family colors, in the distance, Reyla saw Vanessa standing on a tower—taking command. All of their parents were away, the same as Erik who had left two days ago to help another part of the wall that had seen heavy offensive.

The mindless charged the Fort Oasis walls and the soldiers on the battlements opened fire. The fort was lying against the Wall, with newly erected walls surrounding it. Reyla and her brother watched as

arrows and powers slammed into the first line of the taken. Then, a few moments later, soldiers around her opened fire from the walls.

The focus of the attack was on the fort, it was the weak spot, since it hid a gate that led through the Wall. Emrys raised his staff and started sending bolts of fire at the charging taken. Among them, she could see larger shapes moving, the small-type monsters of the enemy horde.

They reached the front of the fort and moved out of her sight line, so she focused on the monsters in front of her. The night had turned into day with the light of all the powers being thrown around. Then, out of the darkness, huge shapes surged forward. Tall monsters flew through the air, everyone on the wall immediately focusing them down. It didn't matter, they reached the walls, their tough hide protecting them, their flat heads smashed into the stone wall triggering the defensive arrays. They didn't do any damage to the wall, but that was not their purpose. They lowered their back end, creating a platform from the ground to the wall. The aptly names bridge-types were difficult to deal with since they were seemingly made to take a lot of punishment. The taken and monsters started climbing over their backs and Reyla got ready.

The first mindless near her lost its head with one swipe of her spear. She tried not to look at their faces, tried not to think that they had once been people. They had captured taken and tried to help them, but nothing had worked. She told herself that killing them was a kindness.

As the first black monster with a forest of tentacles for limbs climbed up, she felt a dull noise in the back of her mind. Her **|Mind Sphere|** protected her from the worst of the mental fear, but she knew from experience that long exposure made things worse. She also knew that there were people behind her, in the camps getting ready to rotate with people who were exposed to the mental attack enough to feel the effects.

With her **|Perfect Fire Dance of Dawning Light: My Dance, Fire and Dawn|** she moved on top of the wall, her brother behind her

providing support as she cleaved through any monster that climbed the wall next to her. The fire from the towers and other ranged users was focused on the bridge-types, trying to bring them down.

As more and more monsters climbed up, she activated her **[Dawnfire Immolation]** and orange flames surrounded her.

Quickly, she realized that there seemed to be no end to the monsters, and she started to burn her cooldowns in a panic. She triggered her **Spear Trance** and **Valkyrie's Might**, then released her **Valkyrie's Shout**, stunning every enemy on the wall around her.

Her spear blazed with orange fire as she focused her will into her **[Perfect Flaming Crescent]**. She cut down every monster on the wall around her, but a moment later more replaced them. Then, she felt her stats rise, then a moment later rise again. She saw a person glowing with dawnfire nearby, holding a shield and a golden spear that twisted as if it had a will of its own. Then she turned into a tall woman made out of dawnfire. With Nayra on the wall, everyone around them had their stats increased, and Reyla raised her spear to the sky, using her **Beacon of Dawn**. The light blinded for a moment, making the monsters pause. With the pillar of light around her, all of her abilities that were stronger in the day gained their bonuses. Her beacon allowed her to summon the light of dawn, meaning that even at night she could benefit from dawnfire. With both hers and Nayra's powers now boosted they continued to fight. Pushing the monsters off the wall and taking down a few of the bridge-types. But even with a moment of respite, there didn't seem to be an end to the enemy horde.

And then, a curtain of blue fire fell on the ground beyond the wall, scorching everything in its way.

Reyla finished the monsters around her and then looked to the sky. Her brother, Erik had returned.

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Reyla walked the battlements, making her way across the dead bodies. Quickly she reached her destination, a small group of people



standing above the bodies of three guards of the House Ornn. Nayra was kneeling next to them, hand touching one of the bodies.

“Nayra,” Reyla said as she approached. Looming nearby were the four guards of House Ornn, Nayra’s ever present companions. Seeing them made Reyla grimace, but she tried to ignore them.

Nayra ignored Reyla’s approach and greeting, making her sigh in defeat. She had tried to speak with her, to try and fix their issues, but it was hard to accomplish anything when Nayra hated them all.

“Please Nayra, I just want to talk,” Reyla said again.

Her sister raised her head and met her eyes. “There is nothing that we could talk about.”

Reyla closed her eyes. Nayra had been kept under close guard for months after Erik brought her back. Only once the enemy pushed and forced everyone to the wall, had she been allowed to fight. When Nayra had first fought, Reyla had hoped that it was a good sign, but... In the end, while Nayra might understand the threat that their enemy posed she didn’t care about the Empire or their family. She only fought because that meant that she was allowed to leave the camp, and because she could grow stronger.

Nayra stood up and then with one last look filled with anger and frustration thrown at Reyla, she pulled the space in front of her apart and stepped through into the Ethereal Realm.

Reyla sighed and turned around. Her sister had been given permission to try and help the souls of those serving House Ornn, as her Class embodied. But despite the things between them being as they were, Reyla always felt anxious seeing her cross into the Ethereal Realm. She knew that Nayra couldn’t escape, she could only exit in the same place where she entered, and not even she was crazy enough to try and escape through the Ethereal Realm.

Reyla walked away, heading in the direction where she left Emrys. She needed his advice. Things could remain this way between her and Nayra for much longer.