

PRESENT – Reyla
Family

Reyla watched her mother lean back in her chair and place her finger on top of the table, on either side of her plate. The few candles in the room cast the room into a pleasant shade of red. Candles were rarely used nowadays, but her mother liked them. She usually had them brought out when they were having small intimate family dinners.

She looked like a prime example of calm, but Reyla had spent the entire last year with her mother. Enough that she had come to know her quite a bit. Karya Ornn didn't allow anything to rattle her or catch her unaware. But Reyla was certain that she was shaken now, that the calm and collected movements served to buy her time to figure out what to do. Reyla realized that she had mirrored her mother's movements almost exactly unconsciously, and that she was yet to respond to her sister.

Nayra hadn't said anything else after her greeting, but Reyla was painfully aware that several seconds had passed without her response. Finally, before Reyla reached out, her mother spoke.

"Tell her that you are with me, and that I am glad that she reached out," her mom said.

Reyla nodded, then focused inward. *"Hi, Nayra. I'm with mother, she wants you to know that she is glad that you reached out."*

Her words were awkward in her head, and she was glad that the link didn't send anything more than her mental voice. Nayra wouldn't glean anything beyond what her words meant by themselves.

"You're with mother?" Nayra asked, and even without any emotion to the words or any sense of her feelings, Reyla could tell that she was surprised.

"Yes, and with Emrys," Reyla added.

There was no response for a moment.

"You've been doing well I see, you overtook me," Nayra said finally.

Reyla blinked, realizing that if Nayra knew that then she had to have leveled again.

"You've been doing well too. All of us were surprised at what you did, Father Ender was pleased," Reyla said, trying to come up with something

else to say, but she couldn't. There was too much between them for her to be able to put into words, not those that wouldn't end up in them fighting.

"You've gotten closer to the family I see, good for you Reyla," Nayra said, then before Reyla could respond she spoke again. *"It is good that you are with mother, I wanted to have you carry a message to the family, but this is better, we can speak through you."*

Reyla blinked, then glanced at her mom.

"What is it?" Karya Ornn asked.

"She says that she wants to speak with you, she reached out in order to send you—well, the family—a message." Reyla answered. Emrys leaned forward, but didn't say anything.

"I'd like to know how she is doing," her mom said.

Reyla looked at her mother then focused.

"Mother would like to know how you are doing," Reyla said and regretted it immediately. She knew that it seemed like she herself didn't care, but that wasn't true, she just didn't know how to bridge this chasm that had opened between them.

"How I am doing... Well, not that good seeing as my siblings want to have me killed."

"What?" Reyla asked, completely taken by surprise.

"Tell mother that I am here with Daria," Nayra said making Reyla blink again.

She turned to her mother and told her what Nayra had said.

Her mother frowned. "Daria? She was supposed to observe without revealing herself. And what is this about having her killed, ask her to explain."

Reyla sent a message to Nayra, then listened to the response. The more her sister talked, the more Reyla's eyes widened. Finally, she turned to her mother and started relaying what Nayra had told her.

"Daria and the two knights with her had been taken prisoners by Nayra's Sect Head, Ryun Nacht, he discovered her spying," Reyla said, having a hard time believing that. She didn't know much about Daria personally, but she was strong enough that she was known in the Empire.

"The Ranker," her mom said slowly. "The report you gave doesn't put him at the level where he could do that."

“I... I don’t know mother. He does grow in power quickly,” Reyla added.

Karya Ornn grimaced. “And he is a Cultivator, something that we have little true knowledge about,” she shook her head. “They are treated well, I hope?”

Reyla sent a message and then listened to Nayra’s response. After a minute she turned back to her mother and swallowed hard, made a choking noise, then spoke.

“Mom...” Reyla started, then took a deep breath and continued. “Nayra says that the two Knights of the Orders were released, that he had given them a... threatening message to pass on to their superiors. If they continue doing things as they had, he will consider them hostile and attack on sight.”

It was Karya’s turn to blink. “He is threatening the Orders? He... doesn’t know who they are of course, but... threatening an organization that he should know is more powerful than him is foolish.”

Reyla shook her head. “Mother he is... He isn’t like other people. I said it in my report. He doesn’t care about those things, and he... Even if he was weaker he would’ve still done the same. He is like...” Reyla paused, not knowing how to say it.

Her mother seemed to have heard her unspoken word anyway. “He is like me, and your father.”

Reyla nodded at that, and Karya got a thoughtful look. “A Ranker, yes, I’ve forgotten how we used to think back then.”

“Mom,” Reyla started and her mother’s eyes focused on her. “Nayra... she told me some things that you should know.”

Her mom nodded and gestured for her to continue.

Reyla glanced at Emrys, who had a blank look on his face, then back to her mother. “Daria told her a few things. First, that the Orders wanted her dead, that the only reason they didn’t kill her yet was because of you.”

Karya nodded. “They wouldn’t risk our wrath, they can want to kill her all they want, but they know that they cannot.”

Reyla shook her head. “Daria also told her that... well that the rest of the family doesn’t share your opinion.”

“What? What do you mean by the rest of the family?” Karya Ornn asked, her green eyes flashing dangerously.

“Daria told her that... that our siblings gave her other instructions. That if Daria saw that Nayra had no loyalty toward the family or the Empire she was to... kill her.”

Every candle in the room suddenly erupted. The fire blazed golden and the candlesticks melted in an instant, throwing the room into darkness. A moment later the formation on the lamps triggered as they detected no light and turned on. Their pale light illuminated the room with much more light than the simple candles, and Reyla could clearly see her mother’s expression.

It wasn’t any expression that she had ever seen on her face before, but it chilled her to the bone. The last year with her mother had been amazing. They had bonded, they talked about fashion, trained, laughed together. She became the mother that Reyla had dreamed about when she was little. She had apologized to Reyla for being absent, and while that didn’t erase the past, it was enough that they could look to the future.

But that look on her face... It made her understand what people meant when they called her the Butcher of Dawn.

Her mother didn’t respond immediately, and when she did, she didn’t speak to Reyla. She turned to look at Emrys, locking him in place with a look.

“Emrys, how likely is it that what Nayra had told us is the truth?” She asked evenly.

Emrys winced, then tried to cover it by raising an arm and rubbing his neck. “Uh... I don’t know—”

“—Don’t lie to me.”

“Well,” Emrys bowed his head. “I had been, uh, approached by others. They had made it clear that my duty is to uphold the family name above all. That nothing is more important than that.”

Reyla looked at her mother, waiting for... something. Instead, her mother calmed down and closed her eyes. “We’ve failed even more than we thought it seems,” she shook her head and then looked at Reyla. “Tell my daughter that I will take care of things. That she doesn’t need to worry about anyone coming after her. I’ll make sure of it.”

Reyla swallowed, then sent her mother’s words to Nayra.

“I wonder if she will think the same once I say this next part,” Nayra said.

Reyla got a bad feeling. *“Nayra? What do you mean?”*

“First, I’ve told Ryun where I come from,” Nayra told her.

“What? Are you insane? You betrayed the Empire?”

“I betrayed nothing,” Nayra’s words came, even without the emotion behind them, Reyla could imagine her sisters sneer. *“I owe nothing to the Empire. I am glad, sister, that you can have a family, a mother and a father. But I barely know them. The Empire and the Family were never my home. And both the Orders and my siblings want me dead.”*

“They will kill you for this, you betrayed the plan! Everything!”

“Oh, get over yourself Reyla,” Nayra said. *“The Infinite Realm doesn’t revolve around the Empire and the Core. What do you think is going to happen when the Empire returns? A great war with the death of everyone outside of the Empire? Of course not. The old bastards are keeping a grudge, but most of the people living now haven’t been born back then. There are more people just on the frontier than there are in the Empire. And you don’t need to worry about your precious plans. Ryun doesn’t care about it at all, he only cares about his people, his sect. He doesn’t want any part in this war. As long as you don’t provoke him, there is no reason for him to share what I told you, with anyone. I’ve had him promise, and I believe him.”*

Reyla didn’t know what to say about that, so she instead passed Nayra’s words to her mother.

She watched her mother take in the words, and then after she was finished speaking, take in a deep breath before responding.

“We failed you so much. Instead of keeping each other close, of having greater bonds, they’ve alienated her. We’ve alienated her. My daughter. I... I can’t imagine what I would’ve done if I learned that my family was willing to have me killed. Daria... she was a fool to tell her that. But I can see what she thought, she wanted to scare Nayra into being quiet, foolish child,” her mother had a sad look on her face. *“Tell Nayra... no, nothing that I can say will change her mind now I would need to go in person.”*

Her expression turned crestfallen. *“And I don’t have the time now, I can’t...”* She met Reyla’s eyes and then spoke again. *“Daria is a prisoner still? Why wasn’t she released with the order knights?”*

Reyla passed the question over to Nayra, and then listened to the answer. She was almost frightened to answer her mother.

“Ryun Nacht considered her owing his sect a debt, for her spying. He wanted Daria to repay the sect with a year of service. Nayra tried to convince her, but... Daria didn't agree. She knocked Nayra out and tried to escape with her.”

Reyla paused, more because she couldn't really believe what Nayra had told her than anything else. “He found her and... captured her again. They forced Daria to agree to a contract. A year of service in the sect, to pay her debt.”

Her mother's expression didn't change much, she only shook her head. “Perhaps that is for the best. Some lessons need to be learned the hard way,” she said. “Tell Nayra that she will be left alone, that I will make sure of it. But... tell her that she is still part of this family, and that I would appreciate it if she remembered that. As soon as I am able I will go to her and talk in person. I really want to meet this Ranker.”

Reyla passed her mother's words to Nayra.

“I have a family here,” Nayra said. *“I am valued and respected, and I have people that I care about.”*

“You shouldn't forget what the family gave you Nayra,” Reyla told her.

“Yes, they gave me a lot. And they stifled me, then tried to have me killed because I wanted something for myself. I don't forget anything sister.”

Reyla winced, but didn't continue down that path. *“Mother says that she will visit as soon as she is able. Nayra, this isn't how it was meant to be. Our parents made mistakes, but they are trying to fix things now.”*

Nayra didn't respond immediately, and just as Reyla worried that she wouldn't, her words came through. *“Tell mother that a visit might be hard. I will be traveling with the sect, we are going to the Tournament.”*

Reyla's mouth opened, shocked. She told her mother what Nayra said.

“The Tournament,” her mother grimaced. “That will be dangerous, but... maybe less so than the frontier after the plan reaches the last stage.”

She sighed, looking unsure. It made Reyla almost ashamed to see her mother like that. As if she didn't know what to do.

“Tell her to be careful, and perhaps that it would be wise if she wasn’t in the arena on the day of the High Division final.”

Reyla passed on her mother’s words.

“Tell mother that I am thankful,” Nayra said. *“And that I am sorry. But I need to make my own path.”*

“Nayra, I... I miss you. I’m sorry about everything.”

“Me too Reyla, but we don’t get to change the past. I was mad at you for so long. Now I just want to be away from you all. I don’t like the politics, the need to worry about the family name. I don’t want the name Ornn to be the only thing that defines me. I want to be Nayra, just me. I... I can’t be living in your shadow anymore. At least you won’t need to worry about overtaking me again. Farewell sister.”

Reyla frowned at. *“Nayra, what do you mean?”* She asked, but Nayra didn’t respond. After a few more tries, she realized that Nayra wasn’t going to respond, and she knew how stubborn she could be.

When she told her mother that the conversation was over, she tilted her head, and a tall Kracean walked in—Kishil, her mother’s seneschal. She had probably called him with a skill.

“Clear my schedule for tomorrow,” Karya Ornn said, calm and collected. None of the insecurities and worry that Reyla had seen on her just a few minutes before was present.

“Mistress, you have a meeting with High Lord Revenilk,” Kishil added.

“Move him, I need the entire day free,” Reyla’s mother said.

The Seneschal looked like he wanted to argue, but his eyes passed over Reyla and Emrys, who didn’t quite have the same control over their expressions as their mother. He bowed and spoke.

“It’ll be done, Mistress.”

After he left, her mother stood and paced around the room. “This cannot be allowed to stand. I will not have this family turned into... this!” She waved her hand angrily at the air in front of her.

“They thought that killing my daughter was a small price to pay to protect the family name!” She hissed. “That they could go against my orders! It seems like my children need to learn important lessons about who is in charge here.”

She stopped and turned around, meeting both Emrys' and Reyla's eyes. She shivered under her mother's gaze, and wondered what she had planned.

"Pack your things, we are going back home," she paused. "Fuck! I'm going to need to take care of things here. In two days, we are going back in two days."

Seeing her mother so animated, and so... angry, made Reyla feel afraid for her siblings. They had no idea what was coming.

"I'll talk with your fathers tonight, we are going to have a family gathering. Everyone will attend, those who can get here in time at least," Karya Ornn nodded to herself. "I need to make things clear to them it seems. And the Orders, damn. I'm going to need to send someone to intercept the Knights, I can't have the Orders hear the Ranker's threat. A bribe should work, if not..."

"Reyla, you've met this Ranker. Do you trust your sister's word?"

Reyla thought about it for a second, then answered. "I... No matter what she said, I don't think that Nayra would really do something to hurt us. And Ryun... the sense I got from him is that he doesn't care about much outside of his own strength, and getting stronger. And he doesn't have any reason to make us enemies. Well, if he ignores the spying."

"I'll trust that Nayra hasn't been completely turned against us. She is hurt, and she feels wronged. I understand," her mother's expression hardened. Then, in an instant, like a fire that burned brightly for a few moments, she calmed down. "This night was supposed to be special, for you."

Reyla followed her mother's eyes and saw the fruit sitting on the table in front of her. She remembered what it was and grimaced.

"I'm sorry that this got spoiled for you," her mother said.

Both Reyla and Emrys shook their head. "It's okay mother," Emrys said. "Family is more important."

"Yes," her mother nodded gravely. "Yes, it is. Now I just need to pound that into your siblings head."

Reyla swallowed hard at her mother's cold tone. Her siblings were not going to like what she was going to do. Not at all.