
[112] [Blades (Captain Deneva)]

Deneva's blade whistled across the air, its edge welcoming the tip of the arrow, a gentle caress that embraced it, twisting its path ever so minutely, until the arrow was no longer a threat but something that would pass through harmlessly. There would be no room to move closer to the attacker, for two more arrows would take the place of the first.

There had been only two kinds of attacks thus far: normal arrows and empowered ones. A normal arrow attack would prove more than enough against the unwary, but empowered ones were dangerous even to Deneva.

Their opponents only used these empowered shots against the Swordmistress, clearly unwilling or unable to spare the energy to do more than that. But these archers were experts who knew how to attack in ways she could not ignore; their positioning was masterful, and their aim would always be set on two targets at the same time. If she dodged a single empowered shot, then it would be one of her knights on the receiving end of the attack. It forced Deneva to deflect or block each one, pushing her to expend a bit more energy to sustain herself mid-air, to be the shield that kept this assault from becoming a massacre.

Yet as she fought, pushing herself to expend the least amount of energy as possible while guaranteeing as much safety to her knights as she could provide, Deneva inwardly cursed. How could they have possibly missed this looming threat sleeping within the very borders of their kingdom?

In preparation for the assault, Deneva had dutifully reviewed every piece of information they had available on the area. Nearly a hundred years of every tiny scrap of paper, documented rumor, and report. Anything and everything from the final stages of the Great Betrayal up to today.

Of course, they'd known there was a grove here; there were dozens of Elven groves throughout the kingdom. They were well documented and well known. Places where the vegetation was so thick that the elemental energies could be more easily accessible. Elves who'd lost their bond would be drawn to the nearest grove with increasing desperation, and once there, would go through a small ritual to create the very grave they would occupy in perpetuity.

As far as the kingdom was concerned, groves were a passive boon. Though Elves that had gone fully feral were impossible to awaken, sometimes, a sleeping Elf would ascend into a Golden Elf, waking up in the process and providing the grove a new protector. It wasn't unheard of to send an expedition into a grove to capture feral Golden Elves and reintegrate them, as unlike naturally-born ferals, these maidens would retain some, if not all, of the knowledge from before they succumbed to the curse.

Even if the Golden Elves weren't collected, their presence would mean the feral population would be naturally culled near and around the grove. And if the protectors weren't strong enough to keep the ferals at bay, then it would not be a loss the kingdom would experience.

They'd known there was a grove here. Deneva had read the details; they'd known it was a grove larger than any seen before within the kingdom's history. Before the wildlings had come to inhabit the area, the grove of the Deep Woods had been the subject of speculation. Some Elves had even reported feeling the "pull" while bonded. Of course, there had been expeditions, but they'd come back with disappointment. The grove had been impossible to find, and the losses to the ferals monumental.

Now Deneva knew it had been a ruse.

The defenders of the grove had many feral Golden Elves amongst their numbers, the Swordmistress could sense them, in how their attacks were more desperate and sloppy. If she had to guess, then only a fifth of the forces they were facing were actually free of the feral curse. Just enough that they could sustain their sanity through kidnapping a handful of humans every few years. Just enough that, were the grove approached by an expedition, they could blend in with the other protectors.

Even now, as Deneva swung her blades in a whirlwind of precisely timed and controlled metal, she knew that their expedition stood at the precipice of disaster. A feral Golden Elf was dangerous but predictable, their attack patterns known, they moved and acted with desperation, prioritizing the safety of the sleeping Elves above even their own. But the rest? Each one of those Golden Elves felt no less competent than the members of the king's royal guard.

The knight captain could feel it in her bones. The defenders were buying time, playing it safe, saving their energy and their tricks. The arrows were whittling them down, shaving away at their power one tiny dent at a time.

At this rate, the climb was likely to fail, perhaps if they changed to a different-

"I am Urtha Cross! I am the Spear of my tribe! AND YOU WILL NOT STOP ME!"

The tribal had gone ahead and thrown caution to the wind, pulling herself up the tree like some sort of feral beast rushing through the plains. Apparently, the Orc did not care she was carrying multiple of her fully-loaded sisters who'd lost the ability to climb.

It was an unexpected move, and one the defenders had not expected. They began shifting their approach, aiming power-shots at the Orc before she gained momentum and broke through.

Not that Deneva would let them. Dismissing her twin blades, she summoned a singular rusty dagger, a last minute acquisition before the expedition.

"Give me your memories, give me your skills." She whispered at the weapon, pouring her energy into the blade and filling it to the brim. Deneva's body twitched, shifting in stance as her mind flooded with decades of combat.

Combat against Elves.

Thrusting herself forward, she solidified the air under her feet to give her impulse, bounding forward and placing herself to block the Orc from the brunt of the attacks. Now, when Deneva moved her blade, the steel did not dance with the arrows but ravenously attacked. Every time she swung her weapon, it would seek out the shaft of the arrow, shattering it with its piercing edge, smashing the spear-sized projectile and taking away its power.

It was a violent edge, angry and filled with death. Hundreds of Elves of all kinds, each of them felled by this singular weapon and its wielder. The memories of its past life weren't definite enough to consume Deneva, but their imprint of rage was impossible to fully contain. It took every ounce of effort not to turn towards a more aggressive stance. Only the promise of what was to come sated the knife's thirst of violence.

When the Orc jumped back down to pull up the others, Deneva nodded with quiet approval and followed to ensure she would fulfill her task. It wouldn't be long before their attackers retreated.

"Did they finally give up?" Urtha proclaimed, drenched in sweat and injuries, the maiden heaving as she lay surrounded by the protective fortifications set up by the knights and tribe combined.

Next to her, the Rahpa, Dia, was tending to two injured Orcs at the same time. It showed a level of control and concentration the maiden had sorely lacked the last time they'd met.

“They are not as enduring as you, and they realized that their positions would’ve exposed them to easier counter-attacks,” Deneva frowned ever so slightly as she focused on the Orc.

She knew of Urtha; she was the biggest Orc south of the Red Desert and had frequently appeared in reports from the Darkton family. They’d mentioned the Orc was roughly as combat-capable as two fully armed knight recruits, but otherwise not worth the effort to hunt down.

The Swordmistress licked her lips, making a mental note to keep an eye on the Orc’s growth. If she developed at the same rate White Claw had, then she’d be a Champion in her own right within the next few years. Paired with healer Dia’s apparent development in healing skills, then it would put considerable weight on the theory that Rick Cross was responsible for this apparent growth.

It wasn’t the bond, though. Deneva had closely monitored each maiden bonded to the otherworlders living in Balet, and they’d not shown such massive improvement.

“We’ve only suffered light injuries, Captain,” Deneva’s armiger hastened to report. “Most losses were the tribals, one in five.”

“One in six,” Dia corrected without missing a beat. “But they’ll need rest.”

A pulse of power ran through the wood of the mega-flora, every leaf and every branch shuddering, the air gaining a mossy taste. For a fraction of a second, Deneva felt every ounce of energy outside of her body falter, as if every inch of the forest was trying to push them all out.

It was the second time it had happened since their attack had been initiated.

Her eyes lingered on the Vampire for a moment longer before she dismissed her weapon, replacing it with her usual swords and sheathing them. “Those unable to fight will be left to go back under their own means.”

“They’d be easy targets,” Dia glared.

“They won’t be targeted so long as we continue to pose a serious threat,” the Captain replied. “We cannot spare to leave capable combatants behind; each fighter will be needed.” She turned to Urtha. “We will handle things moving forward. You and your tribe must focus on recovering your strength and be ready to assist once the need arises.”

“Shouldn’t we hunt them down or something?” Urtha asked, frowning.

“Their positioning is too spread out, and we lack the mobility to capitalize on that. If we push forward, however, they will be forced to coalesce and meet us directly. They cannot afford the grove to be breached,” Deneva kept her tone stern and cold. It was a harsh reality, one where they would need to continue grueling through until the chance to strike presented itself. “Taking the current path of approach should have spared us the worst of their traps, but we should remain on our guard all the same.”

Their main goal right now was to recover strength, lick their wounds, and to make as much progress towards the grove as they could before their opponents launched the next wave of attacks. Monica and Embla had retreated to pool their own resources as well. Deneva was certain they lived, but also that they hadn't found a way to pierce into the heart of their enemy's domain; either situation would've been easy to detect.

“There is... one thing,” the Knight Captain glanced at those gathered, brows furrowed in thought. “Most of them are feral.”

“This means that if we create a direct threat to the slumbering Elves, they'll lose cohesion, right?” All heads turned towards the Vampire, the maiden immediately freezing in place.

The maiden's nervousness dispersed somewhat when Urtha herself pulled her to her side. “She's one of us, one of the tribe.” The Orc dared the knights to do something about it with her growl, one that earned hard looks from not just the other Orcs but also the Dark Elves.

Deneva's jaw tightened. Their own cohesion needed to be maintained. “You are correct.” She shot her knights a quick glare to signal them to stand down. “The moment a single sleeping Elf is harmed, the feral Golden Elves will go berserk. It is an option worth keeping in mind as I doubt they will follow guidance and cues from the others. But it also means we would be facing an enemy willing to burn their own life for the sake of our annihilation.”

“An enemy that's been around for hundreds of years. Even if feral, that's got to count for something.” The Vampire acknowledged.

“Don't see the point of why they'd keep some of their own feral.” Urtha frowned deeply. “Normally you only do that if you don't have enough humans around, but seeing what they can do, I doubt they'd have trouble getting their hands on enough of 'em.”

“Duty.” Deneva had spoken the single word, drawing everyone's attention. “These are not a rabble of mish-mash desperate idealists.” Her gaze traversed over the wildlings, gaining some glares. “They are highly trained and highly experienced combatants.”

“You almost seem to approve of their views.” One of the Dark Elves spat out.

“I acknowledge what they are, not doing so would be foolish.” The knight captain glanced over everyone gathered there. “All information points at this grove having existed for longer than our kingdom’s own recorded history. We cannot afford to underestimate them again.”

When she spoke that final word, her gaze hardened on the trio of maidens bonded to Rick Cross. All three of them flinched, looking away.

Deneva’s gaze shifted towards the Vampire.

A question lingered at the edge of her mind. Would the accursed follow the trend the other three had and grow at the same abnormal rate? The kingdom had only one recorded instance of a Champion Vampire, and it now ruled the ruins of the city she’d destroyed by her own hand, surrounded by fellow accursed in that peninsula West of the kingdom.

The question burned within the knight captain.

Her orders were to rescue and bring back Barry Dodson and May Brown. Her duty called for the assessment and, if possible, extermination of threats. Deneva had come here with her knights to nip the awakening of this “Green Empress” before she could raise her fangs against the kingdom.

But the same scope applied to the Vampire.

Should Deneva act while the maiden was constrained and under the willing control of a human? It was another question that had been churning within her ever since they’d set out on this nigh impossible task.

Her hand tightened around the hilt of her blade.

“We move out in ten minutes.”

Captain Deneva: Swordmistress and the right-hand maiden of Earl Vittchat. She is known for her strict discipline and open contempt towards cruelty. As a Swordmistress, she can learn techniques from a blade if the weapon was wielded by other maidens before her. Her second ability allows her to summon or dismiss weapons on demand.

Earl Vittchat: Direct ruler of Balet, and overseer of the South. He played host to Rick, Monica, and Dia. Currently he is the one overseeing the bulk of the Otherworlders, as they're attempting to fully adapt to life in this world while staying in Balet.

Royal Knight Captain: The highest rank a maiden can achieve within the kingdom, there are only four such maidens, each in service of an earl save the fourth who serves the king directly.

The Prisoner (Embla): A Malumari, daughter of the Warlock Dagmar. She was the unofficial strong-arm of the rebel group, and its most powerful asset on the field. Her specialty lies in her physical capabilities combined with her power to disrupt an enemy's elemental energy.

Dagmar (Warlock): Embla's mother. Last we saw of her, she'd been seeded and turned into Sivent's newest subject, all will and capacity for cognition overtaken by the parasitic plant.

May Brown: Human and current test subject of Sivent. May was one of Rick's students and had come into this world alongside the others. While on her way to Balet, the convoy was attacked by Embla and the other wildlings, and May was kidnapped. At the time, Dagmar had insisted Barry not be informed of this, thus May was kept a secret in the palace's dungeons.