
[050] [Power]

Rick stood at the city wall, eyes lingering on the forest in the distance, his mind a storm of thoughts. The sky almost seemed to mimic his mood, clouds had been growing and darkening overhead.

There was a threat of rain lingering in the air.

Despite how peaceful it all looked, they were under attack.

The assault had been taking place before he'd taken over the tiny city.

Their enemy had either found or created a bizarre parasitic plant that could infect maidens. The ferals had demonstrated suicidal levels of relentless aggression. And by all accounts, the Archangel they'd met in the library appeared to be the pinnacle of the process.

Attempting to wrap his head around it all felt... daunting.

They'd utilized the ferals to isolate Sinco from the rest of the kingdom with an artificial feral rush. The same rush served the dual purpose of acting like a siege on the city, cutting them off from their own farms.

By all accounts, it should have been a certain victory.

"They only made it infectious afterwards."

It made sense in a way. They needed the city weakened, but standing. That's where the Vampires fit into the equation, sabotaging it from within. However, Rick had thrown a wrench in those plans by virtue of stumbling face-first into it.

"They killed the healers." His hands gripped the stone wall with white knuckles, gazing at the newly budding farms. "They assumed we wouldn't take precautions against an infection..."

They'd been forced to alter their strategy, possibly devising a way to deal with the infection before the entire city turned into a useless pile of rubble. How that would work, he didn't have a clue.

Their second failure.

The feeling burned in his gut as if he'd swallowed a red-hot ball of lead.

"And now they've tried to assassinate us." Slowly, he turned to face Dia, the Rapha who had donned the brown and white dress of a healer, salvaged from the lord's manor.

"Please tell me they failed."

Her smile was genuine, yet bitter. "Monica and Kiara are stable, but they don't wake."

He leveled his gaze with hers. "I need more than that."

"Without more information, I can't-."

"Then make an educated guess."

Dia clenched her fists and nodded, swallowing. "Assuming the strain found in the ferals and in Monica is the same, the plant consumes elemental energy to grow... and if threatened, it will do so explosively." She took a shaky breath. "To the best of my knowledge, Monica was infected two, maybe three days before we found her. It planted itself next to her metacarpal and grew from there. When she sensed it, she tried to rip it out. And the plant... reacted."

"It knocked her out?"

"No." She shook her head. "Even now, it's pumping small amounts of adrenaline into her system. I suspect Monica realized it needed her energy to grow and put herself in a state close to hibernation to slow its progress."

Rick took a long, shuddering breath. "What about you? Or the others? Is anyone else infected?"

The healer shook her head. "Eva, Kiara, and I were the only ones infected. Fortunately, it seems to take a few days before it can attune to the victim's energy. It was safely removed."

"A damn Succubus plant." He wanted to laugh. "The crops?"

"I've been checking the farm's output regularly since the feral attack."

That was a relief, but he could sense the tension in Dia. "Can it be removed from Monica?"

"Not easily."

Of course, otherwise she'd have brought the good news by now. "Explain."

"The vines haven't reached any vital organs, but they've embedded themselves into her arms muscles in a way that is... uncomfortably similar to how nerves would. I fear the plant might have control over Monica's arms while she's unconscious." She visibly shuddered at the proclamation. "Assuming the vines will attempt to protect themselves if threatened..."

That seemed like a recipe for a massacre.

"Formulate a plan, prepare for the worst."

"Yes, sir," she declared with a determined nod.

"And Kiara?"

The determination faltered. "Physically, she's been healed, but she's a Succubus. In many ways, her biology is closer to an elemental stone than a living being. There's only so much that can be done through standard healing." She stepped closer, reaching out and grasping his hand with her own. "She will be fine given time, but... Rick, you cannot shoulder this on your own."

His breath hitched, head snapping to look at her as his body coiled and stiffened. He realized his hands were shaking, grip so tight his whole arms ached, jaw clenched tightly enough that the pain traveled all the way to the crown of his head. "I should have realized what was happening sooner."

She tightened her grip in response. "Please."

Her plea was soft, using her other hand to draw him nearer.

Her movements were so gentle, akin to handling glass. All because she possessed the strength to break his bones with a simple strike.

Rick took a long, trembling breath, nodding. "You're right," he conceded, inhaling and exhaling slowly. "I..." His eyes were caught in her purple gaze, the maiden eliminating the space between them. "I detest this feeling of being... powerless."

Dia made a sound of agreement and embraced him, resting her head against his chest and squeezing as if attempting to expel all the bad things. She had also discovered how to utilize the bond in some manner, and was conveying her feelings through it as best as she could. Concern mingled with warmth and affection, the emotions heaped onto him like a pile of oversized, warm blankets.

His effort to escape was destined to fail; the only thing he could do was succumb to it, reciprocating the embrace, pressing his cheek against the crown of her head.

"I've been learning how to fight," she whispered. "I thought it would help, that it'd..." Her voice caught in her throat. "When that... that THING showed up, she said she'd rip you limb by limb, flay you alive, do so many horrible, horrible things." She squeezed. "No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't even wound her. All I could think was that I was thankful you weren't there, that the others would get you out and escape, that... that..."

Her body shuddered, and he remained there, embracing her.

"Dia-"

She was trembling, shaking like a leaf.

"Why did you come for me?" she asked in a whisper.

The answer came naturally.

"Because I love you."

Dia choked. "That... that's unfair," she managed, not stopping him from pulling her back into his arms. "I'm the maiden, I... I'm the one who's supposed to rescue you."

He chuckled softly. "You've done that so many times; I had to repay you somehow."

The healer softly nudged him away, drying the corner of her eyes as she turned to look at the forest near the horizon. "I was ten winters old when I experienced my first feral rush. I'd been learning a bit about healing, but not enough to help. There were so many injured maidens that wouldn't make it..."

He frowned. "You were a child."

"The only thing I could do was stand by them, give them comfort in their final moments," she whispered. "Do you know what their last words would be?"

Rick shook his head. "Can't say I do."

"***Did they make it?***" She turned to look at him, purple eyes glimmering. "It was the one thing that would consume them in that final moment, concern for their human." She took a shuddering breath. "That is what it means to be a maiden," she said. "Urtha and Eva are maidens, and..." She hesitated, grimacing as if having tasted something bitter. "... and I cannot deny Kiara is every bit a maiden too."

"Dia..."

"I refuse to outlive you." Her shoulders straightened, jaw clenched, her chest filled with pride. They locked gazes; she was challenging him to deny her. He knew she wouldn't falter in this; determination shone out of her like the sun.

"Then what am I supposed to do?" He asked.

The Rapha's features softened. "Your human best."

His fists clenched. "And if it's not enough?"

She smiled, taking his hands again, voice shaking with emotion. "No matter what the result may be, I am and will always be proud to be bonded to you." Bowing low, she pulled slightly, kissing his wrist, calming herself with a slow breath. "My Lord."

His breath hitched, feet rooted to the spot as the healer turned to leave. He watched her go, expecting the impossible weight to fall on his shoulders, to hear those damn words of the man whose authority he'd stolen through force and guile and murder.

But there was... nothing.

Just the whispering wind.

It took him a minute to catch himself back, put his thoughts in order, and convince himself he couldn't just stay there indefinitely. He marched down the wall and towards the city. Eight Orcs spread out in a protective formation, divided into groups of two and flanking him in every direction as he moved.

Urtha was nearby, but trying to avoid him at the same time.

Rick could sense her, just at the periphery of his awareness. She bubbled with uncharacteristic uncertainty. For a three-meter-tall wall of green muscle, she was impressively sneaky. He wanted to talk to her, but he felt it would be better to give her a chance to gather her courage first.

He'd talk to her, the conversation was overdue. But there were other things that needed to be done.

For one, the assassins had escaped without a trace. Gone. The only evidence left to prove they'd been there to begin with were the half-dozen Dark Elf corpses. They couldn't have escaped through the passageway they'd used to enter, as the tribe had come in through there.

Eva was diligently investigating the mansion and its enchantments from top to bottom in search of the answer. The risk of a new attack was too likely for them to ignore, and if

the enemy had some easy way to be transported into the city, then they might as well have no walls.

The second concern was security from the threats within. The atmosphere in the city had changed after the attack; he could see far more glares than just a week ago. One of the three powerbrokers of the city had been murdered while being his guest. By default, that meant everyone in her camp resented him.

The possibility of a blood feud was real, but none made a move because there was still a singular unifying threat waiting outside the city's walls.

The most powerful fighter in the city had been left out of commission, and the Lady, his "wife," had abruptly stopped making public appearances under the pretext of illness.

It was the scent of blood.

Even if neither of the remaining power-brokers lifted a finger, the locals could very well sell him out the moment they found out that the "threat" was wildlings and not ferals. As far as anyone would be concerned, they had done exactly that once already.

His only choice was to bet on the possibility of them not doing so.

That was why he'd pressured Whitney into training the militia, and also why he'd made sure to place as many maidens bonded to him in that militia. It was no guarantee they wouldn't turn on him, but at this point, he was running on prayers and duct tape.

They swung spears and ran in small groups, conducting mock battles against imaginary opponents who outclassed them in every sense. He could sense their gazes on him, the crowd of maidens carrying an unspoken question through the bond. Their attention followed him, watchful and hesitant.

It was a simmering nervous anticipation, like someone waiting for a storm.

Rick and his escorts marched past.

Food was another problem, one that was being solved slowly. Day by day, the farms expanded thanks to the protection the tribe provided from the ferals. It was a promise kept that soon they'd have enough to stop the rationing.

In that, at least, he felt some pride that they were making progress.

Something caught his attention as he approached the house he'd been using as his home.

It was a familiar rotund man, accompanied by four other maidens.

And a box, one large enough that their whole group would have fit inside.

Rollo's expression lit up as soon as he spotted Rick, spreading his arms wide. "Ah, my Lord! So happy to see you! I feared I'd spend all day waiting, not that it wouldn't have been worth it. Your guards had refused to elaborate on where I could find you."

Rick eyed Rollo for a moment. "I'm not in the mood for pleasantries, if you don't mind. Could we cut to the chase?" He commented bluntly, watching the maidens surrounding the man stiffen and turn their attention more squarely at the Orcs.

Rollo pulled at the collar of his shirt, coughing once to clear his throat. "Certainly, my Lord. I thought to personally deliver your first request. It was a task far more complex than I'd initially thought. I can see the wisdom of-

Request?

Rick's gaze shot to the box. "You finished the compressor." So soon? Did some equivalent already exist in this world's heterogeneous technological mess? Or had the magic of this world made it easier? "And can it compress the required amount? Continuously?"

Rollo lit up. "Certainly! Its output is that of four hundred compressed air units, and if the container is sealed, it can compress its contents to three times that! You will need maidens to aid in its functioning, however, as-

"You two." Rick spun to face his guards. "They will tell you how to lift this box and how to carry it. Follow their instructions to the letter; the content is not to break, bend, or be damaged in any way." He glanced at the others. "Everyone else, follow me, and Rollo, keep up."

"My Lord?" Rollo abruptly sprang to chase after Rick, stubby short legs shuffling against cobblestone as he hurried.

"Did you write down the specifications and operation of the machine?" He asked, snatching the paper out of the man's grasp and skimming over it.

He was almost running, eyes barely paying attention to the numbers and rules. Uptime, maintenance, output... the units weren't familiar to him, but Rollo had added an index of descriptions explaining what each unit meant.

Standardized, clean.

The conversion to metric was rough, but a rough estimate left him feeling confident it was possible.

A door had opened that he'd thought closed, perhaps one that might remain closed for months, even years. This world possessed magic, literal magic; there was not much need for advanced science, as their medicine alone put his world's to shame without breaking a sweat. Who needed to learn about cancer if it could be treated with a simple spell?

Formulas upon formulas crowded the forefront of his mind, desperately urging him to prioritize them, to choose them over the others. Reactants, coefficients, products, formulas.

There was so much to be done, so much that could be accomplished.

I'm waking up to ash and dust

His heart pounded against his chest. He'd avoided the "laboratory" that had been made out for his use. Why would he want to toy with a basic chemistry set, creating pretty colored flames, when he had literal people starving to worry about?

Rick felt the urge to laugh and cry, snarl and scream, and roar.

He ran, six of the Orcs keeping pace, while the other two trailed behind carrying the machine, slowing for Rollo's stubby flabby legs.

I wipe my brow and I sweat my rust.

They greeted the empty warehouse by pushing its heavy doors open with a bang.

It had been a building he'd requested the tribe construct for him at the city's edge, closer to the port. A spacious, tall, open-plan area with tables and chairs that had been gathering dust. There were boxes of materials he'd requested, which had also lain there, collecting dust.

Waiting.

But that would no longer be the case.

I'm breathing in the chemicals.

"You and you, move those boxes to the wall, open the space over at the edge." He began to bark orders, turning to the other Orcs. "Call in whatever Hobgoblins of the tribe are available, we'll need fire."

Water, air, pressure, heat, and an iron catalyst. Mix at the exact specifications to create ammonia.

I'm breaking in, shaping up, then checking out on the prison bus.

It could be used to make fertilizer, to strengthen production. But no.

They were threatening him and his.

So he would take that ammonia, react it with oxygen and a platinum-rhodium catalyst to make nitric acid. He would mix it with more ammonia to create ammonium nitrate.

And he would level buildings with a spark.

Lightning rippled overhead, the thunder following soon after. His eyes roamed the empty space, mentally checking the list of parts he had, and that he was missing.

He'd only need to test the machines until the process was fully standardized.

This is it, the apocalypse.

If this world wanted to bring war to his doorstep, if it wanted to make him choke on their powers and magic, if they wanted to come after the people he cared about...

Then he was going to show them how humans did war.

[051] [The Line (Embla)]

Embla had been born a Dark Elf; the rebellion was all she'd ever known. By the time she'd been born, there was a reward for every head belonging to someone of the Dark Elf genus. She'd been raised by her mother, the Lady, a Warlock. They'd traveled the land in secret, seeking out others of their kind and any maiden with a desire to drive a blade into the king's eye.

During those years, her mother had been the sole reason for their survival. It was her power that warded off ferals and hid them from the eyes of the king. No protection was perfect, and Embla had learned the taste of steel from a very early age.

So she'd fought, she'd learned, and she'd grown. Now, she was a Malumari, having reached the very pinnacle of her genus, having transitioned into this form nearly four winters prior. It had taken well over a decade of effort to attain this level, earning her position as the leader of the rebellion.

The name of her species alone would cause any would-be spell-slingers to flee in terror. On the battlefield, it was she who'd lead her sisters. She would be the storm that would shatter any gate, and she would be the shield that protected their retreat.

Her armor, heavier than the weight of any two humans combined, could withstand blows that would fell weaker maidens. Her ax, twice that weight, could breach any defense. Embla had engaged in and fought more battles than she could count, and throughout her years, she'd vanquished foes that by all accounts should have been her end.

There was no threat she would not face for her cause.

And as she stood guard over the doors, she prayed that she would not have to step through them and confront what lay within.

Some part of her wished to claim everything had changed when they'd encountered the pureblood humans, but the truth was that things had begun changing ever since she'd become Malumari.

Her mother had urged them to return to her birthplace, the very kingdom that had chased her away before Embla's time. It had been in pursuit of the Lost Elves, a civilization that, according to the Lady, had once been an empire in its own right. Their

search had led them to ancient and forgotten fortresses, structures made from living trees that continued to grow to this day.

They'd made it their home, gathering others to their cause, searching for a way to awaken those that lay in the Elven Grove. But there had been a second reason, from what Embla could gather; her mother had received a boon from someone of the Elven race decades prior. A gift that had prolonged her life by a considerable degree.

A boon that was running out.

Her only salvation lay in awakening the ever-slumbering Elves, an impossible dream... until Barry joined their ranks and revealed he had not come alone. The naïve, pure flame-headed human had not succeeded in awakening the Green Empress, the Elf Queen who had once ruled these lands long before any of the current kingdoms or empires even existed.

But he had succeeded in awakening one of the High Elves.

A High Elf who had been alive during the First War against humanity.

It had been a cause for great celebration, the High Elf had been born by the hand of The Maker Himself.

The maiden might have been jarred by the state of the world, but she had proven invaluable right away. Not only did she possess long-lost knowledge of how maidens could more reliably traverse to the pinnacle of their respective genus', but she also held power over the grand forest and its secrets.

Within a day, she had unlocked parts of the Elven palace that had been lying hidden for centuries. And among the treasures, one of which she had used to become something more powerful.

More horrifying.

"Pinielf" was a name Embla knew; she had read the texts, a maiden breed that was considered "kill on sight" by every nation where maidens were not free. She had thought nothing of it, as one did not sin by merely being born.

She should have heeded Barry's warning, the whispered plea for her to reconsider whom they were allying with. He had seen the hate in those eyes, or perhaps the insanity. But there had been no reason to heed those words then.

They were desperate, cornered; their successful kidnapping of his fellow pureblooded human had drawn the Earl's attention to the forest, and every day his forces approached closer.

Each week, fewer of their sisters returned from patrols, whether captured or killed, no one could be certain. In their desperation, they had welcomed the monster.

Now she remained as still as possible.

Not moving when the screams commenced.

This was her infernal duty, for if any of her sisters took her place, they might not be strong enough to endure the horrors that lay behind those doors. This was the only way she could protect them.

"Embla!" The Lady's voice snapped like a whip, intermingling with the cries of agony and insanity. The Malumari braced herself, gazing at her axe for a fleeting moment of hope, but left it behind as she entered, shutting the doors behind her.

The room had no windows, only stone and wood encased them, the harsh light emanated from pale, cold glow-lights that had been positioned in a grid on the ceiling. Streaks of fresh blood ran in nearly every direction, crimson slowly trickling down the walls.

On one end of the room and covering almost every wall were potted plants, and they would have represented the sole symbol of sanity in this chamber if one were to disregard that the vividly colored vegetation was not growing out of soil, but animal entrails.

Approaching the center was a single large slab of merciless murisium metal. The monster's captive lay there, vine-covered body convulsing and flailing against the wrist-thick enchanted metal in a desperate attempt to break free. The body fought for its own survival; the visible bits of flesh and bone displayed the distinct iridescent glow of radiant power, scorching the vines as they lashed and tried to burrow back into their victim's body, securing themselves in place once more.

Neither her flesh nor the vines seemed to gain the upper hand.

At the end of the table nearest the head stood the Pinielf.

She wore bone-white clothes that covered every inch of her body except for yellowed eyes with red irises that burned with something Embla dared not stare at for too long. A single vine extended from the maiden's shoulder, holding a flower to the "subject's" face.

Even unconscious, her body fought desperately against itself. Though what could be considered "her body" was difficult to determine as vines continuously emerged from every part of her flesh.

It might have been a mercy to kill her, but Embla had seen what White Claw had done to the maiden, and how she had survived.

The Malumari wasn't sure the Archangel was alive, not anymore.

"Stop standing there!"

The Warlock's voice called out over the howls, leaning against a metal chair, holding her staff over the Archangel, pouring every drop of her power into the creature. "Contain her power! Do not allow a drop to escape!"

Embla stepped closer, avoiding the lashing vine. The elemental power was thick, leaving her feeling as if she was walking through a firestorm. Clenching her jaw, her heavy boots thudded as she advanced into the nightmare.

Stretching her arms over her mother's staff, she added her power. Beads of sweat trickled down her neck and back; the Archangel's power was like trying to catch a bolt of lightning or a ray of sunshine. It slipped through her fingers and sought to strike at her with searing force.

Only her heavily enchanted armor kept her unharmed.

But it was her task, and if she failed, her mother would be caught in the storm. Her condition was nearing its limit; such a blow would end her there and then.

"Not much longer," the Pinielf said, voice muffled through the white cloth, the fabric underneath writhing in ways that suggested something other than a mouth beneath.

Red and yellow eyes locked on the monster as she leaned closer, caressing the maiden's cheeks as one would a child. "You must become perfect; you will have your revenge. Just push, push past your limit, become that which your lord desired for you to become." The voice warbled with heavy breaths. "You must kill the human."

"LORD THORLEY!"

The maiden howled, blackened eyes opening as the brilliance of her body transformed into a blinding light. Embla screamed, bracing herself, pouring everything she had to contain the explosive force before it could destroy them all.

And inches beneath her fingers, the maiden's form continued tearing itself, flesh and vines growing over one another and burning off as the power continued to rise. The speed of their own self-annihilation and recovery accelerated with every passing second, until the available energy began to diminish.

Slowly at first, but noticeable after only seconds, the tempest of power died down, until it vanished entirely.

Embla gasped and stumbled back, sweltering and catching her breath. She couldn't look away from the table and the thing on it.

"That... that is no Seraphim," she said, breath caught between horror and shock. She had witnessed a Seraphim once, a battle she'd been forced to flee.

This was not it.

This was a perversion, a plant mimicking the form of a maiden. The vines were compacted with one another so tightly they might look like merely pale green flesh at a glance, but they never calmed, writhing and curling into itself. The same could be said for its four wings, its hair... its eyes.

Embla took another step back.

"She is perfect," the Pinielf said, still caressing the monstrosity as if it were her own child. A kindness the creature did not return, its blackened eyes fixed on Embla with all-consuming attention.

"Will it work?" the Warlock spoke with a pained hiss, leaning heavily on the chair, her grasp too weak to hold her staff.

"She will need rest and time to become fully accustomed to her new power." The flower the Pinielf held drifted back over the face of the... thing, and it slumped as if truly unconscious. "And she will do exactly what we need her to do." An amused chuckle followed. "When her work is done, she will become the seed to your new boon."

The words took a moment to process; Embla lurched forward.

"Mother, you cannot!"

"Silence, would you have me die!?" The Warlock replied with a tired glare.

Embla flinched but didn't relent. "Death would be better than being turned into a monster!"

No, she would not stand for this! She clenched her fists.

"Perhaps you were not taught discipline properly." With the scent of lilacs, the room shuddered, coming to life and slowly moving, as if waiting for a command. "Rest assured, you will not die."

Embla saw the Pinielf through the corner of her eye; the maiden had grown, the white cloth had stretched, wriggling with the same distinctive movements of the accursed vines. She clenched her fists; regardless of her fate, she would ensure the monster would not live to see another day.

"NO!" The Warlock flung herself off the chair, crumpling to her knees in front of the creature disguised as a maiden, bowing her head. "Please forgive my foolish daughter; she does not know the old ways. She does not understand what is at stake."

The Malumari stood frozen, disbelief etched into her face and heart. She growled, anger coiling around her gut.

"The rebellion will accept your aid to conquer Sinco. However, our collaboration ends there."

"Embla!"

"No!" She roared at the Warlock. "If you wish to sell your soul for an accursed life, then I won't stop you. But I will not allow our cause to be turned into... this." She gestured at the table, where the creature lay. "We fight to kill the monsters, not become them."

The red and yellow eyes of the Pinielf gauged her, the creature slowly recovering its form. "That is acceptable, under two conditions." Gloved fingers caressed the body of the unmoving monstrosity. "The pureblooded girl, she is not yet ready to awaken the Empress into the world."

"And the second?"

"I've heard the current ruler of that city is another pureblooded human, of the same world as your... pet."

The leather creaked as her fists tightened. "He killed our sisters; I will see him dead. If you wish him to be alive, then you will have to get to him first."

The Pinielf laughed. "Would you not rather see him suffer? I can arrange for such."

"I wouldn't wish your 'gifts' even upon my worst enemy." Embla's gaze turned to her kneeling mother, and she marched out of the hellish nightmare that was that room.