
[136] [Through Fire](Dia)

DUCK.

Dia hesitated, the feeling within her mind a scream so loud it drowned all thought. She'd barely had time to raise her left arm and thrust with her right before red-hot pain exploded. Armor screamed as it was torn from her left arm, the Rapha thrown backward and into the dirt.

"I hate these things." Throag stared down at the Rapha with a slight scowl, opening and closing her paw, pulling out several metal spikes that had been torn from the armor. "Makes fighting the blood-suckers a pain."

The Sabertooth lumbered over Dia, staring down at her with a smirk. "I thought you were a warrior, but all I'll need is one hand."

Anger flared; she lashed out with her rapier, getting back up to her feet. Dia thrust, twirled, and twisted the razor-sharp blade in a flurry of steel. But despite her massive unarmored size, the Sabertooth avoided every single one, amusement glinting in her golden eyes.

"BACK UP!"

Rick's command startled Dia into jumping backward, obedience faster than thought.

She realized, a moment later, how Throag's arm had changed position.

"Tch." The Sabertooth flickered her gaze at Rick. "That makes three times you react too soon. It's not psychic... Whatever trick you're using, it's annoying."

"Monica could beat Dia with just one arm," Rick said, having moved away from the immediate vicinity of the fight. "If you use more than that, then that means you're weaker than her."

Shame burned in the Rapha at the admission, but there was no time to dwell on it.

GO LEFT.

It wasn't truly words, but more akin to an overwhelming sensation that she had to move.

With just her right hand, she swung wildly at the incoming claw. She'd barely nicked the Sabertooth, stumbling but not losing her balance. Realizing the feelings coming over her came from Rick, she moved to more readily interpret them while Throag kept pushing.

High, backstep, right.

The murisium rapier chimed violently as Dia barely parried another crushing blow. Her arms trembled under the strain, muscles burning from the exertion of the relentless one-sided assault. Her movements flowed, seeking to lead the incoming force away from herself, but her opponent was a Sabertooth.

Middle, sidestep, thrust.

The claw descended like a meteor, claws tearing away at the spikes in Dia's armor from the narrow miss; the Rapha had barely leaned away enough to avoid the blow, thrusting forward and aiming at the axillary artery in the armpit. The Sabertooth lowered her elbow, slapping the blade low enough it only scratched her ribs.

"What's wrong, Throag? Having trouble?" Rick taunted, hiding his nervousness well.

The Rapha's breath came in ragged gasps. Every move, every step, every blow required her to put everything into it, just to be able to keep up. Using the time her Lord had earned her, she immediately patched up the bleeding on her off-arm.

Step-forward, feint, pull back, chest.

With not a word, Throag swung her massive claw with a casual ease and speed that turned the limb into a blur. Dia stepped forward all the same, launching an upward thrust and pulling back. Her blade was swatted downward with enough force she nearly let go, but managed to twist her arm and raise the tip back up, pushing it towards Throag's chest.

The Sabertooth took a step back, leaving the blade barely a foot away from her chest.

The feline stared at the blade, then at Dia, and slowly, at Rick.

"You're doing tricks again," she said.

Dia was still reeling, her head spinning in a jumble of thoughts. She had trained against Monica for hours on end, and she had never made the Sabertooth take a step back the way Throag just had.

Frustration welled in her chest. Had she been doing something wrong all this time?

She wanted to look at Rick, to ask what was going on, but there was no time.

Pull back, brace.

The first attack was a quick jab, followed by an even faster one, knocking her rapier arm back. Her half-step back turned into quick backpedaling to regain her balance. She pushed her blade forward to slow down her opponent, but the Sabertooth had anticipated the attack, leaping forward and grasping Dia's wrist.

She heard the crunch.

But it was Rick who screamed.

The sound shocked Throag, his head snapping towards him. In the fraction of a second that followed, Dia used the opportunity to summon a scalpel with her free hand and slice through the Sabertooth's tendons.

The next instant, Dia was flying, rolling on the ground, her mind spinning several seconds after her body had come to a halt. She couldn't breathe, yet she felt no pain. The ringing in her ears was replaced by hacking sounds, not her own, but Rick's.

Her human was on his knees, clutching his chest, barely able to make a sound.

An odd sense of clarity washed over her, devoid of emotions, panic, or pain. She understood that Rick was taking everything. Dia took the chance he was buying her to look into herself and noticed the heavy damage; her rib cage was caved in, the armor bent and having punctured a lung, with shattered bone pieces all over. With a swell of power, she began to stitch herself back together, one crucial injury at a time.

"I can't have you dying." Throag stood over the human, his tail flicking him over to his back. "You aren't taking her wounds away... what are you doing?"

"I..." Dia croaked out with healed lungs, struggling up to her feet, blood pouring out of her closing wounds, flesh closing around the metal to stem the bleeding. "I haven't lost." With every passing second, Rick's breathing stabilized, and she hastily urged her body to patch itself back into place.

Slowly, she raised the rapier with her left hand, her right hand still dangling as shattered bone began to mend.

The Sabertooth looked her over, then scoffed. "A dead maiden walking is not worth my time." She reached towards Rick, shadows flickering around her.

Dia lunged, sabertip first.

"STOP!" Rick jumped.

There was a solid thud.

The world froze.

Dia looked up at the Sabertooth claw that had come to a complete stop inches from Rick's head as well as her own. Death but a flick away.

"That makes four." Throag snarled, pulling her claw away lest she hurt the human.

Warm wetness in her hand drew Dia's gaze downward, at her own sword embedded into his stomach.

"Dia, look at me." Rick's face was pale, his voice trembling. "I'm ok, this is nothing." One hand grasped her own, keeping the blade in place, preventing it from being pulled out and causing him to bleed out. "I need you to do something for me."

She could see it in his eyes, the fear, not for himself, but for her. It hurt worse than the knowledge she'd harmed her human. He wanted her to run because she was weak.

It was as if something had stabbed through her core.

Despite everything she'd tried, despite everything she'd done, she was weak.

If that was the case... she grasped his hand, clenching it tightly, refusing to let go.

"Heal him already," the Sabertooth growled. "Or he'll die before he can be useful."

The bond twanged at the words—a chord that demanded her undivided attention. She was going to lose; the Sabertooth would take him away, and in his injured state, he would die.

Rick was going to die because she was too weak to protect him.

"No."

The word shook her.

She'd said 'No' before, to maidens, to humans, even to Rick. But this was different; she was refusing something far more fundamental, something far more important. She was refusing to heal someone, no, not just someone. The most important person in the world.

Like a wall with its foundations unearthed, everything began to crumble.

"No," she repeated through gritted teeth, turning her glare up at the Sabertooth. "I'll kill you first."

The floodgates opened; anger and desperation flowed through her with the speed of a lightning bolt. Shoving Rick aside, she jumped at the Sabertooth, scalpel in hand. The feline gave a savage grin, but it quickly turned to confusion and panic as the healer's hands blurred.

In a flash of movement, the paw that had been raised to protect herself lost a digit, then two, then three. The scalpels danced, cutting through fur, flesh, and tendons, stripping each finger down to a nub. Even then, the Sabertooth managed to thrust her bleeding paw in a savage punch against Dia's shoulder.

Flung backwards, metal digging into flesh, bone shattering, but she was on her feet in an instant.

Throag swore, only now noticing how close the tribe was to catching up, glaring daggers at the healer. "That's enough playing around." She moved towards Rick, shadows spreading all around her.

Dia lunged again, the power within her exploding outward in a blast of gray light, vanishing the shadows. At the same time, pain exploded out of her back, wings of bone bursting into existence and pushing her faster towards the Sabertooth.

"No!" she cried out, sinking scalpel into tendons, ripping through the wrists of the already injured paw. Her uninjured hand moved faster than either of them could keep track of, ripping and tearing apart through flesh, cutting all the way to the bone.

"I. Said. Enough!"

Throag's knee came up against Dia's chest with brutal force.

Then hammered her down with a devastating elbow strike.

Dia smashed against the ground, spitting blood.

Shattered spine in four places, ribcage, femur. Three ruptured organs, heavy internal hemorrhaging, inability to breathe, and she was entering cardiac arrest.

Death imminent.

She lay there, watching as the Sabertooth approached Rick, shadows growing. "N-No..." Dia wheezed, fingers burying into the ground, pulling herself forward. "N-no... Rick..."

Another blast of gray light made the darkness waver.

Her bones cracked and popped, fissures forcefully knit back together, heart squeezed into compliance. Nothing was healed or mended; they were forced into place. Dragging

herself closer, her breathing began to stabilize, feeling returned to her legs, healing magic pouring through her. An attempt to get back up failed, her leg giving out before she could stand up.

Throag stopped, eyes going wide, fear that was quickly hidden behind sternness.

“Dia, was it?” the Sabertooth said. “I’ll remember that name.”

The darkness swirled around her and Rick.

His eyes met Dia’s, his mind reaching out with two words.

Protect Sinco.

Then, they were gone.

Dia screamed.

She screamed and with every bone that was healed, she struck the ground harder.

She screamed herself hoarse.

And then screamed some more.

Too late, she regained the ability to stand back up.

Too late, she regained the strength to walk again.

“Head nurse.” The Pollita approached; it took Dia a second to remember the girl’s name was Maxine. The little maiden offered a cup filled with a familiar golden juice. “You are hurt, you must drink,” the Pillbug maiden said, shaking in her boots, face still caked in dirt, marred by the tears running down her cheeks.

Dia didn’t speak; she just nodded, taking the cup, drinking it, loathing the pleasant reenergizing feeling coursing through her. She looked around at the tribe, at the horde, at the militia, and at her own nurses. They had gathered there, waiting, watching. Fear and concern clear in their eyes, gaze constantly flickering at the bony wing-shaped protrusions upon Dia’s back.

“Thank you,” she croaked out, returning the cup, patting the girl’s head.

Quietly, she turned back towards the others, silently followed by them. Not a word was spoken as she approached, as she made her way through the protective earthworks, and as she stopped in front of the prisoners.

Everyone had become deathly quiet.

Dia locked eyes with the Viscount, the man looking back up at her hesitantly.

“Order your knights to fight the Vampires,” she commanded. “They are under my command until they’re all dead. After that, my Master’s offer remains, even if none of you deserve it.”

The young man next to him blustered, “You will treat your superiors with respect!”

The next moment he toppled, clutching at his throat as it bled out.

The scalpel in Dia’s hand glinted with a crimson droplet.

She had not blinked or looked away.

The older human’s face had grown pale, his stoicism shifting under the choking coughs of his son drowning in his own blood.

No one moved, no one said a thing.

The only sound was that of a dying man, slowly growing weaker.

The Viscount cracked. “I agree.” Closing his eyes tightly, he glanced at the bleeding human. “But my son... He does not deserve this!”

“You knew the price for coming.” Her fury burned as she looked at these nobles, at the people responsible for every preventable death that now lay on their shoulders.

“Not like this!” He whispered hoarsely, lowering his head, falling to his knees. “Please, not like this.”

She stared at him for another moment. Without a word, Dia moved closer to the dying man, passing a single digit over the wound. The laceration was mended, and the human retched, vomiting blood, coughing for air, gasping as his faculties were returned to him.

She turned towards the west, in the direction she could feel Rick had been taken in, the growing distance clenching around her heart like chains.

Clenching her jaw tightly, she turned to the others. Though the Orcs met her gaze with determination, it was in the eyes of the militia and the horde that Dia saw that same spark that’d embedded within her.

“We will destroy the invaders.”

Protect Sinco.

”No prisoners, no survivors, no mercy.”

Each one of them nodded.

First, save the city.

Second, regroup and rearm.

Then, they'd go get Rick back.

And destroy everything that got in their way.