
[109] [A spoonful of medicine (Dia)]

It was an unmitigated disaster.

By Dia's estimates, the wildlings had roughly fifty humans available to them before the rampage began. Now there was only one: Barry. And that one human wasn't in the best condition either, his body saturated with so much nature-element his mouth had fungi growing inside.

"You have those Politas well trained, Head-Healer Dia." One of the healers from the knight's group approached. "Would you mind if I observed your work on the patient? My name is Bea, I'm currently recovering my breath and could do with some pointers."

"I'm no Head-Healer." Dia answered, gesturing for her to come closer. "You're in the Earl's books, right? This might help with all the purebloods you've got over at Balet."

"Those were my thoughts exactly. Nothing serious has emerged yet, but-

"It's a matter of time." The two Raphas nodded at one another, sharing a small if cordial smile. "Purebloods have extremely low tolerance to elemental energy, healing in-and-of itself needs to be done at a far slower pace if not intermittently. Though I bet you girls in the big city have yourselves someone competent to suck the energy out."

If there was irony to be found in Dia wishing Kiara was here, she did not acknowledge it.

Removing enough of the elemental energy from the pureblood human to keep him alive was a challenge, one she readily recruited Eva to assist in. They couldn't just suck all the blood out of him, though, especially since nature energy preferred places like the lungs and intestinal tract instead. It presented a different challenge than blood-elemental saturation, and Dia was forced to fight a game of trying to kill the things that aren't human that had grown too much, but only so much that it wouldn't hurt the host.

If this were a maiden, Dia could just blast everything with targeted over-healing until they died by their own tumors. But no, humans couldn't survive having everything "not human" inside them dying, their mutualism involved a whole host of smaller, weaker things inside them.

The process was easier and harder at the same time, but overall definitely more annoying. That she wasn't bonded to this pureblooded human made this more of a learning experience than a panicked one.

"Your energy work is impressive." Bea commented, keeping close enough to watch but retaining a respectful distance from the patient. "How can you manage such fine control?"

"I just use several small healing proboscises rather than one larger one. A moment." She glanced over her shoulder at the other wildlings that were still being pulled in. "You, green-hair, the patient has visible green veins, she goes to the sleepers."

Roughly a third of the wildlings had been infected by the parasitic plant. Only a few of them had reached advanced stages of development, those were pulled aside and knocked out properly. There was nothing they could do for them currently, the process of removing the parasite was tedious and slow, and at the latter phases it would take weeks.

It was time they did not have available. The tribe would keep them knocked out, restrained, and ready to be brought to Sinco for proper purging.

The knights did not like this.

As far as Dia was concerned, the knights could eat dirt.

"Not a Head-Healer... could've fooled me." Bea teased.

"I can barely keep one human alive." Dia waved her off a second time. "Head-Healer Astral could've done something like this in her sleep."

Bea shot her a look. "You mean Royal Guard Captain Astral, the 'Winged Goddess'? Sorry, I thought the requirement to be a Head-Healer was to have a team of healers at your beck and call."

Now Dia scoffed. "Those girls have a long way to go before they're proper healers." She shot Bea a look. "Didn't your break finish a minute ago?"

They had plenty of work ahead of them.

The tribe had not been gentle in getting their hands on patients to rescue from the pandemonium that'd been unleashed throughout the whole place. More often than not the Orcs would break into fights with them while others forced the infected into submission. All sides had lost a few of their numbers, certainly more than if the knights and tribe had been working together.

But in the end, the one with the least casualties had been the tribe, and Dia could accept that. What was surprising was how little bad blood had emerged out of this.

The moment Deneva had given the order, the knights had switched to assisting in every step of the process. If they held ill intentions, they kept them well and truly buried. Meanwhile, the tribe had shown some weird form of respect towards the knights. If Sheel's words were anything to go by, it seemed the tribe would happily "have another go", but were willing to put that aside for the good of the tribe.

Meanwhile, the wildlings were mostly... shattered.

The return of Embla might have given them something to rally around, but the Malumari had glued herself to Barry's side. Next to her were the Tenebrin and the feralborn hound. All three maidens under the watchful gaze of the captain herself.

The wildlings had been on the losing side from the start. First the Earl hunted them down, then the Pinielf set them up to implode, and now they found themselves alive solely out of the kindness of their enemies.

To claim the situation was complicated would've been an overstatement. It was as simple as it could be: either they helped the tribe to get Rick back, or they'd end up on the spot they'd been rescued from.

"You're that student from the Crone, aren't you?" Bea had approached Dia during their next break. So far it had been a whole day's worth of healing, and there was probably a whole second day ahead of them.

Dia wanted to run and get Rick back ASAP, but it would be worthless if they went with everyone being nearly dead to begin with.

"No such thing as students, only dirt, worms, and slightly better dirt." Dia shook her head, trying to suppress the memories of the brutal training methods of the matron that'd been called 'walking nightmare.'

Emptying the bottle of water over her head, she rubbed her face to get rid of some of the wariness.

"She paraded your report to the newer generation, kept telling them about how the author was this healer who still can't do proper cursive."

With a groan, Dia sank a little further into the chair, covering her face and trying not to scream out. She'd known her penmanship was off, she should've used the flatter desk from inside the Lord's manor.

“Then she hung it in her office.”

“What!?” She did a double take. “Excuse me, what? She hung it? On the Wall of Wonders?”

Bea nodded, giving her a wink. “That’s the one.”

Dia leaned back, taking a long sip from her water. “Huh.”

The Wall of Wonders, a relic from the years of her life when she couldn’t even fathom what the difference was between high-strung and low-strung healing spells. It was meant to be some sort of impossible place, some sort of proof that the Crone’s impossible standards could be, somehow, met. Maidens just didn’t get their names on that wall, whoever did might as well have been a myth.

“You don’t seem that elated.” Bea commented idly.

She... wasn’t.

She was thinking about Rick, about Sinco, about the knights and the tribe and the wildlings. There were a thousand and one things to be done, to be finished. A name on a wall just wasn’t what it had been.

“I lost my human during that attack. Five years down the drain.” The other Rapha leaned back a little. “Just trying to think of positive things. You know. Maybe after this my new owner will be cuter.”

“I... guess I wish you best of luck.” The words felt so odd coming from her lips. No, Dia realized the odd one wasn’t here.

Bea had just lost her human, someone she’d spent more time with than Dia had with Rick. Yet the reaction was so... mild. So passive, accepting, stale, as if she were nothing but a leaf being dragged by the current of events around her.

Was this really the kind of person she wanted to be? The sense of repulsion felt off. It was so completely unthinkable to look at a fellow healer and just... refuse that. Because Bea would not have been able to save Rick, to stand where Dia now stood.

“I need to handle some things.” Dia quickly said, waving her off. “Keep up the good work.”

“Same.”

With the parting, Dia made a quick check-up round to confirm none of the patients had complications her team couldn’t handle, and then went straight towards the “floor” the

tribe had assigned as their own. Most of the Orcs were there, loudly snoring away, getting as much rest as they could at this late hour. Their large green bodies piled on top of one another like a mound promising to crush anyone that tried to join in.

Yet there was a room, tucked away in a corner, with a dim light.

It led to one of the private rooms, where the others were.

Urtha, Monica, and Eva.

“Planning something?”

“Just couldn’t sleep.” Urtha shrugged.

“Angry.” Monica muttered, glaring at the magelight.

“I’ll rest once we set out.” Eva added.

Dia nodded along. “Situation?”

“Not much has changed. Deneva and Embla are committed, so far as we can expect them to be.” Eva broke out. “The knights are working out how to adapt to the defenses we might face, Embla’s sharing as much as she knows, but...” Her red eyes lingered on Monica.

“It boils down to Deneva and Monica buying everyone else the time they need to get into position,” Urtha said. “Until we finish that climb, we’re just hogs on a hill waiting for the Neigix. We have fancy tricks to not make it too one-sided, but that’s about it. Either we get up there or we don’t.”

Their gazes turned to Monica, the feline was glaring at her shaking claws.

Eva made a motion at the door conjuring a small spell, and causing it to gently close, sealing them into the room. “If worst comes to worst, we use the others as shields on our path to get Rick out of there.” The Vampire spoke with a low whisper. “The tribe included.”

“I can’t allow that.” Urtha shot a dirty look at Eva. “We’re bonded to Rick, yes, his survival is our priority, it will always be. But I do not believe his life is at risk, not to that degree, not-”

“You believe there’s enough wiggle room for you to decide.” Eva spoke hastily, expression darkening. “He’s at the hands of that monster. If he survives, then it might very well end up-”

“Don’t.” Dia cut her off. “They didn’t kill him, that means Rick will survive, Rick will live, and Rick’s wish is to prioritize the tribe. We will not burn them, doing so will only mean Rick will die at their hands later.”

It was a pitfall, one intentionally designed to cut off Eva’s and Monica’s venues of argumentation. Dia had been trained for this, it was one of the core precepts of keeping your own bond under control: if you convinced yourself the impossible was possible, then the bond had nothing to grasp at.

Rick’s survival was assured because he was her human.

Eva faltered a little. “Dia, you can’t seriously claim-”

“You are a maiden, you are no longer human.” She snapped, cutting her off. “Your mind is no longer human, your instincts are not human. You have aspects of yourself that are human, like any maiden would have, but the bond and things pertaining to your partner’s survival is not one of them. Believe Rick will survive, believe it because it is the single most powerful truth you can use to defend yourself against the instincts from your bond. If you falter in this belief then you become panicked and betray those closest to you.”

Her eyes lingered on Monica, the feline bit her lip but said nothing.

The tribe understood the things Monica had done had been to try and protect Rick. But it had been Dia who’d shifted through the corpses of those who’d been left open to attack because Monica had spent her efforts trying to run away.

There was no shame in a mistake, but this was not one she’d allow the Sabertooth to repeat.

“So long as there is the tiniest sliver of hope, of a chance, that Rick will survive, then believe he will survive.” She got a nod out of Urtha as she said this, keeping her eyes on Eva and Monica. “It isn’t logical, it doesn’t need to be. It is faith. If you think you can’t rescue him, then think he can rescue himself.”

So long as there was the tiniest sliver of opportunity that he would live, then it was assured within Dia’s mind. There was no room for “perhaps”. If she had the power to do something she would give it her all, and if she didn’t, then she had no reason to be worried.

Theory and reality were never cleanly cut, but now wasn’t the time for gray’s and maybe’s.

“I think we should all try to get some rest.” Urtha told the others. “Even if you don’t sleep, closing your eyes is better than just sitting here brooding all night.”

“You can brood and plan all you want once your head is clearer.” Dia nodded. “I have sleep spells I can use if you’d rather do that. I’ll be taking a nap before I get back to getting bones stitched back together.”

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.

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.

Medicen: Medical-Center, a hospital.

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.

Sheel: A Hobgoblin, eldest maiden of the tribe. She is one of Urtha's closest friends and advisors. Her powers lean into creating fire, but her specialty is in enchanting wood so that it gains explosive properties.

Golden Elf: Highly capable combatants, the power they're most known for is being able to make their arrows travel straight through a tree unhindered.

Tenebrin: A branching path of ascension within the Dark Elf genus. They specialize in removing or twisting enchantments. The breed is particularly well known for their skills weaving curses into objects.