
[139] [Chrysalis](Eva)

The moment they had left one of the stronger Vampires to die, something shifted among the other blood-suckers. All too suddenly, their attempts to overwhelm and attack turned on its head, and they began pulling away. The ritual-spheres proved to be flying fortresses from within which the Vampires could throw blood-spells towards the knights. Eva had tried to get Embla close for their next target, but whenever she tried to make the jump, one of the older Vampires would do something that turned the air all too bright.

As the encounter progressed, bit by bit, the Vampires' strength grew. Their attacks became more powerful and more frequent. It was a mystery, at least for the first few minutes, until they realized that the blood-suckers were cutting off their supply to the Fledglings down below in exchange for empowering themselves. Every passing second made the spheres glow stronger, sturdier, and harder to disrupt, let alone approach.

"They're reinforcing their position," Eva declared, huddling behind the Malumari as she dispelled another wave of blood-spears.

"We can't turn this into a siege," Embla added through gritted teeth. "I doubt we have the energy to forcefully crack more than one of those, two if we're extremely lucky. And the knights don't look to be in much better shape either."

Two out of the three rituals that remained, and if things kept the current trend, then destroying the other rituals would only mean the third could guzzle up more power. Granted, its disruption would cause the explosion to be that much more catastrophic, but that would only happen if they could disrupt it in the first place.

Gritting her teeth, Eva turned her attention down to the fight that was still happening on the ground. The tribe's retreat had slowed to a complete stop, and they had even begun gaining ground near the areas where Dia was most active. By the looks of it, the Fledglings could not keep up without the backup from the rituals, while the bone-winged healer's presence bolstered the tribe's morale.

Eva knew the tide could turn back against them the instant those rituals shifted their focus towards empowering their forces again. The only thing stopping the Vampires was the current ongoing onslaught.

If they could just hold out long enough until the Fledglings were killed, then they would have no option but to retreat. Pursuing at that point would be ill-advised, but did they really have an option? They knew who Eva had been in her previous life; they would undoubtedly come back sooner or later.

What would Rick do?

The question came unbidden to her, and even as the fight raged around her, she realized there was one resource she hadn't been taking into account. Two, in fact: her enemy and herself.

Turning her attention towards that faint blood-soaked connection that she had been blocking off, Eva reached through and sent out her presence through the magical network. "Leave Sinco," she declared firmly.

The connection was not like her bond to Rick; there was no warmth to it, no emotions gently coaxing and welcoming her. No, what the Vampires had set up was a harsh metallic-like corridor where the voices echoed, and her lips were left wet with the blood-energy empowering it.

Unlike the bond, Eva realized this spell wasn't just meant to set up communication but also to provide an easy way for the Vampires to send energy to one another. Hers was being blocked, however, only her voice being allowed through.

"You will not win this fight," came the response.

"And if you win, I will escape, or failing that, take my own life," Eva responded without a shred of hesitation, eyes searching for the most powerful Vampire overhead and locking eyes with her. *"You took my man from me; you will not take his city, and you won't take me."*

"You know not of what you speak, young—"

"I alone hold the secrets of the bond-collar," she cut her off, raising the power she poured into the spell, drowning it with all the energy she'd been guzzling. *"Secrets I swore not to divulge, and that my human saw fit to protect."*

"Lowly humans have no right to command a creature of eternity such as you are now."

Outside, the fight continued, but the Vampires had begun switching targets, focusing their fire on everyone but the Mikila. It gave Embla and the Dark Elves breathing room. Eva could only hold back a tiny grin. *"Funny you should say that, for his aid was crucial in my ascension. One could even argue every second of my eternity I owe to him and him alone."*

The entire assault faltered for a split second as every Vampire turned to look at Eva as if she'd just proclaimed she was the Emperor himself in the flesh. "What are you doing!?" Embla hissed under her breath, moving closer and preparing herself to grab Eva and jump off.

"Buying time," Eva replied. "But I'll need you close."

"Am I going to like it?" Embla asked, hesitant.

She would not. "Pool your energy and be ready."

"You cannot lie through the spell," the elder Vampire spoke, too far away to have heard the exchange. The tone held a matter-of-fact statement, but Eva had caught the mild surprise in her words, almost as if she wished to call it out as a lie. *"But we do not have him."*

"I find that hard to believe, seeing how Throag the Sabertooth that kidnapped me took him," Eva replied, accusingly.

"The Red Queen ordered us to touch neither the ancient Succubus nor her human, the Lord of Sinco. And she ordered us to bring you back alive, no matter the cost," Lady Aimes spoke up, her voice echoing calmly through the channels even as she battled a knight in a fierce blade fight. *"A small group of opportunistic pests happened to follow us here."*

Eva flinched.

The Red Queen!?

Swearing under her breath, she looked around the battlefield one more time. Evans Bavtha hadn't been too bothered with the politics of the kingdom, but even in his isolation, he'd learned of the Red Queen. A Vampire Champion who had single-handedly taken over an entire major port-city, only to then create her own queendom out of those she'd converted. The maiden was almost as old as the kingdom itself, and the stories of her deeds haunted the nightmares of every child and every noble.

But this was also useful.

"They took the Succubus' human right from under your nose, using your attack as a cover for their subterfuge," Eva pushed more of her power through the connection granted to her by the spell, suffusing her words with every ounce of energy she could throw in. *"The very human that helped me ascend, the very human the Succubus favors,*

the otherworlder that made it possible to defeat this army that outnumbered him three to one on an open field."

It was a gamble, obviously, to shift their focus and draw their attention. There was the very obvious concern that drawing their attention towards Rick would make him a target. Unfortunately, the Red Queen singling him and Kiara out meant the Vampire Champion already had plans for them.

Still, Eva had learned her lesson from Kiara's interaction with the blood-suckers; there was nothing worth trusting about them other than their greed. She had no intention of letting them live if she had any say in it.

"If you come with us, we can get your human back," the Vampires spoke out, Lady Aimes' eyes in particular blazing as they stared at Eva intently. *"But we must have proof of your determination."*

She nodded. *"I will attack the Malumari, then. Be ready."*

With her energy already flowing through the magical channels and the Vampires distracted between the fight and figuring out what to do about Rick, Eva turned to the Malumari. "I am going to suck on your energy, as much of it as I can through your blood. I need you to use me as a catalyst."

Embla's eyes widened, barely enough time to give the faintest nod before she lunged. Mouth clamping on her throat as she knocked the taller maiden over, Eva ignored the screams around her. Focusing solely on the elemental energy, she opened herself to Embla, allowing the maiden's power to flow through her and into the channels provided by the spell. The wall that had been blocking her energy opened, and the Vampires greedily guzzled the power being provided.

The Malumari's power tasted of ash, and with Eva specifically trying to allow it to freely flow through her, she could sense the maiden's energy vibrating in a way that made her insides rattle. The vibrations intensified with every passing second, and for a moment the Vampire felt as if her blood had turned to glass.

The next moment, there was an abrupt and violent pulse of power that made her vision go white. Her mouth tasted of blood and pain, her head dazzling with a thousand stars popping in and out like foamy waves.

When she recovered her senses, it was to the realization they were falling. Everything around her was falling: bodies of knights, Dark Elves, and Vampires alike, all tumbling down towards the earth below. The air shook and vibrated with the echoes of an

explosion. The blood energy was so thick it was almost as if she was plunging through soup.

Eva struggled to summon darkness, or her ashen wings, to no avail. The insides of her body revolted with aftershocks of whatever it was that Embla had done. With the insides of her body entirely unwilling to respond to her commands, she reached out, tendrils of power grasping at the blood-energy.

She gritted her teeth and pushed harder, further, clutching at everything she could find within her grasp. Heart pumping faster, Eva could feel something responding to her call. "Come on!" she screamed, pushing harder even as the ground rushed up to meet them.

A million thoughts and feelings jumbled together: a lifetime spent with dry books and research, a lifetime of oaths and duties, the terror of having her life and humanity thrown away, the fear and bitterness of a life accursed. And now that she had finally found something better, someone better, was she going to lose it?

"NO!"

With a surge of determination and fury, Eva clutched at her own wrists, drawing out her own blood and sending it out. The blood-energy in the air was violently absorbed, and the sudden blockage within her burst as she felt herself drawn thin in every direction at once.

And for a moment, everything stopped falling.

Heaving for breath, Eva opened her eyes to look around.

A ruby red spiderweb had grown out of her wrists, extending in every direction, creating a crystalline structure that reached all the way from the ground up to where she and everyone else had been suspended. A dome with her at the pinnacle, one that shattered as the bodies plummeted through it, slowing them down on their descent.

Then, the bits holding her aloft broke, and she too fell, shattering a hundred different glass branches until she hit the ground like a sack of flour.

All around her, everyone screamed out commands.

"KILL IT!" the knights shouted.

"SAVE HER!" the vampires retaliated.

"GET HER OUT!" Embla's and Dia's voices rose through the chaos.

Everyone converged on her location, knights fighting fledglings, the tribe, and the ruby webs alike.

One got to her faster than the rest, a shadow forming beside her, cracked glowing skin and viscous red eyes a familiar figure.

“Zagan.” Eva hissed, trying and failing to pull herself away, her body nearly entirely unresponsive to her desires.

Yet the ghoul did not reach out to her, stopping just shy of touching her. “I cannot take you as a prisoner, Champion,” she spoke with strained words, her glowing veins pulsing with light.

Their gazes met, and for an infinite second, Eva hesitated.

Zagan hesitated, the sound of battle growing closer. “We can save your human,” she declared. “We will leave Sinco!” she added, urgency making its way into her voice.

Eva didn’t answer, not right away, her gaze fixed on the ghoul as the fighting grew closer. “The knights must die.”

“Done!” The ghoul twitched, jumping a little as a whole section of the ruby web crashed.

Yet Eva waited another moment. “As well as the vampires that came to claim Sinco from my lord,” she allowed the words to linger over the sound of clashing steel and screams for a long second, then, slowly, she reached out.

This time, Zagan smiled, a cold and cruel smile. “Done.”

Taking Eva’s hand, they were both gone in a swirl of darkness.

In their wake, every Vampire and Fledgling shuddered, and suddenly changed targets, ignoring the tribe as well as the ordinary Darkton soldiers and turning into a single-minded assault on the knights.

Only the Mikila would manage to flee from the massacre.