
[102] [Subjugation (Eva)]

“Get away!”

Eva barely had time to glance over at Embla as the Malumari clutched her head, toppling over with a scream. At first, Eva had thought someone was attacking them; the lack of blood or any other visual indicator betrayed a potential psychic. But that too was discarded when the ebon-skinned maiden slowly rose to her feet, her eyes wild.

“I... Barry is in danger...” She muttered, rising to her full six-foot height; her silver eyes had a dangerous glint in them.

The handful of knights and Orcs that had been assigned to ‘keep them contained’ exchanged glances. Those of the tribe moved closer to Eva, while the others drew their weapons.

“Embla, whatever’s going on—”

“Knights, push! Rescue the humans!” Deneva commanded nearer the heart of the camp.

Embla tensed, her eyes darting over at the knights first, then at Eva. “I will hurt you,” she growled, her eyes full of barely contained wrath, yet her attention remained entirely on the knights.

A chill ran down the Vampire’s back; her first instinct had been to make a run for it, to escape here and now before she was crushed. There was no way she could survive in a fight, let alone win. But the situation didn’t make sense; something was happening to Embla, something...

“It’s the bond?” she spoke. “Barry’s... something’s affecting him directly, and—”

“NO!” Embla’s attention turned to Eva, lunging at the Vampire with curled fists.

Eva raised her arms.

The next moment, she was sprawled on the ground, three Orcs surrounding her, shields raised up, providing a canopy of protection. “Wuh?” The Vampire struggled to her feet and nearly fell over. Her jaw ached something fierce; the world was spinning.

“It was a beautiful punch,” one of the Orcs laughed, offering her a free hand.

Eva didn't hesitate, leaning forward to pierce through the thick skin, taking a long gulp of the earthy nectar. It was rich in energy, but paled in comparison to its taste mere weeks ago—most likely from prolonged time without direct sunlight.

“What's the plan, Little Spear?”

“I'm not...” Eva pulled back. “What's the situation?”

“Metal-heads are losing against Embla, it seems. We'd bring you back to the others, but the Father warned us that doing so might anger the people he's trying to befriend.”

Of course, they'd call the Malumari by name.

Eva dismissed the thought, looking around to take in the situation. The knights had made their move towards and into the palace; the squadron had clearly been selected for their capabilities in close-quarters combat. There were no Valkyries that she could see, and judging by their size, the bulk of their forces was some combination of Hounds and Pitbelles, something that could operate without much fear of disruption from a Dark Elf.

As was to be expected from a Royal Knight, Captain Deneva had built the squadron with a specific opponent in mind. It was standard procedure for any self-respecting force to ensure that one's own forces exploited weaknesses in those of their opponents. This also happened to be the reason why knights went to such lengths to make it hard to recognize what species of maiden they were.

“And the Father?” she asked.

“With the Chieftess. He could've called for help but has not. We think things might be going better over there.”

Eva had to trust that the knights and the tribe would fulfill their goals and get the situation under control. It was one of the simpler facts of noble life that deference to the strategy of one's superior was paramount.

Rick's plan involved Embla and Eva not being a problem; thus, they had to stop Embla.

“We help the knights. Something's going on with Embla's bond, and she needs to be restrained,” Eva declared, straightening out and licking her lips clean as she glanced at the three Orcs. “I can assist on my own, but it would be better with your help.”

The trio exchanged looks, their eager grins showing gleaming tusks.

“And no using the Father's tools. Those are for an emergency.”

The enthusiasm died down ever so slightly.

"Just keep an eye upwards. We've seen a few of the weaker bunch getting picked off by those freaky arrows," the Orc she'd drunk from stated, lowering her shield as they turned towards Embla.

The maiden was embroiled in a fight with five knights. They weren't attempting to surround her; instead, they kept themselves between the Malumari and the palace, spread out so they could intercept any of the possible routes. Their reach was extended by their weapon of choice: metal polearms.

Eva could taste something electric in the air, and judging by how Embla put so much effort into preventing contact with the rods, it became apparent the knights had some familiarity with elemental electricity.

Pitbelles, then—one of the paths of ascension for a Doggirl, albeit one requiring the maiden to be infused with an abundance of the pertaining energy. They, perhaps, made up perhaps a solid fourth of their numbers throughout the kingdom. This was, for the most part, because unlike ascension into Hound or Terrielle, the Pitbelle could be more easily prompted by outside means. The Lightning-dome Lord Throley had built in Sinco was the distillation of that process pushed to the extreme. Created solely for the purpose of pushing a maiden into the very limits of what they could become... or endure.

She pushed the distraction away, focusing on the fight, trying to think of some way they might be able to help. Eva was no general, but being familiar with how maidens fought was the bread and butter of any noble's upbringing.

The first thing that became obvious was that they couldn't just charge in. Embla was pushing back the knights, clearly stronger than any two of them put together, but their coordination was fluid enough to compensate for that abysmal gap. The other factor to their advantage was that the Malumari wasn't looking for a fight but to rush through.

Whatever was happening to her bond was clearly affecting her capacity for rational thought. Eva couldn't imagine why she'd keep pushing like this rather than re-evaluate and ruthlessly crush the knights one at a time.

A plan quickly formed.

"How good are you at strengthening your bodies with stone energy?" she asked the trio.

"You're asking an Orc how good they are at being Orcs," they chuckled.

Eva nodded. "Then our better option for helping is for you to try to put yourselves between the knights and Embla," she pointed ahead. "Specifically, to try to grapple. But the electric element will shock you as well."

"That's it? Then we have nothing else to do but fight!"

There was no more that needed to be said; the trio slung their shields to their backs and approached the fight, looking for an opportunity to slip in. Eva had an easier time at this, using the shadows to emerge slightly behind Embla.

The maiden barely even spared her a glance. There was an overwhelming feeling of... insignificance. Both of them knew she could not pose much of a direct threat; the gulf in experience and skill was too vast.

For now, words were all she had. "Whatever's happening to Barry, we have a healer. Dia's the likeliest option available since she's familiar with the Pinielf's parasites."

Embla didn't answer, launching herself at the knights again. She twisted and turned, hastily slapping away the electrified poles thrust her way. Eva could sense some disruption going on, a momentary flash of power that overwhelmed and removed the knight's own energy. It was within this split second that she would slap the poles away, safe from their paralyzing effect.

The demonstration of skill alone was impeccable.

But while she was powerful and skilled, she was no Monica. Embla's style of combat relied on using either brutal strength or her impeccable timing to overwhelm her enemy. It was meant to quickly dispatch opponents and was likely at its strongest against a singular target.

In Eva's eyes, Embla had been trained to be the perfect counter against a Champion that was heavily reliant on elemental energy rather than physical prowess.

That same specialization made her less capable at handling many foes at the same time. The five knights had been doing their damndest to exploit this, offsetting their attacks by fractions of a second to guarantee that even if Embla disrupted them, each blow would carry its own threat.

One managed to land a charged blow, and Embla's whole body stuttered.

The next instant, a pulse of power sheathed the maiden, blasting outwards as she launched herself away from the knights. It was the perfect opportunity for the Orcs to move in, chasing after the Malumari.

“You don’t need to fight; they will have the situation under control!” Eva called out, keeping her distance, waiting. Clearly, this behavior was not brought up out of fear of Barry’s death, yet it wasn’t wholly her own either.

Again, Embla didn’t answer. The maiden snarled like a wild animal. Unlike with the knights, she took the Orcs more seriously. Whenever one of them got close, she’d rush to narrow the distance and hammer them with enough power to shove them away.

She was holding back, which was a good sign.

“Whatever Barry’s feeling, you can block it. The bond isn’t—”

“I don’t care!” Embla roared, moving with more determination, meeting the next Orc not by trying to avoid the grapple but by pummeling the maiden’s arms, entirely uncaring of the hardened body and shattering the bones. “If I wait any longer, the bond...”

When one of the knights pushed in with a thrust of their polearm, Embla grappled the weapon and let out a wave of power, a blast that had an almost physical presence and made Eva jump backward in fear. The knights didn’t hesitate; all four others threw in their attacks. Yet the Malumari did not let go, gritting her teeth as her body spasmed from the shocks running through her from five different maidens.

Another roar, a second blast that disrupted the elemental energy of the other maidens, provided Embla the split second she needed to kick the knight away while retaining the polearm for herself.

All combatants paused; the Orc with a broken arm had gotten back up, calmly placing the limb back into position while her sisters tightened their stances.

“Then help us,” Eva called out, hesitating. Embla was getting serious now. “The sooner we get Barry safe—”

“STOP TALKING LIKE YOU’RE ONE OF THEM!” Embla’s roar brought with it an opportunity for the others; the knights jumped in, pushing an assault while the Orcs corralled her, blocking out most paths for her to dodge.

Most paths but up.

Pole in hand, Embla thrust down to the ground, launching herself above her attackers. The knights instantly pulled back and began to thrust upwards to take full advantage of the new situation. Airborne targets had a harder time maneuvering; there were ways to get around that, though. Embla showed one of them as she twisted herself, swinging the weapon like a counter-ballast.

Suddenly erratic, another burst of power was followed by her swinging downward at the unarmed knights. There was too much strength in that blow; however, blocking would be suicidal, and the maiden lunged herself out of the way. The polearm hammered against the ground, its tip embedded in the soil.

Eva realized what was about to happen and leapt forward, materializing next to the weapon and kicking it away before Embla could use it to launch herself past the knights.

And not a moment too soon, one of the knights knocked the now-unstable Embla down to the ground, where the Orcs quickly moved in to collectively pin her in place. It was a hard, messy thing; the Malumari was physically stronger than any single maiden there, but not more than all of them together. Eva approached, fully intent on draining the maiden of some of her blood, and energy, to make this easier.

“No matter how hard you try, you will never be one of them!” Embla screamed, her silver eyes full of anger, hate, and desperation pinning Eva in place. “Stop acting like a noble that you’re not!”

The accusation startled her; Eva took half a step back. “I’m a maiden,” she declared; there was no hesitation in the statement, nor the lingering regret that those words had held a few months prior. “I’m not acting—”

“Can you even sense it? The knights do; they know,” Embla laughed, a sound equal parts bitter and amused. “They know your human is being targeted by the Golden Elves right now. And where are you?” She snarled. “You’re here playing pet to the very people who would execute you without a second thought.”

In that instant, several things happened at the same time.

It was like a fire had burst into existence within Eva; her pupils narrowed into pinpricks, her blood turning to ice. Eyes glowing in a bloody glow shifted from Embla to one of the knights, peering straight into the darkness of the Pitbelle’s helm.

The maiden flinched.

That was all the confirmation she needed.

One of the knights tried to say something, but by the time the first words rang out, Eva had already leapt into the shadows.

[103] [Cornered]

Rick had little reason to suspect that danger would be coming his way specifically. The instant the palace had opened, Captain Deneva had issued a very simple command: charge. Lord Harold had quickly requested the tribe's help in ensuring the safety of everyone not involved in the battle. There were humans nearby, as well as non-combatant maidens such as the healers.

He agreed, of course. The tribe was sturdy, and it was a less risky endeavor than fighting within the palace. Not to mention that sending them to retrieve Barry could very well result in getting in the knight's way.

Not the strongest position to take, but the whole point of these negotiations had been to ensure a better working relationship with the Earl's people. And if they happened to get into a pinch, then the tribe coming in as a reserve would also gain some favor.

Monica didn't let him take a single step; however, her fuzzy paw on his shoulder was iron, and she was not moving an inch, eyes fixed on the branches that loomed nearly a hundred meters overhead.

Lord Harold noticed this. "Is something the-?"

Monica's paw lashed out, grasping Dia right as she'd been about to step away from them and towards the tribe. In an explosion of dust and debris, a spear had embedded itself into the position she'd occupied a split second earlier.

"GET COVER!" The healer screamed out from within her black spiky armor, held tightly against Monica's chest right next to Rick. "ATTACK FROM ABOVE!"

With the dust settling, Rick realized Dia had not been the only one targeted.

Lord Harold and the three knights who had been his guards were now impaled by eight spears. The knights' bodies had been pierced cleanly through either their chests or helmets, immobile as they dripped blood through the shafts.

The noble was mangled beyond recognition, his body closer to a splatter. The brutality of the attacks had shredded through everything in their path. A human like Harold had not stood a chance.

Eyes widening in horror, Rick thought to rush back to the house, but Monica had not moved an inch. “Stay,” the Sabertooth declared coldly, keeping both him and Dia close against her chest.

“We have to do something!” he called back out. “We-”

“STAY,” Monica snarled, keeping her sight still pointed upwards.

“Rick,” Dia drew his attention softly, lowering her gaze to the Sabertooth’s arms. They were shaking.

Turning back to Monica, he could feel it now; the anger was a facade, there was terror underneath. Every hair on her body stood on its end, her grip trembled, ears flat against her skull. She was afraid, truly afraid. Her sole concern was escape; he could feel the desperate desire to leave this place as fast as she could.

Rick could only fathom that whatever was attacking them was, somehow, not giving her room to move an inch. Any attempt to peer through the bond was only met with an overwhelming sensation of walls closing in from all sides. How? Why? What was going on that only Monica could sense?

Further away from them, things were getting frantic. Harold hadn’t been the only human targeted, nor the only successful one. The tribe was swarming all over the place, each individual Orc wielding broad metallic shields they’d brought in preparation to fight the Golden Elves. Each Orc glued themselves to a human and would help shepherd the weaker maidens as well if any came under the protection of their shields.

Yet whenever the spears (Rick refused to call them arrows when they were longer than he was tall) landed, someone would die. Whoever was above them was not wasting a single shot, only taking the opportunity when it presented itself. Not once did Rick spot anyone on the tree branches overhead, the spears only ever came with brutal force, so fast he could not even follow them.

One moment someone tripped, or perhaps they would try to peek from around cover, or ignored all warnings as they rushed toward their human.

The next, their head would be gone, and the ground would burst out as if someone had detonated a grenade.

By contrast, the knights attacking the palace had not ignored the threat but rather could not afford to pay attention to it. They’d unilaterally removed their collars rather than risk descending into panic. Whatever was happening inside those wooden walls had put a

fire under them; it was clear they deemed having two open fronts suicidal. Deneva herself remained at the rear of the assault, focused on the branches overhead.

Much like with Monica, the Swordmistress' presence appeared to be considered as effective as a physical barrier. The snipers overhead were not taking shots at her, seemingly focused on picking off stragglers.

His gaze turned back toward the first victims. Rick didn't like the thought of "getting used" to corpses, but this was entirely on another level. Every instance of a maiden killing a human had been measured, clean, minimal. His own murder of Lord Thorley had carried with it more brutality in many ways.

This looked like someone had placed bombs inside Lord Harold.

"Rick." Dia's hand squeezed his own, but Rick pulled away, unable to turn his eyes from the stained ground.

Every shot had been clean, perfect; not a single target survived. Which felt out of place. If they left the injured behind, then wouldn't it be easier to wear the knights out? Wounded meant healers working overtime; it meant people dragging survivors away.

And the humans... Why the overkill? It couldn't possibly be that they couldn't ensure the kill in a less gruesome manner.

Rick glanced back at the others. The knights were succeeding in their push into the palace, and the tribe was gathering people within the safety of the homes that had been built into the trees. Everyone was making a grand effort to move into cover and out of direct line of sight from the archers overhead.

Everyone but Monica, who remained exactly perfectly still, holding him and Eva in place.

She could have shadow-jumped into the house they'd been in earlier.

Something felt terribly wrong, and Rick was barely catching up with his gut, or was it his bond? Despite how still Monica was, her bond was screaming out like a cornered animal, every part of her not just refusing contact but lashing out. The disparity felt as if they were two completely different people. The one he could see with his eyes, nearly perfectly stoic if not for the shaking claws, and the one through the bond that seethed and screamed in terror, looking for any way to get him out of there.

No matter what he tried, he couldn't touch that terror through the bond. It was worse than Eva's hunger, like it wasn't just an emotion but an inextricable part of Monica herself.

“Hold tight,” Monica whispered, crouching ever so slightly and tightening her grip on him.

For a fraction of a second, she'd looked at the houses, at the places the tribe was moving into for shelter. Monica hesitated, trying to say something, pain shooting across her features, but no words coming out, fear flaring out with soul-crushing intensity.

She looked at Rick with a wordless scream for help.

It didn't click for him until the first of the houses exploded. There was no fire, no smoke, just an overwhelming barrage of concussive force pushing dust and debris out of the windows. A volley of attacks had pierced straight through the bark without leaving a trace behind.

Some of the people there were his own.

The world swirled in darkness as they plunged into the shadows; coldness drove all air from his lungs. His skin itched from the energy swirling around them as Monica dragged all three through the shadows.

Powerlessness burned in them both.

Rick gasped for air the moment they burst out of the shadows, mind spinning, unable to keep up. Monica had no sooner emerged than she'd plunged again. There was the muffled sound of explosions striking nearby.

Their path shifted abruptly; he couldn't see it in the shadows, but he could sense their inertia swinging differently. The three of them surged out at the edge of the clearing that surrounded the palace, and Monica plunged again, quicker this time.

Over and over, she'd pull out, plunge back in, and change direction. Not once did Monica surface too far away from the palace, and every time they plunged back into the darkness, the muffled sound of those concussive blasts would follow instants after.

The Golden Elves were blocking off escape, somehow. Perhaps not through directly disrupting Monica's abilities, but by making it impossible for her to surface safely further away from the palace. It was a maddening game of cat and mouse, one Rick couldn't survive for long; the longer the jumps, the more he felt a chilly coldness spreading within him.

All the while, his mind was locked into that glance she had given him, that moment where their eyes had met.

She'd known. She'd known it was unsafe inside the houses, that the Golden Elves would attack the survivors the moment they thought themselves safe. She'd known and not

said a thing, because the easiest opportunity to get him out of there was to slip away during the attack.

Because, according to the bond, his survival trumped all else.

He wanted to be angry at her, but he couldn't. Her emotions were pouring out through the bond; she desperately wanted to help, to do anything. But she couldn't take that risk; she could not put him in that situation.

They emerged from the jump when Dia said something to Monica. Rick's head was spinning; the chill had been digging into his bones. He didn't exactly grasp the meaning behind Dia's words, but he got the gist of it: the elemental energy was starting to mess with his body. Not enough, not dangerous, not yet at least.

But it was impossible to sustain this.

Rick didn't want to escape; he wanted to help, yet he shared their confusion. Why were their attackers focusing so much on ensuring they couldn't get out?

With Dia's touch, soothing warmth pushed away the coldness; he looked around. They were still at the periphery of the palace's clearing. Monica was glued to him, looming, gaze fixed overhead and attentive for anything coming from any direction. The healing brought clarity and realization.

What could their objective be that required keeping them here?

"They're not attacking."

The spears had only landed on them every time Monica jumped, but always an instant after she'd entered the darkness. And right now, no one else was being assaulted by the snipers. As if every single one of them was entirely focused on Monica. To make sure every possible one of her avenues of escape was accounted for, threatened.

"Monica, I need you to listen to me."

Her hand clenched his shoulder hard enough to make him wince. "Not leave Rick." Her words were harsh, yet there was a waver in her tone, a plea for him not to do what she likely suspected he would do.

"Then don't." He held back his grimace; they both knew Monica couldn't be trusted. The bond had coerced her into this corner. "But we can't get out of here. We have to fight."

"No!" She hissed, turning to look at him with desperate eyes.

“You can’t get me out of here, Monica, you tried. If you push any harder, I’ll be poisoned by your energy.” He gripped her hand. “We have to fight.”

“Monica keep Rick safe, tribe fight, tribe—” She was shaking, breathing fast.

“We have to fight. All of us.” He had an idea, a dangerous idea. “Take me to Sheel, Monica, she can keep me safe. You can help the tribe fight back.”

The feline shook her head firmly. “No, only lose, too weak.”

“There’s a way.” He gripped her hand and squeezed. “I just need you to trust me.”

Deep within his heart, Rick knew that if his suspicion proved to be true, then his plan would be one none of the maidens bonded to him would approve of. Particularly Monica, not as she was now, where everything meant death in the most absolute of ways.

Monica’s desperate blue eyes moved from him to the healer. Perhaps she was aware that her judgment was compromised. Something that wasn’t at such an extreme for Dia. Rick could sense Dia was on to him, her eyes boring into the back of his skull.

“Trust Rick,” Dia said after what felt like an eternity. “He promised not to put his life needlessly at risk. He knows what I’ll do if he dies, after all.”

His attempt at a reassuring smile stiffened.

Monica was too beside herself to notice, giving a slow trembling nod.