
[116] [Scar tissue (Kiara)]

Not for the first time since meeting him, Kiara's human was dying.

Lying on the bark of the city-sized tree, surrounded by moss, Rick's skin was cracked, his veins dark green from the life energy currently trying to choke out his arteries. The ritual thrummed around them, leaving Kiara feeling as if she were caught in the eye of the storm, at the very lip of a massive funnel of power.

The Warlock, if that was the right term to use for the vegetable monstrosity, guided the ritual with the same sort of precise action that only a golem could possess. There were no emotions from the former maiden, only power at a scale that made Kiara's skin tingle.

In all her many years of life, the Succubus had only twice seen a ritual at such a scale and level of complexity. It was a weave of spellcraft that tied Rick and the Empress to every other sleeping Elf within the tree, branching out invisible tendrils that created a web of connections.

A spell that was killing him.

Kiara was trapped; she could feel the cracks and holes in the ritual, she could've used her powers to sabotage it, to break it apart. But the blade on her throat from the Pinielf left her little option other than to mitigate the effects on her human the only way she knew how: absorb as much energy as she could from his body into herself.

That they'd allowed the crazy woman to set up the ritual and funnel it through Rick had been a sign of how truly desperate the guardians were becoming. It was a gamble that relied entirely on Kiara managing to keep him alive long enough for the Empress to awaken. The moment she did, they would push for Rick to bond with every single sleeping Elf, if only to do so for a moment and force them to awaken and fight for their leader.

All because their defenses were proving to not be enough; the attackers were getting closer by the minute. Kiara's ears were ringing too loud to really bother to pay attention to that. She would've taken Rick and made a run for it if that were not an instant death sentence for both of them.

Something heavy swept over Kiara, so large, heavy, and fast that she felt the wind against her skin. And despite the decapitation of the Warlock, the ritual did not collapse; the aberration instead finished its crystallization as the tree rumbled.

The very instant the Empress opened her eyes, the ritual snapped, now focusing the full brunt of its power into Rick.

A surge of energy that would be dangerous for even a maiden.

Kiara gripped her human's arm with every ounce of strength she had, shattering bone as she dug her nails into his skin. Green blood oozed out, and she screamed, absorbing so much power so quickly that it would've killed him a hundred times over were he not overloaded to such a degree his skin was flaking off and burning into the air.

It was more power than her own broken body could process; her flesh screamed, old internal wounds flaring out in pangs of searing agony, fresh new ones joining in. The only thing Kiara could do was grit her teeth and bear with it, flaring out her own power in every direction as she could not keep up.

"Stop," the Empress' command rang out like a bell, the full brunt of her power aimed directly at the Warlock.

Behind Kiara, the Pinielf spoke up quickly. "My Empress, there is no time, we are under attack, and-"

"If you will not stop, then **die**."

It happened so quickly Kiara barely even sensed it; the power that lashed out turned the command into reality for the plants that made up most of the body of the monster. The Warlock barely had time to let out a quiet whimper as her body withered and died, blackening and turning to rot, every bit of vegetation within her sloughing off in sizzling tar-like clumps. All that was left behind was a dead husk of what little flesh and bone remained, collapsing in on itself.

A wave of the Empress' hand and the tree beneath them thrummed again, the ritual instantly shattering as the tree absorbed every bit of energy in the air, leaving the entire region devoid of ambient power.

With no new energy entering Rick, Kiara had to abruptly slow down how much she was sucking out of him lest she kill him in her attempt to keep him alive. Her body trembled and shook as she dispersed everything she had to spare, sensing the tree beneath them absorb that as well.

“Why do you threaten that Succubus’ life?” The Empress’ green eyes blazed, now focused on Kiara and the Pinielf. There was only a trace amount of anger and displeasure within her words, yet it made the tension in the air thick enough to cut.

“My Empress, she is not to be trusted, she sabotaged the previous attempt to awaken you.” Sivent hastily spoke, tentatively pulling the knife away from Kiara. “More importantly, we are under-”

“What is your name?” The Empress declared, stepping closer.

“It is I, Sivent, your-”

“Sivent? No, Sivent was a kind and curious High Elf. Sivent was a student of botany, and her work with flower-stem adaptation was unparalleled. You are not Sivent.” The Empress scowled. “Why did you take her name?” She asked, raising her hand. “Did she even know what you were?” A gesture of her hand, and the Pinielf thrashed, screaming.

“I am Sivent, my Empress!” Though she said this, the cloth covering her body broke apart as vines and roots lashed out of her body, whipping against the air. “I am no one else!”

“I see that she ascended into a Pinielf... was that why she put you into her body? To gain power to save us? Did she even realize you were taking over? Was it so gradual that not even you realized it?” A flick of her finger and Sivent collapsed, her body blackening. “No matter, for awakening me, I will give you the mercy I should have shown you long ago.”

With a dismissive gesture of her hand, the blackening mass of vegetation abruptly stopped moving. A cloud of steam began to rise from its body, shriveling up as it lost moisture until it began to crack and splinter. In an instant, it crumbled into a pile of dust. The Empress approached, reaching into the pile and pulling out a tiny marble-sized seed.

“One of our crowning achievements, created by our brightest minds... a plant with the potential for sentience.” She spoke, holding the seed as she stared at it intently. “One of the many failures we left behind.” With a deep sigh, blue fire enveloped the seed, consuming it and turning it to ash, even as it did not hurt the maiden’s fingers.

Kiara grit her teeth. “We need a healer, or he’ll die.”

The Empress’ gaze barely acknowledged Kiara, focused on Rick instead. “So it seems.” The maiden cast a spell on herself, her eyes never leaving the human. “Curious, even without the bond... C8, see to it that he lives.”

One of the Golden Elves dropped from a branch further above, the maiden's masked face and hidden aura betraying nothing. Yet Kiara recognized a moment of hesitation as C8 looked upon the Empress, the Golden Elf letting out a minuscule, almost undetectable pulse of energy.

"It is good to see you as well; it seems we have much to talk about," the Empress spoke as if in response, the barest hint of a smile touching her lips. "But that will have to wait; for now, consider the human to be... hm..." Cocking her head, she finally acknowledged Kiara. "What station does he have? Is he a general? An emperor?"

There was an air of detachment about her, as if there wasn't a roaring battle a few hundred meters away. The calmness of her words carried with them the same aloofness as if they'd been sitting down to drink tea in a gentle garden.

"He's Rick." She coughed and shuddered from the wave of pain that shot through her, every part of her body burning from within. "He's barely a Lord."

For the first time since awakening, the Empress' expression took a momentary look of shock. "Over how many does he rule?"

"He is dying, and I am not a strong enough healer," Kiara insisted.

The Empress looked at C8, and a series of pulses were exchanged, small and imperceptible, tiny things that tickled at the edges of Kiara's awareness. There was a pattern to it, and she recognized it had to be a language or coded messages in some way.

"Thousands? JUST thousands? What has this world...? No, consider him at least equivalent to a prince." The ruler turned around as C8 hurried to kneel opposite Kiara.

The Golden Elf dug into her pouch, pulling out wooden flasks, several glass-like stones, and bandages, carefully weaving small spells as she began her work. Kiara just watched, she would've called out to warn the Golden Elf of how vulnerable Rick's body was to elemental energy, but C8's spells and powers hovered around the human.

"You've dealt with humans like him before."

Kiara slowly retracted her bloodied fingers from his arm while the maiden opposite to her poured the ointments on his wounds. But she got no answer from C8, the Golden Elf working efficiently and quickly.

Meanwhile, the Empress had finally turned to acknowledge the battle that had been raging a few hundred meters away.

On one of the branches leading up to the heart of the grove was a small army of Orcs, knights, and Dark Elves, the group led by an armored Swordmistress and Urtha. They'd taken defensive positions, using the Orcs' incredible strength to carry heavy shields and slowly advance against a storm of arrows. Every inch fought for by tooth and nail, every step against an unrelenting storm.

Here and there, the Swordmistress would split from the group, walking on air as she'd abruptly pulled out massive polearms to assault the barrage of arrows, and destroy them before they reached the main force. And in those instances where the assault relented ever so slightly, the formation would open up gaps between the shields just enough for spears to be thrown back at specific reinforced positions some of the Golden Elves had taken.

And then there were Monica and Embla, the two maidens working in tandem to assault any gaps within the Golden Elf formation, forcing them to keep divesting their attention from the main approaching force.

"Stop." The Empress spoke the command, and the Golden Elves obeyed. "Stop," the Empress said once more, this time to keep her forces from taking aim at the dark meteor that had taken the split-second opening to lunge straight towards Rick.

In the blink of an eye, the cat was upon them.

Monica emerged from the shadows to loom over Rick, her large body looming threateningly over the two maidens and the human, with blue eyes narrowed into slits, and every heavy breath reeking of adrenaline and blood. Obsidian claws glimmered in the shadow she cast over them, with torn arrows poking out of her scar-littered body.

C8 had moved swiftly away from the human, leaving only Kiara to look up to the murderous fear and anger that washed from the Sabertooth's aura like a wall of blades.

"Before you do anything to me, he needs Dia," the Succubus said, pulling away from him to give them space.

No doubt the feralborn maiden would see her as the traitor she was. It was Kiara's involvement that had caused Rick to end up where he was now. Everything she'd done had only made things worse, and for what?

She was broken, broken in a way that was impossible to fix. Her goal had been nothing more than a delusion from the beginning. The very pain that kept her from using her full powers was what prevented her from being able to heal it.

Everything she'd done, every betrayal, every plot, every scheme, weighed upon her shoulders like a mountain for hundreds of years, all in the name of the power that she could never achieve.

All for nothing.

So she welcomed it, she welcomed Monica's anger, fully expecting that what was to come would be painful, that the bestial feline would tear her limb from limb. Even if she didn't kill the Succubus, no doubt the knights would want to finish the job... and who would stop them? The purposeless Malumari and her ragtag group of desperate Dark Elves? A crippled Hound?

Kiara hadn't even properly enthralled any maidens while in Sinco; there was nothing for her, nothing but bitterness.

At the first feeling of contact, she flinched, but the pain didn't come.

Monica wrapped her brutish frame around the Succubus, hugging her gently despite the ocean's worth of rage still pouring out of every pore. The feralborn thing wanted to kill, to rip and tear; her desires were as naked as the maiden herself. Kiara should've been the most obvious target!

"Monica needs... to calm down," the Sabertooth whispered, arms shaking slightly as she squeezed.

"But... but why?" Kiara's own voice was trembling.

"Rick said... it's important not to hurt friends, important to talk, understand." Letting go, she stepped back, looking down at the Succubus. "But Monica is still angry."

Turning to Rick, Monica gingerly scooped him into her bloodied arms. Blue eyes met the Empress's, the ancient maiden having been looking keenly at the exchange, and now their gazes locked into one another. Quietly they gauged each other, their power subtly shifting around them, darkness swirling around Monica like a naked blade, while every inch of the forest shifted in response to the Empress' whim.

After a second, Monica snorted loudly, turning towards Urtha.

The tribe and the knights had not moved an inch forward, nor had they relaxed their formation. The Swordmistress and the Orc clearly were not about to leave themselves open for a potential attack, as the current situation relied entirely on the whims of the Empress. One command, and the Golden Elves would renew their assault in full.

Yet from within the walls of shields, a single pink-haired maiden rushed out to meet Monica. Dia shot a venomous look at Kiara but was too far away to properly verbalize her opinion as she began to pour everything she had into healing Rick.

“It is odd to see so many maidens fuss over one human mortal,” the Empress had approached Kiara, sparing her a glance but keeping her attention on the knights. “C8 has briefly told me you are as much in the heart of this situation as he is.”

“Not exactly wrong.” Still kneeling, she couldn’t find it in herself to move from her spot. “If what you want is a summary of what’s going on...”

“That would be preferable; a battle here, even if victorious, would result in too much loss of life, a resource I cannot spare, and an opinion Rick has also expressed.”

When had she...? Kiara dismissed the question. There had been some psychic elements to the ritual, no doubt their minds had formed a connection in some way; otherwise, the bond couldn’t have formed, and the Empress would not have awakened. With a weary sigh, she shook her head.

“What, exactly, would you want to know?”

“Why does the Swordmistress want me dead? Her aggression is subtle, but it is the only one very specifically aimed my way... and at you.”

Kiara had not sensed anything but wasn’t surprised that it would be the case. “She is not one of us; she’s part of the kingdom.”

“I am a threat to her superiors; that is easily understandable,” the Empress frowned. “But you?”

“Same deal, though it’s because I’m too pretty.”

The Empress frowned. “Humans are immune to most of the charms a Succubus wields.”

“That hasn’t been the case since before I was born,” Kiara replied, glancing down at her hands, trying to shift them to some different form, and grimacing as every bone cried out, quickly stopping her from finishing the attempt. “Not that it matters.”

Not once had she felt as cracked as she did now. Kiara had a sinking feeling she couldn’t even push her aura outwards if she tried. The last time she’d been hurt in such a way, it had taken almost a decade to regain some semblance of recovery in terms of how much of her powers she could wield.

It was all a cruel joke. It all kept coming back to that little black room, that nightmare tucked away in a forgotten corner of a city that had long since been swallowed up by the desert. That tiny hole with moldy pillows and rusted chains, that place where Kiara had been dragged into, kicking and screaming the instant she'd ascended into her Succubus form.

That place where she'd been shattered for the first time.

"Your condition is curable," the Empress commented, her eyes never leaving the group gathered around Rick. Everyone appeared to be waiting for something to happen, yet neither side was willing to make the first move.

"W-what?" Kiara muttered, hesitating.

"Maidens losing the ability to use their powers is nothing new; fixing it is no simple matter, however."

The Succubus' face turned to a scowl, stamping down on her emotions. "Your pet project fucked me over for the sake of waking you from that nap. You know what she promised? Exactly the same thing you're offering." She bared her teeth in a snarl. "Except she told me it was unfixable right before turning me into a pincushion."

The Empress visibly grimaced, a pang of regret clear through her aura.

"So I am calling bullshit," she snarled, trying to move to stand up, yet finding her legs failing her, tumbling back down to the mossy bark of the tree. "I don't know what your game is, but I'm fed up with being played." Gritting her teeth, she clenched the moss. "What do you want from me, anyway?"

The Empress gave Kiara a glance and turned her focus back towards Rick, her expression calm and betraying no emotions, yet for a fraction of a second, her gaze gained a flicker of sweet curiosity and a touch of ambition.

She almost couldn't believe she had tasted the emotion out of the Empress, but as soon as she did, everything clicked into place.

"You want to use me to get to him."

The maiden remained quiet for a moment. "The first purpose I was ever given was to grow strawberries. It's a tricky thing. In hydroponics, you need to have an eye for detail if you want your plants to truly flourish. One aspect is to choose the right seed; it is just as crucial as managing its hydration and nourishment." Her lips curled into a dead-serious expression. "That man is a good seed."

Kiara looked up at the maiden, dumbstruck, mouth agape.

A wave of amusement made her break out in laughter, quickly devolving into a painful fit of giggling. She couldn't hold it in, ribs aching and lungs burning as she wheezed out between chuckles, entirely uncaring for the scowl the Empress was giving her.

"I do not find this humorous."

"No, I don't think you would see it that way," Kiara managed to speak out between howling fits, cackling and coughing as she nearly choked on her own tongue. Had she really sounded like this when she'd been plotting on how to get Rick to bond with her? The realization just made her devolve back into cackling and coughing, holding her tender ribs as she fought to calm herself down. "I need to know how this works first," she declared after a minute, noticing how the Swordmistress was looking less and less pleased by the minute as she talked with the barely conscious Rick.

The Empress straightened out, looking at her and crossing her arms distastefully. "Much like how a muscle might rip or a bone might tear, a maiden's ability to channel energy through their body can break. And if it is not healed properly, then it will likely deteriorate." She leaned forward, scowling slightly as she kept her gaze on Rick and the others. "The solution is as simple as it is hard. Energy must be channeled through you. That which healed wrongly must be broken again, so that it may mend anew."

"Bullshit." Kiara closed her eyes and sighed. "I've tasted more types of energy than you can even begin to imagine."

"I do not have a hard time believing you've slept with every maiden out there." The Empress's words struck true, and the ancient ruler shook her head. "No offense."

"None taken." The Succubus smirked.

"But I also do not believe you've suckled on the energy of a maiden attempting to tune her energy to your own. Not in quantities large enough to break through the blockage."

"I just sucked off that damn Warlock thing and her ritual," Kiara gestured at the pile of... whatever it was that was left of the plant-like mutated maiden. "If that wasn't enough, then this is already impossible."

The Empress scowled, stepping towards her. "I tire of this needless arguing," she offered her hand. "You are freshly injured. I can prove my words here and now. It will be enough to at least mitigate most of the damage you just took."

Kiara hesitated, staring at her.

“Fine.”

They clasped hands.

The other maiden tightened her grip.

In the Empress' free hand, a blade of green energy appeared, flickering and wavering as it became a blinding light. Kiara's eyes widened as she tried to escape, too weakened and too hurt to move.

Cold green eyes regarded her evenly. “Do not take this personally,” she whispered. “You will only remain dead for a little while.”

She struck with the swiftness of the wind, piercing Kiara's chest, straight through her heart.