
[100] [Dream on (May)]

May Brown opened her eyes for the first time in what felt like forever. She didn't recognize her surroundings; it would be hard to forget the lush green beauty that surrounded her from every direction. Far above, the treetops glittered with bits of sunlight filtering through. The young woman had been sleeping in a bed of emerald green moss, her own body was dressed in a soft lime dress.

The last memory was of getting on a carriage with Miss Alice, and... something had happened, but everything after that had been so incredibly fuzzy, like a very long dream...

There was a little concern and shock as she looked down at herself; her arms were thinner than they should've been. It reminded her of how bony her grandmother's arms had become after her stay in the hospital. Why was she here? Her skin tingled, the air around her felt thick with... something.

May was finding it hard to think clearly. Maybe she was in a dream, half-asleep and not entirely present. She tried to sit up, to look past the mossy bed she lay in, but she could not find the strength to do so; her body felt so impossibly heavy...

"There is too much damage; I'm not sure how much I can work with," The person speaking had a soft voice, purring straight into May's head. The voice made her warm inside, it made her smile despite herself.

"But can you do it?" Another voice, a different person.

May twitched at the sound of it, shivers and dread running through her even if she didn't know why. Again she tried to move, but this time a hand reached out, pressing her forehead back against the moss. The warmth returned, and all was well again.

"I might need to go all out on this one," the warm voice soothed May, the hand idly caressing her hair. "It might interfere with that ritual your... thing is doing."

"That is not acceptable." The harsher voice snapped. "The ritual is necessary; otherwise, she won't be able to bond with everyone."

The hand on May twitched. "...everyone? You didn't say anything about..."

“You know what you need to do.”

The fingers against May’s forehead twitched again. “This might kill her, that many bonds...”

“That is my concern, not yours.”

“It’s my concern when you could go back on our deal.” The softer voice hissed. “Her dying means you’ll only get a handful of these to wake up, not everyone.”

There was no answer. May just lay there, staring at the streaks of light overhead. The tree-tops felt so far away... as if the very sky had become a canopy of leaves. There was nothing to be worried about though, not with this warmth suffusing through her body. She tried to think, but everything was just so comfortable...

“Work within the confines of the ritual. If you cannot do so, then we will have to re-evaluate whether this deal is worth keeping.”

The warm stranger pulled her hand away from May, the young woman whimpering at the lack of contact.

“Then I guess I can just do nothing and watch you fail.” A lilting laugh followed. “Don’t give me that look, you called for my expertise, and now you’re trying to play a fast one on me when you reek of desperation?”

“Fine.”

“No. I came here looking for information, and now you’re making me doubt you even have it.” The hand came back, and all the worries flew out of May once more; she melted into the moss, sighing in relief. “I want to hear it.”

A growl rang out. “The Queen.”

“**Just** the Queen.” The voice emphasized. “No ritual.”

“No.” The voice barked back. “So long as the Queen awakens, you will get what you came for. If the ritual kills the human before she can awaken any others, then that will be, as you say, my problem.”

A sigh. “Workable,” the soft voice said, but there was some hesitation. “Let’s get this over with.”

The warm hand against May’s forehead left her once more, and the soft woman stepped into view, with dazzling azure blue hair and waxy black horns. The woman held May’s

cheeks with a tingling touch, looking at her with deep golden eyes, an eternal fuzzy warmth and kindness pouring out through those orbs.

“Can you hear me?” She asked with a whisper of honeyed words.

May tried to speak, but the woman sealed her lips with a finger, the digit trailing down in a road of sensation not too unlike television static. May groaned and weakly squirmed, trying to make sense of the pattern being drawn on her face by that lone touch, trying to discern if there was any significance to it.

“Just let go, relax,” the woman declared as if May were anything other than a puddle of a person, poured into a mossy bed and left to simmer. “This won’t hurt a bit.”

It didn’t hurt, but her numbed nerves jolted with intensity, confused and certain there should have been some kind of discomfort.

May’s hand was lifted up, the arm bending out and leaving her palm to rest upon something cold. In the next spasm, her fingers entwined with those of a dead hand; she couldn’t see the owner, but she clenched all the same. Everything was so intense, her existence boiling outwards in heat.

“Just follow your emotions.”

The world started to spin, white noise drowning out her own heartbeat, eyes open but unable to see, mind swirling as the dead hand clenched back. Suddenly, the moss around her began to vibrate, the leaves above swirled, and the trees sang and thrummed with an ancient power.

And with a gasp, May found herself alone, standing atop a grassy hill.

Everything around her was out of place, the world was slightly skewed and blurred, yet her thoughts felt sharper than they’d been in... forever. Everything after that carriage trip with Alice was a fog of barely-remembered sensations and fear.

May glanced around, the grassy hill had been lost in a sea of green, but now there were trees sprouting here and there. She moved closer to one of them, marveling at how they grew taller and thicker with every passing second. Up and up they went, until their canopies pushed past the clouds, growing outwards and covering the sky.

“You are in my domain, little mortal,”

The voice came from everywhere all at the same time, every tree speaking with the same vibrant, powerful voice.

“Uhm...” May shivered a little, glancing about nervously. “I didn’t mean to be here. Can I... is there a way out?”

There was no answer, not in words. The forest trembled, roots wriggling out of the earth, slowly at first, and then breaching the soil in explosions of dust and rock. They reached out, grasping at anything they could, crushing boulders to dust, churning the soil and seething.

May ran.

Her legs took her as fast as she could, the world blurred around her, the trees flew past her in a messy swirl of browns, greens, and yellows. Everything shifted, and her legs came to a sudden halt near a precipice.

She looked down the chasm, and there she found a crumbling city. Skyscrapers with all their windows shattered, revealing hollow, moldy office buildings, industrial complexes consumed by rust and collapsed under their own weight, houses burnt to their foundations with nothing left behind save scorch marks.

Looking back, the forest was still growing.

The trees were so tall the blue of the sky made it impossible to see their tops. The roots marched outwards like a tidal wave, consuming the land, causing more trees to sprout and grow, turning the world into a mass of wood and foliage.

“Another one.”

It was the same voice as before, this time coming from a single place, a woman that stood right next to May. She was tall, gauntly so, a woman that might have looked like a human at first glance, yet the longer May looked the more things felt out of place. The arms being slightly too long, the eyes slightly too large, the mouth slightly too broad, the hair slightly too dark. It was as if she were a creature made of small impossible things coalesced into a mockery of a human shape.

This creature - this woman, if that was what she was - turned her head ever so slightly to glance at May through the corner of her emerald green eyes. The same green of trees in summer.

“A second human, it must mean the previous one was no accident,” she spoke with a voice of creaking branches and rustling leaves. “Only a failure.”

Below them, the roots burst out of the walls of the cliffside. From the city, screams rang out, jets of fire and gunshots desperately struggling to fight off the encroaching wood.

But it was impossible to fend off the encroaching roots, the plants plunging down onto the city, piercing it at its core.

“Kneel, human. That is your way out.”

She'd turned to face May, dressed in armor of gold and silver. The woman held a bow of shimmering sunlight, her head crowned with a thousand flowers. The Empress of Green took a step towards her, and all May could do was watch in horror and awe.

“Kneel, human,” she commanded once more with a voice that made the world tremble, that shook the very earth.

Facing May in full, the presence of the Empress bore down like a yoke, the human's body shaking from the impossible weight. Something in May refused, however, but she lacked the strength to fight. She collapsed backward, her backside hitting the ground, desperately scrambling away from the creature that wielded such immeasurable power.

“Submit,”

She stepped closer, standing in her full regal glory, a Goddess of the forest, of nature, of the very world.

May desperately wanted to get out of there; she wanted to kneel and bow and scrape, anything to escape this terrifying space of impossible things. But her chest burned brightly with fire and anger, one that was not her own, one that came from elsewhere.

“Resist,” a voice whispered into her ear, silky soft and full of tingles. “She cannot harm you,” it promised.

The Empress' scowl deepened. “Someone's helping you.”

Slowly, she raised her bow, drawing it, plucking a beam of light out of the very sun and turning it into an arrow. “She is right; I cannot harm you. But that does not mean you cannot feel pain.” The string of moonlight grew taut, the emerald eyes becoming fierce. “Yield, human. This will be my only mercy.”

May looked upon the beam of searing light and trembled. “I...” Her chest was burning, so much anger was growing within her. “I can't!” The shout was a mix of terror and defiance.

Pulling herself away as quickly as she could, her hands met air.

The next second she was tumbling down the cliff, screaming, reaching out for anything before she crashed at the bottom of the abyss. Roots shattered through the earth, reaching out to her outstretched hand, and...

With a gasp, May found herself back in the mossy bed.

All around her there was violence; the beautiful woman of blue hair and kind eyes was snarling, her clothes torn to shreds as she lashed with wicked nails at the nearest foe. All around her there were soldiers, women dressed in leather, wielding spears tipped in forks.

Next to May stood a person covered in white cloth, one watching the unfolding fight. "Do not let her cast a teleportation spell," she commanded with a voice heavy with anger, barely sparing a glance at the young woman, snarling with disgust.

The blue-haired woman fought as best she could, waves of semi-transparent energy blasting out from her body, claws biting through wood and armor, her own skin seemingly untouchable. Yet she held no chance, no method to escape. Eventually the soldiers used their spears with oddly forked tips to pin her to a tree.

"This could have gone so much easier if you'd not lied to us, Kiara." The white-clothed woman approached. "Bringing a disposable human? I knew something was amiss when my darlings did not catch that delectable aroma he carried with him last we'd met. What was your goal?"

"None, if you'd kept your nose in your own damn business," the horned woman with blue hair snarled. "You'd kill my human in a heartbeat, of course I'd leave him behind."

"You're smart, I'll give you that. This little stunt guarantees I need you alive." She held out a seed, approaching the restrained woman and pressing it against her forehead. "But much like the Warlock, I require your obedience, not your mind."

Kiara thrashed. May couldn't see what was happening, trying and failing to find the strength in her legs to pull herself up to her feet. Her lower body was numb, unresponsive to her commands, yet the lingering anger urged her to pull herself up, if only to better see.

The blue-haired woman screamed, pulses of purple and pink light coalescing through her body. It became incandescent, blinking on and off at near-blinding intensity. Several other screams joined in, alongside a cascade of moans. Warmth washed over May like a morning sun, her face heating up as she covered her eyes.

Two bodies tumbled out of the searing purple miasma.

Sivent had fallen to her back, hands clenching tightly onto both of Kiara's claws. The blue-haired woman's sharp nails were barely inches away from her foe's throat.

"I see, you figured out a way to kill the seed before it could take root." The woman of white moved fast, raising her legs to kick off her attacker.

Kiara snarled, then spared a glance at May before frowning.

She lunged at the human.

"NON-LETHAL!" Sivent screamed.

A singular spear fell upon Kiara, piercing through her arm, hammering against the mossy floor with the percussive force of an explosion. In an instant, a dozen more followed, and the woman was abruptly held mid-air, not by her wings but by the spears that penetrated her limbs from multiple angles.

She'd been made into a living pin-cushion, thick red blood trickling from the many injuries. Yet Kiara didn't scream, gritting her teeth. "Fucking..." She heaved through choked breaths, golden eyes looking at May with what could only be a look of apology, heavy with regret.

"You've already made this more complicated than it has to be," Sivent said, standing up and smoothing out her white clothes. "But even if you'd killed her, there are other pureblooded humans within reach. Barry, for one, though he already failed in this. But your own human is pureblooded as well isn't he? May had much to say about her *'teacher'*. Do you truly think he is safe with that Sabertooth and the Orcs?"

May grit her teeth, watching Kiara pale.

"You regressive rabble don't understand what it means to be a maiden, you don't even know the true potential hidden within you. Techniques, spells, and so much more were lost to time. Looking at you all is like staring at apes flinging sticks and mud." She laughed. "We might be weakened, true, but within the Empress' forest, none can escape us."

"Yeah, well, there's a smart mud-flinging bumpkin of a healer that outsmarted your little star project. It's thanks to her that your little parasite won't be useful on any of us." Kiara chuckled weakly. "Just don't tell her I said that."

"Succubi, always with your taunting, your empty words and barbs." Sivent marched up to May, sparing only a glance at Kiara. "Just to be clear, I did intend to tell you how to ascend. Mostly because it is useless information for a cripple like you."

May flung her arms at the monster that covered her face in white cloth; her arms were snatched without effort, and a wave of drowsiness washed over her. Her legs, formerly wobbly, now failed entirely.

“Then say it,” Kiara spat.

“Let us not pretend you aren’t disabled. A Succubus of your age, with your capacity for fine energy manipulation? You should’ve ascended by now.” Sivent turned only her head to glance at her opponent, sneering. “But I’ve seen others like you; something shattered you, long ago, and now the more power you use, the more it hurts. You can’t even bring your full strength to bear without collapsing from the agony.”

“No, I...” Kiara’s eyes were wild, unfocused. “I just need a human immune to-”

“You might have, once, but it is a requirement you’ve outgrown without realizing it.” Sivent laughed, pulling May up into the air by her wrists, dangling her in front of Kiara. “Humans like this one are so frail, yet they remain useful. Bonding aside, they serve as a great way to improve finer control. After all, apply just a little too much energy and...”

The tingling in her wrists suddenly became a searing heat. Something within her body wriggled, pain flaring out all over. She whimpered, muscles spasming, breathing hard and uneven.

“Torturing her gets you nothing,” Kiara declared in a dejected whisper, not truly looking at anything, gaze fixed on the ground, a curtain of blue hair hiding her face from sight. Her own body tense against the spear-sized arrows keeping her held above the ground.

“That is true. I am merely... venting.” With a shrug, she dropped May, letting her crumple on the mossy floor, sobbing weakly and curling into a ball. “You broke my key, and I need it fixed. One way or the other, the Empress will awaken, and she will take what is hers.”

“Never,” May growled with a sob, drying her tears with shaking hands. “I... will never-”

Sivent kicked at her gut, a light blow, but enough to drive the air out of her. “Your willingness to cooperate never mattered, human. Unfortunately I cannot say the same about the Succubus over here.” She crossed her arms. “But if there is one thing that has not changed over these many centuries is a maiden’s weakness to their bond. I am lucky you lack the knowledge or means on how to quickly break yours, perhaps then you’d be able to prolong this little resistance, for more than a few days.”

Kiara laughed. “You can’t get to him.”

“You will find that, as long as he remains within our forest, I can.”

Turning away from May and Kiara, Sivent marched towards the center of the grove, slowly spreading her arms and looking up at the trees. Her clothes wriggled, then tore, revealing a sea of vines and bark, barely a shred of flesh or skin to be seen below the white-cloth-covered head.

“My sisters!” She sang, voice shrill. “There’s rabble sullyng the Empress’ palace! There are invaders laying siege to her majesty’s domain!”

Summoned by the call, figures began to emerge amongst the treetops. One after the other, each shrouded in cloaks of leaves and wielding bows larger than they were tall. Each and every one looked upon Sivent with gleaming eyes of gold.

“Bring me the human named Rick alive, kill all others that stand in our way!”

Without a word, without a sound, they vanished.

May Brown: Human and current test subject of Sivent. May was one of Rick's students and had come into this world alongside the others. While on her way to Balet, the convoy was attacked by Embla and the other wildlings, and May was kidnapped. At the time, Dagmar had insisted Barry not be informed of this, thus May was kept a secret in the palace's dungeons.

Sivent: Formerly a High Elf and a researcher of the Green Empire, specialized in plant-flesh melding under the command of the Emerald Empress. She was awakened by Barry, and promptly succeeded in ascending into a Pinielf.

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.

[101] [Rip and tear]

Rick was no stranger to personal-scale politics. As a teacher, he'd been "invited" to attend the college's "fundraising" events every now and then, and it ranked as one of the worst parts of the experience. In a way, he'd come to envy Alice; her innate power to make a moral grandstand had instantly resulted in her name being removed from invitations to any future events.

The woman had, effectively, been cut off from having any power within the college.

Of course, the official policy was that fundraising wouldn't influence administration, but that was an empty claim. How could an administrator remain impassive if certain decisions risked large chunks of funding evaporating? When you had to cut jobs, wouldn't it be smarter to keep the guy that had become best buds with their largest donor? Only an idiot wouldn't keep such considerations in mind, potentially quickly finding themselves replaced by someone more skilled in navigating the local politics.

As a teacher, Rick's philosophy in the matter was to only ever keep himself in a slightly favorable position, but never enough to get dragged into the power-plays. It was simple survival. Befriend the people that moved things and made the decisions, but never get so close that he might be mistaken for being "on their side".

Seated in the tiny hut carved within a titan-tree, looking out at the maidens currently working on figuring out some way to penetrate the palace's defenses, he missed when the worst that could happen from a wrong move was getting fired.

Opposite to him, Lord Harold Vittchat drank from a jug, the smell of alcohol lingering in the air. The man was currently busy looking at the box Rick had given him as a "gift", a wooden container roughly large enough for an arm, filled up with the few pieces of purple cloth they had to spare.

Fortunately for them, some of the Orcs and assistants to the raid had requested spare neckerchiefs in case they were lost or torn during the expedition.

"This is of impressive quality," Harold said, finally breaking the silence. "The dyeing is thorough, uniform. Spinner silk no less. Do you know how much it would cost to buy just one of these in Balet?"

"A year's wage from a farmer? Or so I've been told."

“Then you misheard; in the right hands, you could sell this for the year’s worth from an entire farm.” He corrected. “And you are giving this to me as a mere gift?”

“I can make as many of those as I want; currently, the bottleneck is how much silk our local Spinner can produce.” Rick made a point to offhandedly shrug. “Miss Ahina can produce twice that much in a day, more or less. She’s incredibly skilled.”

“She must be, for you to remember her name.” Harold carefully put the silk into the box and closed it. “Would you be willing to share the production methods for the dye?” He cocked his head. “Or should I assume I’ll have an easier time finding the secret from one of your former students?”

Rick chuckled. “I can think of only one person among my students that would’ve bothered to learn about something like this.” His lips thinned. “At least one among those that survived.”

Harold nodded, taking a sip from his waterskin. “A tragedy, truly.” He leaned back slightly. “I will be blunt, Mister Rick, are you aware of the Earl’s goals?”

“No.”

“He wishes to avoid war. Both internal and external. One could claim Earl Vittchat is like a Puppeteer, with many dolls in many places.” The noble tapped the box. “And this right here is a big excuse to start one. Your actions here will cause my uncle great distress.”

“That doesn’t make much sense.” Rick frowned. “The best option here would be for Aubria to accept a trade deal. I sell to them, and they can sell to everyone else. The only thing war would bring is the risk of the process being lost for good.”

Harold chuckled. “That would only make sense in a world where such things are put at risk.” He tapped the box. “Why would Aubria attack in such a way that they’d threaten your life or destroy your facilities? Minor sabotage here and there, perhaps, but not outright destruction. Besides, your life would be assured.” He took another swing.

“Not if I kill myself and set everything on fire.” Rick countered with a deadpan.

The man choked, being reduced to a coughing fit, dropping the waterskin. Wine spilled out, drenching the noble’s boots. “I will have to ask you not to make such tasteless jokes.” The noble sputtered, picking up the waterskin and sealing it shut.

“It is not a joke.” Rick crossed his arms; he was serious to a certain degree. Suicide wasn’t on his to-do list, but he couldn’t imagine himself surviving for very long without his partners anyway. “I’ve seen how you people operate. What you want to control you keep locked up, stripped of any possible way out.” He bared his teeth in a humorless smile.

"Me? You'd do everything in your power to take Monica, Urtha, and Evangeline." He snarled. "As if they were bargaining chips."

And Kiara, but he didn't want to throw her name on the table. "You would..." Harold chuckled nervously, raising the wineskin but stopping with a grimace. "This is the true reason why Lord Thorley died, isn't it?"

Rick didn't answer, shrugging as he looked away, not confirming anything verbally, but leaving the silence to speak for itself. The noble shifted in his seat, glancing over at Captain Deneva as she stood next to the door. The maiden had not moved an inch, let alone blinked at the conversation. She might as well have been a statue.

"It is true that maidens are bargaining chips in this game of ours that we call the noble court." Giving Rick a side-glance, he sighed. "To ask to play by different rules will earn you many enemies. Enemies that might opt to go against unspoken agreements to get what they want."

Rick wanted to tell him the other people and their desire to get things could go fuck themselves with a cactus. It was understandable but frustrating. Rick was a completely new element being introduced into an existing system. Someone somewhere would think they'd stand to gain or lose from his existence and do something about it.

"I guess I can always just fuck off somewhere more open to play by my rules."

Harold sighed. "Seeing the maidens you command, I find myself feeling such a claim to be less of a long-winded declaration of suicide intent as I would have coming from others." With a shake of his head, his hands reached up to the golden buttons on his vest, flicking at them as if to distract himself. "And what would 'your rules' happen to be?"

"Gold works. I'd rather be told I owe someone a pile of coins than a person."

Harold didn't respond to that, not for a few seconds at least. The young man had the look of someone who was trying to figure out the best way to say a potentially distasteful thought. And all the while, Rick couldn't help but feel like the guy was young enough to be one of his students, yet behaved like someone a decade older.

Finally, he spoke. "You request to be treated like a merchant while wielding the power of a noble."

"I take it that when you mean 'power' you mean what maidens are bonded to me," Rick answered.

"Not just the quality of them, but also their quantity. A merchant does not require as much oversight as a noble; they cannot coerce dozens of maidens into spontaneous violence through coercion of the bond." Harold gave Rick a serious look. "You, on the other hand, could potentially bond every maiden in a small city. What measures would anyone be able to take to protect the citizenry from a riot the day you fall seriously ill or are grievously wounded?"

"I... what?"

"I assume you are not familiar with how absolute the bond's compulsion can be on a maiden's psyche." Harold gestured at Deneva. "I am currently bonded to the captain. She loathes my guts, and for good reasons, I may add, but overall, if I were to find myself on my deathbed, she would become no less rabid than Miss Monica was upon your arrival."

As if to punctuate his claim, she nodded ever so slightly, not moving an inch otherwise.

"How this manifests can... vary wildly. In the worst instances, it can become extremely violent. This is the reason why it is rare to find an elderly person bonded to maidens; their mortality rubs at the bond every day. Very few maidens have the acumen to withstand that." He gestured at Rick. "Now, for the average maiden, this can be handled through breaking the bond. A simple process involving but a gesture of their hand. For you, however..."

Rick nodded but didn't comment.

He could understand where Harold was coming from. If there were someone in Sinco whose literal physical health could mark the start of a riot, he'd probably be pulling at his hair every other day.

That wasn't to mean he'd roll back; he'd drawn the line in the sand, spilt blood to hold it.

There was no way in hell he'd let anyone step over it.

Something drew his attention elsewhere, gaze meandering from the noble and back to the outside. For a moment, he couldn't be entirely sure what was going on, at least not until he began to feel an overwhelming sense of... frustration, loss, fear.

"**RUN.**" A voice screamed in his head.

"Sir Rick?"

The words slid right off, Rick took half a step towards the entrance, barely stopping as he felt something wet on his face.

He was crying.

"I..."

The pain came a moment later. A dozen iron rods were driven through his arms and legs. Suddenly, he could not move, collapsing under his own weight. Deneva caught him before he touched the ground, crossing the room in the blink of an eye. But Rick couldn't find the capacity to move his limbs.

It was as if his body had been made of stone, and someone had attacked him with a sledgehammer. Everything within him had cracked, forming invisible crevices, cliffs, and chasms that made their way into his very soul.

And then, it was gone.

Gasping for air, Rick flailed his arms, fighting to get back on his feet, eyes wild as he looked around in every direction. The pain lingered like a ghost of a sensation, not truly there, but a vivid memory all the same.

With it came certainty.

Kiara was in danger, something had gone terribly wrong.

He had been ready to say as much out loud, but hesitated, realizing he was in the presence of two people who wanted the "Charmer" dealt with definitively.

"Are you alright, Sir Rick?" Lord Harold questioned.

"I... something is coming." He marched straight towards the door, stepping outside. "Danger is coming!" He shouted for everyone to hear, raising his voice as loud as he could. "Prepare for a fight!"

Confusion was the first reaction. The knights exchanged looks and sought guidance from the chain of command. Meanwhile, the tribe responded instantly. Weapons were drawn, shields put into place, and the weaker maidens rushed towards the abodes so they wouldn't get in the way.

Monica was at his side instantly, as were Dia and Urtha.

From one side of the improvised encampment that had been raised around the titanic tree that was the "palace," Rick spotted Eva and Embla rising to their feet and looking just about ready to jump into action. The duo was surrounded by a few knights and Orcs, so they kept to their little corner, waiting for something more concrete than a general state of alarm.

"What is it?"

"I don't know for sure," Rick answered. "Our... the scout we sent to the grove got into trouble."

"Of course she did," Dia hissed under her breath.

"Rick."

Monica's paw grasped his arm, eyes focused on a spot somewhere off in the distance, high above the canopy.

The others followed her gaze.

They saw a singular glowing black arrow streak across the air, traveling in an arch towards the palace, moving slowly enough that it almost appeared like a graceful flight.

"Is that... A flower?" Dia asked, spotting something on the tip of the arrow.

Whatever it was, they didn't get to see it in detail. The moment the arrow reached the wall of the palace, it sank into the wood until it was gone, vanishing into the wooden structure without leaving a trace in its wake.

A scream followed. At the edge of the camp, Embla had fallen to her knees, clutching her head. "Get away!" She screamed.

And from within the palace, dozens of muffled voices screamed out, desperate pleas for help mingled with roars of fury. A cumulative roar that reached up to the sky. The palace opened, doors and windows forming out of what was once smooth bark, revealing maidens fighting maidens, rabid as they lunged for one another in blind rage.

"Knights, push! Rescue the humans!" Deneva commanded.

It was then that the spear-sized arrows began to rain down on them.

All hell broke loose.

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.

Earl Vittchat: Direct ruler of Balet, and overseer of the South. He played host to Rick, Monica, and Dia. Currently he is the one overseeing the bulk of the Otherworlders, as they're attempting to fully adapt to life in this world while staying in Balet.

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.

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.

Lord Harold Vittchat: Though we share the same family name, I am merely the third cousin to the Earl." The man's smile was dazzling. "Or put differently, about fourteen different relatives would need to die before I had a chance at inheriting the title."

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.