
[058] [Honor (Urtha)]

"ATTACK!"

Urtha roared the command, and with it, the relentless beat of the drums stopped. Now, only the tribe's unified battle cry pierced the night.

Every structure along the main street had been brought low for the sake of this "trap". The plan hinged on a single prevailing premise: a wild stampede was predictable. To ensure the ferals' loss of control, they'd aimed to overwhelm all of their senses. Rick had dubbed it "jamming," but everyone else referred to it as torture. They'd resorted to stuffing wax plugs into their nostrils and ears just to make the ordeal somewhat tolerable.

And what a sight it had been. Hundreds of ferals had been caught under the toppling buildings, completely blind and uncaring in their suicidal charge. Now it was the tribe's job to move.

Maidens operated in units of five. Three Orcs lugged enormous, interlocking shields capable of forming a protective dome, while the fourth maiden - a mousegirl - led them through the darkness. The final member, a Hobgoblin or some other fire-wielder, was tasked with incinerating everything that might be a feral, be they alive or dead.

Their progression was deliberate and steady. It wasn't a battle—it was extermination. The militia, concealed behind wooden barriers and armed with spears, stood ready on the periphery, prepared to halt any creature that tried to escape the killing fields.

Everything had been planned around keeping themselves guarded and invisible from the sky. The less the enemy could see, the less things she could target. If they couldn't deal with one of the elites, then their goal was to minimize how much damage they could make.

Urtha and her team were there to deal with the second elite, the one who'd led the charge. Unlike other teams, hers had the puny blood-sucker as their eyes in the darkness. More importantly, they were equipped with the handful of weapons the Father had been able to help them create.

"HERE!"

The cry was echoed by a red flare ascending into the sky from across the battlefield. A cloud of dust erupted upwards, debris flying in every direction, punctuated by the unmistakable death-roar of several Orcs.

In that instant, the sky fell. A singular, perfectly straight beam of light shattered down to the earth with a deafening thunderous roar. For a fleeting instant, they could see the world around them - the sea of debris, the defeated ferals still desperately attempting to dig their way out, the pools of blood, the scorch marks.

"Seraphim," Eva uttered the word with the fear of a timid greenlet, gripping her own smaller shield so tightly it creaked in protest. "Why would they expose themselves?"

Because they were going to die. "We move!" Urtha commanded instead, quickening their pace in the direction the flare had come from.

"WALL!"

Barely had Eva shrieked the command, pointing directly ahead, that the three Orcs reacted. Their shields shifted, two curved triangles forming a barrier against the ground while Urtha manipulated the third as a wedge between them while angling it so as to keep them protected from the skies.

The blow that followed pushed all three of them back, sparks dancing wildly against the black sky. Urtha grit her teeth, she'd been hit by the Chieftess' full strength, and it paled compared to this!

"RIGHT SIDE! HIGH!"

Sheel lined up the shot, and a torrent of crimson fire roared past their shield's curve. The silhouette of the armored maiden flickered into existence momentarily before the flames were extinguished as though they had never existed.

"Down!" Urtha ordered, yanking Sheel.

The sky collapsed a second time that night, striking the spot Sheel had been pulled from a mere split second earlier. Another rumble of thunder echoed through their bones, the stone and wood debris radiating a heated red glow.

Their target wouldn't grant them a moment's rest.

"SPLIT!" Eva's voice pierced the blinding rumble still echoing inside Urtha's skull.

Urtha and one of her sisters sprang left, hauling the blood-drinker along. Sheel and the remaining Orc dove in the opposite direction. An axe cleaved the ground, showering

them in a rain of sparks and molten stone, revealing the dented, darkened armor of the Malumari. The gaze from within the visor was cold, sharp as a blade.

Urtha felt the surge of power buffet her body like a sea of jagged thorns. "You call this intimidation!?" She bellowed, channeling her power into her skin, fortifying it further as she propelled herself forward, shield leading the charge. The massive slab of layered orcwood connected solidly, slamming into her opponent with a satisfying thump. "Take food from our Chieftess and you will know true fear!"

The armored body was sent into the darkness. The sky above flashed in brilliance, the spear of light struck down at Urtha's shield with its wrath, a power that buckled her knees and made her bones tremble. The thunder that followed left her grateful she'd not removed the earplugs, else she'd be deaf. An ominously glowing, perfectly circular spot adorned the upper part of her curved shield, glaring in warning.

Squinting, Urtha spotted their target, the armored maiden illuminated by a dim purple glow, gauntleted hand tracing cryptic patterns in the air. "Sprout!" The Orc called.

"It's a healing spell!" came the prompt reply.

"THROW!" Urtha roared, her metal club gesturing at the enemy.

At her command, all three of her sisters pulled spears with bulbous tips and launched them. Only Sheel's ignited mid-flight, trailing fire as they whistled forward thirsty for blood. Embla gestured at the spears, and the fire vanished in a flicker. The maiden hesitated, and abruptly leapt away as if suddenly aware of the true threat. The instant the spears impacted against the debris, all three of them unleashed a concussive blast of sound, fire, and light that knocked her off balance.

Embla's disrupted spell retaliated, lashing out in a burst of purple that seared the maiden's armor, leaving scorch marks.

It was impossible to miss the apprehension, the maiden glancing at where the spears had landed with a tension that had not been there. "We wield the weapons of the Father!" Urtha bellowed, a call that was echoed by every other maiden in the city. "Sheel! Light a path!"

United, the trio of Orcs hoisted their shields to ward off the sky. Meanwhile, Sheel began lobbing bundles of oil-soaked cloth she set aflame, the Malumari's power allowed her to extinguish elemental flame, but not normal one.

The crimson light sources scattered around them, casting a sufficient glow to properly reveal their adversary. Instantly, another blow descended from the sky, striking their

interlocked shields. "Hold!" Urtha commanded, holding the weight along her two sisters while Sheel's hands ignited.

Embla swung her massive ax against the empty air twice, finishing the gesture by pointing its tip at them. At the same time she did this, her left hand traced a different spell, the maiden slowly advancing towards them.

"She's starting a curse," Eva whispered, appearing even paler than usual, holding her spear and shield tightly.

A flash of brilliance fell upon them, completely enveloping their group behind curtains of blinding white light. The force was less intense due to its dispersion, yet it removed their ability to see entirely.

Urtha reacted on instinct, breaking formation and lunging ahead of the group, wedging her shield into the ground. The ax's impact against her shield battered her whole body, sending her rolling across the debris, sparks dancing around her eyes, the parts of her that hadn't been protected stinging from the burning light from above.

"Protect Urtha!"

Sheel had cast a stream of fire directly at the spot Urtha had occupied, intending to strike at the armored enemy. But Embla had leapt over the group. Almost as if suspended in mid-air, the glowing hand pointed directly at Urtha, purple power crackling like some kind of maniacal flame.

The Orc's first instinct was to pull the shield up, but she was only holding a tiny piece; the rest had broken off from the first attack. The flame shot at her like a vengeful Lamia, whistling across the night sky with gnashing fury.

From the shadows emerged Eva, hurling her shield with everything she had. It met with the curse halfway to Urtha, unleashing a blast of heat and sound, becoming a rain of flaming splinters.

The falling Malumari continued her arc towards Urtha, ax descending upon them with an unstoppable force.

"Move!"

There was no time for thought; Urtha kicked the Fledgling out of the way, putting everything she could into the upward swing of her metal club. She barely managed to knock the falling ax out of the way before it could cleave her in two, sparks flying across the air. The weapon struck the ground, a burst of rocks and debris jumping out in every direction.

Embla thrust her head forward in a savage headbutt that made Urtha stumble back.

"IS THAT ALL YOU'VE GOT!?" The Orc roared, recovering her balance to step forward and return the favor.

"No."

She didn't even see the metallic fist, only felt its impact against her chin that was immediately followed by the world spinning out of control. Urtha's knees lost all strength, dropping to the ground, ears ringing and tusks throbbing, she blinked slowly, unable to understand why she wasn't eye to eye with the armored Malumari anymore, or how her limbs were so sluggish.

Pillars of light struck the earth behind Embla, targeting the two Orcs and Hobgoblin, pinning them in place.

Orc and Malumari met gazes, the ax rose into the air in a silent promise, the brutal weapon held aloft by a lone arm.

Eva rushed between the two, lunging with a scream, bulbous spear thrusting forward with trembling hands. The act was a desperate clumsy attempt, one Embla reacted to instinctively, slapping the weapon out of the way, a gesture that would've ensured an easy removal of the weakling any other day.

The moment the spear's tip was touched, it exploded. Both maidens were engulfed in its ignition, sending Eva crashing away with smoldering arms while Embla tumbled away, losing balance and getting caught in the irregular terrain.

The ringing in Urtha's ears was incessant as she gradually regained strength in her legs. There was no time for contemplation, while still fighting to recover full control over her limbs, the metal club whistled through the air, the Malumari barely dodging as her free hand began tracing patterns in the air again.

If there was one thing the blood-sucker and Father had insisted upon, it was that Embla could not be allowed to finish a spell. "Fire-casters to me!" Urtha roared, each step surer than the last. Whatever the Malumari had done to her was wearing off.

Fireballs—about twenty in total—arched across the sky in her direction, launched from all around, every team that could spare the effort taking the shot. Embla reacted with a glare aimed at Urtha before pulling her power, the air trembling around her body, purple flickers of light sparking into existence. With a shout, power was unleashed in every direction, and the fireballs vanished upon contact with it.

Embla retrieved her weapon and swung her blade over her head twice, pointing it at Urtha. The Orc recognized the signal scrambled to duck out of the way of what should have been an attack from the Seraphim. The beam of light did not strike where she'd been, however, as one of the buildings at the periphery was caught instead.

Shrill screams followed, repeating as the beam of light then targeted another building, and then another, and another. Fire rose all around the sea of rubble as the city began to burn.

“What the...?” Embla was the one to talk, frozen as her visor panned all around them.

Alarm bells rang out from every direction, the militia giving the signal that they could not hold positions. Urtha did not see any ferals, however, yet there was one clear reason why they would scatter so readily.

“You're targeting the humans.”

Her jaw fixed, tightening as she turned her glare at the Malumari. The armored maiden stood still, barely gripping her ax as she observed the spreading flames.

With a roar, Urtha stormed toward the maiden, brandishing her metal club with every ounce of ferocity that burned within her. The Malumari maiden, more out of instinct than deliberate thought, raised her weapon to block, using its thick shaft as a shield.

“Is this what you wanted!?” The Orc bellowed, not slowing any as she pulled back just to hammer down at the maiden's weapon again.

Embla is startled, capable of taking the blows but barely able to muster any initiative other than a rushed counter-attack. Urtha hit the ax out of the way and took the chance to strike at the enemy's exposed flank, barely missing as the Mulamari weaved out of the way.

The momentary hesitation was gone, the Malumari cleaving at the dirt with enough force to shower Urtha in rocks and dirt. With the distance the attack created for her, Embla shifted her stance, holding the weapon closer to the very edge of the shaft.

With a grunt of effort Embla swung her blade with explosive speed, so much so in fact, that her body flew right after it, the maiden intentionally breaking her own solid footing. Urtha barely had the chance to deflect the blow as the assault began.

Lost was all caution, the Malumari took her brutal strength to hurl her weapon and herself at Urtha. While Orcs were trained to always have their feet firmly connected to the ground, the armored maiden was closer to a rag-doll. She used her own weapon's massive weight to shift the center of mass and allow her to spend as much time in the

air as she did grounded. Each swing of the colossal ax would be followed by her using her body like a flail, turning every missed attack from her weapon into an opportunity to strike with metal-clad boots and fists.

This was no longer a strategic battle, there was no longer consideration for the presence of other maidens. Embla was throwing everything she had at Urtha, and the Orc was forced in a slow retreat. Every blow from the ax could split her in half, and every savage kick left her hardened bones teetering at the edge of breaking.

Bruises began to accumulate on Urtha's body, faster than she could heal them, her mace was being chipped away with every deflection of the ax. She had to buy time, as powerful as the maiden was, none could outmatch her endurance.

“Fire!”

The voice came from Sheel, and it nearly startled Urtha. The first instinct was to growl at the wave of fireballs coming their way. Couldn't she see the fight had changed? But she wasn't about to let it get the better of her. The moment Embla unleashed her power to snuff out the flames, the Orc took her gamble, lunging forward and throwing her mace with everything she had.

Caught by surprise, Embla could only block it.

The ax's handle could not bear the abuse it had gone through along the attack, wood splintering and being rendered useless. The ax's heavy metal head bounced against the stone, both maidens breathing heavily.

Urtha pulled her new weapons from her back, a far smaller shield than the portable curved wall, and a orcwood hammer.

Grim determination emerged from Embla's voice. “Well done,” she declared, discarding the fragments. Without a moment's hesitation, she retrieved the metal club and gave it a few experimental swings. “This is a good weapon.” She removed her helmet. White hair danced in the air, her dark skin and pointed ears were her most striking features.

The maiden diverted her gaze from Urtha, toward the enclosing wall, and then the ominous sky overhead as it continued to indiscriminately rain fire upon the city. She took a deep breath, and with the exhale, the power that had clung to the Malumari dissipated.

“What did you do?” Urtha questioned, raising the secondary shield with her left hand while clutching the hammer's shaft tightly in the other.

“They've given up on the attack,” Embla murmured, ignoring the question, her gaze glued to the sky. “This is a ploy to sow discord, a strategy to buy them time for a retreat.”

“And you?”

The Malumari locked gazes. “I fight.” The Orc had heard that tone before, she’d heard it of many a Chieftess, back before she’d conquered them. It was the resolute voice of a warrior who knew had lost everything. One deprived of their cause, yet not of their pride. “What’s your name?”

“Urtha.”

“Those are quite the peculiar weapons you have there, Urtha,” Embla proclaimed.

She wielded a long-shafted hammer with an oversized head. Its balance was atrocious, and the item could do with a better handle. Meanwhile, the shield was no less strange, tall enough to match her stature, curved, and adorned with fist-sized lumps all over its surface. “They were crafted under the Father’s guidance.”

“Like the spears.” The Malumari studied it briefly, then shook her head. “My human, his name is Barry and he has hair like fire. He isn’t to blame for any of this; we pulled him into our conflict.”

This was a truth that all maidens accepted. Urtha nodded in understanding. “As the Spear of the tribe, you have my promise that we will not harm him.”

Embla’s tension eased, shoulders relaxing slightly, she reciprocated the nod.

Nothing more needed to be said.

They stared, measuring each other up, gauging.

Rubble erupted as Embla lunged forward in a sudden burst of movement. Urtha reacted, angling her shield slightly upward to absorb the impact.

BANG

Several of the lumps exploded outward, showering Embla with fire, the force of the explosion thrusting the club skyward. The maiden was left off balance, shock etched across her face as Urtha capitalized on the moment, delivering an uppercut swing with her hammer.

A glimmer of realization flickered across her face, recognizing the danger lurking within. The maiden forcefully kicked off the ground, spinning backward in a swift pirouette, her leg striking out to connect with Urtha’s jaw with a bone-shattering force.

Undeterred, Urtha charged forward, dismissing the pain. She thrust her shield at the maiden in a brutal, upward swing aimed at her exposed back before the full pirouette could complete and her feet could find the ground once more.

BANG

The remaining clusters exploded with Urtha's added force behind the attack, throwing the maiden up into the air.

Embla didn't even lose her composure, her feet glowing as her body spun, freezing mid-air while facing downward as if she'd found a foothold on an unseen ceiling. With a ferocious scream, she pushed off downwards, swinging her club with a single-minded determination to shatter Urtha's body.

Without a moment's hesitation, the Orc summoned every ounce of energy within her to meet the blow with her shield, feeling the crushing impact on her shield, her arm, and her shoulder. And as it did, she struck downwards with her hammer, targeting the Malumari's spine.

BOOM

A wave of heat and light accompanied the familiar sensation of burning pain up her arm. But this time, she managed to not budge.

With her left arm grotesquely mangled beyond recognition and the right one missing everything after the forearm, the Orc stood triumphant over her defeated adversary. The explosive strike had pierced through the annoying armor and straight through the maiden's lower back.

The maiden lay sprawled on the ground, barely moving, fighting to breathe.. "Why... why didn't you kill me?" She managed to gasp out each word through a series of bloodied, clenched coughs.

Urtha felt a mix of annoyance and relief. "The Father ordered us to take you in alive if we could."

Embla groaned. "You lie." She coughed, arms straining, but legs entirely unresponsive.

The Orc straightened out. "He thought you were worth keeping as a prisoner, he just didn't say it out loud." To be exact, he'd instructed them all to fight to ensure they made it back whatever the cost. But there was something else she knew he needed to do, a wound he needed to mend.

“Just... kill me.”

“Do it yourself.” Urtha stood next to the downed enemy. “I’ll tell that Barry of yours you preferred death.”

Embla’s eyes flared defiantly, her jaw clenching tightly as a trembling hand began to weave what she now recognized as a healing spell. Urtha picked up her trusty metal club and watched closely. The spell wasn’t powerful, it only stopped the bleeding and mended some minor cuts, the spine still looked very much shattered, though it was hard to tell seeing how much of the armor had been mangled with the flesh.

“Chain her up, get her some Polita juice.” She frowned, shifting her attention to the city. The beams had stopped altogether, but everything appeared to have caught in flames. “Sprout, go to the harbor and contact the Negixes, they’ve got orders to start some rain the moment the sky is safe. Until then, they need to stop the wind so the fires can be contained.”

The blood-sucker looked just about recovered from the fight, drained, but with her own regeneration having patched up most of the injuries. “And... her?”

“We’ll keep her as a prisoner.” She flinched slightly, feeling something within herself, from the bond. Urtha shared a concerned look with Sprout, the Fledgling had felt that odd sensation as well. “Get moving.”

[059] [Lines (Subject)]

Subject could not think, Subject could not feel.

To feel the world was to be a constellation of entities working together. Each leaf upon her wings absorbed information, smoke, light, air-currents, humidity, temperature. Similarly, her body was a multitude of inputs and orders. There was no singular thing that Subject was, she was a collaborative whole.

If she focused, she could sense something lurking underneath, an undercurrent of commands that united her into one thing that separated her from everything around her. And deeper still was something else, something that wasn't allowed to pierce through the commands.

Taking in the world underneath, Subject could sense the glimmering yellow and red of fire, the taste of smoke, and perceive the movement of others, other... individuals.

Individuals.

The concept stirred that deep undercurrent, but it was a concept that left her perception as soon as she'd stopped acknowledging its existence.

The night air carried with it neither comfort nor discomfort, only humidity and a slight dip in temperature. The wind only helped her sample things that were further away, the salt of the sea, mixed sometimes with sulfur, and sometimes with something else she couldn't quite place.

"Take due north until you reach the sea, then fly into the city from a low altitude," the words were laced with the scent of Command, joining the stream of unity. "Stay away from any light, avoid being spotted. If we are spotted, do not use your light, we must not draw undue attention."

Subject complied.

Her wings beat slowly, lazily, allowing gravity to pull them down in a wide spiral until the whistling wind was mixed with crashing waves. The goal ahead was dimly lit, and she could not sense any creature looking out to the sea. With the cloudy sky above, their approach was made harder still to detect.

"Land here."

The taste of sand under her feet was acceptable. The salt concentration was high, but it would serve well for the Subject. Water was appreciated, but it too was too salty. There was little to be gained from prolonged exposure to either, Subject moved away from the water.

“Follow me, use your vines to attack on my order,” the scent of Command etched the need for Subject to acknowledge an individual, though this individual was easier to acknowledge because she was much like Subject, a delineation that contained many things within.

In a way, this second entity was not truly a separate individual but rather a continuation of Subject.

No, it was the other way around. Subject was the extension. This was a conclusion she had reached before, many times, but it was a thought and thoughts were hard to grasp out of the stream. Her vines writhed, tense, ready to lash out. Down on the ground, the smell of smoke and blood tickled her senses, but there was something else that was overpowering those signals, something that made her shudder with hunger. What was this delicious thing?

“Ignore the smell. It’s fertilizer. In those concentrations it might as well be poison,” Command ordered, the parts of her that hungered wriggling under her fake clothes. “We need to focus.”

Despite the slight scent of Command, Subject’s attention was elsewhere, looking for the source, she could sense they were spilling a lot of the delicious thing, her feet itched with a thirst she hadn’t known she could feel.

“Focus.” Command grasped at Subject’s face, the scent overpowering all else. The direct contact broke the noise and left nothing but Command. Nothing but Command. “Ignore the fertilizer, ignore the food, follow me and avoid detection.”

Compliance.

Subject followed, leaves shaking and taking a darker color as they cut off their ability to detect the delicious thing. The silence of the outside, the stream shuddered underneath, something within her recognized the other things she could see, but the undercurrent of Command pushed it down.

“With a scent this strong, no wonder the subjects wouldn’t follow the pheromone trail.” Command spoke, but there were no signals to indicate Subject should care, so she did not.

Command led them through the stone, and Subject felt the stirring become stronger. There was a sense of... something, something individual, separate, that was not the parts of her that moved and felt and complied, but something that was its own, alone. Subject had been here before, but she could not find a way to express the feeling or find a proper cause for it. As if she'd witnessed this place through a crude drawing that didn't match what she could now perceive. Or maybe it was the other way around.

Subject didn't know.

As all else, the thought slipped through when her focus returned to the Command. There were others, others that spotted them, and upon the signal, Subject crushed them. Weak mulch that left the taste of blood and sweat in her vines.

They moved relatively quietly, Command was chasing after some of the individuals, and then stopping, only to chase after the trail of another. There was an objective, a goal, Command had stated they were to find "the one", but no further details had been shared. Whatever the case, Subject had been ordered to focus.

With a shift in the wind, something within her stirred, her steps slowed, her attention shifted.

"Subject?"

"Another." She spoke, though the word was wrong. There was a tug within, pulling, screaming. The tug felt pain, yet it was gone in a breeze, leaving behind only an impression that was quickly slipping.

Death and agony of a part of herself.

"A sympathetic response? But the only one with your strain... ah." Command made a sound. "Let us look for your sister, I will need a replacement for you once you've finished maturing, and it should make things easier to get a hold of that human."

Human.

Another odd thought, Subject's insides stirred. There was a human, everything was blurred, buried under the stream, but she could sense it was there, barely within reach. She had to-

"Lead me to your sister."

Command touched, and thoughts stopped. Subject had to find her sister, her pained sister, her crying sister. Subject's wings spread, sampling the air all around them. There

was food everywhere, but she had to ignore the food. With a shift in the wind she caught another hint, another taste.

There were obstacles, but Subject dealt with them, more blood.

“They’ve barely got any fighters here,” Command muttered. “I will deal with them, we can’t leave too much of a mess.”

Command took the front, only pausing to confirm with Subject what direction to take from time to time. There was much movement, an odd thing in Subject’s not-memories, she could hear the screams, and many times they moved undisturbed as the others ignored them.

Then they reached a structure, of old dead things, stone, and dirt, and that reeked of Subject’s sister.

“Enemies ahead.”

This time were was no scent of Command, but of Warning and Aggression.

Subject flared her wings outwards, locking on the figure that stood there. Her power pooled, light forming an invisible line that connected her to the target. Then, she expanded the line, pouring power through the line until it burnt through the Enemy, leaving a burning hole. Another screamed, and Subject took aim.

All of them were dealt with in quick order.

“Follow, defend me.” Command.

Subject complied.

They entered the building, the scent of slow agonizing death made Subject’s parts shudder. These individuals were the cause for it, they stank of the decay, and this knowledge made her body coil and snap. She lashed out whenever an Enemy got close, one by one they fell, some took several blows, but within the confined space of the house, there was nowhere to avoid Subject’s unrelenting attacks.

Command took them through stairs that went down, the smell of death was suffocating.

“It seems they were killing my baby, but have not finished the job.” Command slowed, glancing at Subject. “Only defense, do not attack without confirmation. We must not risk your sister. Enter first.”

Subject acknowledged, moving through the door.

The room had more occupants than just her sisters, a maiden clad in black spiny armor let out a battlecry, thrusting forward with a short sword. Subject raised her hand, knocking the weapon out of the way. Another maiden emerged from the shadows wielding a spear. Subject threw a quick burst of light that knocked the maiden to the floor, twitching and clenching the spear with shaking hands.

“You.” The armored maiden snarled.

Behind her was Subject’s sisters and... and something stirred, the thing under the current was screaming, a strange heat that had nothing to do with the cold room. Subject tried to make sense of it. “Threat?” she asked, swinging her arm at the armored one, knocking her out of the way so that she’d follow the other weak one.

“No,” Command clarified.

Subject acknowledged, turning to her sisters, taking a step closer, seeing their half-dead bodies limply hanging from the claws of... of... “Threat?” she asked, her insides burned, uncertainty and thought, there was a reason for this, but it was something deep, fear and anger, fear and anger, fear and anger.

“They’re your sisters, of course not.”

“GET AWAY FROM HER!”

The armored maiden lunged in the way, swinging a glowing blade. This time it pierced through the hand, and Subject recoiled at the sting, body covering for the wound before any sap could leak. She shifted her attention to the armored maiden, watching her warily, seeing her holding a sword with one hand and a jar with clear liquid on the other.

“Threat.” Subject determined, power coursing to her hands and wings, readying to eradicate the danger.

“Wait.” Command used touch for the command, stepping forward. “You’re a Rapha, aren’t you?”

“And you’re the monster who did this.” The armored maiden replied, keeping the glowing blade at the ready.

“That you’ve done this much without having ascended... this is commendable,” Command praised, moving closer to the sisters, her body releasing other commands, but not ones meant for Subject. “You have talent, imagine what you’d achieve as a Nightingale.”

Subject turned her focus to her sisters as they slowly stirred awake, sensing their agony, and feeling the hotness grow. There was something about the host that made her tremble, made her thoughts narrow, almost as if she were...

“Maidens like you are a rarity.” Command declared. “Killing you and your human would be a waste of potential.”

There was a word ringing inside Subject’s mind, a word that vibrated and seethed and wrestled against the stream of the many. The more she looked at her sisters, and their host, the more the hotness was overtaking her. Her wings ruffled and hands clenched into fists, vines coiling tight.

“That... is very generous.” She lowered the blade, taking a step away from them, ignoring the shocked look from the paralyzed one.

“It is.” Command eased a little as well.

“And... you just ask for a simple thing in exchange, right?” The armored maiden paused in front of a cupboard. “Monica becoming your property.” She uncorked the flask that contained the clear liquid, its acrid smell inundated the room.

Those words... that name... A trail of lightning ran down Subject’s wings, the air became charged. Particles of light danced behind her.

“Of course.”

The heat was boiling, it was burning, and the depths didn’t feel so shallow anymore, the stream was trembling, trying to contain the thing underneath, but. There was something urging her attention inside, deep, buried under leaves and vines.

“My human made his opinion clear on this matter.” She whirled around, raising the jar into the air. “Also, Monica says no.”

“STOP HER!”

There was no Command in the words, Subject could only sense the cloying scent in the air as her eyes were fixated on the host for her sisters. Thus she did not move. Instead she was focused on something else, the words were boiling up and out, her body was trembling, vines were grinding and coiling, tightening and throbbing.

The liquid splashed over her sisters, they withered and dried, writhing and wriggling in desperate pleas. But Subject wasn’t paying attention, her body was struggling against the undercurrent, the vinegar-like rancid smell sweltering and deafening the world.

Her sisters were seeded into flesh that was covered in white fur with black stripes.

White fur, black stripes.

Monica.

Sabertooth.

Heat and fire rose within the Subject, the suffocating smell mixing with the burning screams. Her mind screeched as her body convulsed and ruffled. Thoughts upon thoughts upon thoughts poured over, breaking through the stream, memories of screams and death, screams and death, watching her sisters writhing in a desperate attempt to survive, to resist.

“What have you done!?”

Someone shouted, sounds of loud metal crashing, glass breaking, Subject stumbled half a step, her parts searched for Command, for something to quell the thoughts, but found none. In its place there was something else, something that was coming out in anger and fury.

Individual.

Sabertooth.

More crashing, screams. And then fire.

An explosion that rocked the room, the Seraphim tumbled, her wings torn and falling, she'd been attacked, the paralyzed maiden from the shadows was paralyzed no more. The Pinielf was screaming, throwing the burning pieces of herself, her blood and gold eyes looking across the room at the Seraphim.

Then her sister's seed-bed awakened, with piercing blue eyes.

The Seraphim's body creaked and screamed and cried. Leather broke, cloth tore, light danced and lightning arched through her body.

It came to her. A name.

Her name.

“I. Am. Matina.”

“That's not good.” The Pinielf muttered, holding the armored maiden by the throat against the wall.

Then there was light.

And screams.