
[108] [Fight (Embla)]

The bond screamed in fury, Embla's heart pumping fire through her veins. It was an anger that came out of agony and confusion, a desire to lash out and destroy anything and everything. It was a familiar emotion, one she'd been taught to temper when she was but a kit, to forge it into a fine blade. But this was no rebel flame of youth, this was an inferno, a voice rooted in the back of her head relentlessly screaming out.

But that voice was muffled, distant despite how close she was to Barry.

That knowledge was worse than the fury, it twisted her guts into knots of ice. Either the bond was reaching its limit and about to snap, or something truly dangerous was happening to Barry. It was what pushed her over the edge, to act, to no longer be able to sit still and wait for others to fulfill their promises.

Driven by an ever-increasing dread, she'd broken past the Orcs and the knights, smashing into the palace through one of the many glassless windows, and following the traces of the bond to work her way down to the underground.

The entrance was discreet, almost tucked into a hidden corner on the second floor. The stairwell was uncomfortably narrow, intentionally designed to make for harder movement. Without any maidens guarding the place, no wonder the knights had ignored it and focused on where they could sense the wildlings.

Working her way down, Embla chewed on the inside of her cheek, fearing the worst. From what little the Pinielf had told them, the palace had a vast amount of energy it used for its defenses. But there was a way to lower them such that, rather than disengage the whole mechanism, they'd instead concentrate on the underground of the structure. It was its default state, and the reason why the wildlings hadn't been able to discover let alone breach the guarded rooms underneath.

Even with the bypass the Pinielf had provided, only a select few rooms had opened, the rest remaining locked and impregnable. They'd tried breaking through anyway, but it was clearly a task that would take them too long to be worth the effort, at least so long as they intended to awaken the Elves.

The staircase led to an open chamber with many doors. Each and every one carried the faint green hue of the concentrated energy of the titan-tree itself. Embla could only

fathom the engineering that allowed it to do such a thing, for a plant to manipulate elemental energy as if it were a maiden trying to strengthen her own limbs.

And there, in the direction her bond was leading her to, was one of the doors the Pinielf had unlocked but that now remained sealed, a green glow surrounding it. The power contained within the wood practically made it vibrate under Embla's touch, the elemental energy so thick and woven so tightly that any attempt to dispel it would merely cause it to shudder and re-knit itself.

The task of breaking through would be no different from trying to bring an ever-renewing avalanche to a stop.

Someone had brought him here for the sake of hiding him from everyone else.

"Barry," she whispered under her breath, wondering if he could sense her. Was he alone inside? Or was there someone else with him? She could easily imagine Lala at his side, the Tenebrilin was too smart not to have glued herself to his side. But was Orion there as well? Would the feralborn Hound put his life at risk?

Embla liked to imagine that though the maiden might lose herself in fury, the bond and her own instincts would keep her from doing anything she shouldn't.

Just because the door couldn't be opened from the outside did not mean that it couldn't be deactivated from within.

Gathering her power into her palm, Embla carefully pooled her power into a sharp edge. It might be impossible to remove the defenses for long enough to smash the door open, but maybe it would be enough to be heard.

Pulling her fists back, she clenched her teeth and unleashed the power, shattering a fraction of the protection for less than a fraction of a second. "Barry, open the door!" she shouted, gathering her energy once more and bringing it forth in another blow.

The bond shuddered, and for a moment, she could've sworn she sensed something, but...

"This is where they hid him."

Embla looked over her shoulder, temper flaring. "We do not need to fight."

"I agree," Deneva answered, standing near the center of the room, as pompous with her full enchanted regalia as she remembered the Swordmistress. "Last we clashed, you were not fighting for a human. The Earl will not do him harm, nor needlessly imprison him. Can you honestly claim his life would be any worse than here?"

"He wouldn't be free," Embla clenched her fists. "The kingdom would make a tool out of him, lock him in shiny boxes."

"It's to my understanding you were no better," Deneva's cool voice rang out, her stance neutral, but the blade in her hand was not. "Could you claim that if you take him out of the kingdom and to the domain of the Coven he would be anything more than a token?"

Embla growled. "I'm strong enough for both of us. And if they don't want to grant us the freedom we seek, then maybe we will never join any cause."

Her adversary scoffed, approaching slowly as both maidens began to circle one another. "You impose your decisions on your human."

"We'd decide together," she eyed the blade in Deneva's hand, a thin wispy blue thing barely two feet long and devoid of enchantments, only holding the glimmer of murisium.

"That envoy from the Coven we caught has said many things about you," Deneva made a simple swipe. "How you locked Barry Dodson in his room to 'keep him safe', how you cowed and bowed to the Warlock. And seeing the current situation, you clearly allowed him to be used to awaken that monster as well."

Embla flinched.

Her opponent lunged at that very instant, thrusting at Embla's knee with the pinpoint precision of her saber. Embla deflected the blow with a twirl of her sword, trying to keep her strength in check to avoid the metal from shattering from the impact. Sparks flew and both maidens disengaged the next instant.

"You don't want to kill me," Embla frowned.

"Seeing Rick's interactions with his maidens, it is clear that despite your misgivings, Barry's collaboration would be easier if you're left alive," she twirled the blade once, then twice. "It remains your choice whether you'd rather be brought in willingly or not."

"Slavery is not a choice."

This time she pooled her aberrant power in her free hand, fingers tracing the patterns of the spell. Deneva reacted quickly, throwing her blade at the same time she launched herself back at the Malumari. Embla knew better than to deflect the blade, instead taking a sideways swing at Deneva, allowing the thrown weapon to bite her flesh.

The Swordmistress reacted with a flicker of her wrist, the thrown blade reappearing in her hand and deflecting the attack. The room vibrated with the clash, and Embla's spell finished. A stream of ethereal chains lashed out from Embla's hand, reaching out to

grasp the knight captain. Their glow intensified as they wrapped around the maiden's enchanted armor, suckling at the power contained within the protective framework etched into the metal.

Taking the opportunity, she yanked on the chains, thrusting with her blade and twisting it into a downward swing, fully intent on skewering through the maiden's torso. Deneva didn't fight, allowing herself to be dragged along and spinning alongside the pull, her blade vanishing as two daggers took their place, using one to parry the attack while the other nicked at Embla's arm.

Unconcerned by the injury, she shoulder-checked the maiden, slamming her away and immediately pulling at the chains again. But Deneva found footing midair with a burst of power through her soles to stabilize herself, yanking back and using her arm to clash against the chains. The combined stress tore the energy-construct, freeing Deneva and sending her to the opposite side of the room.

Deneva took a slight pause to look at her arm where the chains had found purchase, the armor was dented and cracked, the enchantment within them flickering irregularly. "You're better than last time," she commented idly.

Embla glanced at her own injuries, noticing that they weren't closing as quickly as she would've expected. "This isn't poison, is it?" She couldn't sense anything disrupting her energy, yet the injuries were persisting.

"Who knows?"

Both maidens continued to circle each other. Embla knew exactly what she was up against; her mother had gone into great detail about the many options knights had when it came to enchantments. There was not a shred of doubt they'd geared specifically to counter Dark Elves and their disruptive powers.

The only way through would be to shred the protections the armor provided, one layer at a time.

Deneva took the offensive again, dismissing her daggers halfway down and leaping into the air. Embla barely had the time to leap to the side as a glaive materialized inches from her face. She used her blade to deflect, but her opponent was not giving her any room to maneuver, rapidly thrusting the bladed tip of her weapon to push her against the wall.

Seeing no options, Deneva allowed the blade to bite into her forearm, gripping the polearm and yanking it out of Deneva's grip. The maiden flowed with the motion,

thrusting herself closer to Embla while releasing the spear and summoning her daggers again.

The perfect response would've been to swing at the Captain with the butt of the glaive, but Embla didn't do that, thrusting a kick outwards at her opponent instead. The force of the kick was such that, even when blocking it, Deneva shot back out, slamming against the wall.

Embla threw the spear to the side. "Your weapons can't be used against you."

"I guess I owe you that much." At a twitch of her hand, the polearm vanished, alongside the discarded saber that had been left ever so temptingly within Embla's reach. "I don't remember using it against you in our last encounter five years ago."

Embla's lip twitched in a smirk. "Who knows?"

She could almost feel the scowl through the visor from her adversary as she switched back to the glaive.

The Swordmistress did not rush, moving closer and systematically assaulting the Malumari without extending more than absolutely necessary. Every attack was shallow and fast; it was clear her intention was to slowly wear Embla down through attrition, keeping a distance to ensure she didn't need to concern herself with her armor.

Unwilling to give her that option, Embla began another spell. This time aiming for something far more dangerous. The aberrant energies began to shift and twist, coalescing around her blade. Deneva did not push into the attack, instead switching to swinging attacks to force her to block with the sword.

Did she not know what was coming, or did she suspect it might be a trap? Whatever the case, Embla focused on parrying to minimize the stress on the blade, feeling as each blow chipped off tiny shavings each time.

Yet as more power coalesced around the edge, the denser the spell became, and the more the glaive started to vibrate. Deneva's attacks intensified, the weapon in her hands beginning to hum loudly while Embla's sword glowed violet. And then, as she managed to finish casting the spell, the elemental energy of the blade swiftly embedded itself into the spear.

Deneva threw the weapon away from herself, barely in time to avoid the worst of it as the weapon exploded in a shower of metal and violet light. But not quickly enough to avoid her armor being torn by the larger pieces.

Embla took the opportunity and pushed forward, balled glowing fists hammering against the armor. The metal around her torso began to vibrate much as the spear had, and the instant it did, Deneva summoned knuckle dusters and her movements abruptly grew faster, burning through her energy to bolster her speed and foregoing defense.

Every single one of Embla's blows carried devastating force that didn't shatter the maiden in twain by mere virtue of how absurdly well-made the armor was. Yet not one of them landed as they should; Deneva twisting her body to spin like a whirlwind of fists, the wicked spikes she held gouging at Embla's arms and legs.

Neither maiden slowed or backed down, so close their breaths mingled in the air, Embla's body bled profusely. But she wasn't losing either; Deneva's chest piece was starting to hum loudly, vibrating with the slow but steady accumulation of power from every attack.

The question was whether it would explode before Embla gave out or not.

“STOP!”

The voice came with an intense flood of red energy. Suddenly, every spilt drop of Embla's blood began to glow, amplifying the energy in the air, thickening the power until the Malumari could taste iron. The room itself felt as if it could slow them down.

But it did not.

Neither maiden paid attention to the vampire. The momentary sense of surprise washed off as the blows came back. Embla briefly considered turning her attention to Eva to remove her from the equation. The blood-energy was making her bleed more profusely but kept her focus on the Swordmistress as turning her back would prove disastrous. Instead, she shifted her aberrant spell to feed off the now thick ambient energy to empower itself.

There was a mild sense of pity towards the vampire. Embla knew the recently-turned maiden lacked the skill to intervene. Stepping anywhere near either of them could result in both of them finishing her off to remove the unwanted variable.

It did not seem that would dissuade Eva from leaving, though.

The Vampire jumped from shadow to shadow, making her way around the periphery of the room. Both combatants kept an eye out, only just enough to ensure there were no surprises about to come their way.

Neither expected the Vampire to be able to influence the fight more than she already had, but neither had missed her pumping out more and more energy into the air. The

longer this went on, the more Embla frowned. She'd met Vampires before, she'd fought them to test out their power, yet not once had she seen them having this much power available to them.

A slight shift in Deneva's aggression raised alarms, the knight pushing the fight closer towards the Vampire. Embla felt the shift and realized the Captain had deemed Eva a threat best removed now before she ever had the time to properly pose a threat.

The best option available was to deny her the chance and keep her at an awkward-

The anger vanished.

The bond hadn't broken, but it meant Barry had lost consciousness. The realization struck her like a hammer all the same, concern flaring out and turning into fear. A thousand and one things crossed her mind, each and every one panicking at the prospect of her human being in danger.

It was the opening Deneva had needed, striking at Embla's gut and tearing through with the spikes on her weapon. The Malumair managed to kick her off, but the damage was too heavy, the fight became defensive, unable to add more power to the spell imbued in Deneva's armor. Inch by inch she was pushed back, desperately sacrificing her own arms for the sake of buying at least another minute.

"I have Barry Dodson, and if either of you keep fighting, I will kill him." Eva's voice rang out through the room.

She stood exactly where the locked door had been at, holding an unconscious red-head against the floor, pressing a dagger against his throat. Slightly further into the open room was a terrified Lala, the maiden nursing her cheek as if she'd just been punched away.

"H-how-?" Embla stuttered, holding her stomach with one arm while desperately pushing her body to repair itself.

"If you harm him, you will die." Deneva spoke coldly, dismissing her knuckle dusters and bringing out a sword.

"And if you don't let me bring him to our healer, he dies anyway," Eva snarled, baring her fangs. "While two were fighting, I figured out the defenses here pump more energy if they sense a potentially incoming attack."

"It was obvious enough. Otherwise the tree would not be able to prevent a large attack to overwhelm whatever resources it had spent." Deneva didn't move from her spot, voice calm and collected.

“But it also means higher ambient elemental energy, and pureblood humans have horrible tolerance for it.” Slowly, Eva rose to her feet, dragging the human up along with her, the dagger ever present on his throat. “So now that I have both of you paying attention for a change...”

With a whistling sound, several Orcs walked into the room, each of them sporting the explosive spears and shields. Eva handed her hostage over, watching them leave, but keeping her eyes firmly on Deneva.

“E-Embla?” The maiden from within the vault spoke.

“Not now, Lala.” She glanced at Eva. “What do you want?”

“Both of you will work together to non-lethally neutralize the wildlings so that Dia can remove the parasite. We need every abled maiden we can get our hands on.” The Vampire stood firm, ruby eyes holding nothing but steely determination. “And once you get your shit in order, we’re going to rescue Rick.”

“Under what pretense would the knights collaborate with an accursed that’s not bound to a noble?” Deneva’s question was not one with animosity, but it carried a warning that without proper cause, they would not act.

“You would not be working with me but the tribe, and they will see to it that if you do not collaborate, you will return empty handed.” Eva shrugged. “I just happen to be their hostage.”

“Hostage.” A twinge of disbelief and humor reached Deneva’s voice.

“I might be accursed, but I’m a maiden first.” The Vampire shot a dirty look at Embla. “And I’ll do anything to rescue my human.”