
[222] [Barry]

Barry glanced at Kajou, the Amazoness sat at the edge of the court. Her eyes stared into the distance as she seemed to be lost in thought. Her black hair swung with the light breeze, her face a serene mask that hid the turmoil underneath.

She'd been more responsive and willing to lend a hand with things, but Barry could see the redness around her eyes. The young woman kept looking down at the blade that sat on her lap, the blade that belonged to Pan.

"What do you think, Orion?" He asked his shadow, the Hound that hid there didn't answer, only her head popping out to look up at him. "Yeah... nevermind." He crouched and patted the head of messy hair, giving her a bit of bread she greedily gobbled up.

Orion glanced at him for another moment and sank back into the darkness.

Barry hadn't managed to get her to socialize much with others, but if she was happy like this then maybe that was alright.

"Let her be, Barry, you should be worrying over other things." Lala gripped his elbow and nudged him to follow. The dark-skinned maiden grinned at him and squeezed a little tighter.

He could only smile bashfully as Lala walked next to him standing as proud as she could, exposing her bare neck and raising her chin whenever someone looked their way. Barry could spot several of the guards he'd bonded going about also sans a collar, they were the ones that were likeliest to shoot dirty looks at Lala.

"Do you know why Lady Dagmar called for me?"

"Not a clue, but it seems everyone's a lot more active now that she's back on her feet, don't you think?"

Now that Lala had pointed it out, Barry did notice everyone seemed to be very active. The trees that made up the houses were being reinforced, and the handful of elves that lived in the Court were moving around and summoning thorny plants to weave around the walls of every structure available.

"Looks... fearsome."

“Probably preparations for an expedition?”

“Expedition?” Barry quirked a curious brow.

“Sometimes we have to send our people out to gather needed resources. Like some medicines. That leaves the Court vulnerable, so those that stay behind try to bunker down.” Lala nodded along as she kept looking about. “Though I hadn’t been told anything.”

“Me neither.”

“Oh, maybe we’ll be part of the expedition?”

Lala pulled harder, directing them towards the massive tree conglomeration that made up the palace. It had been left untouched by the preparations, but Barry figured it would only be a matter of time, right now the work was focused on the periphery.

They wandered into the colossal trees and marched through corridors that had been carved out of their insides. It always surprised Barry when he tried to take into consideration just how large the trees were. It reminded him of when he’d first appeared in this world and the trees that were larger than skyscrapers.

Sometimes he had nightmares about it.

They reached the royal audience chamber. Within, there was a large wooden throne with a crown of branches. The seat was empty, the one waiting for them sat next to the throne, on a heavily cushioned chair. The woman looked far younger than she was, Barry knew, her coal black skin was smooth and devoid of wrinkles, the only blemish upon them the chalk-white scars that had developed from the healing process.

But her eyes felt old, ancient, and exhausted.

They were the eyes of someone who had lived through several lifetimes and was barely holding on.

“Lala, Barry.” Lady Dagmar bowed her head in greeting to them as they bowed in respect. “We will be needing your help in an expedition we will be conducting. Eastward, into the ancient groves.”

The silence that followed gave Barry a chill. “Wait.” He spoke. “Isn’t that... where I showed up?”

“It is in that direction.” The older maiden nodded absently. “From what my daughter told me, the place you appeared in was at the edge of the ancient grove.”

“Lady Dagmar, you couldn’t be...” Lala swallowed. “Is it true?”

“Yes, Lala, I believe Barry might be able to awaken the elves.”

“Right, the elves.” He nodded a little. “Embla talked about that, said that elves that go feral... gather there? Or something?”

There was a strange look in the older woman’s face, her eyes focused on him as if she could look through his skull and directly into his mind. “When a maiden goes feral, they often lose their sanity. To certain degrees, some breeds manage to retain some of it. But not elves.”

“Elves slumber.” Lala nodded. “When an elf’s bond breaks, they start feeling an urge to head to the ancient grove. The closer to ferality the stronger the urge. And once they become feral in full, they fall into a deep hibernation. None have been able to wake them.”

“The humans of this world have lost the ability to make strong bonds.” Dagmar declared. “Humans once did not need enchantments or spells to form a bond.”

“Why has that changed? Something happened?”

“We do not know. I am sure many have sought the answer and failed.” Dagmar shook her head. “What matters is that you can make bonds like the humans of old. And hopefully that is strong enough to pierce the dreamless sleep of the elves.”

Though Barry nodded along, his thoughts turned in another direction. “What happens if it’s possible? How many elves are we talking about?”

“There must be thousands of elves sleeping within the grove. The oldest of whom were the very creators of this wooden palace we stand on.” She stated, gesturing at the wooden walls around them. “If we were able to awaken them, then the forests of the kingdom would become our very allays. Nothing would be able to pose a threat to us ever again.”

Lala nodded enthusiastically. “We’d live in peace.”

“I’m not... sure.” Barry frowned as he said this. “Wouldn’t the kingdom see it as a threat?”

Dagmar waved her hand dismissively. “Of course they would. But what option is there to be had? They will kill us for what we are, or worse, enslave us. The better option is to have the strength to defend ourselves.”

“I guess I could understand that.” He nodded. “I’ll help however I can.”

The words made Lala preen, nodding and sticking a bit closer to him. “I’m not sure how I’d be able to help, but I would like to join in the expedition.”

“We will certainly need your abilities, Lala, that is why I called for you.” The old woman spoke, slowly standing up from her chair, her lithe figure was clad in a white sash. “You might have to work in the field. Prepare yourself accordingly.”

“Work?”

“The grove is not without its protections. Some of them are of the enchanted sort, those I will have you help with.”

Barry’s back straightened up slightly. “And there’s... other kinds of protection?”

Dagmar’s expression soured. “The guardians of the grove. Let us hope they allow us passage.”

“They sound dangerous.”

“The kingdom attempted to take the elves from the grove, once upon a time.” An amused smile came upon the woman’s lips. “They failed.”

[223] [Embla]

She'd been avoiding Barry. The bed had felt empty without him.

But her mother had a point: Embla was too earnest at times.

And though she knew she could keep from telling him anything, she also knew he would be able to detect something was amiss. For all his ignorance, Barry had shown an unnerving ability to know exactly what to say to calm her down and lower her defenses.

And right now, Embla was preparing herself for war.

They were preparing to attack the humans that had come from Barry's world and their escort. Knights, well prepared and equipped. There could even be a royal knight amongst their numbers. It was a bad situation, but one they could not afford to ignore.

And yet Embla felt they were making a grave mistake.

Her gaze coursed over the maidens that were to fight with her. Their gear was made out of salvaged leather from the boars and deer they hunted. Useful to avoid small scratches, but useless against a maiden's true powers. Their weapons were ones stolen over the years from the corpses found in the forest or roads. Some they had made themselves, most they had not.

Most worrying was that the maidens under her control were descendants of those who'd run from the kingdom's clutches. They'd grown in the wilds, they'd fought ferals and learned to sneak and avoid trouble. They were no knights, raised in training for combat against fully conscious and capable maidens.

They could do it, but there were limits.

The attack on the city to rescue Barry had been viable because it hinged entirely on her shoulders. But an attack against a coordinated knight force would need far more than that. More so when their goal was to wipe them out and take the humans with them. Failing that, killing the humans.

That was the other part that bothered Embla.

In the privacy of the storeroom, her fingers brushed against her throat.

Were these people humans like the others in the kingdom, she would not hesitate at the thought. Her skin still burned at the memories she'd sought to forget.

Most of these humans, however, were like Barry. They came from a world where freedom was considered an unquestionable aspect of life. A world that had gone to war to free others from the chains of slavery and they had won.

Donning her armor, Embla moved through the words her mother had spoken. The horrors that might loom on the horizon if these humans were to make it to the heart of the kingdom where they would be untouchable. By no fault of their own, they would become tools of conquest and subjugation. Tools that would see free maidens everywhere chained and turned against one another.

But was such a fate as certain as Lady Dragma had made it out to be?

Would Embla be able to kill Barry were he about to fall into the hands of the enemy? Even if doing so meant safety to the Court and other free maidens out there?

The thought made her scowl, were these thoughts brought about thanks to the bond?

She heaved a heavy breath and put on her helmet. The new battle-ax lay next to the door. A wicked edge that had been enchanted to make healing harder. Still, it was crude, far too crude. A piece of elder-wood with metal that had been hastily melted into the shape of a fang that had lost its point. The magic within it was weak, barely a paltry trick that would only be useful if the fighting took long.

If the fighting took long, they'd be doomed.

The heft of the weapon forced her to adjust her balance, Embla looked at it with an edge of disdain. The thing was barely passable as an improvised weapon. It would serve its purpose, but she doubted it would survive long enough to see a second battle.

Perhaps they could gather the gear from the knights? Lala could likely find a way around the protections. But would she be able to do so before the kingdom could use those very enchantments to track them down?

Questions upon questions, risks and dangers, actions and consequences.

A part of her loathed this role, this duty, this responsibility. She longed for the days where her concerns only went as far as her ax's reach. Of a time when she needed not concern herself with the future and the world was entirely reduced to the now. Of when she danced at the edge of her blade.

Those days were long gone.

Now she was a rebel.

An enemy of the kingdom.

Lifting the ax, Embla stepped outside. She was met by her maidens. Loyal to the last, they would follow her orders, she knew this without a doubt. But were the orders she was about to give the right ones? Was this truly the path forward? To freedom?

She wanted to touch her throat once more, but her armor was in the way.

And Barry was not here. He'd left that morning with Lady Dagmar and their own protection. They'd left in search of an answer to their problems. To awaken the elves of old.

Though Embla marched north through the forest, her mind was elsewhere. It was upon the books she'd once read. Of the first war of maidens. Of the maidens of old. The elves, and their power to turn forests and jungles into nightmares to any that trespassed. Of humans raining fire upon them and yet unable to stop the forest as it expanded, swallowing cities and leaving the world in a lush green landscape. She had met Elves and even a single High Elf, she'd known of their prowess with vegetation, even used it to help defend the Court. But none had seen an Elf Queen, and the books never specified.

How much of it was exaggeration? How much was the truth?

Half-way to the ambush point, she realized she'd been trying to distract herself from the task ahead, from the real questions she should be asking. Embla forced her considerations back to the humans, the people that were friends of Barry. Of everyone there, he had spoken ill of but one, the single human that shared blood with him.

Embla grimaced under her helmet. Mark, Barry's cousin, had been the one they'd captured first, and the one that had run away. Another secret she'd never tell him. She clung to that thought, that feeling. It went against the bond but it had been exactly the right choice. As Lady Dagmar had taught her, she used that reasoning like a tool, to sift through her thoughts and separate what was fact, and what was illusion.

The humans posed a potential threat to the Court, in the long term. And they represented a potential asset in the short-term. Barry being bonded to everyone within the upper echelons of the Court was inconvenient at best, dangerous at worst. The more maidens bonded to him, the more weight his opinion would carry.

Just how many could he bond? Embla knew of nobles that had managed hundreds of maidens, Barry no doubt could-

No.

Embla shook her head, focus.

They needed more humans able to make strong bonds, and they needed to bond them under their own terms. They were outsiders, Barry had shown they do not understand that idealism is nothing without the power to enforce and protect it. Their opinion should not hold sway in matters that pertain to the freedom of maidens.

So was this attack a good idea? Was this the proper course of action?

A slow nod was the only show of her inner thoughts. The attack followed their goals and objectives.

But was it pragmatic? Strategically sound? Did they have the power to do what had to be done? Or were the risks too great?

Embla's mind focused on the present. They were approaching a stretch of road the knights would be passing through tomorrow. It was the best place for an ambush, they had good cover, and the road had poor visibility. And flyers would have a tough time due to the amount of foliage. They had brought every fighting abled maiden in the Court that hadn't left with lady Dagmar and Barry to the grove.

The maidens were working to remove their scents and presence, to hide and obscure and make the ambush that much harder to notice. They outnumbered the knights three to one, and they had the element of surprise. Even Kajou was here, merely because she was another pair of hands with a blade and they would need every single one if they wished to succeed.

But was it enough?

Did they have the power to see through the consequences?

[224] [Alice]

Ever since the attack on the city, ever since Barry had shown up and vanished, Alice had felt something deep in her gut. The Lord had made claims that it was impossible there were some group of independent maiden rebels in the area, let alone one with a member as powerful as the one that had smashed through the gates.

His claims had continued on, telling that it was doubly impossible Barry would be with such a group. Only a coincidence that the two would show up within minutes of one another in the tiny city.

The knights had not been convinced. They made it clear, they suspected a potential attack, and would only take volunteers. The goal being to reach Balet and drop them off before heading back with reinforcements to get the rest. Over half of the group had been left behind in Seledo, and now, each of the carriages had two knights within.

The inside of the carriages were supposedly protected from detection.

A trap.

There were far less knights outside than what a simple glance might reveal.

Alice still wasn't sure why she'd volunteered. Because Helga had given every indicator she wanted to help the knights? Because May had volunteered first? Now she was stuck in a carriage with two armored knights that were paying a lot of attention to the outside of the carriage and very little to Alice or May.

It was suicidal, risky, dangerous, dumb. The carriage wouldn't protect them from a determined maiden. Much less from a powerful one. It would buy time at most in case something did happen.

But then again, Alice did have an idea of something she thought might be necessary to do by getting to Balet earlier than the rest. Earlier than Miss Dodson at the very least.

"I know that you wouldn't consider speaking ill of the Earl." She broke the silence, glancing at the two knights. "Though I am curious as to his public service policies."

The knights shared a glance, a quiet moment of wordless conversation before one of them turned their focus to Alice. "I'm not sure what information you need, my Lady."

“Public service policies, the... are there any projects meant to help those that don't have the resources to help themselves?” Alice explained. “I'd heard of the relocation program from the king, about those who lost their villages to the ferals being brought to the larger cities.”

“The Earl guarantees any human woman is given a fair chance to join the Academy.” The knight nodded quickly. “A month of tutoring and the standard test. Those who pass can join without needing to pay for the entry fee.”

Alice hid the grimace, nodding along. “And what about maidens?”

“The elders are given a stipend to own maidens if they go over the usual two. It's very rare for a maiden to not be able to find someone to bond to, though, since only a dumb girl wouldn't have several emergency options at hand.” She shrugged. “Worst case scenario is a maiden that's bonded to someone that doesn't own her. Such circumstances tend to resolve themselves easily enough, however.”

“No drama?”

The knight smiled slightly, the gesture invisible under her helm, but clear in her voice. “Only in the romance stories.”

“There are some horror stories about destroyed villages and villagers unable to bond everyone that survived.” The second knight spoke, keeping her head looking out the window through the visor in her helm. “Those are always... horror stories, exaggerated beyond measure.”

“How?”

“Humans tend to only be able to bond ten or so maidens, unless they happen to share some noble blood. The Earl himself can bond seventy or so. And there are rumors that the king can bond up to two hundred.” The knight's shoulders tensed. “When a village is overrun by ferals, if too many humans die, there might be too many maidens to be bonded.”

“Oh, so they...”

“No, of course not.” The knight shook her head. “In such situations what happens is that the maidens rotate, removing their collars and breaking the bond so that their sister may remain tame. Since it usually takes a week, they can sustain themselves this way... even if it is tense.” She sighed deeply. “The real horror is when the collar is broken or damaged. Unless someone has a spare...”

“So maidens carry spares?”

“If they or their owner can afford it.” The knight patted her belt. “I have my green and black collars right here. They’re old, but useful in an emergency.”

“So normally they sell them.”

“Or pass them on to their daughters.”

Alice’s back straightened a little, thinking back to the worn blue collar Helga had insisted to use for herself. It had clearly held emotional weight for the Valkyrie, and there was little doubt how much care she put on making sure it remained in as good condition as something so old could be kept.

“What about inheritance?” The question came from May, the young woman speaking up for the first time in the day.

The knights shared a look. “From mother to daughter?”

May nodded.

“Legally speaking everything we have is owned by our human, but only monsters would keep a maiden from being able to give their daughters something useful or important to take with them.”

“What if the human dies?”

“If there’s no next of kin, it becomes property of the immediate overseer of the land. If you owned a house in Seledo, it would have gone to the Lord, even if it’s under the Earl’s protection since he would be the immediate overseer. Nobles tend to ensure that whoever buys the maidens also has to take ownership of the property. But whoever buys the property often will only be allowed to if they also take ownership of the maidens.”

“And what if they can’t bond any more maidens?” Alice quickly brought up.

“Then they hire someone to do so in their stead.”

The answer felt easy enough, but Alice bit her lip in consideration. What if someone lost everything and only had their maidens and enough gold for a house, but the only ones came with maidens of their own? What happened if a city had too many maidens and too little humans?

She thought back to the time limit. They had to find a way to pay off the kingdom so they wouldn’t be forced into either military academy or standard conscription. There were some ideas, but... how viable were they? It seemed plausible enough in a large enough

city, but would they be able to bond as many maidens as she suspected they'd be able to? Would the Earl...-?

Something gave her thoughts pause. A flicker of movement outside.

Alice turned her head to look at the forest and frowned.

“GET DOWN!”

The knights had moved so fast, so impossibly fast. Metal gloved hands shoved Alice and May down to the floor. Suddenly they weren't just kneeling there but it was as if their whole bodies had been glued to the cloth covered wood. Power thrummed all around them.

The realization that it was a barrier of some sort came a fraction of a second before the whole carriage lurched.

The world became a blur of movement.

They were under attack.

[225] [Kajou]

Kajou had been sure this was the right decision.

She could not let herself think otherwise.

After Pan's death, her sister's words kept assaulting her. Traitor. She'd bonded Barry almost by accident, she hadn't even considered how easy it would be, an agreement with his words that had come from within the depths of her heart and...

And now she stood in the forest, waiting for the knights of the kingdom to come. Because she couldn't stand the thought that she'd betrayed Pan. Their cause was the thing that mattered the most to them, even if they hadn't seen eye to eye on many things, but the one thing that mattered the most was helping the Coven.

It had been the purpose for them crossing the Craggy peaks. To solve the problem of the failing collars, to prevent the curse of ferality to fall upon their sisters. They'd hoped the Court had an answer and now...

And now Pan was dead. And Kajou was bonded to the potential solution to their problems: Barry. An otherworlder, a human with a capacity to form such strong bonds it was only comparable to the stories of old. Of the Kings that had raised their blades after the Great War, using armies of maidens bonded to them to conquer the wilderness and bring civilization back.

A story of equals, of the army splitting to find partners amongst the many humans that were saved and protected.

Now Kajou crouched in a bush, looking upon the carriages that were approaching, and her mind desperately clinging to that story. There were humans there, special ones. If she could capture one, then she could take them with her to the Coven. Barry might stay with the Court, and a part of her might desperately wish to remain here with him, but... but she had come here with a mission and she could not ignore it.

The days might not be counted for a solution to be found, but the future was bleak until one could be brought forth.

She had to do this. She had to prove Pan hadn't died in vain.

"It's a trap. They're trying to pretend they have their guards down."

The words came from the leader of the Court. The Dark Lady in armor, the strongest maiden in the forest. Her gaze looked upon the carriage, the maidens flying overhead, and she spoke the words that made Kajou's chest tighten.

"There is no alternative." She declared, hissing.

Pan's sword feels heavy in her grip. Kajou can feel her sister's memory within it.

She would rather be gone, away, on her way back to the Coven with her mission fulfilled. Not here, not with... her. Not with the woman that a part of her hated almost as much as she hated herself. But there was no other way to solve this, to accomplish their mission, to do right by her sister.

"We cannot win this fight."

Kajou's lips thinned. This was the woman that had so cruelly crushed them to prove a point to the human they were both bonded to?

"Then make it worth the loss."

She'd lost Pan already. She couldn't back down, she'd charge the carriages herself if she knew she'd be able to get something out of it. She needed just one human. Just one. Pan's sword was practically vibrating within her grip, her eyes locked on the visor of the maiden she should be trying to kill by all accounts.

Slowly, the large maiden glanced at the others. Embla's intentions were impenetrable through the helmet, her body was not even tense, no, she was relaxed. She was considering facing off over a dozen knights and she was calm.

"Stay hidden, wait for my signal. Prioritize taking the humans, kill them if you cannot. Do not fight the knights unless they are attacking one of ours. Do not bother to shoot at them until it's time."

That was as far as her orders went.

Kajou could barely believe what she was hearing. Was the intent to fight the knights on her own to buy the others an opportunity to fulfill their mission? Watching the Dark Lady grab her gigantic ax and raise it, everyone else had moved to hide.

Lady Embla did not roar or shout, she merely tensed and took aim.

And in a single surge of strength, threw the ax at the carriage in the front. The centaur that had been pulling it screaming as she got yanked along. The massive weapon flew

with the power to knock it over to the side of the road and roll further off. Embla had followed after it, even as the knights surged into formation.

Embla was a Dark Lady, a maiden whose power specialized in neutralizing the abilities of other maidens. In doing so, the large armored woman had prevented the more dangerous kinds of retaliation from the knights. Her powers had surged over them and destroyed both spells and abilities that had been about to be used.

A split second that was all she'd needed to pick up her massive ax and strike the first of the knights. The maiden had raised her shield. The very same shield that dented by the sheer force of the impact, the maiden not just getting knocked back but being sent flying towards the centaur that had seemed ready to pull her own carriage out of the area.

And even as the knights tried to take formation, Embla would move in to avoid it. Her strikes were dangerous, but she was clearly keeping them from being able to box her in or block her out. It was forcing more of the knights away from their carriages and into the battle.

Even out of formation, the knights tried to fight her off. Swords and lances thrusting and spinning. But the maidens were never quite able to get close enough to make a blow decisive enough to pierce through the armor.

The dance continued, Embla pushed her way forward to the other carriages. Her ax sought the centaurs, and the knights would only barely be able to stop her. Every time they tried to use their powers to reinforce their shields or attack, Embla's own powers would lash out and turn their attempt into emptiness. An ability that couldn't so much target a group of individuals but an area.

Kajou was left in stunned silence and begrudging respect for the Court's leader powers.

The second carriage was knocked over. Then the third. Kajou heard faint muffled screams within each one. Her heart thundered within her chest and Pan's blade tightened in her grip. She eyed the carriages, two of four had been knocked over, the centaurs pulling on them were prioritizing their protection since any attempt to get them out of the combat zone was being met with extreme violence.

And yet, even as the knights were being battered and tossed around like rag dolls, something felt off.

They weren't panicking. There were knights in the periphery, focused on everything that was not Embla. And Kajou could spot the ones overhead flying in circles, waiting. She grimaced, this was what it meant to face off against a trained and coordinated force.

This was what it meant to fight the kingdom. Even with Embla occupying the majority of their force, it would be a tough fight.

The signal came in the form of a roar. The maiden that had quietly attacked the knights with a deathly silence had unleashed a shout that made the knights hesitate for a split second. And in that split second, the Court's fighters and Kajou surged from both sides of the road. Arrows shot into the air and forced the flying maidens to dodge and stay out of the way, some of the maidens unleashed their powers unto the knights, others like Kajou ran forward with their blades.

The Amazoness felt the desire to fight, to cross blades, to meet the knights, test herself.

But she had a goal. She sprinted past the knights and to the nearest carriage, intent on opening the door and pulling off the first human she could reach.

The door was opened for her.

Two knights stepped out of every carriage. And suddenly their numerical advantage was not as great as they'd thought it had been.

Gritting her teeth, Kajou gripped Pan's sword, feeling the memory of her sister that remained within the blade empowered her. She could not back down any more than the knights.

She had to win.

[226] [Helga]

Helga circled over the battlefield. Her orders were clear. In case the carriages were ambushed, she and the other flying maidens that were not knights were to pretend to dive to draw away any potential arrows or long-range abilities from the attackers.

That was their job. Exactly and explicitly. The knights did not trust they could fight with the coordination and skill they held, and trying to help them could just as likely result in them getting in their way.

So that was exactly what she did. Once there was confirmation there were more maidens than the armored one, Helga would dive, lance in hand, and then swerve every time arrows and elemental energies surged upwards in an attempt to stop her and her fellow flier. They would take turns, ensuring a constant diversion of attention from the attackers.

And they watched, nervous.

The armored maiden was well beyond what any of them had expected. Someone this powerful had been just living near Seledo and no one had known about her? And the armor was eerie, not because it was unlike any Helga had seen before, but because it had clearly been custom made. It fit the maiden exactly, it flowed and moved without impeding movement and the large maiden needed only to adjust her position to ensure any blow she could not block would be intercepted by what was clearly enchanted equipment.

Helga didn't like it, not one bit.

Such a piece of armor was expensive beyond belief, and the maiden was experienced with it.

Who was she? Why was she here?

The other attackers were far closer to what she'd expect from wildlings. Old and worn weapons, armor that was only useful against animals, not maidens. And crude movements that allowed the well equipped knights to fend them off even when outnumbered. If not for the larger one ensuring the knights could not take a formation, the entire fight would have been won already. By virtue of the attackers not being able to pierce through.

And when things seemed like they would start turning in favor of the knights, the large armored maiden managed to strike one down.

It had been a simple slip. A small trip while trying to pull away from the reach of the crude massive ax. The knight had stumbled, and her sisters had not been close enough to help. And just like that, the ax had come down upon her with enough force to cleave its way through the breastplate.

There hadn't even been a scream. But Helga gasped all the same.

The attacker had paid for her small victory, several of the knights had landed blows upon the uncovered parts of her body, drawing blood. It hadn't been enough to even slow her down, the fight returned anew, but things had shifted. The knights were wary, their discipline kept them from attacking in fury, but with one less of them to hold the attacker back, some of the knights that had yet to engage were forced to join the fight.

Helga struggled with the desire to dive down. She could only grit her teeth and pretend to dive once more. Just like the knights, she couldn't let herself be distracted from her role, from her task. They depended on her just as much as she depended on them to protect Lady Alice and the others.

But the question lingered.

Were they able to take down that beast of a maiden? Her ability to neutralize other's abilities was clearly ensuring none could land a definite blow on her. Something she did not have to concern herself with as her ax was definite enough.

Did the knights know how to deal with this? Could they? Helga didn't know. She'd heard of the knights and their great skills, and yet she doubted. It didn't look like they were managing to stop the large armored maiden, or even slow her down. Only barely keep her from reaching out and avoiding the other attackers from being cut down.

The scream snapped Helga's attention towards the carriages. She saw three of the attacking maidens had reached Lady Alice's carriage and yanked the door open. Helga didn't think, her wings folded around her and she dove.

Behind her, someone screamed for her to stop.

Pain exploded from her wings, arrows piercing through, drawing blood.

Helga's body began to glow as she pulled out her power. She raised her spear and with a scream, threw it. The three maidens jumped away, and the spear missed. Half a second, enough for Helga to land and yank her weapon from the ground.

Her injured wing slammed the door shut. The carriage was enchanted and reinforced, Lady Alice was safer inside than outside.

Every instinct and every minute of combat training told her this was a mistake. She had wings, she should fly, she should engage from where she held the definite advantage. And every fiber in her body and heart burned with the determination that not one of them would touch a single hair in Lady Alice's flowing auburn hair.

Three enemies, dark skin, sharp ears, white hair. According to the Hunter's manual on feral combat, they were most likely dark elves? Their powers were... energy neutralization. Aberrant. Abilities to unmake other's abilities, stronger individuals were...

Oh.

So that was what the armored maiden was.

Helga did not care to reinforce her body with her energy, relying on such a thing would mean the moment they took her power away she'd suffer. She took just one look at the short swords they wielded and lunged with her spear at the closest one. A simple direct thrust, her wings spreading wide and blocking the swords of the other two.

The pain sent a surge through her. Helga did not slow, thrusting again in rapid succession, her injured wings serving to give her steps a bit more forward distance. The dark skinned maiden tried to dodge and block, using her sword to parry the spear while the other two aimed for Helga's back.

But her wings were large and bulky. They hurt, the blades dug into the feathers and flesh, and Helga would not be able to fly during this fight but it did not matter. She pressed forward, tightening her form and pressuring the dark elf. The maiden could not keep up.

A blade sank into Helga's side. She grimaced and kicked at the attacker just enough to push harder. Push harder. Keep thrusting her spear, harder. Helga's arms moved faster, even as her wings kept taking the brunt of either of the other two. Helga pushed, and thrust, and thrust and thrust.

And the instant the dark elf stumbled just a little, when her footing had wavered just a bit, Helga spun the spear. The impact sent the sword flying from her enemy's grip, and the dark elf's eyes widened just a fraction of a second before the sweeping turned into another thrust and Helga had pierced into her gut.

The attacker fell.

Bloodied wings and a dripping flank, Helga spun to face the other two.

Shock and anger. They charged at Helga, aiming to stab at her torso.

Helga squeezed her wings around herself and tightened them to take the brunt of the blow, their blades bit into her flesh and her body buzzed with the pain. They had not expected for her to so freely allow herself to be stabbed like this. They clearly had not read the Hunter's manual on how to fight a Valkyrie. Valkyries felt pain differently than normal maidens, their bodies meant to heal from a thousand injuries.

The error cost one of them a leg. Though Helga could not finish her as her companion put herself in the way. It was still a losing prospect, they were not well trained for this kind of fighting, the maiden could only defend as Helga pressed her attack harder, ignoring injuries and pushing her back further and further.

“PAN, STOP!”

Helga would not have stopped if not because the shout had come from too close to the carriage. To Lady Alice's carriage.

Upon its roof stood a maiden with black hair and a glowing golden sword.

“Who's Pan?”