
[113] [Last Push (Embla)]

“They’re not moving quickly enough,” Embla spoke the words with concern, watching the tribe and the knights as they traversed through the branches of the titan-trees.

There were a considerable number of traps and obstacles that had slowed them down: poisonous spikes, tripwires, false surfaces leading to drops through the branch itself... The whole place had been worked over for what could have only been centuries. Even the less dangerous routes had a frightening degree of protection against anyone unfamiliar with the territory.

The Golden Elves themselves would also throw some volleys at the group from time to time, never committing to the attack but always just enough to give them pause. More often than not coinciding with the group reaching some new set of hidden traps, providing a potentially dangerous distraction.

Monica spared her the slight tilt of a single ear; the Sabertooth’s attention was aimed squarely at the center of the tree.

A pulse of twisted energy rushed through the air, causing ripples in its wake, twisting and bending the elemental forces of the gargantuan tree and the very forest for just a split second. Every shred of vegetation and moss seemed to thrum with its passing, leaving behind a sensation of hostility that was all-pervasive.

“The ritual... it’s going to be finished before they get close enough.”

To the casual, inexperienced observer, the wave of power was a singular thing, one wave of elemental energy originating from the center of the tree and washing over everything. Embla did not perceive it that way; she could sense the tell-tale disturbances of a ritual. Worse still, she could recognize the one leading the ritual, the familiar tiny little nuances of aberrant power that could only belong to her mother.

The Malumari had grown up under the watchful eye of the Warlock; everything was a lesson, everything was a plan. How many times had she sparred against Lady Dagmar and lost? How many hours had she taken the matron’s tutelage to heart, practiced and trained, and bled in preparation?

All for the sake of a war that had been lost before Embla was even born.

Her relationship with the matron had centered entirely around that. Their genus, the Dark Elves, had once been part of the kingdom's elite, protectors and providers of guidance for feral-born maidens. They had seen the cruelties the kingdom imposed upon their "property"; they'd tried to mitigate it, to change the system from inside, to warn the nobility of what was to come if they didn't listen to the hearts of maidens. And when the rebellion struck, they'd been branded traitors for seeking a peaceful resolution.

Or so had Embla's mother claimed.

It felt like so much had changed since her capture at the hands of the otherworlder.

Weeks locked into a tiny cell, with no excuse for her presence there other than it being by her own volition. She could've escaped at any time, yet hadn't. Some side of her had come to acknowledge that any move she made would've been a mistake, that there were no options left for her. Yet when the Succubus showed up, that delusion had been shattered.

The reason Embla had kept herself in that tiny cabin had been because she was tired and without a cause. Tired of having spent her life acting more like a bandit than a rebel, tired of every action needing to be weighed between her own interests and that of an ephemeral belief, tired of day after day being spent on the knife's edge.

"//It's alright to be selfish, to take a step back and reconsider what's best for you. Why follow something that doesn't align with what you want?//"

The Succubus' words still stung, pulling up a lifetime of guilt, of having to be the strongest, the best, the stalwart unshakeable pillar. All for a cause she no longer belonged to. No, not a cause, she knew freedom was the highest aspiration, but the group aiming for it had lost their way, and unwittingly, she'd been part of that.

"//I've seen plenty of girls like you. Grown in a little corner, kept away from the world, isolated and controlled. Whoever your handler was, they insisted this was your duty, that you were born for this. In truth, they took away your choice from you.//"

Not even now could Embla find a way to properly deny those claims. It was as if the Succubus had dug her fingers into her brain and pulled out her very thoughts, exposing her, laying her bare. At the time, the Malumari could do nothing but mutely deflate. What was the point of fighting the truth?

Though their cause was just, Embla's mother had lost her way long ago.

"//This can be so much easier, you know, we just need to keep things straight. I want you to help me, play your role of the prisoner, and if things go sour, play the role of the

fighter. No need for complications, allegiances, or trust. The moment these roles aren't convenient for you, you walk away. The only string would be that which you tie yourself, so tell me, what do you wish for?!"

At the time, she hadn't answered; she'd not spoken a single word, yet the look the Succubus had given her spoke for itself. The charmer knew exactly what Embla wanted deep within her heart, and that terrified her. So, the Malumari followed along, pretending to have taken the deal, looking for her own chance to get away. And when she'd seen her opportunity, she'd taken it.

Barry was now almost dead because of her, the one thing left that mattered.

At that moment, the realization had struck her.

In the end, she was a warrior; scheming and plotting was not for her. Everything went to shit every time she tried to take the reins; she lacked the vision, the means, and the experience. It would be better if she just... stuck to what she was best at.

Though the Succubus had not been present at the time, Embla made the choice to fully commit to the charmer's offer. All she had to do was fight, all she had to do was aim her blade at whatever enemy lay ahead. She held no trust in the Succubus or Rick; there were no delusions that they would stick their arm out for her. But if they chose to cross her, then she would make it their problem.

Just like that, it was as if a weight had been lifted.

Their cause was lost, their purpose long since corrupted, and their fates at the hands of people who wanted them dead. There would be no blazing fight to the bitter end, just a sad whimper in a forest no one would hear about nor remember.

It was time to reconsider things; it was time to pick new sides.

This was the truth she'd shared with her former sisters.

And this was their choice.

There had to be some semblance of irony. Embla and the other Dark Elves were preparing to fight her own mother and the monster she'd awakened. All the while on a shaky alliance with the very knights who'd wanted them all dead a few days ago.

"We... push?" The Sabertooth glanced at her, the words coming out in a mix between an annoyed growl and something equal parts nervous and hopeful.

"We should, hopefully that armored monster catches on and does the same."

By no means would this be ideal. The three of them were definitely not enough to destroy the defenders, but it could be enough for them to get Embla close enough. She'd trained with her mother for far too long not to know her tells, her little tricks, the weaknesses of the methodologies she followed.

“Ok.”

That was all that needed to be said. Monica reached out, gripping her hand, wrapping them both in her shadowy energy, and plunging them into the darkness. Watching the way the Sabertooth controlled her power, Embla was left slightly surprised at the intense dichotomy compared with the Swordmistress.

After having fought the knight-captain, she'd gotten a strong impression that Deneva's methodology was systematic and precise. Every strand of energy had a purpose and a direction. Monica was the opposite; her powers followed unknown patterns, never the same and always adapting to their environment. To Embla's powers to undermine and destroy the energy of her enemy, the former was akin to a wall of steel while the latter closer to a shiv made from whatever was immediately available.

She might have a hard time neutralizing Deneva's power due to how durable its inner structure was, but doing so with Monica would be the opposite. Destroying the pattern would prove effortless, but that would be like trying to strike water; it would reform near instantly.

They emerged on a different branch and immediately plunged back in, with Monica leading the way through what Embla could only guess to be instinct. There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to her movements, though the closer they got to the defenses the Golden Elves had set up, the clearer it became that she was probing for any cracks. The Sabertooth's ability to locate safe spots was impeccable; every time they emerged, there would always be just enough time to take a peek and leave before any attack could reach them.

Without having used a single ability, without attacking a single individual, Monica was putting pressure on the Golden Elves. It made it impossible for them to position themselves and focus down the force led by Captain Deneva, for to do so would leave their backs far more exposed to the huntress. She was a threat that the defenders could not handle without overwhelming force; thus, the only way to lose through a battle of attrition was to pull in and spread out their attention.

Embla figured that wasn't the feline's goal, but internally commended it all the same.

While the feline worried about the defenders themselves, Embla was looking for the traps. Even if Golden Elves could perfectly hide their aura, and their traps had Tarantella silk, making it equally hard to spot, Embla knew what to look for. The minute alterations in the ambient mana, the way some places seemed to suckle at the tree like leeches, mapping out the most obvious problems.

But there was a limit to how much Monica could push, and how much Embla could plan. After what felt like a full hour of playing peek-a-boo with the Golden Elves, their retreat had come to a full stop. As expected, their positioning remained impeccable, holding a tight formation, but keeping enough of a distance from each other that it would require something massive to be able to attack more than two or three of them at a time.

And there were a few hundred of them, spread around the branches of the inner sanctum of the Grove like a multi-layered sphere. Even now Embla couldn't pinpoint their exact locations, only guessing at a vague location for each of them, and her best estimate was that every branch had at least two. But it was an uncertainty that Monica did not appear to have.

The feline popped out onto the branch that had the least amount of traps, no different than any other jump throughout the past hour, yet this time they did not pop back into the darkness.

In that split second of opportunity, they jumped away from one another to avoid being easy targets.

Embla leapt forward straight towards the center, while Monica used the claws on her hands and feet to dig into the bark, ignoring gravity and gripping the branch like a spider as she bolted towards the underside of the branch. They were moving in the same direction, Embla from the top of the massive branch while Monica did so from underneath.

The protective dome was only a few hundred meters away.

The arrows came next.

Ten at a time, each of them faster than any attack Embla had ever witnessed, but coming from so far away that she had the time to dodge. But the attackers were thorough; the volley was followed by ten more from a different set of archers, and another ten from another. Though the first attack targeted Embla directly, the ones following it aimed at the possible areas she could dodge to. The way they were spread out made it harder and more dangerous for her to push forward rather than retreat.

Urtha hated how thorough it all felt, like every step she took she was inching closer to the open maw of a machine filled with cogs that wished to grind her to dust. And the closer she got, the more intense the volleys became, going from ten archers per volley to fifteen.

Every iterative increase made their aim more precise, the prediction of what action she would take more accurate. The wood exploded all around her from each individual spear-sized arrow impacting with the force of an explosion. The impacts alone were enough to litter Embla's body with minor scratches and cuts. In her wake, hundreds of arrows painted the path she'd taken.

Another pulse of power shuddered out from the grove.

The number of archers per volley suddenly doubled, practically every one of the guardians turning their full attention to them. It appeared the Golden Elves had made the choice to pour everything into this last stand. Embla had no more room to dodge. Though she still carried her massive sword, she broke off arrows, using them as improvised tools to swat away the attacks she couldn't afford to take.

The sanctum was so close Embla could make out the pulsing green aura of the ritual through the rain of arrows.

Another pulse of power, faster and more intense than the last.

Through the hundreds of arrows coming her way, Embla felt a looming threat a moment too late. An empowered arrow impacted against her improvised weapon, smashing into her shoulder with enough force to break her stride and send her reeling back a few meters.

"Fuck," she bit off, cursing at how the attack had been hidden within the sheer volume of arrows. Embla pulled out her massive blade; if she couldn't keep rushing forward, then she wouldn't be sacrificing speed by putting it to use.

The blade was longer than she was tall, with a large flat surface, and nearly ten times her weight. It was the foundation of the fighting style she'd been trained in, one that allowed her to use her brutal strength to maximum effect. To a maiden, there was an inherent limitation to how much force they could use before anything they did would break their balance. Punch hard enough, and you effectively just turned into a spinning top.

The more common solution to this problem was to find ways to use your power to glue yourself in place. To add the mass of the world to your body as you unleashed an attack that could throw ten times your weight across a room. Embla's style used that

foundation, but only for a split second, just enough to build momentum on her massive blade, and then letting go of the earth.

The world became a whirlwind as Embla turned into chaos itself. Her body flung around the spinning blade like a rag-doll. Her hands never left the thick handle of the blade, using it as a pole around which she would pull or push herself. The arrows would either be dodged or blocked, their inertia used to accelerate or slow down her blade depending on how she angled it and herself.

It made her movements impossible to predict, and Embla could conveniently seek footing within the very air to adjust her trajectory; she merely needed to release an intense enough burst of power through her soles. But at the same time, it also made moving forward far slower, she was forced to make an extreme form of beeline, every meter forward a victory. The bigger drawback, however, was the massive energy expenditure this style imposed upon its user. She was exhausting herself for the sake of buying time and attention from their enemies.

Another pulse of power coursing through the trees, this one massive like none before, threatening a climax to the ritual.

In that instant, Embla saw it.

Barely a hundred meters ahead, at the very center of the grove, was the center of the ritual.

Upon it were four figures. She recognized Rick, lying down next to a sleeping pale figure that seemed to vibrate from the power thrumming around her. Even from this distance, Embla could sense an intense sense of power emanating out of her like a sun. It could be no one but the Green Empress. Next to them was Kiara, kneeling over his unconscious form, gripping his arms as if her own life depended on it.

And in the center of the ritual itself was Embla's mother.

The Warlock was unrecognizable, her body more plant than flesh, her head a knotted mass of wood and vines. Yet she held on to a wooden staff tipped with a glowing black rock. There was not a maiden in the whole world that could wield Lady Dagmar's staff other than the Warlock herself.

A deep ache clenched at Embla's chest at the sight of the monster.

A culmination of power was cresting, pulling into the Warlock.

There was no time to reach the ritual.

With a massive heave, Embla planted her feet as firmly into the bark as she could, several arrows piercing through her stomach and thigh. She ignored them, gritting her teeth and letting out an earth-shattering roar as she threw the blade with every ounce of power within her.

A bang exploded out through the air.

A dozen Golden Elves near its path leapt to intercept, placing their own bodies as shields. But the weapon cleaved through them like hot butter, the piece of metal spinning like certain death.

It hit its target, cutting the Warlock's head clean off.

"I'm sorry," Embla whispered. With the ritualist's death, the whole thing would collapse and unleash all that raw power, killing-

The Warlock's body, still standing, hit the butt of the staff against the wood, seemingly uncaring for its missing head.

All the power pulled in, coming to an abrupt halt, energy so thick motes of green light were left suspended midair before vanishing as if it had never been there at all.

Embla's breath caught in her throat, an oppressive silence had descended upon her, so intense was the looming sensation that hung in the air that even the archers had frozen, all eyes centered on the four figures.

The Green Empress opened her eyes.

And the forest trembled.