
[009] [Blood]

“Wake up.”

The splash of water yanked Rick out of his sleep. He became a tangle of limbs and gasps, spinning around in an attempt to make sense of what was going on. The chain around his neck cut off the air, driving him to grasp at his neck and stumble.

“I said up, slave!” A male voice spoke.

The second yank forced him to his feet, the bright light blinded him. By the second step, he'd realized his hands were free and had grasped the chain around his neck. The third step was to take a swing towards the blur in front of him.

Whatever he hit, it fell over. The chain grew taut and Rick was pulled along. His vision was recovering, and he spotted a man clutching the chain. Not missing a beat, the now-captive leapt at him. The first two swings left the stranger trying to fight back, but after the third, he'd been reduced to trying to protect his bloodied face.

Breath short, head still spinning, Rick yanked the chain from the captor's grasp and broke into a full sprint towards the nearest door. What had been stray beams of light became open space. He was back to being half-blind.

Was it morning or noon? It didn't matter. He half-stumbled, squinting and recognizing several figures all around. With no time to stop, Rick started running in the direction with the least number of people.

“Girls! We have a runner!” someone shouted, booming with laughter. “He's going for the pens!”

“Someone stop the little man before he becomes feral food.” A second voice called out.

By his third tumbling step, the truck ran him over.

It probably wasn't a truck. It was green and wore clothes, but it might as well have been a fully loaded eight-wheeler. Rick's everything jolted, and he found himself airborne. Gravity caught up with him a split second later, and he met the dirt at a high velocity. His

body tumbled wildly, trapped in a drying machine that had been powered by cocaine and gone out of control.

After skipping and tumbling, he finally came to a grinding halt. The first thought that made it out of the turbo-charged spin cycle was that at least this wasn't as bad as asphalt.

It didn't make it any less painful. Everything felt scraped and bruised.

Someone was shouting, Rick grunted and watched as an Orc was bowing low to another maiden, one wearing some kind of light metal armor. Underneath the armor, her skin was charcoal gray, cracked as if her body were made of dry clay. And from within those cracks, dim red light glowed.

"You short-brained idiot!" the maiden roared, claws digging into the green flesh and tearing bloody strips out of the maiden's face. "I need him alive!"

The green-skinned maiden fell and shrieked, clutching at her face as smoke rose from the injury. Several others around her dragged her away from the black-skinned one as her claws still glowed with red power.

"Let this be a warning to you all." The maiden stared at everyone else. Her eyes were a uniform red glow, devoid of iris or pupils.

The figure turned towards Rick, approaching with the same gait of a predator moving in on a cornered prey. The gash of her mouth curled to reveal rows of sharp teeth. "What a brave little man, not even feeling a little afraid?"

"It's probably the concussion." He wryly replied.

She loomed over him. "I like it when the humans are feisty." She declared, leaning down on him and reaching out. He tried to struggle, but she had that same kind of unstoppable strength that Monica showed when she was serious.

The creature pinned his head in place with one claw, the other reaching up to her neck. Cruelty shone through her red eyes as the singular digit was marked with the red energy of her claws as she punctured her own flesh, drawing out black blood and coating her digit with it. Rick struggled, kicking and wriggling, and finding her body to be no different from stone, her grip as unrelenting as Monica's when she got serious.

"I really don't recommend you do that." He declared.

The maiden didn't answer, grasping his hair and forcing his head to the side, using her blood-coated claw to pinch into his flesh. It was barely a prickle. "This should be enough to... tame you."

Rick remembered the first time he'd been burned by acid in a laboratory. The instantaneous burning experience paled in comparison to this. The point he'd been injured was producing a blinding heat that quickly spread over his whole body, burning from the inside of his veins.

The maiden let him go. He was no longer able to do anything but thrash and cry out.

"If you try to escape... your fate will be far, far worse than this. Remember that."

With her laughter echoing within him, the world began to spin out of control as the fever overtook him from the inside out. Any semblance of consciousness was wiped away. His body was so impossibly hot, and everything else so impossibly cold.

Rick opened his eyes to darkness.

For a moment there, he wasn't even sure he'd woken up at all. Nothing felt broken, but everything felt tender and bruised. Had he actually broken bones in that tackle, or had someone patched him up?

"Are you lucid?"

"Eva?" Groaning, he tried to move, felt the chains weighing him down, and opted to just lay there.

"What is your name?"

Where was this coming from? "Richard." He grumbled, blinking away the cobwebs inside his head.

"Where were you born?"

Without such a thing as “Arizona” in this world, he went for the local alternative. “Astunes.”

“That is such a bad lie.” Eva deadpanned. “But at least you’re no longer babbling nonsense things about light having a constant speed.” She let out a disappointed sound. “You’ve been in and out of it for several days now.”

“It does feel like it.” He frowned. “And light in a vacuum...”

“Fluctuates in speed. It’s easy to prove with the proper ritual.” Eva’s voice carried with it a chiding tone Rick wasn’t sure he liked. “Or if you cause a ritual reversal detonation... that would be far more violent, however.”

He tried to growl, but found his ribs ached at the sound. “I know that you think you’re making sense, but you’re not.”

The only response he got out of her was an annoyed exhale. “Uncultured commoners.” She muttered under her breath.

Rick attempted to move again, barely shifting and clinking the chains. They were far heavier than they needed to be. Or maybe they just happened to be chains meant for maidens? It certainly felt like they made more sense on a ship’s anchor than on him.

“Monica is going to be so pissed.” He managed a weak laugh.

Eva was focused on him. He could feel the stare. Even if he couldn’t pinpoint where she was in this darkness that surrounded them. Sighing heavily, he leaned back down into the bundled cloth.

“Did you take care of me while I was out?”

She didn’t answer.

“Thanks, I guess.”

It was uncomfortable to know that she was looking at him intently, yet being this quiet. Or maybe it was something else that was unnerving him.

“Can you... wait, you can’t make a fire, right? Crud.”

“I do know a something for making a cold light.” Eva muttered. “But the elemental energies within me are incompatible with the spell formula.”

“So... you know what’s going on outside?”

“Why did you do it?” Eva blurted out.

“Make a run for it?”

“Not that, the... before. Under the rock.” There was an edge to the words, a trembling hesitation.

“What?”

“No. It doesn’t matter,” she spoke quickly.

Rick tried to shift to see if he could at least look at her as they talked and slumped when he failed to spot anything other than darkness. “You sure?”

“It’s... nothing, forget I asked.”

“We might as well get back to my original question, then,” he said.

Eva let out a dejected sigh. “The charmer did what charmers do. She betrayed you.” In the dark, it was impossible to see the eye roll, but it was obvious in her tone. “Your dull wits have doomed us all. Put us into the grasp of the maidens of cursed blood.”

“Vampires?”

”Yes.”

“So... like you,” he replied. “Fledglings can become Vampires and all that, right?”

“I WOULD SOONER DIE THAN-” The shadows all around him somehow shuddered, and immediately stopped. She took a calming breath before continuing. “Fledgling blood is not cursed. They cannot turn humans into maidens the way Vampires can.”

Rick’s eyes widened. “Wait, then the ash-skinned bitch?”

“A Ghoul, the other form a Fledgling can shift into. Along with the Vampires, it is the entirety of their genus tree.” Eva intoned. “The Ghoul marked you, but they hold no power to curse humans into becoming maidens.”

“Curse of ferality, curse of blood... you guys have a lot of curses going around.” Rick shook his head. “Do you know anything about Monica and Dia?” He could feel the bond with them, but wasn’t too sure how close they were. So at least they were alive.

“The charmer left them to their death.”

It was quite the weird statement to hear out of the Fledgling when he could still feel his bond with them. Still, it was clear both of them were too far off to even be able to tell what they were feeling, but Kiara's sense of anxious nervousness was impossible to miss, and Eva... was blocking her emotions as usual.

He sighed in relief. If Kiara had left Dia alive...

Though the fact that it had been several days and Monica hadn't just burst through the door concerned him.

"As I said, your lack of-

"Let's not waste breath complaining and start thinking of a way out." He interrupted her, not looking forward to her working herself up.

It took her several seconds to respond, "There is one... For me."

Eva emerged from the shadows, stepping closer to him, red eyes shining in the dark. There was a heaviness to her stare, a tired edge that carried fear with it. "The... Ghoul made an offer."

"One you can't refuse?" Rick snorted.

But the Fledgling didn't answer.

Something in the bond shuddered, a sudden overwhelming thirst that clawed at Rick's throat. Not knowing exactly where she was came with a sudden dangerous edge to it, the feeling of a lamb that knew there was a wolf hidden in the bushes nearby.

"Are you... hungry?" He forced himself to keep his tone even, calm.

Having had to deal with Monica, he recognized the precariousness of the situation. Dia had warned him that maidens that needed special kinds of nourishment had particularly powerful feeding instincts. Fledglings, much like their creators, the Vampires, fed on blood and the energy drawn through fear.

The last thing Rick wanted was to appear that much more of a juicy meal. If she fed, it could very well mean he'd be sucked dry.

"Yes, I'm... I..." There was an apology somewhere in those words. Her red eyes shone in the dark. She was so close, her hot breath washed over his neck. "It's..."

"Eva. Step back." He barked the command at her, loud and clear.

His eyes were hard as he clenched down on the bond as if he were holding a live wire. The feelings from her poured through him, and he found the sensation of sand running down his throat, his mouth dry, the very act of breathing scratched his lips.

The maiden turned away, vanishing back into the shadows. "Sorry, I... I-" Her voice came through in a choked sob.

The door to the prison cell swung open, a flood of daylight followed, and a voice called out. "Three days and you're still able to hold back? Do you care for the little man that much?" Kiara had a way to add a coo to her every uttered syllable that made the mocking words feel like an open invitation. She entered the cell with a sashaying silhouette breaking the light, casting a shadow into the darkness.

"YOU!" Eva screeched, jumping at the Succubus in a whirlwind of crimson shadows.

Kiara's hand glowed a dim purple, and she backhanded the Fledgling. The impact carried enough force to send Eva across the room, stumbling and falling to the ground.

She wasn't getting back up.

"Since you've been able to hold out this long, Zagan has ordered that you'll get to meet the Lady in person." Kiara stated with a bored yawn. "After that you'll just be happy to serve, I guess, Vampire blood being addictive to Fledglings and all that." She laughed, turning to look at Rick. There was a flash of concern in her eyes as she carefully looked him over. One that was quickly hidden as she turned to look outside. "You, the one with the thousand meter stare, fetch me the toy. If he's not going to serve as an appetizer to our prisoner, then he might as well be put to work with the other slaves."

A far larger figure stepped into the room, lifting the chains holding Rick like they weighed nothing. Meaty green fingers undid the locks, and he was flung over the maiden's shoulder like he was nothing more than a sack of flour.

"Tie the leech up."

Kiara's voice rang with the crack of authority, her gaze sweeping past Rick as if he were no more than a part of the background setting. He grunted and flinched as the Orc carrying him stepped outside and several Goblins rushed into the cell. The sun was no less annoying than it'd been the last time. But now he had a chance to look around.

It was some sort of conglomeration of... yurts? Each structure was circular and made out of wood, with a flattened cone as a roof. Crude but direct, most of the yurts had

windows and no doors, but Rick's was different, thicker, without obvious ways out other than the entrance itself.

Put together, it all looked like some sort of village that had been built within days, if not hours.

Rick's eyes returned to the Succubus as she glanced his way. "How long were you waiting on the other side of the door?"

Kiara nearly tripped.

The maiden quickly looked around, then at him, growling.

"Shut up, you. I'm finally free," she said, voice faltering for a moment as she caught herself back up. "And the first thing I want is to never hear your voice ever again." The Succubus reached out and grasped his hair, pulling him closer so they'd meet eye to eye. "You'd be more useful if you at least knew who killed the Vampire in Balet, but you weren't even there." She emphasized every word of the lie with a slow nod, her face nothing but a mask of exaggerated disgust.

He frowned with a mild feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach.

She let go, scoffing and shaking her head. "You're little more than a toy. Perhaps you will be allowed to kneel and pledge yourself to the cause." A cruel plastic smirk spread across her lips, her face stiff and her shoulders set in stone. The fakeness of her expression took an edge of honest amusement. "I know, a weak male like you working as a cook. That would be quite fitting." She laughed. "Off he goes, then."

The Orc carrying him let out a loud snort and began to march off.

Rick thought fast. "Dia and Monica... they're alive." He declared, meeting her gaze squarely. "I'm sure of it. You'll regret this."

Kiara stiffened, her lips twitched as an honest smile spread across her lips, her shoulders relaxed as she did. "The healer and the house cat?" She laughed loudly, that same annoying grating sound she used when she wanted to taunt someone into attacking her. "An empty threat from a man who doesn't know his place." Her voice raised, projecting it outwards for everyone to hear. "They're feral by now, likely dead. Off with you." She turned away. "I have more important things to do. Off you go."

His gaze lingered on the back of her head and the bob of her horns, then shifted lower to the peach-shaped rear. Rick felt his body flush, and Kiara looked over her shoulder at him and winked, the smirk plastered on her lips full of smugness.

The green-skin lugging him around was not gentle. So with little to do other than suffer as his bruised body was bounced against the shoulder, he kept looking around and trying to figure out where they were and what was going on.

It was a conglomeration of several dozen huts, and it all was surrounded by a wall of closely packed trees in every direction. From the inside of the camp, it looked like a fortification, but if the trees were any indication, he had suspicions that from the outside it would look no different to a grove. In the center of the camp was no large tent or construction, but crops. It covered an area roughly twice that of a football field, and in it he could see dozens of maidens and humans alike tending to the harvest. Sprinkled all around were maidens wielding whips, bows, and spears.

It was a village in its own right. It couldn't have been built overnight. To Rick, it was clear this bandit problem was far better organized than anyone in the kingdom's payroll suspected.

For a moment, he wasn't exactly sure what he was looking at. Then it clicked. A line of younger maidens moved in the front, carefully planting seeds. Behind them there were the Elves, waving around sticks that glowed with green light over the soil. With the energy, the plants would visibly grow bit by bit as the sharp-eared maidens moved forward. In the middle of the line there were the humans, harvesting. And last in line was another group of maidens, burning what was left and stomping the hot ashes into the ground.

It was as much a ritual as it was an operation. They inched forward ever so slowly. Each individual in line would move a step every handful of minutes. It was clear they each knew exactly what they had to do, and Rick was stunned at what he was looking at.

An entire season of harvest within the span of... hours? Days? Both maidens and humans looked like they could barely hold themselves up, dragging along as each step that hesitated was met with harsh bitter punishment from the Goblins that surrounded them.

It felt like a miniaturized slave plantation, one powered by fantastical powers. But Rick didn't get much of a chance to see more of the spectacle. His ride had turned towards one of the larger huts.

His thoughts began to turn towards escape, the warnings, the dangers. The part that unnerved him was that he wasn't sure what to expect out of the blood-suckers. Having only met the Ghoul here, his previous experience in Balet had been overall very brief.

Mostly thanks to Kiara's involvement.

He couldn't help but grimace.

Eva was right.

He'd put them into some deep shit.

[010] [Feast]

“Ah, we have a new helping hand! Welcome! Welcome!”

Rick looked at his new workplace and he felt... disappointed. Sure, he was technically a prisoner and slave right now, and the camp might have been in the butt-end of a tiny kingdom. But some part of him had imagined it couldn't be this... this.

The hut was a singular, large empty space, occupied almost entirely by tables, racks, and filth. So much filth. The stench of rotten fruit and vegetables lingered in the air, thick with the humidity brought about from the monumental boiling cauldron at the center of the room.

Rick calculated his chances of catching a disease just from breathing in the air and did not like his odds.

Standing within the mountains of half-rotten spoils and fresh vegetables was a man of dark olive complexion that had clearly seen better days. He was tall, with a coarse unshaven black beard around his round chin and a friendly smile that skewed at the edges. There was something off about his disheveled appearance, ragged clothes, and the forward greeting. It was the way he held himself, forcefully open, forcefully friendly, not so much someone that held ill intent but with that kind of contagious friendliness Rick had seen countless times among his students.

It clicked when he saw the scars on the man's arm, wounds that had badly healed over, ones that were too uniform for them to have been anything other than by design.

“Hello...” Rick hesitated, realizing that he had not seen anyone with such complexion within this world. So he was a foreigner to the kingdom?

“You're the runner.” The man declared, nodding. He shot the Orc a pleading look, one of a man looking for an alternative.

One that was ignored. “He works food.”

She proceeded to drop Rick.

For someone so brutish and thick, the maiden was surprisingly deft when she wanted to. Her fingers brought a chain from one of the walls and clamped it to his own metal collar.

“Just so we are clear.” The man declared, wielding a half-chopped... carrot? “I was not born into this world to find trouble I wasn’t already looking for.” His hands patted his scarred arms. “I’m perfectly capable of finding it on my own.”

“I’m a bit too bruised for trouble right now,” Rick said.

The tall man gave him a look over, putting down the carrot against the table he was working on. The area he was handling was the only available surface that didn’t look like a health-hazard. “Such are the whims of Fortune.” A smile appeared on his lips. “I am called Yasir Lodi. May the sun be kind.”

“Rick Cross.” He replied in kind, nodding. “So, what’s the job here? We just try to survive against whatever emerges from the muck or the pot?”

Yasir laughed. “We try to put things into the pot.” He pointed at the gigantic cauldron. “And the others eat from the pot.”

“That’s it?”

The man put down the carrot, combing through his hair with his fingers. “There is a clause, tricky thing. If anyone finds bad stuff in their food, they will come to complain about it.” His smile became crooked, showing a missing tooth. “And the... lovely ladies here... tend to be of few words and heavy fists.”

“Lovely indeed.” Rick frowned. “Are they... all so physical?”

“Depends.” Yasir replied. “Most of them are maidens that have found the kingdom rather disagreeable as of late. Those will be the likeliest to have a short temper. Especially with someone who’s not sworn enmity to the King.”

“And the rest?”

“Wildlings in every sense of the word, the original Orc wartribe. Those are very few. They’re far more careful.” He chuckled slightly. “They’re also the ones likeliest to stick to wartribe customs.”

Rick nodded, glancing at the tables he had access to with the chain. “And those would be...?”

“Willing humans are well appreciated.” Yasir chuckled.

Not wanting to pay much thought to the undertone of that statement, and focused on the task at hand. “Might as well get to work. Do we get knives?”

“No weapons for the prisoners. We get the table. Look closely, be careful not to cut yourself.”

It took a moment for Rick to spot what the man had been talking about. Removing the piled vegetables revealed the table underneath, and the features that had been added to it. There were a series of sharpened grooves, spikes, and indentations, most of them having holes underneath.

It was as if someone had merged a knife and a potato peeler into the table itself.

Using a vegetable to test it out, he was further shocked to find these additions were actually pretty damn sharp.

“Orc-wood. Hard as steel and just as capable of cutting if sharpened.” Yasir declared. “Makes us fortunate, does it not? The tables are sturdy. Good to hide under if the roof ever falls on our heads.” He pointed at his own table. “On the left is for peeling, and on the right is for cutting. If not careful, you might lose a finger. The healers here are... unpractised. Those of the Goblin genus are quite adept at healing themselves.”

With a little nod, Rick started with the pile of turnips. “I have a healer. She’s really good at what she does.” He declared idly.

“Have... or had?” Yasir spoke in a careful tone.

The pot bubbled softly, the heat and scent of the soup clogging the air around them like a sauna. Rick’s work would fall through the hole and to platters put there. It was a grand mess, one with at least a fourth of the content falling out. It explained the current state of the place.

“Both you could say.” He answered. “How long have you been... a guest here?”

“No shame in calling things by their name. We are slaves.” Yasir spat at the side. “I lost my Hamia to the raiders. I had left for Aubria in search to acquire new trained guards.”

“What happened?”

“Sinco is a small city, easily shook. A good merchant is the one who reads the tremors. Fortune turned her smile from me, however.” He pointed around himself for a moment. “It has been over a month, but at least I was not given the black tooth, or I might have been sent to the drinkers of blood with the human women.” Shrugging, he pointed the half-chopped potato at Rick. “You are not of this kingdom. You come from the northern Empires, yes?”

“Not really.” He grimaced as his body began to complain. As they kept working, the aches were getting worse. “Do we have to peel and chop it all, or can we just toss the whole thing in?”

“I thought that, at first.” The man stroked his beard, staining it with vegetable juices. “But everyone eats from the pot, and many came to visit that day to complain. Few words, heavy fists.”

Yasir shuddered, returning to his task. Rick frowned as he did the same.

“English isn’t your first language, is it?”

“I know it as the language of the Northerners. Yes, I grew up in the Sea of Pearls. My father’s tongue of the tribes from the Deep Sands.”

“That seems quite far.”

Yasir acknowledged the question with a small nod. “Such is the life of a merchant, no?”

Rick wasn’t too sure how to answer that, nodding along and trying to focus.

They worked quietly, and the table got filled with grime and juices from the vegetables and tubers getting chopped up. Potatoes, tomatoes, carrots, beets... the variety was astounding, and Rick wouldn’t have believed such variety and freshness were available so far from everything if not because he’d seen them literally growing them.

With the heat and humidity, he couldn’t help himself, mind wandering. Would the bandits move locations once the soil was entirely depleted? It made sense, a way to constantly be on the move. Though he wasn’t too sure the defenses they’d set up would make for something that could stand up to a serious feral rush.

Maybe that was the point. To only be on the move when certain the danger had passed. It spoke to experienced nomads. The original wildlings, then?

“There’s not enough food for the whole camp.” He declared after a moment of consideration, seeing how large the pot was.

“Orcs, Goblins, Hobs, they eat very little if there’s enough sun,” Yasir said, throwing him a strange look. “Did you not know this?”

“There are many things I don’t know.”

The response appeared to be enough for the inquisitive eyes of his cooking companion.

The strain of working on his feet and the tenderness of his body did not mix well with the steam and heat. Breaks were frequent, sitting down on the floor that was chock-full of discarded pieces of the ingredients. Those would get swept up and taken away by some maiden or another from time to time.

Photosynthesis.

Was that the reason why the Orcs needed sunlight? His mind turned towards chemistry.

Growing plants that fast... the components couldn't be brought out of nowhere. Sure, there were a great deal of things that didn't make sense through the lens of his world's physics.

Like Eva's claim, that light had a fluctuating velocity.

But at least some of it still applied. A maiden five times his strength and half his weight could still be thrown around by him unless she had some way to glue herself to the ground.

And if that was the case, the chemistry of the farm...

Nitrogen, Potassium, and Magnesium? Rick knew the first was the main ingredient for fertilizers. But also for many types of explosives. Nitrogen's triple bond was violently strong, after all. The more he thought, the more he realized he'd spent so long just thinking about survival or events or just... stuff, concerns, worries, everything.

This was the first time in quite a while he'd been able to just stop and think.

And on the cooking operation went as he did. There was little rest to be had.

Rick watched the maidens take the massive pot and come back with it empty, filling it with water and preparing the fire again. It had been the only real break since they got to just sit down and eat.

"Could I have something to drink?" Rick asked, glancing at the man with the bucket.

"Sure, here." A toothy smirk followed.

And just like that, he was drenched from head to toe.

Yasir chuckled. "You have much to learn, indeed."

Rick glared at the empty door, combing his fingers over his damp hair to push it out of the way. "I don't have plans to sit down and wait for a rescue."

“May Fortune smile her crooked teeth at you.” The man laughed heartily. “Though I doubt you will find your answers in the cooking pot. I have tried. There is nothing but soot and grease.”

He kept glaring at the pot all the same. They began work for the third and final meal of the day: more soup. As far as it seemed, this would be their routine for the future ahead of them. At least if they didn't find a way out.

Maybe the others might be able to help, maybe not.

The fire under the pot crackled and sputtered. It felt like a domino had been set off inside of Rick. His mind wandered back, years, to before he was dragged into this world, to before he was a chemistry teacher. To that very first time, he'd worked with the 'serious' stuff, the kind that required checking how many layers of physical protection there were between you and the substances that would painfully kill you.

That moment in time when “the smell of chemicals” had a nuance to it whenever someone had an accident.

His foot began a rhythm. An old song blasted him down memory lane.

Baby, can't you see I'm calling?

How would these maidens contend against the kind of substances that made chemists wince? Would an Orc's durable skin and regenerative powers make them less susceptible to fluorine? Or would it just make it worse by virtue of making their demise take longer?

Rick couldn't help himself. His lips quivered, and he began to hum a tune.

I need a hit, baby, give me it

His hands moved with ease. The work was automatic now, formulas, benzene rings, beakers, he greeted them like old friends... well, except the benzene rings. Those he wanted to throw back into the pits.

Still, he was remembering it now, all those years ago, when he'd been the student, when he'd seen his teacher make water boil and freeze at the same time by messing around with temperature and pressure.

A chuckle escaped him when he thought back to the first acid burn. And what about the first accidental run-in with ammonium sulfide? And all the subsequent intentional ones afterwards.

I took a sip from my devil's cup

And now he looked at the tables again, at the vegetables and the oils and the smoke. Perhaps it was the heat or the humidity or the exhaustion. Rick looked at them and imagined the long lists of chemicals each of them contained.

The image flashed, of the Sorceress taking aim at him, and the gesture alone keeping Monica in check, frozen in the space between them. At the sheer sense of being cornered out in the open, even when everyone knew Monica could have creamed the spellcaster.

It was so simple. They didn't matter. The Orcs, the Goblins, the Vampires, the Fledglings, or anything else. The maidens and their capacity to ignore every bit of common sense and science he knew. Their presence or lack thereof changed nothing.

They could be immune to the worst and most dangerous chemicals on the planet.

It still didn't matter.

Don't you know that you're toxic?

Because the humans were not. And maidens without humans were nothing more than ferals. Wasn't that exactly how the bandits had been operating? Ruthlessly aim at the weak-point.

"How many of the humans in the camp would you say are willing participants in this... little bandit endeavor?"

Rick slowed down, his hands were shaking. Was he really considering this?

"Most, I would claim." Yasir eyed him skeptically. "The unwilling are mostly sold as slaves, sent off to the lands of the drinkers of blood."

"But you are here." Rick pointed at the chain. "And so am I."

"Fortune is most fickle. I am here because the former chieftain finds my complexion exotic. I can guess at what will occur once she finds something else that catches her eye." He answered with a laugh. "What of you? Why are you here in chains and not somewhere less troublesome to our captors?"

There was a moment, an instance where he considered what might happen to the humans that were there unwillingly, or the maidens that were in a similar condition.

And he made his choice.

It felt like cocking a revolver, a metallic click that made his adrenaline shoot up. “There’s a dangerous maiden about these parts that happens to want me around.”

Yasir’s gaze had shifted, a scowl on his thick brows, as if he’d heard something in his answer. “You have the look of a man about to do terrible things.” He spoke slowly.

Rick hadn’t looked up from the latest victim of his peeling and cutting efforts: the humble chopped potato. He looked at its starchy yellow surface, taking a long moment to bounce it in his palm.

“You’re smiling, though.” It was with a simple toss that the tuber was sent into the pot, splashing as it sank under its turbulent, frothing surface. Rick shot a long look at Yasir before turning to his pile of never-spent ingredients.

“One of the first things a merchant must learn is to identify fools thinking their visions in the smoke are prophecies.” He stated. “You do not seem a fool.”

“Depends on who you ask.”

Yasir nodded. “And you are certain your idea might work?”

“Not at all.”

Another nod. “We have all the time... it is the only thing left, I’m afraid.”

The bubbling cauldron frothed and bubbled, the scent of every ingredient they’d put into it mixing and dancing together.

“I also have a very big cat.” Rick declared, smirking at the obvious confusion from his partner in cuisine. “She might be of help.”