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## [008] [Rick]

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Rick could only stare as the streak of moonlight gleamed upon the imposing woman that was, for all intents and purposes, the current one able to decide on the fate of everyone present. Through the dimness of the forest, her image stood equal parts alluring and dangerous. Scars littered her honeyed skin, blood dripped from her soft snowy fur. Her figure was that of a creature that looked human in most ways, beautiful even, tall and muscular yet accentuated by naked curves that left little to the imagination. And at the same time, she was no more human than the other monsters, the claws she had for arms and feet making it apparent enough.

She was wild, powerful, deadly.

Yet it was her eyes that Rick found most captivating. Green and blue, they held a light of their own that pierced the darkness. An infinity of swirling depths was kept within them. They snared his attention with sharp claws and refused to let it go. The man felt as if he was a mouse in front of a tiger and unable to turn to look other way. There were no less than twenty meters between the two, but the chemistry teacher could sense it would take her but a second to breach through and end him.

Were she to wish it.

That very same gaze angled away, changing the focus towards the corpses that lay next to her downed prey. One second, two. She glanced back at the bus, and then she swung her attention to the foe whose blood still dripped from her claws. She took a single step out of the beam of moonlight; her figure reduced to a blurred silhouette in the shadows. Rick could only see vague shapes and could only guess what the terrible incredible creature was doing now that the darkness turned her near invisible to his eyes. He had absolute confidence it mattered little. For once, her attention returned to the living. It was then that their fates would be sealed.

Rick was reminded of a documentary he'd once seen, of people during the great wars, sitting in bunkers, knowing that the chaos and destruction would unfold around them within mere moments. To him it held a certain similitude, a certain morbid appeal. The main difference was that the incoming violence was neither bullets nor explosions, but a single creature that was far too alluring for the apparent power she wielded.

The chemistry teacher remained the lone person still outside the bus, waiting, leaning into the chassis and burning with curiosity. To know what? He couldn't explain it, yet it was just as impossible to escape the pull. A part of him wondered idly if, perhaps, what he wanted was to stare death in the eye before it all came to an end. Or maybe it was something else.

The shudders and whimpers from the former passengers broke the silence of the night. Some prayed under their breath, their voice carrying through the inky air that enveloped them. Someone even dared to turn on the flashlight of their phone, only for the flicker of light to die out instantly, others having rushed to cover the source before it could risk bringing attention upon them.

And all the while, Rick remained on the spot, peering into the shadow that moved through the bodies. His heart beat like a wild drum, and his eyes strained yet unable to make anything out specifically. The minutes ticked by; the air becoming thick.

No one moved. They all wished she would leave. The prayer fell on deaf ears.

Rick sensed movement. He saw the gleam of those two blue-green eyes that flickered like a roiling sea. Her focus had fallen upon him now, in full. His every muscle froze solid, those that stood near him and near the entrance pushing themselves further in. Someone let out a whimper.

And the feline approached slowly, cautiously.

The shadows hid the details, but Rick could make out the contours of her body. There was confidence in the saunter, in the sway of hips, and yet there was impossible patience in her slowness, in the way her eyes flickered at the bus and back at him, taking every minute detail. Each step was quiet, even sound was afraid to stand in her presence. And the closer she was, the clearer he could see the swirls of emotion within those eyes. What were they? He couldn't tell.

Rick's heart hammered against his rib cage in an attempt to escape as the closer she was. It swiftly became clear she was taller than she seemed at a distance. She was stalking, so she'd been slightly leaning forward. But as she got approached, her stance relaxed, her shoulders straightening as her tail flicked at the side of her hips. Whatever caution she'd held slowly vanished. She was domineering in her quiet proclamation there was nothing here that would be able to threaten her.

The woman came to a stop in front of Rick.

Peering down at the teacher, she stood taller than him by a full head. He was tall, a meter eighty five or so, yet she held her chin at the height of his forehead. It was an

imposing presence that lingered close to him; her gaze pinning him to the ground as he stood and barely leaving room for him to breathe.

Then she moved to step past Rick, towards the bus entrance.

Someone whimpered inside, and within Rick's mind, the image of Charlie flashed bright and sharp. The scream, the eyes, the guilt. The teacher's body moved before he could think to stop himself. The man stepped to the side, arms wide, blocking the bus entrance and preventing her access to the inside of the as he looked upwards at the feline and met her gaze firmly.

"No," He spoke the single word, somehow having found the strength to draw breath.

"Look down," a voice hissed from within. "She'll take it as a challenge!"

Immediately Rick's head bowed, eyes aimed firmly at her clawed feet, but his body did not twitch from where he held himself. Nor did it dare to move further. Like a statue, he remained locked in place, his heart now drumming fast enough it was a deafening hum between his ears. Icy sweat ran down his back, and it became colder with every passing second.

The presence of the feline woman was a force in and of itself. The very air around her was oppressive. She remained still for only a moment. He could not read her expression, though every part of him desperately wished he could at least see death as it came for him. When she moved, Rick held his breath. She leaned closer. Her breath was hot and rancid with the stench of blood. It washed against Rick's face like a damp cloth, making him shiver.

With apparent interest, she sniffed at him. The first sound she'd made since her approach. The human's eyes wavered as he fought with his own body to stop himself from trembling. This close, he could make out in minute detail how the anatomy of her hands made it seem as if she was wearing large furry gauntlets with wicked obsidian claws at the tips. But they were no gauntlets. They were her paws. The bony white fur ran all the way up to her elbows before it turned into tanned skin. Everything about her looked human, all save those claws on her hands and feet. And with some small sense of suppressed amusement, he realized her tail too was amongst the features that were not human.

After a heartbeat of silence as she kept sniffing him, he dared slowly look up into her eyes once more, into those deep pools of glimmering azure. He felt his heart stop, and his mouth fell slightly open. Despite the dried blood covering her lower jaw,

despite the unkept wild hair, and despite the imposing threat of her very proximity, Rick could not help himself but gasp.

The backhand that hit him a moment after felt like getting run over by a truck.

One instant he was standing at the bus' entrance, and the next he was sprawled on the ground four meters away, seeing the world spin. Shrieks exploded from within the vehicle as the feline leaned inside to look at the source of the noise. Her tail lashed once, twice, thrice. She let out a loud snort, stepping back, and turned to Rick as he frantically struggled to stand up, his mind reeling from the impact and attempting to assess the situation again.

She pounced before he could- a leap across the air, a graceful arch that covered the four meters in a single easy bound. Rick had rolled out of the way, but it didn't matter. With a quick step, she'd caught up, her hand pinning him to the ground and driving the air right out of his chest.

A feral smirk played on her face as she leaned down, meeting his eyes with evident amusement at his feeble attempt to slip away. One clawed hand kept his chest in place, her strength impossible to fight against. The other hand moved to grasp his skull and hold him still.

He could no more escape her grip than he would be able to spontaneously start flying. She was supernaturally strong. There was no other explanation. The woman was so strong, the young teacher was quite sure she could rip his head clean off if she so wished.

Breath ragged and heart racing in an attempt to flee his ribs, he stopped moving, meeting her gaze in full.

She leaned down, breath hot and heavy against his face. She sniffed deeply first, several quick times later. A growl came to her lips as Rick twitched. The human instantly became still again, breathing hard as she leaned closer.

And then she licked his cheek.

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## [009] [Rick]

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With the monster's tongue lapping against his cheek, Rick's mind whirled, the gears spinning out of control, eyes wild and rapidly blinking as she leaned closer. Her tongue was wet, rough, and stinking of things far worse than bad breath. There was a hint of blood in that scent, but the human was far too near a panic attack to properly think things through. What was going on?

She licked him a third time, tracing her way to his lip. After a moment, she leaned away, appearing amused at something, letting go of him as she sniffed at his shoulder, inhaling deeply. Another sniff. She followed her way down his right arm. The sniffing paused at his fingers.

The woman stopped as she focused on the blue backpack he'd been holding in a death-grip this whole time. A purr escaped her, sniffing harder and licking her lips. She reached down and snatched the bag right out of his hands. She frowned at it, as if it was her first time having seen such an object. She turned it upside down as her other hand let go of him. The contents fell out and spilled all over the floor. It was one item in particular that caught her attention in full. The zip-bag of half melted chocolate treats.

The sugary treat had oozed out, perhaps when Rick had fallen onto it from her shove. The feline glanced at it, frowning, sniffing closer before giving it a tentative lick. The reaction was immediate. Her tail lashed out, eyes widening, the feline ears atop her head perking up. She began licking some more. The wild woman chomped on the side of the bag that had the most chocolate covering the outside plastic, biting down and ripping it out in a single savage yank of her head.

Laying on the ground and looking up at her in disbelief, Rick could only blink in disbelief as he watched her purr as she chewed at the stolen treat. The sound lasted up until she started gagging. The white-haired woman spat out the pieces of plastic, glaring at the packet while holding it pinched between two fingers as if it had just committed a grave sin against her.

The young teacher hesitated, his mind racing. From the chaos of near panic, a thought made its way through. "Hey." He leaned over, sitting up just a bit, waiting for her to turn his way before he began slowly reaching for the bag, but not daring to even make it seem like he was going to take it out of her paws.

She pulled her hand away from his reach as she glanced at the bag of sweets with a scowl. Her eyes narrowed in a silent threat when she turned back to look at him. He didn't move, meeting her gaze and lowering his eyes afterwards, but remaining firmly in place. He lingered, swallowing hard, waiting, wondering. Was this the right choice? Should he do this? Was she going to attack him and put a definite end to this?

A heartbeat, then a dozen more that followed in quick succession. He waited with bated breath.

She frowned, peered at the bag, then at him, and then at his outstretched hand. Pausing, she kept her eyes narrowed. Her lips pulled back, and she bared her fangs at him as she moved her clawed hand closer to his palm. Rick gulped, nodding slowly when she dropped the bag in his palm.

The snarl was making his body want to shudder uncontrollably. It was physically oppressive. With supreme effort and no small amount of nervousness, he picked up the bag and peeled off the plastic from the chocolate. Carefully, gently, with shaking fingers and with an aching chest that was nearly going to fail at containing his racing heart, he took out one of the half-melted pieces of candy, now devoid of plastic, and left it on her outstretched paw.

She looked at it closely. Gave a brief look at Rick, then at the chunk of chocolate. The monster lady sniffed at it and then licked it off of her paw, taking the entire piece into her mouth and chomping down on it. At first she did so slowly, appearing to test whether there was plastic within, but once she had confirmed there was none to be had, she chewed on it loudly and swallowed.

A wide smile spread across her face, smirking as she sat down in front of Rick, legs crossed, leaning forward. She licked her paw as she looked at the bag with keen eyes. Her head made a gesture at it. The human let out a nervous chuckle, feeling a knot forming at the back of his neck. "Oh, you want more?" He couldn't help but force a chuckle while his shoulder remained stiff enough to hurt. Rick mentally calculated how much remained. Maybe enough for a dozen or two similarly sized pieces? Less?

What would happen once the chocolate was gone? His back felt like it was about to collapse in on itself from the tension.

Keeping the smile fixed in place, he took another sample, scooping it out of the bag and offering it. It took a moment; she leaned down to inspect it, sniffing it again, licking the edge lightly. Her paw reached out to grab his wrist firmly. Sudden panic rose in Rick's chest as she opened her mouth, sharp fangs laying within. The man fought with his own body to keep it extremely still, watching as she slowly licked at his

fingers now that he was unable to pull the limb away, lapping his palm clean while purring, grinning from ear to ear while her tail lashed.

The woman let go after a second and leaned away. Rick let out a withering sigh and relaxed, glad he still had all ten digits. Her face glowed with a smile as she opened her mouth, clearly asking for more. With a nervous chuckle, he obliged, doing his best to ration the sweets so they would last as long as he could make them. His brain was going a mile a minute as it attempted to figure out what to do, where to lead things. He couldn't just keep giving her chocolate indefinitely; he'd run out, and fast.

What would he do afterwards? "Here you go." Another piece of candy. Rick's hands were shaking ever so slightly, but he was getting it under control. His eyes moved up to her perked, feline ears as she suckled his finger. And the absurdity of the thought that followed made him want to scream at himself to stop. Should he? He waited, allowing her three more nibbles before he'd worked up the courage.

Not that any better options came to mind.

It was all or nothing.

The chemistry teacher used his free hand to reach out towards her head. Very, very slowly. The hammering of his heart between his ears was deafeningly loud. She saw the outstretched hand and frowned. Rick froze, leaving it there, unmoving, waiting.

His other hand offered more chocolate underneath the outstretched hand.

Her focus shifted towards the candy and leaned to pluck it from his fingers with her lips. In doing so, she pressed the top of her head against his other hand. Waiting before moving again, Rick gently dug his fingers into her scalp, stroking in slow circles, and following through her hair up to the base of those twitching ears. He was ready to pull out at the first sign of so much as a twitch of a brow. But she stayed there, and he proceeded. One scratch, two, then three. He drew slow lines with them, unable to look away from her intense gaze as she peered up at him.

A nervous chuckle left him as he redoubled on the insanity, caressing her hair and ears, trying his best to make sure it was enjoyable. His mind kept bouncing back to Odin, the odious black cat that loved nothing more than to scratch him to hell and back.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a purr. Rick let out a massive sigh of relief. His whole body half-slumped back to the ground as he continued scratching. A strange hysteria gripped at his chest, making him want to laugh. A part of him wondered just how mentally exhausted his brain was to have thought this idea was a

decent one. But the sight of the feline woman relaxing into his touch was as good a sign as any.

Her purring became louder, leaning forward, catching Rick by surprise as she buried her face against his stomach, her arms wrapping around his waist, tail lashing back and forth in an apparent simple enjoyment. She forced him onto his back as she cuddled close against him. The gesture prompted him to continue, now moving both palms to the top of her head, stroking and massaging the base of her ears.

The teacher marveled at them, feline in their entirety, attached to her head and completely functional, the muscles twitching on her scalp. Nothing about them looked any different than a cat's. He didn't spot human ears at the sides of her head, either. It seemed as if this was the real deal.

A growl came out of her when he'd slowed down to observe her ears more closely, her grip tightening dangerously. Rick's hands immediately moved faster, the question repeating itself inside his mind over and over and over.

The memory of what she'd done to the bat-like monster, and of how she scared off the spider with but a roar... Rick's heart raced as he considered the prospect. What if...

Hope wormed its way into his chest.

What if he could convince her to keep them alive?



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## [010] [Rick]

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Sunlight streaked through the treetops all the way to the ground, the rays incandescent and painful, yet not quite as irritating much as the edges of Rick's mind felt at the moment. His consciousness came to him with aches that lingered and pierced into his thoughts from all angles. Everything seemed out of place and disjointed. Nothing made sense. His brain scrambled to piece together what was happening as his aching body greeted him.

Opening his eyes, the first thing the man saw was the ash-haired feline woman. Just like that, the slumber in his thoughts vanished. For a fleeting moment, he had hoped that what had happened last night had been no more than a dream. But she was no dream. Naked, she lay half on top of the young teacher, keeping him pinned to the ground under her weight while squeezing him against herself. Her soft, supple self.

Rick thought, for a second, of how tender she was, how calm she looked, and how peaceful it all felt. And yet, it took but a moment to note the bloodstains on her claws, face and neck, and of how her body thrummed with strength even as she slept. Her grip on his body felt entirely impossible to move, yet she was relaxed. A light snore mingled with a purr that was far too tranquil for the violence she'd unleashed the previous night.

After the sights came the smell, and it slapped him on the face with a damp cloth that carried a stench of blood and sweat. It was primal, intense, saturating his throat. Rick was clearly not in a situation where he could do anything about it, either. Especially since her grip on him tightened whenever he twitched or tried to wriggle away.

There was a startled sound nearby, but he was unable to see where it originated from due to the current angle. Rick knew he must have passed out last night at some point. How? He wasn't sure. It must have been a hard crash from the adrenaline of the day. What of the others? He had to check.

Turning to the feline woman, he kept his grumble silent. If she was keeping him bound, might as well see if he could wake her up. Wriggling, Rick reached up to the woman's head and slowly felt his way around until he found those two triangular, furry ears he'd been stroking the night prior. It took only a moment of scratching, but the reaction softened. She relaxed, purring. Her arms tensed and hugged him closer for a moment before she sighed and slowly released him.

It took some wriggling, but when he'd managed to escape her immediate grasp, she stirred, opening her blue-green orbs and staring at him. The pout that followed was disarmingly cute, if not for the dried blood staining her jaw and claws.

"Purrrr," she muttered in apparent indignation. Rick hesitated, but only for long enough, at least until it was clear she wasn't about to do anything about his escape. His eyes darted towards the source of noise that had caught his attention moments earlier.

His breath caught in his throat as he saw trails of blood that had not been there last night, ones that lead into the vehicle. What had happened? Dread rushed through him. His gaze turned to the bus. Several people were peeking out with pale faces, showing rings under their eyes. Each of them was no better for wear than he was. Their gazes angled to the feline woman for a moment, and then at Rick.

Said feline was, instead, bending down and licking the blood out of the fur on her hands, appearing entirely unperturbed and uncaring about the others. She was being slow and methodical, clearly intent on having a tongue bath.

Rick turned towards the others. Of the storm of emotions welling through him, there was a growing sense of numbness to it all. What should he even feel about this situation? No, now was not something he should even be asking himself. He didn't even know what had transpired. That was more important.

"What happened?" He asked the young... Tomas? Tomas, right, the student with a well-built body and glasses thick like a bottle's bottom.

The sophomore's face glanced at the professor and shook his head. "After you fell asleep, she approached the bus, stepped inside. Some people screamed, they tried to defend themselves, attacked her, and..."

His head gestured at the pile of bodies. There were two new ones in the lineup.

Rick's stomach lurched, but he kept it down, responding with a grimace.

"We were nothing to her, one casual swipe from her was enough." Anger and fear flared across the young man's face, his expression becoming grim. There was an attempt to glare at the feline, but he did not dare to, certainly not wanting to risk starting anything.

The young teacher could only nod. He took a long pause to calm his emotions and head back to where he'd been sleeping and sought his backpack. He noticed the feline's eyes were on him as he moved, though she appeared uninterested for the

time being, continuing on her self-cleaning while Rick put the pouch with chocolates into the bag and pulled out a bottle of water. He needed a long gulp or four to clean his throat of the smell and took the chance to think things through more carefully.

He needed a plan.

What now? What would they do? How could they proceed? The monster woman was right there, uncaring and unmoving. She'd kill them all if she wanted to. She was the most important piece of the puzzle. Her presence could mean their end... but could it also be their salvation?

Determination swept through him. He moved towards the vehicle, stepping inside. Waiting a second to let his eyes adjust to the dimness, he focused on those gathered there. Most everyone was present. The mood was grim, their looks distraught and distant. Rick nodded once and clapped his hands, drawing the other's attention.

"We won't last. We need to locate help. I am volunteering to head out right here, right now. And if I'm lucky, I hope to get the lady out there to follow me." A heartbeat of silence. Every pair of eyes on the bus was looking at him as if he'd grown a new head. It didn't stop him, he continued. "If anyone else has a better idea, or wants to join, this is your chance."

"You're going to get yourself killed," Alice spoke up first, scowling deeply. The bags under her eyes were heavy.

"Do we have an option?" The response came from Mr. Gabriel, the old man slowly standing up. "It's gutsy, but she's the spookiest thing out here. Count me in."

The woman next to him gawked. "Grandpa!" She proclaimed, hissing under her breath and reaching out to grab his arm.

"Don't you 'Grandpa' me. Been in worse places. This is a time for action, not to pussy around and wait to die."

The words fell on those gathered like an avalanche. Everyone remained quiet, glancing at one another. There was a heaviness that draped onto the shoulders of each individual. Rick waited for a heartbeat before speaking up again. "Anyone else?"

"I'm not leaving my gramps to go alone," the woman spoke with a sigh, standing up and looking at Rick with iridescent sky-blue eyes, her expression heavy and tired. The teacher struggled to remember her. She wasn't one of his students, that was for sure. She looked too punky for him not to remember her. "Name's Catherine, Kat for short. And no, the irony isn't lost on me."

“Welcome aboard, Kat.” Rick nodded, turning to the others on the bus. “Anyone else?”

“I’ll go.” The voice came from right next to the teacher. Tomas, the bespectacled young man, had glimpsed at Kat and then at Rick before nodding firmly. “I’ll go,” he repeated, as if to convince himself.

“... very well, then.” With a sense of weariness, the teacher glanced at the rest of the bus. “We’re going to need to prep food and water. Doubt we’ll have enough for more than a couple days, so if we’re not back soon...”

A grim nod.

If they weren’t back by then, they’d likely be dead.

And it was time to get moving.

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## [011] [Rick]

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No sooner had Rick stepped out of the bus that he jumped in shock. The whole structure had shuddered with a metallic groan at something landing on top of it. Some of the people inside let out shrieks and cries. A few rushed out, Rick moving further away from the vehicle, wanting to get distance and avoid a potential threat. The chemistry teacher twisted around to check out whatever had made the racket.

It had been none other than the white-haired woman.

She'd hopped onto the upturned chassis. Her scrutinizing gaze was keenly focused upon the dead vehicle, sniffing it and scrunching up her nose in revulsion, turning to the side and continuing her inspection, moving towards the front wheels. Her focus shifted entirely onto the piece of rubber. She poked it with a claw tipped finger.

Rick's eyes widened. "No!"

Her head jerked at attention to him just as her claw dug into the wheel a bit more deeply, as if it were no more than half-melted butter.

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The tire let out the pressurized air with a bang.

Startled, the woman had taken a step back and then roared at the bus. The sound made Rick's blood curdle and his feet root into the ground. In the blink of an eye, she'd shredded not just the offending remains of the tire, but had also twisted the axle with a clean punch. The feline woman looked no less gentle when she punched down against the vehicle's frame twice more, as if to make sure it'd learned its lesson.

The metal whined and bent from each jolt. Rick could hear more shrieks from inside the bus's remnants. his eyes could not be any larger. With each display of power, he could do nothing but stand in awe.

With a snort and a hiss, she hopped off of the bus, lightly kicking it in irritation as she stepped onto the ground. With a shake of her head, her eyes turned to Rick, and her mood instantly improved. Her gaze twinkled with a hidden smile. The feline woman approached with just three bounding steps. The human tensed, shifting his gaze downwards, doing his best to avoid eye-contact. Things felt different from the previous night. The danger was there, but there was an almost familiarity to the way

she moved that had lost its threatening edge. This close, now with the presence of daylight? Her complete absence of clothing made it impossible not to notice her every curve, the white scars littering her honeyed skin, the imposing, powerful athletic physique, and the gravitas of her femininity.

But he had just witnessed her shredding a chunk of metal meant from a bus. Right now, the only emotion within him was distress.

“Mrow,” she declared, her closed hand bumping his shoulder.

Rick paused, peering up at her. What did she mean? She bumped his shoulder again- softly, yet with enough force to shake him. The young teacher noticed it was the strap of the knapsack. A quick nod. “Chocolate?”

There was little to be gained from taking the risk. He moved with deliberate patience to make it easy for her to read his every move. He pulled the backpack, opening it up, and drawing out the bag of chocolates. The woman smiled instantly, purring. A hungry smile emerged on her face, beaming from ear to ear. It made Rick want to chuckle as he broke off some for her. He’d been about to slip it into her paws when he saw the traces of oil marring her fur.

Not having any wish to risk finding out whether she’d be happy to have motor oil on her meal or not, he held the piece between his fingers and presented it. His heart pumped hard against his ribs. The image of missing fingers was vivid, and one he didn’t want to make a reality. And at the same time, last night she’d proved uninterested in needlessly harming him.

With a brief pause, she leaned forward, trapping the chunk in her mouth and licking his fingers as she gingerly extracted it from his grasp. The woman purred contentedly, the smile widening ever so slightly as she chewed on the candy. “Chuocrrr,” she murmured, parting her pink lips again and suckling on them.

It was with a sense of startled wonder that Rick stared at her. Had she just tried to talk? His brain rushed through the possibilities. If she could speak and learn words, then... then...! No, he froze- no, he shouldn’t rush. Patience, he’d earned a fraction of her attention, maybe even trust. Who knew what might come afterwards? He couldn’t even guarantee she wouldn’t kill him the moment he ran out of the delicious treat.

With a brief nod, he took another piece and offered it to her. The woman repeated the process, suckling on his digits, the rumbling sound that came from within her chest no different from an idle chainsaw waiting to be revved.

The young teacher nodded. "Rick. My name is Rick." He held his palm against his chest. "Rick."

"Mriw?" She pushed her hand against his pectoral. It was a slight push, not even an effort on her part. But it carried the strength to force him a step back. It was like trying to stop a train.

The woman smiled a bit more widely and chuckled as he yelped. The expression was short-lived. She noticed the oil on her paws that had stained his shirt. With a frown and a pout, she turned around and walked off, her tail swishing and her hips swaying to an unheard rhythm. The change of behavior left the human feeling equal parts confused and vexed. Rick closed up the bag and made a mental note to ask for as much of the treat as the others could offer. At least the candy looked like a shortcut towards having her attention and good mood.

"Seems she marked you, huh?" Kat commented as she stepped out of the bus.

The young woman's hair was a dirty blond that was half-haphazardly tied into a messy ponytail that had more hair haplessly left outside than within. Her jacket hung loosely from her small frame, and amusement danced across her face. There was a light giggle to her tone of voice as she pointed at his shirt. It took the young teacher a moment to realize what exactly she was talking about. Looking down, he saw the feline's grease stained paw had left a dark hand-shaped stain on his shirt. A little sigh escaped him, but he kept from commenting about it.

His attention turned back to the feline. Said creature had quickly started rubbing her paws against some tree-bark in frustration. "Are we ready?" He looked at the others. "I only need to get some food and chocolate, and hopefully she'll tag along."

"Do you have any idea where we're going to?" Mr. Gabriel arched a brow.

"I thought about it for a while. The best direction is likely the one she came from. It's the fuck away from the spider, and she'd be likelier to follow since she likely lives over wherever that leads to." A slight sigh escaped him. "There also might be water in that direction since, well, I'm hoping her place of residence was in that direction."

"Some felines can survive for long periods of time without needing a direct source of water since they can absorb most of the moisture they might need out of their prey." Tomas had approached, nodding once as he'd unleashed the factoid their way. "We don't know how she... works, we might not find drinkable water."

"North is still the better option, I'd say." Mr. Gabriel shrugged.

Rick looked at the older man. “North?”

“Sun set in that direction.” He pointed at some of the trees. “Unless the planet doesn’t work properly, then that’s north.” He then pointed in the direction the feline woman had come from.

The young teacher nodded as he rubbed his chin in thought. He had doubts of whether to bring Mr. Gabriel or not. The man was looking rather close to his sixties. Still... it seemed he might know a thing or four. “North it is.” Better someone with an idea than someone without.

“Now we only need to convince the big pussy about it.” Kat grimaced, making a gagging sound. “Ok, that was bad, even for me. She needs a name.”

“Does she have one?” Tomas looked at her in surprise.

“If she does, I don’t know it,” Rick declared.

“You’re her handler and don’t know her name? Shame on you, Rick.”

“Handler? What!?” He turned to the young woman in full, scowling. “What part of anything so far looks like I’m her ‘handler’?”

“You’re the one who spent the night all nice and warm, cuddled with her. I figure that’s as close to a certification as you’ll ever need.”

“As good a reasoning as any.” Mr. Gabriel shrugged.

“That settles that, you’re the official cat-interpreter. First duty is to give her a name since ‘cat-lady’ is a shitty name to use.”

Rick wanted to roll his eyes and groan.



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## [012] [Rick]

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“We are going to have to push hard, not enough to do much else.” Rick scanned the backpacks each had assembled.

“You need more food when you move.” Mr. Gabriel shook his head. “So assume we have even less.”

“Here’s hoping we don’t take too long, then.” Rick grimaced. Intellectually, it would become a losing battle. Time was against them. He glanced at Mr. Gabriel again, speculating how fast the group would be able to move with him coming along.

They had to find civilization if there were any to be had.

There was a teeny voice in the back of Rick’s head, warning him, toying with him as it whispered that maybe, just maybe, there was no one to be found. That there was nothing other than wilderness and monsters. He crushed the idea before it could take root. There was little sense in taking things in that direction. It wasn’t as if they had a better chance of surviving by sticking around and waiting for a miracle.

“Double check everything. I’m going to attempt persuading... her to come along. Hopefully, we don’t need to worry too much over things on that end.” Tossing his backpack at Tomas, he kept the bag of chocolates in his pocket, moving on to approach the white-haired woman.

Said woman was rubbing her paws against the dirt, claws sinking into the soil and splitting it with ease, long thin strips marking the passing of where her natural daggers had opted to aggravate the earth. She was vexed, swiping once or twice, checking her hand, smelling, grimacing, and doing it some more. She’d yet to fully get rid of the grease.

Rick leaned into wisdom and caution. He kept himself well away from the range of her claws by a good extra five meters, instead opting to put himself where she could see him, but not approaching further. As expected, she noticed him. A quick glance was as much as she needed to confirm he was there, but she did nothing about it. Her focus remained on wanting to remove the smell of car grease from her skin and fur.

A minute, then two, then three. Her clawing was unearthing everything around her, throwing little bits of dirt, dust, and rocks all around. She’d sunk herself a good foot in

her insistence of being thorough. It had been only after her fur had been dyed and caked in light clumpy brown soil that she appeared marginally satisfied. Enough to stop, at least.

“Tough day, huh,” Rick commented with a wistful smirk, arms crossed, leaning against the tree and presenting a chunk of chocolate he’d broken off. He was doing his level best to appear relaxed, though he certainly didn’t feel it. Another part of him was just grimacing at his attempt to look in control.

The woman pouted, scoffing and shaking her head all in one fluid motion. The glare she shot at the bus was one that would have ignited it... if only she had been gifted with anything other than incredible power and speed. Since the totaled vehicle appeared intent on remaining inert, she huffed.

Rick forced his shoulders to slump, nodding with only the barest bob of his head, gesturing at the others to get slightly closer. He stepped towards her with measured steps, swallowing the lump in his throat and getting within range of her paws while trying to avoid falling down from the new tripping hazard she’d dug out.

He touched his chest, right above where she’d left the stain. “Rick,” he said, then pointed at the sweet he was holding onto. “Chocolate.” He pointed at her, taking a long second to push out the idea he’d formed earlier. “Monica.”

She cocked a brow, reaching out and snagging the chocolate from his fingers with her lips, popping it into her mouth and savoring it with a purr. “Meow,” she declared, patting her chest. “Mriw.” She pointed at him. “Chuoc.” She pointed at his pocket.

Good enough, he guessed. “Monica it is.” Rick smiled.

She looked at his face for a moment, tilting her head before she returned the smile.

“This feels like a movie. ‘Me girl-Tarzan, you ugly-male-Jane’,” Kat commented under her breath, giggling. “Should I get popcorn? Bet she’d love it.”

Rick made sure to ignore the comment and keep his eyes on the newly named Monica. He reached out a hand, empty, but gesturing slowly for her to follow. “Let’s... go? Come?” He turned towards the forest, in the direction she’d come from originally. Her ears perked up. “Come? Please?”

“You should ‘pspspsps’ her, but pretty sure she’d rip you to shreds.”

The young teacher sighed, stepping through the threshold between the clearing and the forest. A chill ran down his spine, all the way to his toes. He took another step, and then one more, glancing over his shoulder at the feline woman. She was looking

at him with her head tilted to the side, ears perked and tail lashing behind her. So Rick had to take a slow second to breathe in and continue walking.

He couldn't make her come, not if she didn't follow on her own, but... were there alternatives? His mind drew blanks. "Let's go."

"And if she doesn't follow?" Tomas asked with a whisper.

"We can't force her even if we wanted to," Rick replied, pulling out the half-full bag of chocolate from his pocket and shaking it over his head, praying it'd do the trick. He moved forward another step.

"She's, like, not following," Kat commented with a nudge of nervousness.

It was enough for everyone to stop.

Pausing, Rick glanced at the other three. "What are your thoughts of our chances of survival without her collaboration?"

"Nill," Mr. Gabriel said with a growl. "If we encounter anything like that spider again, we're dead. All of us."

"I... have to agree with Mr. Gabriel."

"I don't wanna be monster food." Kat scowled. The words brought the image from last night through his mind. He blinked slowly as the student looked at him intently. "You... have an idea."

"Maybe, but it's a terrible one. Stay put."

There was a heartbeat of hesitation as he turned towards the feline that had turned away. Turning his way back towards her, he took every step with a growing sense of dread. His back was becoming colder. His fists clenched in determination, and his thoughts returned to last night, to how she'd behaved when caressed and scratched, to the curiosity and eagerness for the sweet treat. His gut was telling him this was the way to go, and he could sense every other part of him telling him it was a horrible, horrible idea.

In his mind's eye, Rick saw the scene unfolding again. Charlie, the spider, and how it might happen to others. Help was sorely needed, and the wild woman, Monica, was the only way he could see their future success. Rick couldn't afford to stop.

The young teacher stood firm, the feline turning to look his way once more. With a frown, he patted his chest. "Rick." He stepped forward, hesitating for a heartbeat, his

hand moving towards her. She looked at his palm with a slight frown, for a split second she appeared to observe it rather closely. But she did not move to stop him.

Rick stepped closer still, and patted her shoulder. "Monica." The gesture had come out with a lot less hesitation than he thought it would have.

The feline barely reacted, arching a brow as he pulled out the chocolate, took out a piece, and moved it closer to her. Her eyes focused on it with lasers precision, licking her lips. Rick moved it away from her and threw it into his mouth, crunching and chewing in defiance, meeting her gaze with a scowl.

The growl she let out made his stomach do a somersault. But it was too late to lose his nerve. Rick met her gaze, pretending his whole body wasn't about to shake like a leaf. She leaned closer as he chewed. He ignored his racing heart and waited until her snarl had come close enough he could feel her breath against his face, baring her fangs at him.

It was then that he leaned forward and licked her lips, smearing the chocolate against them. Once, and pulling back to give some space, meeting her eyes and watching closely how she'd react.

It had caught her by surprise, the anger vanished instantly. Confusion followed. She blinked, licking her lips slowly, looking at the human with wide eyes. Monica took an endless moment of silence as she kept her eyes on his own. Rick took the risk, leaning a second time and smearing the rest of the chocolate that remained in his mouth against her lips again. He waited a heartbeat and leaned away, but only managing a single step back before her clawed hand fell onto his hip.

He hesitated as she looked at him more seriously, licking her lips more slowly, frowning. A heartbeat, then another, she let go. The human took another step back and put his hands on his hips, nodded. His heart was racing inside his chest, he turned to leave back into the forest, not waiting for any further reaction.

He was a second away from losing the ability to stop trembling. His hands stuffed into his pockets and hands clenched as he tightened himself, moving, moving because if he stayed still the adrenaline would have him shaking like a leaf.

His thundering heart was trying to creep up his throat, his blood was a racing roller-coaster. But he kept his ears sharp, his attention only focused on his hearing. It was the only thing that matter.

He was waiting, praying.

When he heard Monica yowl and follow close behind, he all but collapsed in relief.

There was hope. Time to go find help.

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## [013] [Mark]

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Mark Dodson had watched as the teacher and the crazy cat-monster had left into the forest, and he knew that those left in the bus were doomed. It was a simple statement of fact; now that the feline had taken off, the spider monster was likely to come back sooner or later. And when she did, it would be unlikely they'd have a way to scare her off.

Being near the feline was a death sentence, but so was staying here, away from it.

Within the stuffy darkness of the totaled bus, Mark had kept himself focused monitoring the others, especially the teachers and older adults that pretended they had a clue what was going on. There was an air of self-importance that they were keeping as they tried to convince the others everything was under control.

Now that they were distracted talking over what to do next, there was no time to lose.

Moving fast, Mark stuffed some extra food into his backpack while glancing around at the various survivors that were in varying states of shock. He paid closer scrutiny to those that were talking with one another in loud tones and wide, angry gestures. The last thing he needed was to draw attention.

Most of all, he was keeping an eye out for the woman that called herself his step-mother. She was likely to prove the biggest obstacle if he gave her the chance.

"Barry." He threw a half-empty bag at his brother, the young man had been looking down at a phone with a broken screen. "We're leaving."

That snapped him quick out of it. "Wha-? Are you crazy!?"

The younger sibling raised his voice. It made Mark flinch as it caught the ears of several people around them all at once. The first one to react was the old crone of a woman that had invaded their lives for too long.

"Going somewhere, young man?" The sound was irritating, nails over chalk. Mark belatedly turned to look at her. The half-decrepit woman almost appeared to step out of the shadows on the bus. The leather mask she called a face was a stretched raisin hidden behind a pair of half-moon glasses, leathery pale skin, her hair was a soggy wet black ball of fur that'd been left to dry for too long under the sun. if she ever had the ability to smile, it was surely lost over a decade ago.

Mark kept from grinding his teeth, his lips stuck on a downward curve. "I was going to help find aid. Maybe food."

"Whatever made you think you'd be of any use?"

His hands clenched slightly. He glared at her, at the woman whose very presence was likely no worse than an ill omen. His blood began to simmer. "I'm at least not as useless as you."

Her bony palm slapped him faster than he could realize she'd done so, for a woman that looked like she belonged behind a glass, she was surprisingly quick. His eyes widened in shock at the dismissive glare she'd given him, her face almost furious enough to turn red- an otherwise near impossible feat considering the amount of makeup she wore.

"Mark!" Barry lunged to step between the two, glancing at the older woman. "He didn't mean that, could we stop this fight?"

A snarl came upon Mark's lips that interrupted any further words out of his brother. The eldest Dodson sibling would have pushed things were the situation a different one, but there was no reason to. "I'm going to head out, and I'm going to be searching for food and help. Unless you plan to stop me, get out of my way."

Rather than wait for a response, he shoved forward, pushing the old hag to the side and making his approach to the front of the bus. His steps came to a halt as Ms. Smith walked in his way, the young teacher giving him a pleading look. "Give me one minute, Mark, just one."

"Why?"

"I can't let you leave alone."

"Then make me."

"I can't do that either, please, just one minute. There are others that can help, I'm sure." She looked at him with those deep green eyes and an asking, quiet expression, her hands reaching to clasp his own tightly. The gesture surprised Mark, who was unable to remember when the young psychology teacher had ever gotten this close to him before.

With a grunt, he pulled his hand out of her reach, looking over his shoulder at the old woman and Barry. "Fine." He dropped the inner glower as he strode out of the vehicle, ignoring the almost hostile looks some of the others were giving him.

The air outside didn't help calm him much- not when he could see a literal line-up of corpses just a couple dozen meters away. How much longer until they'd rot and bloat and decay? How long until their stench drew in other things like the spider or the cat? Mark looked the other way, reaching for his pocket and pulling out a cigarette. That damn crazy teacher hadn't proposed to bury the dead, it was infuriating in its own way.

"Need a light?"

The voice made him turn his head, glancing at the young woman offering her neon pink lighter. He rolled his eyes, pulling out his zippo, a simple gray worn-out metal thing that had been scratched to hell and back. A quick puff and he felt the bitter relief of nicotine.

"Alrighty then."

She raised a delicately trimmed brow, pocketing her own and peeking at him for a moment, leaning against the bus chassis and taking a drag of the cig. Quietly, she swung her attention away, and Mark's eyes took the chance to trail up and down her body. A part of him was trying to confirm whether he should know her from somewhere.

There was something aloof about how her long black hair seemed to cascade around her head and into a lazy ponytail. Her face was pale. There were traces of Asian descent, but Mark couldn't pin them down to anything specific. What he was sure of was that he didn't recognize her from anywhere. "What're you studying?"

She glanced at him, giving him a corner of her eye worth of attention. "Psych. You?"

"Admin."

"So the simple crap."

"Whatever got me somewhere else." A shrug, and quiet. "Name's Mark."

"I am aware." She let out a little chuckle.

"Yours?"

"I guess you'll have to find out."

The redhead snorted, shaking his head. Well, the minute was up. He turned towards the bus, hearing the muttering inside and not very much liking the tone. The young man spared a thought to Barry. He did not want his younger brother stuck here, even



less with the harpy. But he also wasn't about to force him to follow along. It would be impossible to, anyway. That one was going to bite him.

"They're about done."

Mark's attention returned to the black-haired woman. "What?"

"I can hear them talk, the old prune is trying to stop your bro."

"You can... Wait, you know who my brother is?"

"Hard to miss the hair." She laughed with a soft lilt to her voice, gesturing at his head. "I'm in his class." Her lips parted ever so slightly. "Why did you come on the field trip? Would've thought you took it already last year."

"Barry didn't tell me the prune was coming."

"Family trouble?"

"None of your business."

"Hey, don't mind me, I'm just looking forward to poking into that head of yours." Her voice lilted. "Psych students just looove to mess around with everyone's heads, hadn't you heard?"

"Yeah, well, keep your bullshit to yourself. I need no more."

The words only prompted her to laugh a little, nodding but not adding further comment. She took a long drag of her cig, the gesture reminding Mark he still had one of his own. The redhead's gaze kept flickering at the currently nameless young woman, his foot tapping against the ground as he mentally counted down the seconds.

Ms. Smith stepped out of the bus, glancing around with an expression of desperation that turned into reassurance as she locked onto Mark. "Barry insisted on coming along with you, but don't push him, he hurt his ankle."

At least the brotherly sentiment wasn't one-sided. "Yeah, sure, whatever, we're burning daylight." Snorting, he crossed his arms. "Who else is coming with?"

"Five others, safety in numbers."

"Six."

Ms. Smith turned her attention to the raven haired woman as the latter dropped her cigarette and stepped on it. "I'll be coming along."

“But you are a-”

“Young independent woman capable of taking care of herself?” The nameless woman arched a brow. “I also know a thing or two about hunting.”

The psychology teacher hesitated, nodding after a moment of consideration. “I can’t stop you, Veronica.”

“Ah, fuck, I hoped to keep the mystery going for longer.”

Mark glanced at her, cracking a half grin. “Welcome to the team, Veronica.”

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## [014] [Mark]

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Mark walked with a strange sense of existing within an alien world. The forest was quiet; the trees loomed from above, spires casting deep shadows all around them. It reminded him of walking through downtown after dark, it might have held some more eeriness to it if not for the company.

Some douche named Daniel had self-assigned himself the position of “leader” of the people who’d left in search for food and/or help. Tall, lanky, and with a growing bald-spot on his head, the man had claimed it without hesitation as the only teacher in the “team”, he’d just kept insisting on being the one to tell the others what had to be done, and how. No one cared to tell him that walking at the front of the others also meant potentially being the first to meet any possible monster that crossed their path.

Mark was more focused on Barry. His younger brother had a limp he was trying to hide. But it was clear he was slowing down the others. That fact made Mark wonder whether it’d been the best idea. He did not wish to leave his sibling with the hag, but more importantly, he didn’t want to leave him in that deathtrap. But the limp was worrying, he hoped it would be manageable.

“If not for the hair, I’d have a hard time believing you’re brothers.”

“We get that a lot.” Barry quickly smiled at Veronica. “We have different mothers.”

“So the one back there...?”

“Not really any of your business.” Mark hissed, peering at the dark-haired woman and scowling.

“She’s just asking... and she’s our aunt, it’s complicated.”

“No, no, Mark’s right, it wasn’t my place to ask.” She wasn’t apologetic, just twirling a lock of hair, glancing around the forest. “What do you figure the next thing we encounter will be?”

“Next?”

“You know, there was that spider that ate glasses-guy. Then the bat that got eaten by the cat. Then the cat. I’m betting on hogs.” A slight smirk followed. “Hog women, or maybe there’s going to be a male monster sometime soon?”

The younger Dodson grimaced, becoming pale. "Are you serious?"

"Why wouldn't I be? Don't you ever get those flights of fancy of wanting to go someplace else? We ARE someplace else. This is as weird and wild as it gets." A cackle left her, the sound bouncing all around them.

"Not like this." Barry shook his head with haste.

Mark rolled his eyes. Not that he could escape Veronica's attentive gaze. "And you?"

"Waste of time to think about that."

"Not like we have better things to do." She shrugged, but didn't push for conversation any further.

The elder brother's attention shifted away from her and Barry, turning to the rest of the group. There was an air of nervousness, their eyes peeled and attempting to look into the woods, there was something almost funny of how clear it was they wished to be able to see through the wood of the massive tree trunks. The amusement was interrupted when Mark heard a hissing sound, looking over his shoulder, he noticed Veronica had stopped and pulled out a... can of spray paint? She'd drawn a single line across the tree trunk, bright yellow and a glaring contrast to the brown and dark greens of the forest all around.

"What's that for?"

"It's easy to get disoriented in a forest you don't know." A shrug. "Besides, if we can't make it back, it could be a good way for the rescue team to find our bodies."

"What... about the smell?"

Barry's words got an arched brow out of Veronica. "It'll dissipate soon enough. And it's not going to get far with how stale the air is." She dismissed his concern with a wave of her hand, drawing a line on the next tree.

"Experience hunting, huh?"

"Just a little." She shook the spray can. "Not that I'd thought of using this for something actually useful."

"You were going to graffiti at the mountain?"

"It's a tradition." Veronica chuckled. "Sophs get the trip to the big rock, and the ones looking for some fun find the fuck-cave. Then they do the do and paint their names there."

Barry stuttered and blushed, looking the other way and scratching his head with awkwardness. Mark hid his frown as he noted the mirth in the young woman's lips as her gaze became distant for a second. He wasn't sure what to make of her, there was something that certainly felt out of place about her.

"And... you came with someone?" The younger sibling's question rung in the air as he kept his gaze lowered.

"Meh, doesn't matter anymore."

Not wanting to bother himself with the conversation, Mark returned his focus to the forest that surrounded them. The roots were a hassle when it came to walking, too clear a tripping hazard if one didn't pay attention. Thick and large, the trees looked like someone had wanted to make the plant life as big as they could, and then some. And this size kept feeling too out of place, his eyes looking upwards every other second, like some damn tourist lost in a big city, every skyscraper a new sight to behold.

Except these were more dangerous, holding unseen threats he was certain he didn't want to meet. Not that he'd be given a choice. Would some other spider drop out of the trees without them noticing? Had that been a rustle? Movement? Or just the wind? Was it something else? It made Mark want to frown, squint, stop, and stare. But he couldn't really do that with every single twitch that frayed his nerves.

His only sense of reassurance lay at the bottom of his backpack, a distinct weight, heavy, and metallic. He'd thought of bringing it out and keeping it in his pocket, but there was little use there. It might fall, or worse, it might draw the attention from the others, and then a fight might break out.

"Yeah, I'm nervous too."

Barry reached out to clench Mark's shoulder, the younger, paler sibling putting up a reassuring smile. The sound of crunching twigs was all that could be heard for a very long second.

"You're always afraid."

"Shut up."

Chuckling, Mark shot an upward look one more time, staring at the glimpses of blue sky from between the tree tops that stood at what felt the edge of the sky. It took him a long moment before he frowned slightly. "I wonder if there'd be any way to climb these and get a good vantage point."

Veronica glanced up and whistled. “Not unless you plan to spend a day or two doing it.”

“Two days? Seriously?”

“These things look two hundred meters tall, maybe more. Two days might be a low-ball unless you’re good at it and don’t need to sit down to recover your strength every handful of minutes.” Her gaze flickered at Barry at that last comment, the younger sibling didn’t notice it.

“What, you a rock-climber as well?” Mark snorted.

“My ex was, wouldn’t shut up about it. Guess some things stuck even though he kept boring me to death.”

“So you’re... single?” Barry paused.

Veronica rolled her eyes, stepping past the shorter sibling, moving ahead and twirling her black hair. Mark glanced at Barry and sighed, slapping the back of his younger brother’s head.

“What?” The younger man asked in confusion, not receiving an answer from either party.

They kept walking.