
[099] [Squad Leader Darcy]

Darcy's nose twitched as the direction of the wind changed. Her eyes peered into the darkness, piercing through the veil and catching every detail. She didn't need the faux-light the other members of the unit were carrying. Hounds could see perfectly in the dark after all.

There was an itch in the back of her head that almost made her tail wag as she sniffed again, trying to catch a hint of their prey's scent. There was an edge of frustration gnawing at her. She could smell the offworlders, but not the Tigress.

"Report." The Mousegirl next to Darcy spoke with a soft breathless voice, her gaze distant, glassy eyes that looked at nothing at all.

Darcy always hated when Mimi spoke through one of 'her girls' like that. "We only caught a whiff of burnt-up Phoenix feather, nothing on White Claw. Yet." That bothered her plenty. The only one that could make Phoenix feathers was lady Miranda. Something didn't make sense. "We're approaching the location where we heard the roar."

"The Lord reminds you your role is not to pursue."

"I read the Hunter's report too, you know. We know how White Claw fights." Darcy hid her annoyance, keeping her attention in the surrounding forest. "Celine spot anything yet?"

"The North is clear. Celine is checking East of your location. Squad three is keeping their distance and waiting for confirmation. They're two minutes out West."

Holding back the urge to roll her eyes, of course the Northern side was clear. It was the direction they'd come from! Still, Darcy kept her retort in check. "Squad four, it's time to shine. Shields up, we're going to see if our prey's feeling protective."

The five Doggirls under Darcy's command quietly acknowledged the order. They raised the heavy tower shields and formed a circle around the Hound and Mousegirl. Darcy gave one last look around them. The forest was quiet, deathly so. She remembered the times she'd been brought to hunt White Claw. The feline had only ever killed one or two before giving them the slip. It had never felt this oppressive.

“Emily, you’ve got the better lungs of the team. Would you do the honors? Give us your best battle cry.”

This time would be different. They knew that coming in with everyone in a large formation would just mean she’d avoid them entirely. Thus why they’d spread out. Darcy’s eyes glanced at the brunette behind her.

The Doggirl’s brown tail wagged with pride as she nodded, drawing in a sharp breath. Darcy covered her ears right as her subordinate let out her howl. The Hound held back from grinning. Emily could shatter glass from across the room with that voice of hers. Her singing was likely why the Lord had taken her in the first place.

With the howl still echoing all around them, Darcy took a look around, glancing over the heads of her maidens and their shields, peering into the forest. White Claw had to be there. The roar had been a challenge. So where was she? Waiting for a chance to ambush them? The wind changed direction again. Darcy’s nose twitched as she caught the faint traces of Squad three. Ray’s scent was impossible to mistake for anyone else’s. Too much grease.

“DANGER!”

The Mousegirl’s shriek snapped Darcy to attention, her ears perked as she heard the swish of something flying their way. She turned, just in time to see a blown blur headed straight for her head. A rock? She raised her small shield to deflect it.

It wasn’t a rock, it shattered with the sound of pottery. It contained a liquid, trailing over her shield and splattering behind. A split second after, the liquid burst into flames and shrieks broke out. Several of the Doggirls had been hit by the splash. Darcy’s mind sounded the alarms as she instantly recognized the substance to be Phoenix feather. Her eyes took a moment to adjust to the burst in light. She first had to make sure those burned with-.

“DON’T BREAK FORMATION!”

The shout came as two of the ones who’d been splashed with the liquid had tumbled backwards in an attempt to stop the burning that was lapping at their clothes.

“INCOMING!” One of the maidens on the front of the formation cried out, voice shrill with terror.

Darcy whipped around to look ahead and saw the incoming white blur. Tightening her jaw, she pushed her elemental energy through her body, pushing it to strengthen herself. “Shields up!”

The tower-shields slammed together, forming a wall, ready to receive the impact of the charging maiden with everything they had. The spears rose in preparation to intercept. Darcy's own shield, still wreathed in flames, was placed on top to protect them from a potential ranged attack. The blur reached them, and the Hound pushed forward and tried to incline the spear to pierce through White Claw. The feline flowed, dodging with barely an effort. The following attack upon the shields was a heavy impact that nearly knocked the wind out of Darcy and her squad.

There was a collective grunt from the strain. This was a Tigress' strength!?

"Move to-."

"She's above!"

It had been fast. The feline had moved with an impossible grace. The attack she'd landed on the shield barrier had not been an attack at all. She had merely used them as stepping stones, soaring over the flames of Darcy's shield and towards...!

"Emily!"

The Doggirl had been one of the two who'd stumbled out of the formation and had been trying to stop the fire from spreading over her. The Doggirl had been unprepared, barely able to turn to put her shield up in an attempt to block White Claw. The feline didn't even lose momentum, ducking low and hammering the shield at the base with such force it knocked Emily off balance.

While the maiden stumbled, White Claw reached for one of the Doggirl's feet, and then she spun, throwing Doggirl away from the formation. It was a beautiful arch that sent the armored maiden far outside the squad's reach. White Claw followed before Darcy could attempt to strike at the feline.

Though to the rest of the squad it might have looked like both of them getting swallowed up in darkness, Darcy could see it in detail. White Claw overcame Emily's strength and ripped the shield out of her hands, and at the same time, used her other claw to rip the Doggirl's throat out.

Emily fell without a scream, clutching at the wound.

Tempering her anger and fear, Darcy met the eyes of the predator. "Mimi, if you tell me Squad three isn't on their way..."

"Forty seconds!"

Not fast enough. "Quartzal formation!"

The four Doggirls burst into motion. The burnt one had managed to splash some numbing potion on herself to stop the pain and joined the others. Two shields in front, two above. The interlocking pieces of murisium steel would be impossible to punch through, White Claw would be forced to come at them from either side. The spears were ready, and Darcy stood at the back and center of the formation, ready to assist in whichever way the attack would come from.

White Claw emerged from the shadows, standing above the corpse of their fallen pack-mate. Darcy's hackles rose at the sharpness in those eyes, calculating. More so when White Claw leaned down and plucked Emily's tower shield with a single hand as if it weighed nothing.

No Tigress should be able to wield that much strength so leisurely. That and the Phoenix feather that still burned on the surface of her shield... this was not going the way it should have.

"Incoming!" she barked the command as she watched White Claw take the massive shield and break into a full run towards them. They had to withstand just one more attack, fall into the rhythm, let the other squads come, and box their prey in from all angles.

Kill its mobility, and it would only be a matter of time before White Claw would exhaust itself out.

"Tighten formation!"

What direction would the monster take? Left. Right. Above. The sides would have the maiden met with spears, and jumping over would be of little consequence to them. They would just reorient again. So long as they blocked successfully, they could buy the time needed.

But White Claw opposed all her predictions.

The feline pushed straight into the shields, the entirety of its strength placed upon the shield it had stolen, using it as a wedge to force them apart. It was enough to break their formation and split them in two. With a swing of the arm holding the shield, the two Doggirls to White Claw's left were flung aside. The one on the right was slashed through with a glowing claw. Blood sprayed as the Doggirl fell.

Darcy didn't hesitate. Coating her spear in dark energy, she thrust the weapon at White Claw before the maiden could follow up on the attack and finish off another victim. She aimed it at the feline's heart. Following the Lord's orders to take it alive was no longer an option.

But White Claw didn't dodge, swinging the arm, holding the shield into the spear's way instead. The tip of the elementally coated weapon struck the murisium shield. The ring of the impact trembled up Darcy's arm like a bell. But the Hound didn't wait, jumping into the shadows to emerge on White Claw's opposite side, striking from the shadows before their prey could get its bearings.

Her mistake was jumping into a place that was directly in White Claw's line of sight.

The feline had used its free hand to grab one of the Doggirls and yanked her into the path of Darcy's spear. Horror and fear swept across the squad-leader as she met the eyes of her own subordinate right before the Doggirl was thrown to the side, her body dragging the weapon with it.

Darcy's eyes rose to meet the gaze of White Claw. Green-blue ice crystals split by a pitch black slit stared back, smouldering.

Its lips pulled back into a snarl full of teeth.

"Bah-ron bad." It raised a glowing fist.

The Hound's body reacted on instinct, pulling out her round-shield to protect herself from the punch, summoning as much elemental energy as she could to reinforce herself, to reinforce her armor.

The punch sent her flying all the same. The pain in her arm and the hard snaps told her one or several bones had shattered. Darcy expected a follow-up. She'd fallen prone, too good a chance for White Claw to pass up.

Instead, she found the feline running away, the ground she'd been standing up littered with glowing arrows and growing moss.

"Squad-leader Darcy!"

Squad three had come to their aid, but the Hound did not feel relieved at all.

[100] [Squad Leader Ray]

Even with the weight of the armor, Ray found herself running faster than she ever remembered running. She berated herself for not putting more effort into training. She'd shrugged off her combat duties by putting her job at the power station as an excuse too often.

"Darcy!" she cried out, almost collapsing to her knees next to her sister. The Hound grunted, and Ray almost cheered at the fact she was at least alive.

"White Claw..."

"Ran." Ray quickly stated, glancing worriedly at Darcy's flaming shield. It was bent inwards. Murisium was not meant to bend. Had the attack landed squarely on the Hound... Ray shuddered at the idea.

Carefully, she moved the arm wielding the shield, and watched Darcy clench and hold back a scream.

"This..."

"Is bad." Darcy nodded, using her good hand to grasp Ray's breastplate and pull her closer. "That was not a Tigress."

"What?"

"She's a Sabertooth, she must have shifted, there's no other explanation." The Hound winced, groaning. "The others..." There was a tremble in her words as Ray helped her sit up. "Three, fuck."

Ray knew exactly what that number meant. There were only two surviving Doggirls after all. She held back the grimace, reaching into her satchel to pull out a potion. "Drink up." Putting it on Darcy's lips and watching the Hound take a heavy gulp, she used the rest to drench the arm with the multiple fractures. "This should keep you able to fight at least..."

"Won't be using my arm for much."

"The Lord requests an update."

Ray flinched, glancing at the two Mousegirls. One had been in her squad, the other in Darcy's. The duo had spoken in unison, eyes blank and distant.

“Darcy’s in need of healing. White Claws retreated.”

“I can smell the blood on her.” Darcy growled, pushing herself on to her feet, looking around. “Where the fuck is Celine.”

“En route. As is Squad two and the Lord.”

“Why aren’t you closer!” The Hound was already stomping towards the merged squads, looking around and through the darkness. Ray could smell her sister’s fear and anger. That made the Pitbelle’s every nerve stand on edge.

The two Mousegirls turned to glare at the Hound, the first expression they’d shown all night. “If you were able to hold White Claw off and wear it out, we would have no need to hurry. Watch your tongue.”

Ray didn’t bother to think of a response to that. Darcy’s face was loud enough a proclamation already. The Hound had always cared for her squad, and now... Ray pulled out her crossbow and loaded a flechette, coaxing her elemental energy into the small rod and watching it sparkle with the charge of her lightning power.

“We cannot let White Claw close.” Darcy gave the order, looking at the two remaining Doggirls along with the four Elves from Ray’s squad. “It’s too dangerous. Shoot on sight and block any attempts to get close. We need to buy as much time as possible until Bronte and Kimi get here. They’re our only hope to avoid getting slaughtered.”

“Do not kill White Claw.” The mice spoke with a fierce growl. “The Lord commands it.”

Ray flinched at that, seeing Darcy’s expression darken, the Hound remaining quiet. The lack of acknowledgement concerned.

Clink.

Everyone froze as they heard the sound.

“North, North East.” Darcy said, and as one, everyone turned in the direction she’d pointed at.

Ray took aim towards the darkness, shouldering the crossbow as she removed her finger from the trigger-guard, ready to shoot at a moment’s notice. Her hand on the fore-grip held four more flechettes, charging them with her power as she prepared herself in case she missed. She would rather engage in close range, use her powers directly, but there was little option to be had since White Claw was clearly far too dangerous.

Clink.

“What’s that sound?” Ray whispered under her breath.

“Jars, they contain Phoenix feather.” The Hound replied, the growl echoing through her words. “It’s... not moving.”

“What?”

“White Claw’s just there, not attacking.” Darcy clenched her jaw. “Be ready, she’ll-.” Her eyes widened, choking as she began to wildly look around. “It used shadow dash! East!”

Shadow dash? Ray spun in the new direction. Tigresses shouldn’t be able to... no, White Claw was a Sabertooth. They could use the elemental energy of darkness. Where had the maiden learned...?

“Claw copied me.” Darcy growled. “South East East.” The maidens rotated, keeping the tower-shields between the darkness in the direction the Hound was pointing at.

It was clear White Claw was looking for an angle on them. Ray felt cold sweat running down her back. The maiden had been a myth as a feral, claiming many lives of those who’d attempted to hunt it. And now the creature was stronger, and tame. This would be a tight fight to be sure.

Clink.

“Dodge!”

Ray saw the brown blur, and she’d nearly jumped out of the way as it’d been aimed squarely at her head. It was a close call. Fire burst against the forest floor as the jar shattered off in the distance. The Pitbelle tightened her hold on her weapon. That was Phoenix feather alright. Getting the stuff on her face would... be painful.

Wait.

“Have the Hunters... betrayed the Lord?”

“Not our concern right now. North West. Inco- READY TO SHOOT!”

The order made Ray tense, and she saw White Claw approaching. The feline wielded one of the tower shields, the blue tint of the metal a dead giveaway of it being made of murisium. The way that the feline was approaching, however, was concerning. She was keeping the piece of protection up in exactly the same way a knight would.

“Fire!”

Ray didn't aim for the shield, turning her flechette downwards towards the ground in front of White Claw's feet. The bolt flew true, unleashing the electric power it had contained all around the area it had struck. White Claw hadn't expected this, freezing up as the lightning energy coursed through her for a split second.

It was exactly what the Elves needed. Their arrows struck the shield and the ground around their mark. Vines sprouted from the shafts, latching onto the maiden's ankles and shield-bearing arm. Ray saw the opportunity, the confusion clear on the feline's face as it continued to try to swipe away at the thickening vines before they could restrain her.

"Keep firing!"

Pulling on the string and prepping the crossbow while the Elves loaded and shot more arrows, Ray put two charged flechettes on the rails. With careful aim, she tensed, looking for the right moment. The feline maiden was fighting the vines while also blocking any direct arrows with the shield with the other hand. Seeing how easy it was to destroy the vines, it was clear their only option was to try to overwhelm her with quantity.

But the Elves didn't have infinite stamina, delaying would only make things worse.

"I'm going to flank. Look for an angle to shoot and bring White Claw down."

Ray's eyes met with Darcy's. The Hound hesitated. "Do not engage directly, keep your distance. Be ready to bolt back."

With a nod, Ray rushed to the left, crossbow aimed directly at White Claw. Her fore-grip hand was charging another set of flechettes. If she was fast, she might be able to shoot twice before having to retreat.

If she could safely close in the distance, then... but no, it was too risky.

The chance to shoot presented itself when White Claw had to turn her back towards Ray to swipe at some vines that were trying to crawl their way up her legs. Pulling the trigger, White Claw roared as the two bolts sank into her shoulder. The maiden spasmed, almost falling, but not quite.

Ray realized two wouldn't cut it, and loaded four more, shooting them just as White Claw had yanked the initial two out of her shoulder. This time, the attack struck true. The Sabertooth spasmed and shook, falling down.

But the maiden wasn't downed, twitching and still fighting.

In that moment, Ray understood there had not been enough of an elemental charge to her flechettes. The maiden would be up in seconds and the chance to shoot again would likely be gone for good.

“Ray, no!”

Ignoring the order, the Pitbelle rushed forwards, dropping the crossbow and charging herself with as much lightning as she could muster. She only had one chance and if she wasted it, half of them could end up dead before Captain Bronte made it here.

Their prey was lying on its side, twitching even as the vines from the Elven attacks spread up her legs and tried to bind her arms.

Ray lunged, arms extended with every bit of power she could muster.

White Claw spun far faster than someone paralyzed should have been able to. She'd pretended to be hurt.

The last thing Ray saw was a piece of brown pottery crushed against her face.

Then, the world became fire and pain.

“DARCY!”

[101] [Squad Captain Bronte]

“Squad leader Ray is dead, as are over half of Squads three and four.” The words hit Captain Bronte like a hammer. Her head whipped towards the blank-eyed mouse. “White Claw is confirmed injured and having disengaged from Squads three and four. Squad leader Darcy confirms it has run away in a North East direction. Celine has begun a search of potential areas White Claw might have hid in.”

Captain Bronte frowned as she heard this, glancing up into the night sky. The wind was blowing south.

“She’s coming for us.”

“Captain?” Kimi’s question came with an edge of concern.

“White Claw knows we’re here, our scent must have made that clear. She must think she can catch us by surprise since we couldn’t have had a chance to catch a whiff of the bloodbath.” A pause and a frown. “She’s aware there’s too many to fight all at once. She’d rather engage us now than let us join forces.”

“Wouldn’t that mean that she’s-?”

“It means she’s sure the other squad won’t find her human... and that she doesn’t want to run away.” Bronte frowned as the words rang out from her lips. “Does the human trust she would be able to fight us all without guidance or assistance?”

“He is an otherworlder, we should not try to guess at their line of thought.” Kimi proclaimed with a slight shake of the head. “If White Claw is coming our way... we should prepare.”

Bronte turned towards her squad. The maidens carried lengths of metal coil, heavy and cumbersome. It was the main reason for them not being able to keep up with the other squads. Their mobility as a squad was greatly reduced. “Ladies, prep the area, an important guest is coming our way.” Her focus turned towards the Mousegirl. “Bring Celine this way, White Claw’s bound to appear here, and we need her.”

At her command, the maidens dropped half the coils of cable they’d been carrying and hurried to move to tie some of the cables onto nearby trees. They worked fast and efficiently. As soon as their task was done, they’d ready their crossbows and take formation. Bronte was quite proud of her squad’s speed.

Mimi's Mousegirl spoke with a shudder. "Orders confirmed. Celine will be here in-DANGER!"

Bronte's hand thrust in a southward direction. She let loose a stream of sparks that flew into the darkness, piercing through the forest and vanishing into the distance. She'd not intended to hit anything in particular, the burst of light that had emanated from her attack had illuminated the dark, and in it, they saw White Claw.

It had been a split second, the feline's left claw was badly burnt, fur gone and the skin on her hand blistered, there were another couple injuries on her side, the bleeding had stopped, but the trail of red had marked its way down her thigh. There was a slight strain to her steps.

But what Bronte worried over was the look on the maiden's eyes.

White Claw was a maiden with a mission.

No wonder the other squads had nearly been wiped out. The Captain inwardly cursed at her Lord at having rushed this. They should have never approached the forest while it was dark and they weren't prepared, it gave the predatory maiden too great an advantage.

"Celine better move." Tightening her body, Bronte prepared the next bolt of lightning, her metallic skin glowing with her power. "Kimi, keep the others safe."

"Yes, Captain." The Terrielle spoke in a nervous whisper.

Peering into the darkness, the magnetics-wielding maiden tightened her core, sparks dancing across her metallic body. She needed exactly one clue, one indicator of White Claw's position, or at least of her first intended target.

She needn't wait at all.

"South South East!" The proclamation came right as White Claw had entered the range of light of their glow-spells.

The target was one of the maidens still attempting to tie the wire to the trees. And White Claw would have made it to Bronte's subordinate if not for the very ground rising to block her path, courtesy of Kimi. White Claw bounced off of the wall of dirt and quickly rolled out of the way before the crossbow bolts could strike true.

Bronte didn't shoot, keeping the charge at the ready and the aim squarely pointed at White Claw. The feline was moving between the trees and trying to avoid giving her a

clear shot, clearly considering her the bigger threat. If she let lose her attack and it missed, the maiden would take the opening to fully commit.

White Claw lunged for another of the maidens handling the wire, and Kimi created another wall of dirt to block her off. As the feline switched target, Bronte saw she'd approached one of the abandoned coils of wire and smirked.

Holding back the attack, she reached out with the rest of her concentration towards the metal. The wire sprung to life, leaping upwards and coiling around a leg. The other end snapped towards a nearby branch and tightened. White Claw tried to break free, but Bronte kept the grip of her powers tight, reaching her hip and pulling out her metal whip.

With a crack, she snapped the whip so it would coil around the wire that had captured White Claw. Only then did she unleash the contained lightning, letting it flow down her weapon and onto the wire.

A shriek broke out, the elemental energy zapping its way into its intended target. But White Claw managed to break the metal before Bronte could release the whole of her power.

The Squad Captain felt a slight concern pool inside her as she saw White Claw stand back up with barely a tremble to her body as she dipped back into the shadows. The amount of lightning energy she'd poured into that attack would have put lesser maidens out of commission for a day. The pain alone must have been crippling.

Her eyes returned to the darkness, searching for her quarry as the squad had finished preparations. Kimi called them in and prepared walls, the work would let her create a small bunker with arrow-slits so they could shoot outwards. The objective was not to pose an actual threat to White Claw, but to protect the squad while Bronte dealt with the feline with support from Kimi's geokinesis.

The interruption was brought to an end as a beam of light pierced the canopy and down onto the forest. In its center, surprised, stood White Claw, her eyes moving upwards towards the source. Bronte smirked. "About damn time, Celine." The metallic maiden grinned, their guardian angel had showed up just in time.

"Everyone will converge in this location in five minutes. Squadrons two, three, and one will join first to give a chance to heal the critically injured."

"Yay me." Bronte tightened her jaw shut, holding her whip as she pushed her powers outwards towards the lengths of coiled cable that were placed around their location.

"This is going to be tough."

White Claw had shifted her focus towards the angel shining a literal spotlight on her location. The feline tried to use the shadows to dash out of sight, but the light followed her. Bronte would've attacked, but her objective was to buy time, for both her squad and the reinforcements.

No need to rush things.

And of course White Claw immediately opted to jump into action, headed straight towards the Captain.

Because things could never go smoothly.

Focusing her control on the cables, she forced them to obstruct the feline's way, intent on tangling and trapping her in place. White Claw tried to dip into shadows to dash and close the distance, but Celine's bright beam of light kept her unable to use those abilities in full, forcing the dashes to be short, which opened up for Bronte to snatch her up and unleash thunder in her direction.

Some of them were connecting, but White Claw's movements were starting to become more and more erratic the closer she got. A desperate attempt to reduce the distance and dodge everything coming her way at the same time.

But it was a game of probability that was in Bronte's advantage, and eventually one of the free-floating cables managed to latch onto the feline's burnt wrist. The metal gave Bronte a point of leverage, and she pushed her powers to the limit to yank White Claw closer to the traps. More cables sprung out, wrapping around the restrained wrist and adding more metal that made it all the harder for her to break free.

There was a pause as Bronte began focusing on the other free-floating cables, she'd have to be careful but fast. The next length of cable was tossed toward White Claw's throat. The feline was forced to block with her free paw, and that allowed Bronte to begin the process of restraining that one as well. She squashed the thought of victory before it could form, this wasn't over, and one wrong move could spell her doom.

Just keep the feline focused on blocking cables, get her further tangled up. Reduce her movements.

"Have we-?"

"Shut up." Bronte cut Kimi's words with a harsh bite, moving the next set of cables to try yanking at the free arm towards the other length of cables, forcing the arms wide apart.

CRACK

Something hit against the Bronte's shoulder, something that barely registered to her metallic skin. Barely a poke. But it was followed by a sensation of wetness, and a sudden burst of warmth and light.

Half her vision was abruptly covered with flames, Bronte's shoulder seared with fiery pain. She didn't shout, fighting against the instinct to duck and roll or do anything to stop the pain. Her hands tightened into fists as she refused to let go of White Claw, doing so would spell everyone's doom.

She could use some of the healing potions they carried with them, but if White Claw broke free...

"Threat, South West!" She chocked, not entirely sure where the attack had come from, the fire blinding her near completely. The roar in front of her snapped her focus back to the real threat.

White Claw's body shone as she clenched hard against the wires, one by one they began to snap. The sound drove Bronte to fight against the fiery kiss the Phoenix feather was bringing to her right side. Bronte grasped her whip and lashed out at the cables, intent on unleashing everything she had to stop the maiden even if it killed them both.

CRACK

The projectile fell onto the side of the improvised bunker that still had a hole, screams were heard within. Her squad! They hadn't finished making the-

The roar in front of her made Bronte realize her mistake, seeing White Claw grasp the whip right as the metallic maiden had begun unleashing her power.

And then, the feline yanked.

Pouring everything she had into the metallic weapon, Bronte's eyes widened in horror as White Claw kept pulling her closer. The feline's eyes were sharp, snarling, her entire body shaking. The amount of lightning Bronte was pouring into her should have finished her twice times over!

But White Claw kept pulling.

"Nonononono!" There were shouts, but Bronte couldn't look at them, couldn't see in her squad's direction.

She was entirely unable to look away from the blue-green eyes of the predator, there was fire and anger, hate and impossible determination. No pain.

It didn't make sense.

“Bah-ron, bad.”

The claw grasped Bronte's wrist firmly.

[102] [Knight Scout Celine]

Flying high above the treetops, Celine could only watch in horror as the Captain was killed. The wind hid her gasp, and if not for her connection to Mimi, she just might have tried to do something about this, to help, but...

“Whatever you do, do not lose sight of White Claw. Do not engage either, keep your distance.”

The telepathic order was clear, and it revolted her. “She’s going to kill them all.”

“And if you engage, you’ll die along with them.”

Cold and loathsome, the order went against everything Celine had ever believed in.

And in her horror at the unfolding massacre, she’d nearly missed the singular other sign of life in the area. It had been because the source had been so weak, so meager, barely invisible in contrast to the thick elemental energy in the air.

A human, one whose aura was no more than a flicker in the darkness.

Celine’s mind surged at this, shifting her position to get a better view from above while making sure to keep White Claw within her line of sight at all times.

The human didn’t just have a weaker aura, he was weakened, greatly. It was hard to discern from up above, but it was a male, and he’d collapsed, either unconscious or close to it. She hadn’t seen any attack going in that direction, had the human been hit by collateral?

“KILL HIM!”

The mental screech rattled Celine’s brain, she’d nearly folded her wings and dove, but held off as she realized how close she was to White Claw’s location. “What?”

“That has to be the human White Claw’s bonded to! Kill him now! The shock should push White Claw into a blind rage! Capturing her would be a far easier task then!”

The glow in her wing’s stuttered as she turned to refocus on the bunker that had been intended to protect the rest of squad two and was now their final place of rest. Could they even stop White Claw anymore? The other squads were weakened, retreat should be-

“She’s exhausted and pushing her limit, now’s our chance. Quickly! The Baron commands it!”

That locked it, pushing aside her hesitation, the angel shifted her attention towards the human. He was barely alive, finishing him off shouldn’t be hard. She removed her light she’d been beaming down at White Claw and focused it on her hands, slowly shaping it into an arrow.

The roar that exploded beneath her nearly knocked her out of the sky out of sheer shock, every nerve on her body demanded she switch her focus towards the bigger threat. And it became clear why, seeing how the feline was currently climbing the nearest tree at an impossible speed. Celine folded one wing and dove to the side, avoiding the path the snarling feline would’ve taken to attack her had she spent a single second still.

Diving, she gained momentum, using it to put some distance. She only managed to catch a glimpse of White Claw dropping to the forest floor and picking up the near unconscious human. The glare that was sent her way gave her shivers, she should quickly gain altitude and keep her distance, this way she could freely attack from out of range. Celine’s breath grew ragged as she flapped her wings as strongly as she could, increasing her height.

The cool rush of the night air blew past her as she was changing her course, canting to a side and carefully looking down into the forest. A twinge of concern ran through her the moment she failed to spot White Claw. It couldn’t be, had she run with the human? Celine’s eyes widened slightly, flapping harder and carefully sweeping her gaze through the darkened forest floor, seeking the aura of either the maiden or the human.

“Did you lose them!?” Mimi’s voice burst inside her head and she flinched.

“Give me a- there!”

Celine dove just enough to gain some momentum again, she’d spotted the trail of elemental energy left by White Claw using shadow dash. They were heading further North? That was concerning. If they were seeking to escape the Lord and recover, then that could mean they’d be able to engage the Lord’s forces in full once night fell again. Maybe even finish them off.

Bronte had been their strongest fighter, things were looking grim already.

The Angel spotted the feline, running, arms occupied, no doubt carrying her human. Celine mentally confirmed the location and direction, and began charging her arrow.

But the human in White Claw's arms saw her, and all too suddenly White Claw altered her course, jumping to the side and starting to weave her way through the trees. The angel cursed, wings pulsing in frustration, beating her wings as fast as she could to close the distance, the trees were getting in the way. She couldn't lose White Claw a second time.

The feline was fast, using her incredible strength to bounce between the trees as the movements became increasingly erratic. The chances of landing a shot were becoming dimmer by the second, if she didn't kill the human now...

The only reason she'd lasted this long had been because she didn't just blindly charge at every opportunity. Just one shot, one hit, and White Claw was bound to go berserk. The Lord would use the remaining forces to bring her down. The angel aimed, releasing a light arrow. It missed entirely, the human was looking over White Claw's shoulder and through it clearly signaling when the attack was coming as well as Celine's location.

With a curse, she realized her mistake. With the dark sky above, and from this distance, it was too easy to see the attack coming and react to it. Made all the worse by the near unpredictable movement patterns.

"Engaging White Claw, aiming for the human."

She dove closer to the treetops, holding back her light arrow and gathering the power within her instead, focusing so that her wings would not glow as well. It would be tricky, but she should be able to form the arrow and shoot it quickly enough to avoid being spotted by the human.

And at that exact instant, White Claw turned around.

Celine's eyes widened as she saw the feline drop her human and shoot straight towards the nearest tree. The angel hesitated. Only a heartbeat, White Claw would reach her location before she could escape if she didn't change course, but if she changed course, she wouldn't be able to shoot the human.

"FIRE!"

Mimi's voice inside her head snapped the decision in place, her right finger pointed towards the human, the left held the energy. And just as she formed the power, White Claw had appeared on her line of sight. The feline had leapt too early, not enough to reach her, but enough to block her view of the human. It didn't make sense, she should know she'd fall before reaching Celine, at which point-

CRACK.

A vial of brown ceramic, it smashed against the Angel's breastplate, thrown by a mere flick of White Claw's hand. Celine's eyes widened, releasing the bolt right before the Phoenix's fire ignited. Her attack impacted squarely against the feline's shoulder, knocking her ever so slightly off course. Any thoughts to start a second attack were pushed away as fire burst from her armor where the vial had broken. The flames licked at her face, and she could only hold off the pain by using her elemental light to push the pain away while her hands moved to detach the piece of armor.

“RUN!”

The order came right as Celine felt something wrap around her ankle. She gazed downwards and saw a metal cable, a whip. Bronte's whip. The wielder being none other than White Claw. The cat looked smug.

A shriek escaped the Angel, the piece of burning metal armor dropping off right as she was dragged along gravity. Her wings tried to sustain her, but her weight was too great with White Claw hanging off of her leg.

Screaming and shrieking as she fell, all Celine could do was draw every bit of elemental energy as she could to protect her body as the ground rushed up to meet her. She grit her teeth, breath knocked right out of her as the ground met her like a full-bodied hit from Bronte during training.

The dull thud was replaced with agony as she felt the sharp claws sinking into her wings. Celine shrieked, agony exploded forth, blood raining down around her as fear quickly took over. She was going to die, White Claw's grip reaching for her neck.

“MONICA!”

The voice was a male's, and suddenly White Claw's hand stopped.

Celine breathed, holding back the pain, trying to focus her powers to use what little she knew about healing to stop the bleeding. She clenched her teeth and looked up from the ground. The human, the male, was walking towards them with unsteady steps and heavy breathing. He was pale and clammy, his aura shivered with pain, he held his right arm as if unable to move it yet Celine saw no injuries, only exhaustion.

“SHOOT HIM! THE LORD ORDERS IT!” Mimi's voice rang within the Angel's head, but she could barely move, it was impossible to carry through on it.

The human didn't talk, his arms reached down and... Celine's eyes widened as her collar was removed. She felt the weight of the bond vanish instantly and shuddered.

What was he going to do to her? “I’ll never surrender.” She grit her teeth, fighting back the tears from the throbbing pain.

He crouched, and it was then that she noticed him drop a pouch he’d been carrying. It was a familiar pouch, from where...?

“You’re going to bleed out and die.” His words were ragged, breathless, the man looking as if he were at the very verge of exhaustion. “I don’t know which of these can heal you.”

Celine froze, blinking. The pouch, a knight's pouch. And she had a good guess as to who it once belonged to if the badge on it was anything to go by. The angel grit her teeth. “Just kill me.”

“The only threat to us is the Baron, if you promise to leave us be, you don’t need to die. It’s why I removed the collar.” He pulled out one of the vials, a red colored one, showing it to her for a moment, carefully observing her reaction. “But I have other uses for you if you don’t want to collaborate.”

“Wh-?”

Celine’s jaw tightened as he poured a bit of the potion on her wings. Relief instantly washed through her as numbness overtook the area, a sigh left her as she relaxed ever so slightly. The human kept looking at her, taking a stick and poking at the area. “This potion helps, right?”

“Numbs the pain.” She nodded, no sense in hiding it. Shock came when she saw him empty the contents on White Claw’s burns.

A yowl escaped the feline maiden that was keeping the angel pinned to the ground, but what surprised Celine was watching the paleness in the human’s expression soften as he sighed. A great deal of tension in his body eased up, his previously almost limp arm moving slightly again.

“Next.” He pulled out a yellow potion, but the captured maiden couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

“You.” She gasped, watching some color return to his features and his aura regain some vigor. Her eyes widened. “You... the bond... you were taking in her pain!”

Without a word, he pulled out the next vial, this one was small, barely a thimble in size, its contents a dark swirling black. Celine’s eyes widened at the sight of it, face going slightly pale. She knew she should ask to have that applied to her, to bring this situation to an end and avoid potentially falling into the hands of the enemy, but...

“Not it, then.” The human nodded and put the black sphere back into the pouch. “Let’s see what else we can use to patch Monica up...”

[103] [Baron Matthew Flirlai]

To say Baron Matthew Flirlai the Second was angry would have been a categorical mistake. Had he lost a considerable portion of his wealth overnight, he might have been angry. Had he lost a Knight or a Knight Captain in battle, he might have been angry. But no, things were far worse than that.

His Knight Captain and head of the electric generation facility had died, as had the Knight that had been in charge of the radio tower's maintenance. Adding in the total loss of Squadron two, and the partial one from squadrons three and four, his combat capacity had been effectively crippled. It would cost him dearly to regain it.

And it was because no one had done what they should have.

"My Lord, Celine... has been cut off. Likely dead."

The noble's glare turned towards the mousy maiden wearing thick armor that stood right next to him. Mimi the Tigermouse, the only psychic in his service, the tanned short woman kept a neutral look of frustration. Matthe idly wondered whether she was part of the problem or not.

"Did she confirm the kill?"

The mousy Knight knelt, bowing her head low. "No, my Lord."

"We should consider the human's alive." The words pulled Matthew's attention towards Nalda. The Orc Knight being the only one that dared to hold her head high around him. "How long until everyone's healed?"

The question moved towards the nurse, the only dedicated healer they had brought. A sore mistake Baron Matthew was willing to admit was his own. He should've brought at least three more, but with the village about to be attacked by a second feral wave... The man grit his teeth as he adjusted himself on the saddle of his centaur.

"These burns are severe, ma'am, I don't-." The nurse spoke in a hushed whisper, shaking her pink hair.

"Move faster, girl." Matthew commanded, watching the nurse wince and pour more energy in healing the severely burned Elf.

Burns.

When fighting a Sabertooth.

The snarl was barely held back, Darcy had confirmed it was Phoenix feathers, and the human they were chasing had also been using a scent killer. The Hunters had betrayed them, it made Matthew's lips curl in disgust. The filthy cowson that dared call himself a Major would feel the full weight of the noble's anger once this whole mess was dealt with.

He'd only need to call on the Earl and press charges of treason against the Hunter representative. After that it would only be a matter of time before the brute's own maidens would be requisitioned for the good of the Kingdom and his head made to roll.

"My Lord! White Claw approaches!"

The proclamation from the Hound startled everyone into tense attention, even the equine maiden the Baron was currently riding stirred, turning in the direction of the wind and lifting her lance and shield. "Knight Darcy is right, there is a strong stench of blood getting closer."

"Prepare for combat!" Nalda barked the command, and the maidens quickly moved.

Two Doggirls with tower-shields moved to protect the two remaining Elves. The Hound and Orc armed and ready. Things were not ideal, they'd been destroyed by the monster that was White Claw. But that would make victory all the sweeter, once she was in his grasp, he'd be able to wash away the shame.

Success was within his grasp.

"BARON!"

The male voice came from the darkness within the forest, and it instantly raised Matthew's hackles as he recognized it. He glanced at Darcy and Mimi, the only two maidens that could see through the darkness, and neither reacted past a slight shake of their head. So the human wasn't showing himself.

"Most of your forces are dead, the rest are injured." The man continued, far off into the distance. A coward. "Give up."

"You are not the one with the most cards to play, thief! White Claw must be exhausted by now, badly hurt too." Matthew's hand tightened on the holster at his hip, the weight of the gun heavy, a reminder of the power at his disposal. "If you surrender, I will be lenient, leave the judgment of your misdeeds to the Earl." A long silence followed, and the Baron wondered whether the offworlder would answer at all. So, instead, he pushed on. "There is no need to spill human blood tonight, hasn't enough of it been lost to the ferals?"

Again, silence, a total lack of an answer that was interrupted by a light within the darkness. It was distant, barely visible to the Baron's eyes, a flame that coated a tower-shield that stood still. The Baron's mind whirled as he frowned, was that a challenge? A last stand? Who hid behind the shield, the human or White Claw?

“GET DOWN!”

The cry came from Darcy, the Hound had leapt out of her spot and straight towards the Baron. The man hadn't had the time to react, she'd moved so quickly that by the time he'd processed the words, he'd been knocked over and to the ground. Anger might have flared up within him if not for the fire that exploded out of Darcy's back instants afterwards. It came with the sound of shattering pottery.

“White Claw removed her scent! She's attacking from South West!” Mimi's voice squeaked out in a desperate shriek.

She might as well have said nothing at all. The fire had exploded in several places at once, the one targeting the Baron had only been one of four, the splash of damage coated Darcy's shoulder and a considerable percentage of the Centaur's equine back, the equine maiden panicking and running off as fast as she could. Shrieks and panic broke out all around them as everything moved fast.

The noble stumbled to his feet as Nalda pulled him to his feet, equipping her short sword and blocking his view of the battlefield as she stood her ground, the singular protection from what was surely White Claw now that his steed had been scared off so easily. The roar that exploded from somewhere ahead of them made the Baron feel his armor was far too heavy to be able to let him run if the need for it arose.

Instead of running though, he called out his subordinate. “Mimi!”

The Tigermouse did not respond, kneeling as her hands were aimed forward, her body glowing bright lavender as she wielded the mind energy. It was only once he'd been fully on his feet that the Baron got a chance to witness what had happened within the mere span of a handful of seconds.

One Elf lay on the ground, minus the head, the other was rolling, still aflame. Both Doggirls had been struck in some fashion, laying in pools of blood; and the Centaur was nowhere to be seen. Nalda and Darcy were the only remaining effective fighters, the first wielding a short sword and a round shield, the latter a spear and tower shield. And they were currently struggling against the feline that was ducking between their attacks, trying to push towards the Baron but getting cut off every time.

“HIT HER WITH EVERYTHING!” The Baron roared at Mimi, pulling out the elemental gun from its holster, the weight of the weapon making him feel his arm strain.

Matthew checked his surroundings one last time to make sure there were no other potential threats. The nurse was tending to the Elf with a burnt face, her back turned towards the noble. So long as the healer was alive, the Baron felt reassured of what was about to happen next.

The psychic mouse squeaked, stopping her attack and pooling energy for a larger one. A twinge of nervousness shot through Matthew as he saw White Claw speed up, the restraints that had been holding her back lifted. All too quickly she struck out against Nalda’s shield with such force the Orc was sent flying. Immediately she leapt towards Darcy and the Hound was cornered, barely able to defend herself against the Sabertooth, quickly losing ground.

For a moment all the noble could feel towards the feline maiden was awe, the same awe he’d felt the first time he’d seen her, wild, unstoppable, powerful. Even with the burns and bleeding wounds, and the exhaustion, even then she was putting his best fighters to shame. Surely a maiden such as this would qualify for a Royal Knight once properly trained. All his troubles would become a thing of the past.

Which was a shame that he had to gamble all of it away, but there was no other alternative anymore. Raising the gun, using both hands to carefully wield its weight, he aligned the barrel.

There was a whizzing sound, something flying past his head but close enough it had nearly missed. He almost startled and pulled the trigger on instinct, but held back at the last second, glancing at his side and meeting the hateful gaze of that loathsome thief as the offworlder loaded another flechette onto the crossbow. The man was too far away to stop him.

Matthew laughed.

“Watch as I end everything you fought for.”

He turned forward once more, his boot kicking the Tigermouse, signaling her it was time. The maiden’s glow became all the brighter and all too suddenly vanished right as she collapsed. Matthew felt the dull thud of a flechette hitting his armor, but he knew it would be useless against the enchantments. His focus was on White Claw, and how she suddenly froze, eyes wide in shock as a dull magenta glow wrapped her.

It had slowed her down.

Enough for Darcy to jump out of the way.

Enough for the Baron to have a clear shot.

He pulled the trigger.

And White Claw fell.

[104] [Rick]

After spending the past half hour in a dead sprint across the forest just to catch up to Monica after the pain from the burns she'd experienced had nearly knocked him out cold, Rick wasn't exactly certain of what he'd be able to contribute to the fight. Thus why the chemistry teacher had been a bit too focused trying to close in on the Baron without being detected.

He'd wanted to sneak in closer, ready to use the Phoenix feather or the black vial on the guy to bring it all to an end if the chance arose. But then he'd seen the guy pull out the gun, and all bets were off. At the provided distance he couldn't throw anything effectively, so instead he used the crossbow he'd picked up from one of the dead maidens.

The metal arrows bounced off of the armor like it was an impenetrable wall. Leaving Rick as merely a spectator to the firearm wielding Baron taking aim. The gun was practically the size of his arm, the muzzle wide enough it would have made a tight fit for his hand. It was a hand-held canon.

And then the gunshot.

Rick had felt more than seen or heard it. A gut-punch that knocked the air right out of his lungs and left his knees feeling like melted butter. His mind whirled, a cry out to Monica almost made it out of his lips but it only came as a choking sound. Fire burned and coiled within his innards like an angry snake, weakness and pain all too suddenly.

Monica's roar of agony rattled his bones, the chemistry teacher pulled at the feeling as best he could, trying to hold it down, pin it in place, remove some of the worst of it from Monica lest it leave her too out of the fight. But there was just so much of it that Rick wasn't even sure he had the strength to do more than struggle to breathe.

Raising his gaze at the Baron, the man had dropped the gun, the barrel glowed red hot, smoke sizzled out of the barrel's mouth. The lord's own armor had cracked, the recoil on the firearm being apparently monumental. The nobleman's face was split by a wide eager smile as he walked forward, not even sparing a glare at Rick. "Hold her in place."

The teacher barely found the strength to rise to his knees, looking towards Monica and feeling his blood run cold.

She was pale, gasping, and weakly struggling against the two maidens pinning down her arms. And in her belly there was a large red hole, big enough Rick could've sworn he could see through it, blood pooling as the feline's eyes moved wildly from side to side. "Rick." She managed to speak with a gasp.

It sent a chill down his spine, the red hot coiling snake in his gut drawing out every ounce of strength he had.

"Nurse! Make sure she doesn't die, or else all this would have been for naught!" The Baron spoke with a jovial grin, laughing as the maiden with pink hair rushed to kneel in front of Monica.

The nurse's hair hid her face as she didn't look in Rick's direction, hands glowing with a dull gray light, but he knew who she was. Dia. "Brain and heart weren't seriously hurt... I can keep her alive until she reaches the hospital."

"I want her to be stable." The Baron snarled. "Can you?"

"...with all due respect, my Lord, even if we used every potion available, I'd have a hard time pulling it off."

"Then do that." He dropped a bag next to her, turning around and facing Rick. "Mimi."

"Yes, Lord."

Rick tried to move, to get out of the way. His legs were weak, his mind spun with the dizzying pain, his eyes unable to look away from Monica. She was growing paler, breathing becoming weaker, he could feel her presence slowly slipping from him.

But he couldn't keep his focus on her any longer, the mousy maiden with a deep tan had him pinned within the next three seconds. In the next two, she'd emptied his pockets and tossed the crossbow well outside his reach.

"Rihck..."

Monica's wheeze came with a slight cough, her face an ashen gray.

The Baron laughed, and the human fought against the mouse's grip. She was lighter than him, but her hands had an iron hold on his wrists, her tail keeping his ankles tight together as well.

The sight of the Baron's metal-coated boot forced Rick to look upwards.

“You lost.” The noble chuckled, walking back and forth, staring down at the chemistry teacher as he glared hot coals of anger in return. “The only reason you got this far was because you took what was rightfully mine.”

The glare was a silent one, Rick’s jaw held tightly enough his teeth ached.

“Unlike you, I’m not a barbarian. So rejoice! You’re not going to die tonight. ”

The laughter became all the louder as the chemistry teacher’s expression faltered, feeling something was deeply wrong with the situation.

The Baron kept talking. “You’re a pure human, killing you would be a loss to the kingdom. There is much good your genes could bring to this land.” The man reached into the pouch hanging from his belt and pulled out a singular round piece of metal the size of his palm. “I will put you to good use.”

The coin glimmered under the floating orbs of light that cast the clearing into a yellow gloom. The only defining feature of the item was the ‘5’ etched on its side, and the sense of dread that churned within Rick’s stomach when looking at it.

“My Lord...” Dia’s voice rang out, her healing faltering as she looked at the coin, and then at Rick. Fear was painted across her every feature. “Fiving coins are too powerful for use on humans!”

A slight snarl crept across the Baron’s face, his grip on the coin tightening as the metal gave a slight black glow that appeared to suck the light out of its surroundings. “It won’t kill him, he’ll just never truly recover. Which works just as well. His mind is of no value to me.”

Lowering himself, crouching so he could meet Rick’s eyes, the Baron’s lips curled into an upwards smile.

“Any last words?”

“Monica will never be yours.”

The smile grew. “I’m sure she’ll cry your name a few more times.” He smirked, lowering his voice into a whisper, one gauntlet covered hand grasping Rick’s jaw tightly. “But don’t worry, the shock of having your mind erased will break the bond... and if it doesn’t, I’ll just do the same to her.”

Rick spat at the man, wildly struggling against the iron grip of the tiny maiden that kept him firmly immobile. The noble grimaced, whipping the spit off, the edge of amusement not entirely gone. “As your friend told me: ‘I hope you rot in hell’.”

He pressed the coin against Rick's forehead. Its surface cold and hard.

It started with an intense tingling sensation, a ticklish itch that quickly spread all over his skull, turning into lightning and ice. Rick screamed, fighting with everything he had against the restraints of the maiden atop of him, the sound drowned out by the intense ringing that exploded within his skull. His vision turned white and every muscle on his body seized at the same time right as his sense of touch began to become numb. For a fraction of a second, he almost thought he'd manage to throw off his capturer, but his thoughts didn't get to exist for much longer let alone any sensation from the rest of his body.

A storm of white noise spread within him, his thoughts battered away against a growing sphere of nothingness. There was no chance to fight back, everything that touched the nothingness vanished, his mind scattered, trying to escape, but bound within the confines of his brain there was nowhere to run.

"RICK!"

The voice screamed within the nothingness.

He blinked.

The first thing he felt was his own breathing, hard and raspy, struggling against a heart that beat so fast it felt like it was going to explode. The next was the warm wetness on his face and head, and slowly, the whiteness that covered his vision was receding. And what he saw in front of him was slowly pushing thoughts back into existence.

The Baron was kneeling, eyes wide in horror, face pale, hands trembling. The coin had fallen off of Rick's forehead and somewhere to the forest floor.

A blade struck out of the noble's throat, blood pouring down the man's chest.

And Dia was the one holding the dagger.

"My Lord!" Two voices rang out at the same time.

Yet a third spoke in barely a mousy whisper, leaning over Rick. "Close your eyes."

Barely able to think, the human reacted in time to avoid looking straight into the brilliant surge of blinding white light.

As soon as the dazzling flash of light ended, the weight that had been keeping Rick pinned in place was off. The human was fighting to be able to focus, his head felt like it had been dunked into molasses, everything was a painful blur if he tried to summon

thoughts. So he didn't think, his eyes locked onto the brown vial along the black glass thimble with a stopper, two items that had been in his pocket merely seconds ago, and he grasped at them both as he found the strength to rise to his feet.

The Baron's dying body was knocked over backwards, and Dia was caught by surprise, almost falling as well. The nurse said something, but her words were left as a numb ringing in the chemistry teacher's ears.

He didn't pay attention to her, nor to the canine that was fighting the mouse.

His eyes were locked onto the green-skinned maiden that was screaming and covering her eyes in pain from the flash of light. Something inside Rick told him she was his enemy, nothing else mattered. His palm slammed against the right side of the green-skin's face, shattering both vials on impact.

The fire that erupted from the liquid wreathed both his hand and the maiden's skull. It brought a sudden sharp jolt of pain. The pain was an electric shock, one that pushed his mind to move, thoughts were flooding back, pain, the forest, Monica. MONICA!

Snarling, Rick rammed his whole weight against the stumbling shocked Orc, she fell by his weight alone, dropping her short sword. The maiden was too concerned on the searing pain. There was something in the flames, green, the smell they gave off stung Rick's throat. But he didn't have time to think, to feel, he grasped the sword and lunged, trying to sink its edge into his enemy.

The Orc's wildly flinging free hand almost knocked the weapon out of his hands, but he did not stop. The second attempt struck against her throat, exposed, unburned, and yet it barely scratched her. Letting out a scream of frustration, the human pulled at everything he had.

"HEY BITCH!"

The shout made her stop only long enough to look at him with her unburned eye. The blade came down, and her free hand grasped at it before it could strike true.

Her singular eye seared with rage, a snarl growling out of her chest as her face burnt under the liquid fire. "He's dead because of you!" She screamed, her fingers gripping the blade more tightly but faltering.

Black veins were spreading from the burning flesh and across her skull, a poison that corrupted the dark green flesh into pustulant blisters.

Rick pushed harder, shoving more of his weight down on the blade, unable to look away as the flames that covered half her face were slowly dying out, leaving behind blackened

skin. His own arm still burned, but everything felt too numb for him to be able to properly feel more than a slight pain from it.

“THEN GO JOIN HIM!” He roared back at her, reaching down with his burning hand and pressing it against her free eye while his weight pushed down on the sword with the other.

She screamed, the arm that had been on her face falling numbly as she held the edge with the remaining one. The blackness was spreading further across her face, Rick’s searing fingers pushing into the good eye.

Opening her mouth, the Orc roared, a primal scream as she shook.

Her fingers slipped.

The blade pierced through her eye, a singular solid thunk and the Orc abruptly went limp.

Silence spread within Rick’s mind.

And his strength left him just like that.

The human stumbled to the side, his gaze was blurring, and the world was suddenly spinning very fast. His legs gave out, falling to his knees. Only then did he become aware of the nasty purple burns that covered his right arm all the way to his elbow. He could barely make out black tendrils creeping up his arm, chilling his bones as it moved.

“Rick.”

The single word made him raise his head to look at Monica, the feline laying against the tree as she stared at him with those blue-green eyes. A pale smile lingered on her lips, her face almost white as a sheet. Rick figured he didn’t look much better.

All around him the world seemed to be getting darker at the edges.

“I’m sorry.”

That... caught his attention, Rick looked over his shoulder as the glowing blade struck his arm. In a single burst of pain his mind became lucid again, red hot pain and a scream as quite suddenly all sensation past his shoulder vanished abruptly. Just as fast as it came, something cold was pressed against his lips, a liquid pouring into his throat that turned into fire, glowing hands pressing against the bleeding stump.

He tried to shout, coughing instead, his mind whirled in confusion, things were becoming blurred again.

“It’s the only way to stop the poison.”

The voice was distant, poison, the black thing, the black thing he’d smashed with his hand. Everything was spinning again. “Monica.” He grit his teeth. “Heal...”

“Sir, if-.”

Summoning every ounce of strength he had left, Rick’s left hand reached out for the first thing he could see. A piece of metal, an armor, a woman with pink hair. He yanked her. “That’s an order.” He growled, meeting her startled and wide violet eyes. Dia, her name was Dia, and he did not let go until she nodded.

Panic crossed her blood-stained face right as Rick felt his strength leave him.

Collapsing, a pair of soft hands grasped the sides of his head and slowly cradled it. Rick saw the purple light and felt a soothing wave of calmness. A sense of detachment followed as his body slowly felt as if it was further and further away. His eyes caught sight of Dia’s hands glowing over Monica’s injury right as his eyes became too heavy to stay open.

Time slipped from his grasp, and the world spun.

[105] [Rick]

Rick couldn't think, or feel, or move, but he could sense the passage of time vaguely. It was a slow eternity before he could sense the hands holding his head, the soothing detachment and sense of distance, the whispers of voices. He tried to wake up, but he couldn't, he was too tired, his everything felt like it would hurt and his everything felt wrong. Like he was feeling several things at the same time.

When he was finally able to open his eyes again, Rick realized the world had shifted. He was somewhere else, somewhere with a rocky stony ceiling over his head that gave him a strange sensation of having been there before.

The pink-haired maiden kneeling next to him was certainly more familiar. It took him a moment to properly recall her name. Dia. "I feel like this has happened before." Rick spoke out, his voice cracking.

Dia startled, eyes opening and instantly reaching out and pressing her hands on his chest, the gray glow pouring into him with warmth before stopping as soon as she realized what she was doing. "Sir." She looked at him, blinking with a forlorn troubled look, there were bags under her eyes, and exhaustion permeating out of her every pore.

"Monica?" He croaked out.

"Unconscious, but stable." She pipped up instantly, tensing as she looked down at him and grimaced. "She... will live."

"Am I in a bad spot?"

"You're stable too, sir." The nurse deflected the question.

Rick closed his eyes and breathed in. "I can't move."

"You will make a full recovery, sir... I hope."

There was a trickle of concern to be had there. "Hope?"

"How..." The maiden paused, her lips curling and brows furrowed. "How much... do you remember?"

She had her hands on his chest, there was a dim glow, and Rick abruptly realized she was a snap-decision away from knocking him out. “I... fought the Baron, no, Monica fought the Baron, we, she... killed... and lost, and...”

“What is your name?”

The question caught him by surprise a little. “Rick Cross.”

“And where were you born?”

“I was born in...” The words abruptly died in his throat, his breath hitched. “I was born in...” A deep breath, his brows furrowed. “I... was born in a... in a... it was a city, I...” His breathing was quickening as he felt his heart start to hammer. “It... it was a medium? No, large, no, small? It had... a college. I worked there as a teacher, chemistry.” It was right at the tip of his tongue, like a shelf he could barely reach out. A name, right there, it was right there! “My mother’s maiden name was Angela Cale, she... came to live in the city from a small town. I’ve been there, the farm, the chicken, the-.”

He stopped as he saw Dia’s tears. “I’m sorry.” Her fingers tightened, squeezing against his chest as her lips trembled.

Rick couldn’t find a response. He didn’t need to ask her what she was sorry about, it felt like a mountain had fallen on her shoulders. The words were loaded with meaning, far more than he could process right now.

There was nothing he could say about it, so... he didn’t.

“My arm?”

Dia let out a hiccup, wiping off the tear. “Sir?”

“My arm.” Rick muttered again, feeling drained, tired, exhausted, and every other synonym to the word in existence. He wanted to sleep and rest and eat.

“We had to amputate to avoid the spread of the poison.” Dia’s hand moved to touch his shoulder. “Limb regrowth is perfectly possible, your body will make a full recovery in time.”

“That’s... good.” Rick let out a sigh he hadn’t known he’d been holding onto. “That’s good.” A deep breath, trying to not think about the other wound. “The others?”

“They are outside, safe.” Dia quickly nodded, her fingers carefully pressing against his bandaged chest, her gaze distant.

Closing his eyes, he tried to find something else. “How... did we win?”

“Sir?”

“After the... coin.”

“The... Baron died.” The nurse’s body tensed as she spoke, her eyes closing tight for a second. “I killed the Baron.” She added, there was a slight shake of her voice. “Just... it was wrong, I couldn’t let him... I couldn’t let him...” Lips pursing, she became quiet.

Rick held his expression neutral. “And then?”

“And then... Mimi helped.”

“Mimi.”

“The Tigermouse.” A slight nod. “The one that had been pinning you down.”

“... why?”

“The Baroness commanded it.”

There was a long pregnant pause, the chemistry teacher looked up at the rocky ceiling and blinked. “The Baroness.” He spoke with a deadpan, not having expected that answer.

“Mimi was never bonded to the Baron.” Dia nodded again, her expression a complicated one. “Her Ladyship ordered Mimi to sabotage the fight, and if the Baron died, then to aid in subduing the others.”

“If.” He blinked. “You said ‘if’.”

A slow nod. “The Lady’s goal was to weaken the Baron, to make her own fight against him more certain of victory.” The voice came from somewhere to the right, Rick wanted to turn his head to look, but couldn’t, forced instead to keep looking straight upwards. “She is thankful for your help, and has given orders to the Hunters to come pick us up once the second feral wave concludes.”

“Rick’s awake!?” A voice rang out from outside.

The aforementioned Rick wanted to sigh as he could recognize the voice.

There was a shift in the light, all too suddenly there was a lot less of it. One blond woman was leaning down to look at him with a smirk, Tomas not too far away and a bit more apprehensive. Then there was the woman with scales on her face and Rick felt himself tense up. “Who-!?”

“Rick, meet Lizzy.” Kat waved. “She’s the one who took some of our chicken, she came back! Anyway, I totally bonded her all bad-ass like, and it was great and-.”

“Lizzy tried to kidnap her.” Tomas piped up. “Freya almost killed her.”

Closing his eyes, the teacher sighed, feeling a slight sense of relief at being able to recognize them. At least that part hadn’t been harmed in the incident.

“Please stand back!” Everyone startled at the harsh bite in Dia’s voice, the nurse particularly glaring at the aforementioned Lizzy. The loudness nearly made them all jump back, the nurse leveled her intense gaze on the others. “The patient is in a near critical condition, leave now or be made to leave.”

Slightly pale, the trio had quickly scampered out of sight, and Dia let out an exasperated sigh. Leaning down, her eyes met Rick’s once more. “Sorry about that, sir,” she whispered, carefully caressing his shoulder, fingers readjusting the bandages ever so slightly. “Are you... uncomfortable? Does it hurt anywhere?”

“I can barely move, let alone feel anything.” He replied with a deadpan that did a poor job of hiding a slight chuckle. The relief was washing through him in waves. They’d won.

Dia nodded, and another long silence stretched out, only the sound of the wind outside and his own breaths as the teacher did his level best to keep his thoughts in order, to calm down and recover. The nurse’s eyes kept trailing over him, her fingers fussing over his chest and arm as if looking for any possible tiny scratch she might have missed to heal it up.

There was that quiet nervousness about her.

“Where’s... Monica?”

He finally broke the silence, the question snapping Dia out of the apparently automatic action. She didn’t answer, instead reaching out to grab his head and very slowly and carefully turn it to the side opposite to the entrance of the cave.

Monica lay right there, barely half a meter away, her sleep so silent he’d not even noticed.

The feline was still, her stomach wrapped in so many bandages it was impossible to tell the actual state she was in, if not for the slight rise and fall of her chest, Rick would have feared the worst. His own body was too numb for him to feel anything, a familiar thing considering the time he’d woken up in the hospital.

His eyes caught sight of Monica's claw as it lay on his hand, her fingers grasping his own ever so gently.

"Can you...?"

He needn't ask further, Dia leaned forward, glowing fingers tracing a line from his wrist up to his shoulder and neck. Sensation came back to him, only his left arm, only a slight soft tingle.

It was uncomfortable, almost painful.

But it was enough for him to squeeze back.

"Thank you." Rick whispered, letting out a sigh, glancing at Dia as she let out a shy smile.

Something else caught his attention.

"Where's... your collar?"

And Dia looked away, hiding a troubled expression as her cheeks blushed.