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## [064] [Preparations (Various)]

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"Set everything ablaze," Rollo growled, his voice echoing off the worn stone walls of the dimly lit workshop.

The plump man sloshed water into the building as he stepped through, the downpour outside practically a flood. The merchant couldn't believe his luck, had the Lord commanded for a storm or had the Neigix been unable to stop the summoned rain clouds from forming into one?

"Sir?" A question was tentatively thrown into the tense air.

"All the samples of the explosives as well as the infected feral. The notes too. Burn them. I want not a shred remaining," he demanded, his heavy breaths slicing through his words.

"But..."

"That wasn't a suggestion, Matilda." Rollo's eyes met the Witch's, an unspoken threat hovering in the heated air between them. His heart pounded in his chest, the chill of trepidation coursing down his spine. The rain outside couldn't account for this icy dread. "I want it all gone. Be thorough. Am I clear?"

Swallowing her retort, Matilda nodded tersely. "As you wish, sir."

Inside Rollo, fear and excitement churned together, a heady mix that gripped his senses. When had it last been when he'd felt like this? He couldn't remember. Just a few hours prior, he had borne witness to a miracle—a fiery red star soaring from the city, knocking a mighty Seraph right out of the sky. The Lord had offhandedly dubbed it a "simple small bomb," with the same lackadaisical tone an Elementalist would use to describe a gaping crater large enough that it would've devoured an entire building.

If such a device was "small and simple", then what, pray tell, would be a monumental creation?

Rollo wasn't fooled. He knew the nobles of his kingdom, as well as the powerful figures across the empire, yearned for a weapon of such power—a tool that could level the playing field. He himself had dipped his coin-purse into such a venture, trying to forge weapons that even a feeble human could use and be effective. Alas, the results were

either fragile and overpriced contraptions fit only for hunting small game, or masterful enchantments that could be used once and that demanded a king's ransom worth of resources.

In the end, it had been too specific of a market, to gain a foothold required a well-known name—a reputation he didn't have. One he had wished to obtain through his dealings with the late Lord Thorley.

He'd rightfully esteemed the new Lord's creation to be revolutionary, but the merchant had clearly underestimated by how much. The path ahead required deeper connections rather.

Speaking of...

"Arietta," he barked, calling upon the Puppeteer. "You'll assist the Lord with his legal headaches."

The older maiden stiffened at this directive. "Of course, sir," she replied, her words frosted with a hint of reluctance. "But what if he questions my willingness?"

"You'll tell him the bare truth—that you're ready to assist," Rollo shot back, leaving the dusty, tool-laden workshop behind and heading deeper into the heart of his expansive manor. "I need you navigating his bureaucracy, I need you to familiarize yourself with his ways. And someone, bring Ember to me!"

Her stern face hardened even further, her gaze boring into his retreating back. "It's not possible to carry out my tasks efficiently without understanding my true objectives, sir." Despite the situation, Rollo found himself marveling at the silver-haired maiden's ability to infuse disapproval into the act of existence itself. All while her doll-like face kept a void of emotion, a picture of serene impartiality.

Perhaps it was a psychic thing.

"I need a pair of eyes and ears on the inside, Arietta. Someone who's privy to what's coming," I explain, raising my hands preemptively to halt her protests. "Yasir has poisoned the Lord against me, damn that man." He tightened his fists. "The damage must be undone, we must become as integral to the Lord as his own right hand."

When he entered his office, Ember was already there. The maiden's arms became a living flame as she reached out to him in an embrace. There was nothing affectionate about the gesture, merely professional. The warm caress turned the water into steam, drying him of all the excess moisture. Rollo would lie if he didn't find the touch soothing on a more emotional level, but such thoughts were unbecoming of a merchant.

Logic had to dictate his every decision.

"Sir, I was under the impression that our plan was to prepare for escape?" Arietta queried. "You did not make your opinion a secret in regards to the Lord's plan to abolish ownership of maidens."

That was indeed the original idea. The Lord, in his lofty arrogance, had little effective protection against covert operations. Procuring a few samples of his explosives had been an easy enough task. Ideally they would have an escape ready by the time they'd cracked the production process. At that point the wildling Lord of Sinco would be unable to stop Rollo from forging a mercantile behemoth that stretched all across the continent.

Every noble from here to a hundred horizons in every direction would seek his explosives.

"And yet things have changed." He contended. "I am no longer certain of how safe such a betrayal would be," Rollo murmured under his breath, standing straight as Ember adjusted his clothes around his protruding belly. "This creation on its own will change the face of warfare forever, it could forge an empire. He made this substance within merely weeks of dedicating himself to the task. What if it is true that it is but a taste? "

Arietta stiffened, back aligning with the aged timber beam behind her. "Sir, I question if this is a wise move. Particularly in light of Miss Donohuei's untimely demise."

The self-appointed leader of the woodcutters had been a constant annoyance ever since Rollo had first set foot in the town of Sinco. Yet, she was a human woman, and the late Lord Thorley had been particularly fond of her. Even though the new Lord had an irredeemably beautiful wife, there was no heir apparent, leaving a void in the succession. It wasn't unheard of for a Lord to shift his affections to a different partner who bore him a human child.

Whatever had unfolded within the Lord's stone manor, it ended with Donohuei's death. The rumor mill churned with speculation, each story more horrifying and scandalous than the last, each serving to tarnish the Lord's reputation further. None of them being truly satisfying in their answers.

"I've heard those tales, and they hold little water. If the Lord had desired her death, he could have carried it out in broad daylight. There's no power in this city that could stop him, not with the Orcs at his fingertips," Rollo dismissively commented, turning to look out the window at the rain-soaked streets below. "But that doesn't concern us."

Arietta visibly recoiled at his statement. Not surprising, human life was seen as sacred for many within the kingdom. The life of a human woman more so. "Sir?"

"Clearly, the Lord is unfamiliar with the more sophisticated technologies of this world, it leaves an opening for a man like me," he said, lifting his well-worn quill. "In a sense, he knows how to make ink, but he is blind to the art of quill-making. Have you seen the crude weapons his wildling wife brandished? They're embarrassing to any expert of the craft."

"Sir, the Lord murdered a nobleman, a Darkton. They will demand his head on a pike," she warned, a clear hint of a broader truth: that any who supported the Lord might find themselves suffering a similar fate.

"An astute trader would flee from an impending snowstorm," Rollo spoke, lips curling into a smug grin as he leaned back in his thickly padded wooden chair. "But a great one stocks up on firewood, furs, and meats."

**#####**

Sivent trudged through the mud and rain into what remained of the Emerald capital. To an untrained observer, this once-mighty city bore the same appearance as a monstrous overgrown forest. She saw it as the long overgrown ruins that it was. The stone trees that were the backbone to their houses were now monsters looming overhead like mountains, each trunk thicker than many trees were tall. The pattern was unmistakable if you knew what to look for, the monsters of bark and wood were arranged in loose grids, with the smaller more ordinary trees littering and clogging the derelict streets.

It was within the core of the capital that the squatters had made their home. "The Court" they had called themselves, a mockery of the word. Now everything was being upended for them. The signs were obvious. There was a frantic and chaotic quality to their actions – extinguishing fires, discarding waste into holes that were covered up.

They were attempting to forestall their demise by making themselves harder to find. The only true option available for them should have been retreat far far away.

The city had once possessed a functioning defense system, one weaved into the very homes of every citizen. It, much like the city, had broken over centuries of abandonment. Even if the Empress herself were to awaken, all that would be left within her reach would be a shadow of the capital's former glory.

The Empress...

The mere thought of her sent Sivent's mind wandering back to a time when her identity was a sequence of letters and numbers.

Her original name, much like many other things, had been lost to the deep sleep, the hibernation that almost all Elven kind entered when they became feral. Centuries under the feral curse had stripped her of many things. Was she an outlier or a mild case? She did not know, and the thought brought dread and fear.

Awakening the Empress of Green was paramount, the longer she took the higher the chances of knowledge lost. It was this mission that drove her forward, through the ruins, making no attempt to conceal her presence.

The squatters responded with open disdain. Their leaders had left them high and dry, devoid of their mightiest and most beloved warrior. Sivent wouldn't have been surprised if the Warlock had framed her for this failure. Yet, it made no difference to her; the squatters had grossly underestimated their adversary and paid dearly.

To her it had been a fruitful endeavor. Though things could have surely gone better.

Steadily, she set a course for the palace. She was certain the Warlock was there, the matron was nearly dead, and nowhere else would be as safe. Once past the main doors, the scent of death led her to the infirmary, where a pair of guards tried to block her path.

There was no need for explanations, a voice spoke from inside. "Let her in." The tone was feeble, barely a croak.

Past the wooden door the air was thick with the sickly-sweet stench of rotting flesh and blood. On a makeshift bed, the Warlock lay dying. Her body was lathered in a great deal of ointments and herbs. The rebels were sparing no expense to prolong the wretched thing's life just a little further, a very considerate gesture. The Warlock would be useless dead, after all.

"You should have died," the squatter's matriarch hissed.

Sivent scanned the room. The only other maiden within was a Rapha, an inferior individual than the one from the paltry city. The pink-haired maiden huddled in a corner as if willing herself to disappear. "Out," the Pinielf ordered, causing the healer to scamper away.

The moment the door closed, she urged the palace to grow vines behind it. A crude if effective blockage. Time was precious, and she had no need for interruptions. The delicacy of what was to come was also why she urged her babies to bloom, filling the air with their paralyzing pollen.

"I should've listened to my daughter," the Warlock muttered, shooting a resentful glare from her deathbed. "I will die here."

"No," Sivent countered, retrieving a seed from her pocket – a seed she'd extracted from Subject 01 before sending her to die. It had been the ensuing fight that had created the chance for her escape. "You will live."

The old woman attempted a feeble spell, her frail arms trembled fiercely with the gesture, betraying her weakness. The incantation faltered and crashed, dissipating into the dank air of the musty room before it could solidify. "Futile," the Warlock coughed out, her voice as weak as her magic, "we're lost already."

"Your petty insurrection was never meant to succeed. The moment the Empress awoke, you would've been made to kneel or be crushed. Mortal maidens like you are transient, irrelevant," Sivent retorted, moving closer. With an air of cold detachment, she swatted away the maiden's shaking hand and forced open her chapped lips, revealing a mouth devoid of teeth. In her other hand, she held the seed. She forced it against the maiden's palate, channeling her energy into it, feeling it take root in its new host. "You will find this seed is not as forgiving as the previous iteration," she stated, matter-of-factly. "The mistake of will is not one I will repeat. Tools are meant to obey."

Even in the clutches of death, the dark-skinned woman found a final surge of strength to resist. Sivent quickly retracted her fingers, stepping back, maintaining her stoic demeanor rather than take any risks. Thrice the matriarch of the rebellion summoned her powers, and thrice they flickered out.

The Pinielf took to a dimly lit corner of the room, her boots softly scuffing against the wooden floor, and waited.

"H-help..." the Warlock croaked out feebly, her own body falling victim to the effects of the pollen.

Outside, the clang of steel echoed against the sturdy wooden door. The guards had heard, and seeing the door did not budge, began to chip away at it and the vines that followed. Eventually, they busted through, their swords gleaming menacingly under the dim light as they cautiously stepped into the compact room, the confines restricting their movements.

"Stand down if you wish your matriarch to survive," Sivent demanded, her voice echoing in the small space. Her gaze flickered at the matriarch, the maiden having gone completely still.

In disbelief, one of the guards rasped, "What have you done to her?" oblivious of how her own arm had frozen at her side.

"She wishes to live, and I am fulfilling that," the Pinielf replied with a nonchalant shrug.

Their hesitation was all she needed, a moment, a minute. When the guards next tried to speak, their eyes widened in terror at the realization their bodies did not respond. It was only then that Sivent stepped towards them.

"And you will aid her in this, too. Subject 02, feed."

The Warlock's body twitched, then stirred. Even under the control of the seed, her body was far too weakened. Empty eyes stared out and focused upon the two paralyzed Dark Elves, her own kin. There was recognition in that gaze, but Sivent knew it was not to last. Within the following hours, there would be nothing left.

With a flick of her wrist, she knocked the two guards off balance, leaving them prone on the ground.

"Be content, your deaths will serve a true cause."

She closed the door upon her exit, locking it tight. Subject 02 would need several days to reach a functional state, possibly a week or two to be fully operative. Their enemy would find their location sooner than later, likely before winter came.

The prudent course of action would be to retreat further into the grove where the Empress and her subject slept, taking everything she could alongside Subject 02. The unsuspecting squatters would serve as a diversion, buying her some time, as would the ancient grove's protectors. If she hadn't secured Subject 01's seed, the assault on the fortified village would have been a much greater setback.

Sivent pressed deeper into the heart of the decrepit palace. Over the centuries, its roots had twisted and sprawled, transforming corridors into labyrinthine tunnels and walling off entire sections behind dense wooden barricades. These changes, though haunting, served as stark reminders of her mission.

Of the decay that had to be undone, of the glory that had to be returned.

Determined strides carried her to one of the palace's concealed alcoves. It was here she had constructed a makeshift laboratory, a sanctuary for her other experiment. She might be able to capture and bring the first pure-blooded human here, but that was too big a risk. She already had one subject, and it would have to do. This second otherworlder the squatters had captured, the girl, had no connections, and removing her wouldn't sound any alarms.

Sivent made a mental note to orchestrate Subject 02's '*death*' convincingly, ensuring her departure would appear as a gracious exit, when inevitably demanded. But she was prepared for any violent action the squatters might resort to if the necessity arose.

A puff of her pollen signaled the vines blocking the entrance to the alcove to retract.

The room was austere in its functionality. Dominating the small space was a lone chair, and in it, a young woman. The human's head had been shaved bare, revealing a complex network of green lines, like the tracery of leaves, beneath the skin. Her body, in contrast, was shielded beneath layers of blankets, a precaution against heat loss. From the ceiling, two slender tubes hung down, each finding its terminus in the woman's nostrils, slowly dispensing water and nutrients into her comatose body.

Adopting the cold, detached demeanor of a clinician, Sivent initiated a diagnostic, pulling from the sparse information she'd scraped together from abandoned textbooks. She had been a High Elf before this, a combatant that used empowered vegetation. Having to work with flesh and blood was something she still paled when compared to the healers of her era.

If only more of her sisters had been awakened...

She muttered, her voice devoid of warmth, to the unconscious form before her, "You humans are a tricky lot." The statement was laced with frustration. "Scant elemental energy, with next to no tolerance..." Regret washed over her. To date she only knew of two pure-blooded humans that had managed to bond a great deal of maidens, and Barry had already failed to bond with the Empress.

Her hope had been that, through studying the ruler of the tiny city named Sinco, she would've gained some insight on the matter.

She brushed the sentiment aside and commanded, "Wake up."

Her babies began to flourish, emitting a rich scent that saturated the stale air of her makeshift lab with her words turned into a chemical signal. The roots under the human's skin pulsed rhythmically in response. The subject—victim really—stirred in her restraints. Emerald eyes slowly fluttered open, a glint of confusion and fear muddled by a drug-induced haze. "You...?"

Sivent mentally checked off the initial markers of awareness—baseline consciousness and focusing ability, both present. Good.

"Happiness."



She uttered the word, and she shifted the scent subtly as the invasive plant housed within the woman twitched in response. Slowly, the human's lips began to curve upwards, eyes growing wide, pulse accelerating. "Why am I...?"

"Anger."

Another word, another shift. What was once a smile gradually twisted into a horrified gasp, eyebrows knitting together in pain and anger. With this change, the woman's focus sharpened significantly. "Let me go!" She struggled against her restraints.

"Submission."

She commanded, and her flowers put out the new command in its chemical form, but the woman in the chair didn't yield. Instead, she fought harder, bucking against the restraints. "Let me go!"

That was disappointing. There would be time for a more thorough experiment later, she waved her hand dismissively.

"Sleep."

The order was followed by immediate compliance—the woman's eyelids fluttered and she went limp.

Sivent's lips twitched into a grimace. "It still needs more maturation, it seems." Her sigh echoed through the grimy, dimly-lit lab as she lowered herself into a worn-out chair. "Such a nuisance. If only one could form a bond without the need of an ego..."

She interlaced her calloused fingers. The maiden tried to think.

Was there anything she could remember that could aid in this? There had to be a workaround to this issue she had overlooked. She'd been a soldier, unearthing the prototype parasite seed in those sealed off, forgotten zones had been a miracle on its own. But this challenge was different. How did the Maker ensure compliance from the captured humans? What had been the Empress' method?

Sivent's mind snagged onto a possibility—one that had not been too outside her reach.

"The Succubus."

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## [065] [Separation (Various)]

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Embla's gaze locked onto the cell's rough-hewn wooden ceiling, her mind wrestling with why her captor had selected such an ineffective form of confinement. She'd shown herself to be stronger than an Orc, nothing short of thick murisium chains would be capable of containing her. Granted, she had no true experience with imprisonment, but her mother's training had not been lacking in this regard.

A Malumari warrior was a very valuable asset, and no noble would pass-up the opportunity to convert one to their cause. The way she should've been imprisoned would involve metal thorns embedded into her flesh, meant to pierce through her spine and cripple her the moment she put her strength to bare. An ignorant captor would also add enchantments, thinking her unable to dispel them.

But this? Her present "chains" were mere orcwood shackles clasped around her ankles and a crude rope tethered to the cell's cold stone floor, worn smooth, as if asking her to break them. An easy task even in her reduced state. Embla was rather sure that escape wasn't completely off the table. Her spine and guts may have been in shambles, but she had strength yet in her arms.

If push came to shove, she believed she could reach past the city walls before they captured her.

Was this a twisted mind game by the city's Lord? She could sense the lurking presence of five Orcs at her cell's periphery at all times, their musky scent permeating the damp air. But was that all? There had to be more that she could not detect, maybe safeguards, cleverly concealed traps waiting for her? This could be a test, a ploy to lure her into complacency.

Ultimately, she supposed, the endgame was the same.

When he was convinced she had no answers to offer, that he could not break her bond, then the torture would begin, followed by death.

There was not much else to hope for.

Her cause, her fight was lost, its remnants scattered to the winds. Even if her mother had survived, even if the Elves were woken and rallied, Embla knew in her heart she would not go back. She couldn't.

She grunted dismissively, casting that futile thought aside before it could take root. The responsibility for this disaster rested squarely on her shoulders; she could have prevented everything but hadn't. Now Barry was left with the monsters. Be it the Lord of the city or her mother or the Pinielf.

Maybe this was the only way to atone, to hold and delay until her body gave out.

Her brooding was interrupted by a knock.

Slowly, with a pained grimace, she shifted her focus to the wooden door as it creaked open, revealing three figures silhouetted against the torchlight, the sound of rain not too far away. They had not even deemed her enough of a threat to imprison her underground, which made this all the more confusing.

The first was an unknown, a female warrior armored in black spikes, the metal was melted in some areas, Embla could guess they were there thanks to the Seraph. The other two were familiar faces - painful reminders of her predicament.

Urtha, the beast of an Orc who'd bested her in combat.

And Rick, the cunning human who'd orchestrated their downfall.

"I hope your accommodations have been reasonable, Embla," Rick began, his voice a monotonous drone. She felt his eyes lingering over the raw wounds on her midriff. "How are you feeling?"

Her gaze drifted back to the wooden ceiling, her lips set in a stubborn line. Responding would crack open a door to unwanted emotions. Displaying sympathy for the enemy could risk a bond to form. To bond the enemy was to become subject to their manipulation.

Each passing day her bond with Barry remained was a tactical victory.

"I guess I'll be carrying the conversation," Rick's voice droned on, an unwelcome background noise against the rain from outside. "I'll begin by pointing out that I want you to run away. No matter how good you are at escaping, Monica is better at hunting. And you have nowhere to go but to Barry."

She clenched her fists, the cool leather of her gloves creaking under the strain. The armored maiden weaved a healing spell of some sort, though one intended for scanning it would seem.

Rick's voice turned icy as he outlined his strategy. "Whether you do anything or not, I will find your little friends, and I will give them an ultimatum. Either they hand over Sivent's

head, or I will do to them what that angry bush did to Sinco.” His voice held a hint of anger in it, but one dulled. “What happens to everyone else afterward would depend on whether they opt to surrender or not.”

Embla's nostrils flared, her intense gaze boring into the grainy wood above her.

Unfazed, Rick continued. "Believe it or not, Urtha has been very vocal in your favor." The man let out a half chuckle as her shoulders squared off. "I presume you had a purpose for attacking Sinco that went beyond seeking power. What would you have done after you took over?"

The question was honest, there was an edge to it that denoted tension. Embla's jaw loosened a moment, and she very nearly answered. But she reminded herself of the truth, of the trickeries. She could not trust him, all she could do was endure.

“Were you about to say ‘freedom’?” His question clung to her ear and Embla only made the barest of affirmative noises. “Freedom how, then? Toss it around like confetti? Or did you have some plan to help ease them into it? What happened to everyone that preferred ‘the old way’?”

Her looseness vanished, lips pressing together once more.

It drew an exasperated sigh out of him. "Something to mull over, I suppose," Rick concluded, an irritating note hanging in the air. "I know you won't, but feel free to call for food or water if you need either."

The scraping of chairs and the clank of armor signaled the departure of the three unwanted visitors. Embla was once again enveloped in solitude.

She began a silent countdown from a hundred. Each number a mantra, a protective wall between her and everything else. There was a trick to the man, she knew. Kindness was never free, even the one she'd given Barry had been strategic. Embla carefully reviewed the words.

He had trapped her not with metal but with a conundrum.

He was right she could not escape White Claw, the huntress would find her no doubt. To run away was to be found. Any direction she ran to other than to Barry would be nothing more than a waste of time and energy. To run to Barry would be to lead them to her sisters.

Staying would be a trap in of itself as well. If the man did not intend to torture or kill her, then her very health could serve as a way to make the others falter. She could be used as proof of the Lord's "kindness" towards even his enemies.



the need arose, they could trade for human slaves with the Vampires that lived on a tiny island further east.

But things had started going awry as of the past few decades. The bond-collars were breaking down, and it was happening at an ever hastening rate. According to the matriarchs, a Tigress only needed to renew her bond once every few years. Nowadays, such an event happens every few months. Even with the patchwork repairs to the enchantments, it was clear things were not going to last.

The kingdom had caught wind of this disquiet. An envoy had been dispatched, a maiden carrying empty promises. She spoke of fealty, vowing that the kingdom would provide the bond-collars if the clans bowed down to them.

The audacity was met with a fitting end—she was sent back to the kingdom in pieces.

But the scratches were in the tree-bark for all to see. Without a solution, all would fall to the feral curse.

This pressing issue called for a Gathering, the first one in recent memory. The clans valued their independence, fiercely territorial and each one small in size. It made the Gathering into something filled with tension and animosity. Many of the newer clans spilled blood, the weaker ones did not survive long enough to become a voice.

A sneer tugged at the corners of Throag's mouth as she reminisced, it had been not long after that she'd endeavored to find a solution herself. The Gathering should have been a catalyst for unity. Instead, it descended into a chaotic week of skirmishes and arguments, each voice struggling to drown out the others, each clan desperate to stamp its authority. With no clear victors came no clear leadership.

Suggestions to trade with the Vampires inhabiting the eastern isle were shot down in an instant. No clan worth its salt would willingly trade self-reliance for dependency. There were whispers of a grand raid on the human kingdom, an idea promptly squashed. Such a venture would leave the clans devoid of their best hunters for months, and very few of them could spare them. That... and none of them would willingly let their hunters be bossed around by another.

In the end, the assembly bore no fruit.

Each clan retreated into their corners of the Deadlands, licking their wounds and nursing their pride, left to devise their own, individual solutions—all in vain. Throag's clan, too, sought their own path. In her pride, the Sabertooth decided to tackle the problem head-on at the very source: to seek out a way for them to forge their own enchanted collars. How hard would it be?

The hunt was the toughest challenge Throag had ever faced. It demanded an uneasy alliance with a Vampire and the help of a human from within the kingdom. Three long storm-seasons had passed, sneaking around the kingdom, constantly hiding, constantly waiting. And after all that, the prize had slipped through her claws.

It had not been all for nothing, she'd learned much, and she'd returned to share the information. The clans would need it to be able to devise a new approach.

"Your edge is dulled, Throag," Buul's voice cut through the quiet, as she materialized from beneath a tree branch, breaking the protective shadow cloak Throag had used for disguise. "Even I can detect your presence."

"If you thought my claws not sharp, you'd be at my throat by now," Throag retorted, a menacing growl underlining her words.

"Lucky for you, you brought two humans. I can't tell which you've bonded, and don't want to take the chances," the Tigress gestured towards the unconscious figures Throag had tucked under her arms.

The Sabertooth huffed dismissively. Buul was always overly cautious. "What business does your clan have here?"

Buul's face was a mask of stern seriousness. "Much has shifted since you left."

By how much, she wondered. "I need to speak to the Mother. There are tales that need to be heard. Even your clan would benefit from the knowledge."

Buul laughed bitterly, and Throag could only guess at the reason. Still she followed. The deep shadows provided cover, aiding their swift, silent movement among the mossy trunks. Their claws found easy purchase in the rough bark, the thicker branches sporting all the signs of recent territorial markings. The surface of the shallow, murky water remained undisturbed, and they left no trace of their passage through the dense undergrowth.

As powerful and confident as Throag was, the Deadlands had many dangers even someone like her could not face on her own. And just how the dangers of the Deadlands never sat still, the clans would never stay in one location for too long. The dance amongst the clans was a careful one, with the storm-season marking the time when battles over territory would begin.

Throag's brow furrowed in suspicion as she recognized their destination. "Are you luring me into a trap, kitten?" She came to a halt, gripping the bark of a towering tree with her clawed feet, tail latching on to a nearby branch, the Sabertooth keeping a firm hold on

her unconscious captives and her travel sack. "Did you think I wouldn't recognize the territory of the Salesha?"

"Like I said, times have changed," Buul's reply was edged with bitterness, her ears pressed flat against her skull. "Our clans waged war against the Salesha and her brood. We emerged victorious."

Throag could tell there was no lie, Buul's heart was too calm, her body too relaxed. It did not make the statement any less hard to believe. Two clans working together? It was a sign of things having gone far worse than she'd thought. She didn't voice her surprise, however, choosing instead to continue following the younger huntress.

It didn't take much longer to reach their destination, at the very heart of the former Salesha's territory. The signs of the battle were clear to see, the trees had been torn, the earth gouged and filled with water. She could smell the death in the stagnant air, dozens upon dozens of ferals, and some of her own sisters without a doubt.

At the center of it all was the new dwelling, standing on the largest tree. The clans built for functionality above all. Secrecy was at the very core of the places they called home, hidden away from other predators and potential competitors. They were woven into the thick treetops, built out of sturdy vines and bathed in a subtle darkness that would make it hard to distinguish from its surroundings. One large communal area wrapped and secure, its size proof the battle for this territory had gone poorly.

After all, it was not large enough to fit two whole clans.

It was on her approach that Throag caught the scent of her clan Mother, it permeated out of the darkness. It brought a slight smirk to her lips, it had been her clan that had come out on top.

Upon entering, she was met by a chorus of yowls and hissing. She could identify the familiar voices amidst the cacophony, as well as the unfamiliar, but chose to overlook them. The Mother had clearly anticipated her arrival and was pretending to be a big fat cat as she lounged in her fur hammock, nonchalantly using her shadows to eat fruit.

"I had thought you dead," the matron commented coldly, her icy blue eyes blinking slowly. "But when the kingdom launched their attacks, I realized you must've at least succeeded."

Throag's tail drooped, and she let out a low growl. "I did. Then my prey got away."



"A prey escape you?" The Mother laughed, a noise amplified by snickers and purrs all around. "Such elusive prey it must have been," the barbed remark hung in the dimly lit chamber.

Throag bristled at the condescension but restrained her instinctual growl. Pride was a brittle weapon, and here it would serve no purpose. Her muscular hands relaxed, dropping the two unconscious humans she had lugged in. Promptly, she upended her worn leather travel bag, its contents clattering onto the roughly hewn stone floor – a dozen bond collars, each of them barely used.

"After so many moons hiding, I thirsted for a proper fight, it blinded me to the hunt," Throag pronounced, her voice echoing off the cave walls, bouncing amongst her kinsfolk. "I found a sister, a Sabertooth, her coat white as frost, feralborn from the eastern mountains." Her revelations stirred the clan, a ripple of shared glances, pricked ears, and curiously swaying tails passing through them. "She'd been free of the curse for less than a year. A bond that lasted even without a collar."

Throag could feel the surprise through the ripples in the shadows, all eyes were on her, all ears were on her. Half-feigned curiosity turned into full attention, even the Mother stirred. "How is such a thing possible?" the elder's voice, a low rumble, filled the chamber.

"The humans are at the root," Throag replied, ears laying flat against her skull in disdain. She gestured at the unconscious forms of the humans she had carried in. "I traveled with a Vampire, and she thought me dull. But my ears were sharp, and I listened." A fanged smile twisted her lips at the recollection. "The more maiden blood runs through a human the weaker their blood is."

This drew yowls and hisses, anger.

"You claim the ways of the clan are wrong? That seeking humans with actual strength is the way forward?" The Mother's eyes narrowed.

"Our mistake was thinking the strength we needed was physical. Humans whose blood is so thick with maiden ancestry are frail exactly because they are too much like us. Maidens cannot bond maidens." Throag raised her voice with every word. "Why do you think the Vampires were so eager to give us 'strong men'? They knew of this problem, and sought to weaken us with a poison so slow we would not see it." Her claws opened wide. "The kingdom does not shun the human daughters. I suspect because some of them understand the thinning, but keep it secret."

“I have bonded with men of the kingdom, Throag, they require a collar like all others.” The Mother’s eyes closed, plunging the common room into a darkness deep enough even the Sabertooth could not pierce through it. “Do you take us for fools?”

“No, I do not. The human I encountered was not of the kingdom.” She pulled out another item from the bag, a rag. “Smell this, sisters, and tell me if you recognize it. I do not. His scent was of smoke and tar, but not of wood. A smith’s son is what I thought of him, but it is acrid and foul.” She threw it at the ground in front of her. “I detected others with a similar scent in Balet. The nobles were guarding them like treasures.”

The cloth vanished into the darkness, the others sniffed and prodded at it. It was after a moment that the shadows relented, retreating to protect the Mother’s form once more. “What of the collar maker?” She shifted the subject, as if a decision had been reached, and the Mother was merely waiting for the end of the story to share.

With a violent whip of her tail, Throag voiced her frustration. “We found our prey, a human well-versed in the designs of the enchantments and construction. The Vampire made her a Fledgling, but the leech managed to flee during the clash in Balet.” A growl vibrated in her chest. “If the kingdom has grown bolder in our lands, then it must be because they believe I still have her.”

“Coincidences are too many for there to not be a pattern, in this we agree,” the Mother mused aloud, the shadows shifting and churning, clearly something else in her mind. “And the Vampire you were with?”

“Died in Balet, she lost against the white Sabertooth and another I could not identify, a charmer.”

Murmurs were shared, small snickers were shared amongst those present.

“A Vampire recently came through our lands from the southeast, they reeked of the Orc tribes and of defeat. She had brought with her a Ghoul and some Fledglings.” The Mother’s voice carried an annoyed purr. “The two stronger ones were sold for some humans. The weaker ones spoke of the clan’s betrayal, of a white Sabertooth and a Fledgling that had attacked their leader.”

Throag’s eyes widened, ears standing at attention as her tail stilled. “That cannot be a coincidence.”

“In this we agree.” The matron nodded. “We will share our knowledge with our brethren, as is the way of the clans. The Vampires have taken advantage of our ignorance for too long.” The declaration brought growls and yowls and scratching from all around. “And, once this is done, we will prepare a hunt.”

“Should we not call for a Gathering?”

“No, this is prey Throag found, and prey we will take before the others can pounce.” The Mother stood, the shadows wrapping around her figure and leaving her as nothing more than a walking silhouette, one half the height of Throag. “If we are to break with tradition, then we will not take half-measures. This hunt will involve the whole clan, for it is for the survival of the clan.” Her sky-blue eyes peered upwards to the Sabertooth. “To prepare for this grand hunt, you will share the wisdom you obtained while hunting there.”

The taller maiden hesitated, suppressing the sense of pride within her chest. She'd expected her return to be one of ridicule and loss. Not this.

She raised her head, closing her eyes, ears flattening against her skull as she descended to her knees, presenting her throat in the largest sign of submission. “It would be my honor to be the clan's guide, Mother.”

“It is so, then.” Came the response. “Now tell me of the white furred sister.”

“Her name is Monica, and her human is Rick.”

There was a wave of giggles and murmurs across those gathered. Mother's eyes widened slightly. “A human worth remembering?”

“He was annoying to chase.” Her voice tightened at the memory.

Never before had prey so weak managed to stay out of her reach for so long, as if he'd known her every move. Even now she could not fully understand how he had accomplished this, a man as sluggish as any other, keeping a step ahead of her for long enough she'd grown frustrated and gotten serious.

Serious against a human.

The audacity of it was a thorn on her side.

“What was worth remembering was Monica. A cub, she's not been a Sabertooth for long.” She broke the silence, interrupting the sniggering. “But she needed to see me use the shadow thorns once before she applied them herself.”

Mother's form tightened, blue eyes narrowing, the pressure of her attention making the darkness around them to shimmer like a coiling Lamia ready to strike.

“A grand hunt indeed.”