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## [070-071] [To Run a Harem (Dia)]

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To Dia, the perfect day began before first light. Specifically, it was right after the “fifth nap”. It was a moment in the early pre-dawn where Mousegirls would wake for their final bout of activity before the sixth and final nap concluded their day-cycle. Through trial and error, Dia had discovered that it was at exactly this time when Monica slept the deepest.

It was at this time where a rippling tingle penetrated into her left heel, the alarm spell quietly rousing her into the fuzzy warmth of a shared bed. The room was perfectly dark, isolated from the world in a protective cocoon, only the slow breathing of the other two occupants disturbing the silence.

As with every other perfect day, she began by reclaiming Rick from Monica’s needy embrace. Inch by careful inch, she pried open the claws and gingerly pulled him to lay on his back while she replaced his form with bundled cloth for the feline to snuggle. The skill was one she’d never thought she’d need, but was now infinitely thankful she’d been taught by her seniors during her formative years in Balet.

Successfully excising Rick out of the tangle of fur and limbs, she moved to rest her head upon his shoulder. He barely roused, pulling her closer without a thought and mumbling something in his sleep. Dia preened, kissing his shoulder and moving on to the second part of the morning ritual.

Softly, so as to not disturb him, she placed her hand upon the center of his chest and pushed her power into his body. The nature of her work couldn’t properly follow the strict form of a spell, so she had to improvise, keeping the structure only half-formed. In this way she examined his body, making note of any changes compared to the day prior.

It was only then that she’d steel her feelings and her resolve. With as much scarred tissue both inside and out, Rick was her most delicate patient. As with the past week, today’s focus was upon the left atrium. Barely a millimeter of scar-tissue was removed and healed. Unlike every other case she’d been taught and encountered, the only options available were to work slowly. The process was something she’d created out of necessity; a careful surgical internal wound meant to remove the scar tissue, and allow the flesh to be knitted back together through an equally diminutive burst of healing.

In this way, Rick's body would not risk elemental saturation, and it would be made to work on its own to accelerate the process. Another month or two, and she'd be able to move on to his liver.

The hardest part of the ordeal was suppressing her urge to march up to Eva and strangle her in her sleep. She chased the thought away as soon as it bubbled up; the Fledgling was her sister now, and any punishment should remain proportional.

Her focus turned back to Rick, fingers dancing against the many scars that marred his torso. She nudged her focus towards the day ahead, absently rousing her human's body to begin the process of waking up. With a small injection of energy, his adrenal glands increased activity ever so slightly; the receptors in his gut and intestines would similarly stir into the daily routine.

Rick inhaled sharply nearly an hour later, his heartbeat spiking as his body tightened. Dia silenced him with a kiss before he could say anything and disturb the quietness of the room. His hands moved onto her naked skin before he had fully woken up, and she pulled him on top of her, feeling his hardness pressing in exactly the right places. Soon enough, nature took its course and the room was drowned out in soft sighs and moans, her arousal thick in the air as they lazily shared the moment together. There was no rush, only comfort, warmth, and closeness.

Of course, this daily ritual was nothing but her providing palliative care. Rick's bond to Kiara had left his libido slowly escalating over the past few weeks. It would be truly heinous of her if this were her taking advantage of a patient's affliction.

"You've got some smug on your face," her lover whispered into her ear, kissing her cheek.

"You can't see it, so it doesn't count," she returned the gesture, hugging him tightly, wanting to prolong the moment forever. But the other occupant of the room was stirring awake with a rather loud yawn. "Better tame the wild beast before she grows impatient."

On cue, Monica's large furred paw snatched Rick off her and pulled him into the small-giant's arms. He barely complained as he turned his attention to the jealous feline. Dia knew better than to stick around and took her leave. "Always look for the positive," she whispered the mantra. Monica's affections would no doubt provide Rick with a more thorough physical exertion. If he didn't have any plans for the day, it could even become a full workout.

Also, Kiara's whores would no doubt come knocking sooner or later. As Dia's mother had once wisely said, a bad sister was like a feralborn Doggirl. They could be

dependable to sound an alarm or fight, but always keep your fingers out of reach lest they be bitten off.

Only fate knew what sort of chaos might crop up with the festival right around the corner.

With a swift and thorough spell of cleansing, she summoned a dim magelight and made her way upstairs. The house was still dark, still sleepy, and at peace. Were this the medical center, Dia would've started up by banging some pots and making some noise, maybe startle the restless blood-sucker upstairs, or maybe get the green giant riled up. But there was no need for either, so she began cooking breakfast with a jovial little tune Rick had been humming as of late.

Hot porridge, cooked apple slices, some almond cheese, some mead, and a half-mug of grape juice. Of it all, the juice had been a rather lucky find a few days back. There was an Everspring maiden whose husband had cracked his hip, and who'd been more than happy to share the grapes she'd grown in her garden as thanks for the healing.

Heavy footfalls alerted her to her newest sister having woken up. Urtha's steps were as subtle as dropping rocks down the stairs, the Orc clumsily making her way through steps that were no doubt uncomfortably small for someone of her proportions. "Mornin'," she grumbled, voice thick with sleep as she hunched over to cross through the door.

As soon as she stepped into the common room she made the mistake of stretching out to her full height. With a thump against the solid wood, the maiden growled at the dent she'd made against the beam.

"Rick's looking into the remodeling." Dia didn't miss a beat to remind her before she could complain, putting together a plate of mostly hearty porridge for the green maiden. Out of all the inhabitants of the house, Urtha was the easiest to feed. If it was sunny enough, the maiden barely needed to eat at all, but with the weather as it had been as of late, she'd mostly just shovel whatever was put in front of her. "Eat up, you're going to need the energy."

Sitting on the floor and leaning against the table, the maiden pulled at her tusks for a moment, meaty finger poking at the pointy end. "Tribe's been griping about all the clouds again. Some want to request the Father to have the Neigix clear it up."

"What, is he their caretaker now? Beside, there's a limit to how much those poor Neigix can do, the city would need fifty times the flock." Dia clucked in disapproval, gently rapping the Orc's knuckles with her wooden ladle. "The council is scheduled to meet shortly after lunch, don't forget it."

"Ugh," was the only sound that made its way through her lips as she slurped the contents of the bowl. With a gesture, she demanded another, focused on finishing the meal as quickly as possible before finally putting down the wooden bowl. "The tribe will fight him every step of the way. It doesn't make sense!"

"No arguing before the meeting, you promised," Dia kept her tone firm, pointing the ladle threateningly. "Once you're done, go find Eva and remind her to get her breakfast."

Urtha chuckled. "She showed me the thing you wanted her to wear." The laughter was a low rumble that made the table vibrate. "How in the world did you convince her?"

"I didn't," she replied, her gaze flicking to the stairs leading to the basement. "Now keep quiet, Rick's not supposed to know. Say a word, and there will be consequences."

"Don't worry, they're still going at it." The Orc tapped a naked foot against the floor. "It's a surprise the house isn't shaking."

Still? Dia made a mental note to focus on tomorrow's check-up on Rick's muscles and lungs. Perhaps he was doing more exercise than she'd expected. "So long as he still thinks Eva's trying to put some distance, then the better."

"You enjoy playing with other's lives too much."

The Rapha straightened herself out and glared. "I happen to enjoy a good romance. Especially if I get to tease Eva about it till the end of times." Her brow furrowed. "Besides, would you rather Rick get used to sleeping with anything that drops at his feet?"

The Orc considered her words for a moment, leaning back against the chair, the wood groaning in complaint. Yellowed eyes turned up to the wooden beams overhead. "I guess I do owe you one or two favors." She glanced at Dia. "If you feel anyone's becoming too annoying, I can crush them."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Though she appreciated the gesture, she knew that anything that ended up in blows would have become a lost cause. As tempting as the idea was, Rick had shown open distaste for the more physical approaches to correcting behavior. It made dealing with feral-born girls far trickier; sometimes, someone needed a good whack to quickly learn where the boundaries were. "Focus on the positives," she silently whispered to herself as she took a long sip of the grape juice.

Rick's more peaceful methods had drawbacks, but they were effective in their own way. His ways were kinder, and that made loyalty easier to earn. But most importantly of all,

his style of governance put some severe restraints on what Kiara was allowed to get away with. And it wasn't as if the Succubus' own fake humanity didn't have its uses; her presence as a fake lady made for a powerful ward against humans looking to grab the city Lord's attention. But the best part was that she was an immortal maiden.

Maidens could only become pregnant through parthenogenesis, birthing another maiden. For a maiden to bear a human child, they had to first become old enough to reach their second puberty. Only when one became a matron could their body be fertile to human seed. Immortal maidens could not age, thus the only immortal matrons were those that had ascended into an ageless breed once they'd been old enough.

Dia was the best candidate for becoming the mother to a child that shared Rick's flesh and blood. She was older than both Urtha and Monica, and Eva was a fledgling, meaning she could eventually become either a Ghoul or a Vampire, both ageless breeds. So long as things stayed the course, she'd become Rick's true Lady.

She began humming again as she pulled the meals away from the fire.

A tingle up her left foot warned her that sunrise was right around the corner. "I have to leave," she glanced over at Urtha. "Rick's going to be teaching some classes. Remember to get Monica to sit near the front so she doesn't cause a mess."

"What?"

"Sir Rollo is obligated to have his experts meet with the public and answer questions. Rick is planning on expanding that into a more proper teaching environment, one he will be taking part in." She glanced at the Orc with a glare. "Don't tell me you-?"

"It's not that," came the response. "I meant about the Chieftess."

"She will want Rick to teach her new words, but she can't do that with her claws as they are." Dia hid the grimace as she spoke. "Keeping her near the front of the crowd will make it easier for Rick to placate her if she gets frustrated."

The Orc shook her head. "Sure."

"Look, I don't like this either," she snapped. "But you have to focus on the positive. This injury gives you the perfect chance to show her she can rely on the tribe."

That had been the right choice of words. Urtha's dismissive expression had become thoughtful. "I'll do what I can for the Chieftess," she declared, her tone far more serious.

"Good."

The change of tune was worth noting, but ultimately kept to the back of her mind. Could she possibly get the Orc to lend a hand in the day-to-day chores if she presented it properly? As things stood, Eva was the one doing the bulk of the housework since she was the only one who spent most of her day at home. She'd only venture outside when Rick was home, mostly to avoid a potential accidental meeting.

Hopefully, the Fledgling's tune would change after the festival.

Stepping outside, she summoned a small light and made her way through the city.

A new day had begun, but the heavy clouds cloaking the city promised to extend the darkness for a while longer. The streets were showing some activity; the nocturnal maidens were making their way back home, while those early to rise were stirring.

Her first stop was the former Hunter's building, a fortified house that was halfway between Rick's current humble home and the thick, reinforced walls of the Lord's estate. It had been repurposed, now serving as the household for Kiara and her ilk. She would've avoided the place entirely, but a patient was a patient.

With a sharp knock, the door creaked open, Eli greeting her arrival.

The Hound had seen better days. Exhaustion oozed out of her every pore. The black-haired maiden looked down at Dia with dark circles under her eyes and a pale complexion. "Good day, Miss Dia," she spoke with a cordial tone that drawled on.

"Sleep well?" she replied, with a punctuated pep to her tone. "Any changes to the Lady?"

As if to answer her question, she caught the sound of moans drifting inside. Eli shuddered in response, glancing over her shoulder for a moment before turning her attention back to the healer. "The Lady is still... feeding. She has yet to say anything coherent." Her ears flattened against her head, her smile showing canines. "Would you want to go inside and check?"

Now it was Dia who shuddered. "I'd rather not expose myself to that particular maelstrom again."

Dia's memory echoed with the events of Kiara's recovery. Following her coma, Kiara had awoken with a desperate, gnawing hunger for energy. Dia had found herself the unfortunate focus of the unresponsive Succubus' attention. By the time she'd been rescued, a whole day had passed, and the healer had needed the sort of baths that took a whole day before she could feel clean again.

“So long as she's taking in fluids, this is likely a step toward recovery.” With an apologetic smile, she shook her head. “I can't be sure how long it'll take, but I doubt it should be much longer before she's verbally lashing out at everyone again.”

Eli made an effort to chuckle at her comment. “That is our hope,” she agreed, bowing slightly. “If there's nothing more, I need sleep. My next shift starts at noon.” There was barely a hint of a flush at the admission, followed by a second shudder.

“Don't go and become a patient yourself. Make sure to rest as much as you need.”

“Mhm.”

She made a move to close the door, but Dia's hand slammed against the reinforced wood. “And do be sure to send word when she's fully awake. The Lord wants to speak to her before she has a chance to run off and start anything.”

“Sure.”

The door slammed shut.

Dia's jaw tightened, eyes glaring holes into the wood for a moment. Eli had been trying to cozy up to Rick but explicitly doing so through everyone other than her. As far as declarations of intent went, it was a pretty loud one.

“One problem at a time,” she muttered, turning to her next destination on her morning round.

[[Break 1]]

Her second stop of importance was a diminutive hut, a small rustic box made from orcwood, set strategically on the outskirts of the city. Anyone looking at the hut and the few Orcs near it would assume it was just some storage area, or perhaps a place where some ill-behaved maidens were being held for punishment. None would suspect it was where the city's most dangerous prisoner was currently held.

Rick, with his knack for unconventional strategies, had masterminded this setup. When confronted with the challenge of imprisoning a Malumari, a task as formidable as restraining Monica herself, he had reached this solution. The argument in favor of this frankly insane choice had been two-fold. On one side, if the Malumari wanted to escape, she would. Having her imprisonment near the heart of the city would only put others'

lives at risk. On the other, anyone seeking to free the Malumari would need to specifically know where she was being held, as the Lord's manor was being turned into a very large trap.

Very few had been convinced about his choice, but none would argue it. Particularly when Urtha herself had sworn that she'd beat the maiden as many times as it took. Dia hadn't been entirely convinced of the plan. But, she conceded, anything that pushed a potential threat further away from Rick was preferable to the alternative of him finding a way to sleep with it.

As Dia approached, a mouse-girl squirreled her way out from behind the nearest Orc, eyes wide and alert, blocking her path. "What is the password?" she asked in a quiet whisper.

"Kiara is a gigantic whiny baby," the healer responded with a hint of amusement.

It was a necessary precaution; there were shapeshifters, and one of them could become a gigantic pain if she met the prisoner unsupervised. Of course, it had been Dia who had proposed the phrase, mostly to get some small pleasure out of her morning routine.

With her identity confirmed, she moved past the guards and entered the hut's antechamber. Once properly dressed in the black, spiky armor, she entered the lone room, meeting the occupant and prisoner. Embla lay on the bed, awake and glaring at the ceiling, as if trying to etch her frustration into the wood.

"No humans here," Dia pronounced gently, her gaze flickering to the empty bowl and platters. "Was breakfast tolerable?"

There was no answer from the prisoner.

With a nod, Dia stepped closer, stopping just outside the crippled maiden's immediate reach. "My healing and diagnostics will be minimal. If you'd rather I not do either, please voice your concerns now."

She waited for a few seconds; her patient only let out a huff of affirmation.

Stepping closer, she knelt to confirm the emptiness of the platters. "Is the Polita mead sitting well? Are there any new discomforts or pains?"

Embla glared harder at the roof. "I want food."

Actual words? Dia kept her tone polite and measured. "Until your digestive tract finishes reforming, solids are out of the question."



She kept her movements slow and easy to read as she touched the maiden's elbow with her left hand. Her right hand moved to press against the abdomen, and she began to circulate it through the maiden's body.

Every time she did this, she could do nothing but feel humbled. Embla's power was a vast ocean, and she was nothing more than a stream. If the Malumari so much as thought that Dia was going too far, then there would be nothing she could do with her powers. Never had she treated a patient that could, with just a thought, throw her healing out.

That didn't happen, however. Embla kept a wary eye on her actions, but didn't impede her in any way.

Able to fully focus on her work, the healer carefully took stock of every corner of Embla's body. Dia noted the physical status with great interest. The Malumari's physiology was not as capable of self-healing as an Orc's, but it was decidedly several steps above a Sabertooth's. The body was capable of quickly scarring, but it was also healing itself and regenerating... just not properly. It was clearly being consciously directed; some of the problems felt as if they were being made by someone who held wrong assumptions about their own biology.

Given how delicate her patient's condition was, Dia was very careful to triple-check her assumptions before she acted. It was a careful procedure, undoing the minute deviations and patching them back in the right direction. In a sense, she considered this to be a more complicated version of what she was already doing to Rick.

"The liver doesn't have that shape," she chided, flickering her focus to Embla's face for a moment.

"Why do you mend my errors?" came the question.

That confirmed Dia's suspicion. Whatever process a Malumari's body took to recuperate, it wasn't automatic. Did that mean that, if Embla were forcefully knocked unconscious, her body's healing would come to a halt after a certain point? She tucked that fact away and focused on the question itself.

"Because my Lord wants you to live," she answered softly. "Even if he didn't, I'd want you to live as well."

A moment of silence stretched out. "As a test subject? I've noticed how much attention you pay to some parts you don't do anything to."

Dia paused, her gloved hands lingering against the ebony skin of the maiden. "I'll admit, I want to know more about how your body works. I have loved ones who have been grievously injured, and my hope is to learn how to undo the damage." She took a deep breath and let it out as she shook her head. "But there are lines no healer should cross. I've seen what the Pinielf did and it's repugnant."

Embla didn't say anything, keeping her gaze fixed on the ceiling.

"You could be a powerful healer, if you put your mind to it," Dia muttered, a twinge of envy seeping into her words. "You only lack the knowledge."

"It won't work," she answered harshly. "My powers only work on my own flesh. Believe me, I've tried. The power of aberration is not meant for healing."

The elemental power of aberration was one meant to twist, corrupt, and alter. No doubt it was how the Malumari could undo the powers of others with but a gesture. Still, Dia could only scoff at the words. "There are plenty of maidens whose powers rely on aberration. Any medical center will have dozens of spells they could teach built around that element." She chuckled slightly. "I'd bet Kiara knows a few herself, but it'd be best if you didn't cross paths with her."

Embla returned to silence, her attention fixating on the ceiling as if to convey the conversation had come to an end.

Dia accepted it, letting the peace wash over her like a cool, calm sea. As her next alarm chimed, she began to pack her medical kit. Today's session could have gone longer, but most everything worth addressing had been tackled, the rest could wait until tomorrow.

She stopped at the door, a thought flickering over the rest. "Have you ever heard the term 'Nightingale'?"

The prisoner stirred slightly, her pale brows furrowing. "Do not look into this matter."

Dia scowled, mimicking the gesture. "Why?"

"My mother possessed a list of all the breeds the kingdom and empire have deemed threats. Each breed was put into its own category. The Succubi, for example, are 'charmners', deemed threats for their ability to twist the hearts of others." Her gaze turned to Dia, deep and troubled. "The Nightingale's name was next to the Pinielf's, they are both 'fleshcrafters', makers of abominations."

The scowl deepened. Was this why the Pinielf had brought up the breed? Dia was a Rapha, and all her life she'd been taught Raphas were like many other maidens whose genus was a circle. She'd been told there would be no ascension waiting for her. And

now this? Her mind buzzed, exploring the complex implications of 'fleshcrafters'. The ability to not just mend, but grotesquely and unnaturally alter flesh — it was a chilling antithesis to the core principles of her medical creed.

Any maiden found wielding such power faced immediate execution, a necessary measure to maintain the delicate balance of the natural order.

The masked maiden — the creator of the plant monstrosity — was a potent reminder of the devastating power, and why breaking the natural order in such a way was deemed a severe taboo. Both kingdoms and empires understood the gravity of the threat. Those discovered indulging in such horrifying practices were swiftly dealt with and for good reason.

"Using a tool changes the way you perceive the world," Embla pressed on, her voice strained. "If you gain great power in crushing things, you will see things you can crush. Some powers should not be wielded."

Dia didn't answer. She lowered her eyes to her gloved hands, the spiky black metal. "There are countless people who will spend their lives crippled." The leather creaked as she closed her hand into a fist. "Meanwhile, there are those who will live their lives capable of fully recovering from even the most grievous of misfortunes." She looked at Embla. "No one has the right to claim the people I love should suffer more just because they were born different."

The other maiden recoiled slightly, turning to look away.

She left, her thoughts turning more decidedly to the matter at hand.

Originally, she had thought that the Nightingale was a breed of maiden so rare that there wouldn't be records of them in any common library. But if they were a forbidden breed, then that also explained why she couldn't find any references to them.

As the city swallowed her into its cobblestone streets and squat wooden houses, she found herself lost in a sea of assumptions. Her training as a healer had made it clear that any reference to forbidden breeds was to be destroyed. The methods by which a maiden could ascend into such forms were meant to be eradicated, lest the knowledge tempt someone desperate enough to try. For this reason, what little records remained would be obfuscated through secondary classifications. After all, if you coined a term and used it to describe forty different possible maidens, then it would be near impossible to determine which part of that information was relevant.

Normally, maidens that could become a forbidden breed would themselves be deemed forbidden. But doing so with all such maiden breeds would be impossible. Being with

Rick had taught her that there was no guaranteed way to maintain control over a city, let alone an empire. What then would they do? She asked herself how Rick would handle such a situation, not wanting to kill anyone but wanting to dissuade them from ascending in a certain way?

Dia had met countless Rapha's like herself, yet not one of them had heard of the possibility of ascension... "Systemic problems are near invisible to those who view the system from within," she whispered Rick's words back to herself. There had to be something going on that made the chances of a Rapha becoming a Nightingale, even by accident, impossible.

And, as a Rapha herself, she should be keenly aware of what this method would be. She'd been trained in ballet by the most experienced healers in the city. However, no matter how much she strained her memory, she found no conspicuous elements to which she could latch on.

"Focus on the positives," she reminded herself.

If she couldn't find a solution right away, all she needed to do was chip away at the problem until she did. Determination and positivity were the best ways to approach things. Maybe she could talk it over with Rick once she had something a bit more concrete.

With no apparent answers readily available, she banished her lingering doubts for the time being.

The sun had finally risen enough that, even with the clouds, walking the streets was no longer a hazard without summoned light. The city was stirring a bit more enthusiastically as well; the odd human would join the maidens. The number of shops and voices was steadily growing. Sinco had yet to fully recover, but the signs were there. Most activity was centered around the food distribution efforts by the tribe. By now, legumes and fruit had already fallen into full commerce, while the rest were on their way. Eventually, the city would need to return to paying coin for their food, and only then would things be deemed to have flowed back into a healthy state.

After a brief halt to secure a handful of toasted nuts, she eagerly recommenced her journey toward what she would one day call a medical center. It was hers, and that added a little pep to her stride.

The building was nestled in the city's core, not too far from the central plaza. It was a single-story construction painted in white to mark its role as a place for healing. Its size was unassuming, and there was a twin building right next to the city gates. However,

that one would only open if they anticipated a fight would take place, or if the farmers were being pushed into a triple shift. Fortunately, Dia's proximity to Rick gave her ample access to this information, so she could allocate what little resources she had depending on what they expected.

Looking at the structure from outside made her want to sigh. The term "medical center" wasn't quite apt. Even Astunes, a village far smaller than Sinco, had a less humble infrastructure. In its current form, her precious medical center was closer to a "medicine shack," not least because the 'nurses' working there left much to be desired.

A staff, she noted, was not present upon her entry.

The reception area was deserted, not a single soul in sight.

The glowstone lamp situated near the vacant desk was off, having run out of power likely hours ago. The deeper recesses of the building were eerily silent. Anyone unfamiliar with the circumstances might surmise the building to be abandoned, which should be impossible since over a dozen Politas called this building their home.

Dia confirmed the absence of any lurking figures — behind the desk, inside the supply closet (a one-time hideout), and beneath the empty patient beds. Moving silently, like a specter, Dia navigated her way towards the basement, drawn by the faint melody of snores escaping past the wooden door.

She knew better than to open the door and count how many Politas there were. The pillbug-like maidens had a knack for hiding out of sight when panicking.

Inhaling deeply, she rapped on the door with force, raising her voice into a commanding shout. "You have three apples or else!" she declared, her voice sending a wave of startled 'eeps' and tiny shrieks reverberating through the room on the other side.

A clamor of hurried movement ensued, the maidens springing into action. Dia retraced her steps upstairs. Stopping at the reception desk, she opened the snack drawer and sure enough, there were some apples there. She picked the first and bit down, the loud crunch serving as a ticking clock for the feral-born maidens that had a rather poor sense of time.

It was exactly at the end of the third apple that the Politas had clambered into the reception area. One and all wore the brown-white healer's uniform. They stood in two lines, antennae waving in a slight panic as they nervously glanced at their mentor, the very same who was currently glaring them down.

"Aside from the usual itinerary, today we do double inventory and sanitization," Dia's announcement was punctuated by the collective flinch of her pupils. "No matter the hour, twilight or dawn..."

"... there must always be a helping hand," the Politas recited in unison. Their bodies mimicked their resignation; antennas dropping, heads bobbing in acknowledgment.

"I will be writing the finished parasite report," her gaze swept over each of the maidens. "You will take turns to read the abbreviated form out loud. Make sure to check your words while you do inventory." She waited for a heartbeat, softening her glare and breaking out into a smile. "This report might make your teacher famous all over the kingdom."

Her proclamation brought about awe in the eyes of the huddled nurses-in-training. It stirred a little pride inside Dia. The report was a thorough exploration of detection, containment, cure, and eradication strategies for the parasitic plant. Even if the infestation didn't make it anywhere else, the report had some potential far-reaching implications within the field of brain-healing. This presented the tantalizing possibility of her work being replicated and disseminated across the continent, a paper trail leading right back to her by name.

Idly she mused about what her mother and mentors would say if they stumbled onto the report. The lofty dreams of humble but far-reaching recognition came to an abrupt end when someone knocked at the door.

[[Break 2]]

"Are you open?" a man's voice called from the other side.

Dismissing all Politas except two to start inventory and sanitation, Dia went to smooth her dress and stopped. She was still wearing the spiky black armor. "Shit," she whispered under her breath, hastily removing the pieces and handing them over to her first assistant. The diminutive maiden wobbled under the weight, hurriedly hobbling off to drop it elsewhere as Dia went to answer the door.

"Good mor-"

Her greeting came to a halt when she saw the duo standing before her. An older male with a scruffy, angry look that was mixed with disappointment and worry lines. His clothes were clean but well-worn, his black hair carefully combed. Next to him was a

young girl with the same coal-dust hair that stared firmly at the ground while holding back tears. Dia knew neither of them by either name or face, but their expressions were impossible to mistake for anything else.

“Threshold.”

The man nodded solemnly, and the girl sobbed.

Dia’s shoulders sagged, glancing at the man. “Do you...?”

“Her mother is a Centaur,” he stated. “Sir Rollo refuses to treat her. He said the Lord will handle such matters.”

“And he will,” Dia answered solemnly. “Please give your details to my assistant so she can write them down; your family will be properly compensated.” She turned to the girl, reaching out a comforting hand as the human marched past them. “You don’t need to worry. Thresholding into a Centaur takes longer than most others, but you’ll be taken care of.”

The girl's defenses crumbled, surrendering to a suppressed sob. She grasped Dia’s hand as the healer led her into the building. The girl gave her father a long look, but he did not return it.

Despite experience dictating against it, Dia couldn’t help but scour the man's features, finding the subtle indications of his silent struggle. His sigh of relief, barely audible, at her closing remarks, his eyes darting, evading his daughter's tear-streaked face, showed the unshed grief. For a human daughter, the greatest gift a family could wish for, to go through the threshold and become a maiden...

The process was a harsh one. A human female would be expected to grow as a part of the family, typically to be wedded to someone of higher status and thus elevating the family as a whole. The purity of human blood was nothing to scoff at. Both minor and major nobles would even come to blows over insinuations of there being a maiden in their family tree. Thus, a human woman was expected to know matters of business, or at the very least of management, so that they could stand proud at the helm of their own enterprises or those of their husbands.

By contrast, a maiden of that age would have been working in one thing or another for several years. Even a pre-pubescent Centaur could outrun and outlast any human, their strength enough to shatter bones if ill-used. At the age of sixteen, they would be seeking a partner for her, likely a trusted friend of the family who could at least provide a token price.

In this context, the threshold was a tragedy, the size of it being proportional to how well-off the family happened to be. But in this rural small city, Dia could only really think of one reason why they would consider selling their daughter to Rollo or the Lord. The answer was plain to see in the man's shoes. They were worn, cracked and scuffed, riddled with holes, poorly kept.

It all played out as she'd witnessed it a dozen times. The man gave his information, was given a promissory note to be paid upon the ending of the threshold, and with a quiet goodbye, he left.

There were many things going through Dia's mind, but her focus remained on the girl, ushering her into one of the private rooms, specifically the one that had the largest reinforced bed. She prompted the girl to sit and raise her shirt. There, on her abdomen, were the first signs of the transformation: two dark protrusions barely as thick as her thumb, shaped like hoofs, and dark in coloration.

"The process isn't painful," Dia explained, lowering the shirt and pooling her energy around the girl. The human slowly relaxed, nodding as she kept her eyes fixed on the floor. "Most thresholds take about a week, but since you're going to become a Centaur, it will take a month to finish."

The girl nodded again, gripping her knees tightly. "My father wanted me to stay," she whispered. "But I know he can't..."

"A thresholding Centaur eats a lot," Dia squeezed her hand, feeling a swell of pride at the girl's courage.

Thresholding could sometimes come with risks, depending on the breed they were becoming. Centaurs were one of the few possible cases where they needed to consume great amounts of nourishment lest their bodies end up crippled for life. By any estimate, the following weeks would see the girl eating as much as ten adults.

"Do not worry, you will meet him again, and your mother as well."

The girl's throat tightened. "But-"

"The Lord wishes for maidens to not be property anymore," she explained. "Once you begin to work for the Lord, you will be given a wage. What you do with this wage will be your choice, even if it means giving some or all of it to your family."

The daughter and father would meet in the near future, perhaps by chance, or maybe to check up on how things were going. Either way, it would be once his daughter had



become a maiden in full, and hopefully by then she would have learned to be strong in ways no human was meant to be.

Now, if Dia could only hammer that lesson into Rick's head...

She blinked in rapid succession, tears running down her cheeks, blue eyes dazzling with emotion. "Then-"

"However," Dia squeezed the hand, meeting the gaze intently. "You will still be a maiden. It is not an easy life. Are you the first threshold in your family?"

"My cousin," came the mumbled response. "She became a Doggirl."

Her answer confirmed Dia's suspicion. Thresholding was a rare event, but when it occurred within a family, there were often several cases in quick order.

The girl's hands clung to her skirt, her knuckles white. "I-I know what comes next. I know they'll hold a wake for me, and that I... my name..."

It was a crucial step in accepting maidenhood. The old had died, and in its place, something new. Where a human was meant to stand, a maiden was meant to follow. Rick insisted this was not how it was meant to be. Kiara, Monica, and even Urtha were of a mind that maidens were not meant to follow. But Dia disagreed. The feral curse was proof of the importance of this hierarchy, for without their human partners, a maiden would be nothing more than a mindless beast.

"The Lord will name you once you've fully adjusted," she promised, giving a reassuring smile. "The bond with him is very special; it doesn't require a collar."

"Oh." The girl's eyes flickered to Dia's neck.

"I wear mine out of habit." She reached up to her neck and undid the clasp. "It's one you should not forget. You might catch someone's eye and find them agreeable; in which case, the habit will save you from potential accidents."

She nodded again. "Is the curse..." The words lingered in the air for a moment. "My mother told me that the curse, for a Centaur, meant wanting to run away..."

The signs were there; no doubt, her mother had 'the talk' with the young girl by now.

"You will experience a bit of the curse as you approach the final changes," Dia smiled gently. "It won't be allowed to progress past two or three days, enough so you can get a feel for it." And, hopefully, if the girl found herself going feral, then she would be able to spot the signs and quickly look for help. "You'll also learn how to prepare yourself to

bond with someone.” But that was a concern for later; there were other things she needed the girl to be focused on. “Do you know how to read and write?”

With a hesitant nod, the girl affirmed.

Dia knew well the significance of offering a glimmer of hope, a touch of the familiar in a world about to be unceremoniously upturned. “In that case, you’ll likely be assigned to be a teacher to others, at least for a while. The Lord values education among his servants, and he wishes to keep those who are educated well paid.” Her words, though filled with uncertainty, held a promise of purpose and belonging, something to hold onto amidst the storm of change.

The process was painless, but it was not easy. Having something to strive for could make quite a difference.

“Is the Lord... should I be ready?”

A tender knowing smile crept onto Dia's face. “Our Lord,” she began, “carries the weight of many duties. His few indulgences, infrequent as they are, don’t reach further than his own abode.”

The girl's apprehension peaked as she broached the delicate topic. “The Fledgling...” Her face flushed, hands clenched in her lap. “I’ve heard tales... He binds her... Uses her as he pleases...”

Dia laughed lightly, a warm, reassuring sound. “I bet she wishes that were the case,” her amusement painting her voice as she waved off the girl’s concerns. “Don’t fret, the rumors are wildly exaggerated. I doubt you would manage to grab his attention even if you tried.”

The words would’ve been cruel if aimed at a fully grown maiden, but they were comforting to the girl. There was no shortage of tall tales about cruel nobles who did nothing but lust after maidens who had once been human. A few of the more outlandish stories involved nobles partnering with Vampires to satisfy their dark desires. Yet, having met an actual Vampire and an actual victim of said Vampire, Dia found it likelier to believe that such a human would have their days numbered.

The girl nodded and relaxed a little as she appeared to look for something else to ask, but couldn’t find anything specific.

“Now,” Dia urged the girl gently, “rest. It is important that you ask for food and water every time you feel the need for either. Do not hesitate in this, do you understand?” She

left the question hanging in the air, the girl responding with a meek nod. “You will be given a bell; use it anytime you need anything.”

“Thank you,” the girl muttered.

And that was just the start of Dia's day.

Leaving the girl to her thoughts, Dia immediately instructed the Politas to maintain a constant rotation at the girl's door. Following this, she found some Mousegirls from the militia and recruited them to be a constant presence with the Politas to ensure they wouldn't forget. This was one job they were not allowed to mess up.

Thus, her day began.

As the city fully woke up, reconstruction returned to full swing. Injuries, both small and large, began streaming through the door, sometimes even requiring her to head out and treat the victim on site. Most were manageable, although the Politas took longer to treat the wounded, laboring for hours where a trained healer would have taken mere minutes. The more serious cases - those that demanded Dia's personal attention - merited a call-out. It served as a gathering call for all Politas, offering them an opportunity to learn by watching.

Some patients squirmed under the exposure, a few even dared to complain about it. But their options were insubstantial. Even the humans looking for some leverage would find none. The only authority over Dia was the Lord, and it was widely known she might as well be his left arm. Anyone wanting to impose themselves on her could go suck on a boot for all she cared. The inconvenience of being under the scrutiny of a dozen Politas was a better alternative to a potential future where they'd be dead because her nurses weren't prepared.

Normally during lunch, there would be a lull in the accidents, but an accident near the logging district caused a collapse. There were plenty of serious injuries, but fortunately, nothing that couldn't be handled. By the time she'd worked through the last broken bone, Dia realized what time it was and rushed her way back home.

The welcoming scent of warm food greeted her.

Rick was conspicuously absent. The pair of shoes haphazardly tossed next to the stairs leading to the basement were a strong enough clue as to his current whereabouts. She chuckled lightly, leaving a mug of Polita mead on the counter. She filled her plate and sat down to eat.

“He's with Urtha.”

Dia's knees banged the table, the fork in her hand flinging out in the direction of the voice. By the time she caught up to who'd spoken, she'd been just about ready to grab the knife. "Don't scare me like that."

Eva emerged from the shadow, prying the fork out of her shoulder and handing it over. "You said I sucked at hiding," her voice held a petulant edge.

"If I'm looking for you. I thought you'd have run off since Rick's here." Dia cast a cleaning spell and sat back down to eat.

"I need to know that... thing isn't a joke." Eva hissed, her pale face instantly gaining a hint of redness.

Dia quirked a brow. So it had come to this? "When we left from Astunes, we traveled to Balet alongside several companions, all humans from Rick's world." She twirled the fork against the plate. "I struck up a conversation with one of his students, Miss Catherine. She insisted on being called Kat. She was quite candid about how stuffy, restrictive, and 'prudish' she found the clothes to be." Dia shrugged. "I asked her what she would've preferred to wear, and at the time, I thought it a mistake."

"It's not!?"

Another nonchalant shrug. "The way I see it, there is a literal Succubus floating around him. So far, we've been lucky that Kiara still thinks that being naked and twirling a finger is enough."

"She's a charmer. Of course it's enough," Eva replied with a deadpan. "Men, women, maidens, and matrons. Everyone ends up a drooling mess when she starts pumping out her powers."

"And yet the strategy holds the same effectiveness on Rick as if Monica were the one doing it," Dia made a shooing motion with her fork. "Now leave me be. If you're too afraid to try, then don't worry, I have my own plans."

"Don't you think I will forget you-"

"Oh hey, Rick."

Eva cut her words short and plunged into the shadows. Only after a heartbeat of silence did she emerge again, openly glaring at Dia as the healer chuckled. But before she could openly complain about the little trick, the door to the basement swung open.

A shirtless Rick made his way directly to the counter, glancing at the mug. "This mine?" he asked, not waiting an instant after Dia's affirmative grunt. He downed it in a single

long gulp. Wiping his mouth clean, he slumped on the chair opposite the healer, entirely ignorant of the shadow in the far corner that vanished out of sight.

[[Break 3]]

“Long day?” Dia asked with a grin.

“Getting the tribe to sit down and listen to the proposal was... manageable.” He let out a long groan, practically draping himself over the chair. “Then things got nasty. Lots of screaming, lots of swearing, lots of things getting thrown around. Urtha nearly dragged me out of there a few times.”

“Surely not out of concern for your safety,” Dia cheekily commented, eyes unabashedly dancing on his sweat-slickened chest.

“No comments,” he deflected. “I’ve at least managed to wrangle them towards agreeing to learn and look into the whole legality.”

She nodded slightly. “Is she still... breaking things? Is she safe?”

“She’s still cracking tables, if that’s what you’re asking,” he mumbled. “But it’s taking her longer, so small victories.”

Dia paused. “Then why are you...?” She made a gesture at his clearly exhausted figure.

“Just... lifting weights,” he answered vaguely, averting his eyes. “No further comments.”

The temptation to ask was there, but most likely it would be juicier to get the details out of the Orc. So, she kept her tongue tied and moved to pick up her dirty dishes. Yet the moment she stood, Rick had clambered back to his feet, snatching the plates and utensils from her hands.

“Hey,” she protested lightly, her lips curling into a smile when he kissed her cheek and made his way to the kitchen.

“It’s my turn to clean,” he stated with a tone that left no room for arguments. “I heard about the collapse, you’ve had plenty on your plate today.” Rick grinned slightly. “I also heard you saved everyone.”

“No one was going to die.” She waved him off, but didn’t make any moves to stop him, turning enough so that her eyes could linger on his back.

There were no scars there, and the sun had been kind to Rick, giving a light, healthy tan to his formerly pale complexion. She quietly took in the way sweat glistened and ran down his back. It took her a good minute to find the will to stand up and dry him off. "It's better you don't catch a cold." The cloth was applied gently; the maiden leaned closer, caressing his shoulders. "I can't help but notice it always seems to be your turn when cleaning."

"If I allowed you to spoil me all the time, I'd become one gigantic potato."

"Lies." She hugged his waist, pressing the cloth against his stomach and leaning to whisper into his ear. "You'd become a wheel of cheese." Her words were followed by a light pinch of his flanks. "Don't be too cruel to yourself. Firmness has its merits, but a little softness here and there would be healthier." Her caress moved to his back once more, intending to trail her way down to his pants, but stopping when she found tension. "Is... something bothering you?"

"Nothing escapes you, huh." He chuckled lightly. "It's... the whole situation with this world, and Sinco, I've been thinking about it."

He let out a soft grunt as she began to massage into his muscles, undoing the knots with small applications of her power, allowing his body to relax and recover. It didn't stop him from continuing his work, using ash and water to scrape off and clean the plates, the splashing water mingling with little grunts of satisfaction.

She patiently allowed him to finish. Once he placed the cleaned wooden platters aside, he leaned more heavily into the counter. "When I came to this world, I barely paid any mind to the radio tower in Astunes. It was just... there, this large metal thing I'd seen a thousand and one times in my world. It was normal to me." His hands spread flat against the wood, eyes closed in concentration. "In my world, everyone could talk to anyone else at the press of a button. I could literally send messages and talk with people that were continents away with barely any effort."

"I've heard such things here too," Dia commented.

"Objects worth fortunes that only a handful of people could ever afford to make or own," he replied, shaking his head. "Information, my world was a place chock-full of it. I'm talking about even the lowliest person having more information within their grasp than they could ever know what to do with." He paused, letting out another groan as she pressed into his lower back. "I had the option to be updated about wars involving complete strangers in lands I've never visited. The progress, the fallout, all of it accessible. Many overlooked this convenience, and admittedly, so did I. Yet, the possibility was always a mere click away," he tapped the counter again, punctuating his

point. "Being disconnected felt natural when we were journeying. My family had a farm, going there to break free from all the bustle was a relief..."

"But?" She held the word out.

"But when I tried to understand what was going on with this world, with this kingdom, it was like a gigantic slap in the face. I'm blind." He was glaring at the wall. "Anything I find is out of date by months if not years, and I rarely, if ever, have any way to verify its validity. And it just kept making me think about Sinco."

Dia's eyebrows rose in interest, her face assuming a more alert expression. "Hm?"

Rick was clearly grappling with his thoughts. "Astunes is a mere speck compared to Sinco. They're barely a line on a map, but they had a radio tower and Sinco didn't." Another tap. "Why? Why would Thorley not tap into this source of information? I kept thinking he might have been a moron for not seeing the potential. To turn the Lightning-vault into a radio tower would've been far easier than making that tower in some remote village with barely a couple dozen homes."

"Perhaps he sought isolation, to have a better excuse to stay out of touch?" she suggested, applying a bit more warmth to his back.

"I thought it might be the case. But I spoke to Rollo today, and when I asked about the prospect of getting a radio tower, he mentioned how much Thorley had wanted one." He growled slightly. "Particularly, he kept talking about the lengths he'd gone to try and acquire the equipment, but how there was clearly some ploy in place as every time it would be thwarted."

"He does seem overly boastful at the wrong time."

"The documentation was there to prove the purchases, and he didn't lie either." Rick shook his head. "It reeked of a pattern, and I just kept circling around the notion, over how convenient it was."

Should she put it off? Were her Lord's safety and plans more important than the life of innocents? Her hands lingered on his chest.

Maybe there was an alternate way; maybe she could find a way to send the report to Seledo, or Balet, or Astunes, something to bypass Aubria and thus avoid the Darktons. But such a task would be nearly suicidal for the messenger. Sinco was in a corner of the kingdom, and the great forest kept it isolated from all other cities except Aubria. Any messenger seeking to go directly to the other cities would need to travel for a month through the deadly wilderness. Perhaps if they sent a flier to head south into the sea,

then east, and then followed the snowy peaks north until they reached Astunes? No, that would be even worse; the Frostcaller was awakening again.

“One week,” he whispered, caressing her shoulder. “If I can’t find a solution by then, send your report.”

“But-”

“If a swarm of plant-feral-zombies were to infect the kingdom, we’d be toast.” He chuckled, his voice thick with reassurances. “Nobility is at least easier to negotiate with.”

Dia leaned against him, laying her ear against his chest. “Does the bond let you read my thoughts?”

“No, you’re just a terrible liar.” He kissed her head and pulled her into a hug. “I’d like to read your report, by the way.”

“It’s nothing special, it’s full of boring, dry text.”

“All the more reason you should be there when I read it.” He chuckled. “I’ll definitely need your help to understand it.”

A swell of pride fluttered inside her chest, and she hugged him back. Yes, she could work with this. Maybe if she removed her name from the report, passed it off as Thorley’s healer...

The moment was interrupted with a thud.

Urtha stepped out of the basement, completely naked and uncaring about the lack of clothes. “Spikes,” she greeted, smiling widely as she marched towards them, picking up the bucket Rick had been using and drinking from it.

Their human visibly shuddered. “Urtha, that’s...”

“Ash, water, some food.” She shrugged. “Water is water.”

Rick visibly recoiled, his face twisting into a grimace. “Ugh,” he trailed off, shuddering, unable to finish his sentence.

“You’re too bothered by things that don’t matter,” the Orc retorted with stubborn defensiveness. But she didn’t press further, turning her attention to Dia. “Haal is with child.”

Dia’s face split into a wide smile, heart soaring as she let go of Rick to give her sister her full attention. “The tribe must be buzzing! A parthenogenesis Orc is-”



"It's big, yeah," Urtha nodded with a self-satisfied smirk, giving a punitive look at Rick. "See? This is the proper response. Not that stale 'good for her' crap."

The comment earned a scowl from Dia. "You said that!?"

"I'm happy for Haal. I just don't know what you expect from me." He held his arms up in a poor attempt at appeasement. "I've barely had a handful of conversations with her. As far as anyone is concerned, I'm basically a stranger."

Urtha huffed, crossing her arms. "Have you forgotten what your title is, F-A-T-H-E-R?"

Rick paled for a moment, then scowled. "Haal is married. I know she's married because her husband is one of the men looking for a divorce."

"Any maiden born from the tribe is of the tribe. A tribe you are the Father of," the Orc insisted. "And Haal is no slouch, she-"

"Urtha, if you would, a moment," Dia interrupted, raising her hand and turning her attention to their human. "Rick, in your world, if..." She paused, biting her lip, her mind working to frame the question the right way. "Suppose you were a resident of a village or town, and a neighbor brought a child into the world, how often are you expected to help with the child's upbringing?"

He jerked a little, looking pensive. "None? In most cases the answer is a very solid 'no'. Anything that goes beyond that hinges on what sort of friendship I'd happen to have with them. If they were family, or close friends, then I guess the norm would be to visit each other's home every few weeks? And to lend a hand if the parents have to do something and need someone to look over the child."

"And you were raised this way?" Urtha was the one to ask, her thick brows knitted together in a look bordering on concern. "This explains so much."

Without allowing him to complain, she pulled Rick into her meaty embrace, thick fingers patting his hair as he struggled (and failed) to escape. "Hey!"

"Families are large," Dia stated matter-of-factly, grinning from ear to ear as she watched him give up his attempts to find freedom from Urtha's hug. "And a tribe is one very big family."

"Haal is my sister; we have fought many battles together. She is a great warrior, and I'm sure her daughter will be no slouch," she rumbled, squeezing him tighter.

"A daughter, mind you, that will be born an Orc," the healer casually danced around the two, looking for his gaze. "The only other Orc-born the tribe has witnessed within its

lifespan is Urtha. This will no doubt be seen as a great boon, and a sign that your promise for a better future is being fulfilled." The smile only grew. "You wouldn't want to give a cold shoulder to your niece, would you?"

He visibly twitched, then froze. "Niece?" It escaped his lips like some horrifying echo.

"Why are you more terrified of the idea of having a niece than of fighting the kingdom?" Dia teased.

"I can bomb a kingdom! I can't do that with..."

"I'm sure she'll eventually be strong enough; it would make for good training," Urtha muttered out loud.

"NO!" Rick and Dia spoke at the same time.

The Orc just rolled her eyes and huffed. "Whatever the case, you'll have to help her find a good husband."

"What?"

"Divorce, that whole nonsense," she finally let him go, glaring at him. "If you succeed in making it a reality, and Haal's husband leaves her... if you do not help her find someone else..."

"Not you," Dia snapped, then quickly put back her amused grin. "Besides, wouldn't want the mother of the next generation's Urtha to hold some vendetta."

He collapsed against the chair, rubbing his temples as his eyes were glued to some invisible horizon. "Damn it all."

"Just remember to look for the positive," the healer reassured, patting his shoulder. "It will serve as good practice."

"Oh." He straightened slightly, blinking rapidly. "Huh." His eyes moved from Urtha to Dia, then back.

It was the quiet that followed the statement, a hesitation as he turned to look at the floor and frowned. The silence strangled out anything either of them could've said, but both maidens shared a concerned look all the same.

"I guess I should be thinking about that sort of thing too."

"Rick?" Dia asked.

"No... it's nothing." But it was everything. It was the look he had when he'd found a problem he could not ignore. "What would happen if Monica got pregnant right now?" His question lingered in the air like a sword.

"It'd be practically impossible," Urtha commented. "The stronger the maiden, the harder it is for them to be with child before becoming a matron."

But that wasn't what Rick wanted, Dia knew. She stepped forward, looking at him intently. "The child would be seen as a potential gift to be traded for amicable relationships with some noble family. She would grow up to become a prized knight. No one would see her as your child, let alone an heir."

"I see." His brows furrowed. "I don't like it."

And just like that, everything changed.