

---

## [025] [Crisis]

---

When Rick woke, it was to the emptiness of a dark room. He was alone. With a sigh, he fumbled his way around, looking for his clothes. And then he fumbled his way around until he found the door.

It was still dark outside, but the sky only had the first hints of purple dawn.

“Sir?”

Rick nearly screamed, jumping and turning around to look at the source of the squeaky voice. Who needs coffee when you could just jumpstart your adrenaline with a heart-attack? The source of the voice had been a short maiden, barely over a meter tall, solid black eyes devoid of pupils, antennae twitching wildly in the air. She was a Polita.

“Yeah?” He tried to put up a neutral smile.

The maiden stepped forward, raising a wooden mug. “Healer Spikes said that you should be given medicine as soon as you woke up.”

He eyed the honeyed fluid, all too aware of how it was made. “... thanks...” Taking the mug, he eyed it warily. “Hey, where...?” As soon as he raised his gaze in search of the bug maiden, she’d left. “Drats.”

With a resigned sigh, he took a sip. Was it bad that it tasted good? He tried not to think about the production method. “This feels like when I found out how packaged meat is made.” He mumbled, walking and trying to put his mind in order.

The tribe wasn’t asleep, but it wasn’t awake either. Maidens were mulling about, but the green-skins were the ones looking like they were on their way to take a long nap. Most didn’t pay him any mind, and only a few seemed to recognize him out of those that did.

It was odd, feeling like something should happen. Some part of him imagined there would be more of a reaction, a parting of the crowd, maybe a wave. But maybe this was better.

He had enough on his plate.

Following the bond in Dia's direction, he found the maiden surrounded by a dozen Politas. The pink-haired healer was kneeling in front of a bowl of water. Slowly, she dipped her thumb and forefingers into opposite ends of the liquid.

"You start slowly." She intoned, a trickle of green light reaching out. "You need to keep it submerged. Humans and most maidens are made of water, it's important to move your energy through water without causing damage."

### ***Most?***

"You need to make the ends meet without disturbing the water. If you cause ripples or splashes, you need to start over." The captive audience watched. A thread of green light inched its way from her right hand and into the left. "For those of you who do this, the next step would be..." Slowly, she pulled her fingers back, disconnecting the light and leaving the glowing thread inside the bowl, where it dispersed. "Remember, you need to get it right three times in a row to move to the next step."

Nods shared all around.

Dia handed over the bowl to the closest Polita and stood up. She saw Rick, and gave a little smile as she approached.

"You're not wearing your cute armor," he said as she hugged him.

"That's for the Orcs. My little helpers would run away if they saw me in it." She leaned closer, kissing his nose. "You should rest more."

"Are those the healer's orders?"

"Would you follow them if they are?"

He chuckled, taking her arm as they walked. "I might. I definitely see a nap soon with your name on it."

She preened, hugging his arm closer. "Would you like an update of the situation or should we delay work related conversation until I've put my armor on?"

A little shrug. "Want to walk? Show off a little?"

Preening, Dia smiled from ear to ear and led the way towards the edge of the camp.

"We're almost ready to depart. The prep-work has been going smoothly."

"I've been meaning to ask." Rick pointed over his shoulder at the tribe. "When do we plan to take the huts down?"

“The wood will be chopped and left behind. It’d be easier to make the huts from scratch.” The Rapha nodded mostly to herself. “Most of the work has gone towards securing a corridor.”

She stopped at the edge of the camp’s southern edge and gestured ahead. The maiden was oozing enthusiasm, though that left Rick unsure what he was looking at other than a bunch of chopped trees and an expanse of plains further out.

“A... safety corridor?”

“Exactly!” Dia nodded. “Typically, the tribe would’ve just moved out and left behind anything that might slow them down. But that only worked when the tribe was mostly Orcs.”

He nodded a little. “But we’ll be moving more slowly than they’re used to.”

“Thus why we need to copy the kingdom’s evacuation protocols.” She intoned with a sagely nod. “The areas are being swept for ferals.”

“But...” Rick frowned a little, trying to imagine the situation. “The ferals wouldn’t pose a threat to the tribe, not unless it’s some freak situation where they stampede.”

“They don’t need to pose a threat to the tribe. They only need to be dangerous to a human.” Dia’s tone hardened. “All the feral would need to do is hide when the tribe approaches and come out when it’s least convenient for us. More so if they’re desperate or starving.”

There was a mark of warning, but mixed with... purpose? “I would’ve only thought to put everyone in combat stations. You know your stuff.”

Dia swelled with a dazzling smile. “I had top marks.”

“For a second there, I was worried that you were only cute.” His hand tugged at her hip, and the maiden obliged, leaning into his shoulder. “So you learnt military safety doctrine, and superpowered healing, anything else in that tool-belt of yours?”

“Animal husbandry?” she muttered. “Since I’d volunteered to go to a small village, I wasn’t sure if it’d be useful.”

“You people have animals other than boars and birds?” Rick chuckled.

“Cows, chicken, deer, horses, goats...” she listed off, using her free hand to count. “Nobles are usually the only ones with the money to run shelters and steadings.”

“Special needs?”

“Mostly protection from thieves and ferals.” Walking next to him, she nudged him in a different direction. “When the instructor told us the cow was worth its weight in elemental stones, half the girls didn’t even dare step close to the pen.”

“And here I am, the dude that comes from cheese country.”

“Cheese?” Dia blinked a moment. “Isn’t it made with soybeans and oils?”

Rick gagged a little. “No, that’s... yeah, no, no, that’s just wrong. Cheese comes from milk.”

“Was your country’s cheese good?”

“More like they make it in absurd amounts.” He paused a moment, rubbing his chin. “The average citizen ate about... thirty kilos of cheese a year?”

Dia nodded along, then slowed.

Then stopped.

Her eyes were fixed on him.

“Thirty kilos. A year.” She declared. “And... how much milk do you need to make milk cheese?”

“Huh.” Rick rubbed at his chin. “Ten liters?”

Dia blinked slowly. “... that would require one cow for every three humans.” Her gaze became distant, eyes opening like saucers. “That... so many cows...”

“Yeah, about a fourth of the country’s territory is used either for the cows to roam, or to grow the food that feeds the cows.”

His words seemed to fall into deaf ears. The maiden was looking off into the distance with unfocused eyes. Her steps remained slow, following along and making vague affirmative sounds.

When she regained her focus, she looked at him with a frown. With a tug of her hand, she halted them both, moving to place her hands on his arm. They glowed.

“What’s wrong?”

“I need to check something.” Her hands reached up, grasping his chin and turning his head this way and that. Her frown deepened. “This is bad. This explains so much. I should’ve known sooner.”

“What?” He took a step back.

“At least a third of you is cheese.” She declared with a grave nod. “That’s why you’re so pale and don’t like the heat.”

Rick slapped her hand away, the maiden breaking into a fit of giggles. “Hush, you.”

“I should’ve brought cheese-balls to train my healing on.” She continued.

“Hey!” He reached out to grab her.

“No wonder Eva wants a bite!” She slipped away with a grin, staying just a step ahead as he tried to catch her. The healer let out a sharp laugh and kept pace, always a step ahead.

And right as he’d been about to run, she stopped.

They toppled over, Dia holding on to his chest and laughing louder still as they rolled. Someway, somehow, the maiden angled them both so that the roll would end with him on top. Pink hair sprawled in a halo around her head, violet eyes glistening.

“My cheesy hero.”

“I’ll shut you up.” He leaned closer.

Her breath caught. “Make me.”

So he did.

Her arms wrapped around his neck, kissing him back.

There was a holler. They both snapped at the sound, realizing at the same time that they were well within sight of the tribe and its many maidens. Maidens that were waking up and staring.

Dia’s grip didn’t quite give away, though. “I hope you could shut me up some more tonight.” She whispered into his ear.

And then it clicked.

“You sent Monica away with Eva, and Kiara…”

“Is on sentry duty.” Her eyes twinkled mischievously. “I’ll have you all to myself.”

Pulling himself up with his added passenger, he made a gesture towards the village.

“Let’s get today’s stuff done, then. Wouldn’t want to keep the greedy dragoness waiting.”

Dia dimpled. “You will obey, fleshy human,” she whispered, then blushed fiercely, a darker shade of red than her hair. With her being bridal-carried, the maiden had every opportunity to bury her face into his chest.

They had a nice non-soup breakfast. Then Dia helped him wash up, and he helped her put on the very clunky set of armor. And by the time they were ready to get to work, the tribe had fully awoken and people were milling about their day.

There was a surprising lack of Urtha in the “main hall” of the tribe.

There wasn’t, however, a lack of fresh faces.

Rick vaguely recognized the two maidens from the previous night, though a lot of the event was a hazy memory. The duo were kneeling, held in place by the Orc guards and heavy chains.

The first of the two was a Hound, black canine ears atop her head, sharp eyes, and short dark hair. The other was a Doggirl, the weaker form, with brown hair and a smaller frame. Both had seen better days, neither were fighting against their restraints or captors.

When Rick stepped into view, with Dia at his side, both of the newcomers zeroed in on him. There was a dawning realization in their gazes. “Yes, I broke the feral curse from you two,” he said. “You’ll understand my precaution, so you’ll have to forgive my rudeness.” He took his seat, adding a bit of drama to the gesture. “What are your names?”

The two maidens shared a glance, dubious at first, then bowing. “Our names will be whatever-”

“No.” Rick interrupted. “You are not property. You are prisoners, yes, but not property. What are your names?”

The Hound spoke first. “I am Eli.”

The other one followed her lead. “My name is Vanessa.”

“Eli, Vanessa, great.” With a nod, Rick straightened out.

Dia stepped forward. “You are not the first, nor the last. Other maidens remain feral and will be awakened. We will ask them the same questions. Whether or not we look at you favorably will depend on how honest you are in your responses.” Slowly, she crossed her arms. “Tell us, what is the last thing you remember regarding Sinco’s circumstances and situation?”

The two canines eyed Dia, and then Rick. “May we ask who you work for... sir?”

“I work for myself, but you could say I have the trust of very important people further north.” A half-truth, he’d been the Earl’s guest, and he could trust the man would read anything he sent. But the noble was a neutral party at best, and a potential enemy at worst. “And, to my understanding, there are many things that have been happening that need to reach important ears.”

He glared, leaning forward and meeting their gazes. Trying to read them through the fresh bond was mostly futile. He had better hopes at knowing what they felt through their expressions. Both maidens were stuck in some point between doubt, panic, eagerness, and hope.

The Hound broke the silence, lowering her head until it touched the ground. “I am a Hunter. My duty is to protect the citizens from the feral threat. It is all I have known, and all I have done.” She inhaled sharply, gritting her teeth. “My last memory was of being given a report by the Baron’s knights. It stated a weakened predatorial feral had been spotted. We gathered a force to get rid of it. What we found was a Ghoul and her monsters.”

“It was an ambush.” The other blurted out. “They knew we were coming, the Baron-”

“Careful.” Dia raised her hand sharply, eyes intense. “It is dangerous to speak of crimes without proof, particularly of a noble. Do you have any to provide?”

“The Ghoul.” Eli spoke in a whisper, not moving an inch. “The only proof we have is her scent. It reeked of the Baron’s perfumes.”

“For all we know, that’s proof she successfully snuck into the place, or that she ate someone else who had been there.” Rick shook his head. “Tell us of Sinco’s circumstances.”

“But-” The Doggirl’s words were cut short when she noticed Eli glaring her way.

The Hound answered. “The ferals destroyed the farms at the start. Going out at night is a death-sentence, and even during the day the ferals will attack any that venture too far from the walls.”

“What’s the food situation?”

“Most of our food comes through fishing. The feral wave didn’t affect the sea. Last we checked the soil within the city had yet to be used for emergency farming.”

“Security?”

“Strained, everyday someone is lost. Ferals have become bold enough to climb the walls at night.”

Rick noted Dia becoming tense. “Something the matter?”

“Such drastic behavior, for ferals, is... rare.”

“Nothing is normal about them.” Eli nodded. “Even the loneliest of Mousegirls is as aggressive as a wrathful Dragoness. Strangest of all is that they rarely attack one another if there are alternatives available.”

That caught his attention. “That’s not normal either.”

“Nothing about this wave or the things that happened after are.” The Doggirl declared with an eager nod. “And the Baron-”

“Choose your next words very carefully.” Dia glared.

“Vi, don’t.” Eli shook her head slowly, rising from the ground, then sighing. “Forgive my friend. Events have been straining. We have lost much to this tragedy.”

“What was it she was trying to say?” Rick spoke slowly. “If you have doubts or lack of proof, then word is as if it were a rumor that you’ve heard rather than a fact.”

The Rapha glanced at him warily, but nodded.

Eli glanced at her companion, then at Rick. “We... had heard the Baron’s behavior previous to the feral wave had been erratic.” She waited for a heartbeat, glancing at Dia again, then at Rick. “There were rumors that he’d come to blows with the local head of the Hunters.”

“Could you try guessing why such a rumor would spread?”

“I couldn’t possibly fathom a reason.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter right now.” Rick rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “Before I send you off, I need detailed physical descriptions of companions that were with you the day of the attack. Hopefully we can find them amongst the boxed ferals.”

The duo nodded. “Are... are there any humans...?”

“The Ghoul killed many humans and took many more. If your human isn’t amongst those currently present in the tribe, then there’s not much more we can do.”



They nodded, ears drooping down as they provided descriptions of over a dozen maidens, and four humans. Rick watched them go, and waited. Once the door closed, Yasir emerged from the back of the hut.

“Got thoughts to share?”

“Their words matched most of what I knew. Which doesn’t mean there might not be half-truths or that they are keeping some information from us.” Yasir stroked his beard in consideration. “What... are your intentions for the city?”

“For now, my goal is to get as much information as I can get my hands on.” Rick avoided the question. “We’ll consider the options from there.”

“And the ferals?” Dia asked. “Taking them with us as they are now would slow us down and represent a great danger if something goes wrong.”

“I have a few ideas in mind.” He rubbed at his chin in thought, glancing at Yasir. “How many maidens would you be able to bond or awaken from the feral state in a single day?”

The man hesitated. “I...” Slowly, he stroked his beard. “I have only ever formed up to six bonds.”

“And if you didn’t have that limit?”

“I could maybe form a dozen in a day? Under normal circumstances, I mean.” He glanced at Dia for a moment. “But we only have a handful of spare collars as is.”

Rick took a moment to consider, looking at Dia, then at Yasir. “At that rate, we’re going to need over a week to process them all. We’re going to have to recruit help from the other humans in the tribe.”

Yasir nodded, albeit with a grimace. “About the collars... you wouldn’t be suggesting the tribe enter a rotation... right?”

Dia stepped up. “A rotation is when several maidens share the same collar. Since the curse takes a week to fully grab hold, in extreme cases a group of maidens can swap.” Her gaze darkened. “Doing so for a prolonged amount of time is not advisable. Morale aside, being in a state of continuously decaying sanity is not something just any could withstand unscratched.”

The comment made him think of Kiara, and how the Succubus would often remove her collar to pretend to be a human. A habit she’d used well before meeting him, before being able to do so without risking her mental state.

“There are a couple ideas about that, but I think we’ll manage.” But there was something else bothering him. “What’s the limit on how many bonds a human can form?”

Dia spoke up. “It depends on the lineage. The average human can only form up to five, while nobility has been able to sustain several dozen bonds at the same time.”

“Think it’s because of the blood purity they keep spouting?”

“Most likely.” She answered with a simple nod.

That meant he should be able to match that number. “Let’s get things rolling. If the healer units have nothing better to do, I need them to start a survey.”

“Survey of... what?”

“Who is bonded to who, what human has how many bonds, and with what maiden. Most important is that we need to know what members of the tribe are unhappy with their current partners, and what members of the non-tribe are slaves.” There were several things that needed to change, but it was best to make sure they happened in a controlled way. He turned to Yasir. “That learning thing. What were your plans?”

“My thoughts were to start things with a simple celebration before departing, use the chance to consume whatever we won’t take on the road,” he said. “From there, we could use the music to help morale during the travel. What would your thoughts be regarding drums?”

Rick perked up. “Drums?”

“Forgive my assumptions, but I’ve noticed you sometimes tap rhythms when in thought.”

Huh. He did? “Maybe an old habit from the band...” He quickly shook his head. “I think those would work. But I don’t know how drums are made.”

Yasir bowed. “My wife knows a thing or two, and I’m sure the tribe will welcome some minor side-projects.”

“That seems good. The bonding is still my priority.”

“We will keep it in mind.”

With a slight nod, the bearded merchant turned to leave, and Dia moved closer to Rick, staring at him. “You plan to bond all those maidens?” she whispered.

“Does my healer say it’s a bad idea?”

“I am not sure. Bonds have never put a strain on either partner. But bonds with you are different.” She grabbed his hand. “My concern is whether they can be broken safely.”

“We’ll have to do some tests when we can.” He muttered, shaking his head. “Kiara will be pissed off. I’m mostly sure she wanted a big-ass orgy to do the bonding thing.”

“I am sure her big fat ass will soften the blow.”

Rick shot her a look.

Dia rolled her eyes. “I acknowledge she isn’t the worst thing to happen to the world. It doesn’t mean I have to like her.”

This time, he quirked a brow.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said.

The brow rose further.

“Now you’re just messing with me.” She pouted.

“Perhaps.” He chuckled. “What’s the next item on the list?”

“Food, farming, and treatment of the farmers.”

His shoulders slumped. That was not going to be fun.

“Let’s check the fields and talk to the ones in charge of that...”

“Careful not to get a sunburn, cheese lord.”

She giggled, he glared.

---

## [026] [To be a Maiden (Eva)]

---

In the darkness's safety, Eva crouched, trying to use her body to conceal herself further out of sight. Her gaze could see through the shadows of the night without an issue, but so could the predator currently hunting her. Yet her current concern were her prey, animals mostly blind to the umbra, but with sharp noses and ears.

There was a shift in the wind, and the bush opposite to her rustled. Eva reacted, plunging into the shadows right as the boar set off in a mad dash for survival. What was it with these creatures and their uncanny ability to detect danger? The Fledgling pursued, cheap clothes snagging with thorns and low branches, pushing the dumb things out of the meadow and into the open field.

It would be there that she would have the definite advantage, and their fate would be sealed.

Her heart raced at the prospect of a meal, her mouth watered, nostrils catching the scent of fear and adrenaline. The shadows provided her cover and means to move faster, she was gaining on the animals, they split up and she only focused on the larger one, almost there, she was free, she just need to focus, to catch the dumb animal and-.

Eva's face slammed against the tree.

"Dead."

Monica let go.

The Fledgling whirled around, snarling as she clawed at empty air. The feline had vanished without a trace. She couldn't even catch the scent of the Sabretooth, the singular thing lingering in the air that was out of place was the smell of the blood that dripped out of her broken lip.

She growled, swiping the drop from her lips with her thumb, the injury already gone.

Wait, the boars!

"Shit."

Eva began to run after the animal, trying to regain the trail.

The edge of the meadow wasn't too far off, the animal didn't have many places to run to.

And yet, as far as she could see or smell, the thing was gone. It was like it had just up and vanished. Not giving up, Eva looked around, flaring out her power to scare the animal out of hiding, but only waking up some small birds that quickly flew off.

With fresh curses on her lips, she turned around to head back into the deeper areas. Perhaps she would get a better chance with-

Her feet were kicked out from under her, a massive paw slammed against her face, throwing her against the ground.

“Dead.”

Monica let go, stepping back.

This time, she didn't vanish.

“Do you have to keep doing that!?” Eva snarled, fighting through the ringing ears, feeling her own body putting itself back together. “You haven't even bothered to teach me how to hunt and you just keep attacking me!”

“If not survive, hunt fail.” She crossed her arms, snorting loudly.

“If you were hunting me, I'd be dead anyway.”

Eva didn't bother to pretend otherwise. Monica was a mountain and she was but a pebble, looking up at the monster. She wasn't even a challenge. With a frustrated growl, she held the sides of her head and grumbled. No, she wasn't supposed to have come here to play some brute's game.

“Eva stronger than pigs, Eva use shadow but pig cannot, Eva faster, Eva maybe smarter. But pig still survive.”

The Fledgling shot a withering glare, but said nothing. If she were better, the pigs wouldn't have run away. She would've seen the incoming attack. “Pretty sure the boars wouldn't survive against you.”

Monica yawned, shrugging. “Today Monica not catch five pigs.”

Truly? Eva perked up at the admission. “How did they escape?”

“Smart pigs.” Another easy shrug. The maiden drew a zigzag with her hand. “Used trees, found holes. Too annoying.”

It couldn't have been that simple. She glanced at the feline, taking a moment to consider, something like a tree or a hole shouldn't have been enough of a dissuasion, not against a Sabertooth.

The answer made itself apparent when they reached the edge of the meadow. There was a pile of dead animals waiting for them.

“Monica win.”

The damnable brute declared with a smirk, reaching into her pile and throwing one carcass at Eva. Though the Fledgling had the strength to catch it, she lacked the balance, falling over on her ass and looking down at the stinking hairy boar.

There was only one injury on the animal, a clean circular hole at the underside of its skull. One that likely reached all the way to its brain. That was... odd. Eva would've expected the typical injuries: broken bones, or claws. Monica was exceedingly capable in both departments.

“How did you kill it?”

The feline pointed at Eva's shadow. “Poke poke.” She then pointed at the backpack Eva had brought. “Give net?”

The Fledgling pulled out the bundle and felt herself cringe inwardly. Spinner-silk was quite expensive in this part of the world, the thread was both durable and light. Nobles would make tunics out of the thread and pay heaps of gold for it.

Yet when Monica had been offered clothes by the arachnid maiden, she instead asked for a net.

A net.

Made out of Spinner-silk.

So she could more easily carry dead animals about.

Evangeline just pushed the thought aside and focused on her meal, on the smell of blood and how her stomach demanded attention. Her fangs sharpened, and she bit into the animal's corpse. The taste was dull, like a week old gruel. Compared to the richness and fullness of a maiden's blood, this was bland, almost rancid.

But she needn't worry about uncomfortable questions if she drank from a mindless animal.

“How do you handle it?” She spoke the question, glancing at the Sabertooth. “When there’s nothing else and you...? No, never mind.”

She shook her head. It was a dumb question asked to the wrong person. Feralborn maidens were devoid of the social mores and morality of those born in civilization. They could kill, eat, and torture without constraint or hesitation.

“Rick does not like.” Monica shrugged. “If Monica have good food, why make Rick angry?”

“That’s... it? You only care because he might be angry?” Eva scowled. “Why? The bond only forces protection, not obedience, not empathy.”

The Sabertooth’s eyes turned upwards to the night sky. After a second, she sighed. “Sometimes Monica not strong. Weak, hungry, tired, hurt, angry, trapped. Then Rick help Monica.”

That... was it? “Anyone could do that.”

“Would Eva?”

Azure eyes peered into her red ones, and the Fledgling hesitated. It... was true that she would’ve dismissed the thought. A maiden like Monica, a Sabertooth, they were engines of murder. How many pages were dedicated to empathize how dangerous the Tigress clans were to oppose? Of how deadly it would be to enter their forests? Of how many had lost their lives attempting to conquer that part of the kingdom?

Why would a stalwart, nigh invisible wall of muscle and power need anything they couldn’t just take? It was the reason even those that had been caught could never be forcefully bonded or turned.

“No.” She admitted.

Monica smirked, smug all over.

“Is that what it means to be a maiden?” Eva sighed, looking down at the animal corpse, wiping away the blood from her mouth.

The feline shrugged. “Monica is Monica.”

“No, not what I...” Slumping her shoulders, the Fledgling ran her fingers through her long hair. “To be a maiden, the purpose, the meaning of what you’re meant to do, to be.”

“Monica is Monica.” The maiden rolled her eyes, tail flicking in annoyance. “Dia is Dia. Eva is Eva.”

“You don’t understand the question.” A shake of the head. “I’m not sure why-”

“Monica is Monica.” She growled, stepping closer to the Fledgling, a sharp claw poking into the smaller one’s arm, drawing blood.

“WHAT WAS THAT FOR!?”

The Sabertooth glared, poking her own shoulder with her claw, not leaving a scratch. “Hurt Eva but not hurt Monica. Eva is Eva. Monica is Monica.” The proclamation was as if it was the most obvious statement in the world.

Eva hated that to a point, it was. And she’d missed it. Whatever worked for Monica couldn’t necessarily work for her, because they weren’t the same. Still, she glared, rubbing at her shoulders as the regeneration kicked in, closing the wound. “You didn’t need to attack me to prove a point.”

Shaking her head, Monica lifted the net and walked off, not waiting for the Fledgling. It was a fast enough pace Eva had to jog just to keep up, the height difference was too extreme. “Where are we going now?”

“Follow.” Monica touched her nose. “Smell.”

There was nothing in the air save the blood of the massacred boars. Eva kept looking around, trying to figure out what the Sabertooth was following now. But aside from dried up tall grass and the casual tree, there was nothing that grabbed her attention. Maybe that was the point? Anything hiding out here would do their best to avoid drawing attention to itself. So she tried to spot anything out of place, anything that would be conveniently ignored at a first glance.

There was a shimmer in the air, one without light.

For a moment Eva had doubted her eyes, but when one particular bush appeared to change shape ever so slightly... “Is that it?”

Monica made a growling sound Eva was sure would’ve been chock-full of swear words had she actually bothered to vocalize it with understandable syllables. The feline dropped the loaded net exactly at the same time five figures shot from the bush in five different directions. The feline hesitated for a split second, leaping for the one heading in a leftmost direction.

Her claws went through air, the shadowy silhouette vanishing.

An illusion of some sort? Eva chose not to pursue, staying with the pile of dead hogs instead. The Fledgling idly wondered what sort of feral this was, ones able to cast



illusions weren't common, not after the nobles in the capital had put excessively big bounties for the capture of such ferals.

Vasian craving for amusement had-

Eva jumped forward. She wasn't sure why, at least not until she spotted the clawed hands that swiped at the air where she'd been moments ago. Two golden eyes glared at her, a snarl full of wicked sharp teeth and a creature larger than Monica. How had it even gotten this close!?

The monster swiped at the Fledgling, and she lunged out of the way. Her brain whirled through a panicked dozen options. Jumping into the shadows, she got herself as far away as she could from the feral, trying to at least give herself the space to understand what she was looking at. Depending on the feral, running away might be entirely better than buying time for Monica to return.

Yet when she pulled out of the darkness, heaving and gasping for air, there was no monster to be found. In its place were three maidens opening up the net and pulling out the carcasses. "HEY!"

Eva charged, and the trio turned to look at her, eyes gaining a deep pink glow.

The monster was back, taller than anyone Eva had seen and-

And it was gone when she charged through the thing, lunging at the thieves. She didn't manage to hit anything, but they made a run for it. The Fledgling gave chase, running with-

Her back exploded in pain, stumbling, head ringing loudly. Another strike followed the moment of disorientation, claws digging into her flank. She kicked and punched, trying to hit whatever was attacking her, but touched nothing but air. It was an illusion again. The ferals were there but invisible to her senses.

But what kind of ferals were they? She tried to hit the air again, looking for a possible target. Had they run off? The strike that dug into her shoulder said otherwise. Eva screamed, kicking and flinging his fists wildly. Whatever was attacking her was fast, or at least agile enough to avoid the blows.

How would one counter an illusion like this?

When they'd been far enough...

Ah.

Eva crouched low, sinking into her own shadow. Rather than move, she emerged at the same spot, seeing the three ferals spreading out in search for where their prey had escaped. Psychics. They weren't casting real illusions; they were tricking Eva's brain to think there was something else there. Her body screamed as the claws wracked down her back.

Psychic illusions, only able to attack with claws and fang, working as a pack...

Plunging back into the shadow, Eva held her breath, trying to peer out of the murky darkness that surrounded her. But the blackness didn't give her anything. Only once she came out could she vaguely identify the shapes that caught up with her. The Fledgling raised her arms, blunting some of the blows. Why were they attacking and not running away!?

With a scream, Eva pushed whatever she could grasp of her energy outwards, releasing it in a wave. The attack itself didn't do much, it only startled her foes. And it was enough for one of them to falter. Grasping the creature with an iron grip, the Fledgling yanked her closer and bit down.

The feral screamed, and her sisters attacked. Eva didn't let go, she couldn't afford to. She'd tasted blood, satiating her growing hunger, speeding up the healing from the blows she got from the others. There was something off about the taste, but she wasn't about to care or worry, drinking her fill and identifying her attackers.

Foxgirls? Those were rare in the plains, more frequently found in forests where they had many more places to hide. Considered smart for someone under the feral curse. They must've been part of the wave, left behind or splintered off. The ferals lunged, Eva placed their companion in the way.

She realized it'd been an illusion a moment too late. Her two attackers savagely tore at her flanks. Eva released another pulse of dark energy, but neither was surprised. It only caused the illusion to flicker out for a split second.

Where was Monica!?

No time to ask herself that. She let out another pulse and lunged. The flicker in the illusion made the feral's attack falter. The two avoided the risk of being caught like their sister had. It gave Eva the chance to go on the offensive, another push of energy. It almost knocked the wind out of her, but this one was stronger than the last, barely enough to startle.

A precious split second that gave her all the advantage she needed.

Another victim.

The Fledgling fed, even as the feral thrashed and bit and clawed and screamed. Eva's nearly empty reserves replenished with every gulp. Some part of her felt off, she'd drank too much, her stomach must be full. But the rest of her didn't care nor was it preoccupied, her life was on the line.

Her gaze fixated on the final feral, the last victim. All she had to do was get a hold of her and she'd win.

"Dead."

Monica's single word startled Eva. She whipped around. The Sabertooth was looming over her, holding something in her claw. A feral, this one larger than the others, body caked in mud, head tilted in an unnatural angle.

It took Eva half a second to notice what was wrong.

She looked down at her arms and found a dead boar rather than the dead feral. She glanced at the other corpses, animals. Her stomach complained, exhaustion slapping her across the face like a hammer. The Fledgling fell on her ass, blinking, trying to make sense.

"But... the ferals."

"One." Monica shook the corpse, throwing it at the ground. "Only this. Annoying, complicated, smart, tricky."

Eva glanced at the corpse.

Where the typical Foxgirl would look much like a Doggirl, this one had multiple tails instead. It must have shifted into a stronger form. That connected the final dot. She could imagine it. How the creature had created several layers of illusions, smart enough to trick Eva into thinking she had the upper hand, even as the Fledgling exhausted herself against invisible foes. Worst of all was how thorough it had been, even making her feel like she'd been able to replenish energy.

Monica was right, she would've died.

Trying to be rid of the sense of annoyance and failure, Eva looked at the corpse with a glare. A rare breed that had shifted to a stronger form. Anyone having caught such a maiden would've gotten a handsome reward.

But...

It was something else that caught Eva's attention, several things. "She has no scars." That must mean the shift was recent, very recent. Had the feral wave reached its final stages? That wasn't a good sign. Ferals, driven by desperation and hunger, would fight each other. That would push the stronger ones into a shift, making them deadlier and better prepared for a fight... or a hunt.

There were other things about the corpse that felt out of place, like the amount of vegetation weaved into her hair, or how the body appeared slightly bulked up. But the Fledgling couldn't find what she was looking for.

The enemy had outsmarted her, played with her every step of the way, and had nearly ended her.

"How did you see through the illusion?" Eva glanced at Monica.

"Follow smell." She shrugged nonchalantly, then poked at her stomach. "Follow special heart."

"That's... nevermind." Eva's shoulders slumped. "Could we go back? I'm exhausted."

Monica's only response was to shrug, picking up the bloodied net, throwing in the couple dead hogs that had slipped out, and walking off. Eva grabbed her own meal and chased after. Neither maiden spoke much more, and the Fledgling had far too many things to think about.

The hours stretched on, the starry sky above slipping by as they approached the tribe.

The guards greeted them with cheers, Monica showed off the amount of prey she'd captured, and that gave Eva ample room to slip by without being bothered. At this late hour, the tribe was mostly quiet and still. Any activity was mostly kept to the huts, small smoldering fires burning away, small groups chatting, laughing, and playing minor games of chance.

As she moved through the tribe, something caught her ear. A moan, long and low. Eva glanced in the general direction of the source, gaze turning into a glare when she recognized the hut in question.

"Not going to stop and say hello?"

The voice came from above. Eva's mood soured further, gritting her teeth. "What do you want?"

"No need to get rattled." Kiara smirked from on high, floating overhead like a storm-cloud threatening a downpour. "It just looked like you'd want to join the brooding group."

With a lazy flick of her tail, the Succubus pointed at a lone figure standing nearby, trying to remain hidden in the shadows though failing considering her massive size. It was Urtha, the Orc glaring daggers at the hut, giant metal club at her side, still as a statue as she carefully stroked the metal length of her weapon.

“Leave me alone.”

The maiden raised her hands, chuckling. “I just thought you might be able to help.” She replied. “You know, what with you and the Orc having common grounds on denying your own desires to the point of self-destruction?”

“What do you...?” Eva snapped her mouth shut, glaring. “I do not have the patience or energy to deal with you. I don’t think I ever will.”

“Before, I only saw you as a quick meal, nothing personal.” She licked her lips slowly. “But apparently you’re a step above that. Now, you have my word that if I ever do anything to you, all you ever have to say is a simple ‘**no**’ and I will stop.” The maiden touched the center of her chest. “I swear on my little black heart.”

“No. Forever and ever, until you turn to dust.”

Kiara laughed, that loathsome, sharp and humiliating laughter that stabbed into Eva like a knife. “I was serious about the Orc offer. She’s been causing Rick some trouble. I would help, but she’s a bit too hostile to someone as strong as me,” she purred.

The words made the Fledgling flinch. “I’m going to sleep.” She turned to leave.

“Rick intends to find out how many maidens he can bond at the same time. In quick order, too.”

Eva’s steps slowed, her brows furrowed. “What does that have to do with me?”

“I thought that, as the local expert on bonds and bonding collars, you might wish to be informed.”

Her blood froze at the declaration. The Fledgling whirled around, looking at the Succubus through narrowed eyes. “I do not know where you got that information, but you are mistaken.”

Kiara’s golden eyes twinkled. There was mischief in that gaze... and a threat. “You might not be who you were a year ago, but you still know what you did back then.” She lowered her voice to a whisper, smile turning frigid. “So I want to know if this is something that will put him at risk.”

Eva tried to refute, but stopped, huffed, and shook her head. “No, it won’t.”

“I sense a ‘but’ in there.”

“There are a lot of unknowns about him.” The maiden tapped her neck. “But if he can bond a maiden while she wears one of these, and neither the bond nor the collar breaks, then it should be safe.”

There was a nearly imperceptible sigh of relief, a sagging in the Succubus’ posture and a relaxation to the way she held herself. With a simple nod, she quietly turned to leave. Eva couldn’t help but shudder, unsure whether being on friendly terms with the charmer was an even worse prospect than being her enemy.