
[212] [Rick]

Rick woke in the middle of the night, or it was more like he hadn't slept. His thoughts kept moving back to the blue haired woman, Kiara. Her visit had been a surprise, a maiden pretending to be a human woman. He'd felt the way his body tingled to the power, that itching "crawling ants" sensation across his body that shifted through him with a clear sense of purpose, so light he'd almost mistaken it for his own nerves.

But his gut had told him she was a maiden.

And now he was going to meet her tomorrow. She wanted to bond him, why? It felt off, Dia didn't know how to answer either, as far as she knew a maiden's interest in forming a bond was to find a partner and avoid going feral.

But this Kiara woman clearly had something else in mind. Rick felt there was more to it, not... he couldn't put his finger on it. She was showy, but had played it cautious. Those eyes had bore into him as if trying to pry him open.

He could've sworn he'd seen those eyes before at some point. But... where?

Sleep eluded him, even as Dia and Monica slept soundly at either side of him, neither willing to leave him alone after the visit. He wasn't going to complain, having them both around was safer, better, reassuring.

In the perfect darkness of the basement-room, Rick's thoughts flickered to the box with the pokeball. A gift from the Earl, unused, it'd been meant for him to use on Monica. The thought still sat badly with him, Rick could easily imagine the smooth resin surface in his grip, he remembered the warning, it couldn't guarantee capture, but...

A tingling sensation broke Rick out of his thoughts.

It had been subtle, as if his whole body had been a moment away from falling numb. It jolted him, however. "Monica."

The feline didn't stir, she didn't move, but her azure eyes opened. Rick couldn't see them with his eyes, it was too dark, but he could sense her focus was upon him for only a second. Then it was turned elsewhere. "Danger."

Her proclamation was all Rick needed, he turned to Dia and gave her a slight shove.

But she would not wake.

The tingling was becoming more intense, as if his limbs had gone numb. "Dia!" He hissed, but she only slept, not waking up. That shouldn't be, she was always easy to wake, something was wrong.

Rick shuffled to his feet. It took him a moment before he found the small glow-stone Dia had purchased. Its soft white light bathing the small basement room. Monica was by the door, staring at it intently, Rick dressed as best he could.

His hand snatched the small wooden box.

Monica eyed the sphere, her brows furrowed as she slowly looked at Rick.

Their eyes met, and emotions welled and passed between them. He could sense that edge of apprehension, the memory of her capture, the helplessness. Her eyes lowered to the device, and then back up to him. The fear was gone, only a slight nod was shared.

No words were needed.

She vanished into the shadows, melting into darkness until nothing was left but darkness, and Rick opened the door leading upstairs. The short-sword was on his hip, but Rick's trust in it against a maiden was nill. It would be a toy.

Ironic, that the bright white and red sphere that looked so much more like a toy was the better option.

He could feel her within his shadow, even as he moved while holding the glow-stone. It gave him a swell of confidence, a feeling that nothing in this world could properly threaten him so long as she remained with him. It was a powerful feeling, it reminded him of the forest, the Baron.

She trusted him now, they understood each other better.

Whatever was going on was dangerous, but unknown. Monica was good at handling things directly. And maybe this danger wasn't for them to handle, wasn't for them to consider. A quick glance out the window showed a darkened city, a heavy fog had descended, the outside was milky white.

But Rick's skin was prickling and as he approached the door, seeing the shadows at the other side, the feeling in his gut tightened.

There was a knock.

Rick considered things briefly. He could answer, or he could not. If there was a maiden at the other side of that door, how much risk was he in? She'd be able to get through the door, it was just wood. Could the layer provide any actual protection?

No, his protection was in his shadow.

Slowly, he approached the door.

"Who is it?"

"Are you Rick?" The voice was female, because of course it was. It made him think of the forest, the darkness, the spider that caught the screaming student.

Every nerve in his body chilled. It could be a guard, it could be a messenger, or someone, anyone, wanting to check on him. But his gut told him to run. And run hard. Could he though? Dia was downstairs, Monica could get him out of there, but not her.

"Sorry, wrong house."

"Oh."

The shadow moved, leaving. The sound of steps going away.

Rick didn't relax, his eyes locked on the door. He considered whether it would be a good idea to get Dia into the pokeball and make a run for it with Monica. Was that the better option? He didn't know, he wasn't even sure he was under threat.

Monica was silent within his shadow, through the bond, he could feel her focus like a physical force upon the world around him. She was catching every detail he missed, every aspect, and as that broad spectrum of focus narrowed in a direction behind him, Rick's gut screamed at him to freeze.

Monica had tensed, deep within his shadow, hidden, ready.

"You are Rick."

The voice spoke from behind him.

He clenched his jaw.

"Sorry, don't know who you're talking about." He wanted to turn around, his eyes remained locked on the door.

"You're awake, no human should be awake within my mist. Not unless they're ***delicious.***"

A single step was taken, light, so light the wooden floor didn't even creak.

"I wouldn't get any closer, if I were you."

"But you smell so..." There was a single long inhale. "**Pure.**"

His hands were tense, he did not turn to meet the speaker. One hand locked on the short-sword's hilt, the other on the pokeball. "Why are you here?"

"Someone very high up is interested in you." A light laughter followed.

"I hope it's not revenge." He muttered under his breath. Had someone found out about the Baron's actual death? Had the Baroness only pretended to accommodate him since she couldn't do anything to Monica? Or was this somehow tied to the Earl? "That would really suck."

"Who knows? I'm sure it won't be pleasant either way."

"Right."

Every part of his body tense like a coiled spring, his jaw so tight it hurt.

"I prefer when I look prey in the eye."

"I take it looking into my eyes makes it easier to use your powers on me?"

The maiden laughed. "Do you think it matters?"

"I mean, for me it probably doesn't make a difference, but for Monica?"

It happened in an instant. Rick didn't look over his shoulder, he didn't look back, he burst into motion towards the door exactly at the same time he sensed Monica leaping out of his shadow. The gust of wind was followed by an ear-splitting roar and shattering wood.

By the time he'd reached the door, there was a hole in his house.

No time. Monica had to fight, he had to find reinforcements.

The door swung open, and he ran face-first into a wall of tit and muscle.

Rick's eyes looked up, at the woman that had to be nearly three meters tall, built with a body that was meant to smash through walls and lift tanks, with steel-shredding claws for hands, arms covered in fuzzy orange striped fur. It was like looking at someone he would have claimed to be Monica's aunt.

"Huh." The smirk on her lips was anything but friendly.

Maybe it was luck, maybe it was instinct, maybe it was both. Every fiber in his body had told him to run, and instead, Rick took a swing. A wooden box in his hand as he aimed for her stomach.

The maiden was amused, enough she didn't even try to dodge. Perhaps she thought he'd break his hand against her iron muscles. Except he wasn't trying to punch her.

The box shattered, the pokeball made contact.

Time slowed, the point of contact glowed red, her eyes widened, the red instantly spread, and she vanished in a flash.

The spot she'd been occupying was left empty, empty save for a black glass orb that clunked to the floor.

Rick looked at it in shock, then at the pokeball.

The device was shaking violently, heating up as if a fire had lit inside. He didn't hesitate to throw the thing into the gutter, picking up the black glass ball and throwing it into his travel bag before making a run for it straight back into the house.

He heard the road exploding behind him, and a furious roar.

He ran through the hole Monica had made.

The destruction didn't take long to follow.

[213] [Rick]

Rick had seen Monica fight, he'd seen her in action, he'd watched in both terror and fascination as she clawed and pounced and bounced around. The feline maiden was a killing machine, no human being could ever stand up to her and hope to live.

At best, they could only delay the inevitable.

Someone who looked like they were of the exact same species was chasing him.

She was powerful, powerful enough that she could make the ground explode under her feet when she jumped, it was like a grenade going off, and Rick knew the moment he heard that sound it would mean he'd be dead. His mind fed him with information he knew by heart. No open spaces, keep it tight, stay out of sight, never go on a straight line.

He couldn't really escape.

Only buy time.

Monica was fighting whatever had threatened him in the kitchen.

He had to buy time.

There was a crashing sound behind him, he'd already turned a corner, the house the feline had smashed into groaned and creaked dangerously, but did not topple. Rick prayed the damage couldn't get bad enough someone died. But such considerations were for people that could make a difference.

He was just a damn human.

The hairs on the back of his head stood on end, static in the air. Rick didn't think, he reacted, jumping back into the alley right as the wall in front of him exploded. His mind caught up, he'd already turned the first corner by the time the predator had caught sight of him.

"You can't run forever!"

She was right.

There was more amusement than anger in the declaration. She was toying with him, she could get serious, he knew. She could jump over to the rooftops and catch up easily. But

she didn't want to, she was playing. Did she think her companion could handle Monica? Was she not worried about the fading fog? If the fog was keeping people asleep, why not him?

The questions burned.

"Whoever hired you, they must have paid a lot!"

Duck, jump, hear the wall behind him explode and turn another tight corner. Straight lines were bad. He could sense Monica's fight, her feelings of unerring desire for brutality and frustration. She wanted to finish quickly and reach him.

He had to buy more time.

"I don't work for humans!"

A roar, another wall. Rick hesitated, not humans?

An idea.

"Your owner must be devastated!"

He took left rather than right. A split second hesitation, the walls of wood that had been in the right-ward direction had exploded. **Something** had been thrown hard enough to penetrate through like a miniaturized wrecking ball.

She was tracking him, she could probably hear even his heartbeat. It was certainly trying to deafen his thoughts. He startled, slowed, paused, then sped back up. His guess had been right, the wall there'd been another something that had been thrown at the position he'd been in. Leg height. She was aiming to cripple.

She wanted to play with him.

Big strong maiden, she knew he'd lose, he knew he'd lose. What did she want?

"I bet you must be real frustrated." He panted, another sharp turn, he recognized the street. What would Monica do if she were chasing him? Much to his surprise, the answer came to him, he turned around straight back the way he came.

There was a sound coming from the street, she'd tried to cut him off.

Rick tried to lock on to how he'd known.

No time.

"Someone actually powerful trick you into this?"

He heard a snarl, and just in time to take the corner, she was chasing him now, properly. That was bad. The Monica in his head screamed to duck the instant he heard the grinding of stone under him.

Rather than see, he felt the figure soaring over him.

His body moved, jumped back. Movement came without thought.

A claw came, aimed at his leg.

The nameless assailant was holding back, moving far slower than she could have.

It had been just barely enough for him to get out of the way.

Legs wide, stance wide, he kept backpedaling.

His brain tried to catch up, it was lagging behind the mutual dance.

Rick was not the one moving, it was instinct, instinct that was not his own. The opponent moved and she was moving exactly how a part of him **knew** Monica would have moved. It was clear the goal wasn't to kill him, not instantly, cripple first, toy with him, maybe death would come once she'd had her fun.

That was all that allowed him to remain alive.

To buy time.

"You move like a Tigress." She declared.

"Nah." He managed to pant out through labored breaths. "You're just bad at this."

She growled, and Rick was starting to feel the sting of her claws as she was being ever so slightly more serious.

"Going to use your powers on the weak little human? So strong. So mean."

That startled her, and Rick managed a half-choked laugh that hid the panic. He was sweating bullets, his forehead was drenched, just trying to keep up with this slowed down holding-back she was throwing at him was taking everything. The Monica in his mind was screaming at him, and he could almost count the seconds before he'd react a moment too late.

The feline's claws were extended, she swiped and thrust them like some sort of wicked blade. But she wasn't aiming at his face or chest. She was trying to cripple him, and he could only dodge.

Why them?

Why him?

And then, she left an opening, a swing of claws that was just slightly too much.

If it had been a human, she would've actually been vulnerable against someone who knew what they were doing.

But she was a maiden, Rick was no fighter, and Monica had warned him it was an obvious trap.

He stepped back to buy himself another half second.

But Rick's left leg refused to move.

His head snapped down. Something black had pierced through his calf. The pain came a half second after. The black thorn that had emerged from the ground to punch through his leg withdrew back into the shadows.

And he collapsed.

"Did you really think you had a chance?"

Clenching his leg and tightening his jaw, he did not scream.

"I bet you're going to say I'm pathetic and weak." The words he spoke startled her, he continued before the anger came. "News flash, lady, everyone in this fucking city can kill me. That doesn't make you strong."

"Yet it makes you **weak**." She spat.

His leg was on fire, a fire he'd felt before. Rick's hands were pressing the injury and trying to stop the bleeding, his body was shaking, face pale as a sheet. "Not as weak as the bitch that couldn't put a scratch on me without using her powers." He choked, the pain was flaring, his mind was starting to spin. "You're just like the nobles. You won the birth lottery and mistake it for actual strength."

That snaps her, the ground exploded under her, and Rick clenched his whole body.

This was going to hurt.

Or maybe she was just going to kill him.

Except nothing comes. Nothing except a cool breeze and titillating laughter.

Hesitating, Rick opened his eyes.

The sky was shrouded in clouds and the dissipating mist. Still, a streak of light pierced through, a moonbeam that lit the house's roof under spectral light.

“After our second encounter, I was of half a mind to let her hurt you some more.”

The woman's azure blue hair flowed behind her as if carried by a breeze of its own, golden eyes peered at him in amusement.

Rick opened his mouth to say something.

He promptly vomited.

[214] [Kiara]

She was Kiara.

She had a different name, once, several human lifespans ago. But it was a life she'd practically forgotten. A Succubus, she'd once been younger, weaker, feeble. Yet she'd been chased all the same.

'*Charmer*' they called her, the word poison in their lips. Maidens and humans alike feared her. When she was naught but a Youma it was fear of her potential, now that she was a Succubus, it was fear of what she could do. And for good reason, with but a touch she could bring the most powerful of maidens to their knees, a whisper and pleasure like none other would push them to the brink of ecstasy.

Kiara had traveled a long long time, searching, looking. Her powers were great, but they were not enough. She wished for the last step, to achieve that which so very few Succubi ever had: to become a Dark Queen, the last step in her genus, the culmination of power.

To do so, she needed a human, one like none other, steadfast and strong, powerful in their own right, a champion able to resist yet still in service of her... or so the old dusty books had said.

The latest candidate was currently hurling the remainder of his stomach onto the rooftop. It made Kiara briefly ponder if this had been the right choice.

The moon shone down on them through the cloudy sky and magical mist. One the insufferable vampire had summoned. All was silent when all should be chaos, such was the power of the mist. Kiara was certain the blood-sucker was no pushover, it would be a pain to deal with once things got serious.

As it stood, she was more focused on the human called Rick. But something was wrong. Nausea from one's first teleportation was to be expected, particularly if forced, especially if the target was a human.

The trembling shivering fever and near violent spasms as red glowing veins crept up his neck was a sign of something more concerning.

Her pet-to-be was suffering from elemental energy poisoning. A severe one, if the pulsating glow was anything to go by. But it didn't make sense, the spell had been a very short range, not even a full ten meters. Certainly having a human move through a dozen of those would put them at risk, but just one?

Had he been taking energy from somewhere else? His aura was pulsating, almost, just barely to a level she'd come to expect from a normal human born from a maiden.

But her prey was anything but normal. She'd learnt that the hard way.

Those were thoughts for later. There was a brute she had to deal with, a threat to her project that was far more immediate.

"It might feel like you're going to die, but even if it's a lethal dose, it can be dealt with later." Kiara spoke to the human as he clenched and struggled to remain conscious, eyes unfocused and bile trickling from his lips. "Try not to move too much."

Rick looked at her, even with the energy burning through his body, he had enough presence of mind to try and focus on her. Kiara's lips curled at that formidable will. It would be all the more enjoyable when he was hers.

She'd chosen her prey well.

"Now I only need to get rid of the cat."

The Sabertooth's aura was blaring outwards like a typhoon, seeking her prey. A measured response of a seasoned fighter, and if this brute fought anything like the **other** cat, then Kiara did not want to make things easier for her. The mist made it harder for the cat to properly use her aura as a way to feel out her surroundings. Any normal maiden would find the mist quite annoying, but for one wielding aberrant energy as Kiara, it was a simple matter to peer through the magical shroud.

How fortunate for her.

With a soft smirk, she extended her powers, invisible tendrils of ghostly aberration, ones that would be nigh impossible to detect.

Except by Rick.

What a blunder that had been.

Kiara snorted, another of the questions she'd wanted answered but would have to wait.

"Found you."

From within the fog an orange form blurred, shooting outwards. Kiara barely had the time to raise her defenses before the claws racked across her torso. One gigantic fuzzy paw grasped at her, the other landed a strike on her stomach, an attack that would've gored anyone that wasn't as tough as a Succubus.

"Don't you know about personal space?"

Touching a Succubus was the first mistake.

The energy of aberration shot straight from Kiara's body and into the claws of the filthy feline, climbing up and into her body, subverting the swell of energy found therein. Kiara needed only twitch her power and the maiden abruptly squirmed, letting go and tumbling down, body growing hot and heavy with delicious arousal. Kiara made a dismissive sound, she'd tried to paralyze her, but this one was smart, she had cut off her own energy before the power had gotten a proper hold.

"Succubus." A hiss of anger and disgust, a glare through the mist.

Kiara quirks an amused brow. "Not so dumb after all."

"What do you want with the human?"

"I should ask the same. He's my prey."

That seems to surprise the cat in turn, the growl and flushed cheeks turn into a snarl. "Humans want you dead." A smirk follows, her aura flaring outwards. "Or to make you a tool."

She shrugged nonchalantly, shaking her head dismissively. "They can certainly try." They had done as much many times already, after all.

"Stand down, sister, he is not worth your attention. He is the most pathetic human I've laid eyes on."

And that would be because she was a blind brute.

"It's been a while since I've been called that." A lock of perfect azure hair is flicked over her shoulder as her wings spread wide. "**Sister.**" She spits the word, golden eyes flashing with malice.

Her hand brushes over the patch on her stomach, the scratch is gone, the flesh becomes pristine and flawless. Kiara considers the situation, feeling Rick's gaze upon her, is he still conscious? Barely.

Still, it was a perfect opportunity.

“He is mine now. Run along, little cat, before I spank you.”

Cooperation from the human was tantamount, at least until she'd properly shown him the pleasures of serving her. The less effort she needed to ensure it, the better. And what better way to entice his greed than by making him see how powerful she was?

Her aberrant powers reach out in every direction, a hundred invisible tendrils of pleasure, seeking the feline prey. But the maiden senses the danger, even if not exactly from where. Rather than take the risk, the brute quickly made some distance between herself and Kiara.

“Are you scared, kitty cat?”

“Just not stupid.”

There was a slight chuckle. “I doubt that.”

She sensed the movement of energy, shadows streaking up the buildings walls and towards... Kiara's eyes widen, blue fire explodes from her fingers and flies towards the house's walls, burning away the shadow right before they reach Rick. The human's pale, shivering, red glowing veins pulsing across his face and eyes. He's probably blind by now, but still fighting to stay conscious.

Could it be some sort of poison?

No, it had all the signs of elemental overload, and yet-

The distraction costs Kiara, the feline could move silently when she wanted, and she'd not missed the opportunity. This time it's not claws and fur that meet Kiara's face but stone and shadows. The rock smacks against her head with the potency of a cannonball, any lesser maiden would've found her head ripped off. Kiara's head still snaps backwards and her flight is interrupted, she stumbles, darkness and disorientation shrouding her vision in every direction, making it impossible to control her descent.

The maiden bounced between the walls of the alleyway as she tried to regain control, but her focus was on disrupting the darkness around her. By the time she'd succeeded she'd already been half-way to the ground. Not a good situation when there was a barrelling mass of muscles flying towards her. This time the Sabertooth didn't even try to scratch or claw at her, she just punched.

With a bang and an explosion of air, Kiara's body soared through the house, punching cleanly through. One wall, two walls, three walls, four. The wild spinning halted and she spread her wings, pulling herself to a halt midair and shooting out and up.

She spots the feline as she slings Rick over her shoulder.

Kiara snarled. She was of half a mind to ask herself why the feline hadn't killed the human, and though the rest of her was glad she hadn't, something definitely wasn't adding up. Beating her wings with everything she had, she tried to catch up with the feline.

But it was an exercise in futility, there was no way she'd be able to catch up to a Sabertooth that fully intended to run away. Which in and of itself was concerning, the brute had clearly not been as rattled as she'd thought.

The bile and anger rush through Kiara as she curses.

The course of her flight is corrected. Wherever the feline was headed, the vampire was sure to know. And if the loud roars further east to the city were anything to go by, that fight was still going hot.

A roar shakes the city, its power gives Kiara pause. It came from the other cat. Her eyes narrow.

It was time to strangle a bat.

And she had to hurry, the knights in the castle were reacting to the commotion.

[215] [Monica]

Monica was afraid.

Monica was a hunter, she hunted, she killed. Sometimes she killed for fun. Sometimes she killed for training. Sometimes she hunted and let go. Some were soft ones, some were hard ones.

Monica had started weak, all hunters started weak. Weak and small and weak. When Monica was little, she had hunted cautiously. No fear, only caution. There were bigger hunters, but Monica hunted, and learned, and hunted. Until she became strong enough to hunt the hunters, until none could hunt her.

Even when she was being hunted, Monica did not feel fear.

Because the hunters smelled of blood, of their prey, and it was a scent Monica had. Of dead prey, many dead prey. So many dead prey that her cavern could have been filled with the blood of all her prey.

But this strong one was not like that.

She was a hunter, just like Monica, and she smelled of blood.

But it was so much blood.

Every breath Monica took made her want to run away. The pale strong one had killed.

And killed. And killed. And killed. And killed so much, so much blood, there was so much blood. Monica breathed and she could see it. No cave full of blood, but a mountain. So many prey, so many dead. So much blood.

Rivers and rivers, deep and endless, fear, so much fear and blood.

Monica could drown in it.

Red eyes and laughter, it gave coldness to Monica. She snarled and clawed, and the strong-one turned to mist. That trick again, Monica leapt into the shadows, chasing the feeling, the smell of blood. She had to protect Rick, she had to fight the bloody one. She chased after the scent, until it became the pale red-eyed strong one again.

Monica pounced from the shadows, an explosion of movement and power.

She missed, passing through a fake.

Another fake. So many fakes.

The bloody one laughed, and the laughter echoed all around her, from every direction. The mist and scent of blood thickened. Monica tensed and knew something was wrong. She moved, leaping up and trying to get out of the mist. The feeling of fire struck Monica's body. Not on her skin or her fur, her blood was burning. A scream, but she couldn't stay still.

Being still when being hunted was death.

She had to find the bloody one. She sniffed, ignoring the fire in her chest and legs and arms. It was burning, but...

But it was stopping?

Monica frowned, claw reaching for her chest, touching its center. Confusion. And then realization.

Rick.

He was taking the burning away. Monica thought of the forest, of her fight with the Barons, of the pain going away. Again? But this was different, it felt wrong. Something was wrong. He was trying to hide it, but she felt it. He was hurt.

Badly hurt.

The laughter returns, the red-eyed one speaks from every direction, and Monica stops paying attention. The words don't matter, the bloody one is scary.

But not as scary as Rick being hurt.

Monica inhales, a deep breath, a deepest breath. She pulls in her power and strength, pushing it into her belly. Her chest expanded and she fought to hold her breath as she pushed for more power.

And then, she roared.

The loudest roar, the strongest roar. A challenge and a call and a trick. A very good trick.

The smell of blood goes away, just enough, just barely enough. Monica inhales and detects something else.

Something dangerous.

Something like Monica.

She could not stay here, Rick was in danger.

She will not wait and continue the fight, she begins running towards Rick. He is getting further away and that was bad. Something tries to chase, the bloody one attacks with mist and more false things, but Monica ignores them, even as the bloody one talks and tries to stop her.

Then there was pain. The fire within her flared. Pain and fire and burning blood. Monica stumbled, crashing into the stone ground, her body refused to move as she wanted it to. Rick was screaming, she could hear him. Monica claws at the ground, sinking her grip into the stone and pulling herself, she has to stand, she has to find Rick, she had to stop the fire.

Her legs are shaking, she is afraid.

The bloody one is here, talking again, laughing, so much blood. The blood is approaching.

But Rick is hurt.

Monica takes another step, and this time her ears twitch at the sound of something coming. Something fast. She moves to the side, something hard hits the stone and explodes in a spray of... blood? Blood destroying stone? Monica stared, confused, burning, hurting, afraid, and confused.

The blood was moving, pooling, sharpening into a spike of dark red.

Monica moves again, but this time there are more spikes, several more. They come from the fog, they smell of blood but not the bloody one. It is the blood of someone else, a weak one? Monica cannot tell, she dodges and struggles. Fear and fire and fakes. She had to fight, but how to fight if she could not see or touch?

What would Rick do? Rick didn't fight, Rick could not fight. But Rick had been weak and still won against Monica. He was smart, the smartest. What would Rick do? Her ears perked at the realization.

More spikes, Monica moves, and... stops. Too slow, a spike hits her, she stumbles and the fire burns hotter. She falls, and more spikes of blood come, Monica avoids, a bit, a little, she has to be weak, she has to be prey. She allows some of them to hit, crying in pain, loudly. The laughter is louder, and more spikes come.

The fire is unbearable, Monica stumbles and more spears of blood. Her body is burning from the inside and she doesn't know how or why. It burns, but she has to keep going, Rick was in danger. She stumbles and falls, spears come and she cries. Weak prey, she was weak prey, she had to cry and whimper and yowl in agony.

More spears.

Her wounds are bleeding, she can barely move. Monica falls, and does not get back up.

Her power shrinks and whimpers like she does. And the laughter only grows louder.

Her breathing is shallow, she is weak, she is prey. Her body screams in fire that she cannot see and that burns inside, deep inside.

More laughter, the scent of blood thick and full and disgusting.

And then, a touch.

The hunter had come to finish the hunt. The fire inside Monica burns so hot it was hotter than the bright light of day. Hotter than the tough-one with the thickest hide. Hotter than anything she had felt. She was weak, she was prey.

She is turned, red eyes, fangs. The predator will eat the prey.

With a thrust and a snarl, Monica's claw pierces through the bloody one's throat. It is not deep enough to kill, there is something there that slows Monica's claw. But it is enough, blood spills on the stone.

Red eyes widen in shock and surprise. The fire stops burning, Monica heaves and thrusts, but the surprise is over, the bloody one turns into mist before she can finish the predator. There is a trail of blood in her wake.

Monica does not chase. If the bloody one lives or dies Monica does not care.

Rick is in danger.

With slow trembling limbs she stands. The burning is over.

The fear is over.

She thinks, carefully, licking the worst of her wounds as she starts to slowly stumble through the stone. Rick is in danger, another strong one had taken him. Monica could feel something was wrong, very wrong.

Sucking in sharply, Monica touches her chest, the warm part that was warmest when with Rick. She feels him, his pain. He is burning. He had been burning for her, to make her stronger.

Monica touches and draws from him, draws the burning.

She winces and stumbles again, but she walks faster, she is gaining speed again. She is being fast again.

She would rescue her mate.

But she remembered the scent of the other strong one. Someone like her. She could not go as she was now or she would die.

[216] [Dia]

She woke screaming and in the dark. She was drenched in sweat, cold and shivering, yet feeling like she was burning.

And alone.

There was a moment of fear and apprehension gripping at her chest like a vise. The nurse could only look around and cast the small spell of illumination. The room is empty, and Dia's mind spins with every possible horrible thing that might be happening. She can practically taste the lingering remains of a powerful spell.

One that had kept her asleep. She doesn't even need to check if the bond is still there, its presence is like a sun in her mind and heart, and it is screaming at her. There is little pause, shoes and pants, and she is out of the room in a whirlwind of agitation.

The house is destroyed, of the four walls, two have massive holes in them, the door is gone, and she can see the street behind the kitchen through the hole in the back. All the signs of a fight. Dia takes a split second to confirm there's no one in the house, spots a black glass sphere in the kitchen bucket, and ignores it as she runs out.

There are other maidens, the sound of startled activity and panic. Dia knew what this panic would bring, there would be many injuries and potential deaths from feralborn maidens reacting poorly to what was clearly some kind of battle between two or more powerful maidens.

The nurse in her told her to head straight to the nearest guard and warn them, following orders and heading for the medicen after. Minimize casualties, minimize death, help, heal. Instead, she ran straight through the disaster. Rick was in danger, Monica might be in danger as well.

Monica finds her first, however.

Dia can only scream in shock as the feline emerges from the shadows, stumbling and dripping blood from a great deal of cuts both shallow and deep. "Help." The feline doesn't command, but the tone is close.

"Where's Rick?" Dia knelt and pressed her hands against the feline's abdomen.

"Danger. Hurt."

It quickly becomes clear that Monica was in a bad shape, something had poisoned her and had been causing harm within her body. Dia couldn't quite believe her eyes, however, the damage was in Monica's veins and muscles. As if the attacker had used the blood to channel her powers.

There were very few maiden breeds that could do such a thing, and there being any one of them within the city was a grave sign.

"We need to call the knight captain."

"No."

Monica straightened herself, growling. "Monica help Rick."

Dia narrowed her eyes, keeping her focus on the arteries that weren't too far off from hemorrhaging. The damage was extensive but not critical. Still, Monica was in no condition to head up against someone as strong as her. She would die.

"Rick needs help." She stated. "Captain Deneva will help."

"Monica help."

"Yes, Monica **and** Deneva."

The feline growled, frowned, but remained quiet, eyes fixated on a spot in the distance as if she were looking through everything between herself and the horizon. "Rick need help. Now."

Dia could sense it as well, the sensation of Rick being in danger. It gnawed at her, it burned inside her chest, it called and tugged at her bond like a string. It was an effort to not just stand up and start running straight in Rick's direction. And, much to the nurse's chagrin, Monica's bond was stronger.

She had to be the responsible one.

Her healing poured into Monica, the powerful maiden's body thrummed as it recovered, and Dia... hesitated. Was Monica really the best option to save Rick? Could she ensure he got out well or would she make the situation worse? She knew Monica might have the best of intentions, but she'd seen what those could mean.

The question burned inside Dia. She had a choice, she could disable Monica, right here and now before she left. Did she trust Monica was the best option? Should she stop her? Just one twitch, cut the signals moving down the spine, rendering her unable to move on her own for the next hour.

But Rick was in trouble. What could she do?

She looked at Monica, meeting the blue gaze and sighing.

“Fight.” She whispered. “I will find help.”

Maybe Monica understood, maybe not. The feline maiden just nodded, standing up. She was gone before Dia could even get back on her feet. The nurse’s thoughts turned to what lay ahead, to what she could do. She turned back to the house and found the travel bag, her medicinal herbs and miscellaneous items were contained within. And it was clear she’d need them. She began to run towards the district entrance as fast as she could.

All around her the district was waking up, and panic was starting to rise. The scent of blood in the air was unmistakable even for Dia’s senses, and her sense of smell was laughable compared to most maidens out there. The screams did not take long to start, once she felt one of the houses crumbling down.

The sound of fighting had begun. The knights would lock down the district, she had to get out before that happened. She ran hard, many maidens were moving faster than her, however. The mist was dispersing, the maidens were moving. Every passing second had more maidens rushing to get out of the district before the fights broke out in full. Many of them were bringing their owners along. Dia could only guess that many more were locking themselves in their basements.

Normally, these situations were relatively calm. Maidens could stop maidens, human safety would be prioritized, the elders brought out of the district. Even feralborns had enough presence of mind to know not to start a fight near their humans.

But this felt different, there was fear, lots of it.

The guards at the gates were trying to calm down what was effectively a mob. The maidens were demanding to be let through first, faster. A loud banging sound shook the district and a second house fell. The hundreds of maidens at the gates started clamoring louder.

The scent of blood returned, it stuck to Dia’s throat.

Mist began to emerge from between the houses, howls and snarls and screams echoed across the air. Dia stepped back from the crowd near the gate as she felt the fear clawing at the back of her mind like a wild animal. It threatened to choke her in its intensity.

Someone near the gate screamed.

There was a flash of fire and another of lightning, more screams. Louder, another house collapsed. This time nearby, a maiden's body rocketed across the street, falling against the cobblestone. There was no blood in the corpse, it was shriveled and dry, even with the maiden's head detached from her body, not a drop stained the spot where the body had fallen on.

As one, the crowd held their breath, hundreds of eyes widening in terror.

Something shot from within the house. Something red and fast, so impossibly fast.

A maiden shrieked, clutching at her leg as the red spike had punched cleanly through.

It was a simultaneous realization. The crowd turned towards the gate and ran.

Any who stood in the crowd's path would be crushed.

Dia was there with the other panicked maidens. They crossed through the gates even as more maidens fell to the bloody spears. The nurse's mind screamed at her to run away even as the shadows of the night kept her half blind to her surroundings.

She just had barely enough of a presence of mind to angle her dead sprint towards the direction Rick had been taken. Monica or not, she had to get there and help as soon as she could.