
[084] [Infiltration (Noah)]

Noah knelt next to her rucksack, going over everything that she was taking with her on her expedition. The Tigermouse was absently counting her rations, but her mind was on Mark. The otherworlder had been a bundle of nerves since the day they'd made the decision to ditch the Boss. To her powers, the sensation was akin to having sand rubbed on the back of her neck. Being able to sense and wield psychic energy was something she would've never been prepared for. But then again, who ever grew up expecting to get hit by the curse of Eve and turned into a maiden?

She eyed her own body again, like she'd done a thousand times. The way her skin chafed against the clothes, the way her ratty striped tail swayed against the cool air, the way there was a biting pull to feel the physical presence of another...

"Stop it." Mark's hazel eyes zeroed in on her, his leg bobbing up and down from his spot near the grotto's entrance. "Focus on your mission."

Noah's heart stopped for a beat; prey instincts to not move flared out. Rather than let them take root, she reached out to him. The skin hovered there for a split second, long enough for Mark to roll his eyes at her and nod in approval. With a little inward trill of appreciation, she squeezed his knee, allowing her powers to connect them like nothing else in this world ever could.

In a life where Noah had never been able to trust someone else, she now had the power to view the intentions of another in absolute clarity. It was like gazing into a house made of glass, able to tell every corner, every room, every little secret. The capacity to witness such a thing was eye-opening in a way she would've never been able to express with words. A part of her wished she could've taken the old Noah and shown him this.

Today she focused on the biggest and brightest room of all, the one glowing with anger and sleep deprivation, the room that was covered in spikes and razor edges. In it there was a singular concept, the one responsible for it all: Brie.

Were Mark a normal human, they could've killed Brie the instant they'd chosen to betray the Boss, but the bitch had made her bond with him deeper... somehow. Artificial or not, Noah could practically taste the power behind the bond the two held, a bridge of murisium metal wires tightly latched onto the side of Mark's mind. Tight enough they

feared the potential backlash of her death. It would be impossible for Mark to die, but not so much for his mind to come out unscathed.

“You sure you'll manage?” Shery asked, gingerly lowering the log on top of the unconscious Brye. As she did this, she casually tightened wires around the Nogitsune's throat, and wrapped the other end around the chunk of wood to ensure there would be no teleportation going on.

This mission was as much a risk for Noah as it was for Mark and Shery. Brye was a strong illusionist, and had several other psychic tricks up her sleeve. Until now, Noah had been their early alarm system to catch on to any tricks. But with them having to split up, they opted to pull all the stops.

“No one pays attention to the mice,” Noah spoke, shaking her head. “Mousegirls don't bother anyone.”

It was a bad situation no matter what they did. Going into Sinco was a massive risk. Staying in the wilderness was an equally long-term stupid idea. Their biggest problem was that they couldn't be sure whether this “Rick” could be trusted or not. Mark had freely admitted he'd known the guy back in his original world, but he'd never thought him to be the ambitious sort. And now he ruled a city. It stank of hunger for power; there was no way to be sure he was the same man any more than Mark was the same brat.

And that there was a white-furred Sabertooth. If that was White-Claw... Noah shuddered, caressing her clavicle. There'd once been a scar there, a lesson on the kind of things that lurked in the wilderness.

“No one pays attention to the mice,” she whispered to herself. So long as she pretended to be a normal Mousegirl, no one would bother to look her way.

Tightening the rucksack, she gave her two partners a nod and set off.

Moving across the forest wasn't a challenge in the physical sense. The feral rush had emptied the place, and there was nothing but the stench of death in every direction. Right now, the forest was safe enough that it might not be suicidal for a human to walk around the area on their own.

The challenge was a mental one. Every step she took away from Mark and Shery, the greater the tightness in her chest. Mice were not creatures that survived on their own; they were among the weakest of the maidens after all. Noah, even though ascended into a Tigermouse, was feeling the full brunt of her instincts flaring out. The further away she was from Mark, the deeper the fear that gripped her.

Noah pushed her senses outwards in every direction. Dashing between bits of cover, she sought out safe spots, pausing to verify her surroundings. The whole thing might have been slower than normal walking, but the Tigermouse was fast enough she would've been able to easily outpace Mark.

She focused on those thoughts to distract herself from the empty gulf surrounding her. The thoughts of how much more powerful she was as a maiden than a human. Doubly so when she needn't worry over how far she could go before the bond strained. She was bonded right now; she could sense it right there.

“The bond is Mark, I am not alone,” Noah whispered to assuage her nerves and stay on the course.

Sinco came into view by the time the sun was setting.

Despite the nerves currently clenching her stomach into knots, Noah let out a yawn. If she wasn't careful, she'd be pushing herself past nap-time. That was an experience she didn't want to repeat, so she aimed her steps towards the farmland east of the city.

Approaching unseen was impossible. Like any city, the area surrounding the city was cleared out and dutifully watched. Noah leaned into this, waving at the wall like it was the most usual thing. Since no alarms were raised and no guards came out to greet her, it was safe to assume she'd been spotted and summarily dismissed as someone coming back from some exploration.

It would make a lot more sense than the alternative: a maiden having traveled without their human.

The earthworks that were being made past the farms caught her attention. A great deal of Orcs were currently excavating deep trenches. The maidens worked tirelessly, shoveling earth and stone out of the way as if they were emptying a vessel of water. The trenches themselves were odd, not in their depth or width, but in their pattern. It was as if someone were trying to create an impression of tree roots, stretching out from the farmland and branching out east and north into dozens of interlocking corridors.

What possible use could these have? Noah had seen the work Aubria had done to expand its walls. They'd done so by digging deep parallel lines, so as to allow the foundations of the wall to be pulled out and laid down further away. This was clearly not the case.

This looked like the trenches were meant to be occupied and used by people in some manner.

Dismissing the thought, she approached the first farm in her path. Noah boldly ignored every twisting knot in her stomach and walked over to the first Elf she spotted. The woman was tending to some small tree, muttering softly as she caressed its leaves with glowing fingers. The plant grew a little under her touch, its color shifting to be ever so slightly greener in the process.

“Excuse me, ma'am.” Noah called out.

The Elf glanced over at the spot Noah was standing on for a moment. “Haven't seen you around.”

“Threshold.” She kept her smile tight. It was a close truth, and it would help the Elf to gloss over any incongruencies she noticed. “I was told I should help gather things?” She stifled a second yawn as she spoke.

“It's not the right time for that.” The Elf scoffed, shaking her head and pointing over at a hut. “Go take your nap. Your horde will tell you what to do.”

Noah stiffened a little. The notion of a horde, a large pack that would welcome her... it made her shudder. She muttered her thanks and found herself hurrying towards the hut with a little more eagerness than she'd expected to have.

She did feel a little put off by the six Orcs standing guard around the hut. Why would anyone bother to heavily guard a nap-hut? But they paid her no mind, so she hurried inside.

The first thing to hit her was the smell. A scent of family, comfort, and safety. Noah wobbled on her feet as she just froze there, eyes closed and breathing it in. The smell suffused through her body in a warm blanket that took away her nerves in a cool spring breeze. Letting out a sigh, the tension just melted out of her. Suddenly, there was no need to be nervous. About anything.

Noah stepped forward, opening her eyes. The room might have been in pitch darkness, but it was perfectly visible as far as she was concerned. Hammocks littered every available inch of space both horizontal and vertical. The hut was packed with cloth and warm bodies, and navigating the room would've been impossible if Noah weren't so small.

Finding the nearest hammock that didn't have more than two bodies in it, the Mousegirls within barely reacted to her presence other than letting out a sleepy squeak and reaching out to hug her close.

The room's stuffiness should've been uncomfortable, but it felt right in every way.

Noah stiffened at the feeling for a moment, but reminded herself this was part of the plan. She needed to stick around the place for long enough to learn some names, and get herself to smell like the locals. And, more importantly, she'd take the opportunity to learn as much as she could about the Lord.

It was paramount that they be sure he could be trusted. Mark needed to know how paranoid they'd need to be in their approach. How many bargaining chips would they need to have on the table? What might prove most effective?

The worst-case scenario would be that Mark would have to give up finding his brother and leave the kingdom. Sticking around left them too exposed to the Boss and his ploys.

Noah blinked, and the world around her shifted ever so slightly. Her bunk-partners were now lying on top of her, yawning and stretching.

It was the most refreshing blink she'd ever had. The sleepiness was gone, her mind and body now full of energy. It took her a moment to realize she'd fallen asleep without even noticing it.

"Hm?" The nearest Mousegirl squeaked, looking down at her. "You're new," she muttered. "What are you?" The physical contact allowed Noah to see into the maiden's emotions; they were a naked welcoming curiosity. There was not a shred of suspicion within her.

"Tigermouse." Noah realized a second after that she'd not even considered lying.

"A new sister?" another voice piped up.

"Tigermouse?" someone added.

"A new sister!" and then another.

"Why is she here?" and another.

"If she's new, she should meet the leader." "New sister!?" "Name? What's your name?"

"Backpack smells like the forest." "Her clothes are worn." "She smells of fox!"

"Stranger?" "Not of the horde, new." "New sister!?"

The questions started piling on, and Noah froze up as hands reached out to her. Suddenly she wasn't looking into a singular maiden's emotions but dozens of them. They reached out and touched her wherever they might be able to, and in those moments she got brief flashes of insight.

Each and every maiden around her was glowing with welcoming intent, curiosity, and concern for her wellbeing. It would've been overwhelming under any other circumstance, but all Noah could feel was a contented glow of belonging. As if this was exactly the place she was meant to be in.

The terror at that notion was enough for her to tense up.

And as if reading her thoughts, everyone pulled away to give her some space.

“Nervous.” “Scared.” “Needs time.” “Lonely.” “Needs dick.” “Already smells, has a man.” “Stranger, not of Sinco.” “Strange.” “Strange.”

All around her the voices chattered and squeaked, dozens of eyes and ears looking at her. She stiffened. “My name is Noah, I'm a threshold,” she declared, fighting against the wrongness of lying even about such a small unimportant detail.

“Lily.” “Ela.” “Steve.” “Mary.” “Colin.” “Four.” “Jill.” “Rick.” “No you're not.” “Am now, new bond.” “With the Lord?” “The Lord?” “No, Terry.” “Baker's son.” “Cute.” “Bring bread?” “Share?” “Not enough.” “Bad!”

“Stop!” Noah blurted out the words before the chattering could drown out her thoughts. It was like every maiden in the room was just itching to talk and talk and talk. This was not what she'd been expecting.

Corrected text:

The others shared looks, and one Mousegirl was nudged forward by the crowd. “My name is Sulphur.” The maiden gave a slight nod; her right ear was heavily chipped, enough to look like a spoked wheel. “I am bonded with the Lord. Cog-horde, farming division night-shift director.”

“Show-off.” “Got lucky.” “Rafie playing favorites.” “The leader approved her.” “Leader is scary.” “Yes.” “But the leader is good.” “Yes.”

“Does... that mean you're in charge?” She tensed slightly. Meeting someone with any semblance of authority was exactly the opposite of what Noah wanted right now. But it wasn't like she could just run away now.

Sulphur shook her head. “It means I talk to the scary ones when we need something.”

“Also gets extra cheese.” “And better room.” “Also coins.” “For her cheese.” “Better not to talk to the green ones.” “Yeah, mean.” “Scary.” “Not as much as leader.”

Noah winced, scratching her ears and looking around the room.

“You’ll get used to it.” Sulphur offered a hand. “You’re not the first threshold, but it’s been a long while since we had a Tigermouse sister. The last one...”

“Older sister.” “Dead.” “Dead.” “Protected sisters.” “Brave.” “Broke Rafie’s heart.” “Bad Lord killed her.” “Dead.” “Bad Lord.” “Hurt her.” “But the bad Lord is dead.” “Good.”

“I’m... not here to join or anything.” Noah resisted the urge to reach out for the hand, wringing her fingers together. With the original plan out, she needed to hurry this along. There was no telling what might happen if she stuck around. “I want to help my partner; we need to know about the Lord.”

“Rick!” “Good Lord.” “Protects horde.” “Gives extra cheese.” “Made fly-wheel!” “Stink!” “Boom Lord!” “Boom Lord!” “Boom Lord!”

The name became a chant, and the room boiled over with excited chirps and squeaks. The Mousegirls were quickly egging each other on, turning the gathering into a frothing mess of excitement. Each of them tried to get closer to Noah to add something more, but they all stopped the instant Sulphur raised her hand.

“Our new sister is nervous.” She kept her hand up as she said this, and all eyes were on the hand, waiting for it to lower. “Noah is a threshold.” The reminder pushed the crowd to calm back down, with nods shared amongst them.

Noah kept her expression studiously unexpressive. “I need to know more about the Lord here, and the people in charge.” The directness of the request rubbed her the wrong way, but she couldn’t trust herself right now. Her instincts were urging her to spill her guts out and share everything, and such a thing would be nothing short of a disaster.

“You should talk to the leader.” Sulphur nodded. “She’s close to the Lord. There’s no one who knows him best.”

“Leader scary!” “Careful.” “Can trust, but scary.” “Not as scary as white-cat.” “Yes.”

“Right.” The Mousegirl nodded. “Rafie first. The leader can be a bit... much.”

Noah grimaced, looking around for a moment. She suspected that if she requested to be left alone, they would do so. The impression she’d gotten out of them was just that... pure. Something about that fact was chilling. Not because she thought they were lying or gullible, but because it felt like she was looking at a naked blade. That same unwavering honesty could easily become a razor edge if given a target.

But this was too big an opportunity. Whoever this ‘Rafie’ was, they’d likely be a valuable source of insight into the higher-ups within the city.

“Sure,” she said after a moment of consideration.

And that’s when the horde surged forth.

[085] [Revelations (Noah)]

They moved as if possessed of a single mind. It wasn't the case, of course; it was merely that each individual in the group was keenly familiar with every other. Before Noah could so much as voice a question, she found herself being yanked by four different Mousegirls.

An overwhelming sense of purpose was glowing out of them, and it muted any ability she had to form a protest. Sulphur led the charge out of the hut and towards the gates, all the while Noah was surrounded by at least a dozen Mousegirls on all sides. Anyone attempting to get close or ask questions would be intercepted by the "director." Questions would be quickly shot down, and the guards would allow the small horde through more amused than concerned.

The moment they passed the gates they took a quick turn off the road, their numbers dispersing until only Sulphur and three others remained. Noah considered fighting them off while she still had the chance, but the notion felt like it would only make her situation worse. She knew a gang when she saw one, and needlessly antagonizing them could get her into deep trouble.

Their path led through the unused streets, moving out of sight and away from anyone else's attention. The maidens dragging her across the city kept flickering between earnest concern and a desire to help. The emotions of some kind of familial bond to her kept flaring out with protectiveness.

It was hard to process that they'd consider her, a total stranger, in such a way.

It was equally hard to measure how much of a mess up this was. The plan had been for a nap and a quick discreet entry into Sinco. To watch unimpeded and ignored. Were all Mousegirls this tightly knit? Now she wasn't sure. The lot in Aubria and Astunes had never struck her as very coordinated or daring.

The group led her all the way into a small tunnel that had been discreetly tucked away between two tightly packed houses. Even the Mousegirls, as small as they were, had to squeeze through the gap and into the hole. The tunnel was deep, and forced them to hunch over as they moved. The sole reason Noah allowed herself to be led there was that not one of her escorts held a shred of ill intent.

She recognized the smuggler's tunnel; the design was familiar to her. The corners were rounded into archways, the earth smoothed over. The whole thing was meant to be able to be usable with the least amount of space possible.

Within moments, the tunnel broadened into a room that had the same scent as the hut. "This is the special nap place," Sulphur explained. "If you can't find somewhere safe, you can come here. There are a few other places like it."

"Unused, now," Another of the escorts piped up. "The Lord gives us very safe nap spots."

"Are there other ways to come here?" Noah asked.

"Many." "Lots." "All over." "But not near the shore. Lord wants to dig down." "Said it's dangerous." "We buried the tunnels there."

"And... from outside the city walls?" Noah nudged.

Sulphur regarded her for a moment. "You have a secret to keep. Partner in danger?"

Noah caught herself before she could answer, tightening her jaw a little. "Maybe."

With only a nod of acknowledgement, they continued on their trek. The group took her into a series of bifurcations, weaving between tunnels as if at random, before eventually reaching a rather large chamber the size of a small house.

The first thought that crossed Noah's mind was that she'd entered a space where a mad-man had been imprisoned for decades. Every available inch of space that wasn't the ground was covered in letters, numbers, runes, and diagrams. Noah wasn't sure what she was looking at, only that all of it seemed to spiral around a singular central drawing that'd been carved out of the stone in exhaustive detail.

It was the drawing of a winged wheelbarrow, soaring across the sky with a Mousegirl seated on top.

Noah didn't understand what was going on until her guides had turned to look at the image. Their feelings took a tone of reverence and awe. It was a blinding kind of hope.

At the opposite end of the chamber stood their messiah, gray metallic hair betraying that she was a Metalmouse. Dressed in simple dirt-addled cotton, the maiden was carving away at the stone with a murisium pick. Her hands were a blur of activity even to Noah's eyes.

"Rafie!" Sulphur called out, reverence and trust thrumming through her.

The maiden in question halted her progress, turning around and raising her goggles to take a look at them. The moment she lay eyes on Noah, her eyes widened.

“Tigermouse?” she whispered in disbelief, quickly approaching.

“Uh...”

“Her name’s Noah. She’s new here. Threshold.”

“I am Rafaela.” A short curt nod followed.

“Rafie for her sisters.”

The others fell silent at a wave from the Metalmouse. “We could use your help,” she declared, stepping forward and offering her hands out to her. Silver eyes bore into Noah, the maiden looming over her.

“Help?” Noah frowned.

“Tilly was a Tigermouse. She helped the horde understand the complicated things.” She nodded again. “So long as one of us could understand, then she could help the others understand.” The maiden gestured at the glyphs and numbers littering every part of the room. “This is a very complicated thing, teaching is very hard and slow. The horde must learn these things to make it a reality sooner.”

She was about to make some complaint, but stopped herself, looking at the others.

“Her partner might be in danger,” Sulphur provided.

“The Cog-Horde protects their own,” Rafaela declared with a serious nod, reaching out to grasp Noah’s hands. “This includes your partner.”

“Especially against bad Lords.” Another of the Mousegirls added, and they all shared nods with each other.

The honest intent was mixed with a vindictive anger. It was easy to tell something had happened, but Noah didn’t care much. Everyone had a sob story. “It has to be a secret from the current Lord.”

Rafaella hesitated. There was a sting of betrayal at the consideration, but it was quickly overwhelmed by determination. “We protect our own.” She nodded, squeezing Noah’s hands. “But our Lord is good, he is of the horde. He can be trusted.”

“This is important to my partner,” Noah insisted.

“She is threshold, she doesn’t understand,” Sulphur gave their apparent leader a soft pat on her shoulder. “You didn’t trust either. She needs time.”

Acceptance followed, Rafaella sighed, biting her lip. “We keep this secret from the Lord. For now.” She gave a sharp look. “It cannot be a forever promise. The Lord holds many secrets, and his wives are sharp. The white-cat stalks all.”

A grave nod was shared, and Noah felt a sense of begrudging respect and fear coming out of the Metalmouse.

“We can work with that.” Noah didn’t mention that they would leave if anything felt off or if they got the slightest whiff of danger. It would hopefully give them the time and opportunity to learn more about what was going on in Sinco. Maybe even find a way to break Brye’s bond with Mark safely.

Their priority was escaping the Boss's clutches.

“It is a deal.” Releasing her hands, Rafaella tugged her towards the wall she’d been carving on.

“Woah, woah.” Noah stepped back, pulling herself free of the grasp. “I’m here only to scout things out. My partner’s safety comes first.”

The frustration was practically palpable, but Rafaella didn’t press on. Crossing her arms, she looked at Noah sternly. The two mice kept their ground, each measuring the other. The Metalmouse was the first to relent, letting out a sigh and moving her hands to her hips.

“What do you need?”

“Information on the Lord.” Noah raised her hands before any complaints were aimed her way. “Whatever isn’t a secret would be a good place to start.” She could worm out more important details given time. “Like how he took over the city, or what those trenches are outside the wall.”

The mice shared glances with one another, nodding once before the others turned to leave.

“If you wish to understand the Lord, then you should know about the Cog-Horde first,” she said, gesturing for Noah to follow. “Many of us were originally owned by Mister Rollo. We worked in the elemental stone mine, at least until it began to dry up.” She entered one of the tunnels, squeezing into the space and waiting. “When I ascended into a Metalmouse, the Lord bought me and began construction of the Lightning-Vault. He

wished to use it to make it easier for him to ascend maidens. I helped because I wanted my sisters to grow stronger too.”

Noah was no stranger to the concept. There was no shortage of people claiming they knew exactly how to guarantee a maiden would ascend into some more powerful form. Swindlers in particular could find it very lucrative selling oils or “secrets” detailing how to turn your everyday Doggirl into a Terrielle or Pitbelle or a Hound. Only a dullard wouldn’t see some merit in ascending a maiden or twelve in their service. And the nobility was just as prone to these schemes if not more so.

“It was a mistake.”

There was a finality to her statement.

Noah didn’t need to ask whether there had been any eventual success to it. If there had been, it was doubtful the man would’ve lost the city. Anyone who unlocked such a secret would become an unstoppable force. But in the end, it was an impossible dream. Like elixirs for immortality, or potions that could turn maidens into humans.

“When the feral rush came, people started disappearing inside the city. Some of us had found out it was a predator, but any who reported it would go missing soon after. It became clear the threat was working with the Lord in some way.” Their meandering came to a halt in another room. “Tilly among them.”

This room had a ceiling low enough that Noah could reach out and touch it. On the walls, someone had carved out names. A quick glance confirmed at least fifty, perhaps closer to a hundred. The solemn way Rafaella nodded at the wall could only mean these were the names of those that had been lost.

“We formed the Cog-Horde to survive. We recruited most of the mice in the city and shared the secrets of how to avoid the predators,” Rafaella stopped, turning around. “Vampires,” she declared. “We didn’t know about it until later. What we do know is that Thorley became more aggressive when they stopped showing up. He withheld food from the city to try and hold out, but that was when Lord Rick appeared with the tribe.”

“Convenient,” Noah pointed out.

“We thought so too,” Rafaella nodded in understanding. “One of his wives was a Fledgling.”

“Was?”

“She ascended a few weeks ago. But the leader can be trusted; she-” Her ears twitched; the maiden cut herself off and shook her head. “No, that is her secret.”

“She ascended.” Noah frowned at that. “Into a Vampire?” The silence was confirmation enough; she felt a knot suddenly forming in her gut.

Alarm bells were ringing pretty loudly now. For a moment, they stared at each other; Noah felt a shortness of breath coming to her.

Rafaella stepped back. “You want to run away.”

Noah caressed the hilt of the knife on her hip. “Are you going to stop me?”

The other mouse shook her head. “You have not tried to hurt us; we have no reason to hurt you. It is not our way.” She pointed at one of the tunnels. “That is the shortest way outside if you must run.”

It could be a trap.

The thought popped up unbidden. Noah hesitated in her step, fighting against old instincts. She was a maiden now, not a human. She had ways to verify; she wasn't helpless to treachery as she was before.

“Give me your tail.”

Rafaella frowned, then nodded, turning around to allow Noah to grip her tail. The Metalmouse squeaked with a little surprise, but Noah focused on the feelings coming out of her.

“Think about this Rick fellow. Focus on that.”

At that moment, she thought she'd gone blind. Rafaella's emotions exploded with such tenacious feelings of veneration that they drowned out all else. Noah had to grit her teeth to avoid recoiling away, focusing on the undertones. There was awe and respect, gratitude and trust, debt and apprehension. The emotions were tempered by duty and purpose, a sense of belonging to something greater than any individual could ever hope for.

Noah swallowed. “Now... think about the tunnel, about letting me leave.”

The emotions swirled and changed, becoming regret, sadness, acceptance, and failure. There was no subterfuge, anger, or smugness. It was as much confirmation as she needed to have. She let go of Rafaella's tail and bolted for the exit.

Her mind churned, fear gripping her chest.

This was not the first time she'd witnessed this.

Brye felt about the Boss in the exact same way.

Rick could not be trusted.