



Monsters and Maidens

by Ravnicrasol

Chapter 123 [Rick](Start Volume 3)

The sky was sunny with barely a cloud in sight. The warmth it provided countered the slight humid chill that the breeze carried with it. The visage was equally beautiful, lush green forests to the left just on the other side of the small river, and also to the right. But the road itself was well away from either, and there was not a single tree near the road to provide so much as a speck of shade.

The empty space was clearly man-made, an effort that felt odd if only compared to the dirt road they were walking on. But it wasn't something that really bothered Rick, because as tranquil as the day might seem, other things were not as peaceful.

A constant growl and a tug from Rick's left arm kept him all too aware of Monica's presence. Her eyes would move from looking around and then to Dia. The nurse was pretending not to notice, walking down the road just within arm's reach, carrying a backpack no woman her size had the right to lug around so easily.

Rick was quite sure that if he had to carry the thing, he most certainly would not be keeping that pace.

"If you focus really, really hard, the sound becomes part of the background. Like the chirping birds or a flowing river." Kat pipped up with a chuckle, noticing the exasperated look the teacher shot her way.

"If you hear chirping, ma'am, it would be best to stay away from it." The one to speak up had been Ginny. The Draco, daughter of Major Huge, smiled nervously as she received the focus from the other humans in the group, the maiden coughed, quickly adding. "Normal birds don't make sounds. It would attract ferals. The only creatures that chirp are ferals, usually ones that use the chirping as a way to communicate or lure prey."

"Such as feral Dracos?" Tomas pipped up with a slight look of curiosity.

"... yes." The maiden grimaced, gaze flickering towards Rick and immediately turning away. "Feral Dracos hunt in packs more often than not, and are very smart."

Rick glanced at her for a moment, watching the young maiden scratch the red-green scales of her wrist. The teacher guessed talking about the ferals of one own's breed wasn't the most comfortable subject to focus on. "How much longer until we reach... what was the next place's name?"

"The town of Seledo, sir. We are still at least a week off." Freya was the one to speak up, reaching into her bag and pulling out a piece of paper with some scribbled notes. "Though the Major did request we check some settlements along the way."

Though Rick nodded at the statement, he couldn't help but notice Dia grimacing and lowering her gaze slightly. It made him want to sigh and shake his head. If he had to guess, the whole fiving coin incident still weighed on her, even if she didn't want to show it.

He still couldn't recall the name of the city he'd been born in... as well as that of other places. As far as the Hunter's psychic had been able to tell, the damage might recover with time. Or never at all.

Rick was just thankful it had been something comparatively minor to what it could have been.

"Good thing gramps' not slowing us down anymore."

"Shut it."

Mr. Gabriel was, perhaps, second to Monica in levels of annoyance.

Because, apparently, he was the only one with a ride.

A Centaur kind of maiden.

And he didn't like that.

The poor girl, Rose, was about as nervous as Tess, the mousegirl. The equine maiden kept a very healthy distance from Monica, and every time she looked away, her ears would remain firmly pointed at the feline. Mostly because she'd been one of the few who'd survived the Baron's death and had had a front-row seat to what said feline could do.

Rick would probably also be terrified had he been in her shoes, erm, hooves. Though for the life of him, he couldn't quite fathom how or why she'd volunteered for this job to begin with. The Baroness likely had been the one to make that choice.

"I smell old smoke." Ginny spoke up, and the group tensed, the Draco glanced a bit to the side, in the direction the wind was blowing from. "Coal, no active flames."

"We're close to one of the settlements." Freya nodded, glancing at Tomas and then at Rick. "The report mentioned no responses from attempts at communication from miss Miranda, so it was likely overrun."

"That's..." He nodded, realizing the words were a warning of what they might find, rather than one for his opinion. "Let's move cautiously, then. There might be ferals near, right?"

The Elf nodded in return, which felt off on so many levels to him. As if he was the one being considered in charge of the group in some shape or form. With his gaze moving towards Monica as she'd not so much as twitched, he could guess why that was the running supposition.

Which was quite frustrating, considering the Elf had at least two decades on him in years alone, even if she didn't show it. And she definitely had infinitely more experience in what one ought to do under these circumstances. The cultural norms made those things moot, however, and Rick was left feeling as if he was walking on eggshells.

"Monica." He called out, her head snapped down to look at him, ears perked, growl instantly gone. "Hurt?"

He pointed in the direction the wind blew, and the feline took a long sniff. "No hurt." She proclaimed, calmly keeping his arm in her fluffy grip. Her ears rotated slightly and her focus shifted to the side. "Yes hurt?"

"I'm not sure why she's asking."

"Likely someone was wounded, but they're dead now." Mr. Gabriel spoke with a grunt, shaking his head.

Another sniff, and Monica's ears perked, her whole body straightening slightly, eager smile spreading fast. "Food!"

And she very nearly let go of Rick's arm, taking a whole step away from him before she suddenly realized the hand she was holding was still very much attached to the rest of him. The maiden hesitated, looked at Dia, at the others, and then ahead. "Ride?" She repeated, hopefully at him, lifting her arms in that 'bridal-carry' gesture he had become familiar with.

"No, no rides." Rick quickly replied, shaking his head emphatically.

Monica's ears drooped, shoulders slumping as she sighed. The Sabertooth could only really keep herself walking at his own pace, a pout on her lips as she kept her gaze in the wind's direction. At least her focus on Dia had evaporated. The maiden's ears kept rotating this way and that.

And she kept licking her lips.

"Food rationing is not a meal-plan Monica agrees with, huh."

More than one set of eyes shot Kat a glare.

"It is quite rough, ma'am." Ginny spoke with a nervous chuckle, keeping her gaze slightly downwards. "Though we can survive eating as much as a human would, for maidens such as Dracos and... Sabertooths, it's..."

"Not ideal," Tomas said.

There were more than a few questions Rick preferred not to ask regarding details over the whole food situation. Instead, he just kept quietly doing his

best to avoid getting dragged by the increasingly eager feline.

It didn't take them long to find the aforementioned settlement, or more like the debris of what was left of it. The road dipped down the slope, and between where they stood and the debris were dozens of dirt walls that had crumbled, wooden stakes splintered or burnt, and all of it leading towards the remains of a sad dozen wooden houses that had either been knocked down or burnt. There were signs of there being a wall around the place, and a couple farms on either side, but overall the whole place felt like it had lost all signs of life for at least a week if not more.

"I will scout ahead." Freya spoke, pulling out her bow and nocking an arrow. "In case there might be-."

ROAAAAR

Rick had flinched as Monica unleashed the blast of sound, the proclamation loud and clear. And suddenly there were no less than a dozen figures bolting out of the debris and making a run for the forest up the hills and through the farms.

Freya grunted. "Ferals, one and all." She confirmed, preparing her bow.

"Food?" Monica smiled at Rick, watching the figures and then Rick, and then the running figures again, a lofty grin that went from ear to ear, her tail moving back and forth excitedly in a slow rhythm.

He looked over to the other maidens, Freya and Ginny in particular, and cursed at having given them the chance to put up a stony, blank face. They'd clearly been trained on how to avoid letting their emotions show to their superiors.

Kat and Tomas, though, grimaced.

"No food." Rick shook his head. This was not something he wanted to make a habit out of.

And yet the Sabertooth let go of his arm, still looking thoughtful rather than disappointed as she abruptly leapt down the hill and towards the nearest likely target. "WAIT!" Rick shouted after her, but she paid him no mind, speeding off faster and faster. The human frowned at the feeling of eagerness he could sense from her, it was clear she would not come back any time soon.

"Let's check the place for signs of survivors." He called out to the others, keeping Monica in the corner of his eye. "And... see what we do from there. Let's be safe about this."

"Yes sir!" Freya and Ginny tightened their shoulders. They shared looks, and the Draco broke into a sprint towards the settlement while the Elf stuck to the group.

Just as Rick was about to sigh, a warm hand slipped into his grasp, fingers entwining with his own. Dia quietly smiled up at him as she leaned into his shoulder.



KINGDOM MAP







Chapter 124 [Rick]

Rick looked around the barely standing remains of the settlements.

It took Ginny a whole of ten minutes to claim the area safe. And it took Monica a whole two hours to do... whatever it was that she was doing. At first Rick had suspected she was trying to catch and kill, but it was clear Monica was playing with the feral now, chasing her down, catching her, and then tossing her very high into the air.

The feral would land, sometimes well, other times not as much, and make a run for it. And Monica would repeat the chase.

The group unilaterally decided not to pay further attention to her. The trio of younger humans grimacing and focusing on the exploration of the area while Mr. Gabriel, Tess, and Rose stayed at the periphery and well away from everything that might pose a threat to them.

"There were survivors, but they left. At least a week ago."

Freya's declaration drew their attention. They found a dozen lumps of ash, each no larger than a bowl. "Are those...?"

"Symbolic burials." The Elf shook her head, pointing at the pieces of wood that had been placed next to each lump. Each piece of wood had a circle carved into it. "Whoever their owner was, they survived, but they couldn't find the maiden's bodies. Ferals likely took them."

"How do you figure he survived?"

"A full circle means they fulfilled their final task: protecting their human." Ginny muttered with a bowed head. "They died with honor." The young maiden pressed her palms against her shoulders.

The gesture was repeated by Dia and Freya, the moment of quiet having the three humans awkwardly lowering their heads in sympathy. Rick noticed

Dia's face darkened as she lowered herself to her knees, placing her hands on the opposite shoulder. The bond with her was tenuous, but he could feel... shame.

With a sigh, Freya stepped away from the planks of wood, glancing around before directing her attention at Rick. "We'll look for the black-box, hopefully we'll find some details there."

Tomas jumped up at that. "Black box?"

"It's a book." Dia explained softly, standing up and drying a tear from the corner of her eye. "It contains the logs for all important activity in a settlement, be it a village or a city. It's meant to never leave the location, and whoever the last survivors are, they're meant to also be the ones to leave the final log."

"But why is it called a black box?"

"Because it's put into a black box, one made out of heavily enchanted murisium so that it repels ferals." Ginny replied with a simple shrug.

"I can't be the only one who finds that weird... right?" Tomas glanced at Rick and Kat.

"Do you have black boxes too?" The Draco blinked, a bit surprised.

"For planes, they're meant to be pretty damn hard to destroy, and it's also meant to keep a record of what happened, in case one falls." Tomas waved his hands around slightly, a slight eagerness in his voice. "And I'm sure this world has something to do with ours, because of all the weird coincidences."

"Like everyone speaking English."

"Exactly!"

Rick shook his head. "Let's look for this box and get out of here. It's not safe to stick around, and I doubt we'll find many answers about why people speak and write in English here."

That popped Tomas' eagerness, but he would survive. The chemistry teacher had other things that were bothering him, more immediate ones. Such as how he could spot Monica fast approaching the group. He could vaguely sense that she was eager about something, though for the life of him he couldn't tell what.

Which made him slightly nervous when he realized she was holding onto the feral she'd been toying with. The feral didn't look alive. But as Monica slowed down, Rick could make out the feral was a Mousegirl, and barely breathing at that.

The feline was all smiles, hips wiggling wagging back and forth as she came to a stop in front of Rick. "No Monica food." She said, tossing the nearly dead mouse at his feet. "Rick food."

He paled as she looked down at the feral. The mouse's arms and legs were bent in the wrong way, her body battered and bruised, cuts littering her dirt-caked body. The human's stomach did a somersault. "Monica-."

"Rick food." The feline spoke proudly, stepping over the mostly immobile feral and tapping the scabbard on Rick's hip. The one that had the short sword. "Rick kill food." Monica nodded emphatically, putting her hands together and doing a downwards motion.

As if stabbing something with the sword.

"Monica, no."

His growl made her ears flatten, brows furrowing in confusion. "Rick?"

"Monica, NO." He stepped towards her and frowning, keeping his voice steady but firm. "Rick no kill food."

She growled back, gesturing at the whimpering feral. "Rick hurt food, hurt food, hurt food." She waved again, harshly this time, claws coming out as she clawed at empty air, like she was... fighting? "Food no hurt Rick. No hurt Rick."

A singular emotion twinged through him, frustration, followed by concern. The sensation was brief but intense, enough it knocked his annoyance down a peg as he looked at the feral and then at Monica. Putting aside the instinct to just flat out refuse her again, he grit his teeth, trying to puzzle what she was attempting to tell him.

"This is the deadliest game of charades I've ever had." Kat muttered under her breath.

That popped any energy Rick had right away, he sighed and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. Failing at guessing Monica's intentions, he grasped one of her clawed fingers. "Monica follow," he declared, tugging for her to trail behind him. She tried to grasp the feral as he did. "No. Monica follow... no food." His gaze darted towards the others, a quiet plea for them to handle the feral while he handled Monica.

Dia was included in that gaze. The nurse quietly nodded, staying behind.

Monica clearly did not like this, but a pointed look from Rick was enough for her to falter. It bought him the time he needed to get away from the others. He came to a halt after a quick check that there wasn't anything of note around him besides crumbled houses of stone and wood. He turned his focus on Monica.

Deep breath, how to approach this? There was no room to try to explain... anything close to morality, not with the current limitations on her vocabulary. But he had to try something, right? Break the problem into smaller parts.

"Torture is bad." Rick muttered to himself. Great, morality, there's that wall again. "Don't torture?" Close... "I don't like torture." Maybe that was the way to go?

"Tohr-tur?" The feline she tilted her head.

Hurting without reason, hurting in general? The white-haired Sabertooth kept her gaze focused on him as he paced back and forth, her head tilted a bit to the side. Nodding as he felt the idea materialize properly, Rick stepped to

her. "Word." The term used to signal there was a new term to be learned. "Hurt." He said, pinching his arm. She nodded.

"Hurt." She nodded, mimicking the gesture, pinching her own arm.

"Torture." Rick then proceeded to pinch himself a lot all over his arms.

She tilted her head again, repeating the pinches. "Hurt, hurt, hurt, hurt, torture?"

Close enough. "Yes." Rick nodded.

"Torture... no?"

"Torture no."

"Food hurt yes?"

"Food kill yes."

She frowned. "Food kill yes, food hurt... no?"

"Food torture no."

This time Monica crossed her arms, cocking a brow at him in the most challenging look he'd seen her send his way. "Hurt food yes? Hurt food no?"

He grimaced. "Hurt food... yes, torture food no."

Snorting loudly, the feline made an annoyed growl. "Hurt Dia no, Hurt Ginny no, Torture food no, no, no, no, NO!" She paced back and forth, grumbling, throwing her paws back and forth, using a gravelly tone of voice that... was she trying to imitate him? She looked at Rick and... was she having a tantrum?

The feline got closer, poking his chest and making him step back, slightly surprised. "Bahron hurt Rick, food hurt Rick. Rick hurt Rick!" Snarling, she let out a growl, turning around, gesturing in the direction of the others. "Hurt hurt HURT!" She proceeded to grab his hand, moving it to the pommel of the

short-sword. "Rick hurt Bahron, Rick kill Bahron, Rick hurt food, Rick kill food. Food no hurt Rick. Bahron no hurt Rick."

This time she roared, stomping her feet, crossing her arms, and shooting a look at him that was so damnably close to disappointment he was surprised. There was something else in what she was trying to say, and it wasn't making its way through the language barrier. She just didn't have the right words.

Grimacing, he stepped close, taking her paw in his hand and slowly caressing the back of it. With an apologetic look, he rubbed circles into the over-sized claws, focusing on the puffy pads. He focused his mind on their form, hands that were half-way to paws, thick slightly stubby fingers that had room for retractable claws, but lacking in the dexterity for fine manipulation.

They were meant to fight.

Rick swallowed the knot in his throat.

"Word."

Sighing, he pinched his chest. "Hurt."

Monica snorted, rolling her eyes. "Hurt."

Slowly, he pulled her paw against his chest, making a show of leaving it between himself and the pinching hand. His fingers pinched at the stripped fur. "Protect."

"Prrroh-tec."

"Hurt." He removed her hand, pinching his own chest, then moved her paw back down. "Protect."

"Prrotec." Monica paused, frowning.

"Monica protect Rick."

The feline focused on her paw, then at him, then on her paw again. She pulled away, stepping closer. "Monica hurt Rick." She poked his shoulder with her

claw, then moved to put her other claw in the way. "Monica... prrotec Rick?"

"Yes."

She deflated, sighing as she shook her head. "No."

"No?"

Leaning closer, she knelt in front of him, her head level with his chest as she wrapped her strong arms around his hip. "Monica prrotec Rick." She declared, squeezing him, looking up into his eyes, then moving to grab his arms and pull them to wrap around her head. A second sigh. She breathed in and leaned into him. "Rick prrotec Monica."

She was still frustrated, but at least in this shared hug, she eventually relaxed.

"Rick protect Monica," he muttered, kissing the top of her head.

Chapter 125 [Mark]

"We're running low on supplies."

"Pretty sure you can find some ferals to eat."

"Fuck you."

Mark glared at Brye. She glared back. A soft breeze blew through the forest.

"Either you kiss and makeup, or we can keep walking. It's bad enough super-cock here is slowing us down." Shery rolled her eyes, shifting her shoulders and causing Noah to squeak. The Mousegirl was tied up and gagged tight, getting carried by the gray-skinned maiden like a sack of potatoes.

"Aren't both of you supposed to be good at this kind of shit?" He glared at them.

"Not sure if you've noticed, we're not Hunters." Shery rolled her eyes.

"Or feralborn." Brye added. "Give me a well stocked hole to lounge in, maybe some girls to kill, this shit? Fuck this shit."

It was impressive how quickly the domineering facade fell off the moment hunger started gnawing at the fox's heels. Mark just rolled his eyes in return, focusing ahead and on pushing himself to walk faster. The forest had turned into an annoyance of shrubbery and thickets. It was a pain to walk through, and the human was ever thankful for his jeans. Even if they were getting mangled up.

"Fucking finally, a hog-trail."

Brye growled, pointing at the barely visible 'line' of missing vegetation.

"Is this thing even going in the right direction?"

Mark glanced upwards for a second, confirming the sun's position through the shade of the trees. "Trail's headed West."

"Close enough." Shery shrugged. "Aubria is in that general direction, we're bound to stumble onto an actual road sooner or later."

"Kinda surprised our otherworlder pet knows navigation but not survival." She quirked a brow, and Mark felt something twitch in the back of his mind. The fox smirked. "Ah, your brother knew this kind of thing, and it rubbed off on you?"

Mark snapped. "Stay the fuck out of my head you fr-." He halted his word before he could finish it, noticing Shery tense and Brye's hackles already rising. His mind returning to the river, the drowning, the fox saving his life. The human shook his head. "I'm not your fucking pet."

There was a moment of surprise on the fox's expression, quickly replaced with an amused smirk. "Once we get to Aubria, you can tie me up and spank me if you'd like. Until then, you're going to be the pet."

Snorting loudly, the young man just kept moving, glaring at the fox as she took the lead and Shery covered the rear. His eyes trailed over her two tails as they danced back and forth. Her humor had clearly improved from just that interaction, and the human was left all the more confused for it.

"MFFFF!"

The muffled shout came from Noah, the mouse abruptly becoming far more animated, shaking her head against the blindfold and mouthpiece desperately. Instantly, the group froze, not paying so much attention to the Mousegirl as much as their surroundings.

Brye was the first to act, jumping out of the trail to the right and vanishing uncannily fast. Mark realized she'd used an illusion of some sort, but he couldn't get the chance to ponder over it as a rumbling growl from his left. The human lifted the stick of wood right as Noah squeaked when she was dropped.

Shery pulled out a far thicker stick of wood, looking mighty heavy.

"Feral mutt, run or get pummeled." The gray skinned maiden threatened, raising the stick as she stepped closer to Mark, keeping slightly ahead and to the left.

A shriek from behind them made them freeze and spin around. Yipping and barking sounds followed, ones that were getting further and further away quite quickly. Human and maiden hesitated right until Brye stepped from the bushes, wiping away blood from her fingers and grimacing. "Kitsune, was trying to trick you to steal the mouse for a quick meal."

Both of them glanced at the blindfolded and muffled maiden that was still wriggling and trying to escape the wires that kept her tightly bound.

"When the fuck can we get rid of this piece of shit?"

"When the bond breaks and killing her won't cause our human to get all traumatized." The Nogitsune's gaze flickered towards Mark, and then back at the mouse. "Resilient little fucker doesn't even feel worn down."

Shery nodded, picking the mouse back up and slinging the maiden over her shoulder. "How the fuck does a bond last through her trying to kill him?"

"Not really our job to play the psychic. Just get him to the Boss and see what we do from there."

"Bitch, you ARE psychic."

Brye rolled her eyes again, turning to follow along the hog-trail with the others close behind.

The hours just ticked by, with Brye managing to find some of those edible over-sized berries that Mark had long since grown to hate. "How come these are all over the place?" He didn't take a bite. There was a general agreement no one would unless they didn't have much else of an option.

"Ferals love the stuff." The Nogitunse just shrugged.

"You'd think they'd also love the more edible crap."

Shery growled. "Pretty sure Brye's cunt is attached to her nose, and that's why she only ever picks up on these."

"Feel free to find something else that you're sure is edible." The fox glanced over her shoulder at Shery.

"Boar." Shery and Mark replied in unison, frowning at her. "And there's birds too." The human added.

There was only a shrug in response. "If you find one, tell me, I sure as fuck haven't been able to pick up on anything."

"Turns out the wildlife is smarter than you."

Brye growled, but didn't reply, just continuing her walk.

Things rolled slowly like this. Walk, break, and walk some more. Everyone in the group kept eying the handful of fist-sized berries being carried, and none wanted to take a bite until it was time to settle for the night. At that point, it would be easier to at least set-up someone to guard things over.

Mark was not looking forward to being the sex-toy of the two maidens.

Which was why he felt infinitely fortunate the moment they'd spotted an actual honest-to-God road. Dirt and well trodden, with the patches of forest cleared out at either side to give good visibility for anyone moving through. It meant there would be other people, sooner or later, at the very least.

Maybe even someone with real food for a change.

His stomach grumbled just from imagining it.

"We're pushing things a bit hard." Shery glanced back and forth, confirming there was no one traversing the road currently. "Think we should pull a snatch-and-grab?"

"Definitely."

"A what now?"

Mark felt a trickle of concern.

"We could pretend to be some hunters, claim Noah's a feral we caught, remove the collar and all that." Brye pointed at the squirming mouse. "But that only really works if you're not going to try to sell us out just so you can escape."

"Which you tried."

"Which you tried." Brye nodded along with Sherry. "We'll keep you nice and away from the action while we do the work."

He almost jumped out to complain, before reminding himself exactly what he was going to complain about. Mouth shut, he left it at that. If they wanted to do all the work, then better for him. He was just a payload to them, after all.

Chapter 126 [Mark]

"She's a Tigermouse, don't remove her blindfold."

Mark blinked slowly up at Brye. "You're joking, right?" He showed his tied wrists up at her.

"Hey, you behave, and I've got a nice reward for you later."

With a sigh, he just sat back against the tree, glancing over at the mouse. Noah was hanging upside down, wriggling, ankles tied up to the branch and hands tied behind her back. She very much looked like some prized fish that was being left up. The maiden was quite lively, wriggling and moving about.

"Right, almost forgot."

Brye took one of the purple berries out of the bundle of cloth they'd been using as an improvised backpack. Approaching the wriggling mouse, she squeezed it over her thighs, allowing the purple liquid to splash down and cover her groin, her stomach, her petite breasts, dribbling all the way to the top of her mousy ears. The purple juice sparkled against the deeply tanned skin, goosebumps chasing the fruity substance.

Noah groaned, wriggling harder against the ropes as Brye used her coated hand to properly spread the juices on the maiden's front and back. The fox took more than a few liberties with the diminutive maiden, squeezing her breasts, caressing her lower lips. The upside down woman grunted and squeaked, thrashing against the rope.

"The fuck's that for!?" Shery jumped, glancing over with a scowl. "That scent's going to draw attention."

"She's a psychic now." The fox shrugged nonchalantly, whipping her hand against Noah's rope-like tail. "Can't have her trying shit while I'm not around." Pausing, she glanced at Mark, the young man having quickly looked away in an attempt to ignore the mildly erotic display. "Enjoy the show."

With a sigh, he shook his head, curling against the tree and watching them leave. The sound of their footsteps eventually died out, and the only sound remaining was that of the squirming, wriggling mouse. Mark's eyes turned towards her, hanging from her ankles, body naked and slick with the purple juices.

He'd seen plenty of feral mice, but Noah didn't look like they did. She was far closer to human in looks. Smooth with tanned skin, tight nubile physique, she would've certainly passed for a gymnast. The changes she'd gone through since her 'shift' had been noticeable, her skin having gone from pale to darker, and the fur on her ears having turned white.

Brye kept insisting the mouse had gained psychic powers, but Mark hadn't exactly witnessed any of it.

Sighing, he glanced down at the wire they'd put on his wrists. It wasn't tight, and they'd certainly been sloppy about it. But what was the point? His mind turned to Veronica. The woman hadn't been one to care about his life, and Noah had attempted to kill him the only way she'd been able to, that really only left...

Shaking his head, he didn't want to think about that, how the fox was the only thing that had reliably gone out of its way to keep him alive. To hand him over to this "Boss" person. But...

Noah moaned, wriggling, shaking her head violently. Her head whipped about as she was trying to desperately remove the pieces of cloth binding her mouth and eyes.

"Stop."

Mark's word made her freeze in place. Noah was breathing fast, chest heaving for air through the cloth. "MMMFFF!" She tried to speak against the cloth that stuffed her mouth, the maiden breathing hard through her nose, the only part of her face that wasn't covered up.

"I said STOP!" Mark raised his voice now, feeling the anger flare back out, his voice loud and clear.

The mouse froze in place, shivering slightly as she did. The young human took the chance to glare, even if he was sure she wouldn't be able to tell. "And stay fucking still for a change."

His gaze turned back down to his tied wrists. The wire was still there, and it was annoying him. So he started working on removing them. It only took him a couple minutes, and by the time he'd been done, a new sound was coming out of the bound maiden. Sobbing. It... irked Mark. She'd tried to kill him, used him for her... what? Suicide wish?

He finished removing the wire and stood up, approaching her once, sure there wasn't anything else in the surrounding area. The anger from the river came back, mild, muted. He was tired and hungry, annoyed, but the fury had washed out slightly.

Mark knew better than to trust her. Brye's warning rang clearly, so he avoided touching the cloth covering her mouth and especially the one covering her eyes. Her breathing had caught in her chest, fast and short, very close to hyperventilating. Her belly-button was eye-level with him.

Slowly, he reached out, pressing a finger against her navel.

The maiden squirmed, squeaking through the cloth and trying to fight her way free. "Stop," he commanded, and she bolted stiffly once more, his finger tracing from her navel to the side of her hip. Another slight sob escaped her. He could only frown further. "Just stop this stupid asinine game. Stop." Mark pulled his finger away when the digit started to tingle, wiping it off against the tree-bark. "You did this on yourself. You fucked up big time, turned yourself into this, and then tried to kill the one person who didn't hate your guts."

Noah had become quiet, the sobbing started to grow louder, and Mark growled again.

"No, just... no. You don't get a pity-party." He stomped his foot, glaring at the bound mouse. "You wanted to die, you opted to throw your life away. Well, we're putting that life to damn use. Once we're done with it do whatever the fuck you want if you still want to off yourself."

A long pause followed, Mark glaring at her, watching the mouse stop moving, only a long snuffle followed, shuddering as goosebumps coursed through her body. A slow whimper, and a nod. A quick nod, and then many more, the maiden desperately moving her head back and forth, talking into the cloth again.

Mark sighed, pausing just as he'd been about to pull on the gag to let her talk. He'd seen what those teeth could do first hand, how they'd pierced through maiden skin when he hadn't been able to with a knife. It wasn't worth the risk, he turned in the direction Shery and Brye had left towards, forcing himself to look away from the squirming maiden.

His mind turned towards the larger picture, the prospect of running away. Where? To whom? Not like there was safety. With one last look at Noah as she hung from the tree, his eyes coursing through her juice-covered body, he followed the direction the other two maidens had taken.

The edge of the forest was only a couple dozen meters away, and from it, he got front-row seats to the road. Things had not been calm, Mark saw traces of scorched dirt, and there was a corpse near the road, bleeding out. Maiden if her brightly lit hair was anything to go by.

There were two others. A human lay on the ground, Brye had a short-sword pressed against the back of his neck. A maiden knelt nearby, hands raised and head pressed into the ground. They were a bit too far away for Mark to hear what was being said, but there were clearly cries for mercy.

These were strangers, and they needed the food, but...

"Just stop this."

He spoke under his breath, frowning and shaking his head.

He didn't expect the fox's head to snap in his direction. Her eyes widened before quickly turning back to her captive. Mark felt a sudden shiver. Her hearing was THAT good? His brows narrowed. "They've done nothing to us."

The fox's tails stopped their wag, raising and then lowering. She spoke to Shery, the fellow maiden appearing confused at first, until she caught sight of Mark in the tree-line. She too appeared surprised. Brye appeared to deflate slightly before grabbing a hold of the guy's shirt and vanishing.

She reappeared near the tree-line at the side of the road opposite to Mark. A second jump and she popped into existence near the tree-top. There was screaming, there was shouting, and there was begging. But the fox didn't drop him, instead taking rope and tying him up, leaving him to hang from the branch in much the same way she had Noah.

Except she didn't tie the other end, tossing the rope down for Shery to grab and tie to the remaining maiden's wrists. Behind her back. The situation looked simple enough. If she loosened the rope, the guy would fall, and if she didn't catch him in time, that would be it for him.

The duo proceeded to leave them there, quickly moving towards the sacks and bags that were littered around the bloodied corpse. They picked up most everything there and rushed in Mark's direction, the human having the sense of mind to dip back into the forest and avoid being spotted by the surviving duo.

"If this comes to bite our tails, it's on you." Brye declared dryly, moving past him without further regard, continuing in the direction of the mouse they'd left hanging.

Shery however, stopped next to him. She met his gaze with a slight frown. "Don't meddle in things unless you know what you're doing."

"What?"

She didn't respond, shoving one of the sacks onto his arms. "There're clothes there, see what fits, leave the rest." A loud moan caught both their attentions, a squeaky sound that made it all too clear what was going on. Shery sighed and shook her head. "We'll eat while we walk. Got to get some distance from here."

Chapter 127 [Alice]

Alice glanced at the green-collared winged woman that stood in front of her.

"My name's Helga. It's a pleasure to meet you in person, ma'am." The blond maiden was smiling from ear to ear. "I'm sure I will be of great service."

"In person?"

"I've been in sentry duty, so I've spotted you a couple times." The woman made a gesture towards the radio tower. Or more accurately, to the top of the radio tower. She quickly did a brief salute, placing her right hand on her left shoulder.

"You... don't have to do this." Alice grimaced slightly. "I don't really need to... own... anyone."

"Ma'am, the Major mentioned your... opinions in this matter, and asked only for volunteers. I volunteered."

"To be my property." The teacher rubbed her temples. "Helga, look, I'm not..."

The maiden stepped closer, light gray wings rustling. "Ma'am." She smiled brightly. "It is illegal for a maiden to not have an owner, and considering my duties are to assist and protect you. Being under your ownership is the most convenient arrangement."

Alice frowned. "Willingly, not coerced or bribed or..."

"I am able to wield radiant energy, I could use it to cast a truth spell if you'd prefer?" She was not deterred an inch, grinning brightly.

"No, no, let's... not go into that particular hole." She sighed, shaking her head. "Could you at least tell me... why?"

Helga blushed slightly, her eyes widening along with her smile. "I'd been hearing much about your group from the Baroness' guards, especially over how you specifically had tried to attack the Baron when he'd threatened you." The pale-gray wings spread behind her before quickly retracting. "That shining determination even in the face of impossible odds was so..." A little squirm before quickly making another salute. "It would be a great honor to serve under you, ma'am." And then, hesitation, the smile tightening at the corners. "Would you take me?"

"I, erm, uh..." Alice felt like she was looking straight at the sun, she felt like the young woman was being, perhaps, a bit too intense. "Could we try to see if things mesh and see where it goes from there?"

"A trial?" Helga nodded eagerly. "I will do my best! What task would you have me do first?"

The teacher coughed, nodding slightly. "How about just... staying together for now? See how we get along? I heard the Major was calling out for the... recruits?" Her brow furrowed slightly. "Is that how it's called?"

Helga nodded. "Technically, citizens are enlisted into working for the kingdom in fighting the feral threat. So 'enlisted' is the terminology used in the laws. But they have different names, especially depending on who's calling it and on what they do." A little nod followed. "Though out here so far from civilization, the enlisted are kind of slotted into doing a bit of everything. The people over here tend to just call them 'militia', and most just follow the Hunter's directions." Helga frowned slightly. "I also heard some folk call them 'tamers', but that's mostly for those who've been listening a bit too much to the radio."

"Huh."

Walking across the village, Alice nodded slightly, trying to put together how to approach this brand new conundrum that had been shoved onto her lap.

"Is there anything else you'd like to know, ma'am? I was born in Balet, but grew up in Seledo and Astunes. I've studied a bunch about the law ever since

the Major got into that spat with the Baron, so there's much I can answer if you've got doubts!"

"Spat?" The teacher quirked a brow.

"Yeah, it was about his son." She shook her head. "Lost him to the Pyrebear six years ago. There was a dispute over how the Baron had meddled with the Hunter's job and that's how things went wrong, but... well..." Helga shrugged slightly. "It was messy, and the Earl determined the Baron had been within his rights."

Alice's lips thinned but didn't mention anything else, following the general directions towards the building the Hunters used as a base of operations. She tried her best to avoid paying attention or noticing how every maiden that crossed her path would quickly look her way and then attempt to pretend to not have done exactly that.

It seemed the novelty of the whole "human females" thing had yet to wear out amongst the locals. What was slightly unnerving was how the human males seemed to be far more openly willing to gawk. None had approached, but the psychology teacher was quite willing to bet it would only be a matter of time.

"The Major's this way, ma'am." Helga pipped up, pointing to the side.

They circled around the building and into a large patio. There were several groups of people, the first of which being Major Huge and Irene, standing in the center of the area. In front of them stood eight men, students and parents from the field-trip. Alice noticed Victor as well and quickly turned her attention to the other half of the patio.

There were three metal cages, with four Hunter-uniformed maidens standing at each corner of each cage. But the teacher's attention was quickly drawn towards the contents of the cages. Within each one there were between three and four other maidens. Naked, gagged, and bound in wire.

"What the...!?"

"They're ferals, ma'am." Helga quickly spoke up in a hushed voice. "The Major's likely prepping them for their first maiden."

Alice promptly snapped her mouth shut, eyes turning intensely towards the Major. The man hadn't looked her way, but his broad shoulders stiffened as if he'd been able to detect the gaze all the same. With a nervous cough, he gestured at the cages. "They're all Doggirls, found injured during the rush. We put them to sleep, patched them up, and have some black collars to help break them from the feral state."

"They won't wake up naturally, I am keeping them under." Irene pipped up, her red gaze sweeping over those present, pausing on Alice last. "Please pick whichever seems best. They're all Doggirls, one of the easiest maidens to bond to, and regardless of what task or role you wish to take, they'll prove useful, if nothing else, to keep you safe."

Already she could hear her jaw tighten as she watched him.

Huge's posture tightened further, shoulders drawing back as his spine arched like a bow ready to snap. "Though some might consider it best to make the decision while they're conscious, they're ferals and still dangerous, so prioritizing one's safety should always come first."

The crowd of men glanced at one another, nodding and splitting up, approaching the cages. Alice took the chance to do the same and head towards Huge. Though Irene stepped in her way, the naked red-skinned woman keeping a stony cold look.

"Ma'am." She spoke the word curtly. "Unless you intend to enlist, we would appreciate you refrain from potentially disrupting a lesson that might save the life of your companions."

The psychology teacher paused. "Shouldn't you seek to have these girls taught by experienced people and then given the option on whom to join?"

"Ma'am, a feralborn's best teacher is the one they bond to, as they're far likelier to pay close attention to their human. By bonding them from the start, it lets them adjust to their partner's idiosyncrasies and preferences." Irene

didn't so much as blink. "This also gives them valuable experience. Being able to tame a feral now while under safe circumstances allows them to be likelier to not die when trying their hand on their own."

"We... also don't have enough greenie's that we could spare." Huge added, scratching his chin. "Ma'am."

"But Helga-."

"It was under the Baroness' insistence." Irene snapped up. "Since you and many others have opted to postpone your enlistment, potentially to join the military academy instead, then having a Hunter-experienced maiden would be a minimum to ensure everyone's safety."

"What she said." The Major nodded emphatically. "We're stretched thin enough we can't even send your group off, we have to wait for a sortie from the Earl so they can safely escort you to Balet... I mean, those wanting to join a military academy, and anyone wanting to tag along... ma'am."

"Besides." The psychic's lips cocked upwards ever so slightly. "Would the lady prefer these ferals learn from the values of OUR society and culture, or yours?"

Alice's mouth snapped shut, brows furrowed for several long quiet seconds as she turned to look at the others. "And there's not one woman here amongst the volunteers?"

"If any women from your group have opted to enlist, we've not heard about it." The Major declared.

With a slight frown, she crossed her arms, trying to think it over. Was this yet another move from the Baroness? Maybe Ms. Dodson had stuck her nose into someone's business? Or... a grimace followed, the only one she'd seen enthused with the idea had been Kat, and she'd left with Rick.

"I'd like to stick around and see how this works." She finally pipped up, watching the Major squirm a little. Irene glanced at her, and Alice added.

"Regardless of if I enlist or not, or if I end up joining a military academy or not, this would be a learning experience all the same. No?"

The psychic's lips pursed, eyeing the Major a little.

"Very well, ma'am."

Chapter 128 [Alice]

"We... will start with a simple acclimatization exercise."

Alice quietly watched from the sidelines, doing her level best to purely observe the unfolding events rather than judge them.

The sleeping ferals had been given a black collar, put in place, and then a single one was dragged out of the cage as she slumbered. Laying downwards, they tied her wrists to the ground with wires, and her throat was put into a metal-lasso that would bite into the flesh if tugged hard enough.

A maiden straddled the feral's hips as she kept the other hand on the lasso. In front of this was none other than Victor, the teacher grimacing just as much as the others as they watched.

"We will wake her up slowly. Be sure to keep your fingers out of her reach." The Major explained slowly. "She will panic and attempt to escape, you should try to soothe her. Shushing sounds work, no need to touch, just stay in front of her and wait things out. Eventually she'll tire and calm down." He nodded slowly. "Whenever she's calm, try to put your hand near where she can smell, but not within reach. Repeat until she smells you without reacting violently."

"And then?"

"This might take the whole day, Doggirls have good stamina." The Major answered with a sharp nod. "But you should try to move closer, turn allowing yourself to be sniffed into touching her arms. Once she's used to your touch, you can move into feeding her."

"What's the end-goal?" Alice whispered at Helga.

The Valkyrie's eyes lit up. "The goal is to form a strong sense of submission and trust, the collar boosts those emotions on the unbonded, as a way to promote bond formation." There was a slight sing-song to her voice as she

said this. "The Major usually prefers trust, but if you want to get submission, one of the better options is to pummel them until they realize they don't stand a chance."

"... and that works?"

"Sometimes?" A slight shrug of her wings. "I've heard it's quite tricky. Stronger maidens don't admit defeat easily, and are very slow to trust. But weaker ones could react with more fear and anger than respect."

"Wait, how long do these things take?"

"Anywhere between a few days and a few months." An apologetic smile emerged.

"A few days before they're safe?"

"Oh no, that would be until the bond forms, ma'am." Helga shook her head. "Once bonded, the maidens are to remain contained for at least a few more days if not potentially months until they've properly learned how to hold back."

"Wait, then Monica?"

The Valkyrie's smile tightened. "The Baron thought he could contain a Sabertooth, and he had more resources to spare than the Major."

Alice could only nod at that, feeling keenly aware how fragile a situation it was to have someone like Monica walking around and being entirely unable to stop or contain her. They could only play nice and hope for the best. A howl drew their attention back to the unfolding scene, the Doggirl had awoken, and she'd begun struggling wildly against her bindings.

"As you can see, the feral is, understandably, in a panic. This is one of the most dangerous parts." Huge spoke up over the howls. "There are ways to forcefully calm her down, maidens that wield psychic or corrosive energies in particular are quite adept at it. But for the sake of experience, we won't be using any of those methods. We will assume you are without aid." The man

reached into the ruck-sack that hung at his side and he pulled out a large purple berry. "These are usually called passion-fruit. They grow in the wilds, the bush they grow from absorbs ambient elemental energy, somewhat. The fruit's juices heal wounds, but that same component generally causes arousal and lightheadedness." A slight pause, his eyes moving across the crowd. "There's a trick to reduce the kick, if you don't have a maiden to suck up the elemental energy, you can rub it against the leaves of the bush it comes from."

"Can a bond even be formed while under the effects of some drug?"

"It's not impossible, just harder, ma'am." Helga spoke with a lowered voice, moving a step forward and making sure she was slightly ahead of Alice. The maiden's hand was firmly on the sword on her hip. "The less aware, the tougher it becomes."

The teacher could only really nod along, glancing back at the demonstration as Huge tossed the fruit at Victor, telling him to rub the skin against his fingers and to use that to let the Doggirl to smell them.

The man followed the instructions close enough, and they just about did nothing, the Doggirl kept struggling and whining all the way.

"Just keep at it, be patient, she'll tucker herself out. Once she's receptive, you could give her a bit of food, though it's unlikely she'll take it until hunger starts kicking in sometime tomorrow." Huge nodded along. "How about we bring out the next lass?"

"So we're meant to just... stay here for the whole day?" One of the students raised his hand.

The Major scowled when he heard that. "If things go bad, these girls are going to be your lifeline. Do you have any better ideas over what to spend your time on?"

The hand was lowered, worried looks were shared, and Alice could only grimace at the rawness of it all. They'd escaped the forest, but the danger never left. The young teacher could only sigh and watch as, one by one, the canine maidens were tied down, pinned, and woken up.

"Wouldn't it be better to have them be separate?" She asked the Major as he'd been about to leave. "I mean, having them all howling at once like that... doesn't it make them encourage one another?"

"It... um... Irene?"

"The idea isn't to just teach them to trust the human they bond to but humans in general, ma'am." The maiden spoke up smoothly. "Though it might take them longer, once the first of them caves in and accepts food and water, the others will follow along. Doggirls have a strong pack mentality, so they have an easier time accepting others as part of their group so long as the conditions are right."

"You need to understand the feral's breed as well as the individual's disposition." Huge nodded along, throwing a slight smirk at Irene, his large hand gingerly reaching out to her shoulder. "Having a psychic can help things along plenty."

"Or a charmer." Helga declared.

That made the Major flinch as if struck by lightning, his lips pursing and gaze turning away.

"What's a charmer?" Alice quickly asked, noticing how the Major and Irene were apparently busy looking at something else.

"They're maidens with very powerful abilities that let them influence others in certain ways, ma'am." The Valkyrie declared with an enthusiastic nod. "There're breeds like the Mazouku and Demoness that can create fear, or the Harlequin that can create powerful self-doubt."

"I fail to see how fear or self-doubt could charm anyone, but I'll take your word for it." The teacher replied with a quirked brow.

"Charmers have powers meant to manipulate others in a rather direct fashion. The Kingdom has some strict laws involving ownership of such breeds." Irene declared with a slight scowl.

"Unlike psychics." Alice frowned at the red-skinned woman.

"Though the average psychic does have the capacity to manipulate someone experiences, the best we can hope for is to place our targets into a temporal altered state of mind."

"A psychic can only influence as long as they hold power over the target."
Huge nodded.

"Not really much of a difference."

"A very important one, ma'am." Irene declared coldly. "If I wish to cause someone to feel fear, I need to find something that scares them and present it to them. Charmers have no such limitation, a Demoness for example can cause fear with just an exertion of their power, unconditionally. The subject is left fighting a source-less panic."

Alice nodded ever so slightly at this, the concept feeling a bit convoluted.

"Thus the restrictions and oversight." Huge added, sighing. "Anyway, the enlisted will be having their hands full for the next few days. If you'll excuse me, ma'am, that's about it for today, I have to return to the important things to attend to."

Irene nodded along, both of them walking off.

And the psychology teacher being left to watch as the group spent the remainder of the day trying to get the canines to calm down and accept their scent. She couldn't help but feel a sense of wrongness growing within her.

Was this really the best way to tame a feral?

Chapter 129 [Barry]

Shirtless, Barry shifted uncomfortably in the chair, the sensations running through his skull like a thousand ants crawling directly over his bones.

"Stay still, dammit." Lala grumbled.

The maiden whose hands were causing his head to feel like it had been turned into an ant-hill was growling in frustration. She stood behind him, her chest pressed firmly against his back, her fingers stroking his hair. "I need to get a good feel for the problem."

"I-If you say so," Barry stammered, face lit up as he closed his eyes and tried not to think too much of how soft she felt against his skin. "H-How does it work? Will I... be able to see normally?"

"I can heal just about as well as a Mousegirl can fly. What I'm going to do is put a little curse on you." There was a little chuckle as Lala pulled back from him, hurrying over to the piece of parchment on the table. Grabbing a piece of coal, she began drawing some lines on it.

The small reprieve left Barry sighing and relaxing his shoulders. His eyes moved towards the half-naked maiden. Her dark skin was a dark chocolate, and there was plenty of it to see because the only clothing she wore were a set of green pants, which only helped make her pronounced hips all the more alluring. Barry swallowed and turned the other way, cheeks alight.

"Does... do you need to touch me so much?"

"Consider it a free service, handsome." There was a little amusement in those words as she hurried to the stool behind him, hopping on and then pressing herself against his back once more. With the touch of her fingers on his head, the young man grimaced once more.

"And... how are you going to curse me?"

"When you were talking about lenses, it kinda got me thinking. If I curse you with the right kind of bad eyesight, it should cancel out your own bad eyesight." A slight chuckle. "I'm so going to win that bet."

"... bet?"

The question made the maiden stiffen slightly, a nervous chuckle right as she pressed herself slightly harder against him. "Please don't tell Lady Embla? She might get pissed off."

"But... bet about what?"

"Oh, we have several bets going around in regard to our famous otherworlder guest." She chuckled. "Who gets to fix your eyesight, whose name will the Hound speak first, who gets to fuck you first... you know, standard stuff."

If the flush before was strong, now it became intense, steam practically felt like it was about to explode out of the red-head's ears. "W-W-wha-aT!?"

The door opened instantly, and a naked black-haired Hound pounced inside, fangs out and eyes gleaming sharply. Both people froze, though it was Barry who reacted first, raising both his hands. "It's ok, it's ok. Orion, calm down, nothing... nothing's happening."

"He's ok, see? Your human's all safe and sound." Lala chuckled, ruffling Barry's hair before lifting her hands.

The Hound glared, scoffing, and without another word, turning around to step right out the door once more. Though she did not close it, standing at the edge of the room and sitting right in the middle of the entrance. She chose a position where she could look over her shoulder and towards Barry.

"By the by, my bets are on her being the one to get you to do the dirty. So if you want to help a girl out..."

"I don't, this isn't, I erm... are we done?" He stammered, eager to stand up from the wooden stool.

"You're more than welcome to stick around, you know, check my angles and lines and stuff." Lala's smile was earnest, though considering the way she was smirking and leaning slightly forward, Barry was fairly sure she was also intending to tease him the whole way.

"I can't read without my glasses, so... maybe another time." He quickly put his silk shirt back on, waving the tinkerer goodbye as she headed towards the door. "Same time tomorrow?"

"Sure!"

With that, Barry stopped at the door's threshold, looking down at Orion as the Hound looked up at him in turn. "I... need to step outside."

Her face remained impassive, and the young human sighed, side-stepping her before turning to look her way. Except she was now gone. The young human's shoulders deflated as he looked down at his own shadow. The coloration was ever so slightly blacker than the surrounding shadows, the only sign the Hound was there at all. He deflated slightly further, turning his steps towards the large tree in the colony's center.

The monster of a plant was comparable to the giant trees from the area the bus had crashed into, four of them put very close together, and the main structure that was called the 'palace' being where Barry was living at right now.

His steps slowed as he caught sight of a streak of blond hair. His chest seized up as there was only one person with such brilliantly golden hair in the whole Court. The human hurried his steps as he saw Pan stepping into the wooden palace, the Valkyrie was stomping her way across the place. Barry had no intention of engaging with her, making extra sure to wait to determine the direction she'd taken before taking the opposite one.

A longer route to his room, but one he would be able to avoid trouble.

"Barry."

The human almost shrieked and jumped in surprise as the familiar voice rumbled and bounced across the wooden walls. Every maiden in the immediate vicinity abruptly found they had something to do elsewhere.

Lady Embla looked down at the human with her ever-present frown. "Heading to your room?"

"Yes ma'am."

"I'll accompany you."

There was little room for rebuttal, he nodded in agreement. The dark-skinned maiden reached down and took his hand in her larger palm. It was soft despite the callouses, and Barry couldn't help but turn to look up at her as she marched down the corridor. Everyone they stumbled along the way would quickly march right back out of the way.

That is until Pan showed up.

The maiden glanced at Barry for a flicker of a second, her expression stalling right before she turned to the taller maiden.

"Lady Embla." She approached hurriedly. "I have-."

"Unless it's an emergency, our meeting is not due for another three hours." The dark-skinned maiden declared, throwing the most intense glare a stony still face could manage as she did so. "IS this an emergency, miss ambassador?" Pan hesitated, tensing for only a moment. "I thought so."

Lady Embla walked straight past the Valkyrie, pulling Barry along the way. The maiden's hand gripping his own squeezing ever so slightly right as he'd been about to turn in the blond-maiden's way. It made him look up at her in confusion.

"I heard from Kajou what that Valkyrie did to you while under her captivity." Embla spoke with a firm growl. "Do not let pity taint your views, she is owed none."

There were no more words spoken between the two, Barry nodded as they continued through the corridors and stairs until they reached one of the rooms nearest to the top of the building. Also one of the largest, the place certainly had more than enough space for a whole apartment.

The two guards at the entrance stepped aside to let them through, the doors locking behind them.

The instant the door had closed, Lady Embla sighed, her stiff statuesque shoulders relaxing as she let go of Barry's hand. The maiden carefully raised her hands to her leather armor, undoing the straps with short simple gestures, efficient. She moved like a soldier who'd gone through the process a thousand times over, her steps leading towards the bed and making Barry hesitate.

"Come." She commanded, dropping her shirt and exposing her large pillowy breasts, sitting at the edge of the bed and patting her lap. Barry gulped and nodded, moving closer and pushing back the embarrassment as he sat on the taller woman's thigh.

Embla regarded him for a long moment, closing her eyes and raising her chin.

"Touch my neck." A moment of hesitation. "Please."

With a nod, he reached up, fingers caressing the patch of discoloration on her throat, the one that had been occupied by a collar not that long ago. The woman shuddered and relaxed, sighing. Her hands reached out to pull him closer against herself, leaning down and kissing him for only a brief moment.

With her palm holding his back steadily, she pulled away, meeting his gaze with emerald green determination.

"You didn't bond Lala." Her tone was soft but reproachful. "I specifically sent you to her since she looked the most eager." Leaning closer, her free hand lifted his chin, and she kissed his throat. "I still smell her on you."

"She was... touchy."

"She is bonded to a prisoner, and would gladly take your advances. You need just offer."

"I-."

Slowly, Embla pulled away once more, keeping his chin raised so he could not look away from her gaze. "Barry, you must learn to conquer. Lala would have succumbed under your touch like a leaf falling in autumn."

"I just... I'm not that confident."

"No one is born strong in spirit. You must learn." Embla touched his thigh softly, his body becoming warmer under her caress. "But you must be willing to learn, only then can you grow."

"H-how's your mother?"

Embla hesitated, her brows lowering, the statuesque expression faltering as it darkened. "I know of a way to fully heal her, but I will need your aid, Barry."

The human perked up. "If I can be of help..."

"Then dedicate yourself to growing stronger in spirit." Embla said firmly.

"I... how can that... Help?"

The woman glanced back down at him, her arm circling around his hip. "There are several maidens who have the knowledge and power that could aid her Ladyship, but they are under the kingdom's control."

"Wait, you want me to... bond them?" Barry blinked. "Forcefully?"

"They have grown up as slaves, they know nothing else, they fear freedom. With the bond, you could help them learn the truth." She replied. "But most importantly, we need to be able to trust they will not harm her Ladyship. If, once done, they still wish to return to slavery, then we will not stop them."

The young man hesitated, lowering his gaze in thought. "I... I'll do it."

"Then prove your resolve." Her gaze twinkled with an approving smile, her hand pulling his palm against her soft pillowy breast. "Conquer me once more."

Chapter 130 [Rick]

"Seledo's certainly seen better days."

Rick glanced at Dia, the nurse grimacing as she looked at the large village below. It was certainly larger than Astunes, maybe a little over two or three times the size. Its current state reminded Rick of some towns that had been hit by an earthquake or some similar natural disaster. About a fifth of the buildings had fallen down, a handful of those reduced to smoldering coals.

"You've been here before?" He asked, glancing her way.

"Yes. I was born and raised near Balet, so when there was a nurse position available in Astunes, I volunteered."

"You can volunteer?" Kat looked surprised, pointing at her own throat.

"Aren't you like...?"

"Green collars are public domain." Freya stated matter-of-factly. "It isn't odd to transfer to other areas or to the ownership of another Lord. You do need permission first, and there must be some agreement between the Lords beforehand."

"So you can choose who owns you, so long as your previous owner acknowledges it."

"And they're paid their dues. Either by the new Lord or the maiden herself."

"Speaking of money." Rick patted the coin purse on his hip. "I think we ought to look for some income options."

"The Baroness' bounty reward as well as the Earl's invitation should be more than enough to cover for travel expenses, sir." Ginny looked at him in confusion.

"And when I run out, I'd rather not end up having to rely on money that comes with strings attached."

"Speak for yourself, I'd rather get all the free food I can get." Mr. Gabriel laughed heartily from the centaur.

"I guess I take that from gramps." Kat joined in with a chuckle. Next to her, the green scaled Lizzy next to her smiling in turn.

"If... sir wants to earn some coin, the easiest way would be in assisting with the rebuilding and repairs." Ginny glanced at the humans with a slight nervous laugh, scratching the back of her head with her blue scaly claws. "It's not like we'd have anything better to do while we wait to leave."

"It would be best if we had things to sell." Dia commented, shaking her head dejectedly. "Manual labor only usually is enough to cover for meals, maybe a place to stay."

"It's a start." Rick nodded along. "Might give us a chance to find out more about the Earl."

At his mention of the Earl, the other former-Hunter maidens squirmed. He'd tried prying some information out of them, but the sum total of things they knew of the man was mostly in relations to his job as a mediator and judge for the area. Meaning that most of what they had to share was over the man's preference for people with more human-sided ancestry.

"Food. Up." Monica spoke, her head tilting towards the clear blue sky.

And as she did, everyone noticed the three flying figures that were approaching them from the village. Rick blinked a moment when he noticed a flicker of light shining in their direction.

"Hunters." Freya commented, pulling out a small piece of metal from her pocket and holding it over her head, making some rhythmic twitches with it. "They're requesting we stay put."

"That wasn't Morse code." Tomas muttered. "What do the lights mean?"

"Doing a constant quick rhythm is a basic 'look at me', and once they get a flicker response, they send the message. In this case, four slow beams mean they're Hunters. And the constant quick rhythmic beat afterwards is a request to meet up. If it's used from the ground, it's a call for aid, and if it's used from the air, it means they're approaching and to not move from our location." The Elf listed off in a boorish tone. Her hand was firmly on her hip, glancing up at the sky as she watched the trio approaching rather quickly.

They looked like a triplet of identical twin sisters. Dark brown hair, and wings for arms, they were circling downwards and keeping a distance.

"Monica, no kill." Rick whispered under his breath as he looked up at them, sensing the feline was preparing to attack. She pouted at him in response, but obliged, relaxing her shoulders and sighing.

"Identify yourselves!" The voice shouted downwards. "And the white-haired maiden that's with you."

"I think they mean you, Rick," Kat whispered under her breath.

The chemistry teacher glared at her for a moment before turning upwards. "I'm Rick Cross. We come from Astunes with an invitation from the Earl. The white haired maiden is mine, her name is Monica."

A moment of pause. "Is she White Claw?"

Would he have to do this every time? "She is." He responded.

After another pause, the trio seemed to be talking amongst one another. "Is she... safe?"

Rick glanced at the group. Freya kept her voice low as she spoke up. "By Hunter standards, Monica would most certainly not be considered safe to keep within the village. But whether sir wishes to claim she is... is up to sir."

Rolling his eyes, he wanted to sigh. His gaze turned upwards. "She's still fresh and learning. Could we have accommodations that are close to the

edge?" A slight pause. "We also have a copy of the content from four black-boxes." With a sigh, he glanced at the others. "And a human woman."

He could almost see them startle at that last part. "Under the Earl's law, we will secure safe accommodations for the woman and the elder. Please keep White Claw outside Seledo's human zone. We will ensure there's an area for you and your maidens to rest."

Two of the three split off, heading back to the village, while the third kept circling over them, albeit gaining height.

"Is this normal?" Rick glanced at Freya, the Elf merely shrugging.

"If they are playing things safely like this, it must mean important people aren't present." Ginny spoke under her breath. "The Lords might have fled during the attack."

"Monica is very dangerous, and were she to go on a rampage, it would require a serious effort to stop her." Freya shifted the topic, talking without much commitment. "If they are warned ahead of time that Monica is dangerous and not entirely domesticated, then they'll know to make sure there's nothing that may startle or tempt her."

"And to keep fragile things out of her reach." Kat chuckled slightly. "Or she might knock them off the shelf."

Ginny giggled, the Draco's laughter a nervous one, almost forced. Rick caught her eyes quickly darting between Lizzy and Freya. The silent plea for help within them told the young chemistry teacher everything he needed to know. "Our world had cats, as in, the actual animal. Like a boar, but feline. They were famous for knocking stuff off shelves." He muttered under his breath. Both Freya and Ginny perked up at this, sharing a glance between them and a slight nod.

It must be taxing, being the underling of someone whose sense of humor you didn't share but felt obligated to partake in. He'd been there, and done that.

"So how far out is the 'safe-zone' they spoke of?"

"It's that space between the farm-steads and the first homes, sir." Ginny stepped ahead, moving close and pointing in the distance at the space of mostly barren soil that separated the farmland and the village.

She recoiled away the moment Monica let out a growl, the feline clenching Rick's hand and pulling him closer to her.

"Hey!" the teacher barked. "No!"

His tone made the Sabertooth flinch, turning at him with another deep pout.

"Don't worry, sir, we've dealt with many ferals and we know how clingy they can get with their first bond-partner." Ginny spoke urgently, taking another step away from him and Monica.

"I don't want her showing aggression like that, less so to a companion." Rick replied quickly, glaring at the feline as she turned the other way to avoid his gaze. He pulled his hand from her grasp, crossing his arms and watching her hesitate.

"Riii~iiick."

"No."

The pout turned sullen. She sighed and kept walking.

"Um... sir?" Dia whispered as she stepped closer from the opposite side, offering a hand for him to take. Her cheeks glowed ever so red.

The teacher blinked, an idea forming at the edge of his mind. "First, give Ginny a hug. Friendly hug."

"What?"

"Just... trust me." He hurriedly told her, glancing at Monica from the corner of his eye.

"Um... yes sir."

Dia looked at him as if in confirmation, slowing down and approaching the blue-scaled Draco. The two shared a confused look before halting. The nurse reached out and gave a brief and awkward hug, letting go once Rick nodded.

As she moved back to him, Rick took Dia's hand, though that didn't make her any less confused. Her confusion was greater as he made a show to Monica that he was holding Dia's hand.

Monica looked, holding hands, then at Ginny, then at Dia, and then at Rick. The Sabertooth grumbled but moved with purpose. She quickly approached the Draco, not giving even a chance to take a battle-stance as she enveloped the Draconian maiden in her arms right as Ginny let out a panicked squeak.

Nearly shoving the scaly maiden off instantly after, Monica returned to Rick's side opposite to Dia's. "Rick." She proclaimed, offering her paw at him.

"I think you're going to be helping me to teach Monica how to behave." The teacher whispered, grabbing Monica's paw and then shrieking as she yanked him out of Dia's grasp, pulling him into a full bodied hug.

There was a long road ahead.

Chapter 131 [Rick]

"Riiii~iiiick."

Rick glanced at Monica as she dropped down the four very heavy tree-trunks she'd been carrying, grunting slightly as the wood bounced off of the ground slightly on impact. She stepped out of the slight indentations her paws made on the soft soil from her having walked with the massive weight.

He still couldn't quite believe that she'd been able to carry all that, nor that she didn't just sink all the way to her knees into the dirt. There must be something up regarding elemental energies because physics had walked out the door a kilometer ago which was where she'd picked the lumps of wood.

"Rick!" Monica spoke more insistently now, glaring at him as she poked his chest.

"I'm on it, I'm on it." He nodded along, reaching into the pouch and pulling out a piece of boar jerky. She glared at him, and he pulled out two more.

Snatching it out of his hands, Monica grumbled, following him along as he turned around to walk back towards the logging area. Judging by the number of pieces of jerky left in his bag, he had for one more trip before she stopped wanting to collaborate. The feline made sure to grab his hand, her scowl was a deep one, mumbling and muttering and grumbling with every handful of steps.

"There there." Rick patted her shoulder. "We're doing this for food."

Monica's gaze narrowed, her paw pressing against the pouch. "Food."

"More food."

Her lips pursed. "Monica kill food." Letting go of his hand, she dejectedly crossed her arms, following along with an even deeper pout.

The teacher could only sigh a little, watching her have a tantrum over the whole thing. Like some petulant child who insisted there were better ways to go about things, and... he couldn't really deny that, from her perspective, it might seem far more entertaining to go about things differently.

"Hey."

Tugging her hand, he caused her to stop. His other arm reached out, tugging at the baggy shirt she wore and pulling her closer. She obliged, leaning down. With a quick peck on her lips, Monica's ears perked up. "Sex?"

"Kiss." He chided, watching her pout again. But she didn't lean away.

Leaning back, she wrapped him with her large furry paws in a warm snuggle of an embrace. Monica was hungry for his lips, nibbling and biting them lightly as her tongue quickly pushed to invade his mouth. Rick could feel her breasts squishing against his chest, an elastic pressure that was joining the desire he could sense from her. He had to fight to break it off before it would escalate into more.

Monica purred, tail lashing, back and forth, ears perked and... so were her nipples, visible through the discolored shirt. "Riiick." She whispered, taking his hand and guiding it down to her thighs.

He pulled away. "No sex. Work." He insisted quickly, looking around and only now noticing the hollers and wolf-whistles coming from the construction crew. His face flushed, and he took her paw in his hand, quickly continuing his march up the hill.

"Sex later?" The feline pressured, putting his hand on her naked hip as she grasped his.

Gaining hold of himself. "Maybe." He declared. If she was going to pressure for sex, he was going to at least take advantage of it and get her to earn it. She'd been pouts and grumbles ever since starting this, and it'd been getting harder and harder to convince her to help.

"Maybe." The pout was back, but she couldn't really stop her tail from keeping the happy swish, so that was that for now.

The next round-trip he managed to convince her to take as many tree-trunks as she physically could... in exchange of his hand staying firmly on her ass every step of the way. The feline wasn't exactly happy with it, but she compensated by wringing a make-out session the instant she'd dropped the batch near the construction area.

"So THAT is how you tamed the legendary White Claw."

Someone nearby shouted out, and the hollers came. Rick's face flushed, and Monica didn't care much at all. The feline kept her arms tightly around him, possessive even as he turned around. Like a giant spooning session, she lay her chin against the top of his head and kept her arms wrapped around his chest as the young man tried to compose himself. "Is there any more timber to move?"

"That's about it for the day. Help's much appreciated." The foreman spoke with a hearty laugh, patting his generous belly as the sound shook him from head to toe. "Can't say the show was any less impressive."

"She's... she can be a bit needy sometimes."

"You gotta have some impressive War-Hound in your pants to get White Claw to act like a blushing Ingenue." The man laughed louder as Rick squirmed a little. "Let me invite you to some ale."

"I don't quite think she's going to let me go anytime soon." Rick glanced upwards at his catty-captor.

"No need to worry over that, sir." Dia's voice pipped up from the sideline. It almost made Rick jump in surprise. He glanced over at the nurse as she emerged from one of the houses. "There's a potion-brewer in town. I'm sure we could request some catnip essence to keep Monica entertained while you get a chance to relax."

"That girl of yours' impressive." The foreman declared, stroking his stubby beard. "Saved us a lot of time, didn't need to take anyone to the medicen today."

"Very smart too." Rick nodded, watching the pink-haired maiden smile brightened. "If you think you can handle Monica for an afternoon... I'd appreciate it."

"Certainly, sir. I'll go right away."

The moment Dia was gone, Monica's arms loosened slightly around Rick, and the young teacher could only sigh in response.

"Jealous type, eh? Been there myself." The foreman nodded sagely. Rick noticed the man was talking at Rick from slightly to the side rather than directly ahead, and never quite looking his way directly. The man was clearly mindful of Monica's potential response to him. "Had a puppy girl, adopted, would stay glued to my side all day long. Wife nearly tore her a bloody strip."

"How did you solve it?"

"Becca showed her who's who in the house." A slight shrug. "It was tough watching, but after she got patched back up she mellowed out."

"I don't think that's viable for me." Rick chuckled nervously.

"I'll say, with how she carried those logs, your gal's probably a match even against a Royal Knight!" A hearty laughter followed. The man turned to leave. "I'll have a girl come on over to lead the way. Sundown sound good?"

"Hopefully." Rick shrugged, watching him leave.

Monica proceeded to turn her attention to the other maidens that were looking their way and growl. Many sets of heads quickly turned away, and the feline kissed Rick's head. She refused to let go, though, so walking out of the area was a bit of a hassle until she finally let go and just took him by the hand.

They walked through the "empty" stretch of land that separated the village and the farms, and straight into the large shack the Hunters had provided as a place for Monica to stay at. Their intention had been for only Monica to stay there, but once it was clear, it would have to include Rick and Dia. They'd made sure to upgrade the place with several sets of mantles and straw to use as bedding underneath.

Not the most comfortable accommodation in the world, but it certainly beat having to rough things out without a roof overhead. Also, they brought food every morning, a bonus as it was a trade in conveniences. Monica's presence scared the shit out of any feral that approached the area, and the Hunters had one less place to need to patrol over.

Monica was quite insistent on returning to the shack. Her shirt flew off the moment she'd stepped inside, and so did Rick's. The Sabertooth cared little for much else, dragging him to the pile of bedding and, despite his protests, stripping him along the way.

With a loud exaggerated sigh, she curled up around him, laying her head against his shoulder as she hugged him closely. "Sex... later. Sleep now." She mumbled, closing her eyes. Rick shrugged in return, not really having much alternative for the time being. She was calling the shots, and she wanted to nap. No sense in not joining in.

Pulling one of the mantles over them, he closed his eyes and joined her.

Chapter 132 [Rick]

The tavern, or bar, or whatever the place opted to call itself, had several things about it that caught Rick's attention almost right away. For one, the only females in sight were the four bouncers near either exit, and the maiden tending the bar itself. The second thing to catch him by surprise was the fact that the alcohol was far stronger than he expected it to be. The beer tasted like it'd had rum mixed into it, and there was a sweetness to the flavor that masked the punch a lot more than he expected. If he wasn't careful, he'd likely get drunk way faster.

The third thing to grab his attention was the absence of music or background... anything.

Most bars he'd gone to had at least a television or a radio or something. Part of him was expecting sound to burst out through hidden speakers at any moment and the bar to explode into celebration at the fixing of the technical issue.

"You look like you're about to get jumped."

The voice snapped him out of the thoughts that kept dancing around the room. Rick forced a smile and took a long swing of his drink. "Spent a little too long in the forest."

"You saw some shit, huh." The foreman, Carl, nodded somberly. "Must be pretty damn horrifying. Whole Knight Squad getting slaughtered..."

"... yup." Another nod. Rick held his tongue, making sure to keep from sharing his actual thoughts. As far as everyone here was concerned, he was just a traveler, not an offworlder. "Say, I never did learn much about the Earl. He a good man?"

"As good as any of those nobles go." A large shrug. "Far as we care, he's kept the taxes fair and the roads safe. Honestly, gramps keeps telling the kids to appreciate the peace while it lasts."

"He lived through war?"

"The Rebellion, though he was a wee lad back then." Carl shook his head. "Keeps quiet about it, but you hear the stories of how it went. Maiden killing humans, maidens fighting maidens, ferals burning defenseless cities to the ground... that sort of thing." A loud snort as the man took a swing. "So, what were you doing before joining the militia? Usually folk get a run earlier in life."

"I just recently became a citizen of the kingdom. Family's place didn't have much space for me, so I just went around looking for a new lot in life." Rick just parroted off the first excuse that came to mind.

"Huh, so a noble's son?" As Carl asked this, and the teacher choked, eyes wide and looking around right until the man slapped his back. "Don't think us simple folk too dull. You stink of rich."

The teacher chuckled nervously, trying to calm down. "I... how?"

"Skin's pale, clothes are nice and new, you talk all pretty-like, and you drink like a babe. White Claw being yours? Traveling with a human girl? Stinks of old money all over." The man laughed. "Don't worry too much over it, we don't much care where you come from."

"Yeah... yeah, I'd just rather not..." He coughed, cogs spinning wildly. "You know, I'd rather avoid trouble."

Carl rolled his eyes, patting his belly and keeping his tone light as he waved Rick off like it was nothing. "Got some tips if ya like, though not for free." A wink. "Just wanna know what the lass' story is. First human lady I've seen that didn't come with a military escort."

"Kat?" A slight pause. "She's... traveling with her grandfather, don't know much about her. Tomas fancies her, and there might be something mutual, but... that's about it." He shrugged slightly.

"Bah, fine, keep your secrets." He grumbled, another long swing from his mug, leaving it back on the counter and gesturing at the bartender to refill it.

"If I were in your briefs and wanted to avoid trouble, I'd either stop trying to pretend I'm someone from the dirt and just say something about being some noble lady's thigh-warmer." A chuckle followed. "Seeing how White Claw looks at you, no one would doubt that."

"Duly noted."

"So..." Rick paused, glancing at Carl as he sipped from his drink, the bearded fellow looking at him with a wide smirk. "So..." He repeated.

"So... what?"

"How is she?" The man chuckled. "Wild?"

"Oh! You mean... in bed." The chemistry teacher coughed, taking another swing from his drink. "She... uh, she's intense."

"Come now, you can't leave things like that!" A new face showed up, a man nearing his fifties, weathered face and bright smile. "Name's Victor, sorry, but I couldn't stop but overhear. You're the man who caught White Claw. Right?"

"Victor... huh, I know a Victor." Rick gave a slight nod.

"Hopefully a good fella." The man offered a hand to shake. His grip was firm. "Would a drink in exchange for more details be the right price?"

"I'm not one that tends to share those kinds of details." He shrugged nonchalantly. "She was feralborn, kept me alive for some reason, and things sort of rolled from there."

"Mhm, everyone's seen how she handles things." The new Victor laughed. "Has a lot of things to learn. Must be quite the handful." An emphatic nod followed. "How would you say she's at fighting? Can she distinguish between friend and foe yet?"

Rick frowned. "I feel like that particular question came out of the blue."

Victor frowned in turn, as if trying to decipher what he'd just said, but quickly recovered. "Don't be very surprised. I'm looking for some security heading to Balet, and if I could convince the owner of White Claw to keep me safe..."

If he were a dog, his ears would have perked up. "So you want a bodyguard?"

"From ferals." New-Victor pipped up with a slight grin. "Lost my guards during the rush and I've been stuck around these parts since the rush got everyone's hands tied up. Would you be interested?"

"Somewhat, depends on how much." A little pause. "And you'd have to consider that I'm not traveling alone."

"Sure, sure." Another quick nod. "Food expenses for yourself, White Claw, and the nurse. And ten gold coins?"

Carl choked on his drink, eyes darting between Rick and Victor. The teacher had to take a moment to ponder whether this was some sort of act as a way to get scammed or if it was something else. The sense of money was not one he'd gotten a solid hold on. He'd have to ask the others to get a better sense of how fair the offer might be.

"Sounds decent enough, but I'll need to talk it over with my friends first." His response was cordial enough, taking a long swing from his drink. "Wouldn't want to commit to anything and then find out they'd rather avoid such dealings entirely."

"Of course, of course." Victor nodded. "I'll make sure to pay you a visit, say... tomorrow noon?"

"Sounds... good?"

"Great! Great!" A pat on the back. "I'll be there, then. Got lots to prepare. Be seeing you."

Turning around, he left, waving off as he marched straight out the door. Rick was left blinking and slightly confused, glancing at his drinking partner as Carl merely shrugged. "City-folk, that one. Business burned down in the rush." A long swing. "Personally don't like him much, but he's always paid well."

"What about him don't you like?"

The response was a simple shrug. "Just too... rushed, I guess."

"Hm..." Rick shook his head. No sense in hurrying things on that end. He'd get time to talk things over with the others. "So, about the Earl, you don't got anything?"

"Like I said, peaceful times make for boring stories, thing's been quiet with him in charge. But many folks appreciate that."

He could understand the feeling. The chemistry teacher merely nodded along and spent the rest of his drink. The hours oozed by slowly, doubly so when there was nothing to really keep his sense of time. By the end of his second glass, he was already starting to feel slightly light-headed and a bit loose-lipped. Carl was fun in a down-to-earth kind of way, but Rick was not feeling like he could really loosen up.

So, not wanting to risk talking too much or saying something he shouldn't, Rick called it a night and headed back through the village in the general direction of the shack he was sharing with Dia and Monica.

Tipsy and a little disoriented, the local Hunter girls (green uniform, green collar) were more than happy to help. A few offered to accompany him the whole way, but something in the back of his head kept telling Rick he shouldn't, so he didn't. There was an odd sensation of being watched that followed him as he walked his way back.

He stopped as he found the shack having its door blocked by a heavy trunk.

"Um..."

He knocked and heard movement. "Rick?" The voice called out. It was Dia.
"Rick, Monica locked me in!"

"What?"

"Rick."

This time the young human shouted, jumping and turning around as he saw Monica was standing right behind him. She was angry, snarling as she stepped closer, pinning him against the tree-trunk. Reaching forward, she yanked the trunk out of the way, nearly tossing it out of the way. The door burst open and Dia stepped through. The nurse was shoved aside as Rick was shoved inside.

Whatever complaint Dia had was ignored, Monica lumbered into the house, pushed Rick onto the hay and straddled his hips. "Sex." She stated, pushing him down. "Now."

Chapter 133 [Rick][

Rick could feel the dampness of her crotch against his pants, her paw keeping him pinned against the bedding. Monica's blue-green eyes shone in the darkness of the shack, the only source of light what little filtered through the open door. Her paws were warm, her touch surprisingly soft despite the aggressive use of force from moments earlier.

"Sir, sh-."

Dia's words were cut off by the feline's head snapping towards the door and growling with such intensity, Rick could feel the vibrations all around him.

"Just... don't piss her off." He replied, leaning upwards, and immediately getting shoved back down.

"Sex. Now. Dia. No." Monica proclaimed with a solid, bone-chilling glare.

"I'll... wait outside."

"You do MFFFF."

Monica sealed his lips with a kiss, then immediately pulled back, scoffing and spitting. "RICK!" She whined in complaint, grabbing a fistful of cloth and shoving it into his mouth. Her anger turned into betrayal and annoyance, her claws moving across his body in an attempt to get his shirt off in one go.

The human laughed, pulling out the piece of cloth and helping her along, ignoring the half-hearted glare she sent his way as he reached up to help her remove her own shirt. It was hard to see what with how dark everything was, but even in the darkness, he could feel the weight and softness of her breasts as they escaped from the cloth that confined them. Monica shuddered as his cool fingers squeezed her warm tits, their flesh overflowing through his fingers. There was just too much of her for each hand.

"Riiick." She moaned now, her nipples poking at his palms, the weight she bore down on him relenting now that he was reciprocating. The thrust of her hips against his pants gained an edge of growing impatience and intensity.

"Shhhh." He whispered, releasing one of her tits and moving his right hand down between her thighs. It was easy to find the source of her need. She was wet, practically drenched. The scent of her arousal was thick, her folds warm to the touch.

Another low moan, a slow thrust of her hips. Monica grabbed hold of his shoulders and shoved her breast on his face. He obliged, leaning into her, teasing her with his touch, driving the feline to move quickly against him. She needed no warm-up, but he enjoyed it all the same.

Her weight bore down on him, but Rick wriggled his fingers, nudging her hips to rise. Slowly, he wriggled out from under her, teeth bearing down on her nipples with as severe a bite as he could make it right as he thrust his fingers into her hard. Her response was immediate, a rumbling roar, her arms pulling him against her chest. The maiden leaned back, and Rick took the advantage to push.

Monica presented no resistance, falling back and dragging him along the way, suffocating him with her breast, wriggling madly as the orgasm wrapped through her. Rick took the chance to lower his pants, already hard and ready, he didn't waste any time to guide himself into her eager cunt.

With her legs instantly locked around him, she let him breathe and release her eraser-thick nipple. Still high from the small orgasm, she pulled him into a kiss. Instantly she yowled, he couldn't see her face in the dark, but the sound was greatly annoyed. The feline shoved him back down into her breast and he obliged, tongue and lips laying claim of her flesh as he thrust hard into her.

The Sabertooth maiden tightened, sex slick and silky, one claw grasped his ass to help him thrust harder, the other kept his face against her left tit. Rick used his hands to grip her hip and push. Every thrust rocked them both on the bedding, wild and fast, there was little room for patience, alcohol and pure sensation driving them forward as she met him thrust for thrust.

Wordless, Monica cried out again, pulling him deeper into her embrace. He could feel her holding back, letting the sensations wash over her yet keeping a tight seed of concern within herself, all too aware...

"Turn around." He growled, struggling with her legs, jaw tightening as he felt himself all too close to the edge.

She didn't understand up and until he reached for her tail and yanked at it hard enough she yowled. Taking a long breath, she moved fast, opening her legs and turning around. A mutual gasp as he pulled out of her as she repositioned, his own grasp on her tail the tether that led him to her taut ass.

They fumbled, Monica lowering herself to her knees and then having to adjust further for him, her thighs quivering as he found her needy sex and thrust back into her. With one hand grasping her tail, the other slapped her hips. Monica growled, pushing back against him hard enough it almost sent him stumbling over. A warning as much as a request. And he obliged, guiding himself back into her waiting sex and pushing.

It was wild and out of control. Rick barely able to hold on as he clutched at her body for dear life while she threw herself back at him, finally able to stop holding back as the new angle could barely let her exert any of it on him.

Rick couldn't hold out much longer, feeling himself reaching the edge as she roared once more. The human leaned over, hugging her hips as his hand reached down to her cunt, reaching for that sweet spot right over where their flesh met, fingers pressing down on her clit. It drove her wild, Monica roared again, this time her whole body shaking and pressing hard against Rick, causing his knees to drag across the floor as the cloth they were fucking on made a loud ripping sound.

He collapsed on her taut ass while she fell face first into the hay. Both of them enjoying the ripples of the afterglow, the feline shuddering with every stroke of his fingers over her clit.

And yet, she growled, breathless, tired, but a growl.

"Shhh." Dia whispered in the dark, her hands pressing against Rick's naked lower back.

"What are yo-?"

Monica stirred, beginning to gather the strength to move, but failing as soon as Dia's hand reached down under and between Rick's thighs and stroking his sack. A surge ran through him, his cock throbbing hard enough both feline and human moaned in unison.

"Dia?"

"Let me help." She spoke smoothly, fingers stroking over Monica's pussy and trailing her way down to the base of his shaft. "Master."

The word was a hushed little thing, followed by a stroke that sent tingles up and down his spine. Rick glanced in Dia's direction but only saw darkness, still, her free hand reached out to him, pulling him into a kiss. Her lips were hungry, her other hand stroking Monica and the human. The nurse took the hand he wasn't using to grip the feline's tail, placing it squarely between her thighs, pressing his fingers into her sex.

Moaning into the kiss, the strange rhythm overtook them. Sabertooth moaned and humped, Rick kissed and thrust, Dia stroked and kissed. The pink-haired maiden hungrily took the whole of his head, his chest, his balls. Monica squeezed his cock and thrust against his hips with gusto. A second wind was upon the two lovers, and the third was all too eager to participate.

With the human's exploratory digits, Dia finally let go of his head, grasping his arm and forcing her whole naked body against it. She cried out, legs giving out as she shrieked, pulling him with her.

The trio collapsed, Rick stumbling and pinning Dia to the ground, the maiden wrapping her arms around him protectively as she took the brunt of the impact. There was a long collective sigh, then a second sigh, with Dia breaking into giggles, rolling slightly back and forth as she squeezed Rick's head against her chest in a tight hug. "That was hot, Maaa~aaster."

The moment ended quickly as Monica yanked them apart.

"Rick. Monica. No Dia!" She growled, holding him in the air by the chest with her large paw.

"Dia hurt no hurt Monica." The cat growled, keeping the human firmly pressed against the wall and the nurse to the floor. "Dia hurt no hurt Monica!"

"Dia?"

"She..." A cough and a wheeze. "She caught on to the catnip... sir, only took a bit to get randy and playful, but not enough."

"Ugh." Rick groaned, feeling it hard to breathe. "Monica, calm down. No hurt." His hands reached for the paw holding him in place, slowly stroking it. "No hurt."

"No Dia, bad Dia."

"Sir, I should apologize to her."

"We both should. Not sure how to convey it to her though."

"Maybe... I have an idea?"

In the darkness, Rick couldn't really tell what was happening, but Monica's pressure against him relented as the feline suddenly let out a surprised gasp. A moment later there was a slight moan. "Monica?" He asked, trying to free himself from her grasp but she was quite adamant to keep him pinned against the wall.

She moaned louder, and finally her strength relented, allowing Rick to fall on his feet and stumble in the dark a bit.

"Dia bad?"

"Hm..." Monica's blue-green eyes shone in the dark, the feline moving towards Rick and enveloping in a tight hug, knocking him down onto the mantles. "Dia bad. Dia no bad bad."

"What did you...?"

"I tested something... maiden's secret."

Feeling too tired and woozy, he relented the point, sighing and trying to adjust himself to sleep instead. He'd... deal with it when he was more clearheaded.

Chapter 134 [Rick]

Rick glanced at Monica, then at Dia, then back at Monica, and back once more. The two maidens were looking at each other and trying not to make it obvious. The feline had a clearly confused expression, the nurse a somewhat smug one. The larger of the two currently had the human stranded on her lap, fuzzy warm furry paws wrapped around his chest protectively and only ever shooting a glare when the nurse got too close.

"So about last night..." He coughed. "Why did you... call me 'master'?"

"Isn't it true? You own me, sir." Dia's eyes twinkled with mischief, the nurse giggling slightly. "I also thought it would be sexy."

"I feel like the term has some connotations I'm not aware of."

"Perhaps. Does Master wish to give me an order?"

"Let's..." Rick shook his head. "If it's something you're into, I'm not going to stop it. Just don't use it in public."

"Certainly, sir, it wouldn't do to make others believe you spend long sleepless nights making your maidens moan and breathlessly call out to you." With a fit of giggling, Dia pulled her shirt on, adjusting it. "I think Monica does that well enough, her roars certainly weren't quiet or humble. I expect ferals thirty kilometers away were quite thoroughly spooked."

"Oh God." Rick shrunk slightly. "Could you at least tell me what you did to get Monica so confused?"

The nurse giggled louder, pulling up her skirt and adjusting it. "I just apologized with actions, sir."

"Have you... are you... ?" He frowned slightly. "Do you find girls attractive?"

"Hm? I wouldn't bed one if given the choice." She shrugged, leaning down to tighten her shoes. "But I heard from a Harpy that the men from your world seemed to have a particular penchant for... maiden on maiden action. So to speak."

"There's a lot to parse through in that sentence. You don't have to do this."

"I still choose to." A little shrug, fingers brushing over her hair, palms glowing. Her pink hair smoothed and primed perfectly with just her touch. As if she'd spent the past hour brushing it. "If sir believes I am not property, then it's my choice how I act. And if sir does consider me property, then I am doing my duties to the best of my ability."

"I feel like you talked with Alice."

"Do not underestimate a maiden's courage, sir!" Dia winked, moving the glowing hands over her face, leaving her skin fresh and clean. "I will be going to gather some supplies."

"Wait, before you go." A deep sigh. "Last night I talked to a merchant, don't remember the name, he offered some money to travel with us, thinking about having Monica as protection against ferals."

"That's great news, sir!" She nodded along. "I'll make sure to share this with the others if I see them."

The teacher took a second too long to get his words in order before she was out the door, humming some tune. It left him inside the shack, trapped by Monica's hug as she refused to get out of the bed. A bed that had been reduced to tatters thanks to last night's activities having involved her clawing them into ribbons.

Had Rick known she'd do that, he would've insisted keeping her on her back instead. Or on the normal ground. Resigned to try to spend another hour or so getting some extra sleep and shuteye before the day's activities caught up with them, he snuggled into Monica's arms and stroked her hip, urging her to relax in turn. It didn't take much for her to follow along, and the human felt like he wanted to sigh more deeply than ever.

It was becoming clearer that his job was, primarily, handling Monica. Monica and her mood. Everything else was secondary to some degree or another. And a lot of it had to do with the limitations in her vocabulary. He'd have to focus harder on that, though he wasn't too sure how many chunks of boar-jerky it'd cost them to get there.

The nap was short if pleasant, it was impossible to feel cold when Monica was basically one large heater with fur-covered attachments for arms and legs.

"Let's move."

"Noooooo." The feline complained, squeezing him back into the sheets.

"Monica." He pinched her ear, getting her to grumble in response.

With a loud growl, she let go. But she took all the mantles to wrap herself up into a warmer ball rather than leave the bedding. This left Rick with the chance to use a washcloth Dia had left prepared on himself.

Trying to use the washcloth on Monica proved fruitless... again, so he just focused on getting clothes and checking his things before stepping outside. The feline grumbled and groaned and complained, but once he was out, she soon followed, ducking under the door's frame and standing next to him. It seemed her unwillingness to leave him alone greater than her love for a warm bed.

Fresh morning air, the sun was about an hour over the horizon, and the sky was clear.

Taking the chance to stretch his legs, he glanced at Monica stretching. His eyes trailed over her naked figure, enjoying the well fit tall woman and her generous assets, a part of him felt like leaning to touch her body. But that would get her started up and asking for more sex, and he definitely wasn't with the energy for that right now.

After a night with drinking...

Wait.

"Last night you sneakily followed me while Dia was trapped in the shed." He talked to the feline as she cocked her head at him. Obviously she didn't understand most if not all he'd said, not that it was the purpose, he was venting. "And... Dia took my hangover away?" He definitely shouldn't drink while having to keep an eye on the two. Monica was more dangerous than heavy machinery, he'd have to stay sharp around her.

Doing some stretches, he turned to leave towards where the foreman had pointed out was likeliest he'd find supply run requests. The chemistry teacher didn't really need to consider whether Monica was following, even if he couldn't hear her, he could practically feel her breathing down his neck.

Wait.

Whirling around, he faced Monica again. "God damn it." Reaching for the backpack, he pulled out another of the large shirts he'd been given. "Monica, put this on."

She looked down at the shirt, ears laying flat against her face. "No." She crossed her arms and snorting loudly. "Food."

"This is an extortion..." He put the shirt. "Kiss?"

"Bad kiss Rick, no."

"If kissing's not his strong-suit, wonder what he used to make the kitty roar?"

The voice came from slightly above them, he glanced at the rooftop of the nearby house, spotting one of the maidens with wings-for-arms. She was giggling as she looked down at them, ignoring the half-hearted glare Monica was sending her way.

"Morning to you too." The human called out. "Got anything for this big pout to lug around?"

"Nothing today, she's already dragged half a forest down here." They spoke with no shortage of humor.

"Riiii~iiick." Monica's paw turned him around to look at her. "Yes food. Food. Food." She snatched the shirt from his hands, and immediately began scowling at it as she tried to figure out how to put it on without tearing it.

"Come here, you." Taking the clothes back, Rick ignored the giggling from up above and held the piece of clothing. She had to put the tips of her claws together to avoid puncturing the cloth, and even then it was a bit of an effort to squeeze those large paws through the holes.

She yowled and complained, but got through, head popping out and shaking her wild unkept white hair before looking down at herself and sighing deeply. "Food." She now turned to him, poking his hip, the bag he'd hold for precisely her favorite meal.

"Hug?"

Monica arched a brow. "Food."

"Hug and kiss?"

She stuck her tongue out and grimaced, and with one swoop of her arm, the bag was out of his belt.

"Hey!" With a complaint, Rick tried to take it back, but Monica used her other paw to stop him from being able to reach.

"Monica food." Sticking her tongue out at him, she smirked and chuckled.

The Harpy watching things unfold howled with laughter, and Monica smirked all the wider.

It was going to be a long day ahead.

Chapter 135 [Alice]

Alice sat down on the chair Helga had brought over from... somewhere. The Valkyrie stuck to her side like glue, so Alice wasn't sure how it'd been possible to begin with. Still, the teacher was currently overlooking the same field where the Doggirls had been tied down and pinned not a full week ago. Now, each of the men was holding a bag of boar-jerky and, with varying degrees of success and failure, were trying to get the maidens they were assigned to stay put.

Some had the maiden stock still at their side. Others... not so much. A few of them were just running around while the human 'handler' was trying to draw their attention or get them to behave. Others would have to remind the maiden to stay in place every handful of seconds.

"Ma'am."

Huge's voice drew Alice's wary attention, the man moving to stand next to her as if, somehow, she were in charge of the operation. The psychology teacher could only look up at him half in disbelief and half in exhaustion.

Long nights reading history in the Baroness' library were not kind to the eyes.

"Yeah?"

"I'd just thought... erm, excuse me. Just reporting in, things are going smoothly."

Alice looked at the half-cocked mayhem in front of her, and then back at him. "I have no sense of reference over what's normal in these things."

"They're three weeks ahead of schedule, more or less... ma'am." He smiled slightly. "At this pace, I'd expect they'd be able to start spending more time together in a week or two."

"What do you mean with 'more time together'?"

"Sleep together, eat together, those sorts of things." The man shrugged. "My main concern is getting them through fragility training."

"The what now?"

"The gals are currently under constant watch whenever their partners show up, so if anything goes wrong, it's going to be hard for it to go wrong in a lethal kind of way." He replied, shaking his head. "But once out there, on their own, they need to be able to understand that humans are more fragile."

The psychology teacher felt herself grow tense. "And how would you normally... teach this?"

"Through example is the quickest way." He grimaced. "Thought I'd give you a heads up, ma'am, so you don't feel startled over what's going to come next."

Not giving much chance to ask what's going on, Huge stepped forward, clapping loudly to draw everyone's attention. As he did this, one girl hurried to walk up next to him, a Hunter girl, green uniform and green collar, but she was a Doggirl like the other ones.

"Time for a lesson." The man called out, gesturing at his assistant of the day to step forward. The girl moved towards the recently feral Doggirls.

It was a slow thing to do, approaching each, letting them smell her hand, the young maiden letting out a small bark, and then moving onto the next. Many of the Doggirls that were behaving quickly broke from the rank and file, a gathering occurred, the maidens quickly devolving into barking and yipping.

Five more seconds and all the black-collared former ferals were in the group of maidens sniffing at one another and greeting.

Alice could only frown in confusion, not quite sure what was going to happen that the Major might feel necessary to warn her about. She almost missed

how there were a dozen other maidens that jumped in, each approaching the humans.

"Now, I want you to cry for help." Huge spoke softly, a tone that was so friendly one might have mistaken it for a joke.

There was only a moment of shared confusion right as the maidens that had approached each human reached out and grasped their forearms. It was so synchronous it might as well have been choreographed. Some of the humans called out in alarm, others a half-hearted attempt.

And then the maidens squeezed.

Shrieks and complaints began to emerge all over, the pack of Doggirls rapidly broke into chaos, each maiden appearing to lunge at their own partner. The Hunters that had grasped the humans had pulled away, letting go the instant a canine approached.

"That should form a bruise." Huge spoke loudly. "Make very sure to show that it hurts whenever touching it, exaggerate if you must. Above all, you need to show that you are fragile and weak compared to a maiden."

The psychology teacher could only wince at the proclamation, not everyone was likely to take that in a good light considering the current circumstances. Even with everything they'd gone through, she could tell most present weren't happy with the Major's request. But the man appeared entirely uncaring, glaring them down.

Sighing, Alice stood up. "Do I really have to be present in all of these?"

"The Baroness did insist." Helga reminded her.

And the psychology teacher was left with an odd sense of wrongness about that. Shaking her head, she tried to take a moment to reconsider. "Maybe we should get the other women to participate... or at least observe."

The women had mostly been studying books the noble-lady had suggested. From history to... genealogy, it was something that would supposedly help

them at least not stand out like sore thumbs. Personally, Alice was quite fed up with reading about what noble killed what "rebel-leader" during the civil war they'd had almost a century ago.

Something that did catch Alice's attention was the severe lack of territory-based war compared to every bit of history she'd known of back from her world. There were kingdoms and there were contrived legal disputes over some territories, but not an iota of actual war.

The ferals likely were a strong part of that reason.

"Where to, ma'am?" Helga interrupted Alice's thoughts with a chirpy little smile.

"Just somewhere to sit back and think... alone?" She replied, glancing at the winged woman as she nodded along.

"Plenty spots like those!" The wings spread wide, and with a slight running start, she grabbed Alice into a bear hug and leapt into the air.

Barking noises broke out as they took into the air, the psychology teacher let out a choked scream, holding back and clutching at Helga as the maiden easily adjusted her grip so she'd be carrying Alice by the armpits.

"Don't worry ma'am, I've got you!" A laugh followed, the maiden beat her large wings with gusto, gaining height. Within moments the village below was nothing more than little squares.

"It's cold!" Alice warned, and Helga flinched in turn.

The flying maiden lowered her altitude somewhat, though her trajectory was clearly not intended to be somewhere within the village. Her wings kept flapping, and they kept gaining speed, descending the hill and towards the farms.

It took little more than a handful of minutes, Helga angled them towards one of the farms that looked to have fallen into disuse. The fields weren't uniform, small trees dotted the green pastures, the building itself had a

collapsed-in roof. The place looked empty from above, and the Valkyrie slowly circled down near the entrance.

Setting down in front of the fence, they touched ground, and Alice was quite thankful for it.

"This place's been empty for almost a decade." Helga spoke, standing on one of the broken beams that stuck out of the building's ruins. "Road's that way." She pointed to the left. "You'll get to a farm before that though. The Crambers are nice folk, they've got a killer bean soup."

"Why did you take me here?"

Alice looked around. Weeds and grass all around, little of note beside the remains from the building.

"It's a nice quiet place, safe too." Helga replied with an eager smile. "This is the best place to think stuff without others around. It's inside the land-perimeter and the patrols, but the sky-patrols move a bit further than that, so very few people actually know about it."

"I... um, thanks." A nod. "I think I'll... use it?" Looking around, the psychology teacher awkwardly scratched the back of her head. "Do you know what happened here?"

"It's where I grew up!"

"Oh, sorry! I didn't think you'd take me somewhere personal to you."

"It's ok, after the incident, the Major took me into the Hunters and gave me a good job." Helga nodded. "So the Hunters are like a family, even if they sometimes get a bit too overbearing. Do you have a family?"

"I... did, do, it's complicated. Family's something I never really had much contact other than the rare call." The woman sighed slightly. "I had a partner, boyfriend, been trying not to think about it too much."

"Just because you close your eyes, it doesn't mean the sun is gone." Helga chided. "How was he?" There was a dreamy quality to her smile.

Alice arched a brow at her. "You know, the idea was that I'd have some time to think for myself."

"Oh, right! Sorry ma'am!" Helga spread her wings wide. "If you need anything, I'll be overhead. Just a shout or a really vigorous wave and I'm here. Whatever you need ma'am."

It took her a single jump to take to the air, and the psychology teacher finally let out the sigh she'd been holding onto. The thoughts just rushed back in, the doubt and the... everything. Was she really supposed to somehow lead the group that, for all intents and purposes, wasn't united to begin with? What the hell was she supposed to do here? Just... give up everything she'd had until now?

Leaning against the ruined house, the teacher looked at the stone that lay next to the door.

She wanted to laugh at herself.

Somehow, fighting the spider had felt easier than this.

Chapter 136 [Barry]

Barry walked the forest feeling a strange ease and calmness as he did. His shadow was thick, meaning Orion was there. The Hound barely if ever came out, only to eat and a few other occasions. She was hard to read, but Barry found her quietness something he'd grown to appreciate from time to time.

Looking around, the young man realized he'd walked a bit into the outer perimeter of the safe area for the Court. It was easy to tell, the lowest branches in the trees had scratch-marks. Not really visible unless one looked for them. Heading further out would mean a larger risk.

"You can come out." He tapped his foot to the ground, his shadow wavering slightly. Barry was fairly sure Orion was a bit nervous, so he reached into the pouch he'd been given and pulled out some fruit. "I've got something tasty for you, if you'd like."

Crouching, he put the fruit on top of the shadow, watching it be absorbed into it. The second piece he held it a bit over the shadow, this time a clawed hand emerged, trying to reach for it. But Barry pulled it further away, and the claw followed, until Orion was mostly out of the shadow and had managed to snatch the fruit out of his hands.

The young man smiled at her, and she met his expression with the usual blank stare. "See? We're alone."

The canine maiden glanced around, ears perked and rotating this way and that, her nose sniffing for a bit. It was only then that she fully stepped out of the shadow, looking at him, and throwing the piece of fruit into her mouth.

"Orion." He spoke her name, and her ears instantly perked up. "How have you been doing today?" A nervous laugh followed as she just blankly looked at him. "Mine's been good too."

Orion just looked at him, her eyes calm and barely blinking, her gaze meeting his own and not looking away. Barry tried to focus on her eyes, but couldn't

really keep it going for too long. Turning around to begin his walk, he offered a hand for her to take, but the maiden looked at his hand, and then at him.

"Here, like this." He grasped her paw and began pulling slightly, walking forward.

Three steps later, she was gone, vanished and back into his shadow.

"Guess you just prefer it there, huh."

Barry nodded a little, dropping down more fruit, and watching it vanish into the darkness. Calmly, he set himself to walk, dropping a little food from time to time, checking whether it'd vanish or not and continuing onwards. The forest was calm, peaceful, and a lot less threatening. The human relished on that calmness, on that sense of... safety.

His thoughts turned to Mark, his aunt, his family.

Embla had said she'd sent scouts but had found no other humans in the forest, and he couldn't really bring himself to believe they were all... gone. It didn't make sense, there should at least be signs but it's not like the Court could spare resources to send a whole squad that far East.

Not when their strongest fighter and wisest leader was incapacitated.

"I don't really think I'll be able to help them." Barry's words were muted, a half-whisper. "I mean, I know I need to, they're desperate for good healers, but..." Scratching his chin, he thought of trying to force someone to just do what he told them to do. "I know Mark would do it, blink of an eye, snap, just like that." A slight sigh. "Then again, I guess he'd be just as likely to run off as soon as someone asked him to do anything."

Deflated, the young red-head ruffled his hair, trying to find an answer.

"Just be confident."

His shoulders squared and then dropped.

"Just be confident."

Shaking his head, he turned back towards the Court, meandering through the trees and trying his luck at figuring out the layout. The Court itself wasn't really large, barely a tiny village's worth of houses. But the houses were spread out and many were well hidden, with the sole exception of the palace. So Barry still hadn't really seen the whole thing just yet.

Or any humans, for that manner.

Walking about, he noticed the number of "faux walls" had drastically increased during the time he'd spent with them. It was straight up impossible not to find the court if one stumbled onto the nearby area, the Elves had clearly been put to hard work.

There was a lingering question over how much of that work would actually help if the next rush came from the wrong place.

Orion rumbled in his shadow, a slight shift of her shadow making Barry's feet feel slightly colder.

"Is someone there?" He spoke out to the surrounding forest, glancing at the trees, unsure as to what to expect.

"Only guards, sir." A voice spoke out from above. He didn't recognize her, but judging by the tone, she definitely did.

"Good girl." Barry whispered under his breath, dropping some extra food into his shade, feeling it waver as Orion took the offering without much hesitation. He added what little dried meat he'd been carrying too.

Continuing towards the center of the Court, meandering through the defenses that had been put in place. Eventually, he managed to get fairly close to the Court, but had stumbled upon a large willow. Its trunk was large enough Barry could recognize it as another of the "houses", but the rest of the tree was abnormally... aggressive.

The large hanging branches were covered in bright red bloody thorns, the tips embedded to the ground and the branches tense, as if ready to spring at the slightest touch. Barry felt a sense of foreboding danger in their presence,

it was easy to imagine that a disturbed branch would lash out as it sprung, ripping flesh and muscle along the way.

Frowning, his gaze turned towards the tree, there were windows, but they were small and round, barely large enough for someone to look through. The inside of the tree itself was impossible to discern this far out, but the sheer size of it felt like it could fit at least four or five floors.

Two maidens, dressed in thick green leather, moved up to him from within the thorny cage. They wielded whips, their expression somber. "Sir, the prison doesn't allow guests."

"This..." Barry looked at the place, feeling the shadow under his feet shifting, his soles practically frozen cold. Orion did not like this place one bit. "What sort of prisoners do you have here?"

"Human prisoners." The guards both scowled, lips thin and eyes cold. "The Lady forbids execution of humans, so our only option is to keep them locked."

"What sort of crimes did they do?"

"Enslavement of maidens, those are the ones treated most leniently." The guard closest to Barry shook her head. "But we have others that have done far worse than that. Ones we happened to catch by chance, and that the world is better off without."

"Torturers, breakers, traders. Humans who've abused maidens their whole lives." The other guard spoke with a cold edge. She pointed to her arm, showing white lines, scars, littering her right forearm and shoulder. "My old owner among them."

"It's... that doesn't sound good at all."

"It's not." The taller one replied, giving a curt nod. "Sir, we have our orders. Please return to the safety of the Court. This place has too much filth for one such as you."

He nodded, feeling a chill as he turned to leave and head back towards the parts of the Court he knew better.

As he walked, he felt eyes were on him. He looked over his shoulder, not seeing anyone looking his way, but unable to look from the black holes that littered the willow-tree's walls. He was being watched, by someone within.

He hurried his steps all the more.

Chapter 137 [Rick]

Rick walked down the road. The day was beautiful, sunny sky, a fresh cool breeze to counter the hot sun, shoes didn't have any holes in them, and the dirt under his feet had a crisp crunch about it.

It was a shame that Monica had opted to kidnap him. She wrapped him in her arms and walked, the taller and stronger woman basically dragging him as her eyes kept flicking towards Dia with a certain degree of nervousness about them. The nurse, for her part, was holding his hand and not letting go, but otherwise ignoring Monica.

"Wouldn't your quiet compliance be a form of pampering her?"

"She's mostly behaved well all morning." Rick glanced at Tomas as best he could, making an exasperated gesture with his hands. "If you've got some different way to promote her doing that, that doesn't involve jerky, I'm all ears."

"I just thought this feels like you're promoting her clinginess." The younger man commented.

"Believe me, I know." It wasn't like there was much of an option. Monica wasn't exactly some sort of child. As far as Rick was concerned, she still had ways to go to get acclimatized to this whole 'society' thing. "I hope this isn't bothersome, Victor."

"Please, don't mind me." The man spoke with a nervous chuckle, walking from nearly ten meters away and showing all smiles. Next to him walked two twin purple-haired maidens. "I am paying for safety, after all. I wouldn't dare comment on the methods so long as there are acceptable results."

"Rick becoming a merc is the second wildest thing after the confirmed threesome that included the hot-nurse and amazon-kitty." Kat chuckled, arms wrapped around Lizzy's neck as the Salalexis was giving her a piggyback ride. Next to them, Ginny looked slightly nervous, her gaze bouncing between

Kat and Rick as she walked. The Draco appeared just one wrong twitch away from jumping out and pulling either of them some place safer.

The teacher grumbled. "Could we please not touch on that?"

"Oh please, you woke up the whole village. There were alarms raised, the Hunters went on high alert. Every patrol available went to the street ready for a fight." She laughed now. "Your sex-life is a matter of public safety."

"God." He was thankful for Monica's arms holding his head. It hid the slight coloration on his face. Not feeling particularly inclined to continue in the current conundrum, he began struggling against Monica's grip.

The feline loosened it just enough for him to finally return to his feet, but not without firmly grabbing his hand in the process. Now the human was left with the maidens on either side, each clinging to a limb. "Nope." He declared, pulling them both closer and wriggling his fingers out of both of their hands.

He didn't so much escape. They let go, and the human crossed his arms, trying to use the chance to relax his shoulders. Monica pouted more severely, and Dia mostly nodded along. There was still a sense of troubled jealousy he could sense from them both, and so he just stepped away. "That's enough Rick for now."

He ignored the giggling that broke out behind him.

Now free, he kept walking, noting Monica's constant looks towards Dia. No doubt she'd cling to Rick the instant the nurse opted to so much as twitch the wrong way.

"You have family, Victor?" He shifted his attention to the merchant and the two maidens walking on either side of him.

The man's face lit-up. "Of course, sure, yes I do!" The two maidens at his side sighed while the man moved with an extra spring in his step. "I've got a one beautiful wife and three daughters. Maidens, of course. And quite the healthy boy. I hope he will get the business one day. I was always told that I should marry at least four maidens, but who has the energy to have so many

children? I just prefer having the maidens help and work and that's that. None of my business if they get someone to love. What's the sense of pushing it? Far better to just focus down on whomever you fancy and just go for it. None of that whole multiple-wives thing some of the lower folk love to have. Such a hassle, really. I'm sure you can tell maidens are just so competitive sometimes, right?"

"... I see." Rick nodded slightly. Had the man been saving up all the words he hadn't used since that morning?

"Wait, your daughters are maidens, right?" Kat glanced at merchant-Victor, a strain in her voice. "Are they property?"

The man's face twitched before his smile brightened with practiced ease. "They are part of the family, though many people have said I pamper them too much. I've made sure they get a good education. Hopefully, they will find a nice man and snatch their heart. Though Ema keeps turning down the gentlemen, she's met thus far. Still, they're my darlings, I tell you, and I will definitely not have them sent to some ranch or sold to the highest bidder. Does that make me too lenient? Maybe, but family's family. Or so I keep saying." There was a slight pause as his gaze focused on Kat. "Would you be interested in meeting them? I suspect Ivy might be quite eager to enter your service."

That caught the young woman by surprise. "I mean, I'm not quite sure what you mean?"

"You're a lady, and certainly, you might have customs that are not shared with those born in this fine and right kingdom of Edogia, but I'm sure even you would be in need of someone to support you in matters of coin and business? I can guarantee Ivy is quite privy and skilled in these regards, she has studied both law and business, and being a Witch, she has had much experience with the more traditional spellwork, of the divination sort, as is her mother's specialty."

"Wait, a Witch? An actual Witch? With the wand and stuff?" Kat perked up.

Victor's smile brightened. "Oh yes, she has a focus, built it herself out of a murisium core and flakes from radiant elemental stones. Her mother had had many long a dispute over this choice, but Ivy's skill in forecasting the weather with her spells has saved me many a nice suit, though it's still not quite as useful as her mother's ability to tell when a tax collector might be coming by, I do feel that she has learnt much." A vigorous nod. "Yes, yes, frankly, she is a very bright young maiden, with a great future ahead. Her usefulness to you would definitely be quite the contribution to whatever business endeavor you'd wish to start." His gaze flickered to Lizzy and then Ginny. "Maybe a surveillance and safety enterprise?"

"A what now?" Kat blinked.

"Victor." Mr. Gabriel spoke with a slight frown, the look in his eyes causing the merchant to hesitate. "Back off."

"I, yes sir, I meant no offense." Victor didn't even twitch, bowing his head. "I understand if you might have higher standards than what I can humbly offer."

"There's nothing humble about you." The old man spoke. "Your business is with Rick, not us."

"Yes, yes, I will make sure to keep that in mind, good sir." The man's shoulders deflated slightly, and the maidens next to him squirmed, but kept quiet as they lowered their heads.

"Hey, I decide what I do." Kat turned to glare at the old man sitting on the centaur.

"He is a salesman. Any offer he makes will come with strings attached."

"I would not be so facetious, sir." Victor bowed slightly. "Though I understand the concern, I must insist this is my daughter, and not some merchandise. I would never allow for a final transaction to occur without her approval for it."

"You're barking up the wrong tree, buster, we're dirt poor." The older man snorted, crossing his arms with a glare. "Got nothing for you to take."

"Maybe we should drop the topic for now?" Tomas muttered, scratching the back of his head. "This whole arranged relationships thing is... not normal to us?" He chuckled slightly. "I mean, the normal for us is more like Kat and I? Just meet and-."

"Wait, what do you mean 'relationship'?" The young woman frowned slightly. "Like, sure, we are kinda having fun, but-."

"I think we should have a lunch break in an hour or so." Rick raised his voice, gaze meeting Kat, Tomas, and then Mr. Gabriel. "And if there's any talking you want to do, perhaps consider doing so more privately."

That appeared to snap the trio, shared nods, and worried ones as well. The teacher's focus shifted to the maidens. They'd been quiet, but he could tell there was more than one with a troubled look, Freya and Ginny among them.

Shaking his head, Rick tried to put his thoughts in order. He might need to have a private chat with Victor.

Chapter 138 [Rick]

"I'd like to know what your intentions are with Kat."

Rick directed the words at the merchant, but his gaze was firmly planted in the surrounding forest and not on the man himself. He knew Monica was only a handful of meters away, and by the looks of it, so did Victor. But the anxiousness of something else possibly being there was very much present.

"I was just making an-."

"No." The young teacher frowned. "Let's not pretend you are doing this out of the goodness of your heart. I want to know what benefits you had in mind."

Victor paused, eyes sharp even if there was hesitation in his voice. "You're not from around these parts, right?"

"I'm an offworlder, not been around these parts for long." Rick stated flatly. The man's eyes widened. "And unless you start talking, I'm dropping you off at the next village."

"Yes, yes, certainly, that... would be bad, though I am fortunate you find yourself to be so kind as to not just leave me here for this slight that I have incurred. I really should watch what I say, sometimes I-"

"Let's just keep things to the point?" He gestured back in the general direction he knew Monica was at. "I've got things to do and they're impatient, as you've seen."

Victor paled slightly, nodding vigorously. "Certainly. Well, for someone who's not been too long in the kingdom, human women tend to very quickly gain the favor of many people, important people. I just considered that having my daughter under a prospective future noble could have been a great boon for her."

He wanted to sigh. Of course it would be like that. "Keep the offers of slavery off the table and we're good."

"Slavery? Sir, my daughter would be a servant, and a highly esteemed one. She's no feralborn slave." The man scowled deeply. There were hints of anger in those words that caught Rick by surprise.

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he sighed. "Servant, whatever. To me, it's the same. She's put under someone else's control."

This appeared to baffle Victor for a second. "Sir, the kingdom's laws protect servants and give them higher rights than those of a slave. They are under the protection of a human, yes, but there are consequences to be had if any are treated poorly."

"And slaves can earn their way into becoming a servant, and if they give birth to a human they are considered matrons. Practically human." Rick tried to keep the acid from his tone. "Look, where I come from, slavery is illegal. Having someone whose life you can just control in such a way is severely frowned upon." A vague gesture of his hand. "I'm adjusting and all that, sorry if I caused insult with the choice of words, it's just that, to me, they're all the same."

"You could not force a servant to marry, any more than you could threaten a matron with punishment save extreme circumstances." Victor nodded slowly. "But... yes, yes, I can imagine why it would seem all the same if you come from a place without slaves. I take it there are no ferals either?"

"No maidens, only humans."

The man perked up immediately. "Fascinating, really interesting. And how does this world handle supply and transportation?"

"Boats, planes... wait, no. Victor, I want to make it clear, don't offer slaves, or servants, to us."

"Sure, sure, boats and planes. And money? Do they use gold? Paper notes?"

"I feel that you're not listening."

Victor laughed. "On the contrary, I am very much paying attention. Your sensibilities and apparently those of the rest of your group are not quite those of this kingdom. Understandable, you're much closer to a Wildling I'd say, dangerous stuff to speak out loud in front of the wrong person, but really not that strange. I do share some of that kindness as well. Maidens are just as capable as humans, but the whole feral business, ugly stuff. Can't really treat a maiden and a human the same way because of it."

"Wait, what?"

"Maidens have bonds, need them to avoid going feral. Have this whole thing because of it. If you treated them the same as humans it would be pandemonium. No, different needs are had, maidens need a partner, or leader, or protector. To keep them safe from themselves. They can't exist alone, no sirree, always someone else in the caravan." A loud clap and a smile. "We were talking money. You were explaining how that worked in your world?"

"I wasn't."

"Come now, Rick, Richard? I'm sure we can reach an understanding? I have heard many great things about offworlders." A vigorous nod. "I also heard you wanted to know about the good Earl Vitchatt? The man of strict traditions and cautious steps?"

Rick's brows furrowed. "We use digital money, for the most part, the rest is in paper."

"Paper that represents a portion of gold, I take it?"

"No, it doesn't represent anything, it has value in of itself." The chemistry teacher rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "It's complicated, but basically we once had the paper money represent gold, called it the gold standard, but it's no longer the case. Now about the Earl, I was invited, and-."

"Yes, yes, invitation due to the subjugation of the renowned White Claw, slayer of the Baron of Astunes. The news travels fast and the rumors faster."

There was talk that you bonded her in a single night of intense passion, and the radio messages have had some talk of your power to summon fire that brought her to her knees in single combat." Slow nods that became quick ones. "Now, this money that represents itself, how exactly does it have value? Why would anyone use it if it doesn't use anything? And digital money? Is that like information through the radio or in the small computers? How do they stop people from just lying? Do they have some shared ledger?"

"Something like that. And it has value because people agree it has value." Rick shook his head slightly. "Look, about the Earl, I want to know if I should expect trouble from him or not."

"The Earl? Nonsense, he is a very calm and fair man." A quick nod. "His rule does have a penchant for nobles, but it can never be said he has been cruel or unfair. His father? That man was quite stricter. Back during the years after the war, whole lot of the kingdom was practically ready to explode. It was thanks to him that everything came to order." The merchant shook his head. "So, about the value of this money with an agreement, how does the agreement work? How do they set the value if it is not tied to anything?"

"It's... ok, one sec." The teacher shook his head slightly. "It's like the value of bread or some other commodity. It fluctuates depending on supply and demand. I'm not exactly knowledgeable in these details, strength has always been in chemistry."

"Money as its own product!?" The man was blinking in rapid succession now, nodding slowly as he rubbed his chin. "Yes, yes, yes, hm... but... no, hm..." Humming, he paced back and forth, nodding as he went, clearly not thinking entirely on the conversation but on something else. "Then the more people believe in it and want it, the stronger its value..." Abruptly turning to Rick, he smiled. "Yes, this feels like really useful information. Need to think on it, really interesting I have to say, a value that is volatile only so long as the belief and need for it isn't stable, and... yes. With that out of the way, how long do you intend to stay with the Earl? I could very well invite you to spend some time with my family, it would be quite the honor."

"How... long?" Rick frowned slightly. "I'd intended to meet the man and move on?" As he said this, he noticed Victor's brows rising. "But I take it

that would be bad."

"Oh, OH! Offworlder, yes, that... that makes sense. No, invitations of hospitality are typically at the very least for two weeks, perhaps a month. Though it's not unheard of for guests having trouble with their finances to stick around for longer." He tilted his head a little. "In your world, this is not the case?"

"If we invite someone over, it's usually to spend a night tops." The teacher felt a twinge of nervousness. "Any longer and it's usually because it's a very special event or vacation or something."

"Vacation. Vacate? As in leaving a place?"

"We travel for fun during holidays, sometimes. Go faraway place for a week or a month, then come back and carry on working."

"... that must be nice." Victor's smile faltered for a moment, scratching his cheek and frowning. "Really nice." A slight nod. "My son had asked to come with me, and had to say no, too dangerous."

Traveling here was a chore, a risk, and likely expensive if one wanted to do so safely. "I guess it would be." He glanced at the man as he nodded along, apparently deep in thought. "Well, I guess we should get back to the road soon."

With a slight nod, Victor walked back towards the others, holding his chin and not quite seeming to focus on anything in particular.

The instant he was gone, Monica popped out from behind one of the nearby trees. "Rick safe." She proclaimed with a serious nod, moving closer and grinning as she leaned back, shooting him a coy smile as his eyes bounced down to her breasts.

The human sighed, looking away. "Shirt?"

"No." she purred, grinning from ear to ear.

Rick sighed louder.

Chapter 139 [Barry]

Barry grunted as he felt his knees weaken from the blow. His hands trembled as they let go of the stick he'd been holding. Palms stung and shoulders ached. It'd felt like he'd just tried to lift a car for the past half hour.

"No, not like that, never like that." Embla spoke with a stern voice, stepping closer, grabbing his arms and raising them over her head. "Never attempt to block, maidens and humans both would crush you."

"I know I'm weak, but humans too?"

"The humans of this world have had maidens in their families. Many are stronger for it. Against any opponent you face, you must never rely on your strength or speed, read them, follow their movements, apply as little force as possible."

"Flow like water." Barry mumbled, almost wanting to roll his eyes. "And when do I start hitting back?"

"You don't. This is a defensive style, meant to help you survive. Hopefully long enough that help will arrive. Remember the gesture, engrave it if you must." She spoke sternly, slowly bending his arms so that the stick he held would inch to the side, the imaginary blade he was parrying allegedly slipping downwards. "And now you roll."

"Wait wha-!" The young red-head screeched as he was tossed sideways, thumping against the dirt with a solid grunt. "There was no roll before."

"There is now." Embla proclaimed. "For someone with the speed and strength of a maiden, the deflection would follow with an attempt at a counter, but if you are not going to counter, you are left open for a second attack. The angle would make it tricky for your opponent, but not impossible. The roll would be to avoid that follow up."

Reaching down, she picked him up by the shoulders, pulling him back to his feet as if he weighed nothing.

"Since you don't know how to roll with the impact, we will just focus on the deflection and we will work on rolling for the next session."

"How... what if they go for a stab instead?"

"You will get your chance to train for that."

That would sound much more like a threat if not for how her strong hands moved down his shoulders and to his hips, her gaze boring into his own with an intensity that held something else within. Something soft.

"I... hope I am not interrupting anything, my Lady?"

Embla's hands remained firmly on Barry's hips as she turned to meet the newcomer. "Nonsense, Lala, you may enter." Only once the dark skinned artificer had fully entered the training grounds did the Lady's hands leave Barry's body, though not without giving an appreciative squeeze to his rump.

Lala did not miss that, her face flushed slightly though she kept a straight face. "You call for me, my Lady?"

"Yes, I've heard that you've been slacking in your training. It is time to correct that." The taller woman gestured at the two swords that lay side by side at the edge of the training ring.

Lala paled. "My Lady, I am very honored to spar with you, but I would not desire to take up your very important time. There is certainly better things to do than waste energy trying to train a weakling like me."

"And yet here I stand, ordering you to ready yourself." Embla didn't blink, picking up the short-sword and giving it a couple of practice swings. The weapon looked too short for her size, almost as if it were a better fit to be used as cutlery instead. "You can opt to run, but that only means I will go for my favorite weapon instead."

All eyes moved to the seven foot long axe that lay outside the training ring, and Lala visibly shuddered. "I-I will do my best, my Lady."

Grabbing hold of the other short-sword, Lala gulped, eyes glancing around and landing on Barry for a moment before quickly turning away. "Should we... spar seriously?"

Embla's back straightened slightly. "I had forgotten, yes." She moved her hands down her figure, pulling up her shirt and exposing her naked large dark breasts, her six-pack abs, and her thin yet well toned arms. "Let us keep blows only to the upper torso."

"... certainly, my Lady."

Lala had been wearing a short green dress, and with its removal, she was left down to a pair of loose light green briefs. Next to Embla, Lala was far shorter, even Barry was slightly taller than her. The maiden's skin was fairer, the coloration not quite as dark, a deep tan that left her body looking like a supermodel that had spent a long time on the beach.

Barry felt his throat go dry. Lala looked a fair bit less athletic or powerful than Embla, broader hips and a lack of muscle definition gave her a more homely visage.

"I believe our audience is enjoying himself."

Embla's words caused Barry's back to straighten and his face to flush. Lala had similarly tensed, face turning slightly redder, but she'd not looked away from the taller maiden for an instant, holding her blade firmly.

"Watch very carefully, Barry, I wish to hear your opinion of this spar later."

No sooner had she spoken, than the taller maiden stepped forward. Lala reacted instantly, with a vicious forward stab that was aimed squarely at Embla's gut. The sound of ringing steel deafened everything else. Embla had deflected the attack with a simple gesture of her arm, her blade flowing in an abrupt downward slash that Lala had to deflect.

She rolled right as Embla's attack had turned sideways. Lala tried to prepare to block the next attack but saw the force with which the Lady was swinging the blade and quickly rolled a second time. It was just enough to regain her footing, barely enough to meet Embla's thrust with her blade and spin, pushing the attack to the side just enough to stop herself from getting skewered.

And again, Embla turned the attack into a sideways swipe with such ease that the blade might as well have weighed as much as a toothpick to her. Lala rolled, raising the blade and swinging to force the attack to go over her head. The shorter maiden saw Embla's exposed side and tried to go in for a stab.

The attack turned into a swing when she spotted the incoming back-swing. The two blades threw sparks as metal ground against metal. Again, Embla had been left wide open, and Lala lunged for an attack. But she couldn't cover even half the distance between them before Embla's arm came back swinging with a powerful blow. Confusion was growing on Lala's face with each time she had to turn her attack into a forced deflection, and even Barry was starting to notice that the larger woman was leaving herself open for a counter, but denying the opportunity before it could come to fruition.

She was just that much faster and stronger.

And then the shorter one slipped.

It had been a misstep, a miss-calculation. She'd attempted to attack, and hadn't had the time to parry the incoming sideway attack. So she blocked it.

A horrible screeching sound was immediately followed by a shriek. Embla's attack pierced through the blocking sword, and right as she'd been about to cut Lala in half, twisted the sword so it would impact with its flat edge instead. The technician's ribs audibly cracked as she was sent flying out of the spar-ring.

Barry ran after her instantly. "Don't move." He quickly knelt next to her, hands reaching out to touch her shoulder. "You probably broke something."

"Get up."

Embla stood behind Barry, holding her blade and bearing down on Lala's prone figure.

"Just... one moment, my Lady." The woman grunted, wincing as she tried to get up but failed, groaning in pain as her hand pressed against her bruised ribs.

"Your ribs are broken." Barry's voice rose as his fingers touched the soft skin. "You need to get healed." He looked over his shoulder at Embla. "She needs some healing."

"Broken bones are of no concern during a spar. We are not that fragile." The woman spoke, scowl deepening. "Do you think a feral will care to give you a moment's respite just because you are injured? Or a Knight or Hunter, for that matter?"

"But this isn't a serious fight, it's a spar!"

"D-don't worry, Barry, this is nothing, really." Despite her words, Lala's face was contorted and tight as she brushed his hand off, standing back up, albeit on shaky feet. "Besides, the L-Lady's been generous enough to be holding back today, she must be in a good mood."

Embla's lips curled upwards in a smirk. She raised her chin, making her naked throat all the more apparent. There was something shared in that look as Lala proceeded to lunge with her broken sword, the metal glowing with some sort of purple energy that made Barry's skin crawl from just looking at it.

The Lady merely dropped her sword, stepping forward and grasping Lala's wrist before the swing could be made. And with her other hand, she punched into Lala's good side. It was followed by the crunching sound of ribs. Lala fell to her knees, coughing blood.

"Enough!" Barry barked.

"No." Embla made a gesture with her hand, and the human abruptly felt his feet stuck in place right before he could enter the ring. The taller woman

turned to her subject. "If you had to protect the Court, would this much stop you?"

"No... my Lady." Lala wheezed the words out, slowly struggling as she returned to her feet.

"That's how it should be." A solid nod and a grin. "If you stay on your feet after the next one, I'll let you take your collar off."

Lala's eyes widened, her breathing already short and uneven fastened slightly. She raised her fists, arms shaking slightly as she glanced Barry's way for a second, then tightened her jaw. "I'm ready."

Embla stepped into the shorter woman, her fist swinging upwards. Lala tightened as best she could, changing her position so the attack would at least be blocked by her arms. The impact was a solid thud that felt like a grenade going off. Lala's whole body rose from the ground a whole two feet before being dropped.

She vomited blood as she stumbled, pain clear on her face as she held her knees in place, her whole body shaking almost violently.

"Good enough."

Embla reached for the maiden's throat and yanked, the collar snapping loudly. The taller woman ignored Lala as she collapsed, approaching the still paralyzed Barry. With her arm stretched out, she dropped the torn collar onto the ground before him.

"Your kindness is a strength, but anything in excess can be a poison."

"Heal first?" The woman groaned, falling to the ground and laying on her side. "My Lady?"

Embla tilted her head slightly, turning from Lala to Barry, and nodding. "Not until you and Barry have bonded."

Barry didn't regain his ability to move or form words until Embla had left.

Chapter 140 [Barry]

"How... bad is it?" Barry sat next to Lala as she lay on her back, the ground beneath her stained with her sweat.

"Been... worse." She replied, naked chest heaving with her breaths. "Not going to die from this."

"But in pain."

"Been worse." Lala didn't deny his words, looking at the hand he was holding. "You're soft."

"I'm not used to seeing people in pain."

"No, no... your hands, they're soft." Closing her eyes, her fingers brushed against his palm. "They're really pretty hands."

Barry's cheeks lit up. "I've never had anyone say that to me before."

"I bet it'd feel great if you touched me with them." Lala's lips parted into a weak smirk, shifting slightly to thrust her chest upwards a bit.

"You're in pain!" He complained, pushing through the embarrassment. "Broken ribs, spitting blood, you need to get healed."

"Lady ordered it." She muttered, closing her eyes. "Bond first."

"Then I..." He hesitated. "Do you really want to make a bond... like that?"

"Do you prefer bigger chests, like the Lady's?" A slight wiggle of her hips followed, and a little smugness appeared on her face.

His finger poked at her side and she winced. "You. Are. In. Pain."

"And I just need a strong emotion and for you to accept it, right?" She replied, her fingers stroking the palm of his hand. "I don't want it to be pity."

"Why would I feel pity for you?" He remained seated next to her, fingers grasping her palm lightly.

"Cuz I'm a maiden that lost against someone who wasn't even trying? Because I'm a stick of a girl barely able to swing a sword?" A grumble and a light cough followed. "That's harsh."

"Pretty sure no one can beat Embla," Barry said, nodding slightly along before blinking, his back straightening up a little. "Close your eyes."

"If you're going to have the Hound fondle me, I'd rather keep my eyes open and give pointers."

His face reddened. "It's not that." He waited until she'd complied before he allowed himself to take a deep breath and relax. Fighting the temptation to look her over, he leaned closer.

"Just a heads up, but if you're going to fuck me, I need some preparation first."

"Would y-you stop!?" Barry grumbled, freezing as he'd felt the embarrassment burning through him. "Just... just stop, ok?"

"Bond-less girl looking for a good time, just saying I'm fun, not desperate." She smiled smugly. Barry poked her ribs, and she winced. "Alright, alright! I'll shut up."

"Good." He muttered, sighing loudly. "Just... relax, I'm not going to hurt you."

A deep breath followed by a long slow exhale, Lala lay on the ground flat, arms stretched at the sides, legs slightly apart. The only piece of clothing upon her form the light green briefs. Barry took her body in and leaned forward, placing one hand next to her head for balance while he moved the other to her neck.

Slowly, he stroked it. Up and down, his fingers brushed over the patch of discoloration that marked where the collar had once been. Lala froze as he did so, inhaling sharply and shuddering. "Breathe." He reminded her, ignoring his own flustered face and moving his fingers over her exposed throat.

"That's... ticklish."

"And what else?" Barry asked. "What else do you feel?"

"I-." Another shudder and a slow trembling exhale, her face reddened right as her eyes snapped open. They were shimmering surfaces of ochre, but this close, Barry could see flecks of gold, her pupils widened slightly and her hand reached up to press against his chest.

Parting her lips, she whispered a word, too low for him to hear. Barry leaned closer. "What did you-?"

She rushed upwards the short distance, her lips meeting his in a brief chaste kiss. Her hand pressed against his chest and tugged at his shirt, keeping him from escaping as she mashed her lips against his. Barry could taste iron.

With a gasp, she slumped back down. "That... worked? I'm bonded?" Lala laughed before breaking into a coughing fit and groaning. "Oh wow, it... it was never this easy, this smooth, this..."

"What did you feel?" He asked, scratching the back of his head. "Lady Embla seemed to like it when I touched her neck like that, and... well, I thought you'd like it too?"

"Oh you naughty naughty man." The maiden moved to sit up, and failed, falling flat and back down to the ground. "Ouch."

"You're hurt." He reminded her.

Lala grumbled at the proclamation, head smacking against the dirt underneath. "I know you're an otherworlder and all that, but you were giving

me fuck-me eyes, right?" She said, eying him with a half-cocked grin. "I gotta know if I should pretty up for tonight or not."

"I don't... I don't have 'fuck-me eyes'." Barry leaned away defensively. "I don't even know what that is!"

"That didn't sound like a 'no' to me."

Crossing his arms, he glared down at her, or tried more like, brows not quite managing to lower all the way. "I won't answer that. If you want to come meet me, then you'll have to talk to Lady Embla."

There was a long moment of silence. "W-what?"

"She and I... sleep together." He stood up in full, turning away. "I'll look for a healer so they can patch you up."

"WHAT!?"

Ignoring her words, Barry hurried out of the training area, doing his best to keep his flushed face under control and failing. He'd thought Embla was shameless, but by the looks of it, Lala was going to be ten times worse. Was this normal? A part of him felt like his face was just about ready to burst in flames as he tried to push away the thoughts of either of the maidens coming onto him.

"And what about you?" He glared at his dark shadow.

Orion for her part, did not respond. Though she did take the little piece of fruit he dropped for her to snack on. So at least she was still there, even if she appeared quite content on not popping out at all. Which was sometimes turning out to be quite frustrating.

Quickly moving towards the apothecary's place, Barry tried to keep his pace brisk as he wanted to get Lala's broken ribs treated as soon as possible. So heading straight towards the wooden palace, the young human worked over how he'd request the nice old lady to send someone to heal the hurt maiden.

The last time he'd felt like there'd been some implied faux pass and it would probably do him some good to be more aware of how he said things.

As a strategy began to form, all thoughts came to a grinding halt as he spotted Kajou limping her way in the same direction. Alarms rung within Barry's mind and he approached, looking around quickly as he tried to determine if Pan was anywhere to be seen. "Kajou?"

Getting closer, he called out to her, and watching her flinch.

"Barry." She greeted, bowing her head slightly. Her arms were bruised, and there were cuts on her thighs.

"What happened?" He asked.

"I had a small altercation, nothing of concern." She glanced downwards before turning to continue limping her way in the same direction he was taking.

A moment of hesitation, Barry looked around quickly once more. "Let me help you."

Kajou looked like she was about to complain, but nodded as he took one of her arms over his shoulder.

Their steps led into the wooden palace and into the largest room nearest to the entrance. The walls were lined with pots, vases, and flasks. Dry herbs hung from the ceiling, and there was a moldy kind of scent lingering that mixed with the herbs.

The young man could only inwardly scowl as he glanced at her once more, not quite sure how to deal with this. It had been weeks since he'd last seen her, and yet it felt like the nightmare in the forest had been barely a dream.

"After this..." Kajou hesitated. "Could we talk? Privately?"

Barry could only grimace.

If it were Pan, he'd refuse in a heartbeat.

But Kajou had fought tooth and nail to protect him from the crazy Valkyrie, even put her life on the line to fight for his safety during the feral rush.

This... he owed her at least that much, right?

"... sure."

Chapter 141 [Alice]

"I'd like to know more about how psychics work."

"Could you... not? Ma'am?"

Alice frowned at Irene, and the red-skinned woman frowned back. They were inside the tight little room the psychic maiden called an 'office', and this time the psychology teacher was pushing herself to ignore the discomfort from both the small space and the woman's nudity.

"You run the psychic evaluations. Let's start with that."

"Please?" Irene glanced at the book she was holding, the look on her face looked equal measure irritated and exasperated. "I really don't have interest."

"You have plenty of time, this village has nothing going on of importance, and I've got it on a good source that you can effectively hold twelve conversations at once." Alice replied, crossing her arms.

"So I am to aid in amusing you, I take it?"

"I heard from Rick that the evaluation you gave him was basically torture. Yet the others were not."

Irene sighed, placing the book on the table. "Miss Alice, I hate the Barons, both. But they hold the cards and, more importantly, can make life very dangerous for the people I care about. So when they gave the order to ensure Rick had an unpleasant experience, I complied."

"I already suspected that much. I want to know what the psychic evaluation is, and why it was different for him."

"Because the normal process involves placing the human's mind into a highly strenuous situation, likely traumatizing, and gauge their reactions. With a use

of amnesia afterwards to avoid lingering consequences."

"You can delete memories."

"I can delete dreams." Irene responded with a 'tut'. "Though relaying telepathic information is my duty, dreams are my specialty. I go into dreams, I make dreams, I let the person experience dreams, and I can make it so they don't remember them if I so wish." A slight shrug. "To be more specific, I make them so they don't 'stick', so the memory doesn't form."

"Like when someone drinks too much alcohol." Alice nodded slightly.

That startled Irene a little, the woman shifted in her seat, brows burrowing. "Exactly." There was a slight pause, and a tilt of her head. "You're wearing protection today."

The teacher touched the silver bangle on her wrist. "When I told the Baroness I was going to talk to you, she gave me this, said it would make it impossible to have my mind read without my knowledge."

"... I could attempt to push through, but it would warn your guard outside." Irene didn't look away from Alice's eyes. "Is this all you needed? Or were you looking for something else from this conversation?"

"Why do you want to get rid of me?"

"I prefer the company of my books." The psychic replied flatly, rolling her eyes. "It is not my fault you are bored, nor should I be the source of your amusement."

"I know, it's just... gah!" Alice's fingers brushed through her hair. "There's nothing to do, and so many people I'd rather meet in small measured doses."

Irene's brow wrinkled ever so slightly. "Someone you don't like is occupying the Baroness' library."

"Pretty much. Really not looking forward to having to see that old wrinkly wind-bag's face." The psychology teacher deflated. "I could make it worth your time to tolerate my presence here."

"Hardly. But I am curious as to what you might think I might be interested in."

"Books, maybe?"

"Yet you carry none." She made a show to look Alice up and down.

"I meant right here." Alice tapped her forehead. "I've literally read thousands of books over the years, books that have never and likely will never exist in this world. Can't a psychic hop in and help re-experience them?"

"Thousands." Her lips curled. "A tall tale. Lesser nobles have troubles gathering that many let alone reading them."

"Only really one way to find out, isn't there?"

There was a long pause, Irene closing her eyes and carefully pressing her fingers against her brows. She shook her head after a few seconds. "Why do you really wish to have a look at your own memories? Do you long for reliving your home, perhaps?" Her eyes opened again, red irises boring into the teacher's skull. "You could always just order me to do these things, you do realize this, correct?"

Alice froze and grimaced. "Do you feel uncomfortable being treated like a person?"

"I have two daughters, a loving husband, a wife-sister, and no shortage of maidens that treat me 'like a person'. I assure you I am not bereft of affection or respect." Irene's shoulders slumped slightly. "What I do find... amusingly vexing is that you treat me like a fellow human. There are no undertones to your words, and you behave as if ignorant of the dangers of being alone with a maiden, a psychic no less." A slight sign of mirth came to her lips. "It is as if a child pulling on a Hound's tail and calling it 'fluffy'."

Now it was Alice's turn to frown. "I choose to believe your capacity for violence or harm is not one you decide to wield during civilized conversation."

"A belief that you held in regard to the Baron's actions as well."

This time she flinched. "I... had hopes you'd be better than that." Rubbing her shoulders, the woman lowered her head a little. "Look, I'll be out of your..." She hesitated and sighed. "I'll see myself out."

"No need to rush." Irene made a flicker of her hand, the window closing behind her with a soft click. "I was feeling rather curious over the... alcohol." She tilted her head slightly. "I was wondering how a world without psychics found out that the brain loses the ability to form memories because of it."

Perking up, the psychology teacher nodded. "It's chemistry and biology. The brain's capacity to form long-term memories gets affected if the alcohol content in the bloodstream spikes rapidly enough."

"And how was this discovered, is my point of interest."

"Well, depends on the study." Alice replied. "One had people strapped to an MRI and... wait, ok, this is trickier." She rubbed her chin. "So we created this machine that lets us see the parts of the brain that light up as they become active or inactive. So one study had people get drunk slowly, and another group to get drunk quickly, and observed the differences in how their brains behaved." A little smile followed. "Add in questions and skill tests to them and a control group, and you've got yourself one of many studies into the subject. With a large enough pool of volunteers, the statistical commonalities begin to emerge."

A slight nod in response, Irene drummed her fingers on the table as she appeared to consider something. Alice felt a little hint of nervousness, scratching her chin for a moment.

"Have you bonded Helga yet?"

"I mean, I hadn't even..." Alice frowned slightly. "Are you reading her mind right now?"

"She keeps sending reports to me because she's technically not 'fully under your service yet'." The psychic maiden put up a lofty smirk. "Why not take her?"

"It's..." A sigh. "If there is an unfair system, and I participate in it, then am I not promoting its perpetuation? That would make me a hypocrite."

"If you think it's an unfair society, why not leave? Become a Wildling, go live amongst the trees and ferals." Irene used her hand to lean against the table. "Or maybe what scares you is that accepting Helga would be a self-confirmation that you aren't in your world anymore?"

"Are you... are you trying to psychoanalyze me?"

"Aren't you doing the same thing to me?"

"It's more of an unwanted habit."

"And mine as well." She replied simply. "But out of the two of us, you're the one who is in an emotionally precocious situation due to perceived instability and lack of control in your life."

"The same situation any maiden is pushed into whenever they bond someone new."

"You could always swear your fealty and service to the Baroness. Get rid of having to decide on the bigger picture of your existence, fall into the comfort of a habit dictated by another." Tilting her head, the maiden stood up, dusting her lap and gesturing at the door. "I think we've both had enough of each other for the day. Do feel free to ask Helga on the proper procedure to bond a maiden when she's entering your service."

With a nod, Alice stood up in turn and smiling awkwardly. "Next time should I bring sweets?"

"She doesn't like sweets because they make her look more like a milkmaid!" Helga pipped up from outside the room, giggling.

Irene's lips tightened slightly, though she kept a slight smile. "Boar jerky will suffice."

"See you in two days?"

"Three."

Nodding along, Alice stepped out of the room, hearing the door close behind her and feeling slightly refreshed. She glanced at Helga as the winged maiden stood at attention, fighting against a slight smile and bouncing on her feet.

"You've been spying on my conversation?"

"My duties are to protect you, ma'am, not being able to hear you would be a dereliction of that."

"Mhm." Rolling her eyes, the teacher sighed slightly. "I'll think over what Irene told me, but... I think I'd need to make clear some things first."

Helga nodded, smiling brilliantly. "Of course, ma'am, the best way for a servant to do her job is to understand the needs of their protector."

"And... that's exactly what we'll have to talk about."

Chapter 142 [Barry]

Barry sat down in the small chair in the small room. There was only one bed, and a sack at the corner with what he guessed were clothes. It was only large enough for the bed, a small round table, and a little extra space, with a window filtering the light inside. "This... feels cramped."

"I'd asked for a small room, it is hard for me to sleep in large ones." Kajou spoke softly as she sat opposite of him. "If this is too small for your tastes, we could always go someplace you'd prefer."

"No, it's... alright. Why do you not like large rooms?"

"It's just something that makes me uncomfortable." The Amazon shook her head. "How... how have you been taking? To... Lady Embla? The Court?"

"It's nice... I've... she's helped me, a lot." He nodded. "What about you? You... not in good terms with Pan anymore?"

The Amazon grimaced. "It's complicated."

"Maybe?" Barry shrugged a little. "Sometimes it's easier than it looks."

"I'd..." Kajou's shoulders slumped, dark hair pooling downwards, covering half her face. She softly touched her throat, fingers brushing against the choker. "Coven is in need of help."

"Could you explain it a bit?"

"Coven is..." A sigh. "East of the kingdom of Edogia, this kingdom, there is a large stretch of land that is ruled by no one. Coven is what we call the conglomeration of villages, tribes, and small towns that live there. We have survived for hundreds of years."

Nodding slightly, Barry remembered the map he'd seen of the kingdom. "I'm guessing it's rough out there."

"It is, but it has been a way of life for us." A sigh. "There are barely any humans within Coven, it is a place where they are a very rare sight. Most maidens are ones that have escaped slavery from Edogia... Pan included."

"But..." The young man frowned. "What about the ferals? Can't they be turned?"

"We don't have enough collars." Her words were sombre, her gaze distant as she spoke. "During the Great War, the Creators made collars for maidens to bond to other maidens. Humans..." She shook her head. "According to our Elders, humans had the ability to make bonds without them. Captured maidens were turned to humanity's side rather quickly, and eventually, they won."

That seemed strange, Barry couldn't help but frown. "I thought the maidens had been cursed with the feral state for trying to fight humans."

Kajou shook her head. "That is the story that is told in the kingdoms of men. Some of our elders speak of a different truth, that the feral state was used ensure maidens stayed loyal to their superiors, that the curse was that they were made able to bond humans without the collars. A trick done by the Saintess to avoid humanity from being exterminated." Her fingers crossed together, tightening. "Not many believe the purpose of the bonds was to save humans, and most elders tend to be... displeased, with those that do."

"But... what does this have to do with the collars right now?"

"The collars we have are five hundred years old, made with spells and enchantments we could not figure out how to replicate." Her fingers touched her throat once more, the leather under her fingers didn't look old or worn to Barry, but then again, he didn't have his glasses, so it wasn't like he could see the finer details. "The enchantments are starting to break down, and Coven is looking for alternatives to avoid... war."

The young man became still, brows furrowing. "Without collars, you would need to fight to steal more collars."

Kajou nodded emphatically. "Coven has tried negotiating with the various kingdoms over the centuries. At first we had amicable relations, that is why some of our population has humans, but after the rebellion..." Her shoulders slumped. "Things have not gone well, and many people of Coven have had to hide further into the wilderness where the kingdoms cannot reach."

Nodding slowly, the young man couldn't help but sigh. "It seems like it's not a good place to be."

"The ferals there are far more dangerous, and it is... tough, when one of our own joins them." With a quiet calmness, the young woman met Barry's gaze. "It's why I want to bring you there. I... There is hope that we will be able to learn about the strong bonds, and hopefully how they work. At best we might be even able to make new collars, or at the least be able to ensure those whose collars have stopped working avoid going feral while we seek for a better solution."

"I..." The young man didn't like what was happening, and to a point, he could understand why she'd be asking this of him. "I'll... try to think on it. I can't promise more."

The Amazoness nodded, smiling slightly. "Thank you, Barry, really." The relief the maiden expressed with those words were heavier than he expected them to be. She bowed her head, pressing it against the table. "Thank you."

A pang of guilt made its way through him, and Barry could only look away. "So... what do you want with the Court, anyway?"

"Yes, apologies." Kajou muttered, taking a deep breath to recompose herself. "Coven had taken in some maidens that had been in the Court, and they'd mentioned about a new kind of collar, one that allowed maidens to form bonds of ownership over humans." She shook her head. "Many of the elders were intrigued by this, and we were sent here to try to discern whether the Court found out how to make new collars, or if at the very least they had some insight into the enchantments."

Though Barry could only nod, the realization struck him. "But the... Embla's mother is unconscious."

"And she is the only one with insight into the collars, or at least that is as much as Lady Embla has claimed." Kajou nodded. "Pan and I had some... disagreements, over what to do now."

"I don't want to pry any more than I already have," he said, shaking his head and trying to think of something else to bring up and talk about. Scratching his chin, he couldn't really find anything in particular. "I... I've been spending time with Orion, the... Hound."

Kajou perked up a little and nodded. "The one you bonded in the forest. I can sense her in your shadow somewhat." There was a slight moment of pause. "Have you... does she come out of your shadow often?"

He hesitated. "Not really, no."

"We... have seen escaped slaves doing that, sometimes. Hounds in particular tend to be rather territorial." Kajou said with a slight edge of concern.

"Usually it is a sign that they don't find themselves comfortable with things, the environment."

"That... oh, I'm not... how would you handle it?" Barry adjusted himself in his seat. "I've been trying to coax her out of my shadow, but she usually doesn't do that unless there's some apparent emergency."

The maiden took a moment to stand up, nudging her chair backwards and kneeling down under the table. Barry hesitated, pulling himself away a little and watching as the Amazon reached down to the dark shadow. She stopped cold the instant said shadow began to growl, the maiden calmly moving out from under the table.

"I think she needs a friend, someone to get along with." A grimace followed. "It might be hard to find a feralborn maiden in the Court all things considered, but I've seen a few Doggirls, they might understand Orion better."

"Erm... thank you." He replied, awkwardly smiling at her as he scratched the back of his head. "I'll keep it in mind."

"It's the least I can do."

Her hand reached out to linger on his shoulder, their eyes met, and for a heartbeat, Barry felt as if the air within the room had suddenly changed into something else. But before he could even attempt to make sense of it, the growling returned, the shadow under his feet rumbling impatiently.

"I... I'll be going now."

"Yes."

"Let's... meet again?"

Kajou paused, nodding with hesitation. "I would like that."

Chapter 143 [Mark]

Mark's feet and back hurt, his head felt like it was going to throb its way into an implosion, his legs were sore, and his stomach kept growling for food and water. Everything felt just about horrible right about now, and his patience was running thin.

The quiet mouse lay on the ground nearby. Blindfolded, gagged, and drenched in more of the purple berry juice. It was something that was happening more and more often now, whenever Brye and Shery went off to check things or try to spot a potential new victim, it would always end up like this.

This time there had been no luck in any of the ventures.

"There's a small town, and they're wary." Brye's ear twitched in annoyance, her claws traced up and down Noah's rope-like tail, the mouse wriggling and groaning. "It's going to be a pain to go around."

"Why the hell don't we go in and have an actual rest?" Mark spoke, crossing his arms and glaring at the two-tailed dark fox.

"You?" Shery looked slightly surprised as she answered.

"We can't exactly walk in with rope tied around your wrists." Brye pointed out.

"And I'm fed up." He replied flatly. "The pace we're keeping is going to get me killed before you get to whatever the place's name is."

Brye stepped closer, leaving the squirming mouse shuddering and gasping through her nose. The fox approached the human, leaning down and not looking away from his gaze for even a second.

"Promise it."

Mark hesitated. "Promise what?"

"Promise that you'll be in your best behavior." She replied. "We go into the village, you act like you're our owner, get yourself a nice soft bed if they have a tavern, maybe even a warm bath and hot food. But you keep your mouth shut and let us do the talking." A pause. "Just this village, just this once. Promise it."

Shery hesitated, stepping forward. "Brye, don't be crazy, he could-."

The fox raised her hand to stop the gray-skinned maiden, not looking away from Mark. The silence stretched out, man and maiden meeting gazes, quietly gauging one another. The human's mind whirled through the possibilities, he could lie to her, he could trick her...

And then what? Get put under the control of whoever was calling the shots here like they did back at the Court?

"Deal." He spat on his palm, reaching out to her.

She glanced at the palm for a moment, then nodded. "Deal." She grasped it tightly, shaking once before she yanked.

Mark gasped as she reached out with her other hand, pulling his neck closer as she kissed him. The fox let go immediately after, stepping away before he could even properly react to the surprise.

"Deal."

"You can't be serious." Shery complained.

"I am." The fox replied with a shrug, grabbing Noah by the wrapped-up wrists and tossing her at Shery. "If this is a fuck-up, I'll fix it."

"You better."

Mark nodded somewhat, glancing at them. "So what now?"

"Now we walk, and if we're questioned, you let me be the one to talk." Brye said with a simple shrug.

With Noah being carried by the same person that was also carrying most of the luggage, the group set out towards the nearby road. Mark noticed one of Brye's tails vanished, and so did Noah's tan. He had to blink twice and then twice more before he felt like his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. This was an illusion, wasn't it?

They walked quietly, the dirt road under their feet crunching with every step.

"Oh, by the way." Brye's singular tail lashed back and forth as she looked over her shoulder at Mark. "Maidens like a Doggirl can hear a conversation a whole building over. Not as good as mine, but good enough that you shouldn't consider there's really anywhere private in the village."

"Whatever."

He rolled his eyes, the sooner they got some actual food and rest, the sooner he could consider the prospect of what the hell to do next. Now that they were approaching actual civilization, he'd take the chance to learn more about what sort of crazy place this was. He was fine with not trying to run away at the first chance he had, but he really couldn't afford going at things blind anymore.

It took them an hour before the village came into view. A small thing, maybe thirty buildings tops. Most of the space was occupied by the farmland, which had clearly seen better days.

"Dregs from the feral rush came through here." Shery muttered, her focus on the fields that were battered and torn as if someone had passed a giant rake over it in random directions.

"Doesn't seem like they were hit too hard. And we're on the road of gems, so they might have a tavern."

"The what?"

"There's an elemental stone mine south of the kingdom, the road they take the rocks goes through here." Brye shook her head. "If there's no tavern, we'd have to look for someone offering hospitality, in which case we're better off just moving to the next place."

As they approached the village, Mark noticed there were people working out in the edges of the fields. Some wore loose rags for clothes, but there were a few that had green uniforms. One such uniformed maiden spotted them and hurried over from her work.

"Greetings." The brunette spoke, glancing at Mark, Brye, and stopping at Noah. "What business do you have in our village?"

"Just passing through, will spend the night, maybe two, ma'am." Brye bowed her head low, hands furling against her lap, her voice a demure soft silky plea. "Our Master is very tired, and would appreciate a soft bed for us to warm. Would you happen to know if there's a tavern available?"

The human almost did a double-take at the fox's soft-spoken words and almost submissive behavior. Though the uniformed maiden brightened slightly, apparently not catching Mark's shock.

"We've had very few visitors as of late, so there's surely room to spare at the tavern. Do you plan to sell that feral?"

"No, my Master was looking to break her in. He wanted to give her as a gift to his younger cousin." Brye bowed her head with a slight bending of her knees. "He'd been intending to buy a collar for her in Aubria."

"That's nice." The uniformed maiden waved and stepped aside. "Best of luck out there, and be careful, there's been word of some banditry on the roads, some of the displaced have grown desperate."

"Much appreciated, we will keep a watchful ear and a sharp nose."

Another bow, and they continued towards the village. Mark couldn't stop looking at the back of Brye's head, unable to believe she could behave so... demurely.

"Dear Master, if you are going to stare so much, perhaps I could provide a better focus?"

The fox looked over her shoulder at him, smirking as she raised her tail, making her rump more prominent to his gaze. Mark rolled his eyes and Shery snorted in amusement, but little else was said, even as Noah's struggling had regained some vigor, though by now the maiden had long since pushed herself past the point of exhaustion.

They walked through the town, Mark trying to see if he could spot anyone that wasn't a maiden.

And failing.

Every single person that crossed their path was a collared female. There was the usual sense of normalcy going about them, very few giving them more than a glance. But Mark could feel every alarm in the back of his head sounding off at maximum volume. Especially from those that would focus on Mark for a bit longer than the rest.

Every single person they crossed paths with could crush him in an instant, his eyes kept paying very close attention to their hands, their shoulders, the way they tilted their heads. His jaw was tight as he pushed down the feeling of creeping danger. He could tell there was no hostility, a part of him did at least, he had to fight back against himself.

Where were the humans? He could only wonder at that.

"At this time of day, most are having an early dinner." Brye pipped up.

And Mark realized she'd been looking at his thoughts. Again.

The fox only grinned. "Here we are." She stepped into the building that had a barrel and a bed atop the entrance.

The smell of rancid alcohol hit Mark like a ton of bricks, he covered his nose and had to look around to find the room had at least six men and four times that in maidens. They were eating for the most part, very loudly at that. Mark

could vaguely make out that it was some sort of celebration, but Brye and Shery hurried them along to the counter.

The fox slapped down some coins.

"The biggest bed and the most soundproof door." She stated with a wide smirk. "My tail is in need of some yanking. Also need some hot bath for my partner."

The bartender rolled her eyes, snatching the coins and dropping a key. "Last one to the left. Bath-water in three hours." And without missing a beat, she turned to hand over some wooden mugs at the waitress.

Mark barely had time to finish taking in the sight of the crowded place before Brye was tugging him along and up the stairs. The door slammed shut behind them and instantly after Noah hit the floor as she was dropped like a sack of potatoes. It was a modest room all things considered. Single window, large bed with light brown sheets, and a smaller bed next to it. Apparently meant for 'the help', if Mark's guess was correct at least.

No sooner had he taken in the view that Brye was taking off her clothes while Shery was moving towards the smaller bed. "Don't be noisy." The gray-skinned woman proclaimed, slowly easing herself onto the wooden piece of furniture.

Said furniture complaining greatly under the weight.

"Hm? Why would we be noisy?" Brye shot Mark a coy smirk, naked as she swayed her way onto the big bed and laying on top of it.

The human hesitated, not sure how to react. The first expectation that had come to mind had been that the fox would forcefully strip him and have her way with him. Again. Instead, he was left standing next to the door and focusing on the golden mirthful eyes that were looking back at him.

"Well?"

"Well what?" He scowled.

"Are you just going to stand there and watch?" She arched her brow, fingers tracing their way up her milky thighs.

He growled, taking off his shirt and tossing it at the bed before moving to lay on the bed, his back turned towards her. "Do whatever."

"Sure."

There was ruffling, and then... nothing.

The human looked over his shoulder. Brye was lying on her side, her naked back aimed his way, her two tails draped over his hip. With a frown, he flicked them off and returned to try to relax himself, take the edge off of his weary body, get the chance to recover some energy.

By the time the tails returned to drape over his hip, he was too close to falling asleep to try to flick them off again.

Chapter 144 [Mark]

Mark woke with a start. He'd been feeling a soothing warmth all around him when his mind had finally managed to kick in and sound the alarms. His hand was grasping the knife instantly, his eyes looking wildly around the room in an attempt to spot the direction the danger was coming from.

He was met with silence.

The sun outside had dimmed, the shutters were closed, and there was no real source of light within. He could vaguely make out the bodies in the room. Noah was still in the corner, tied up, slumped, breathing deeply. Shery was on the smaller half-sunken bed, snoring. There was the soft sound of water, and Mark's eyes turned towards an object that hadn't been there when he went to sleep.

A tub.

In the dim light, he couldn't quite see the details, but he could spot the glimmering surface and the naked woman within. Brye's back was turned to him, her head leaning against the bath's edge, the only part of her that was visible. Everything else was submerged in the steamy tub.

"I'm keeping the others asleep." She commented in a slow whisper. "I'm finishing my dip, so take your own if you want." Her hand peeked over the water's edge, gesturing at a bucket next to the bath. "Scrub yourself a bit before jumping in though, don't want to dirty the water too much."

With a soft sigh, she pulled herself up, slowly rising from the steamy water. The light from the window streaked inside, reflecting against her naked, wet body, leaving her curves contrasting with the dark. Her face hidden in shadows, Mark could still see the two golden orbs that stared at him with intensity. She stood there, hands not moving to try to cover herself and slowly teasing the skin of her hips.

"Why did you save me?"

The question was blurted out before Mark could even stop himself. It had been a constant intrusive thought at the back of his head ever since they'd escaped the Court. And he'd been unable to hold it off.

"You could've left me for dead."

Brye turned away, looking at the two sleeping occupants in the room, and then glancing at the door. Her ears rotated and twitched, attentive, and clearly seeking out something Mark would be unlikely to detect. Eventually, she appeared satisfied with whatever she'd found.

"I saved you because I wanted to." She finally proclaimed. Her hands began to glow with a dim purple light, casting her amused expression in a soft lavender light. Brye moved her palms towards her hair and shoulders, slowly caressing them in a downward fashion. In their wake, her skin and hair were left dry and smooth. "Not that I'm not being selfish. You're worth several times your weight on elemental stones. And the Boss will want to meet you at the very least."

The young man scoffed, prying his eyes away from her body as she stepped out of the tub. "And who's this 'Boss' of yours, anyway?"

"He's the Boss." The fox shrugged simply. "Far as I can tell, he controls most of the underground, at least in this chunk of the kingdom."

Mark snorted, standing from the bed and moving towards the bucket. "So what? Local drug dealer works for him or something? Why not find him and make a call?"

She didn't answer his question. The maiden merely shook her head with a dismissive flick of her tail. Turning to face him, she cocked her head, stepping closer. Mark froze as she did, raising his arms in preparation to struggle, the knife still firmly within his grasp.

"Not going to do that." She chided, cocking her hip and stopping close enough the dagger was almost poking her shoulder.

"Why should I trust you?"

"Have you ever been able to stop me?" She smirked, waiting for only a heartbeat as she stepped closer, grabbing the edge of the blade and pressing it against her stomach. Slowly, she dragged it up her body, drawing a sharp breath, pressing it against her throat. The human was left transfixed, unable to look away as she pulled it higher, kissing the tip of the sharp metal before closing her left eye and leaving it to press against her eyelid. "There."

"What?"

"You want to kill me?" Her singular open eye glimmered golden in the dark. "That's where you ought to stab me."

"I-."

"Either trust me, or kill me." Brye pressed, letting go of the blade. "No room for middle-ground."

He couldn't move, his body remained fixed in place, a lump in his throat cutting his breath short. With a growl, he pulled the blade away and threw it to the ground, the clanking metal loudly speaking the words he could not coalesce into his mouth.

"There, much-."

Whatever she was going to say, she clearly didn't expect him to lunge and kiss her. He weighed more than she did, and that alone caused her to tip over. They fell, and she reacted. The human landed on his back, with Brye straddling his hips and clenching his throat with one hand. Anger flared in her eyes. Warm water that had spilled from the tub drenched the floor and his back.

"The fuck was that for?"

Mark laughed. "You weren't reading my mind."

Brye's tails flicked. She let go, and for a fraction of a second, she flushed. The naked fox left his lap with an annoyed growl. "Do your own bathing."

She proclaimed, vanishing. The sound of ruffling fabric told Mark she'd teleported onto the bed and dove inside.

The young man kept a mild sense of accomplishment, stripping off of his clothes down to the briefs. He found the stool and the bucket, and used them to quickly scrub away most of the grime from the wilderness off of his body. The cool cold water woke up his mind and left him feeling far better than he'd been hours ago.

With his eyes turned towards the tub, the human hesitated only as he noticed Brye looking his way. She'd used the sheets to cover herself all the way save her head. The vulpine maiden's gaze remained firmly fixed on him, expression entirely unreadable as he stripped the final piece of cloth and dipped into the warm waters. If he had to bet, she was being pissy at having been one-upped for once.

He ignored it, turning to the bath. Mark cringed a bit at how hot the water was, making his submersion slow and steady. Though it was certainly not unwelcome, it didn't take too long to adjust to it and just lay with his back turned towards the larger bed. His gaze bouncing between the window and the other two occupants in the room.

Eventually, he just stopped letting his thoughts wander and locked onto Noah. "I'm sick and tired of having her be a prisoner." He proclaimed with a grunt.

He was aware Brye was listening, but the fox held back her comment for several long seconds. "If you want to kill her, the Boss likely has a few psychics under his thumb that ought to know how to pull it off without turning it into a brain-butchery."

Mark submerged himself into the water, allowing the heat to suffuse into his body. His thoughts kept bouncing between so many things he couldn't quite decide on which one to focus on. "And what if I don't want her dead?"

The laugh was mirthless, cold and cruel. "Do you own her, then?"

That startled Mark. He turned to look at her as she lay on the bed under the sheets. His brow furrowed as he then glanced back at Noah and her sleeping

form as she was curled up in the corner. The idea solidified in the back of his mind. "She tried to kill me." He said with a slight frown. "I get to decide what happens to her."

There was no room for any other option. Noah was dangerous, but she'd proven just how capable she could be if she wanted to. As soon as he'd said the words, it felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. The resolution crystallized with a snap, and Mark suddenly realized Brie was laughing louder now.

"Ok, then, Mr. Offworlder, you decide what happens to her." There was no small amount of mirth in Brie's voice. The maiden wriggling on the bed as she turned away from him. "But if you want help, you will have to ask for it."

She snapped her fingers, and Noah abruptly drew breath, squeaking awake and rapidly looking around the room. Her eyes met Mark's, and she froze, curling tighter into the corner, round ears perked and attentive, her whole body tense and attempting to make itself as small as possible.

Something soft and smooth caressed Mark's thoughts. He tensed, eyes widening as he suddenly realized someone was touching his mind.

Noah's eyes abruptly sharpened, glowing with a soft violet light.

Chapter 145 [Mark]

Seated within the warm bath in the dimly lit room, Mark's thoughts ran through a thousand scenarios. Noah was in his mind. She was using her powers. He wanted her out, and he didn't know how. His mind shoved against the soft feeling of a caress that was right at the edge of his thoughts, but it was like trying to punch water. It just moved out of the way and right back in.

She was just as surprised, eyes wide and attentive, flicking towards the beds and then towards Mark. There was some hesitation in that gaze that made alarms within his mind to go off. He remembered the waterfall, the darkness, the manic laughter, the joyous feeling of impending death.

His body lunged out of the tub with a slosh of hot water and Noah's thoughts lashed against his own. Pain exploded in the front of his head, but he didn't stop. Mark's eyes sought for something to use, anything in his mad dash towards the diminutive maiden. And he locked onto a singular purple berry, its form almost glowing under the light as if put there by someone else.

Noah panicked, squealed and moved her arms wildly. More pain burst through Mark's mind. Everything was turning white, his neck tightened until it was rock hard, his jaw tightly clenched. He wanted to speak out, scream, maybe even call for help, but the attack was trying to lock his body in place and succeeding. Two more steps, and Noah was starting to get desperate, scurrying harder against the corner, nails scratching at the wood, voice rising in a shrill scream as her whole body began to glow brighter.

"STOP!"

His shout came right as his vision had started to blur. There was an abrupt halt to the attack and pain, and Mark didn't waste the moment to gather his wits. He crossed the remaining distance and shoved the berry into her mouth right as she'd tried to draw breath again.

Noah choked, biting into it and the juice exploding within her mouth. It drenched her throat and chest. Mark quickly covered her mouth and pressed so her mouth would jam. "Swallow."

Her body moved on instinct, and she did. The maiden groaned, coughing and leaning into the wood. Noah's face flushed as she drew in a sharp breath, shuddering and wriggling as she fought against the wires that restrained her wrists and ankles. She was still trying to attack him. He could feel her mind bumping against his own, unfocused and looking for something to latch onto. But it was lacking the reactiveness it had before. It was easier to shove away.

Mark's hands reached for her ears and twisted them hard. Noah let out a squeak and froze. "Stop." He replied, pinching hard enough for her to shudder. "Stop or I swear to God I'll rip them off one piece at a time." With a squeeze, she became very still.

The human frowned as he looked down at her. Didn't she have a gag on moments ago? His head whipped to the large bed. Brye was there, laying on her stomach and looking his way with a grin, golden eyes glimmering in the dark. Her fingers moved and between them, he saw another berry. Had she placed the one he'd used within his line of sight? "Need help?"

Grunting, Mark turned away from her and focusing back to Noah before she could gather her wits. "You don't get to use your powers, especially not on me." He twisted his fingers in the pinching motion, making her squirm and whimper. "Are we clear on this?"

Noah nodded.

And Mark frowned. "Say it."

"Y-." Noah coughed. "Yes..."

Was this enough? Before, it might have. Not anymore. "Yes, what?" He pinched harder.

"Yes... sir!" The mouse gulped, shuddering, face flushing red as she drew in shuddering breaths. "Yes sir." She repeated, wriggling as his fingers held the round, warm, sensitive flesh firmly.

His mind stumbled through what to do next. He... what did he want? His eyes coursed down her naked body, the purple juice that dripped and coated her pale skin. She had goosebumps, and she was breathing hard, face flushed as she drew in air sharply with every gasp. He could feel the flesh of her ears warming up, redder by the second.

Mark knew all too well the effects of the berry.

His mind flashed to the cave, to Brye, the ropes, then the forest and Victoria. And for a moment, he thought back to his father, the sound of his mother shouting.

Mark's lips thinned, moving rather than thinking. He grabbed Noah and checked the bindings keeping her wrists tied together. The only one that was keeping her fixed in place was one of the wires that looped around her throat and was tied to a metal ring embedded to the wall.

The human undid that specific binding and grabbed her shoulder. The maiden was very light, far more than she should have been for her size. She shrieked, trying to kick out and stop him. "Stay still." He ordered, and her body went rigid. Her breathing grew panicked and short. He just took her towards the stool next to the tub, sitting her down. "Stay put." He ordered, not that he needed this time around. The maiden was frozen in place and watching his every move with wide eyes, as if waiting for him to cut her throat any second.

He tied the wire from her throat to one of her hands, keeping it firmly behind her back. It was undoubtedly uncomfortable, and she would choke herself if she tried to break out, but he did not care, undoing the wire holding his hands so that only her left hand would be free. He'd seen Brye do the knots a couple dozen times already, so it wasn't too hard to pull off. "Clean yourself." Mark proceeded to put one of the wet cloths on her free hand.

Noah looked at him as if he'd just grown a second head and asked her to sing a song.

Naked and feeling colder by the second, he didn't have patience for the situation. His fingers pinched at her ears harshly, twisting them until she squeaked. "Wash yourself." He repeated with a growl this time. "Get that shit off of your body."

The Tigermouse hesitated, nodding hastily and pulling the cloth closer into her grasp. She didn't hesitate as much to drench it in water, either. It took her some effort to start applying the cloth to herself as she was using her off hand, especially with the frequent pauses she made every handful of seconds. Each time, she'd look over her shoulder towards Mark, the young man not having moved an inch the entire time, keeping a firm grasp of her ears every step of the way.

His mind was moving through the steps. Ears were painful, and his commands snapped her into a reaction. He couldn't really claim he had control over her, but by the looks of it, he could at least stop her from trying to hurt him if he reacted in time.

And as the cloth moved from her arms to her chest, Noah's breathing started getting ragged. The movements started to slow down, a blush was creeping down her neck. The mouse's hand lingered as the rough cloth brushed against her erect nipples, sharp breath and a wriggling naked bottom against the hard wooden stool. Mark noticed her tail whip to the side and wrap around his ankle softly as her hips made a slight rhythmic motion.

"Just finish already." He ordered.

The young woman almost dropped the cloth, shuddering with a deep breath, hand pressing hard against her chest and squeezing her small breast.

Noah trembled. She shook like a leaf as she moved her only free hand downwards. Her head hung, and she closed her eyes tightly as the hand continued its way between her thighs. With a squeak, she humped her own hand, and Mark felt himself grow hot when he realized the way she'd interpreted his orders.

The anger within him sputtered to a hesitant halt. He glanced the other way, keeping his hands firmly on her ears as Noah moaned softly. Her body was moving rhythmically, the scent of her arousal lingering in the air. Mark could feel his body reacting, but he pushed the thought away, tightening his grip on Noah's ears until she squeaked. "Get it out of your system." He ordered, his mouth feeling dry.

He drew the line there.

He would not rape her.

Yet the order appeared to break damns within the mouse. Noah moaned louder this time, her tail tightening around his ankle. The woman was quickly working herself higher. She pushed herself into it with increasing abandon, rhythmic squeaks and wet noises, erotic gasps and squeals. The young woman didn't take long. She tensed, an abrupt orgasm that didn't quite stop her since she almost immediately got back into it. She leaned against Mark, the soft skin of her back pressing against his erection as she breathed in, eyes tightly shut, hand furiously working at her wet cunt with her only free hand.

With every ragged breath, her small breasts bobbed back and forth, gleaming under the light. She squealed, another orgasm, and this one didn't bring pause. Her legs widened as her fingers dug deeper into her pussy. Noah was clearly lost in sensation, entirely ignorant of how her rhythmic thrusting was teasing Mark's cock with her back as she pressed further into him.

The young man was half paralyzed and half transfixed, hands gripping her ears as his thoughts had ground to a halt at the display she was unintentionally putting up for him. The sensation of her body against his own caused him to flush and grow hotter, and his fingers pinched more roughly into her ears.

Noah shrieked, entire body going rigid as her eyes opened wide. The sound died in her throat as she choked, pressing against Mark hard enough the stool moved and she fell to the floor. On her back, staring up at him, she heaved for air, body flushed and shuddering, her tail firmly gripping his ankle as her right hand remained tied behind her back, the left one knuckle deep in her sex.

She met his eyes, a gaze of deep satisfaction within her. With a deep gulp, she spoke. "Thank you." She managed between heaves for air, closing her eyes and slowly going limp.

He gulped, looking down at the naked prone woman and entirely unsure what she was thanking him for. But a different realization slivered into his mind, and his head whipped to look towards the bed.

Brye lay on her stomach, face flushed and a deep smirk on her lips.

Somehow, Mark felt he'd stepped into a territory he shouldn't have gone into.

Chapter 146 [Rick]

Rick lay on the piece of cloth that he'd come to call 'bed' over the past... month? Had it really been a month? His gaze lingered on the night sky. He would've been fighting a headache if not because of Dia's literally magical touch on his temples, having just about gotten rid of any and all ails, aches, pains, and sores. The pink haired maiden pressed her fingers softly against his temples.

Meanwhile, Monica lay atop his chest, cheek pressed firmly against his shoulder, breasts against his stomach.

At least she hadn't been growling for the past day or two.

"Sir, are you sure you'd rather sleep here?" Dia asked as she moved her fingers to his earlobes. The human was far too tired and relaxed to properly do anything other than feel the stress easing away under the touch that could only be magic.

Turning his head slightly, he glanced at the 'company' in the clearing. The twin maidens Victor had brought with him were currently busy setting up his 'tent'. It was a small circular hut, maybe four meters across, though the living accommodation in of itself wasn't really impressive. The way the twins kept pulling the pieces out of seeming thin air certainly was.

The merchant had offered to set up one for him. Rick figured Dia must have heard the offer.

"I'd rather focus on getting Monica accustomed to not sticking to me like glue."

The nurse smiled, a tiny hint of mirth as she moved her fingers upwards, digging into his scalp. "She is afraid of losing you, sir, of course she'd be overly protective." Dia paused for a moment, fingers moving to his face, closing his eyes for him. "Would you wish to continue with her training?"

"As much as I'd love to be able to neglect that... guess we ought to add another lesson."

"Should I strip?"

"What is it about you and suddenly being so bold about sex?"

"Sex?" Monica perked up, squeezing him slightly as she did.

"No sex." He replied, watching her sigh and return to hugging him.

"It is the language she understands best." The nurse spoke. "Since I can't really expect to make things clear in other ways."

"Aren't you... uncomfortable?"

"I don't mind if it's to help you, sir." She deflected, keeping his eyes closed as her fingers applied light pressure on his cheeks. "Though I do admit I would find it more enjoyable if you liked it as well."

Rick's brows furrowed slightly. "Is this coming from Irene?"

There was a little giggle. "Some of it." She admitted. "She had much to talk about your world's overwhelming volume of... pornographic content."

"Wait, wh-!?" He tried to speak, but her fingers pressed against his lips. Rather than let her, he opened his mouth and bit on her digit. The nurse pulled back as if it had actually hurt her. Rick looked up at her and ignored Monica's chuckle. "I don't know what that psychic has found out about my world, or shared with you, but if you want to know something, then ask me. I don't want you running around under assumptions that could have been cleared out."

She looked down at him with some hesitation, then slowly looked around as she bit her lower lip. Then, she leaned down, meeting his eyes as their faces got closer. Her purple irises seemed to glimmer as her cheeks turned bright red. "Did you... does sir like it when I call him 'master'?"

And just like that, Rick's face turned an equally beet red.

"Rick." Monica's paw pressed down on his face, blocking the view as she grumbled, biting down on his shoulder in a nip that made him yelp and jump.

He barely managed to escape her hug and up to his feet. "Ok, that's it, lesson time." With a scowl, he pointed at Monica. "Shirt."

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. "No shirt."

Snorting loudly, Rick moved to stand next to the still seated Dia. His hand patted her head, and the nurse smirked at Monica. "Yes shirt." She added with smugness, pinching the fabric of her own shirt and tugging. "Pets."

"It's lesson time." The chemistry teacher commented, keeping a steady look at the large feline.

Monica's begrudgingly stood up. Making annoyed noises under her breath, she moved towards Rick's sack and, with a flick of her claw, opened it up. She pinched out the topmost piece of clothing, revealing the over-sized white piece of clothing. "Shirt." She proclaimed, throwing it at Rick and extending her paws towards him so he could help her put it on.

And no sooner was it on that she yanked him to sit on her lap.

"Pets." she now stated as he was made to straddle her hips.

Rick rolled his eyes and obliged, giving her head a couple of seconds' worth of attention before he moved to stand back up. Except she didn't let him. Arms wrapped around his chest and pressing him against her covered breasts, the maiden purred and leaned over, pinning him to the ground. Her head tilted to the side for a moment, breathing in deeply, and then sighed, nodding in determination and looking back at him.

"Rick lesson." She declared, proceeding to lick his face. "Word."

"Sir, should I...?"

"No, no... let's see where this is going." He rubbed his sleeve against his face to wipe off some of the spit. Looking up at her eager smile, he sighed.

"Word." It was clear she wanted to have a new word on her vocabulary, so might as well try.

Nodding, she proceeded to kiss him.

"Kiss?"

"No kiss." She shook her head, kissing him again, then kissing on his chest, then thrusting her hips against him. "Sex?"

"...ok, sex?" Rick frowned.

"Sex, sex, sex, sex." She now declared, frowning. "Hurt, hurt, hurt, hurt, torture. Sex, sex, sex... Word?"

"Orgy?" He frowned, watching her lean away, letting go though keeping him pinned on the ground.

"Orgy?" Monica frowned further. "Sex, sex, sex, sex, orgy? Rick orgy Monica?"

He wanted to groan. Rick rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "Do you have a word for lots of sex?"

"Not in the way she likely intends." Dia giggled, keeping herself to the side. Her tone was light, but her eyes were worried, keeping a very sharp eye on Monica's movements.

"Word!" the feline complained, drawing the attention back to her. "Orgy? Yes? Orgy? No? Rick orgy Monica?"

"I'll just go for orgy." The human sighed. "Orgy yes, Monica."

"Orgy, word." A firm nod, finally pulling away from him and crossing her arms. There was a strange look in her eyes as she glanced at Dia before her focus drifted off towards the edge of the clearing. "Monica hunt. Rick no orgy Dia."

"Wait, Monica, what do you-!?"

With an explosion of dirt and dust, the feline had broken into a full sprint towards the forest. The human was left surprised and confused as she clearly had something in mind he was not too sure he wanted to find out.

"That... is new." He frowned slightly, glancing at Dia and then back at the figure of the Sabertooth as she vanished into the woods. "What... why would she do that?"

"She... wanted to hunt?" She provided with a slight shrug. "If sir wants her to come back, you could trigger the collar's discipline spell... I am unsure how effective it would be on someone as strong as Monica though."

"Let's not." Rick shook his head, grunting as she helped him stand up.

"Are you hesitant on whether it would be effective, sir?"

"It's electroshock. If I ever have to use that on someone, it will be if it's an emergency." With a frown, he shook his head. "But I'll figure something out to punish her when she gets back."

"Maybe you should 'orgy' me to show her you don't follow her rules, but that she should follow yours?" Dia's cheeks were flushed as she reached out to grab his hand, her skin soft and warm. "Master?"

Looking down at her bashful smile, the way she bit her lower lip, how she squeezed his fingers, a stray thought came to him. A warm bed, a small box, a forgotten apartment. Rick didn't let the memory take root, leaning into her and feeling how she wrapped her arms around him as they kissed.

He suddenly realized they'd not properly shared much of any intimacy during these past few weeks, the feline having always been around. Rick pulled Dia harder against himself, and she cooed, melting into his embrace. "Maybe we should ask Monica to hunt more often... maaaster."

"Why..." He slowed down, caressing her back. "Do you like calling me that?"

"Don't you?"

The young man pondered on the question. He took her lips once more rather than answer, not quite sure how to take it, though quite certain there was more meaning to the word than what Dia was letting on.

"Sometimes. In the bedroom only."

He had many more things to say about it, but the maiden kept him far too busy to be able to elaborate.

Chapter 147 [Kat]

Kat glared at Lizzy. Lizzy blinked back at Kat. The human slowly circled the tent, hands extended open on either side as she was very carefully approaching the naked, scale-covered green-haired sexy feral-born maiden. "Just a bit... closer..." the human whispered under her breath.

She leapt forward.

Lizzy reacted faster, springing over Kat, lightly touching the ceiling, and hopping right back down on the opposite side of the tent. The scaly maiden reached into the pouch she'd stolen from Kat, pulling out another strip of boar jerky and chewing on it.

The Salalexis blinked at Kat as if wondering why the human had tried to do that in the first place.

"Ma'am, if you ask, I could..."

"No, no, this is personal." Kat brushed off her bruised pride, glaring at her target.

Ginny blushed and kept herself on the corner of the tent, hugging her knees as she sighed in exasperation. The Draco looked at Kat and then at Lizzy, claws twitching as she clenched her knees a bit more tightly. Kat, for her part, was approaching the Salalexis again, slowly, inching her way closer and closer. This time she made sure not to jump out, very carefully and slowly getting closer to the very still maiden.

There was no escape attempt, but as Kat began to reach out for the bag, Lizzy began moving it away from her grasp. It ended in a rather predictable manner, with Kat hugging Lizzy as the maiden kept her other arm stretched out and doing her best to keep the baggy out of Kat's reach.

"Come on~!" Kat complained, changing strategies and blowing air into Lizzy's ear. The maiden squirmed and grimaced, and with that the human had

managed to snatch the bag. "Aha!"

Lizzy's mouth opened, the tongue shooting out and ripping the bag right out of her hands. This time she didn't even chew, the whole damn bag went down her gullet, Lizzy barely looking bothered by having swallowed the whole thing. Kat was pretty damn sure there was a smug edge inside those wide, unblinking eyes.

"You..."

There was a whirlwind of movement. A blur of color that mixed the green with the blue, and a moment later there was a cry, and by the time Kat realized what had happened, Lizzy was pinned on the ground, both arms painfully twisted behind her back as Ginny had her knee behind the maiden's head.

"Ma'am, are you alr-?"

"What are you doing!?" Kat raised her voice, pushing at Ginny's shoulders until the Draco had lifted her knee from Lizzy's head and stepped away. The human glared at the Draco. "We were playing a game, it was perfectly safe!"

"Ma'am, she used-."

"I know what she did! I didn't ask for your help."

"But she..." Ginny hesitated, meeting Kat's glare and faltering. She lowered her head. "I'm sorry ma'am, it won't happen again."

A single pause and Kat faltered, her focus shifting to Lizzy as the feralborn maiden had shot right from the spot she'd been laying on and stuck herself to the roof. The scales shifted in coloration, going from green to an off white. "Fuck, fantastic." Kat growled, stomping her foot and looking up at the maiden that was attempting to camouflage herself with the cloth. "It's going to be another hour before she calms down."

"It... won't happen again, ma'am."

"I'm sure it won't." Kat gestured at Lizzy as the maiden tried very hard to remain very still. "Just... just get her down of there. I'm going for some air."

Ginny hesitated, her stubby tail going stiff. "Ma'am, I should-."

"There's nothing out there with the balls to get close to Monica, it's safe enough."

She didn't wait for a response, stepping outside and feeling like there should be a wooden door for her to slam shut. Instead, she got a very flimsy curtain to leave rustling behind her. And she might have been more mad about it if she hadn't very nearly rushed head-first against a very familiar broad chest.

"Tomas?" she asked, startled and stepping back.

"Oh, hi." The young man awkwardly scratched at the back of his head, glancing towards the entrance to the tent, hut, thing. "Having... trouble?"

"No, no, just... needed a little air." Kat's eyes scanned the area. "Where's... your elf?"

"Freya? She's doing some perimeter patrol... thing."

Oh? "Great! I mean, erm." She coughed. "I mean, great, erm... you... wanted something?"

"You. No, wait-."

Kat chuckled, leaning closer, grinning up at him. "Hey, if you wanted some fun~..."

The young man shook his head. "No, yes, I just, I don't know?" He nervously smiled. "Just wanted to hang out."

Close enough. "Sure." She grabbed his arm and yanked him away from her hut and into the mess within. With practiced ease, she led the way, with Tomas stumbling to follow.

Kat didn't really have much of a destination in mind, but anywhere else was sounding like the greatest idea in the world right now. It was an easy search. There was a nice open spot not too far from the camp that felt lonely enough and was just enough out of sight that they could pretend they were some place else.

"Here sounds nice." She proclaimed and gestured to Tomas to sit down. Instantly she was on his lap, arms wrapped around that sexy strong neck of his and looking into his eyes.

He didn't need her to tell him twice and kissed her. Kat really wanted to be able to purr right about now, God above, she'd been feeling so pent up she would've exploded if she had to take another week of having a nun disguised as a sexy dragon-girl following her every step at every moment of the day.

"I've missed you."

"Shhh." She did not want words. She kissed him harder, hands fumbling to pull her shirt up and expose her skin to some much needed air. Tomas fumbled with her bra, but points where they were due, he'd been faster than any of the previous quickies they'd gone through back before hitting the road.

He was hot and bothered, his body was hard and there was something about how certain he moved his hands that was pushing every button inside of her.

"Oh Master~!"

Both humans froze. Tomas was the quickest to panic of both of them, and Kat had to cover his mouth before he could say anything. They remained perfectly still, looking around, carefully staying very close to one another.

"Harder, harder please, give it to me haaaaiiiiieieeee!"

The voice was recognizable. The pink-haired nurse. It could be no one else. Still, Kat hesitated, trying to find the source. "Shit." She spoke the word right as they'd spotted some of the stuff Rick had been lugging around. In the silence, they'd become very aware that their teacher was very clearly fucking the nurse not too far from them.

There might be only a bush in the way, maybe two.

"Stay very quiet." Kat whispered into Tomas' ear, hand reaching down, and-

"Ahem."

This time Tomas did jump. "Freya!?"

She was knocked off of his lap, falling to the ground and quickly trying to recover a sense of dignity or at least balance as she spotted the elf. The maiden had been right next to them, she could've tapped their shoulders if she'd wanted to.

"What was-mmfmfff!?" Dia's voice was muffled from the other side of the bush.

A long, shared silence, Tomas looked at Freya and then at Kat. And she saw guilt on his face as he did so. The expression felt wrong coming from him. The young man was quickly covering up his chest as he turned to Kat, reaching down to help her stand up.

She reacted without thinking, slapping his hand away.

"Kat?" He frowned.

"Sorry, I..." Kat went up to her feet, scrambling to lower her shirt and cover her chest. "See you later."

She walked away before anyone could say anything and make things more complicated. She hurried back towards the tents, ignoring the sound of Tomas' bumbling, fumbling attempts at excusing himself to that elf. Kat wanted to scream, but knew that the moment she raised her voice there would be a dozen different people asking her if she was alright or hurt or whatever.

That only made her want to scream louder.

Chapter 148 [Rick]

The silence was practically suffocating as Rick sat on the small cushion that served as a chair. His hands grasped at the metal cup as he used the warm liquid within helped soothe his nerves somewhat. It was a tea of some sort, with a dash of liquor having been added to it.

"So Monica..."

"Is still out hunting." He replied with a slight nod. "We will have to stay here for another day at least."

Victor didn't seem quite reassured by his words. "And do you know when she'll be back?"

"I know she's within running distance if danger pops up." Rick deflected. "She must have detected something dangerous and opted to get rid of it."

A bluff. He didn't have a clue about what Monica was hunting, and she most certainly wasn't nearby. He only had a very vague sense that she was focused and excited in equal measure. And that was about it. The bond didn't really let him peek more into the situation, though he most certainly wished it at least gave him a sense of distance and not just the direction to take to reach the Sabertooth.

The merchant didn't seem all that convinced, but nodded. "And... you are sure we should stay here?"

"For the time being." Rick nodded. "Freya and Ginny already set up a perimeter, and Monica made sure to scare off the ferals."

He did not want to stay put, and the sooner they reached any semblance of civilization the better. But he couldn't trust things would go well, and moving towards the next village on the map meant moving away from Monica. But he wouldn't be saying those thoughts out loud, instead keeping his poker face as he did his best to read Victor's expression.

The man didn't appear too concerned, mostly seeming thoughtful.

"I have supplies to spare, so my main concern would be security." A slight nod. "But it's not like it would be wise to pressure a feralborn maiden that's yet to properly learn discipline." He moved to sit down on his own cushion, Victor made a gesture and one of the twins quickly approached. "I'd like something stronger."

"Yes, sir." The maiden nodded, kneeling next to the man and reaching out towards the void. Her hand vanished into thin air, the rest of her arm following soon after. Slowly, she pulled it back, and it came back into existence with a glass bottle.

The contents were a dark glassy brown, it reminded Rick of whiskey, but he wasn't really sure.

Victor caught the interested look. "You've never seen a Mimica using her powers before?" At his words, the maiden tensed and bowed her head slightly. "Nothing to be ashamed of, they're hard to come by so it wouldn't be too strange that you haven't had a chance to meet one yet." He patted her shoulder. "I was very fortunate to find them, it would've been impossible to open up a new shop without their service. Saved me up plenty in transportation and safety."

"So they have the power to store things away?" Rick nodded politely, noting the girl's nervousness. "Do the stored objects keep their properties, or is it more like putting them on a shelf?"

"Hm? Whatever do you mean?"

"If I put this cup of tea into a bottle, and ask her to store it, would it still be hot if she took it out tomorrow? Would food spoil?"

"Oh! Though I've never tested whether things remain hot or cold, their magic doesn't prevent food to spoil." The man shook his head. "Their power has been described akin to creating a separate room to put things into."

Nodding absently, Rick drank some more of his loaded tea. "Is this normal?"

"What is?" Victor tensed as the question was thrown his way, the maiden at his side had quickly left as soon as she'd stopped being the focus of the conversation.

"For this world, for this kind of interaction." The teacher replied, shaking his head. "If I'm expected to spend a month in the Earl's place, just what exactly should I... do?"

"That... that is a very peculiar question." Victor stroked his chin. "I had thought the silence was a normal one. Was it making you uncomfortable? No, of course it was. I'm such a bad host." Shaking his head, the man crossed his arms. "And here I believed I came from a place where things moved fast, you must be faster still, then? If such is the case..."

Rick quickly shook his head, and that seemed to snap the man right back on track.

"Yes, yes, so to start with, you're not expected to spend a great deal of time with the Earl himself. You will be his guest, but you are unlikely to be with him save once every so often. It is highly dependent on his schedule." He tapped his chin. "As a guest, you'll also be able to come and go as you please, though spending too much time out and about might be seen in a bad light. What would you normally do for amusement in your world?"

"Read books is the only thing that I feel would translate into this world... also, theater I guess? Never did do much of that, but television..."

With a nod, the merchant took a long swing from his glass. "Then perhaps that should be your focus. The Earl has an extensive library no doubt, and every noble enjoys boasting of whatever it is their family has come to collect over the generations." A moment of pause. "It is also the normal expectation that the host amuse the guest and not the other way around. You might not be a noble, but the invitation has been made clear. You could very well expect to be asked to partake in some boar hunting or to watch a play or two."

"Boar hunting?"

"There are variations, but many nobles that have some personal forest will generally partake in boar hunting from time to time." The man replied. "They use non-elemental guns, trying to take down a boar, usually one raised in captivity to make it an easier game."

Rick's neck tensed, his mind whirling towards the forest and the armored baron as he took the shot towards Monica. The loud deafening bang and the solid thud as if a canon had gone off. "Nonelemental." He repeated under his breath. "So normal lead and gunpowder?"

"Most likely, though then again, the Earl might have a Goblina in his service, so enchanted boomwood might be used as an alternative." A slight shrug in his dismissive response.

"What's..." Rick sighed, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. "I just know this is going to be another aberration of chemistry, but what in the world is 'boomwood'?"

Loud laughter met his question. "It's a Goblina specialty, they can make any plant-based material burst in flames, explosively so if they have the time and experience to enchant it into a stable state. It's a substitute to gunpowder in many places, especially in the northern desert where the feral Orc tribes roam."

That gave Rick pause, he blinked a moment and frowned, turning to look down at the cup that he was holding onto. "Have you ever heard of feral Tigresses?" He wondered with a slight hesitation. "Do they just... roam?"

"Everyone's heard of the feral tigresses." Victor chuckled. "They're often spotted near the dead-lands to the west, their territories make incursions into the area a rather dangerous endeavor."

"But not on this side of the kingdom."

"Oh!" He nodded. "Indeed, White-Claw... Monica, was quite the legend precisely because she'd been the first Tigress ever spotted in this portion of the kingdom. You have thoughts about this?"

"Just curious." Rick nodded slightly as he rubbed at his chin in thought. "Monica and I have disparities in how we see things sometimes. I was thinking that maybe meeting another Tigress, a fully tamed one, might be of help to understand her better."

As he said this, he felt something, a twitch, a shift. Rick's back abruptly straightened as he looked over his shoulder towards the tent's cloth walls. It took him a moment to properly place the feeling and the fact that it was coming from Monica herself.

"Something the matter?"

Rick nodded. "I think Monica's found what she was looking for."

Chapter 149 [Monica]

"Riiiiiiiiiiiiick! Fooooooooood!"

Monica called out to him as she spotted her soft-one stepping out of the stinky one's soft hut. She was making sure to drag the food food by the hard little legs because otherwise it would just rip against rocks or branches or things.

And she knew THIS had to be food food because it smelled like the food the stinky one ate and gave Rick. And Rick ate THAT, so there was no way this wasn't the right food. Monica was very happy she'd caught scent of the big bulky food when she did, it might have escaped, and then she'd have to be hungry a lot again.

Her human hurried towards her, he smelled and felt of fear and apprehension, but it wouldn't stop her. She presented her hunt to him, and that was all it took for him to start smelling of shock.

Monica was a very good with hunting, it had irked her that Rick had been the one to always give her food. She could bring food. "Food!" She proclaimed.

"Boar."

"Mother fucking mutant giant hog more like." Kat spoke as she hurried to look at Monica's very fine hunt.

"Boar?"

"Word." Rick quickly added, pointing a finger at her food food. "Boar."

She hesitated for a moment. "Boar... food?"

If he said no, she was going to be so mad...

"Yes."

Monica sighed, shoulders relaxing a bit. Of course this was food for Rick, it wouldn't make sense if it wasn't. Finally, she knew what he ate, she could hunt for him and find him some food. Maybe she could bring a weakened one? Maybe THIS time he would practice killing?

But there was something more important right now. Monica leaned in, grabbing Rick's flimsy cover and sniffing his head. "Dia sex." The weak tough-one's scent was still lingering on him. But at least it hadn't been orgy, only sex, sex, and sex. Rick also smelled more relaxed, which was good, he got tense too easily sometimes, even when she let him pet her.

Monica quickly drew Rick into her arms and licked his hair and face. A good start to get him to smell properly hers. He laughed, and the sound made her chirp up, he was happy? He smelled happy, and relaxed, and... Monica purred, licking his face. "Rick orgy Monica." She proclaimed, she had hunted good food, and he was happy.

"Later."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Sex."

"Food."

That made her hesitate. She did want to eat. She'd snacked on some of the smaller 'boar' she'd hunted so she could show her big kill to Rick. "Monica good?" She asked, ears perked and tail hesitant.

His expression faltered, he didn't look as happy. "Monica... good bad?" He made that face he did when there was a new word she didn't know that was important.

She stomped her foot. "Monica good good." She now proclaimed firmly, patting the bulky meaty delicious body of the food. "Monica hunt food. Rick eat food. Monica good good."

There.

Crossing her arms, she nodded firmly, pulling him towards boar food. "Rick fire. Good food."

Like the birds he had made for her back when he was trying harder to impress her. Rick might not be a good hunter, but he could make the food taste better. Which was perfectly fine for Monica, she could hunt for both of them, and she would be very happy if all their food tasted better.

Her soft-one reached up and patted her head. "Good Monica." He pulled himself up to give her a kiss.

She preened, of course she was good, and of course Rick would see it her way. She purred, hugging him close. She really wanted to do sex right now to work off the happiness with the good tingles, but food...

"I... did not expect boars to get this big."

The one who spoke was Tomas, he was impressed by Monica's hunt, and that was far as she needed to understand. She'd learn more words, but she could always clearly make out what they were really feeling with their scent and tone.

"It looks like it eats adults for breakfast." The older older softer softer one, Gabriel, also looked surprised, but not as much as the others. He was wary, always was.

"This... this size is not often found." Stinky one said, also full of surprise, stepping closer to touch.

"No." Monica growled at him, moving herself and Rick in the way. "Monica food, Rick food. No Victor food."

"She's doing the cute possessive thing again."

"We need to process this..." Rick said, pushing himself away from her hug, scratching his head and looking over towards the others. "I am so not strong enough for this... or experienced."

"We could help, sir, not our first hog, but..." The one to speak was the old-old-tough-plant-green one.

"Monica." Her soft-one took her paw and tugged. "We need to do things, erm... wait here."

She crossed her arms and flopped to the ground, crossing her legs. She knew Rick's fire would take a while, not that she liked waiting, but she'd tried eating it before the waiting was over and it wasn't as good. So she pouted and watched carefully. Maybe she'd learn the trick to it.

That made her curious. Maybe she could learn to make good food too? Then she could hunt and make it good before bringing it to Rick? But it felt like a hassle, and waiting so much was boring. Rick was better at waiting for things, he'd make the good food, and that was that.

Watching as Rick made the other tough ones move her hunt, Monica paid extra close attention. Her soft-one kept himself close to the food, protecting it. Which was good. There was the scaly shiny tough blue-one that wanted sex with Rick, but she was the one that was holding the long 'rope' thing to raise the food by the legs so that the sharp rock that were not-claws could be used to cut the food down into pieces Rick could carry.

Rick needed to be stronger so he could do these things himself. Monica sighed at that, he didn't move heavy stuff, he didn't kill. How could he get stronger otherwise? She fumed over it, he'd been becoming stronger as of late, only a bit, but the sex had been more fun. She really liked how he grabbed her, his hands always felt good all over her body, but especially on her soft big chest. Biggest around, another good thing.

Monica's ears perked, maybe that was it? Sex was like fighting, it felt better in some ways, but it was tiring and made her feel sort of like she had fought someone real good until her arms and legs were tired. Though her arms and legs had never ended up shaking like when she had sex, but that was... good? Bad? Something to think later.

Sex was clearly the way to make Rick stronger. Since he refused to kill or hunt or fight.

Hm...

Her tail lashed and nose twitched, she realized she'd napped a bit while waiting. The food was mostly there. The softer parts of the food were put in a hole. Monica didn't like that, maybe she'd eat those parts before Rick put them into the dirt. It's not like he ate those parts since he'd use the fire on the rest to make it good.

"We will go clean up, to remove the scent of blood." Blue-tough-one told Rick. The tone was one Monica liked, it showed Rick was above, important, strong. "The parasites though..."

"I can handle it, sir, I have spells to cleanse them and their byproducts." The pink Dia declared, clearly thinking she was good like Monica. She wasn't.

Monica approached Rick from behind as he was putting some pieces on the fire. She made sure to be soft, softer, hugging him and kissing his neck, inhaling his scent, purring and licking at his soft pale skin and leaving her own scent to mark him. "Rick good."

He was her soft-one. A soft-one that made tough-one's bow and fear. Even when he didn't know how to kill and was weaker than them.

"That you are, sir."

The purring stopped, and Monica looked at Dia.

The pink-one that now smelled of Rick.

Monica's arms tightened ever so slightly, though not enough to stop him from using the fire. Rick wanted sex with Dia, and wanted sex with Monica. But Rick was Monica's soft-one. But what bothered Monica was that Rick would be angry at her if she hurt Dia.

Even though Dia had been a bahron. And bahrons had hurt Rick. She was... good bad good? It confused Monica a bit, not that she'd let it bother her so long as Rick knew who was in charge.

Even if it still didn't make sense to her.

Burying her head on Rick's shoulder, she refused to think about it any further. She'd have good food, and then she'd have good sex and good orgy. Monica's legs shifted slightly, remembering that she had sex with Dia too.

She still wasn't sure whether that was good or bad. She did know sex with Rick wasn't just good but important, so she'd pay it no mind and focus on who really mattered.

Chapter 150 [???] [🍷]

Running a stable was one of the easiest jobs out there. The maidens took care of themselves, and so long as the Lord of Seledo didn't give some orders to send out the knights, most of their work was patrolling the roads surrounding the town. For Louis, it was a rather simple life he'd inherited from his father. All he really had to do was focus on making sure their health and dietary needs were in top shape, and from time to time he'd have to take in a feralborn filly and teach her the ropes.

Well, that would be the case normally. Ever since the feral rush, however, Louis had been particularly busy coordinating with the various reconstruction attempts. Those of the Centaur genus were highly sought after since they could quickly deliver most of the needed supplies back and forth.

So it was not much of a surprise to see a well dressed Mousegirl rushing up to him with a desperate look in her eye. The older man expected her to hand over a request for nails or perhaps even glass, insisting it was the most important thing in the world.

"Sir! Sir! A woman has come to meet you!"

Her words caught him by surprise. "A woman?"

"A human woman, yes!" She nodded emphatically. "The Lady is waiting for you in your office! She insists it is very important business!"

That jolted him right up. A Lady? But it could not be THE Lady, the local nobles had left when the ferals hit, and had yet to return. Perhaps this was one of the alleged women that had been rumored to appear in Astunes? Louis dismissed the diminutive maiden as he rushed towards the stables.

The moment he entered through the main doors, his gaze immediately went towards the new fillies working on packing up the grooming gear. They were pale and quiet, looking at him with startled eyes and slowly shaking heads.

There could be no louder signal that he should play things with extreme caution. Whoever this Lady is, she was important. "Rachel, I want you to stay outside for the time being." He whispered to his fiancée.

The coal black Centaur still put up a face was of protest, but she knew better than to complain over the preferences of nobility. "Best of luck. I will keep a sharp ear if you need me." She leaned down in a slight bow, her hands reaching for his hair and gently combing the mess of light blue into something more presentable. Her hooves clopping twice as she turned to usher the fillies out of the stables so as to ensure there would be no other eavesdroppers other than herself.

A slight pause as he straightened his shirt, approaching his office's door and opening it.

Stepping inside, the door closed behind him, and three things became apparent to him at the same time. First, there was a stuffiness in his ears that seemed to muffle out any sound within the room and from outside of it. Experience told him of a spell meant to dampen noise. The second was the scent. A floral sweetness that filled his lungs instantly, his whole body becoming too hot for his clothes.

The third was the woman sitting on his chair.

Naked and glowing with dark purple energies, her breasts hung heavy on her pale skin. Her hair had looked black for a split second, but a second look confirmed it to be a fiery red. The flames cascaded down her figure, framing those massive tits and deliciously pink nipples. Louis found his mouth dry and starving, his whole body shivering as thoughts were starting to become harder to put together.

There was some attempt at an alarm, caution, maybe even fear, but those large orbs of flesh called to him.

Without a sound, without so much as a whisper, the man walked towards the woman, feeling as if in a dream. His hands reached out for the hefty mounds of flesh, fingers digging into them. Their perfect softness pulled his hands further in, as if he could sink into them. He didn't know what was happening,

and the longer he touched, the more he realized he couldn't bring himself to care.

"Drink."

The command need not be said twice. Louis felt his knees fail him and his face fall at the level with the two most perfect breasts he had ever witnessed. He leaned forward, kissing the thick nipple and tasting the sweet aroma that filled his mouth like the sweetest of treats.

Something was wrong. His mind fought against the notion. What could be wrong about this? There could never be anything wrong with this.

CRACK

The sound came from behind him, but Louis couldn't care, not when he was tasting the most delicious nipple in the world. There were words, other words, but not ones relevant for this, for what really mattered. He licked and suckled, hoping for liquid that didn't come, yet satisfied with the taste all the same.

The human only cared about the other things when he had to move to make space. Dimly he realized Rachel had taken it upon herself to tackle the other breast with her own mouth. His body shuddered with waves of bliss that were becoming more intense with every suckle.

And then, horror of horrors, the perfect breasts pulled away from his grasp.

He moaned in complaint right as Rachel whinnied next to him. Their dazed eyes could not look away from the pair of tits, finding himself too weak to get closer.

"I have some things I will ask of you." The breasts spoke, and they nodded. "And you will give it to me."

"Please." Rachel begged, her whinny of need only vaguely drawing Louis' attention enough to realize she'd used her powers to turn her body into its more pleasing fully human shape.

"Anything." Louis added.

"Shhhh." The breasts called, hands caressed Louis' body, and his skin burned for the attention he was receiving.

The human realized all too quickly he needed to be naked, he had to be, he burned and throbbed, his every desire pushing out of him and screaming against the scratchy clothes. He could not bring himself to strip fast enough, fortunately Rachel was there to help him. The look on her eyes was glass, far away and distant, hidden behind a fog of impenetrable ecstasy.

The stranger's hand was caressing her head, and Louis realized this was the true pleasure. His focus shifted just in time to see the other hand reaching for his own scalp, and immediately everything exploded into white hot bliss. Fire consumed his every sense, boiling pleasure that removed all capacity for thought or desire. It was like nothing he had ever experienced and so much more than what he could have hoped for.

His body felt like it had all reached orgasm at once. But calling it such would be an insult, his nerve endings sang with a pleasure that seared itself into his mind. So powerful was the sensation that he barely even registered that he was madly thrusting into someone, fucking, somehow, it didn't matter, all was bliss.

"That's good." The breasts spoke, praising them, them? Louis thrust again, and Rachel moaned. "Let's start simple. I will be taking two of your girls."

"Yes! Yes!" Man and maiden nodded in agreement, delirious and feverish, entirely unable to stop.

"One more thing..." The hands caressing their heads clutched slightly, tightening its grip on their skulls. All it did was send more tingles through their bodies. "You will tell me everything you know about the merchant called Victor... and about the man who captured White Claw."

Nothing would bring them greater bliss than to tell the woman everything they knew.

Chapter 151 [Barry]

The room was dimly lit. Only a single streak of light made its way through the window and inside, leaving the area entirely gloom and dark. Barry stood near the entrance, peering inside and feeling the tension in the air as the guards at either side of him and at each corner of the bed were doing their best not to focus on him too hard.

In the middle of the bed lay a lone figure, her skin so dark that within the poor lighting of the room she appeared more a silhouette. The woman, the Warlock, breathed shallow breaths. There was a tremble to the sound with each exhale. Barry could feel the air wavering with every inhale. His eyes moved from Embla's mother towards the four maidens that sat each at a corner of the room. They didn't glow, but the young human could feel as if their bodies were emitting a force of some sort, a palpable pressure that was forcefully saturating the air and making his ears feel stuffy.

Not daring to step further in, he turned towards the door, stepping back outside and nearly stumbling against Embla's imposing figure. The Dark Lady had a stern expression. Barry had been growing able to read past the stony look, though. The maiden's entire body was tightened as if ready to jump into combat in a split second. The way her eyes kept bouncing back down to his shadow spoke of the reason for her tension.

"Why... did you let me see her?"

"You need to know the gravity of the situation." She replied, turning around so he could follow. "Because I cannot wait any longer. We will find a healer and I will need for you to ensure to bond her."

"What's... what's your plan?" He had to hurry his steps to keep up, trying to ignore the dozen guards standing at either side of the corridor as they moved to leave the over-sized oak-tree that was the 'infirmary' of the Court.

"There are several human settlements around the area that have been weakened thanks to the feral rush. We will find a healer from one such place."

Barry froze. "Are you going to attack a village?"

The words made Embla frown slightly. "Not if we can avoid it. Doing so would be not bowing to the Dragoness."

"Wait, Dragoness? What?"

Embla's shoulders twitched as her brows rose. An edge of humor came to her lips in the barest of upward twitches. "It means to cause ire from a foe that can end you with little effort. Our Court cannot afford to become openly antagonistic to the Kingdom."

"But... you have prisoners."

"And as far as the Kingdom is concerned, they are dead. Lost to a feral rush or in the wilderness. To them we must not exist, and if we do, it must be as something not worth the effort to deal with." Her lips thinned. "One day we may gain the strength for them to fear our retaliation."

"But you're strong. Crazy strong, and your mother... with both of you combined..."

"It would take them three royal knight units." The answer stopped Barry in his tracks. He noticed a dark glower in Embla's face, a dark shadow that certainly carried with it far more than she was letting on. "Four if they wish to ensure we stand no chance to retaliate."

The certainty with which she spoke her words made Barry's steps slow down. He couldn't read it from her face, but he was sure he could sense a great deal of concern from Embla. Reaching out, he grasped her calloused hand, meeting her dark gaze and squeezing slightly.

There was something in those troubled eyes. The maiden shook her head and turned away, her hand still within his grasp despite how easily she could

have pulled it away. "I will have to ask for your help in this."

"I'll lend a hand, though I'm not sure how I'd be able to do so."

"We..." Embla began to walk faster before coming to a complete stop. She turned to look at him. "...". Her focus turned to his hair before her scowl deepened further. "One of my women told me of a possible way for you to use your power to bond. It would make for the easier way to complete the mission if... done properly. But it would also put you at risk."

"How so?"

Taking his hand, the taller woman pulled his fingers, so they'd brush against her throat. "Break their bond and impose your own immediately after. Sex would be one of the easier ways to do this."

"Oh, su-." He blinked. "What!?"

"It allows the proximity to remove the collar and the emotional intensity needed for a human like yourself to create a new one. Most importantly, they wouldn't expect a bond to form under such circumstances or so quickly." Embla's grasp moved his fingers down her throat, shuddering as she left, his palm pressing against the mound on her breast over the layer of leather armor she wore. "Once bonded, you would need to impose your will on them. Insist they remain quiet and still, to not move, to not scream or raise alarm. We would be able to extract you discreetly afterwards."

The young man could only gawk at that proclamation of such a plan. "Are you... serious? You want me to seduce some girl so she can be kidnapped?"

"Freed." A harsh rebuttal. "They live in a world where they are little more than glorified objects. Some are treated as better objects than others, but as things all the same." A growl followed. "It is a life where service is all there is to be had, a maiden's value only going as far as their powers and their ability to bear human children." Her free hand touched her stomach and her brows knitted tightly, letting go of Barry's hand as she stepped ahead.

"Prepare yourself, Barry, you will be a key element in this plan."

"Embla, wait!" He called out, rushing forward and grabbing her hand again. "I'm not some sort of Casanova. Can't this be done with a maiden with some powers like Orion's using shadows to sneak inside or something?"

The woman's face became abruptly unreadable. She leaned forward and grasped his shoulders. "This is how you can help us, Barry." The woman lowered herself to a knee and leaving herself only looking slightly upwards at him. "We need you." Fingers brushed down his arms until they reached his hands, cupping them between her palms and grabbing tightly. "I need you."

The proclamation struck like a hammer. Barry felt his knees weaken under the weight of the words. He gulped. How could he possibly consider turning her down? It was just that... "I..." His lips tightened, the image of himself walking towards some unknown girl to try to get her to... he could only feel a knot of dread in his gut. "There are other ways I could help." There was no way in hell he'd be able to pull such a thing off, not when just looking into Embla's eyes was taking so much willpower. "I just don't think I'm meant for this."

She shook her head. "No, you are exactly who we need, Barry." Letting go of his hands, she stood back up to her imposing nearly three meters tall height. The softness left her features as she turned to look somewhere in the distance. "I will send some of my most trusted for you to bond."

"I don't-..." He gulped, going quiet.

"The time to hesitate is over, Barry." A quick nod. She raised her voice. "Consider it training for the mission."

Watching her march off, he felt as if the only thing missing from those words had been 'dismissed, soldier'. Scratching the back of his head and trying to fight down the emerging blush he'd been holding back this whole time, Barry became aware of exactly where the conversation had unfolded.

Out, in the open, within the Court and where dozens of others had been able to see, even hear, their shared words. A pang of nervousness and something else made its way through Barry as he noticed the hungry eyes that were focused on him.

Things felt like they were going to become complicated. He had the sudden urge to go speak with Lala.

Chapter 152 [Barry]

"I am confused. Is this some weird attempt of seduction? I'm not going to complain if it is, just curious."

"I-." Barry could only sigh and sit back dejectedly on the chair, rubbing at his temples. "Could we talk about it a bit more seriously? I don't know who else to turn to."

The shorter maiden raised her gaze from the metal filament she'd been holding onto. "You said you want to fuck me more often. I fail to see how that's not an attempt to get me all hot and bothered. My pants are already falling off. Feel free to finish the process." She wiggled her hips as she smiled up at him, the worn cotton trousers she'd been wearing slipping nearly to the edge of her rump.

For better and worse, though, Barry was seated opposite to her, so her face occupied the majority of his field of view. "I said that I don't think I can handle that many relationships."

"So don't make it romantic. Bam, in and out, in and out, in and out, someone cries, someone moans, naughty fluids all over. Done, presto, that's that." She shrugged. "The itch gets scratched, your balls get empty, the girl gets her bush ruffled." Lala paused for a moment, glancing back down at the filament, her glowing finger reaching out to caress the metal. "Speaking of bushes, I noticed you kinda kept gawking at mine, so I shaved it. It's a bit of a strange feeling, but I hope you'll like it."

Stuttering, his face lit up like a firework, Barry made a point to look away. "A-anyway, I don't think I like making things so... casual. Impersonal."

"Then don't? Just make it fun. Tell them about them having to earn the bush-scratching, ask them to romance you or impress you or whatever. Guys do that all the time, nothing weird about it." She didn't raise her gaze from her work as she rubbed at it slowly up and down, the dark gray material slowly

shifting into a bluer tone. "Maybe have her tie you up, maybe play some spank games, maybe stuff her butt, whatever you want to experiment with. Oooh! Maybe make her call you Papa, heard that one makes some men hard like a Quartzal's wing. Are you into that? Papa?"

"No, wait, stop, just... stop." He shook his head emphatically.

"But it's fun." Lala pouted, putting the filament down on the stained cloth once the blue had started to glow softly. "Do you know how having a guy just look at you like you're a Succubus makes a gal feel?" She leaned forward, a finger dipping into the neckline of her shirt and pulling it down. Barry saw her modest naked breasts underneath, unable to look away fast enough, and his reward being Lala's face lighting up with a smug grin. "Do you like them?"

"I... said I do, repeatedly."

"I still like hearing it." She raised a knee on to the table, raising herself until she was crawling on its hard surface, getting closer to Barry with every swing of her hips. Until their faces were so close, her hot breath tickled his lips. "Well?"

"...I like your breasts." He mumbled, and her smile lit up as her cheeks turned slightly red.

The maiden leaned forward, leaving a peck on his forehead. "Careful, I might ravage you if you keep talking all sexy like that."

"Work, you have work to do."

"And you keep interrupting me so you can vent how awful it is that you have maidens fawning over you and wanting to jump your bones." She rolled her eyes. "You're acting like this is strange."

"It is!" Barry replied. "For me it is, a lot."

"Here it isn't." Lala flopped on the table, using her elbows to prop her head as she stared at him with a bored roll of her eyes. "There's something like ten

maidens for every human male, and not all guys out there are open to having more than a handful." Her face stilled for a moment as she shook her head. "Look, I know 'wildling girls' get a fame for..." Another pause, then a chuckle. "Right, you're an otherworlder, almost forgot."

"It's hard, you know? I've..." He shook his head. "I've never been popular, or, well, desired like... that... I'm not that sort of guy. I... want a connection."

Lala hopped off of the table, dusting herself off and shrugging her shoulders a bit. "Then don't be that sort of guy."

"What?"

"You don't want to be a sex-nut, then don't be." She leaned against the table, looking at him critically up and down. "Though with those soft arms and round face of yours... oof, it's already a miracle no one's jumped you yet." She let out a giggle, turning into a laugh as Barry's face turned beet red.

"I'm... I'm trying to be serious."

"And so am I, Barry."

"Then what should I do?"

"You're asking a Doggirl to meow." Lala shifted, wriggling her hips as she moved to a workbench at the side. "Best I can offer is to help you split the problem into smaller parts. You want to bond these maidens, right?"

"Embla said I have to." He nodded along, absently glancing at the glowing blue wires she'd left at the original spot she'd been working at.

"And does it matter how you do it so long as you do it?"

"I... think not."

"Then you just need to find a way to get a maiden to bond you without fucking her." Lala tapped her chin. "Gee, if only there were some way to do that."

"Lala..."

"I know, I know, offworlder, you're not aware of all the details or customs." She shrugged her shoulders, bringing a clay jar and some vials to the table. "The way bonds are usually formed, over at the Kingdom I mean, is that the maiden gets her collar taken off, kneels, pledges allegiance, and gets her collar put on." Pouring the first vial onto the jaw, the green liquid sizzled softly as she began to drop the pieces of blue metal into it. "They need some training to get their own emotions aligned just right for it to work, but we've all escaped the Kingdom, we know how it works."

"And how do you... made bonds with the new collars?"

Lala grimaced slightly. "I don't know the others, it was different for each one, I just... stepped on them."

"What."

"Step on them. The human I'd been bonded to was a slaver, I kept stepping on him and stomping on him, riling myself up for all the horrible things he'd done, pushing to feel like I was in control of him... until the bond... clicked." Lala shuddered, shaking her head. "Now that I'm bonded to you, I can see there was something twisted about the whole thing."

A slight nod. "I'm at least sure I don't want to be stepped on."

"Well, there goes THAT item from my list." Lala sighed, shoulders slumping dejectedly as she reached into the jaw and pulled out the wires. They were now slightly yellowish, the glow having died down.

"What are you doing, anyway?"

"Hm?" She caressed the yellowish metal now that she'd dried it off. Slowly, she was starting to make it glow again. "Just making a batch of earrings to test some things on."

"What sort of tests?"

"Oh, you know, this and that." She chuckled, glancing at him with a smirk. "By any chance would you happen to have a favorite color?"

Barry felt like her eyes were focusing on his ears, and the urge to run began to surge within him. He pinned it down. "When you did the bond, what do you do?"

"It's just a concentration exercise." Lala replied simply. "You just focus on things that remind you of the emotion you want to feel. There're some tricks to it, personally I just like to make them into a chain."

"Chain... a chain?"

"Just put new links as you go." She paused, putting down the wires and turning to look at him. "It's really easy once you get used to it. All maidens in the Kingdom have to train into it to avoid accidents. Like this. I'd approach you and kneel." She did this, lowering her head, enough that the nape of her neck was exposed, though no collar was to be had. "I'd start thinking about Lady Embla, and how much I trust her to keep me safe. I'd focus on the trust as you'd touch my neck and remove my collar... pretend you're doing that." She gasped as Barry caressed her dark chocolate-colored skin, right near the hairline. "Then I'd move into something more specific about you, about how the Lady gave you an important position, how she trusts you in turn, and how easy it is to believe in that." Another slight shiver. She raised her gaze. "I'd look up at you and focus on how handsome you are with the light shining above, how much I want to put myself in your arms, how-."

She crossed the distance, silencing herself with his lips. The kiss came with her hands reaching under his shirt, caressing his chest and stomach. Barry hugged her close, and she sunk into his embrace.

With a deep breath, they took a step back from one another.

Lala's eyes fluttered open.

"And I'd be bonded to you." She spoke with a slight whisper, smiling from ear to ear, touch lingering on his hips. "Did that help?"

He blinked and nodded.

"I... think I have an idea."

Chapter 153 [Alice]

Alice glanced at Helga as the Valkyrie nervously shuffled towards the tray. "Please don't, just... take a seat."

The maiden turned towards the only thing they could sit on in the room: the light green cambroile sofa. She hesitated as she looked at it and then at Alice. "Yes, ma'am." Her proclamation was soft, almost passive as she approached, leaning to the side so her wings wouldn't become squeezed against the back of the sofa. She leaned slightly forward, trying to get comfortable with the extra pair of limbs shuffling over the armrest uncomfortably.

And Alice mentally berated herself for what clearly was the first screw-up. She made a bigger mental note to remain mindful of the maiden's wings. "Would you prefer a chair, or...?"

"No, ma'am, I'm perfectly fine... ugh, like this." Helga's smile didn't waver as she ruffled her wings a little until she'd found a comfortable position. "Most importantly, you wished to talk to me?"

"Yes, it's about the whole ownership thing." Better go straight to the point. "I'm going to take you in, I think, it's just that... I need to clear some things out first."

She'd apparently only focused on the first part of the proclamation. The maiden's face lit up with a wide smile. "I am honored, my Lady, I will do my best to-!"

"Before that, just... calm down." Raising her hands slightly, Alice took the best professional expression she could summon. She waited for Helga to stop giddily vibrating on the spot, but it looked more like the Valkyrie was about to explode into sunshine and rainbows.

So she quietly waited, keeping her expression calm and serene, smiling softly and meeting Helga's gaze until the maiden had started reasserting herself

over her emotions. A quiet minute of shifting and her wings bouncing lightly until the physical ticks, and only then did Alice speak up again.

"I would like to first reiterate I am an offworlder. That means I do not subscribe to many of the lines of thought that people have in this world." She reached out to touch Helga's warm hand, meeting her gaze meaningfully. "You will never be admonished for asking questions or stating your opinions. I don't know many things, and having clear communication with you is important. Is this clear?"

"Of course, my Lady."

"Call me Alice, please." She said. "I... don't want to consider this situation as me being your owner."

"But you would be, ma'am."

"I know, it's just that I don't believe in slavery." She replied. "I want you to know that if you ever wish to leave, I wouldn't stop you. I consider you a person, an equal."

Helga frowned. "But we're not."

"We are, it's just that the culture of this kingdom hasn't been very kind to maidens."

"But..." She hesitated. "May I ask a question, ma'am?"

Alice pipped up. "Yes! Of course, ask away."

"Would... you go insane if you were alone?"

That caused her to wince. "I know that the feral state is a very big concern for maidens, it's not what I meant."

"Ma'am, if... if I were to ever go feral, I'd kill those I love. I would likely even attack you. It's because of this that we need humans to serve, otherwise..." Her smile tightened, eyes glimmering. "I might look like a

human, but I'm not. No maidens are. If I were to be treated like a human, others would get hurt."

"I started on the wrong foot." Alice quickly put up a reassuring smile, grasping Helga's hand between her own. "I understand that you are a maiden, and that you have different needs than a human would. I just want you to understand that I firmly believe that you should have the same rights a human should have."

Alice shifted slightly as she saw her companion's troubled expression. The maiden was holding back a grimace.

"You... have something to say?"

"I mean no disrespect, ma'am, but... I don't think that would be fair."

"Why would you think that?"

"Rights are earned, we prove our worth, the ways we can help each other and the kingdom." Her head shook slightly. "And no matter how much I would like to, I cannot help other maidens avoid going feral."

"There are things called inalienable rights." Alice quickly replied. "They are rights that belong to every individual. The right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are among them."

"I am alive, and I am happy." Helga declared. "But I am a maiden, and I cannot live without having someone to protect me from myself. Am I not free for what I am?"

There was a long pause. The teacher closed her eyes and carefully considered her next words. "I want you to be aware that I do not desire to dictate or control your life." She grasped Helga's hands once more. "I want to consider this to be a... business arrangement."

"Ok."

The simple and easy nod she gave her was almost startling. "That's... it?"

"I do not mind if my services are as an official thing. That sort of was the point." A little squirm and she scratched her cheek, smiling slightly. "There might be some talk about how some nobleladies have a preference to share their beds with maidens, but you didn't seem to be that sort, ma'am."

"Definitely not that sort." Alice almost jumped, her hands pulled away from Helga as if she'd been touching a red-hot stove. "Nope, no, I am not looking for that sort of thing, at all."

"That's what I thought, ma'am." A cheerful energetic nod, relaxed shoulders. There was even a slight hint of amusement on Helga's smile. "It's a bit reassuring. It means I can focus on being your guard and guide."

"Yes, about that." A small cough to clear her throat. "I don't expect you to die for me."

"What do you mean, ma'am?"

"If or when danger comes, I don't want you to die. If things come down to it, running away is acceptable."

She straightened at that. "I would never leave you in danger's way. Ever." The harshness with which she spoke startled Alice.

"Could you at least promise you would consider... strategic retreats?"

"Of course." Another harsh nod and a look of determination. "I do not wish to die."

Sighing, Alice nodded, rubbing her wrists as she moved to stand up. Helga followed instantly after. The woman had a thing or two to complain about that gesture, but held it back. She'd have to rein things in and be patient about this. "I think this about covers the more important aspects."

"Does that mean...!?" A happy smile. "Will you let me serve you, my Lady?"

"Please call me Alice." She wriggled on the spot a bit. "And... yes."

Letting out a shout, Helga jumped slightly on the spot. Her wings burst outwards and spread out, nearly covering the room end to end as she proceeded to very quickly fold them back and lower herself to her knees right as the door opened in a burst of movement. Two startled maidens had stepped inside, swords drawn, looking wildly from side to side and then at Alice.

"Ma'am?"

"Everything's alright." She quickly replied. "Helga just got a bit excited over the good news."

Both maidens looked at the kneeling Valkyrie and her bright red face. Shaking their heads, they stepped back outside, the doors shutting with a soft click.

"Sorry." Helga whispered under her breath, squirming on the floor as her hands kept themselves firmly on her knees and her wings were trembling as they remained tucked tightly.

"Is this... that important to you?"

"I always wanted to serve a noble Lady." She was looking straight at the floor, her ears glowing red. "Could I-? Could we-?" A pause, her hand reached into her pocket, trembling slightly. "If it's not too much ask, could you use this collar?"

Helga pulled out a strap of leather, a dark blue that was so worn out the color was faded. Some of the spots had lost so much it was far darker. Alice hesitated as she saw this. "Wouldn't... people potentially mistake it for a black collar?"

"I don't mind if you don't, ma'am."

The teacher reached out to hold the collar, feeling the worn out edges. "Who... did this belong to?"

"My sister."

The weight of the simple strap felt like it multiplied itself within Alice's grasp. "I'll use this, then."

Raising her gaze, Helga quickly closed her eyes, exposing her throat to the chemistry teacher. A loud gulp followed as Alice reached around her throat, removing the clasp that kept the green collar in place.

"I hereby vow my life to you, my Lady."

She knew what came next, and though the words felt wrong, she couldn't bring herself to keep them unspoken. This moment was clearly far more important to Helga than she'd given credit. "I accept your vow. May you serve well... Helga." She latched onto the worn blue collar as she spoke.

Alice shuddered, a jolt running through her whole body from head to toe. Helga did the same, becoming very still as she kept her face looking at the ceiling of the room. "Thank you, my Lady." She whispered under her breath, a lone tear running down her cheek.

The teacher squirmed, feeling left on the spot, but not wanting to disrespect Helga's feelings. She quietly remained in place as the Valkyrie waited another minute before drying her cheek and moving to stand up.

Their gazes met.

Alice did not expect Helga's gasp, nor how her eyes widened in shock.

"What?" she asked, startled. "What is it? Are you alright?"

A quick bow. "No, it's nothing, my Lady." Her ears turning red once more. "The bond is just... stronger than I expected it to be. I..." She straightened up, swiftly turning around while avoiding Alice's eyes. "I will patrol the area!"

The maiden hurried out the door.

And Alice was left far more confused as to what had just happened.

Chapter 154 [Rick]

Rick had cooked the monster boar.

All of it.

Because Monica would not let anyone else handle the edible meat once it had been cut off from the carcass. She almost even complained over them throwing away the inedible (for humans) guts.

So it became Rick's job to be the one in charge of rotating slabs of meat on a stick over the fire until it was cooked at least enough for Victor to swoop in with a considerable amount of honey to lather the thing in and to have the twins disappear into their storage space. This way, they could make the meat last for longer.

The process took almost a full day. Especially with Dia pouring over the thing and using her powers to remove parasites and toxins from its flesh, a rather standard practice when the wild game reached a certain age and size.

The first three chunks had gone and vanished, with Monica being none the wiser. The fourth she realized something was up. Everything after that point meant she stuck to his side and glared at each chunk of meat as if daring them to turn into thin air like the previous ones had.

And as soon as her portion was done, she ate it. And the two portions after, and the two after that. And another one as they hit the road once more.

Half an hour later, Monica began to groan.

"What is it?" Rick already knew the answer. She was cupping her gut and her face was slightly green. "Feeling bad?"

"Bad." She patted her belly. It was ever so slightly less 'perfect abs' than she'd had the morning prior. "Hurt."

"You ate too much, dumb dumb."

"Rick bad." Monica glared him, the intent clear in her eyes. 'I know I overate, and it's your fault'.

He burst into laughter, earning a shove out of her that nearly knocked him to the ground. The feline walked with one paw firmly grasping the ruck-sack where she kept the remainder of HER meat, and the other on her tummy. Her gaze turned forward as she sulked on. Rick for the most part, held in the amusement as they moved, noting that despite the lack of a handsy cat, a handsy nurse had quietly taken the Sabertooth's place.

"My hand's never going to be free, is it?"

"Not if I can help it."

Not particularly disheartened, he carried on.

"People ahead." Mr. Gabriel interrupted the otherwise mostly idyllic walk down the dirt road. The centaur he was riding tightened her stance and moved slightly to the side of the road.

She was clearly intent on making a run for it with the old man if things got hairy.

It was a shift in the air, Rick noticed it quite easily enough. All of a sudden, the maidens had changed positions, moving towards the perimeter of the group. Even Dia tensed and held his hand more firmly, also looking just about ready to yank him towards her and out of harm's way.

The only two that barely moved were Monica and Lizzy. The reptile remained trailing behind Kat. Monica just snorted and let out a grumble as she walked ahead of Rick, effectively in the lead of the whole group.

As they moved forward, Rick caught sight of the group the older man had spoken of. It was a caravan of some sort, no less than twenty or so carts, most with improvised cloth roofs and at least forty or so maidens and some humans walking along. Each cart was being pulled by either a centaur or a

normal maiden, and Rick quickly noticed most of them looked like they were one missed meal away from collapsing.

Victor quickly walked ahead of Rick and Monica, waving towards the caravan as one of the maidens broke off from the security perimeter and approached. The woman clearly had seen better days. There were bags under her eyes and she froze the moment she'd spotted Monica. It was clear her focus was on the black collar the Sabertooth wore before it moved towards Rick and Victor.

"Hail." She straightened up. "What do you seek?"

"Hello Cadix, I'm Victor. I have wares if the people wish to buy."

"We have no coin, only trade." The light of recognition never made it through her soured expression. "We also do not allow blackies to join."

Rick took the turn to step forward. "I'm not sure what issue you have with Monica, but we'll just move ahead of your group and continue on."

"Traitorous feralborn bitches, that's what our 'issue' is!" Cadix flicked her hand forward, fist clenched tightly as she twisted it in place before she put it back on the hilt of her sword. Some sort of gesture Rick had not seen before.

"We have no ill will." Victor quickly spoke up, glancing at Rick and then at the rest of the group. "We will be on our way if you let us pass."

Cadix didn't have any complaints to add to that. She merely walked back to the caravan, speaking with various people along the way. And the whole thing slowed down, which made it easier for them to circle around and just continue down the road. Every step of the way, Rick could feel open glares directed towards Monica, some even at Lizzy. More than a few of the maidens even repeated the gesture Cadix had made.

And the feline had not cared a single bit, more focused on her aching tummy and that Rick wasn't too far off.

"What's up with them?" Kat whispered in a low voice as soon as the caravan was a good hundred meters behind them.

"Survivors." Victor shook his head. "Some from Seledo, even. I'd considered traveling with them, but caravans like these aren't the safest bet."

"They'd have surely killed us and taken our things along the way." One of the twins hissed under her breath.

"Where are they headed?" Tomas wondered. "Can't they just... stay in Seledo?"

"It's the law." Rick glanced at Dia, the pink-haired maiden squirmed a little.

"She is correct." Freya added. "Any who lose their home are to travel towards the nearest large city. If the local Lord deems it as a possibility, they will be given provisions, coin, and sent back. If not, they will be employed and given a place to stay in the Lord's city itself."

"That sounds like theft and abuse." Mr. Gabriel snarled as Rose kept clopping her way down the road from the side of the group.

"Dad said the law came about because of the raiders and Wildlings." Ginny muttered as she walked next to Kat. "After a feral attack, smaller villages are too weakened to be able to sustain those that can't pull their weight. Having survivors come could very well result in everything crumbling down as people fight for food or shelter when things break down."

"People who lose their homes in such a way have turned to banditry many times." The elf nodded, looking over her shoulder towards the caravan as it was slowly increasingly further away. "The Wildlings emerged out of exactly that. And it is something the Kingdom has little interest in fomenting."

"So Wildlings are people who just opted to live off the grid, huh. Cool."

"Wildlings are those who have forsaken the kingdom and its laws." Dia spoke under her breath, grasping Rick's hand a bit more tightly as her gaze

became lost in something only she could see. "Many Wildlings are run by sadistic monsters, trapping and torturing humans."

"That..." Tomas hesitated, glancing at Freya.

The Elf shook her head. "We once found a human who'd escaped a Wildling group that lived in the frosty peaks at the edge of the kingdom."

"Noah."

Ginny tensed, expression souring as her face lowered and looked towards the ground with clenched fists. "Papa adopted him, to keep him from having to be sent to Balet."

Rick frowned slightly, quite sure he'd heard of the name before. "I take things didn't go smoothly."

"It was the normal kind of drama amongst humans." Freya shook her head dismissively. "Major Huge had several people in the village that didn't get along well with the way he did things. Eventually it escalated, and after a feral wave had left the village rather tight in resources, the Baron sent Noah off along with the others that had lost their homes."

"The group was ambushed by ferals somewhere along the way."

With a strong shake of her head, Ginny sighed, azure claws relaxing as she turned to look away. She only hesitated as Kat reached out to pat her shoulder.

"At least the Baron's dead now."

Somehow, Rick got the impression the gesture had not been as reassuring as Kat had intended it to be.

Chapter 155 [Mark]

Mark walked down the sunny road, taking the chance to adjust the straps to the rucksack. Next to him, Shery walked while easily hefting five times the weight he was lugging. Plus Noah. The mouse had stopped struggling entirely. Gagged, blinded and bound, Mark still kept a watchful eye over her.

Brye had meant every word when she'd said he was on his own with the mouse unless he asked for help. The fox had remained near Noah every step of the way until the village, but now that they'd left the place, she'd vanished entirely.

"She'll be back in a day or so."

Shery's words startled him, Mark frowned as he glanced at the gray-skinned maiden as she thudded her way down the road. "What?"

"Brye always did this when given the chance. Just up and leaves for a couple days." A slight frown. "And no, I don't know what for. Never asked."

"And never will." He rolled his eyes.

"So long as it can't fuck shit up, why poke the Panthress?"

Mark just absently nodded, not really caring about the explanation and turning his focus towards Noah. The mouse's tan skin around her wrists was slightly redder, the maiden would've looked asleep if it weren't because her ears and ropey tail kept twitching every so often.

"I think we should take a break."

"At this pace we'll take a whole month just to get to Aubria."

"Yeah, not my fault you guys keep taking every side-route in the world." He snorted loudly, reaching out to grasp Noah and heft her off of Shery's shoulder.

The mouse squeaked slightly, inhaling sharply as he moved to bridal carry her towards the nearest tree. She grew tense, but otherwise didn't move, waiting until Mark put her down against the tree before she relaxed slightly.

"You plan on giving her food?" Shery asked casually, dropping the sacks to the ground and grasping the heavy wooden club she had for a weapon as she moved towards the forest.

"Might as well, her stomach's been rumbling for a while now."

"Don't untie her feet at least." The maiden replied, stepping away and into the foliage. "Will check the area."

A slight nod, Mark focused on the remaining maiden. His hand reached out and grasped at the edge of her ear, tightly enough she winced. "I'm going to remove your gag. You will not bite." His command was met with a nod.

"Don't scream either, or you'll regret it." Another quick nod.

With the ritual out of the way, he used his free hand to slowly remove the wire and cloth gag that had kept her mouth tightly covered and shut. She'd slobbered most of it, not that he hadn't expected it.

"Water." She gasped as soon as she'd spat some of the flavor out. "Please." Her voice was raspy and dry, a slight squeak of a cough following it.

Keeping one hand on her ear, he reached for the water-skin and pulled it closer to her mouth. Noah drank greedily, barely breathing as she took every drop until Mark pulled it away from her. A slight complaint left her as he did so. The human knew that he couldn't afford to have her being at her top shape. So now that he was 'in charge' of Noah, he'd opted to keep her supply of water and food tight. She'd survive, that he was sure of, she'd just not be able to be at her best.

Reaching into the pouch on his belt, Mark pulled out a familiar purple berry. Brye had said its name several times already, but he hadn't really bothered to remember it. He slowly moved the berry close to Noah's mouth, watching her nose twitch as she sniffed. "Do you want to eat?"

Blindfolded, Noah's mouth closed, and she gulped, cheeks flushing. "I..." She flinched as Mark's fingers on her ear tightened slightly. "No."

"So you don't want to eat?"

"I..." She gulped, and leaned forward, mouth opening as he very carefully placed the berry on her tongue. She closed her mouth, not chewing, becoming still as if unsure how to proceed.

"Chew."

She did, a sharp gasp and a quiver, goosebumps trailed over her body as she flushed. Her naked body squirmed as she swallowed. Opening her mouth again, she breathed heavily. "Still... hungry."

Mark pulled a second berry, pressing it against her lips. The blindfolded woman didn't wait this time, taking it in, chewing, squirming, and swallowing. Her tanned skin gained a touch of the blush all over, her thighs tightening against one another as she began leaning forward.

With her hands still tied to her back, Noah's face pressed against Mark's chest, inhaling sharply. She sought to press her exposed small breasts against him, but he moved out of the way so she'd fall face first on the dirt.

Not waiting a moment, he straddled her hips, feeling her tail lashing underneath, and worked to untie one of her hands. He quickly held her ears firmly, watching her squirm and gasp as he did. "Just get it over with."

Noah nodded quickly, moving the freed hand to her front, raising her hips and putting her fingers to work. The movement of her body as Mark straddled her ass made Mark all too aware of the position they were in, doubly so when her tail whipped from under him and wrapped around his waist.

The human inhaled sharply as Noah ground her ass against his crotch.

He pulled away immediately after, letting go and standing up before his libido opted to step in. The maiden didn't stop as he did this, moaning into the dirt and thrusting her fingers into her needy sex.

"If it bothers you having her like that, you could give her some different food."

Mark almost jumped out of his skin when the tall gray skinned woman had spoken. She looked at Noah and then at him, pulling out a couple blue berries from the pouch she was carrying and taking them as a snack.

"I know that." He replied harshly, growling and moving nearer to Noah. "This is part of her punishment." With a huff, he crouched, grasping her ears and pulling her head slightly so she'd be staring up at him. He proceeded to remove the blindfold.

Noah winced from the light, pupils shrinking into pinpricks, she closed her eyes tightly and looked back down. Not that Mark let her, pulling on her ears once more until she was turned to face upwards. Her hands plunged into her pussy, her breath short and trembling, and a moan escaping every other second.

Waiting for a very long second, Mark stared at Noah until she slowly opened her eyes again, meeting his gaze. Slowly, he pulled out another berry, pressing it against her lips. "Swallow."

Noah opened her mouth, taking the berry, barely chewing on it as she swallowed again. Her pupils dilated, a breathy moan escaping her, hand working more fervently against her sex. The scent of her arousal was becoming easier to notice, as was the wet rhythmic sound of her fingers.

"Can't say you're doing anything new, though usually the girl gets some cock stuffed up their cunt along the way." Shery only quirked a brow as she glanced at him.

"I'll tell you if I ever give a shit about what others do." He let go of Noah's ears, stepping away from the maiden as she kept furiously masturbating.

Snorting in amusement, the gray maiden popped another berry, looking at the bound maiden as Noah trembled and went all the harder. "I think I'll have a round with her later."

"No."

The brief brusque response made Shery freeze, turning slowly to stare at Mark with a scowl. The air of neutrality about her was gone. "You might think getting her horny is punishment enough for what she did to you, but I'm still due some payback."

"I don't care." He stated flatly. "You had plenty chances, now I'm in charge of that rat. Not you."

"And what if I do it, anyway?" She snorted, stepping forward and shoving him back ever so slightly.

"I won't try to stop you." Mark replied. "But if half the shit Brye's said is true, I could very well end up being the one in charge of you once I meet your 'Boss'."

It was like a slap, the maiden stopped cold. Her gaze turned towards Noah, the mouse too lost in the fog of arousal, and then at Mark. "And what do you plan to do to me then? It doesn't look like you've got the guts to do half the shit Noah had done to me."

"You saved my life. Once." He stepped closer. "Is getting some extra kicks into that rat worth me forgetting about that?"

Shery hesitated, once more looking at Noah and then at him. There was a sharp look on her eyes as she took a step back. "Alright." She finally proclaimed, nodding at some thought that she'd appeared to latch onto. "I think I'll just call it a day, Noah died back at the waterfall. Mouse's yours, do whatever."

She turned towards the sacks to pick out some rations from the sacks.

And Mark realized there were a pair of eyes still looking at him sharply. Noah, flushed and panting, had not stopped focusing on him the whole time. It gave him a slight shiver, but he just suppressed it.

Better blind and gag her again once she was done working the berry's effects out of her system.

Chapter 156 [Captain Eustine]

Captain Eustine walked down the corridors of the 'palace' with a sense of inevitable doom and tedious hassle. She felt her upper lip stiffen as she noticed that the usual Drow guard had been replaced with Dark Elves from Lady Embla's personal unit. She could understand the desire to protect this human pet of hers, but there were surely better uses for these maidens than to stand around a room and do nothing all day?

There were still predatory ferals within the Court's safe zone! How was one human worth more than the increased security for everyone!?

"Captain."

The Dark Elf gave a lazy salute to her fellow, and Eustine could only stiffen her upper lip, returning the salute in turn. "I've come to meet... the human."

"Yes, the Lady gave clear orders." A firm nod.

The following silence had been meant for Eustine to use and step into the personal chambers the human was currently inhabiting. She, however, didn't. Her eyes glared at the wooden door as she inwardly desired to blow the whole palace into one gigantic fireball.

"He is not like the humans from the kingdom." The comment startled her slightly into looking at the guard who'd spoken up.

"And I should take that comment how exactly?" The maiden's cheeks lit up slightly. "You... should remove your collar."

Eustine stiffened. "I will do that when I deem it adequate."

The two guards shared a look and a knowing smirk. There was something there Eustine was not privy of. She scowled. "I will have you know, the human I am bonded to is not a prisoner."

"We are very aware, ma'am." Both nodded quickly, showing proper discipline and stiffness as they did.

Content on having seen at least that much, Eustine took the impulse and knocked on the door twice. Inwardly she wished there would be no answer, but she could easily pick up on the rushed steps and the door swinging open.

She'd seen the human from a distance, but this was the first time seeing him face to face. The first and most immediate word that came to mind was 'fairer nobility'. The man looked like he'd been plucked out of some myth of a fair man who'd lived in lavish opulence and excess. His skin was pale, and freckles adorned his face. There was a slight homely plump edge to his features that spoke of having never starved, and his fiery red hair was lustrous and vibrant in a way that should only be possible for someone born out of a fire-wielding maiden.

"Captain Eustine."

The man spoke with slight surprise and that little edge of breathlessness that betrayed a life devoid of physical strain. Though she turned her focus elsewhere. The young man was actually wearing clothes, a set of black pants and a sleeveless shirt. His arms were thin, unblemished save a freckle here and there.

It presented a soft allure Eustine could see herself enjoying under different circumstances. "Mister Dodson." She reminded herself to greet back, nodding at him and noticing his outstretched hands. "Yes?"

"Your weapon."

Eustine almost blushed in embarrassment, had she really forgotten to remove her weapon? Was she that wary of the human? She berated herself as she removed the two swords from her belt and handed them to him.

Seeing Barry nearly fall from the sudden weight he was holding added a tiny amount of amusement. She eyed him as he placed the two sheathed blades next to the door and closed them behind her.

"I hope you don't mind the dim lighting." Barry spoke hurriedly. "I heard Dark Elves are more sensitive to light than humans, so..."

"I don't mind." Eustine took a look around the room, she spotted the royal-sized bed and was about to note how odd it was that it appeared to be littered with what looked like excessive pillows, blankets, and some other items she couldn't recognize, when her attention was drawn to the table between herself and the bed.

"I was wondering about how that worked, though I was never given much of an answer." The young human had moved towards the table. It was small, enough it could only really had enough room for three to eat tightly side by side. "Here."

"What?" Eustine looked at the table, the white blanked covering it, and what appeared to be pillows underneath.

"It's a massage table." Barry said, patting the lumpy mantle. "It's meant for you to lay face down on, and I give you a massage."

"You give me a massage." Well, the guards were certainly right that Barry did not follow the local kingdom-bred standards.

"Yes." A nod and a slight blush, and Eustine abruptly realized she couldn't see his aura.

Frowning, she stepped closer, and the young man froze nervously. Her eyes lingered over his figure. "Are you ill?"

"I've... heard that a lot. I'm alright."

He didn't look it. His aura was so tenuous, weak, barely even there. And Eustine couldn't detect any enchanted items on his person that might have been suppressing it either. Was this what a pure-blooded human looked like? It certainly explained why the Lady coddled the young man, he looked as if a stiff breeze could knock him over.

Better get back to the matter at hand. "So do you plan to bond me after you've given me a massage?"

"I just... wanted to talk first." He gestured at the table. "You're stiff, and I just think that it would be better to get to know each other before we decide on the bonding."

His excessive softness was not something Eustine was enjoying. Should she press on and just get done with it? "I'd rather not waste time."

"Please?" He asked, holding onto a bottle of what appeared to be oil. "Have you ever gotten a massage from a human? Is the novelty not worth at least some patience?"

He had a point there. Eustine shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. She reached up to the straps of her leather armor and didn't waste any time in stripping all the way down to the nude. Lady Embla hadn't really left much room in the interpretations of her orders, something about training him.

Seeing how the young man had turned his back towards her and made an obvious effort not to turn her way, Eustine had to wonder if the Lady was going about things the right way. "Face down?"

"Yes." Barry nodded even if he didn't turn to look her way. "You... have a sheet there."

"For what?"

"Covering up."

Eustine rolled her eyes, just moving towards the table and doing her best to lay down on its surface. It wasn't exactly something she'd experienced before, the pillows were arranged under the mantle in such a way that it felt as if she were sinking into it. And she discovered a hole for her face, convenient. "Like this?"

She held back a huff as she felt a mantle covering her ass. Her focus moved towards just closing her eyes and pushing herself to will this whole thing to

come to an end.

The Dark Elf shuddered as she felt something warm pouring on her back. It was the oil, only a little of it. "Please do relax." His hands pressed against the liquid and Eustine had to stop her thoughts for a moment as she felt how soft his hands were.

"Sure."

His fingers remained on her shoulders, his touches weren't strained, or at least she didn't feel like he was straining himself. He was lathering her back with the warm oil, a soft scent of... pine-needles? It was subtle, enough so she was sure the human himself wasn't able to pick up on it.

"Do you happen to know why Dark Elves are called that?"

The question stirred her thoughts. "It's what we've always been called." She muttered, the silky smooth sheets around her were drawing her in. "Drows shift into Dark Elves if they're strong, and if Dark Elves become strong enough, they become a Dark Lady."

"And Warlocks?"

"The Lady said that it is only possible if a Dark Elf fulfills a ritual of sorts, a very dangerous one." She muttered, rattling off the old memory.

"Do you think the Lady is strong?"

"Lady Embla? She's our strongest fighter." Eustine sighed, feeling the hands moving their way down from her shoulders. Barry wasn't going to be undoing the knots she could...!

A sharp gasp followed as something cold and hard pressed down on her back. The coldness cause for greater alarm than any actual discomfort or pain. It took half a second to warm back up though, and Eustine gritted her teeth for another second to push herself to relax. The metallic object was pushing down on a particularly sore spot on her back, there.

"Just relax." Barry whispered, putting more of his weight into it, his voice coming out as a strained grunt. "You were saying about the Lady being strong?"

"She's our Lady after all, she leads the Court." Eustine grunted in turn as she could sense her body going limp right as Barry moved the pressure slowly further up. "Oh, that's..."

"Have you ever gotten a massage?" He was slightly out of breath, though not slowing down. "It feels like you have more knots than a tree."

"Massages are for..." A sharp breath as his hands moved down her spine, shifting slightly and holding her waist for a moment. Eustine hesitated, sensing his fingers dig into her skin in a way that was definitely for something else, right before he moved them back up and to her shoulders. Had she imagined it?

"Yes?"

"Maidens don't need massages."

"You're tough, right." Barry's hands were moving down her back again, carefully and softly caressing every scar and curve of her muscles as if memorizing every inch of her. "Very strong." His voice lowered again to a whisper, his hands moving back down towards her waist.

His fingers returned to her waist, this time only temporarily, shifting slightly further down towards the cloth covering her ass. Eustine tensed again, but only until his fingers left her body and reappeared on her calves. For a fraction of a second she'd expected something else.

"Not necessary." She nodded slightly, breathing to relax back into the soft sheets, the lingering scent of pine feeling slightly stronger, her body slightly warmer. "We can survive without it."

"True." Barry acknowledged. "Maidens like you can just about survive anything. It's why Embla trusts you so much."

The way his voice had shifted as he spoke caused a slight swell of pride inside Eustine's chest. She nodded as his fingers moved to the other calf. "That's right."

"And... and you trust Embla, right?"

"With my life."

A slight silence followed, and Barry's hands moved up to her thighs. She drew a sharp breath as his fingers began to squeeze at her muscles, the touch might not felt intentionally erotic, but her body was certainly feeling that way.

"You have very pretty skin."

The offhanded comment made her pause. "You're joking, right?"

"No. The gray color is exotic in a way I hadn't expected." His fingers were definitely lingering close to her ass. "And..."

Frowning, Eustine turned around, pulling herself up enough to move and lay face up on the table. Her gaze locked onto Barry's blush and the way he'd pulled his hands away instantly. She noticed how he looked at her, how he couldn't avoid staring at her breasts, at her bush. The pride from earlier grew slightly.

"Go on." She declared, laying back down though not looking away. "What else do you like?"

"I, um, I..." He blushed harder, looking upwards. "I was supposed to, um, this isn't going how I expected it to."

Eustine quirked a brow. "And what were you imagining would occur?"

"I... wanted to guide you, a bit? Kinda, just walk you through the emotions." He said. "And then see if it was enough to trigger the bond."

"How would you hope to do that while I am..." Eustine's eyes widened as she reached up to touch her throat. The collar was gone. Alarms rung on her

head, she whipped to look around, and found the strap of leather on the bed. "I didn't notice it?"

"You might have been a bit too relaxed." Barry muttered, finally having gathered the courage to meet her irate eyes. "If... since this... is sort of a mess, would you let me try one last thing?"

"One last thing before I fuck you the normal way and hopefully be done with this?" She scowled at him, holding back the glower.

"Y-yes." He stepped closer, reaching out towards her. "It's... um, it's the thing that Lady Embla enjoys the most."

That perked Eustine's interest, though she didn't stop the frown. "What is it?"

"She... talked about freedom." His fingers moved to slowly press her shoulders back onto the table. His expression serious as he met her gaze with a sudden seriousness that felt out of place in his otherwise soft features. "She talked about how she never really noticed how maidens are always in a cage of their own making, that... everyone grows blind to the shackle they wear every day."

His fingers brushed against her throat, and Eustine drew in a sharp breath at the ticklish sensation. Barry's hands traced gentle lines up and down either side of her neck, making it all too apparent she was entirely devoid of her collar.

"Lady Embla said that she loves this the most. The reminder that she's free now, that she'll never have to wear a choker ever again." The image became vivid in Eustine mind's eye. Her neck bare, devoid of the slight tightness that would always remind her of its existence every time she strained herself during a fight or training. "Lady Embla kept saying that I freed her from it, that she'd never truly felt like she was herself until she could walk without it and not fear going feral."

"That's... that's nice." She agreed softly, closing her eyes and focusing on those fingers.

"Don't you want to feel that every day? Feel this?" His touch was becoming bolder, touching her neck and shoulders. "Why wouldn't a beautiful powerful woman like you want it?"

Why wouldn't she? Why ever wear the collar ever again if she could go without it entirely? Had she ever truly been devoid of it?

In that moment, in that instant, Eustine felt naked and exposed in a way she couldn't even understand. The emotion welling within her and growing until her cheeks began to grow hot.

A sharp gasp followed, goosebumps running down every inch of her skin. Something within her clicked, and the realization hit her like as if she'd been struck by lightning. She wanted this, she'd always wanted this. This... this... liberation. The emotion swelled and burst as an odd giddy smile appeared on her lips. When was the last time she'd ever felt so... so...

Was this hope? Joy? She opened her eyes and looked at Barry, truly looked at him, for the first time she realized what the Lady saw in him. Not a weak human or meaningless symbol.

He was to be their wings.

Chapter 157 [Barry][👉]

No sooner had Barry finished the words that the maiden's eyes had snapped open and looked at him with a smile that sent all sorts of different shivers through him. She moved to sit on the table, not looking away from him for an instant as her fingers reached up to his hands.

"I've never felt like this." She declared with a slight nod, moving his hands from her neck down to her breasts.

He pulled away. "I... sensed the bond, so that's that, I guess."

Eustine's expression went from slightly eager to disappoint, whatever bubble she'd entered had popped and the smile that had crept on her face was gone. The scowl from earlier returned. "Why?"

"Why... what?"

"Why would it have to be over?" She looked at him with a calculating serious look. There was something going on in that head of hers, because she proceeded to nod as if in self-affirmation of some idea. "My orders had been to have sex with you, I don't see why this would be over after just some foreplay."

"I'd... not intended it as foreplay." Barry took half a step back. "I really really didn't. I just wanted to test making a bond exactly without it being... well, that, and whether it was possible to do it quickly, you know, for the mission, and all that." He gulped. "I definitely think Lady Embla will understand if things stay as is, no need to push yourself."

"I'm not, I want to fuck you." The proclamation was bold and straightforward, her gaze slightly serious. "Don't you want to fuck me too? I'm mostly sure you were trying to grope me back then."

"Again, a misunderstanding."

"So you were lying about me being beautiful?"

The way she pushed her chest forward snatched his gaze as if magnetized. She wasn't as stacked as Embla, but her proportions were certainly generous. "No! No, I most certainly was not." Barry realized his mistake when he noticed her smirk.

"Then what's the problem?"

Try as he might, the words failed him. Barry opened his mouth to speak and Eustine hopped off the table, stepping closer to him. That alone made her body shift in ways that caused his eyes to return to her curves. He could only gulp as she took another step. "The bond is... probably messing with you. I mean, I didn't-."

He realized he reached the wall, his back pressing against it as her hand moved forward, pressing against his chest. The Dark Elf leaned closer, lowering her voice to a whisper. "A pretty face like yours? If I were raiding a village, I'd take you and leave you chained up in my room so I could have my way with you. All. Day. Long." Her hand moved down under his shirt, her touch was oily. "I'd probably have to fight some of my subordinates to keep them away from you."

Though that did answer his previous question, Barry's alarms were ringing quite loudly. He attempted to step to the side, and she now properly pinned him against the wall, her other hand touching his stomach, there was a tingle in her caress, one that flared heat within him.

"No spells." Barry quickly spoke, breath growing ragged as Eustine froze.

"It's just a little something to enjoy-."

"No spells." He repeated, gulping for air. "I don't... I don't want to lose myself."

"I'm not some charmer, Barry, it's only to make sure you're nice and hard." Her hand dipped under the edge of his pants, finding his throbbing cock and

wrapping her warm fingers around it. Eustine cooed. "Though I think you have a point, there's no need for spells. You want this?"

"I'd... rather stop."

"Why?" She squeezed tenderly, slowly stroking him as she did. Barry's knees became weak, though Eustine was more than happy to hold him in place with her other hand, leaning in to kiss his neck. "Do you really want me to stop?" Her oily slick fingers were causing shivers all over his body, her touch on his cock firm as she pumped him. "Just tell me to stop, and I will."

Barry drew a breath and moaned immediately after. His attempt at vocalization faltered and his hips thrust slightly into the maiden's touch. Eustine used the hand pinning him to the wall to pull him closer instead, kissing him in full and stroking him harder. She was working him up, aggressively invading his mouth with her tongue and overwhelming him with her dominant touch.

It was impossible to hold back anymore. "More." Barry whimpered slightly, breath short and knees bucking as he couldn't really see the sense in stopping anymore. The moan left him and he felt himself reaching the edge. A whine of complaint followed as Eustine gripped his shaft more tightly, abruptly stopping his ability to achieve release. "Wha-?"

"Not yet." The arm hugging him moved lower, gripping his ass firmly. "I want you to say it again."

He had no clue what she was talking about, his hands clenched into fists, despite the tightness, she was still stroking him, still teasing him with an orgasm he couldn't quite achieve.

"You said I'm beautiful."

"You are!" A short grunt and raspy breaths, eyes tightly shut and thrusting into her hand. He was so close...

"I want to hear it."

"You're beautiful." Breath drawing out in a whine, he clenched his jaw.
"You're sexy, I-."

"What? What do you want?"

"I want to cum." He grasped at her shoulders, finding the strength to pull her into a hug. "I-."

"Then cum for me."

The quick pumping action sped up, her lips claimed his own, and she released his cock just enough for him to finally find release. With his throbbing cock exploding within her grip, Barry moaned into her mouth and eager exploratory tongue. His jizz served as lubricant, coating her fingers as she did not stop stroking him, earning louder moans and pulling him closer into her oil-slick embrace.

Gasping loudly, he collapsed, heaving for air and feeling his face burn bright red. The Dark Elf slowly eased him to the floor without much complication, her face practically glowed with a pleasant smile, pulling her white-coated hand up and giving it a slow lick. "Tasty."

Barry's face might as well have turned into a nuclear reactor, he looked away, feeling the blush running down his chest and all over. A shiver coursed through him when she finally let go of his ass and paused, glancing at his cock analytically as it slowly softened. "You've had a long day, haven't you?"

"You... this is the third one." He muttered under his voice. "Really didn't think it'd lead to sex again."

"I think you're too cute for that." She replied, kissing his flustered cheek. "Do you... need anything?"

He shook his head. "I'll catch my breath in a minute."

"If you ever want more, call for me."

A slow kiss, this time gentle, taking her time to taste his lips before pulling away. Eustine shot him a hesitant look as she stepped away, clearly wanting to stick around. But since Barry didn't speak up, she took her leave. It left him feeling wrong, almost used, he could only sigh.

The human just remained slumped there for a very long quiet second.

His shadow shifted, and Orion emerged. The black-haired Hound regarded him with that ever-present impassive look before leaning down and picking him up into her arms. Barry complained, but she paid little attention to that, carrying him over towards the massage table and deftly dropping him there.

Orion looked at him, at his naked body, and Barry quickly moved to cover what little dignity there might be left. Her clawed hands stopped him, soft puffy pads that pushed his hands against his chest. "Orion?"

Acknowledging her name, she just looked at him as she leaned down, licking his stomach. There was a slow methodical touch to the gesture, while his hands remained pinned, she moved down, licking his hips, then his thighs, finally moving to lick his cock. He twitched, and Orion's tail wagged exactly once before she moved to keep licking her way back up. She licked his chest, tickling him with her breath, and then licking his shoulder and the side of the neck Eustine had kissed.

Slowly, she moved to hop onto the table, straddling his hips.

She laid her head against his chest. "Barry."

He hugged her, and her tail wagged exactly once a second time.

Barry did his best to ignore how nice and warm Orion's naked body felt against his own. One of her canine ears was laying firmly on his chest, the other stood pointed at the door.

His hands wrapped around her hips, and Orion let out a small sigh, relaxing further into him.

"I really need to find a better way to do this."

Chapter 158 [Alice]

Alice glanced into the library, the only library, Baroness Aeris Flirlai's library. It was small and cozy. It had two tables and three chairs. It was a perfect place to sit in and just calmly read, watch the hours melt away. The Baroness put it to use from time to time, though most of the rest of the time she spent up at her office or somewhere else.

But what was eating at Alice was that the library was being occupied by the wicked hag and her cronies. The three oldest women in the group of offworlders, Miss Dodson, and two others who Alice had not bothered to remember their names. The three weren't even reading, just chatting away.

Taking a step away before she could be spotted, Alice berated at herself. She knew the trio had set-up shop in the library to mess with her. And though she'd have normally not bothered to worry over it, this lethargy that had taken over their lives in this outwardly idyllic middle-of-nowhere village was sapping her far more than she thought possible.

There was just too much time to think about anything and everything, and it was all too easy for Alice to get lost in thought.

"Is everything alright, my lady?"

"Would you happen to know any spells that could make people want to vacate an area?"

The Valkyrie perked up. "I do have a spell that unleashes a blinding flash of light."

"Not exactly what I was looking for." Alice shook her head, walking down the corridor and away from her defiled sanctuary. "Do you know where the other girls are?"

"As of right now, the only group of offworlder women I am aware of are taking classes in etiquette from the Baroness."

"Just..." A slight frown. "I could've sworn you've been beside me all day. How did you find this out?"

"I overheard the Baroness' personal knights talking over coordinating guard rotations with the maidens protecting the ladies for the day." Helga straightened her shoulders and threw a smile that could have illuminated the whole building. Her wings certainly ruffled and seemed bigger for it.

Nodding a little, Alice could only really acknowledge the young woman was far more attentive than she sometimes appeared. "Let's go take a look, then." Anything better than just walking the same cobblestone roads for a hundredth time to try to work around the feeling of everything having slowed down and being wrong in some fashion or another.

Village life did not agree with her.

They reached the 'second dining room' and found it being closely guarded by no less than six maidens, three of which sporting the pale blue armor that made Alice's skin tingle whenever she got too close to it.

Helga moved ahead of Alice in a flash. "My lady seeks to observe the lesson."

The only reaction they showed was a stiff nod. "Certainly, one moment."

The tallest of guards stepped through and inside. Ten seconds later, she stepped back outside and opened the door, gesturing for her to step inside. Not Helga, though, which appeared to be protocol, so Alice just held back from adding a comment and followed through.

The dining room had been cleared out of the large table, only the chairs remained. A dozen, each occupied by one of the former students or parents. The women of the offworlder group, and looking just about bored out of their minds. She quickly noticed the half-glazed and unfocused eyes and the distant looks. It seemed things were as tedious here as she'd expected them to be.

"Miss Alice, welcome." The Baroness gave a slight courteous nod at her, the only perked up smile in the entire room. "We were talking about the proper

steps to take in addressing members of the noble houses by their rank."

She smiled slightly. "Just bow and do that thing with the bending knees. They'll be slobbering over you, anyway."

That earned a slight chuckle from the room. The baroness didn't quite look that amused, but nodded slightly. "A lady is to keep her wits about her, no less when single." Her gaze was sharp as she turned to the others. "Never accept invitations alone. Always bring at least one other human with you. Not doing so can be seen as an... invitation in itself."

A rather uncomfortable memory bubbled up for Alice, her lips thinned a little. "Have you talked over owning maidens yet?"

"Considering that aspect of military service will not be of too much importance, I was reserving only a small amount of lessons to it." There was a slight defensive tone in her voice, only seeming to notice the myriad of reactions the others present had. "Though I take it, this is an important topic to some of you."

"Why wouldn't it be? Don't we get to trust our lives to them at the end of the day?"

"Indeed, though I-." She stopped herself, taking a slight step back and crossing her arms as she tapped at her chin. She smiled. "You have had a chance to witness bonding ferals and have the potential to bond a maiden yourself. Maybe you could have some insight to share?"

"I-." Suddenly in the spotlight, she hesitated, but regained her train of thought rather quickly. "They're people." She said this and scratched at the back of her head. "Don't blind yourself to what they are, focus on who they are."

"All very wise words." The Baroness nodded. "Let us consider a hypothetical situation. You own two maidens, support types, very poor choices in combat. And you are going to be sent to an area that is expecting a feral rush. Do you sell them to acquire a maiden that could more definitely protect you? Head out with the two maidens? Or disobey orders from your superior and refuse to head out?"

Alice's head swiveled and focused on the woman in a snap. "I would put the maidens that could die in the field under the care of a close friend and head out without any maidens to protect me."

That caught the woman by surprise. Her eyes widened slightly. "That would be suicidal."

"If my superior is aware of my unwillingness and inability to operate without the ones I've come to trust as my partners, then the responsibility of the resulting events would be on their shoulders," she said.

"And why would you be unwilling or unable to operate?"

"Because a maiden isn't some hammer that can be replaced by any other hammer." Alice pointed with her thumb over her shoulder at the door. "I can trust Helga is listening to my every word and is just about ready to jump in if I cry for help. If she were replaced by someone else, I would not trust them nor know what to expect from them."

There was a muffled sound from outside, one Alice could only guess at being a cheer of some sort.

The declaration made the baroness frown slightly. She nodded absently, taking a moment to look at the other women in the room. She must have seen something in their faces, as she nodded a bit more firmly the second time.

"I can see that some of the Hunter's point of view on things has rubbed off on you." She finally conceded. "There is certainly some merit to the mindset, but it is undoubtedly going to cause some issues if you were to keep it once having joined the King's army. Maidens in the army do not belong to you, they are the King's property." Her hand gestured at the door. "My knights spent the first two years under my care not being truly mine. Green collars up and until I had earned the right to give them the azure collar." A slight pause. "You start within the army with the right to a single azure collar."

"So your initial question was a trap."

She laughed lightly at this. "I must admit I was curious about your answer." A slight smile as she cocked her hip. "It is, in truth, a question posed to Hunters. The army is not expected to participate in a feral wave, their duty is in the protection of the Kingdom's heart and its laws." She glanced at the others. "Who remembers why the army and the hunters were split apart?"

The room was filled with groans.

Alice's brow furrowed as her mind latched on to something else. "Wait, I'm not enlisted."

"Hm? That is correct."

"How can I legally own Helga?"

"You're a human female, citizen of the Kingdom. You have the right to have a guard regardless of our status, we all do."

"Then... they do too?"

There was a sudden collective thoughtful look from everyone present, the only exception being the Baroness herself and the sharp stare she had focused on Alice. There was a quiet warning in those eyes.

Chapter 159 [Alice]

Alice wasn't quite too sure what she was thinking of right now. The idea was coalescing but not there just yet. Women had the right to 'own' a maiden to keep themselves safe, regardless of whether they were enlisted to fight the ferals or in the army itself or neither. And one could avoid participating in either if they paid a hefty sum of money to the kingdom.

Her fingers were almost twitching as she considered the possibility. Participating in a cruel system of slavery was morally dark grey at best of times. Taking Helga under her service was already toeing a line she could not let herself to commit to.

But looking at the big picture and the bigger issues was always going to make any effort an impossible task. She had to set up goals, smaller goals, possible goals. A stepping stone to move ahead.

"You look like you are giving some serious thought to something."

Baroness Aeris' words snapped her out of her inner monolog. Only now did she notice the other women had been staring at her as well. "I was considering the possibility of not joining either the army or the militia." She said, glancing at the dozen or so young women currently seated. "And wondering who else might be interested in such a prospect."

"To legally participate in neither, you would require no small amount of gold." Aeris said, her eyes narrowed ever so slightly, the warning within cold and sharp. "And you would be putting yourself at a great disadvantage. It would be far more logical to utilize the military as a way to form contacts and amass enough personal power to be able to engage in an economic endeavor without as many risks."

But was it the right thing to do? "The army works to incarcerate and detain those that break the law, correct?"

"... yes."

"And is setting maidens free breaking the law?"

The woman's lips pursed. "Miss Alice, I feel that you are not expressing the entirety of what you are thinking of."

"I don't think the Kingdom should have slaves."

The sign of surprise was expertly hidden in the Baroness' features. It was barely a twitch of the brow and a curl of the lips, a tension in the shoulders. "You should be very careful with what you say, and to whom." Her words were carefully crafted to be neutral, but there was a hint there, a warning. "Many a noble would feel obligated to... act, when hearing such a statement."

Alice reacted quickly. "I didn't intend to mean any insult."

"I did not take it as such, miss Alice, but there are others who would not be as willing to let the issue go." There was a coldness in her gaze as she said this, focus turning towards the others. "To you, Mao's rebellion may be no more than ink on paper, a long-forgotten event. But the truth is that it is a wound that has not quite closed, the proclamation of freedom for maidens is one that comes with memories of blood and loss."

With a grimace, Alice had to concede the point. As far as the books had gone, Mao's rebellion had always been an event with much kept between the lines. The focus had always been on the victories of the kingdom against rebel forces, never detailing the losses or the costs of a civil war.

"I think lessons have come to a conclusion for the day."

There were no more words. She turned towards the entrance to the dining room and left with barely little more than a bow of her head and a quick step. The first reaction Alice had was to follow, but she stopped herself. The question of whether she understood the complexities of the Baroness' words took a backseat as she felt a hand tugging at her wrist slightly.

"May."

The young woman nodded shyly, a slight friendly shake of her head. "I wanted to know more about your idea."

"It's... it's not so much more than that." Alice commented, noticing the others shifting their focus her way. "It's objectionable to join the army out of convenience. If this is a world, we're..." A knot formed in her throat, and she swallowed it. "If we are going to live in this world, then we should try to make it a better one, right?" A slight warmth within her urged her to straighten her shoulders. "I know how it feels to be aimless. Go through the motions, and this is exactly what's happening right now. The baroness means well, but who here really is looking forward to join the army of a kingdom we barely know, for the sake of finding someone to marry?"

Grimaces were shared all around.

"Well, the Baroness said the army would let us get what we want."

"I was propositioned by the Baron to bear his child. He said he'd give me anything in exchange for that, and I believed it. But I still turned him down." That caused more than one face to go pale. "The Baroness is right in that the army would value us greatly. But the focus always goes back to us being human women. Of being baby factories for pure blooded heirs."

May nodded slightly, closing her eyes as she sighed. "And what's your idea?"

"Just... work." That came out more easily than she expected it to. "It's that simple. We just need to recruit some maidens to help us, officially put them as our guardians, and get to work. If we gather enough funds, we can safely move forward to being independent while keeping ourselves away from having to sell our bodies for the sake of a promise of political weight that would belong to whomever you end up marrying."

"So what, get rich and use that?" One of the women stood up from her chair, dusting herself as she did. Alice recognized her as Natalie. She'd been the mother of one of the people who didn't make it. "As if getting rich were that easy."

"I don't intend to become a political beacon." Alice frowned. "But at the worst, it would be an option for at least an honest life."

"It... it has a time limit."

Every head turned to May. She shrank a little at that. "The law, um, it says that citizens can only postpone service to the kingdom for a handful of years."

"It would be an objective measure to how viable this would be." A quick and fast agreement from Alice as she turned to the others. "If we have no way to pull this off, we would have to either run from the kingdom or enlist. And if we make enough to survive as well as pay the amount of gold the law requires..."

"And you expect us to help with your idea? Do you even have a plan on how to make money in the first place?"

"No clue at all." A sharp, determined nod. "I only know that it's the right direction to take, and that the more of us work on it, the better."

Natalie looked as if she'd been slapped. A slight frown and a sigh. "Do you even know how one could go about recruiting maidens without buying them? What happened with you and... what was her name again?"

"Helga."

"Right, and who paid for her to be able to become yours? Or did you sell something to be able to afford the cost?"

"I am keenly aware it was only possible, thanks to the Baroness' kindness. I intend to pay her back when I can." Alice looked around the room. "And I don't expect you all to just jump at this prospect. Some or all of you have your own goals and objectives. This is... it's an alternative."

Nervous and uncertain looks were shared amongst those present.

May was the one to step forwards. "I want to try it."

"I guess we can consider it until the Earl's knights show up to let us travel safely. The plan was to join the academy in Balet." Natalie nodded, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "It sounds like a pretty idea, but..." She glanced at Alice and then at the others. "Without at least a good starting plan, I'd rather put my eggs in another basket."

"That is... a fair assessment. And it's your choice to make."

There was a sound of a starter pistol in the back of Alice's mind. Now it was time to figure out what their business plan would be... and start doing research.

Chapter 160 [Rick]

"Welp, that must be Balet."

They had left the ever-present embrace of the heavy forest two days ago, and were now walking down the cobblestone road surrounded by lush green fields that only had a sporadic tree or bush here and there. Rick could see scorch marks all over the place, and judging by the long strips of barren land that ran parallel to the golden wheat fields round the city walls, it seemed they had a purpose of some sort.

The city was... well, by his world's standards. It felt small when compared to a metropolis. But when compared to the medieval cities he'd seen in pictures, it felt far more... more. The place looked like it had been built with the intention of making it look like a gigantic target practice from space.

On the outermost edge were several concentric rings of barren dirt, separate from one another by long strips of land covered in lush greens. After the fifth ring was where the farmland started, wheat being the most prevalent crop and also being grown concentrically to the city itself. Then came the first wall, a structure that seemed to have been made out of wood. The structure was made out of tall parallel trunks, perhaps a couple hundred meters long and only covering a small portion of the perimeter. From a distance it was hard to make out, but Rick was fairly sure there were no less than hundred people dismantling the thing.

Then came a long stretch of barren land, penetrated only by the road itself, and then the 'real' walls, monoliths of stone that must have been at least maybe fifty meters tall. With the rest of the city well hidden behind it. "It looks... well protected."

"Do the protections go all the way around?" Tomas pipped up, glancing at Victor.

"Indeed they do, since there have been feral rushes coming from just about every direction. Just five years ago, we had a big one coming from the north. The ferals were particularly hardy and troublesome since they managed to bring down a part of the wall." He nodded in response. There was a certain spring in his step as he walked.

"So you've been here when they fought." Mr. Gabriel frowned as he spoke.

"Just about every citizen of Balet is expected to at least be aware of how the city fights ferals and what to do in case of things going badly." Victor looked quite eager to answer, smiling up at the frowning old man. "The first perimeter of defense typically involves hurling explosives and incendiary potions at the ferals, the general intention being to funnel them as tightly as possible." A slight nod, the look on his face as if he were reading the facts off of a book. "Once they reach the crops, the iron rain begins."

"That sounds ominous."

"They're merely spears, thrown spears." The man shrugged. "Thrown metal spears."

Rick did a double-take.

"That's... that's almost a kilometer."

"Could you imagine Monica throwing a metal spear? How far would that get?"

All eyes snapped to the feline. Monica realized they were talking about her and glanced back, eyes focusing on Rick. His mind broke down the math, what little he understood of it at least. If Monica had enough physical strength to be able to lift a fully mature tree, then a single metal spear... He suddenly could imagine a cow getting nailed against a wall from a hundred meters away. It made him shudder from head to toe.

Seeing no followup, she turned forward and focused on the cart that was traveling a couple dozen meters ahead of them. She kept sniffing the air and

licking her lips, and Rick was mostly sure he was going to run out of boar jerky to distract her.

"Their methods could certainly do with some improvement." Victor appeared slightly bitter as he said this. "Many smiths end up becoming too occupied repairing the recovered spears after every rush. It can often mean an order gets pushed back weeks if not over a month since the Hunters have priority."

"What if the ferals survive the spears?"

"If they do, then they get picked off by fliers or attacked from both the walls and from underground during the stretch of land between the first and second wall." The man just shrugged and sighed.

"What if the ferals don't feel that suicidal?"

"Then the crops are set ablaze while they are on it. If the fire doesn't kill them, then the smoke will certainly choke them enough to make for easier pickings. A loss, but one that would have happened if the ferals weren't driven off."

"Who pays for the damages?"

The question caused Victor to stumble as he glanced at Kat and put up a brighter commercial smile. "If I remember correctly, the Earl owns the farmland, so it would fall under his responsibility."

Nodding absently, Rick glanced at the walls and felt a twinge of concern creeping down his spine. The man that had invited him to talk was the same guy who owned those walls, and could give the order for 'iron rain' to turn an area into pincushions from a kilometer away.

Rick's gaze turned towards Monica, looking at the feline as she walked. The last thing he wanted would be to start trouble.

"How does the city handle... feralborn maidens?"

"Black collars are usually kept either to the farms or the secure zone within the walls. But I am entirely unsure how this situation would unfold

considering you hold the Earl's invitation and it mentions Monica." Victor shook his head at this. "It would likely be best to confirm at the gate, White Claw's situation is rather unique to say the least."

"This is going to suck." Kat wrapped her arms around Lizzy's neck, the reptilian maiden not quite really paying attention to her and instead keeping her off-yellow eyes darting in every direction.

"If I may." Freya spoke up, drawing attention as she stepped forward. "I received instructions from the Major to relay a report to the city Hunters. It includes details of Monica's and sir Rick's special circumstances."

"Sir Rick?" Kat barked out a laugh, moving into a fit of giggles.

He just rolled his eyes and continued walking. "One step at a time, let's... see how Monica handles this."

"Catnip?"

"She's already figured that one out. If you're feeling brave or curious about what she'll do with it when you offer, go try." He shot an unamused look at Tomas. The young man paled slightly and vigorously shook his head.

"Wus." Kat elbowed him with a little smirk.

They continued approaching the city, watching the line of people at the entrance slowly grow. By the time they were reaching the stone walls and stepping into its shadow, there was a gathering of people in front of the wall, and it was growing larger by the looks of it. Many caravans and travelers were denied access to the city and sent to wait at the side. By the looks of it, Rick could spot the guards asking for papers, running into the wall, and then coming back out. Whatever verification procedure these people were having, it didn't seem that their system was fast enough to keep up with the influx of people.

"This is going to be... stressful." He muttered as the two plate-armor-wearing maidens approached the cart in front of them.

Both stopped cold the moment their eyes had locked on Monica.

"Shit." Everyone heard the first guard whisper the word under her breath. Her focus very quickly turned to the cart, and she raised her voice. "Off to the side."

The cart-owner did not seem in an argumentative mood when there were five more guards hurrying up to join their companions. Each of them wielded lances four meters long, made out of a pale blue metal and with a wicked sharp tip. They stood in formation a good ten meters in front of them.

Monica began to growl.

Everyone present flinched.

"Sir, is that White Fang?" The apparent leader of the group asked loud and clear, her hand doing very quick gestures at the knights.

"She's telling them to not show aggression." Freya whispered under her breath.

"I am. Name's Rick Cross. I have the Earl's invitation." Reaching into his backpack, he pulled out the piece of paper the Baroness had signed as proof of having received the invitation through the radio system.

"We were informed of the circumstances involving your maiden." The maiden kept her tone clear. Her hand gestured to the area not too far off from where everyone else had been made to stop and wait for entry. "If you will please settle down there, we will inform the Earl and take measures to avoid your maiden from being... agitated... while traversing to the Earl's castle."

Rick could almost hear the crowd gulp collectively.

Chapter 161 [Rick]

"Pets."

Rick sighed for the hundredth time, hand reaching out and leading Monica's head to lie on his lap as his fingers stroked her hair. He huffed and glanced back at the gate. The soldiers had been far quicker in processing the people there and moving them into the city. Victor and Kat, in particular, had been quite happily allowed the fast pass through and into the city while Rick, Dia, and Monica were left outside to wait.

The other people had been quite happy to not make any loud noises or sudden movements. A couple times someone new had shown up and started to make a hassle up until someone else would hurriedly approach and discreetly point their way.

It was a bit amusing how quickly they would become thoroughly compliant with the guard's instructions.

"It'll be alright, sir." Dia spoke softly. She'd been seated right next to Rick and not moved an inch as if this were just another normal day to her. "The city must be having an uproar over your visit, preparations would take some time."

"That is not very uplifting." He shook his head, glancing at her for a moment. "Are maidens as strong as Monica that rare?"

"Yes and no." Her hand lay on the part of his lap, unoccupied by a needy feline, an unsure smile on her lips. "What is truly rare is that she is feralborn. Maidens that are at her level of strength are often too dangerous to be successfully captured and bonded. Even once contained, they generally don't bond easily or at all."

"What about the fiving coins?"

Dia grimaced. "A feral that is fived is still a feral, their instincts do not change. I have heard of cases of successful bonding after the feral was fived, but there is no glory or honor."

"And even when they succeed, they'd keep the maiden locked up for months until considered 'safe' while being trained." With a sigh, Rick noticed a sudden increase in activity at the gates. Two dozen knights wearing particularly bulkier armor were stepping out and ushering everyone away from the gate. "Seems it's our turn."

Though he wanted to stand up, Monica was quick to hug his hip and start purring as she rubbed her cheek against his stomach. The human became effectively trapped now, and he could only feel increasingly flustered and uncomfortable as the twenty odd knights were approaching. Not that the cat appeared to care.

It was surprising watching the knights. They were all women, some barely over a meter and a half, yet all of them were able to move swiftly despite wearing thick layers of armor. It was as if the whole thing weighed nothing. The pale blue pieces of metal were far sturdier than the ones worn by the maidens the Baron had taken to hunt him down. These were at least several times thicker and covered the whole body. There was also an odd buzzing that made his hairs stand on edge the closer they got.

In the front of the procession was the only maiden without a helmet. Her hair was a pale pristine green, shimmering as if made out of jewels. She looked at Rick with hawkish focus. Her face was a conglomeration of sharp angles and statuesque beauty. And she appeared no older than he was.

The moment she'd been within thirty meters of him, Monica stopped purring.

Twenty meters. Monica's shoulders tensed, one ear twitching in the knight's direction.

Ten meters, the feline growled.

All knights stopped dead in their tracks, though the leading woman looked neither startled nor put off. It was hard to read the others other than by their

body-language. The whole unit appeared closer to readiness to start a fight than run off, and that alone told Rick this was a different kind of beast than the Baron's knights.

"Don't." Rick pinched Monica's ear, and the sound stopped, though she looked no less ready to spring into action.

"Sir."

The woman leading the knights lowered herself to a knee, bowing her head. The other knights followed with synchronized ease. Rick could feel not an ounce of animosity from the leader. Rather, he felt like he was looking at a blade or a gun laying on a counter. There was no direct sense of threat directed at him, but there was a heavy sense of looming danger from her very existence, as if he might cut himself from approaching the wrong way.

"I am royal knight captain Deneva. I have been tasked to guide you to the Earl's castle."

So this was a royal knight? "Erm... thank you. Monica? We need to move." He patted the feline's head, and she looked up at him for only a moment before glancing sideways at the knight. There was something there. Even if the knight herself had kept her gaze to the ground, Rick could feel the air had become charged for a split second.

Monica proceeded to stand up.

Without letting go of Rick's waist. He held back the surprise as she proceeded to bridal-carry him and hold him close against her chest, looking down at the knight with narrowed eyes.

"Monica." His tone had a warning in it.

"No." she replied in the same tone, not turning away.

Rick flustered. "You... will have to excuse her, she is very protective." He glared at the feline, but she was having none of it, focused exclusively on Deneva's bowed head.

"It is not a problem."

Deneva stood without looking at Monica, without meeting her gaze, without so much as a single threatening move. Her gaze remained on the ground as she turned around and headed back towards the city. The other knights did not move. Neither did Monica. "Follow." Rick pointed ahead, pushing down through the awkwardness as best he could, given the circumstances.

Monica let out a grunt of annoyance, and obliged.

The knights waited until after Monica had walked past them before rising from their half-kneeling position and following from behind, keeping a distance of a dozen meters or so, just about the same distance Monica was keeping with Deneva. It was a chorus of synchronized thuds and clanks of armor, and Rick could feel Monica growing tense as she got closer to the gate.

Her unwillingness to put him down increased by the second. He considered struggling and making it clear he wanted off, but he also knew that doing so would make her that much more wary of her surroundings and the knights. It wasn't that she was scared, she did not trust them.

The gates were empty, the other guards gone and out of sight.

As was the rest of the city.

The moment they'd stepped inside, the feeling of emptiness struck Rick like a hammer. The streets were clear of people, the windows were closed. Nothing moved besides themselves. The architecture reminded him slightly of the houses in Seledo, thick walls and reinforced doors and windows, a large room between each building. The structures were shorter near the wall, but no less fortified. Rick could see the buildings became taller the further into the city one went. There was a lingering smell in the air that Rick couldn't quite place, not a nice one, but not horribly unpleasant either. It just made his nose wrinkle.

And for a fleeting moment, he could've sworn he saw people amongst the roofs or the top of the walls. But it was such a brief thing he could've easily

convinced himself he'd imagined it.

Monica's left ear was locked onto Deneva, the other rotated every which way. Her gaze had not left the royal knight's back for even an instant. Her steps were quiet and measured. She inhaled through her nose with deep sharp breaths, nose twitching as her head would rotate in one direction or another just ever so slightly enough. But never looking away from Deneva, the Sabertooth's tail keeping deadly still.

The procession walked through the empty streets, only moving through the widest cobblestone road available towards the castle.

A door closed, the sound sharp and loud within the otherwise dead silence

Monica snapped her head in full in its direction, inhaling sharply and letting out a roar that rattled Rick's skull. Several muffled shrieks could be heard from within the buildings around them.

The human blinked and suddenly realized the knights had pointed their lances at Monica. The movement had been swift, silent, instantaneous. Deneva had stopped dead in her tracks, her back still turned to Monica, but her hand on the pommel of her sheathed sword. The air became thick with danger, the silence sharp.

The feline's ears flattened against her skull, lips curling into a snarl.

"Monica!" Rick let out the word, not quite a shout but putting every ounce of anger into it he could summon. It startled her, forcing her to hesitate and look down at him for the briefest of instants before locking back onto Deneva.

"Monica." He repeated, now wriggling within her grasp and kicking his legs.

She didn't try to stop him this time, her expression confused as she hastily moved to stand slightly in front and between him and the green-haired knight.

"Let's not escalate this." He'd stumbled once on his feet, turning his focus to Deneva.

She peered at him over her shoulder, a single eye focused on him and the intensity behind that single look feeling as if it could punch right through him. The gesture was the barest of nods. The twenty maidens behind them simultaneously raised their spears to point them back to the sky, standing stock still and at attention once more.

Reaching out to grasp Monica's claw, he gave her an intense frown. "No hurt."

The maiden didn't look pleased about it, turning her glare back to the back of Deneva's head as she snorted. "Monica protect." She chided him with a slight squeeze of her paw.

He could only sigh.

They continued their quiet procession to the Earl's place.

Chapter 162 [Rick]

Rick looked at the Earl's 'estate' and felt that the proper term would have been 'fortress'.

It was surrounded by its own smaller wall, and there was a wide open space right behind the only entrance. But within the smaller set of stone walls was a structure that looked just about ready to take head on a nuclear bomb and stay standing. The dark gray walls of the building were oddly angled inwardly, like something that had attempted to make those approaching to imagine it had been inspired by a pyramid. With at least three or four stories tall and without any windows short of the very narrow arrow slits. And though there was no stone "peak" to speak of, Rick could certainly recognize the radio tower that emerged out of the top.

As well as the eight winged maidens that were perched at several points of the metal tower, each of them looking down at them with intensity. Rick could almost imagine how quickly they could shoot him down if they so wanted.

Monica as well, because she moved to stand directly in front of him and growl at the winged maidens on the tower.

Three of them spread their wings and jumped off, quickly vanishing from sight as they soared elsewhere. The fourth took a heartbeat longer, her wings larger than the other three, a deep blue that almost made her melt into the light sapphire of the clear sky above.

There were no other guards besides Deneva and the knights that had been escorting them through the city. She marched unerringly towards the gates, unflinching as they opened, seemingly on their own. "This way, sir." She declared once the heavy metal doors of the fortress pried open for them.

Monica stopped at the threshold of the door.

The growl came back.

She was standing stock still, for the first time in the whole trip up the city, no longer focusing on Deneva directly but on the corridor ahead. Her claw grasped Rick's hand and she would not take a single step more. "Bahron." She declared with narrowed brows and tightened fists.

Rick grimaced, feeling suddenly several dozen eyes locked onto them and watching their every move. He knew all too well what she was concerned about. He himself did not like this meeting whatsoever. Just being here sent his mind reeling straight back the Baron's dungeon, and it clearly did so for her as well.

"Monica." He took his free hand and lay it against the back of her furry hand. He looked up into her eyes and slowly stroked her wrist. With a deep breath, he pushed his concerns down. Whether this was a trap or not didn't matter. It was too late to back down now, and if things got messy, they'd tackle them as they came.

Taking half a step backwards, he nudged her paw and tugged a little. "Rick protect Monica."

Her ears flattened against her head, focus flicking once more between the fortress, Deneva, and him. She wasn't happy about this one bit, yet she took a step forward and into the fortress. Needing Rick to urge her for two more before he could finally turn around and lead the way.

He noticed the green-haired knight had been staring at him ever so slightly, but her silence continued. Rick felt like he was being quietly judged.

The corridor was relatively wide, and it led into a large circular chamber that made every alarm in his head go off as it looked like it was exactly designed for an ambush. The walls at either side had slits in them, with people standing behind them. The door in front was partially out of sight since it was behind a wall. Attempting to rush through would mean having to move around or over that wall, and throughout the whole distance those standing behind the arrow-slits would have had a grand time shooting them down. He held back the grimace, following Deneva as she opened the doors leading out of the 'entrance' area and into a larger chamber.

It was far better illuminated than the corridor, the light poured into the room from narrow windows up the walls, yet the light appeared amplified somehow, bathing the area with a clear natural glow that made the otherwise dreary locked chamber appear so well illuminated it might as well have had tall open windows instead.

But his focus on the marvel of light manipulation was cut short when he noticed a lone figure standing in the center of the room. A human, the very first thing Rick noticed was how the man stood with a certain degree of poise, wearing a deep blue set of clothes inlaid with gold and silver that sparkled under the rays of light. The man's face was a study in round contours, an attempt at making something spherical appear slim and long, his black hair framing the sides of his face and hiding the true form that his plump cheeks betrayed, anyway.

The man was short, short enough he wouldn't have been able to look Rick eye to eye if not for the set of heeled boots he wore, the only leather on him. The rest of his body freely flowing within the soft garments and shirt, both loose enough to make the portly proportions become harder to determine in full.

"Welcome!"

The man spoke with a boom to his voice that was slightly startling, there was force behind the word, bouncing around the room like a canon that had just gone off. He bowed his head only ever so slightly, the barest amount to acknowledge their presence.

"I am Tylen Vitchatt the first of my name, Earl of Balet, son of Nair the Brave, third of his name. I invite you to my home."

Rick drew from what he remembered from his conversations with Victor, bowing his head a bit more than the Earl had. "I am Richard Cross, offworlder." He glanced at Monica, pinching her wrist a little for her to let go. "I accept your invitation."

She just snorted, returning her focus to Deneva as the knight had moved to stand next to the Earl, lowered to one knee and keeping her gaze aimed at the

floor in front of Rick's feet, unwavering.

"I must ask to be excused, Monica has... much to learn."

"Forgiven. No reasonable man can expect a feralborn thing to learn proper manners on the road, let alone the span of a month." The Earl smiled brilliantly, his eyes pausing at how Monica was holding onto Rick's hand and not letting go. "Normally I would request to have a minute alone, but it seems your maiden may be too uncomfortable here."

"She is very protective." He did his best to put up a polite smile. "The last time we were apart..." Pausing, Rick thought through his words carefully. "... there were some unfortunate circumstances that put us both in danger."

He was all too aware there were such things as truth detection magic. The last thing he needed was to unwittingly set off an alarm somewhere. He was not sure what were the Earl's goals. He wouldn't have even showed up if he felt he could've gotten away with it without complications.

"Understandable, all feralborns tend to be quite possessive of their first owner." The man smiled slightly. "I imagine it must have been rather hard to put up with her while not having the adequate resources to discipline her."

Rick's shoulders stiffened ever so slightly.

"If you wish, I could assist in distracting her." Tylen declared with a slight gesture at Deneva. "You must be weary from the road after all."

"I'm... not quite sure what you mean."

The Earl blinked, then chuckled. "Oh, I must be the one to ask for forgiveness, I'd heard rumors that your maiden habitually did some... unsavory things to your person. My offer was merely to have my knights spar with White Claw until she tires. If nothing else, a tired maiden is far more easily handled and taught."

"Be that as it may..." Rick coughed slightly, glancing at the feline who looked more impatient than tense. "... I think this is not a proper situation for

it, as Monica does not understand the concept of a friendly spar, and has yet to... grow accustomed to this environment."

The man laughed. "I wouldn't worry too much, Deneva is the strongest maiden in my domain."

It had been said so offhandedly, so dismissively, Rick felt a prickle of anger as his gaze turned towards the green-haired maiden. He couldn't help but ask himself what powers did she have? How strong was she compared to Monica? Could she really beat the feline? The royal knight had not moved a millimeter, not shown the barest sign of emotion, her eyes still locked on the stone floor in front of Rick's feet.

The thought was hastily crushed.

If trouble arose, the best card in his hand right now was that no one here knew the extent of Monica's abilities.

"I thank you for your generosity, sir. I, however, feel it would be counterproductive to have Monica attempt to fight seriously without understanding the rules." He forced a slight laugh out. "She may attempt to kidnap me and run if she sensed she cannot win."

"True true." A nod, he clapped his hands twice. "Please, rest and recover. You are an important guest, feel free to roam, though you will have to inform the knights if you wish to take White Claw on a stroll through the city."

"I... ah, certainly." Nodding, Rick glanced at Monica again before pushing his thoughts away from her. "I must admit I am not familiar with the customs surrounding hospitality. Is there any particular requirement needed from me?"

Tylen nodded slightly, the fat of his neck compressing and almost revealing a second chin as he did so. "Considering the circumstances, I believe the safest approach would be to assign Deneva to your personal use. Anyone else might be harmed if your maiden were to do anything untoward. Feel free to ask her anything you might need."

Somehow, the silence in the room became colder, and Rick noticed the barest of twitches from the green-haired knight. Just a slight flicker of the eyes as she focused on the Earl's leather boots before lowering her head in a slight bow. "It would be my honor." She spoke with the same cold and detached voice of precise control, standing up to meet Rick's gaze. "I will lead you to your room."

He felt there was an accusatory edge to those words, hidden somewhere.

Chapter 163 [Rick]

The room was large enough Rick could easily see the place being used by no less than twenty odd freshmen sharing rent. Though they wouldn't be able to pay for it even if they squeezed thirty more. He couldn't spot the modern amenities he would've wished for, but it certainly looked... luxurious. The bed was made of wood, carved with iconography of women kneeling carrying plants that grew and spread across the scene, Rick noticed that the closer the carvings were to the head of the bed, the less dressed the women were.

Each of them was carved with a gemstone across their throats, blues, coppers, and golds. As the iconography continued towards the back of the bed, the headrest rose to show the image of a single woman dressed in flowing robes, without a collar, and clearly very pregnant.

They couldn't have been more subtle about the meaning if they'd put it in bold blinking neon lights.

He had to look away from the bed, a hard task considering how much of a centerpiece to the room it was, and glanced at the other features. A desk, also wood, but carved as if to mimic the castle walls and stone bricks. Paper, actual decent paper, rested on top, blank and waiting to be used. There were drawers he was quite certain were not empty. There was also a washbasin, filled with water, right next to the bed, plated in silver or perhaps metal polished so well it could appear to be the rarer metal.

Monica snorted loudly, blowing air through her nose and rubbing it slightly. She made a face, wrinkling her features slightly as she did. It was only then that Rick caught the slight hint of incense burning. The stick was on a small coffee table on the opposite side to the desk.

Glancing over his shoulder, he spotted the two other maidens that had accompanied him into the room.

Deneva stood like the iron statue of a warrior that's just about ready to jump into action and fight some gargantuan threat. Next to her Dia remained quiet, head ever so slightly bowed, shoulders shrunk, the pink haired maiden doing her best impression of a wallflower to avoid being seen, heard, or noticed.

"It is... a very nice room." Rick declared to the green-haired maiden. "By any chance my companions...?"

"The Earl had offered accommodations, but they insisted on staying with... the merchant." There was nothing in her tone to signify any emotional attachment to the statement, her eyes locked on him and him alone, even as Monica glared and kept herself almost blocking the maiden from being able to see Rick at all. "If that will be all, I will be outside."

A curt dry bow of the head, she spun around.

The door closed with a solid thud that Rick was quite sure did not bode well for him.

Instantly, Dia sighed deeply, relaxing her whole body like an unwinding spool of yarn. She didn't say anything, only walking over towards the bed and collapsing face first into it. The fact that she stayed there and didn't move or say anything at all was about as sure a sign the whole experience had fried her nerves all the way through as any.

"Monica?" Rick glanced at the feline, raising his hand, the one she was still holding. "Let go."

The feline looked at him, then at the door through which Deneva had left. Frowning, she did let go. Rick thought that would be that, up and until she walked to the desk, lifted it up, and then placed it in front of the door.

From the bed, Rick heard a muffled groan.

Monica nodded, apparently proud of herself, and sat down on the desk. "Monica protect." She crossed her arms, smirking from ear to ear.

"For fuck's sake..."

He really wanted to join Dia on the bed right now and groan into the white silky sheets. Instead, he first turned towards the burning incense sticks and smothered them, dropping them and the ash into the small ash-box they came in. Following this, he moved towards the window and stopped as soon as he realized what he was looking at.

A glass door embedded within a window, surrounded by softly glowing orbs that amplified the incoming natural light. At the other side of the door was a small balcony, with sights to a small garden below. There were metal shutters at either side of the window inside the room itself, they looked too heavy for him to be able to move them.

Opening the door, a soft breeze of fresh air made its way inside, and he sighed, looking down at the garden. It had a small pool of water, surrounded by some bushes with colorful flowers, and the balcony had a set of stairs leading down to the garden. Rick had to wonder what the purpose was, from up there the place looked like it led to a larger garden of some sort, but there were some trees making it appear as if hidden from sight.

"I need to clean up."

A loud screeching sound nearly made him jump out of his skin, he spun around to see Deneva peeking into the room, face impassive. "I will call for the maids to draw a hot bath for you, sir."

The door closed, and Monica was now glaring at it.

Had the royal knight just flexed on them?

Monica sprung into action, shoving the desk back into place, this time hurrying to pick up every other piece of furniture she could find to leave on top of it. The feline glared at the door even if she didn't growl, and Rick was fairly sure she was trying to x-ray vision through the thing to Deneva.

"Is what she's doing normal?" Dia asked, looking about as exasperated as Rick was.

"Everything's new with Monica." His answer came with a long drawn out inner grumble. He just was too tired, the Earl had been right, the trip had been wearing him thin, and Monica had not been much help in that regard either.

Now, if only he could actually believe he wasn't deep in potential enemy territory, he might even find amusement out of this. As it stood, he was going to have to figure out how to dance around the noble without causing some sort of misunderstanding or insult, while at the same time trying to spot a potential trap. Ah, and he also had to make sure that if it so happened that the Earl was earnest and actually not out to fuck him up, then he had to make sure that opinion didn't change.

Hopefully gifting him the demon-hog's fur would earn him some points, Victor certainly thought it would be seen in a very positive light. Still, hopefully things were not going in a bad direction, Rick was sure the Earl wasn't being openly hostile. If the man wanted them dead, he already had several opportunities to try it.

"You look too tired, sir, you should rest."

"I wholeheartedly agree." He muttered, glancing at Dia as she lay on the bed and had done barely the minimum to turn and face his way.

His eyes turned towards the blockaded door and the frustrated cat.

Perhaps Deneva had done that merely to irk Monica, maybe she'd done it to show some of the irritation he was fairly sure she must have felt for being turned into some sort of glorified maid. Or maybe she was just making it loud and clear that the walls had eyes and ears, and he was going to remain closely watched every moment he spent there.

Whatever the case, the sooner he could blow it all off and leave, the better.

Though a part of him wondered about that.

Go where?

Chapter 164 [Rick]

With the morning rays coming in through the window, Rick lay in the bathtub and did his best to pretend he was alone. The water was warm, soothing, and his muscles could almost start relaxing and easing themselves into the endeavor.

There was just one problem.

Monica was standing behind him, exactly a twitch away from yanking him out of the tub. Close enough, he could feel the slight movements of her tail as it came ever so close to his head, swishing little sounds. To say nothing that he could quite literally feel her anxiousness oozing through the bond despite his best attempts to ignore it.

"Monica." He opened his eyes to look up at her, huffing.

Arms crossed, naked, the underline of her bust squeezed and drew his attention as she looked at him then at the tub and then at him again. "Rick no sleep, water bad, Monica protect." She declared.

She was being a bundle of nerves, and not having any real way to relax her until he stepped out of the potential drowning, he turned his attention towards Dia. "Do you think the Earl has a shower somewhere we could use?"

"If the Lord does, it would likely be in an area of the castle that's been recently renovated... or in the servant quarters." She sat at the edge of the bed, wearing a nice white dress, her eyes were lingering on the lump of items that had been dropped off late last night. "Do you really think I should be present during breakfast with the Lord... sir?"

"Monica's not going to give an alternative." Rick shrugged. "If she's going to be there, I want you there too." His eyes looked up at the feline and sighed. He was not going to be able to relax like this.

Standing up, Monica leaned over to stare at the tub they'd brought in, dipping her clawed hand into the warm water and frowning at it before returning her attention to the very wet and very naked Rick. He almost jumped when she groped his ass and licked his ear, and Monica was all giggles instantly, leaving him to just grumble and turn his attention to the next enemy to contend with: clothes.

Not having any 'formal' wear, the Earl had given him some.

And he had a feeling this was going to be a very long day.

"Might as well..." With a dejected sigh, he glanced at the smirking Dia.
"Mind lending me a hand?"

"Of course, sir."

Getting dressed up and looking himself over in the mirror, Rick was left with a sense that he'd been thrown into the early 90s vision of what nobility should look like. Big floppy sleeves, pants with wide bottoms, and a slight dip in the shirt that left his clavicles in view. Normally it would have felt tacky and just... off, but after almost two months of seeing maidens walking around with their collars, wearing skirts and dresses, it seemed that the second and more important objective of the set of clothes was to make it loud and clear he was human, and a male.

"You look good, sir." Dia said with a slight smile as her hands glowed, combing his hair with a tickling touch. "Would you wish to shave?"

"... might as well." He rubbed at the shadow he'd developed during the past couple days, turning to face Dia and, with a sigh, leaning forward.

The same glowing tickling hands moved from his hair down to his chin and cheeks. It felt as if his face went slightly numb for a split second before he could feel the warmth of her touch. It barely took a second before she called the whole operation complete with a peck to his cheek.

"I honestly had not expected you to know a shaving spell."

"It's not a spell."

"I don't see the difference."

"To cast a spell, I need to very carefully manipulate my elemental energy into a stable structure to run my power through." Dia caressed his chin. "It... is a difference akin to pushing a rock up a hill or tying some pulleys together and then pulling on the rope."

"So you can get the same result with either."

"Spells take longer and cost more energy, allowing for less flexibility." She replied cheekily, taking a step back.

He didn't let her escape, taking a longer step and reaching up to her neck. Dia froze, then melted as he kissed her in full. His hands were about to move to her shoulders, but she urged them further up, to her choker. "Not now."

"I know, I know." She whispered, leaning into his arms, pressing her head against his shoulder.

The moment lasted about half a second before Monica had moved herself behind Rick, wrapped him into her arms, and harrumphed, play-biting his shoulder opposite to the one Dia had lay claim to. At least she didn't shove the nurse off this time... progress.

"Yeah, yeah." Holding back from just sighing, he kept the hug with one hand and used the other to pat Monica's hip.

There was a knock at the door, both maidens squeezed him slightly tighter.

"Come in."

Rick forgot about the furniture Monica had piled on the door as it screeched open. Deneva peeked. "The meal is ready, sir."

"We'll be out in a second."

"Certainly."

Having Dia let go was easy, having Monica do it... not as much. The instant the impassive face and voice of Deneva had crossed the room's threshold, Monica had gone from just possessive to protective. It was a sharpness, an edge that left her entirely too ready to jump with her claws out and fangs ready.

When they did manage to leave, Rick gestured at one of the bundles and Monica immediately picked it up. The thing was almost as large as she was, but she didn't really exert herself any, her focus remaining on the green-haired maiden that was awaiting them outside the room.

Since yesterday, Deneva had changed her clothes out of her serious armor and was now wearing... a maid uniform. The skirt was long, flowing all the way to her ankles, with black sleeves and an apron. Her face was impassive, but Rick had the creeping feeling that she was not happy about it. Especially considering her actual job and rank.

He'd call it a hunch.

"This way, sir." With her hair done into a tight knot, the maiden walked down the stony corridors of the fortress with Monica keeping a good ten meter separation and making sure Rick would be behind her every step of the way.

She led them to a sunlit room with a table about five meters long. It was a rather simple place, with a glass chandelier. On top of the white cloth that covered the table were plates with more food Rick had seen in one place short of when they were processing the monster hog.

"Rick, welcome." The Earl was at the opposite end, bowing his head in greeting and wearing a slightly fancier version of the clothes that had been provided to Rick. "Protocol normally would have us eschew all maidens and just share a pleasant meal, but I understand your circumstances are somewhat unique. You will have to excuse me as I will request Deneva to stay."

"I thank your consideration." He returned the gesture, bowing slightly lower as Victor had indicated was protocol. "I heard it was customary for guests to bring a gift to their host. Last night Victor was kind enough to send my things over, and I have something that I hope is to your appreciation."

Looking at Monica, he reached for the bundle. She just dropped the thing and Rick almost toppled over. The thing must have weighed forty kilos easily.

"During our trip, my maiden happened to encounter a particularly large boar." He grunted, moving to drop the thing at the side of the table where the Earl could see it. "I lack the knowledge in leather and furs, but I thought its hide might be appreciated by someone with more experience in these things."

"That... that is just one fur?" The plump man frowned, looking at the man-sized bundle and quickly making a gesture at Deneva.

The maiden approached and Monica's hackles rose, the growl was low, barely audible. Rick felt his heart freeze in his chest as the expressionless maiden did not waste so much as a split second, grabbing the parcel and turning away with a bowed head and slumped shoulders. With the parcel in tow, she approached her Lord and dropped it.

A flicker of her wrist and she used a small knife to open it.

Rick hadn't seen where she'd been hiding the weapon.

"Oh my." The Earl's expression brightened as he saw the cloth open up and reveal the black fur of the boar. "This... must have been quite the hunt." With a slight nod, he glanced at the door behind him and clapped once.

Three maidens wearing maid uniforms moved in, took one look at Monica, paled, then at Deneva, and turned chalk white. Only then did they look at their Lord and the fur he was gesturing towards, and they moved with immediacy in their every step, rushing in to take the fur and leave at a speed that would have made a Formula 1 pit-stop jealous.

"I will have to admire it more in detail once it's been properly processed." The Earl turned back to Rick, smile wide as he bowed deeper than when he'd greeted them. "This is simply marvelous! It is very rare to find hogs of such a size. A gift most welcome, and one I wish to reciprocate."

"It is unnecessary. Your hospitality is more than enough." Rick avoided gritting his teeth, keeping his smile polite and drawing from experience

having to talk to potential donors to the university he worked at.

"I insist." Came the response, he stretched out his hand towards Deneva. "I've recently come to acquire a particularly powerful device, a most excellent-."

"Stop." Rick did not waste an instant, eyes fixing firmly on Deneva and not on the Earl, the green-haired maiden halting mid gesture as she'd been reaching into the folds of her dress. "Is it a sphere, white and red?"

"Why yes!" The Earl had not noticed, not seen the tension on Rick's face or Dia. But Deneva had. "Are you familiar with it?"

"I must apologize, but could you wrap it up? Or perhaps place it into a box of some sort?" He spoke hurriedly, his head gesturing towards Monica. "I fear that though I may not have ever used such an item, my maiden has had one used on her and seeing one may... startle her."

"Oh... oh!" The Earl looked at the frowning tense Monica and nodded. "Certainly, I will have it delivered to your room, then."

"Thank you for your generosity."

"Let us eat, then." The Earl gestured at the table. "Lest the meal cools."

Rick bowed, he smiled, he kept his expression placid and the conversation light.

And made sure not to forget Deneva had been carrying a ready-to-use pokeball in her pocket all this time.

Chapter 165 [Dia]

"Are you sure you'd want to go around on your own?"

Dia's lips pursed slightly as she held Rick's hand. "Sir, I should have done this yesterday." She had a slight pause, noticing the odd look he gave her. "This is to ensure things are less likely to go wrong. The better aware they are of your needs and..." Her eyes flickered at the feline currently using her tongue to groom herself on the bed. "... Monica's... the better."

He hesitated, but nodded. "Alright."

Stealing a quick kiss before the feralborn cat could do anything about it, Dia smoothed her service dress and headed to the door. Monica had switched tactics and had laid down the furniture as an obstacle course for anyone wanting to enter the room. It took Dia a minute, but she managed to get out of the room just perfectly fine.

With the door clicking shut behind her, she turned towards her first true obstacle. Deneva stood a step down the corridor, wearing the regalia of a royal knight.

Dia lowered herself to one knee, head bowed deeply. "I ask forgiveness for my sister's behavior."

With her gaze locked on the beige rug, Dia's only confirmation that Deneva was even there were the murisium boots on the corner of her vision. The royal knight did not move, not even a twitch, not even a sound. The pressure increased, elemental energy coiling around her and pressing down on her.

Dia lowered the second knee, gritting her teeth, she remained quiet, waiting. It wasn't the first time a knight would put her under their scrutiny, the Baron's held a habit of it during their visits to the medicen. But this was different, intense. She could feel the knight's energy moving just barely within her ability to perceive it. It was like an icy dagger threatening to slice her head clean off before she could blink.

She started to sweat, the knight's energy stopped dancing and the edge and bore down on her, pressing inwards. Dia's instincts screamed at her to tighten herself, to raise her defenses and block, but she knew this would only make her look insincere in her apology. So she grit her teeth and waited, exposed, vulnerable.

"Leave."

The singular word was followed by a release from the pressure.

"I thank you."

Barely holding back from stuttering, Dia hurried to shaky feet and hastily walked down the corridor. Her back was drenched in sweat and her breathing came irregularly, heart beating at an unhealthy two hundred thirty beats a minute.

At the first corner she found, she dropped to lean against the wall, heaving for air to calm herself.

That had gone far better than expected.

If still terrifying.

Deep breaths, Dia started to force her body back down into as calm a demeanor as she could. Her focus and control wavered as she had to attempt casting the cleansing spell four times before she got it right. It had always been tricky since her energy didn't have a fire or wind attribute. Steam rose from her body as the sweat dried and a fresh breeze blew through her, leaving her still agitated but back to more manageable conditions.

It was only when she raised her head to look around that she realized she hadn't been alone. Three knights stood there, looking at her through their visors but not moving an inch. Protocol was strict, and their captain was clearly a stickler.

"I apologize for the... lack of decorum."

Even if she was owned by Rick, even with her blue collar, an Earl's knight still outranked her by a hefty margin.

"The captain hasn't been in a good mood." The closest suit of armor spoke. "For obvious reasons."

Being assigned maid duty. Dia still grimaced at that. It was clearly a punishment of some sort. "She angered the Earl?"

"Nothing relating to your owner's situation." The response was a bit too stiff, almost as if startled. The armor blocked casual reading, but the slight shift in tone was impossible to miss.

Dia had to imagine this conversation topic was too delicate to be brought up within the potential hearing range of said knight captain. "I'm looking to familiarize myself with the staff, and my Master sent me to give help where I can."

"Service corridor is over that way. The entrance is a bit hard to spot. Look for the golden inlay." The knight pointed her in the right direction. "The head of the maids is likely in the kitchen right now. She'll point you in the right direction."

"I thank you." With a bow, she turned to leave, but halted as she felt a flicker of energy from one of the other knights. "Yes?"

"Is it true?" The maiden didn't move, her armored body making a perfect impression of a statue. Yet the tone oozed curiosity. "That he captured White Claw in the wilds, on his own?"

Dia kept her smile polite. "It is true. Though the details are improper for polite conversation." Meaning that she was not going to share the juicy parts for free. "If you'll excuse me."

Another bow, and she walked away. Her eyes trailed around in search of the service door. Just as they'd warned, it was discreetly hidden and hard to find for the untrained eye. She approached and applied a bit of elemental energy

on the area the pommel should have been. With a soft click, the door opened inward, revealing a corridor too dim for ungifted humans to see comfortably.

The layout and construction of service corridors was always more or less the same. The general purpose was for maidens to be able to move through the building unseen and without obstructing the way of the owners of the place. Dia had visited the Baron's house enough times to know more or less what to expect. Still, it took her a couple of detours before she found her way down to the first basement of the castle. From there, she let her nose guide the rest of the way to the kitchen.

She tried not to look too shocked at the size of the place.

There were at least twenty maidens actively working on cooking one thing or another. The room was large enough to have at least twelve stoves and just as many ovens, every table and counter-top was occupied and being used. The elemental energy in the room was thick. Just from a quick sweep Dia could spot five maidens dedicated exclusively to keeping the fires burning and the ovens at the exact temperatures. Two were doing the exact opposite, using ice elemental energy to cool down the contents of two stone lockers. And those were just the ones she'd spotted right away. The cacophony alone of shouts and requests and updates was almost overwhelming.

The chance to observe more closely was spirited away as a Hound emerged seemingly out of nowhere. She was clearly nearing her forties and wore a golden collar along an immaculate white dress. The matron had the homeliness to mark her importance, but the clear sternness on her face of someone who believed in strict discipline. "I know who you are." She proclaimed, frowning down at Dia. "I am the head maid. You can call me Pristine."

"I apologize for not being able to come sooner." Dia bowed her head, making sure to stay away from the veritable mess of people mulling around and hurriedly making sure she wouldn't bother anyone's work.

"I've heard you come from a small village, so I'll keep it brief. The lord's healers all have copper collars and think they're too good to come down here." She placed her hands on her hips. "I'm guessing you know how messy

things can get when someone sneezes at the wrong time, so you'll help keep my girls tip-top until things slow down."

"Sorry!" someone shouted from the other side of the room.

"I will help however I can." Dia smiled brightly.

"Down here we don't have sunshine, keep the smiles and rainbows for when there's someone who cares about attitude over results."

With a slight shudder, Dia rolled up her sleeves. "I'm ready to help."

Pristine shot her a savage grin. "That's more like it." A firm nod followed. "Before that, my girls are terrified of going into the guest wing. Knight captain is hard to approach, but we know how to handle it. Your sister is more rumors than facts, none too pretty."

"She is known as White Claw, her-."

"Stick to the notes. How do my girls work around her."

Dia took a deep breath. "Don't make sudden moves, keep your eyes down and don't show aggression. Don't push, don't run away, and don't try to drug her or you'll regret it when she wakes up. She will give a single warning if you're close to crossing a line. Carry some boar jerky to apologize, but leave afterwards rather than risk making a second offense. If you do, and my Master isn't around to stop her, she will break bones without hesitation."

"Master?" The tone was amused, and a chuckle crossed the kitchen staff.

Dia's cheeks lit up, the blush creeping all the way down her neck. "She is territorial over people and specific items, not over an area." She coughed loudly, trying to get the words to stutter their way through. "Her priority is my owner first, her food second, and being the strongest thing in the room third."

"Service?"

"My sister will rub herself against anything my owner wears that doesn't already smell of her. So his clothes can smell nice or look nice, not both.

Don't use scented candles or incense or strong soaps. My owner already has a strong penchant for hygiene and with my sister around him, it's best to keep scents mild or gone. As for food, he doesn't like sweets and has a preference for meat."

"Don't they all?" Pristine laughed.

Dia felt her hackles rise. "My owner is an otherworlder, the first one this kingdom has seen in generations." Her voice was firmer, louder, her expression abruptly stern. "He grew up having meat or fish almost every lunch and dinner. A world with so many sweets that diabetes affected a significant amount of humans. And in this world, my owner was a professor." She squared her shoulders, making sure to stand as tall and proud as she could, even if she couldn't match Pristine's height. "Not just any professor, either. His services were highly sought after. Hundreds of human women and men came to learn from him every year. The number of students he has taught numbered in the thousands. I swear this on my bond."

The kitchen had gone considerably quieter. Pristine's eyes widened only marginally, the barest show of surprise on her otherwise stern face.

"My owner enjoys reading but has had to busy himself with my sister so much he has had no chance to indulge. He is considerate enough to the Earl that he won't ask for the library since my sister may break something, so offering to bring books to his room will be a quick way to ingratiation," she said, "He also desires to teach my sister how to read and write, so children booklets and toys are another option."

"Enough with the accolades." Pristine quickly barked, turning to the rest of the kitchen once clear they'd been slowing down to hear more attentively.

"And get back to work!"

"Yes ma'am!" Everyone responded.

"I know what you're trying to do, girl, and even if your owner were the King himself, you keep it out of my kitchen."

"Sorry ma'am." Dia's bravado faltered, a shy smile replacing the stern mask.

"Just give me the "don't" now that you shouted out the "do"."

"He doesn't think of maidens as inferior, but as equals."

"That doesn't tell me anything."

"It's a comprehensive perspective. Would you whip a human woman for having done her job poorly? My master would not suggest such a punishment, let alone idly stand by when witnessing it."

Pristine kept her nod tight. "What else?"

"With the rumors circulating about my owner, the Earl might send someone to his bed as a show of hospitality. It is best that he does not do so."

That got her a quirked brow. "I can't go against the Lord's orders."

"Then he should be informed that anyone he sends will come back in a box. Likely several boxes."

"Even if your sister is not around to play rude games?"

"The threat wouldn't be my sister. It would be me."

Pristine let out a bark of laughter, nodding. "Very well. I'll try to warn about it, but if the order comes down, I'll run them through you first."

Dia's shoulders loosened, and she sighed with relief. "I'd appreciate that, ma'am."

Chapter 166 [Mark]

Mark and the rest of the group fell into an odd rhythm. The road was long and full of detours. Two out of every three villages they stumbled through would be avoided. Some of the hamlets were far too closely guarded for them to want to risk sneaking through. So they'd have to take a long detour around to avoid drawing attention. The same thing would happen when they spotted caravans or large groups of people traveling the roads.

From time to time, they'd stumble onto a hamlet that had been destroyed by the ferals. The wild maidens themselves popped up often, but never with a force or size that couldn't be easily scared off by the illusionist fox. Brye marked the pace for them. She scouted and determined how unlikely escape would be if things became hairy. It was an open secret that her objective was to ensure they got Mark to the Boss.

And all the while, Noah would mostly remain bound, gagged, and blind. The mouse would eat normal food one out of ten times, the rest being more of the berries. Each time, Mark would be left wondering whether this was a needless risk, whether he was setting himself up for another betrayal. Sooner or later, he'd have to decide on whether he could trust untying her and letting her act on her own.

"Aubria is only a couple of days away."

Brye stepped out of the bushes, seemingly having appeared out of thin air. Which could have very well been the case, considering her teleportation powers. Not that the encroaching darkness around them did any good to discern details, anyway.

"They're currently having some refugee issues."

"Just how far are we from that place?" Mark asked.

"You could get there in just one day. It'd be one good long walk."

"Good luck with the guards." Shery snorted, shaking her head. "We're going to want to get in without getting interrogated along the way."

"What's so important about this village?"

"City."

"Where I come from, a small city has a million or two people at least." Mark replied.

"Tiny city, then." The fox sat down next to the backpacks. "I'll need to get inside to see if things are as they should, then arrange to get you all entry."

"If Lee is still alive, he owes me some big favors." Shery crossed her arms.

"If Lee's still in charge, then that dimwit will have bigger things to worry about than a favor or two." Brye snorted, kicking Noah. The diminutive mouse squeaked and huddled against the tree. "The place must be a mess, and we'll have to tell the Boss about the deal with the Court getting burnt to the ground."

"At least they didn't get to the cache."

"Fuck."

"What?"

"We're going to want to go for the cuddle angle."

Shery shot Mark a look, then at Brye. "You're shitting me."

"Do you want to go back there and check on the cache and empty it if it's been left untouched?"

"Shit."

"Told you."

Mark watched the small exchange with a frown. "I'll at least be rid of you two."

"Don't go throwing us away so quickly." A quick smirk and the fox appeared on his lap. "We'll probably end up stuck with each other for a while. Not that I'm complaining."

"I am." Shery raised her hand. "I most certainly am."

"So what happens after you hand me over." It wasn't a question so much as a glaring proclamation.

"You'll get put into the prettiest and comfiest room they have while they try to figure out what to do with you."

Shery snorted and rolled her eyes.

"The Boss will want to meet you." Brye's words came without the taunting smug edge they usually carried, but a hard certainty. There was something in the way she looked at him that felt like a warning. "What he does after that will depend on you."

"He'll either want to use me or lock me up, apparently."

She shifted on his lap, turning to face him in full, straddling him, her arms wrapping around his neck. Golden eyes looked into his with that edge of warning within them. Her fingers pressed into his hair, pulling away as he shook his head. That edge to her gaze wasn't gone, however.

"Take what you want, Mark."

"What?"

"That's the offer you get." She leaned forward, pinning his shoulders against the tree. "You want something, you take it. If you couldn't, then it just means you weren't powerful enough."

Brye flinched as a pebble hit her on the back of the head. She turned to glare at Shery.

"You don't need a speech. Go fuck already." The gray skinned maiden rolled her eyes.

"I was trying to get him to be more open about the cuddle angle."

"You psychics don't make a straightforward plan, even if your lives depended on it." Shery sighed, turning to Mark. "Cuddle angle is we suck you off and ask pretty please."

"Pretty please what?"

With a groan, Brye let go of his shoulders and vanished from his lap. "Yeah, you ruined the mood, bitch." She appeared at the opposite side of the clearing.

Shery grunted. "Pretty please don't break the bond with us."

"Why the fuck wouldn't I?"

"Ideally, the question would be asked while you had less blood flowing through your head." Brye stated. "We're no Doggirls just happily wagging our tails at your every word. But we're a heck of a lot better option than the alternatives."

Mark leveled a glare at her, scowl deepening.

"She's got a point." Shery snorted. "Not that our word means anything here."

"Just imagine it like this." Brye sat down against her own tree-trunk. "The Boss gives you a maiden. She obeys you, complies with your commands, but she will put you in a plush box the instant you toe out of line."

"Mhm, and what's the difference between that and this?" He scowled. "If I make a run for it, you'll just drag me back. If I open my mouth, you'll shut it."

"You never struck me as someone who's a stickler to any rules that aren't your own." Brye smirked. "I'm a selfish bitch. I don't care about the rules so long as I end up on top."

"Or getting pounded from behind."

"Suck it, flat-ass."

"Cunt for brains."

"Would you two shut up!?"

Mark's voice came out with a growl. "If either of you were half as selfish as you claim to be, you wouldn't be going through half the shit we've been through just to get me to that Boss of yours."

Their expressions shifted as he said this. They glanced at each other for a moment. There was something dark in those eyes. Shery shook her head intensely, and Brye's lips thinned. "There's no alternative."

"What are the alternatives?"

"We either go back to base and report, try to escape the kingdom, or try to stay in the kingdom and pretend we are just some simple humble traders." Brye said, counting off on her fingers. "Trying to escape would involve going out through the eastern ridges. Suicide with a different name. And option three is a sword hanging over our heads as we wait to get found out either by knights or by the Boss."

"Not going to ask whether we join the Court?" Shery sneered.

"Fuck them." Mark shook his head. "That crone wanted to sell her own daughter, you can't trust someone like that."

Brye stiffened, her eyes turning to him with a surprised look. Her attention quickly shifted towards Noah as she started to grunt and wriggle madly on the spot. The mouse started to speak into the gag, albeit her voice only coming out muffled. The wires and blindfold were too well placed, however, and she couldn't free herself. So Mark leaned over and pulled the gag out of the way.

"Guenes."

Her voice came with a pant, a slight squeak of a thing.

"Not possible." Shery shook her head. "We'd have to cross half the kingdom without getting caught. The feral rush was a miracle. We couldn't have gotten this far otherwise."

"Mark will be locked up. His blood is pure. He's worth more as a breeder."

Brye's brows furrowed as she teleported in front of the mouse, putting the gag back into place. "If anyone wanted to use you as a breeder, you'd get royalty treatment. No way a human woman would let herself get knocked up by a nobody."

As she said this, her gaze lowered to the ground, frowning, deep in thought. The same expression Shery was showing. Both maidens shared a look. Something went unspoken, but there was surprise in their eyes.

"Don't let her get into your head." Shery said.

Somehow, Mark felt the words were directed at Brye, and not at him.

Chapter 167 [Ginny]

The stairs to the second floor creaked as Ginny wandered her way up. The walls felt too narrow, and her tail kept bumping against the walls whenever she wasn't paying attention. The house overall was cramped compared to the ones in Astunes. A more vertical approach, where outside the large city of Balet would have been more horizontal.

Four steps after the stairs, she reached her owner's door. Ginny gathered her resolve and, while balancing the tray with one hand, she knocked twice. "Miss Catherine?"

With the lack of a response, she frowned and focused. There were no sounds from inside the room. The mild panic was pushed down. All rooms in the city had basic sound-proofing enchantments weaved into them. With so many maidens going around, it would be impossible to truly keep any sense of privacy otherwise.

She knocked again.

"Miss Kat?"

Again, no answer. She reached for the handle. It was unlocked. The moment she twisted the handle, the sound finally reached her ears.

"Harder!"

The moan was shrill, loud, passionate. Ginny very quietly closed the door again. Blessed silence replacing the lurid cacophony that had drowned her senses a moment prior. But she could still catch a whiff of sex. Tomas and Miss Kat.

Ginny's face was flush, cheeks burning as she left the tray at the foot of the door and turned to hastily retreat. Her claws battered their way down, and she very nearly jumped half the stairs.

"Someone's in a hurry."

"Miss Hyung!" Ginny had nearly jumped out of her scales. "I am so sorry."

Miss Hyung stared at her with the same cold, detached look she'd been sporting since their arrival. "Is there a ferocious feral up in our guest's room?" The lilac eyes twinkled with a hint of amusement.

Ginny sighed. "It would be easier to handle." She bowed a little. "Sorry for the startle."

"I'm more sorry about the stairs."

Dread ran through the young Draco as she turned to look at the wooden stairs. The rich, dark brown wood had been scratched by her claws. The color started to drain from her face at the consideration of just how careless she'd been. "I will-."

"It was a minor thing." The lady spoke, reaching into the furls of her dress to pull out a small leather bag. "I'd suggest you get yourself some proper household footwear."

Clenching the bag of coins, Ginny nodded, keeping her head bowed. "Thank you for your generosity, ma'am." She said. "I... will head out to the market."

"Perhaps you should look for your sister. I haven't seen her, and she's likely not with your owner considering..." Her gaze flickered upwards. "... things."

"... yes, ma'am."

Ginny held back the grimace and bit her tongue. The lady of the house was a matron, age and power oozed from her, much like her own aunts back at home. She knew better than to disrespect the matron of the house, especially if they were the only wife. Doing so while your owner was a guest would be worse still.

With Kat not interested in having her around, and the lady of the house clearly not finding her presence welcoming, Ginny didn't really have many options left. She moved towards the kitchen and picked up some boar jerky,

the kind she knew Lizzy liked. The lexis had probably figured out another way to break out of the house and was sunbathing on the rooftop again.

Ginny approached the door and paused. Claws went to her shoulders, hips, then knees. Confirming her clothes are the ones she should be wearing, she stepped outside. The midday sun was comfortable, welcoming even. A perfect time for training, maybe do some light patrol. The Draco craned her neck upwards to the roof.

No Lizzy.

The trickle of concern was pushed aside. Ginny had taught her owner how to set up the black collar so Lizzy wouldn't be able to get further away than a couple dozen meters. Kat wouldn't have changed that setting... right? Ginny could only hope now, circling around Mister Victor's house while trying to look for the slippery reptile girl. The distressed sound of grunts and whimpers drew her towards one of the alleyways.

Lizzy was curled into a ball, clutching her neck and whimpering.

"Figures."

Ginny approached her sister, picking her up from the ground and carrying her closer to the house, until the maiden grunted and went limp. In all likelihood, the maiden had been drawn by something and jumped at it. Landing squarely outside the allowed zone. The collar's paralysis had kicked in along with the punishment.

And her owner hadn't noticed the tugging in the bond because she was in the middle of having her senses otherwise thoroughly occupied.

"Was it food?"

"Bird." Lizzy mumbled weakly.

"Of course it was a bird."

Shoulders slumped, a quick glance towards Mister Victor's house left her unsure whether to come back inside and drop Lizzy or not. The matron

wasn't exactly welcoming of either her or her sister. Ginny had no doubts the Sorceress saw them as obstructions or dead weight to the potential future her own daughter had in Kat's service.

"Let's go shopping."

Allowing Lizzy to regain her footing, she reached out to her collar and caressed it. Carefully, she chanted the small spell her mother had taught her. She could feel the tether placed on Lizzy shifting to tie around her own blue collar. A little tug and she felt the mental strain that came with it.

Another aspect of the collar. By running Lizzy's black-collar tether through her own blue-collar tether meant that, so long as they remained close to one another, they could both move up to five hundred meters away from their owner. It restricted Ginny, but she didn't mind, since she estimated the market was within range.

Hopefully, she'd get to teach Lizzy some manners.

"Food?"

"If you behave." She pulled the leash out of her satchel and clicked it onto Lizzy's collar. The feralborn maiden shot her a dirty look, but Ginny ignored it. "I'm not going to choke you unless you run off."

She got an angry hiss for her efforts. But Lizzy didn't try to immediately run off... this time.

"I know it's really hard. I don't do this because it's fun."

Not that what she said was understood by the reptile maiden. Ginny's claws clicked against the cobblestone while walking. The city was sleepy during the midday, but even at its most peaceful the place was comparable to Seledo at its most bustling. The cacophony of smells and sounds was something that Lizzy seemed far less concerned about than Ginny. The feralborn maiden kept sniffing this way and that, needing her sister to rein her in before she got too close to a stall or another maiden.

The crowd gave them a healthy berth. For good reason, one of them wasn't trustworthy.

It still brought up bad memories Ginny didn't want to think about.

The market street required her to keep Lizzy closer and for them to move more slowly. Her gaze sought for any store or stall that would sell claw-tip padding. She found what she was looking for. Small leather triangles with a leather strap connecting each to a circlet. The stall owner was more than happy to let Ginny try it on to check the size. It was a rather simple endeavor, merely attach the circlet to her ankle and adjust the straps so that the leather triangles would fit on her claws and stay there.

A simple purchase. Far quicker than she'd thought it would take them.

Lizzy perked up as she saw the trade of coin. "Food?"

"Sure."

As she turned around to look for a food-stand, a hooded figure stumbled against her. Ginny realized she had not heard the figure approach, she'd not sensed anything. Her mind reeled, trying to catch up with the sudden realization something was out of place. Her instincts blared an alarm.

Before she had the chance to act on it, she saw what was under the hood.

Framed between deep blue hair were a pair of golden, shimmering eyes that pierced through her very soul. And the most beautiful face she'd ever seen.

"You look so cute I just might eat you up."

Chapter 168 [Rick]

Rick found himself facing a conundrum. He was, by all means, trapped in the castle. And the reason why was not by any direct act from the Earl, but because of Monica. If he wanted to just take a stroll through the streets outside the fortress' walls, the feline would undoubtedly follow, and that, in turn, would cause things to escalate.

It made sense. The feline was like its own tiny nuclear device, and everyone was keenly aware she was the one with the finger hovering over the button. If things went off the rails, Rick could attempt to use the collar to restrain her. But as far as he understood, even if he wanted to use the feature, its power would definitely be not enough to do the job.

Not that Rick would have trusted the approach, even if it did. He could ball her, but that would be a severe breach of trust. So the pokeball the Earl had gifted him remained tucked away and well out of accidental reach of anyone.

So, with his own options of mobility snipped by his own hand, Rick was left with a singular thing he could do to spend time.

"This is a...?"

Sitting cross legged on the massive bed with baby-making themes that had been carved throughout, he held out an item in front of her.

"Shirt."

Monica nodded as he held out the item in front of her. "Good." Rick nodded, pulling out the next item. "This is a...?"

"Shirt."

"Pants."

"Shirt."

"Pants."

"Shirt." Monica grabbed the denim piece, pushing one arm through the pant leg until her furry claw popped at the end. "Shirt."

Rick quirked a brow. "Head?"

She looked down at the pants, then frowned. "Shirt." She declared, extending a claw and moving it toward the zipper, lowering it carefully. "Head, here."

The brow rose further. "Smell?"

She frowned, sniffed, then sighed. "Butt." With a grumble, she pulled her arm out and tossed the thing at him. "Pants."

"Good."

Legs crossed, she gave him a look. Her ears perked and pointed themselves at the door, then at Rick. And she smirked as she slowly licked her lips. The feline began leaning towards him.

"No sex."

The quick proclamation halted her advance. Huffing, she crossed her arms in resignation. "Monica no sex. Rick no teach."

"Come on... Monica."

"Riiiiick." She replied with the same tone, rolling her eyes at him.

"You need to learn more words, you know, so we can talk." Rather than hope the words stuck, he pressed the feeling of what he wanted to convey.

The look on her face flattened, even less amused than before. She shook her head and crawled towards him, one claw toppling him onto his back despite his best struggle. "Monica teach Rick."

He sighed. "Word?"

"No word." She pressed down on him, knocking the air out of his chest.
"Teach." She kept pressing.

Rick frowned, concern growing as he was having a harder time breathing the more weight she put down on him. With a grunt of effort, he grasped her furry wrist with both hands and pushed back. She reacted by putting more weight, and Rick was left straining. Concern trickled through. Heaving in as best he could, he pushed the wrist sideways and off of him.

With her being someone over two meters tall and built like an Amazonian goddess, her weight hadn't really been displaced as much as Ricks. He'd managed to escape but Monica hadn't really worried too much, shifting to pin him back down. "Monica!"

"Rick no hurt. Monica teach." She declared, steadily increasing the pressure again. There was a catty grin as he struggled to break free again.

This time he didn't hold back, tucking his knees against his chest and pressing his hips upwards. His arms might not be able to lift her, but his legs certainly had at least enough to make it easier.

"Good." She nodded once he escaped, catching him and pinning him down with her claw once more. "Again."

"Oh come on!" He raised his knees once more, pushing her off and rolling off the bed onto his feet. "Monica, stop."

"Teaching now, rest later." She purred, eyes shining as she crawled from the bed. She kept herself to all fours, claws silently pressing against the rug, stalking him.

Monica's eyes glimmered with amusement but there was determination there as well. Rick felt something fearsome in the air, dangerous, sharp. His breath caught in his throat as he took several steps back. What was she doing? What was she trying to teach him? His eyes darted around the room.

"Bad!"

She pounced, claws pinning him against the wall and hammering the air out of him. The move had been so fast he'd barely registered himself being standing at one moment and slammed against the rocky surface the next. Several somethings inside his chest strained, but hadn't snapped. "Bad bad." Monica admonished, pulling back enough to let him breath and cough, but not enough to let him leave the wall.

"Rick."

She poked his forehead, then pointed at herself. "Good." She poked his forehead, then pointed at the rest of the room. "Bad bad."

"I'm really not a fan of getting beat up for a lesson." He pushed her back, the feline relented and let him stand on his own wobbly legs. "Would you prefer it if I taught you that way?"

She might not have understood what he said exactly, but there was enough heat in his voice to make her frown. Her next words came out with a growl that shook the room. "Monica teach Rick." She declared, flatly. "Monica no hurt Rick. Rick hurt Monica."

"What!?"

He ducked out of the way right as she pounced. The feline bounced off of the wall, pinning him to the ground. "Bad." She stated, pressing down on him and driving the air from his lungs. Rick kicked upwards and freed himself, rolling, and yelping in surprise as she backhanded him. There was just enough force behind the gesture to send him rolling, and she pounced again.

There was barely any space to really move or escape, Rick shoved against the bed to avoid getting pinned again, scrambling to his feet and ducking just as Monica flew over him. The feline bounced against the opposite wall like it was nothing. Her next attack came faster than Rick could move, he was pinned against the wall with a definite thud.

She didn't talk, pressing against him until he kicked her away and stumbled again. The process was a simple game of cat and mouse. Rick being the mouse, trapped in a box with a supernaturally powerful cat. His attempts to

make her stop fell on deaf ears, she was serious, and that was starting to bring an edge of concern. Not enough to attempt to force her to stop, but enough he had to wonder where Dia was right about now. His biggest fear was that Monica wouldn't hold back, that one of these pounces would bring her true strength to bear. Rick had no illusions about the situation, she could crush him like an over-ripe grape.

With each successive escape, she would increase the force just a little, with each dodge she would move just a fraction faster than before. Rick was finding himself quickly being pushed harder and harder, and Monica was getting more serious.

"Rick hurt Monica." This time she pinned his left arm and chest against the ground, leaning over and looking into his eyes sternly. "Hurt Monica, now."

"No." With a growl, he tried to shove her off. This time she didn't let him, increasing the pressure. "Monica."

"Hurt Monica."

"No."

Her scowl deepened, placing more pressure. "Hurt."

"No!"

He returned the glare, heaving air as best he could with an increasingly compressed ribcage. His breaths were coming in shallow, and the pain was starting to move past being merely discomfort.

"Rick!" She said, growling. She was growing angry.

The pressure was cutting his breathing short, his lungs were starting to strain, his beating heart was hammering away faster, and it wasn't calming down. Cold sweat began to run down his back, eyes widening. He was drowning.

"ENOUGH!"

His voice came out hard, carried by more than just the air in his lungs.

Monica yanked her claws away as if scalded, anger evaporated instantly and now her gaze was full of confusion and concern. Ears flat, her tail hung limp as Rick collapsed on the floor, heaving air and clenching a fist against his chest.

With his eyes fixated on the floor. "Breathe." He spoke to himself, inhaling deeply. "Breathe." It was a struggle, his heart wanted to explode out, his body was tense like a coil. "Breathe."

"Rick?"

The hand touched his shoulder softly, concern washing through the bond. He didn't shrug her off, but he'd certainly felt tempted. "I'm... I'm ok." He lied, focusing on the now, on the here, on the cold stone floor and the hard surface against his hand. Irene had warned him it might happen. He just hadn't expected it after over a month without problems. "I'm ok."

She didn't wait further, pulling him onto her lap and hugging him against her. "Sorry." She whispered, rubbing her face against his shoulder. "Sorry."

Undetected by either of them, the room's door closed without a sound.

Chapter 169 [Lady Embla]

The royal room was dark, no sign of light from outside. But to Embla this was of little concern, the room was inside the Court's palace, built out of several of the ancient trees and still very much alive. To her eyes, the lack of light was no impediment, the tree's aura was easy to spot and the shape of the room perfectly visible.

Laying in bed, her gaze shifted towards her lover.

Barry's aura was so feeble it was easier to spot him by the outline of his body surrounded by the denser aura of the tree. The man lay with his head pressed softly on her shoulder, his hand squeezing her breast.

For a moment she wondered whether he was seeking to wake her, but it was clear he was still deep in his sleep. He twitched and groaned, muttering under his breath and shaking his head. Embla cast a simple silent spell, the words coursed through her lips as she focused her energy to follow the patterns. She made sure to keep her power light. With a mere caress, he relaxed, sighing and sinking into her embrace. She slowly wrapped him closer into her arms, kissing his forehead gently.

A singular sound broke the silence, a growl.

Embla chuckled in amusement. "Of course."

She let the Hound keep complaining for a while longer as she stroked Barry's hair between her fingers. Alas, she could not ignore the feralborn maiden forever, even if she did feel tempted to.

A second spell was muttered, her whole hand glowing with a faint green as she caressed Barry's chest. Spells that placed someone into an unconscious state were useful, but unconsciousness was not restful. So she made sure hers would be one for deep sleep instead.

Untangling herself from Barry's grasp, Embla threw the bed-sheet over him and walked towards the double-doors of the room, sending the Hound follow. She was uncaring for her nudity. Though the same could not be said about her guards.

"Ma'am!"

Embla needed only to give them a look, and they returned to their posts. She could feel the feralborn Hound trailing within her shadow as she descended the stairs towards the training courtyard. There were a few trainees using it, but she scared them off with a small increase of her aura. With the place left for herself, she waited for the Hound to come out of the shadow. Embla waited, naked and enjoying the light cool breeze of night air.

They both knew the rules of this encounter, it was not their first.

With a savage snarl, the Hound lunged at Embla. Her response was a roundhouse to the chest that sent the maiden flying backwards.

The guards knew better than to come and check.

Embla pressed her advantage, closing the distance in a single step, her fist sinking into the canine's gut. There was enough resistance to show the Hound had at least put some effort in learning since the last time, the canine used the chance to lashing out to rip out the Lady's flesh.

She let her.

Long angry strips of blood and skin were gouged out of her arms. The pain surged through Embla's body like fire, and the next punch found her target's ribs. Embla punched again despite the claws sinking into her arms, the next attack came harder, hammering the feralborn mutt against the wall. Each impact shook the tree with a concussive blow, the pain of the claws sinking into her biceps pushed her to throw herself harder.

It wasn't until she felt the protective layer of elemental energy drop and the Hound's ribs crack that she stopped. Orion was breathing heavily, coughing,

blood dripping from her lips. But her claws remained firmly grasping Embla's biceps, claws having dug themselves past her dark skin.

With barely a flinch, she tore those out and stepped back, letting the Hound drop to the ground. "Is that all?" She growled at the canine, pushing her powers to close the wounds, the bleeding had stopped within seconds. She turned towards the courtyard's entrance. "Berry."

The door opened, and two soldiers entered, quickly leaving a small bag with the healing berries. Embla took one out and tossed it at the feralborn that lay on the ground. At least this time the canine hadn't been dumb enough to throw the offer away, quickly consuming the fruit. It wouldn't heal her broken ribs, but it would go a long way towards leaving them less of a crippling injury.

The canine whimpered and grunted, slowly raising herself to her feet again.

The growl came back.

Embla nodded solemnly. "Good."

Lunging forward, her fists came hard and fast. Orion managed to dodge a few, but she lacked the skill and experience to handle someone that could so openly ignore the pain of having her claws rip into them. Admittedly, the difference in experience would have been enough to mark the difference, but even without it, Embla was in a thoroughly advantageous position when it came to a fight with no powers involved. Her breed was faster, stronger, and had not just a powerful ability to self-heal but also to ignore pain.

The primal maidens had made her breed as natural born mage-killers, able to disrupt and deny spells and some of the more complex elemental abilities. Meanwhile, the Hound wasn't a fighter, she was a hunter. Made to track prey for months and wear them out before delivering death, she had a healing power, but it paled to Embla's.

But the biggest and true drawback besides inexperience was that a Hound was half-way down her genus, its powers not yet realized in full, she still had another shift left in her... once she became strong enough.

Meanwhile, Embla was at the peak. And had been for nearly half a decade.

The spar took four hours before the Hound could not get back up even with the aid of the berries. She had learned the hard way to dodge rather than block, to move out of the way with the least amount of effort. It was a lesson she'd yet to truly hammer down, but there was a talent in the canine, a clear goal somewhere in the maiden's mind she was pushing herself to.

By the time the Hound could stand up no more, most bones had broken under the unrelenting fists. No guard stood around watching for long, many of them were familiar with what training a feralborn maiden meant, and none were keen on spectating after the first ten minutes.

Embla gazed down at Orion, proceeding to pour every bit of her power over the creature to show this had been little more than a warm-up to her.

The Hound grunted, growling weakly but not moving.

Embla rolled her eyes and scooped the canine into her arms, walking her towards the apothecary. The resident healer grunted in annoyance, lifting her gaze from the book she'd been reading. "Again?"

"Again."

Placing the Hound gingerly on the table, the old maiden made an annoyed sound. "You're trailing blood all over the place."

"Someone will clean it."

"You should have cleaned yourself."

"Your tone should clean itself too."

With glowing hands the old maiden leaned over the Hound. There was a sound of annoyance, and then rest. The healer glanced at Embla. "You should show more respect to the one who changed your diapers."

The only response was a cocky smirk as she put her hands on her naked hips. "Going to finish any time soon, hag?"

"For failing to get a feral to bow to you, you're in a good mood."

"Perhaps."

"You fought naked."

Embla shrugged her shoulders slightly. "Maybe I've grown a taste for insolence. Makes it more interesting."

The healer quirked a brow. "Or maybe you're proud your male bonded a high-spirited thing."

The barest hint of color reached Embla's face. "Maybe." She rolled her shoulders to remove the tension.

"Don't think you can fool me, girl, you've been parading that bare neck of yours all over."

"A symbol of freedom."

"At the hands of a human." The woman spoke with an edge of steel.

That caused the woman's eyes to narrow. "What are you trying to insinuate?"

"Nothing, my Lady. I only feel concern about whether you've forgotten our cause."

Embla growled now. "Never."

"Good." A slight nod, the old woman leaned away from the unconscious Hound. "Your mother does not have long, and action must be taken."

"Barry's not ready."

"Your mother's health does not depend on his readiness." The old woman spoke, meeting Embla's steel gaze.

"I am aware."

"If a rush comes through while she is incapacitated like this, we may lose too many to survive."

"I am aware."

A harsh nod followed. "Then act like it."

Embla leveled a glare at the woman, but said nothing. She reached to take Orion from the table and with the feral in her arms, she proceeded to walk over to the nearest shower. She placed the unconscious feral on the floor and allowed the cold water to drench them both. Thoughts of her mother came heavily as she began scrubbing her body clean of the blood, her own wounds closed.

She cared not to dry herself as she headed back to her room.

The guards dared not speak or comment on their Lady carrying a naked drenched Hound back into her chambers. And after laying Orion on the nearest chair, she moved towards the bed, stopping herself at the edge. She looked at the human that slept soundly, hands stretched out in search of someone who was not there. Quietly, in the dark, Embla stared at the pasty pale redhead. The young man whose eyes would still twinkle with wonder and innocence. His warmth called to her with a promise of rest, of peace. A breath of fresh air she had not known she'd needed so desperately.

Had she lost sight of their goals? Had she deluded herself to believe this could continue forever? Fingers reaching for her throat, she caressed where the collar had once been. She could still see the item, its enchantments broken and gone, no more than a piece of leather.

Closing her eyes, Embla steeled her resolve.

She turned towards the dresser, she activated the mage-light to look at her reflection. Her fingers brought the collar up, clicking it around her neck. The sound loud in the silence of the room, her fingers shook for a moment, as if expecting something terrible to happen, of old memories to resurface. But there was nothing, inside or outside, only quiet.

Embla opened her eyes to stare at her reflection once more.

She looked as if a weight had fallen on her shoulders, she knew it to be one that had never left. Her eyes shone with sharpened steel, the soft contours of the hint of the smile she'd worn now gone.

A wave and the light was out.

She turned towards the door, knowing she could not turn to Barry or she'd waver.

The guards froze as she stepped outside, feeling her power as she projected it in full.

She gave but a single command.

"Bring me my armor."

They ran.

Chapter 170 [Mr. Gabriel]

"Elder Gabriel, we should be heading back."

He leveled a stern gaze at Rose. The Centaur squirmed slightly and nodded sheepishly, clopping her hooves and turning to look at the alleyway they'd walked into while remaining silent. There was nothing there save darkness, some trash, and mud, but Mr. Gabriel didn't mind it, walking past and making his way forward. Tess the Mousegirl was stuck to his side, albeit far more loosely than she'd been on the main streets of the city.

She felt safer away from the crowds, and Rose was practically the opposite.

Keeping a steady march, his eyes continued to turn upwards to the rooftops.

The castle town had a feel to it that made it appear haphazardly put together, a certain chaos to the streets and their layout. But he'd seen more subtle traps during his time. The layout was clearly meant to make it hard for attackers to navigate the city effectively. Trying to go on straight lines would lead to dead ends, taking a wrong turn could have you clashing face-first into whatever incoming force was trying to rally their way to the fortress. The philosophy was quite thorough, like trying to use a river's strength against itself.

Old habits died hard, and in this case, Gabriel had spent the better part of the past few days walking around the city. His legs weren't as strong as they used to, but he wasn't about to let that slow him down. "There we go."

There was a mild sense of accomplishment once he confirmed the street they came out to was the one he'd been aiming for. And that meant the conman's house was... "There."

Just slightly further up the street and-

"Ginny!"

The centaur sprung to action faster than Gabriel had the chance to notice what was going on. He spotted the two lizard girls standing in front of the house with a third one talking to them.

"Don't worry Rose, we're alright." Ginny spoke with a wide smile and a flushed face, her hand gestured at the woman next to her. "We met on the market."

"And who is this?"

Gabriel's voice startled Ginny, she turned to him with a moment of nervousness that was followed by a quick bow. "Greetings, elder, I was merely introducing a maiden I met at the market."

His eyes turned towards the woman in question. She wore a long dark cloak which hid just about everything about her save her head. Her hair was a shimmering blue that made it appear as if made out of gems, her eyes a brilliant gold, high rosy cheekbones and a picture perfect demure smile framed in ruby red lips. Her eyes locked on him, and for a moment Gabriel felt like he was a teenager all over again.

The moment was fleeting, however, leaving him with only a slight smile of days long past.

"I met a woman like you, once. Most exotic girl in Ho Chi Minh."

Her face flushed slightly, she bowed her head. "You are too kind, sir."

"That, and she gave half the platoon more crabs than a crustacean buffet."

"Excuse me?"

He laughed, ignoring the shocked and confused expression the maiden shot his way. He waved them off.

"Don't pay me any mind, I'm just some old bones rattling." His focus moved to the blue-lizard girl. "My hell-spawn still jumping on the bed with the Tomas boy?"

Instantly the woman squirmed. "I, erm-"

"So yes." His gaze rose towards the window on the second floor, eyes narrowing slightly.

"Ginny?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Go tell her she has exactly ten minutes before I go up to get her down myself."

"I, um-."

"I am going to count the time, whether you tell her or not."

Jumping from her spot, the maiden turned towards the house, rushing inside.

"It appears you are quite strict." The voice came out smooth, the stranger stepping closer to him.

"Owner of the house is too scared to put his foot down. Someone's got to hammer some manners into that girl."

"Children do need some tough love from time to time."

"You have any of your own?" He turned to look at her, noticing her hand gently patting Lizzy's head. The reptilian maiden nuzzling into the touch.
"That girl was a very squiggly line."

"You're surely not insinuating I am old enough to have children, sir?"

"I met one of you lot that looked as young as my granddaughter and was closer to my age. I'm not taking chances with assumptions."

The smile remained sweet and soft as her golden eyes shone. "A very wise view. Is there a Miss Elder by any chance?"

"Long gone, I'm afraid."

"Ferals?"

"Illness."

"I am sorry to hear that. She must have been very happy with such a man at her side."

"The lucky one was me." A deep sigh, he glanced at Rose, the Centaur had gone quiet, moving to his side and watching the conversation unfold. On the opposite side, Tess was gripping his hand tight enough to hurt.

The door opened. "I have informed her, sir."

"Good, good. The ten minutes were almost up, anyway." He glanced at the blue-haired woman. "I think you should be going now."

"Indeed, my owner must be getting worried."

Gabriel snorted. "Owner, sure."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"A pretty woman like you? Men would be lining up to get wrapped around your finger like a ring."

She laughed, the sound a soft chime that sent chills through places Gabriel hadn't felt move in decades. "This was a very pleasant meeting, Elder." She bowed low. "I hope to meet you again."

"I'd invite you in, but it's not my home." He shrugged, giving a dismissive wave of goodbye. "Maybe when I'm under my own roof."

"I will be waiting, then." She bowed again. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Liz, Ginny, and Rose."

"Have a nice day!" She Draco waved her hand enthusiastically and watching her go.

Gabriel merely stepped into the house with Tess, stroking her hair with his free hand until she loosened her death-grip on his fingers. The mouse slowly eased and relaxed until she leaned into his hip, wrapping her arms around his chest in a hug.

He waited until Ginny brought in Lizzy and closed the door before talking.

"You should be careful around that woman."

"I... she is a stranger's maiden, of course, sir. We must be careful." She nodded emphatically but it was obvious her response came from an instruction manual.

"The only time Tess gets this terrified is when Monica's looking directly at her." His expression grew stern.

"I will keep that in mind, elder. I thank you for your wisdom." Another quick nod before crouching, taking out some leather straps from her pocket and putting on what looked like little leather boots on her claws. "Miss Rose should be waiting for me at the back, I'll let her. Hopefully we can help to prepare dinner."

"You do that."

With a weary sigh, he turned to walk his way up the stairs. He didn't need a cane, Tess was more than eager to help him every step. The young woman was no more than four and a half feet tall and she showed far more strength than any he could muster. Likely more than he ever could have.

Reaching his granddaughters' room, he knocked twice.

The door swung open. "Wha... Hello gramps."

"Well, at least I can be sure you got that from my side of the tree." She yelped when he reached out to pinch the back of her hand. "Keep your hormones in check, girl, this isn't your house."

"Hey!" She rubbed at the back of her hand. "I can do whatever I want."

"And so can I. Your mother taught you better than to be this disrespectful."

"What do you want me to do? This city blows, the closest to a party they don't even have parties unless it's some big event or whatever."

"Well, Victor did say he had a daughter that..."

"Shut up!" Gabriel and Kat spoke in unison, the shirtless Tomas flinched.

"You can help with the meals."

Kat's eyes widened. "Are you joking? That's what the maidens are for."

"You can speak up when you get a better idea." He leaned over to glance at Tomas. "Same goes to you."

"... yes sir." He sighed.

"What!?" Kat whirled on him.

He just shrugged. "I don't have a better idea."

The two began to throw half-hearted grumbles at one another, and Gabriel could only sigh. He couldn't wait until he found some place to settle down his weary bones and stop worrying so much about the petty things.

It was just so tiresome.

Chapter 171 [Pan]

The sound of loud banging startled Pan out of her bed. Her sword was in her hand within instants. The room was dark, the light shinning through the cracks in the wooden panel that covered the window telling her it was still late at night.

"Pan, wake up!"

Kajou's voice eased her concerns, she sheathed the sword. "I'm coming."

"Dress up."

That gave her pause. If she was to dress, then this was more than just Kajou visiting at the late hours. Pan nodded and quickly donned her full gear, the movements a welcome comfort, the protective clothes were always more comfortable than the alternatives. She was out of the small room within the span of two minutes, finding Kajou and two Court guards flanking her.

"The Lady's called for an emergency meeting."

Pan's brows rose, was it finally time? "Do you think...?"

"I think nothing. I've not been told what this meeting is about."

The tone stung, but Pan kept it from showing. It was clear Kajou was still very much irritated. Perhaps from their last argument, or the one prior. At this point it was becoming hard to keep track of what had been the last issue to cause sparks between them.

They marched into the palace, its massive size hidden in the darkness as the trees stretched up towards the night sky. Four towers that had been built by the elves long before the current Court came to be. Pan couldn't help but wonder whether the dark elves had sought this place or merely stumbled upon it, her wings itched with the sense of awe for the elves of old, now long locked in slumber or enslaved to the humans.

The moment they stepped into the palace it was clear something was off. The guards were tense, they were trained, their emotions hidden behind discipline. But it was a clear sense of something larger looming over everyone.

Kajou had clearly noticed as well, her hand remaining idly on her sword.

They were taken towards the conference room.

The table was gone, the chairs were gone, in their stead was Embla, seated on a stool as if it were a throne. She had the same fearsome black armor they had seen her wearing during the feral rush, using her right hand to hold the giant war-axe standing in place as it rested beside her. The implications prickled at the back of Pan's mind. She shared a look with her sister, they knew they'd just stepped into a Dragoness' den. They could feel the gaze of the maiden from within her helmet. One wrong step and they would burn.

"We greet you, Lady Embla." They spoke in unison, bowing low in a show of cordiality and deference.

There was the barest of nods. "I greet you in turn." Embla's voice carried perfectly even through the armor's helmet. Silence stretched out, and the sisters glanced at each other once more. "I have reached a conclusion to our negotiations. But you will first wait."

Wait for what? Another worried quiet look, they dared not speak and nodded.

It didn't take more than a minute for someone to knock at the door.

"Come in."

As soon as Pan noticed who was opening the door, she felt her hackles rise. Her hand twitched and froze when Kajou's own hand gripped it tightly, the two maidens shared a cross look as Pan's jaw clenched shut tightly and waited in silence as Barry stepped into the room.

The human was clearly not to meet them either.

"Do you... need me?"

"Yes, come."

Even with Barry's presence, both sisters could feel the Lady had not moved her focus away from them even an inch. Once he was standing in front of her, she waited several more seconds before moving her attention to the human.

"You have lived with us for several months. You have seen our ways, met our people, and have dined with us." Embla's voice boomed outwards, carrying every bit of power she wielded. "It is time to decide. Will you join us?"

He shuddered under the pressure, nearly falling to his knees but holding out. "I... thought I had."

"No, you had not." She stood, dwarfing him. "Joining the Court means you will fall under my command. It means you are ready to obey that command. And it means you are ready to lay down your life for our cause. Do you understand what this means?"

"I mean, I-."

Squirming, he did not step back as she stepped closer. His eyes looked into the helmet and he paled.

"This is your only chance to make a decision. If you stay, you become one of ours, we will protect you as one of ours, but we will also command you like one of ours." A heartbeat of silence. "If you leave, you can do so on your own, or with them."

Seeing the look of panic Barry had when looking their way, it suddenly became clear why they'd been called. Pan's eyes widened and fury boiled in her blood, her mind was half made up to stake a step forward before she felt Kajou's grip tightening around her hand painfully. Only then did she realize Lady Embla had not let go of the gigantic war-axe, holding the weapon exactly where it needed to be to block them if they tried anything. And trying anything would get them summarily executed, no doubt.

"I... I want to join. I want to fight with you."

Barry's voice carried as much resolve as it could under the pressure Lady Embla was putting out. He was shaking, pale, and likely would faint soon, so it had come out as barely a whisper.

"Very well." She released the pressure, he stumbled forward, falling into her embrace. With one arm wrapped around his shoulders and pulling him against the armor, Embla's attention turned towards Pan and her sister. "How this proceeds will depend on you."

"What do you mean?"

"Barry was liberated from your abuse upon his reaching our Court. Under our law, he is due vengeance."

A chill ran down Pan's back.

"Even by Coven standards, you have been barbaric."

Pan took a step forward, and Kajou yanked her back. The Valkyrie glared at her sister. "Don't do this." Kajou mouthed under her breath, pale and shaken. If a fight broke out, they knew exactly how it would develop.

She yanked her hand out of Kajou's grasp, turning towards Lady Embla with a glare.

"You took us in and yanked us around like we're some-."

The words were cut short, the war-axe swung and Pan barely had the time to unsheathe her blade to block it. Her whole body rung like a bell, instinct moving faster than thought, wings spreading wide to slow down right before smashing into the wall. The most surprising thing wasn't how hard she hit the wall, but why Lady Embla had not followed through and split her body in two.

"STOP!"

Barry stood between the Lady and Pan, arms wide. He was three shades paler, skin closer to snow than flesh.

"I don't want revenge."

"That had not been for what you are owed." Embla had not moved, war-axe held on her right hand like it weighed nothing. "You have two choices, ambassadors." Her voice was smooth, cold. "You can either both die, or the Valkyrie willingly surrenders and the other leaves."

Pan's eyes widened.

"If you surrender, the Amazoness walks away with everything we know about the collars we were supplied."

"That's a death sentence all the same!" The winged maiden shrieked. "She'd be feral by the time she reached the mountains."

"Not if she bonds Bary."

Whatever was said next, Pan did not hear it. She roared, bursting away from the wall with fury and coating herself with radiant flames. There was just enough sense to know she would stand no chance against the Lady, so she turned her focus towards the human. Putting every bit of power she could pour into her blade, she met the scared look on his face as she swung.

Just as her blade began to arch downwards, something washed over her, and the world around her became empty of energy, of her own power. The searing white fire surrounding her blade sputtered and died, the energy coating her body for protection vanished.

It knocked the air out of her, everything slowed, the very acceleration she'd been trusting on dying as well. She didn't see the metal boot coming her way, but she felt it as it landed squarely against her chest right as her powers flickered back into existence. It barely avoided her ribs cracking under the impact.

The consideration as to how to retaliate died when the war-axe came down upon her. Again, instinct kicked in and she raised her blade, gathering every bit of power she could in an attempt to deflect the incoming attack. The two

blades sent sparks flying, Pan kept a close eye on the Lady's energy, trying to get a read whether the next attack would be elemental in nature or physical.

She didn't expect another burst of void to hit her. It was followed by a singular punch to the chest that came before her powers came back. She chocked and stumbled, the war-axe was coming back, its edge bit into her leg with searing hot pain. Pan did not hesitate, lunging forward with her wings right as her powers flickered back in place, blade dancing towards the visor.

Her adversary turned enough for the metal to miss and scrape against the enchanted murisium. The movement flowed into a thrusting movement with the butt of the axe, smashing against Pan's wing. The blow was too heavy, Pan stumbled back, nearly falling over from her wounded leg.

With glowing hands she sealed the wound before it could bleed her dry. There were voices shouting, but she heard none, leaping right forward. Her blade thrusting at her enemy as she carefully tried to read when the next flicker of void would hit her. Not that she could keep her focus away from the war-axe more than a split second, the Lady swung it close to her body with such precision and speed it was impossible anyone else would have been able to accomplish such a feat, even less within the tight quarters of the room.

Lady Embla danced with her axe, a deadly sharpened edge stuck to a gigantic pole of wood and steel that barely avoid scraping against her own body. The armor and weapon ought to weight several humans on their own, even maidens would have a problem putting that much inertia and shift the direction, but Lady Embla made it look easy, weightless, a leaf in the wind.

Pan had no room to attack, barely room to defend. She gathered her power onto her blade, ready to strike at her opponent's elbow, seeing the gap in the armor.

Pan did not expect Lady Embla to take the attack, to allow it to pierce into her flesh.

In her surprise, she could not react to the burst of void.

Nor the war-axe coming down to her head with a definitive blow.

Except something shoved her out of the way.

The cry that followed made Pan's world shatter.

Kajou stumbled, her right arm gone, a spray of blood painting Pan's side.

There was only one thing she could do.

"I yield!"

She threw herself in front of the Lady, kneeling and looking up at the uncaring cold eyes within the helmet. "I... yield." Her hands spread wide, her head hung low. "Please, not... not her."

"Pan..." Kajou grimaced.

A clatter of steel and stone, Pan's sword yanked out of the wound and tossed across the room to a corner. Lady Embla wasn't even breathing hard, she merely reached down and, with a gesture, yanked Pan's collar.

"You won't be needing this. I heard of what you'd done to Barry and his companion during your trip. And so the same will be done to you." She tossed the piece of enchanted leather at Kajou and ignored the younger maiden as she turned to Barry. "They will go feral in one week. Whoever you have not bonded with, I will execute."

The guards took them both away.

Chapter 172 [Rick]

"This breaks physics."

Sitting on the large plush bed, legs crossed, Rick kept glaring at the book about '*alchemy*' that he'd been provided by the maids as a "loan" from the Earl.

"How so, sir?" Dia, leaning into his shoulder, had been glancing at the book.

"Here." He pointed at the formula that'd been written down on the yellowed pages. "It lists that the total mass changed. In a sealed environment."

"Well, yes. Metal-based elemental energy interacts differently with an elemental stone than with a piece of wood." She pointed at the start of the formula. "The properties of the elemental stone barely changed, but the wood gained weight."

"Mass doesn't just..." Rick rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "Where does the weight come from? Does elemental energy have weight?"

"Sometimes?"

"So if a maiden just goes and uses a lot of that elemental energy, her weight abruptly goes down?"

Dia giggled. "Oh no, that would be crazy."

He could feel the start of a migraine. "I think I'm going to need to look at the fundamentals. Is there any... alchemy... book that's more basic than this?"

"I will ask, but I think this is as basic as it goes, sir." She nodded with a wry smile. "Does chemistry work differently where you come from?"

"This isn't chemistry, it's..." He closed the book and sighed. "Science is something you can replicate consistently. It's trying to figure out the building

blocks and how they mesh. And this... this feels like I'm looking at an art book on how to draw. Except I don't have any brushes."

"But you have me, sir. And the kitten who must not be named lest she wake up."

They both glanced to the side. Monica was curled up in a ball and sleeping soundly.

"I know you're trying to make it sound reassuring, but it doesn't mesh well with me." Rick said. "It's... to make alchemy I have to get my hands on a maiden with the elemental energy I want to use? And she must be talented enough to be consistent with her output? And... none of this really explains what elemental energy is. Not as an actual fundamental force."

"I'm sorry, sir, I can't give you a proper answer either." She placed her hand on his knee. "I could tell you what lack or excess of elemental energy does to a body, of some of the more common afflictions pertaining to this, and the basics for healing spell casting, but..."

Monica's ears perked up, her head rose, turning to the door. Two seconds after, there was a soft knock. Rick glanced at the Sabertooth, gauging her current mood. She wasn't alert, merely curious, which had to mean whomever was knocking wasn't perceived as a threat.

"Come in."

The door creaked open, and a mousy woman stepped inside. With a pale complexion and gray hair, the maiden looked older than her peach-shaped face would have otherwise shown. She took a single step inside, barely enough to close the door behind her, and immediately stiffened like a board. Even if her eyes and ears were aimed directly at Rick, it was clear she could feel Monica's presence.

"The Earl invites you to a boar hunt, sir."

"Hunt?" Monica perked further, fully sitting up and glancing between Rick and the mouse.

Rick kept his lips locked into a passive expression. "When would it be?"

"In five days, sir. The Earl understands you may not have the proper apparel, and has offered calling for a seamstress." She shifted ever so slightly.

"Unless sir intends to head out to the city?"

"Oh god no." The words slipped out of his mouth before he could stop them. He quickly shook his head. "No, no, just... thank the Earl for his offer. I would appreciate having the seamstress brought here. And thank you."

"Of course, sir."

She turned to leave, softly closing the door behind her.

"Huh."

"What is it, sir?"

"She's the first one that didn't run."

"You think she might come back?" Dia chuckled.

"Honestly, I hope so. Monica needs to get accustomed to... people."

"Sir, with all due respect, you've spent most of your time locked inside this singular room. This is not a great example." Her tone had a slight humor to it, her finger poking his shoulder. "I may soon have to invoke concern for your health so I can drag you outside."

"I know..." He shook his head. "And Monica is only going to take so long before she starts becoming bored with the monotony. We should start thinking about how to handle the hunting thing."

Monica approached the bed, glancing down at him with a frown. "Rick hunt?"

"She looks giddy... why does she look giddy about that?"

"She looks like normal."

"No, no, look at the tail." Rick gestured. "It's flicking. She flicks it when she's giddy."

Monica frowned, crawling onto the bed and poking him with her claw. "Rick. Hunt?" She asked more insistently.

"Alone."

She quirked a brow and snorted. "No."

"It's not something you can argue, Monica. You can't just ghost me everywhere."

"Rick no hunt alone. Hurt."

"I get that. It's not like I have a choice."

Dia giggled. Both Rick and Monica glared at her. "Monica doesn't know half the words you are using, sir, but she's clearly understanding your intentions."

"I think it's the bond. It helps... somewhat." His shoulders slumped. He glanced at Monica. "Boar hunt. Only a boar, nothing else. Just..."

"Rick soft. No hunt alone." Another poke.

"Small hunt."

"No. Rick hurt."

This time she poked the center of his chest, and he could only wince as he felt more than saw Dia's expression darken.

"Sir?"

"It's nothing, just a scare when she got a bit rough."

"Sir!?" She raised her voice now. "Monica got *rough*!?"

"Not that kind. She got a bit tough, and I just had a thing."

"Is this... oh, this is when I started feeling *horrible* all of a sudden!" Dia's eyes widened. "I spent an hour doing self-diagnosis when I should have run over here! You should have told me, sir!"

"Rick no hunt alone."

Monica's poke knocked him onto his back, the two now leveling determined anger his way. He laid on his back, frowning. His lips parted as he tried to form the proper words to the two scowls aimed at him. Slowly he glanced between Dia and Monica. He could actually feel their concern. If he didn't pay close attention, he might have mistaken it for his own. With a deep sigh, he just closed his eyes and leaned further into the bed.

"We have five days to convince Monica to not get in the way." A sharp inhale. "And if we can't, then... I don't know what we'll do then."

"Sir?"

"As to what happened to you, I'm sorry I lost control like that. I shouldn't have allowed it to get that bad." Opening his eyes again, he moved to the edge of the bed. "I think I'm going to need to take a walk or something."

"Rick?"

"But I can't, because Monica clings to me, afraid that I'm going to die or vanish the instant she isn't within pouncing range." His brows furrowed. "But we can't let that keep up."

When he opened his eyes again, he saw the glares had been replaced with concern. His own gaze moved from Monica to Dia, and then back.

"Fuck it."

Moving to leave the bed, he slipped his shoes on.

"I'm going to take a walk."

Two steps towards the door, Monica had intercepted, placing herself between him and the exit.

"I'm going to take a walk. And you are staying."

He tried to take a step around her, and she made sure to body-block his path to the door.

"Monica protect."

"Yeah, well, this is Rick protect."

Monica took a slight step back, confused. He took the chance and stepped around her before she could throw some more questions or, worse, block him. The feline shot him a strange look as he closed the door behind himself. On the bed, Dia looked on with her own concern.

The moment the door closed behind him, Rick took a sharp right and began walking. His mind was running through the number of meters he estimated he'd traversed. Twelve steps, thirty, sixty. It wasn't until he'd been fully and entirely certain that he'd gotten outside of Monica's incredible hearing range that he let out a long, withering sigh.

Slumping against the nearest wall, he took a deep breath.

That had been harder than he'd expected.

His heart was beating a mile a minute, even if he wasn't entirely sure why.

Regardless, now came the harder part. Waiting.

Chapter 173 [Rick]

Though Rick had left the room with the intention of just clearing his head, he'd been just about ready to run straight back in. He wasn't sure why, but that was the feeling that was coursing through him currently, as he sat on a set of stone stairs and trying to pretend he'd intentionally stopped there for some reason or another.

He was right where Monica couldn't hear him or feel his exact location anymore.

Rick wasn't sure how he knew that, how he was so sure about it, but he knew. He was a dozen steps away from her becoming aware of where he was again. He was half sure that just talking loudly would let her hear him, even there. It felt absurd. His brain told him it shouldn't be possible for her to be able to just hear him exist this far off from the room. Was it over twenty meters away? More?

And the only reason he had that sense of certainty was because he felt a sense of anxiousness gnawing at the back of his mind. A feeling that he was sure had to be Monica's. But at the same time it was hard to separate from his own. Her nervousness was rubbing off on him in a way that made his back cold with sweat.

"Do you... need anything, sir?"

The owner of the voice meekly stood next to Rick, a Mousegirl with a long and plain maid uniform. The pale complexion and button nose were easily recognizable as the one who'd come into his room just a handful of minutes ago. "Just catching my breath."

She nodded, head turning towards the corridor he'd come from.

"Would sir wish for some privacy? This place would certainly... draw attention."

"Uh, sure, I guess, just not too far off from here."

"The gardens are just down the stairs to the right. It is a good place to... catch one's breath." She paused for a moment. "If you follow the wall to the left, it leads to a small untended corner that is out of sight. Very few know of it."

"Oh, thank you." Rick rubbed at his forehead, slowly moving his fingers to his temples as he did his best to control his breathing. "What's your name?"

"My name, sir?"

"Yes."

"My Mistress calls me Little Mouse."

"I see." He let out a slow sigh. "And what's your name?"

Her lips curled slightly upwards. "Little Mouse, sir." She gave a curt bow and turned to leave.

Rick waited for a minute before he got up and began to make his way down the stairs. He attempted to mostly take in the views as he moved. The fortress had a definite medieval feel to it, but there were also modern aspects incorporated. The walls, though made with large stone bricks, were almost polished smooth, with barely a gap between the large blocks. The stairs were covered with a rug of some sort, dark green and rough to the touch. The illumination was more modern. No candles or torches, but rather constant stable lights within colored glass orbs placed on the walls. They looked electric, but when Rick tried to move a hand close to one, the tingling on his skin told him they were made with elemental energy somehow.

The door leading outside was guarded, the two maidens wearing some teal blue uniforms opening the way without prompting, wait, or question. They acted as if they were nothing more than statues.

"Thank you."

The small comment caused them both to tense, though they remained quiet.

The outside world brought with it a breath of fresh air he hadn't realized he'd been sorely missing. Sunshine and a cool breeze did wonders at the tension on his shoulders.

The garden was lush, just down the set of stairs there was a tunnel that had been built by having several trees entwine with one another, forming long archways. The trees were different from one another. Rick was no botanist, but he could at least see no less than a dozen just at a first glance. Each one had its own leaves and flowers, their own shapes, giving the tunnel an almost kaleidoscopic appearance.

Rather than walk through it, however, he glanced to the left, spotting a narrow space between the fortress' walls and the outer edge of the trees. It was hidden well enough. He would have certainly missed it if not for Little Mouse's directions. So he followed, finding his steps slightly irregular and uncomfortable, but the ground was well trodden, this space clearly being used often. Perhaps to allow servants to care for the garden from places inaccessible from within the tunnel.

Within just a dozen meters or so, he'd made it to a small clearing that had the stone walls on one side and the trees on the other. Under the shade of the tree, there was an empty bench.

Rick took the opportunity to reassess the situation with Monica. She was still nervous, and it was gnawing at him. Strangely enough, he was fairly sure he wasn't all too far from her detection range. There was a mild sensation that if he kept himself to the wall and continued further into the garden, he'd eventually get closer to her.

It was weird, strange, and disconcerting. The emotions and feelings clearly came from the bond. They hadn't been as apparent while traveling or while he'd been recovering. Something had shifted since that fight with the Baron, something that had been growing and hadn't become apparent until now.

Or maybe he just hadn't paid attention. He'd been able to draw pain from Monica while she fought. That wasn't something that should be possible. Irene, the town psychic, hadn't been sure about that either. She had certainly

been emphatic over how little she knew about bonds. He'd have to find an expert in the field to be able to give him answers.

The sound of crunching dirt drew Rick's attention.

"Oh, I didn't know this was occupied already."

The man was young, barely past his teens. His hair was long and smooth, his complexion thin and fair. The first thought that crossed Rick's mind was that the stranger had been plucked straight out of some 90s boy-band.

"Don't mind me, I'm just here to breathe."

"Oh, uh, ok. Thank you, sir."

He sat down on the opposite side of the bench, looking straight ahead.

Rick tried to get back into organizing his thoughts, but he could feel the young man looking at him every other second. He was trying to be discreet and failing. "Yes?"

"I... wouldn't want to be a bother."

Too late for that.

"You've got something to ask, I'm guessing?"

"Are you... you know, the one?"

Rick shot him a weird look. "The what?"

"The owner of... White Claw."

"That's me." He sighed, slumping further into the bench. "Name's Rick."

"Right, sorry, I'm just being rude, I'm sorry." The young man made vague hand gestures as he stood. "You're clearly looking to relax and I just should've kept quiet."

Rick looked at him from head to toe. The guy looked like one coffee cup away from imploding. "What's your name?"

"Oh, uh, Nicolas."

"And what's your trouble?"

The man fidgeted. "I don't think they're that important, sir, not compared to... well."

"Compared to... what?"

"Well, handling such a dangerous maiden." The man coughed. "A Tigress is already very dangerous. I've heard of how they've ripped their partners apart merely because they were not worthy. And you have one who's shifted to an even stronger form..."

Rick's back straightened slightly. "You know about Tigresses?"

Nicolas appeared confused for a split second, nodding. "Only rumors. They are very rare outside of the southern villages. And they're infamously hard to bond, which is why they're so dangerous. I once-"

"But there's tamed ones." Rick dismissed the warning. "What's known about those? There's barely any written material about them."

"That would likely be because they were one of the stronger and most successful factions during the rebellion against the kingdom's power. At least in the south. They are dangerous to humans since they'd never bond with-"

"I'm asking about their culture." Rick's voice came out in a growl, meeting the young man's gaze intently.

Nicolas paled, nodding quickly. "They respect power, above all else."

"But what about humans? There's no way a human can compare to a maiden in power."

"Of course, even gifted humans are far weaker than maidens." A very quick nod, almost eager, his shoulders relaxing and a smile emerging on his lips. "Which is why Tigresses are known to be violent against humans who try to impose on them."

"Sure, sure, but what about the relationships?"

"I... am not sure what you are talking about."

"When a tigress decides she will have a human, what happens then?"

"Well, they test the human, and if they're not worthy, then..."

"Oh." Rick blinked a little.

"Which is why they're so dangerous. You should definitely watch out."

"Hm... are you sure you don't know anything else?"

"It is based on rumors. They tend to be very isolated, so..."

"Ah, a shame." Rick nodded slightly, standing up from the bench. "But I think you've helped me a bit." He moved to stand, dusting himself off. "Thanks."

"I... you're welcome?"

"Best of luck, Nicolas."

Rick headed back through where he came from, leaving the young man to look on in shock.

Chapter 174 [Royal Knight Captain Deneva]

Royal Knight Captain Deneva sensed Rick approaching his room not because of his presence, but because the Sabertooth within the room had stopped pacing behind the door. The human was frustratingly hard to detect through his aura. It was weak enough Deneva was certain she'd seen newborn humans with a stronger presence. By comparison, the feline maiden that had remained at his side was a miniature sun. She held back nothing, and even when asleep her power was annoyingly washing over everything around her as if laying claim to it.

Deneva had seen cadets with better control over themselves. Still, she had to begrudgingly accept that the feralborn cat was strong enough any of the knights would not really be able to stop her. The Lord's decision to put her on guard duty was understandable, but did he really need to make her act like some lowly maid?

"Excuse me, miss Deneva?"

It was the human, Rick.

"Do you need anything?"

She eyed him, acknowledging his presence. Everything about him was as feeble as his aura, yet Deneva felt her gaze gravitating towards his hands, as if a part of her half-expected him to attack. There was an intensity in his pose, his gaze, his gestures. Like an echo of the feral that was bonded to him.

Curious.

"Would I be correct in assuming that your orders are to keep a check on Monica so she doesn't harm anyone?"

"Yes."

"And would I be correct in assuming that if you saw the need to intervene, it would be seen as a failure on my part to handle her?"

Deneva kept her expression impassive as she spoke. "Yes." Sensing a twinge of amusement from him, she wanted to frown, but she'd be dead before she did such a basic misstep in protocol.

"I would like to request a small game involving Monica. Though I guess the intent would be to consider it more like a training exercise. Would I need to speak with the Earl over the details? Or would it suffice to talk it over with you since you're the captain?"

A game?

Deneva caught herself half-way into scoffing at such a proclamation. Her gaze moved upwards to meet his gaze. "It would depend on the details."

With a nod, Rick began to explain his idea. The more Deneva heard, the harder it was to keep her expression impassive. One thing became clear: the Lord would have to be the one to approve of it.

"And you intend this to be a... learning experience?"

Deneva stood next to her Lord, the man's aura hidden behind layers of enchanted protections, impossible to read by even herself. But it was easy to tell there was an edge of enthusiasm behind the otherwise dubious cadence of his voice.

"Yes, sir. I've been trying to seek alternate ways to teach Monica societal values, and I believe this may be one way to go about a rather important lesson."

Rick, on the other hand, was a study in opposites. The human had the fearful aura of a thief that had been caught mid-burglary. Yet his body kept a tight appearance of confidence, almost calm. His tone was cordial and respectful,

but his eyes held no deference. His words were controlled, but they were spoken in a hurry.

Deneva had stood next to his room for long enough to know the man to be weak and deferential to his own maidens. What they wanted, he gave freely.

"And what lesson would that be?" The Earl asked, pretending to be bored.

"Trust, sir." Rick answered quickly enough. It was clear he'd expected the question. "Monica's relationship with knights has been... harsh. She would sooner assume they would attack us than protect us."

The truth in Rick's aura gave Deneva pause. She urged her own aura to press against her Lord's hand. A signal that the words were important. To Deneva's senses, the statement had been true and not just in reference to the feralborn maiden.

"I see." The Earl nodded slowly. "I will approve of this. Though you would understand the need for caution."

"Indeed, sir."

"Deneva? How long would the preparations take?"

She would have to gather as many of the knights as they could spare. This was an opportunity for them as well, after all.

"Thirty minutes, my Lord."

"Very well. Rick, you may leave."

"Thank you, sir."

A curt bow, and he departed.

The Lord waited until after the doors had closed before he acknowledged Deneva's presence. "What are your thoughts on this?"

"He has no more control over his maidens than over the weather. The Rapha has some semblance of discipline, but it is clear that it is by no merit of her current owner."

"Is that so?"

"It is, my Lord. It is in my humble opinion White Claw is merely humoring him. It is only a matter of time before her amusement runs out and disaster comes."

"Are you suggesting I take her from him?"

Though his tone was calm, there was an edge of steel in his posture that brought a chill. She quickly spoke up, lowering her head further. "I would never dare presume such a decision, let alone suggest it, my Lord. Excuse my impudence."

"I've been pondering on it. As you've said, he does not control his maidens. Yet it is clear he is not passive either." A contemplative edge emerged on his plump features. "There is something about his ways that feels familiar..."

Deneva lowered her bow.

"What is your command, my Lord?"

He nodded sharply. "I think I would like to... surprise him."

The sun glared down upon the dusty ground from its zenith.

Three fourths of all knights in the city had gathered in the training grounds. The orders had been clear, and everyone had moved with the discipline of a royal knight captain. Within the half hour, nearly a hundred maidens stood at attention. Save for a handful of exceptions, all high ranking knights that had been within the city were present.

And even through their stoic silence, there were murmurs.

Everyone had heard of White Claw and her owner. The fact that the two had remained locked up in the room had only fanned the flames of curiosity. Anyone with a bare minimum of perception of elemental energy would have been able to feel White Claw's energy permeating over a third of the fortress, and anyone with heightened hearing would have surely heard of the nightly activities she and the human engaged in.

Now the mythical feralborn maiden was there in the flesh, pushing her presence outward with a level of force that was making the poor pink-haired Rapha pale. But it wouldn't be enough to intimidate the knights. Deneva had long since ensured each and every maiden under her command could not be scared by cheap tricks.

"Would you do the honors, Rick?"

The Earl spoke with magnanimous grace.

Rick had been practically invisible. His aura was hidden within the downpour from White Claw's own. If not because he stood in front of her, no one would have been able to acknowledge his existence.

"Sir?"

"You did intend to be part of this. You should be able to explain it better than I."

"... right."

The man moved stiffly towards the center of the combat training field. White Claw's behavior turned her focus from the gathered knights to him. The intensity of her gaze would have made many a maiden freeze. Yet it did not appear to affect Rick as he turned his back on the Earl so he could address the gathered knights.

"I am looking to aid in training Monica to be more trusting. To do so, I will need volunteers for this game." He gestured at the feline. "The game is simple. She will attempt to reach me, and the volunteers must stop her. But

you must neither use weapons, spells, nor special abilities. The goal is to show her that she can trust your skills in ensuring a human's safety."

Deneva felt the Lord's mirth as he called out to those gathered. "Any volunteers?"

As one, all hundred knights took a step forward. Next to Deneva, the Earl's lips curled in amusement.

Chapter 175 [Royal Knight Captain Deneva]

"Monica hunt Rick. Knights protect Rick."

Rick's words had been simple enough, pulling up a chair and placing it at the center of the training grounds. Deneva stood next to her Lord, holding the umbrella and keeping a keen eye out for potential dangers.

"No." Monica proclaimed, looking at Rick and then the six knights standing between her and him.

Each knight wore their full combat regalia, their visored helmets obscuring their faces. The murisium metal had been intricately carved with protective enchantments that would make even a Dragoness unable to bring them down in a single blow.

"Monica protect Rick." The feline's aura covered the entire field like an angry blanket, smoldering in annoyance and irritation.

"This is a game, Monica." He replied, tone calm. "Monica hunt Rick."

Deneva felt her hackles rise. Negotiating with one's own maiden was a severe sign of weakness. One could never trust such a human would be able to accomplish a mission, much less survive without dragging someone else with them.

"Monica win? Prize?"

The feline was looking at the knights, all of them were captains of their own squadrons. Deneva knew none would individually be able to provide the kind of power that could outmatch White Claw on their own other than herself, but as a team? There was little doubt they would succeed. Even with the absurdly powerful aura that would have made recruits falter, there was little doubt on how things would end once they started.

"Yes, prize." Rick calmly leaned into the chair, directing his words to the knights.

"Sex prize?"

Rick's face turned several shades of red and then pale. None of the knights dared laugh, but the amusement passed over the auras of everyone gathered like a wave.

"Oh my." The Earl chuckled, covering his mouth curtly.

"Monica, not now. Talk later, game now."

"No sex, no hunt."

"Come on..." Rick quickly looked around, and the knights avoided meeting his gaze out of respect. With slumped shoulders, the man rubbed at his temples. "Yes sex."

"Orgy?"

"If you lose, I'm giving orgy to Dia."

This time it was the Rapha's turn to go from brilliant red to pale. The poor maiden would have likely shrunk herself to nothing if she had the ability to do so. As it stood, she locked her gaze to the ground and tried to blend with the surroundings.

"Monica win." The feline proclaimed.

"You should prepare yourselves." Rick's voice carried softly, grasping at the chair he was sitting on firmly.

"Don't worry, sir, we know what we're doing."

The feline took a step forward. "Monica hunt."

Raising her hands high into the air, she slammed them down against the ground with concussive force. Instantly, a cloud of dust rose into the air all

around her. Rubble and sand scattered in every direction. Deneva snorted, crossing her arms.

"What are your thoughts?" Her Lord spoke softly.

"A fruitless attempt. Even if they cannot see her, it is still very easy to detect-."

Deneva froze.

The aura was gone. The absence of the overbearing presence almost deafening to her senses.

A hard thumping sound followed, and Deneva stepped to place herself between her Lord and the potential threat, the pommel of her blade in hand. The royal knight captain's hackles rose as she sharpened herself. If this was some ruse to attack the Earl, then...

"From above."

It came as a surprise that Rick had been the one to shout the warning.

As one, the six knights leaned to look in the pointed direction. White Claw had emerged right at the peak of the dust plume, the angle clearly intended to land squarely where Rick sat.

As one, they shouted. "Shields!"

Their coordination was impeccable. The six surrounded Rick, raising their shield arms and forming an impenetrable barrier. White Claw landed on it with a solid thud, though rather than move or roll off, she merely stood on top of the shields, tapping against them with her claw in apparent annoyance and contemplation.

"Heave!"

The knights thrust the shields upwards, sending the feline off. Though it did little, the feline landed with ease. Under normal circumstances, the knights would have moved to a battle formation and engaged White Claw, but

without being able to use their weapons or elemental abilities, it would be a more reliable approach to prioritize becoming an impenetrable wall.

Deneva kept her nod of approval from showing. Someone might pick up on it and start thinking they could slack during training.

"She thinks the left flank is weaker."

Rick's voice carried over softly, breaking the silence. Deneva could see why the feralborn might think this way. The shortest knight in the group was on the left side after all. But only a fool would think this to be a sign of weakness.

"I see." The Lord leaned forward in his seat, stroking his chin in contemplation.

"My Lord?"

"Just observe for now, Deneva. These are idle musings of mine."

"Yes, my Lord."

She turned her full focus to the knights and the maiden. It was clear the Earl had seen something she had not. Her eyes narrowed in close contemplation. White Claw was slowly circling the six knights currently surrounding Rick. The knights kept a formation that kept at least three shields aimed at the feralborn maiden at all times, the other three ready to supplement the defenses wherever needed.

They were gauging each other.

"She's focusing on your shields. Probably wants to rip them off."

True to his word, White Claw lunged straight at the group, her claws fanning out and ringing loudly against the tower shields. To a normal bystander, it might have looked as if the attack had been ineffective, but to an expert eye it was clear the attack hadn't been intended to push through the shields. The claws found the edge of one of the shields, and White Claw yanked viciously, a move that would have normally been able to pull the maiden out of formation. But not against trained knights, the rest of the team had been quick

to overlap the edges of their shields with that of their companion and, together, overcame White Claw's strength.

She didn't give up, however, switching targets to another. The knights weren't as fast, but they had years of coordination. They needed to move far less to cover for the companion that was being focused on. The clash of claw against steel was beginning to ring louder, White Claw's aura broke out of its confines and began to hammer down on the knights. The timing was impeccable, White Claw changed the timing of her attacks with her aura. Sometimes the aura would impact moments before her claws, and other times she would delay it.

"What are your thoughts on how she fights?"

"She's not used to dragging things out." Deneva declared. "She is trying to trick her opponents into opening a gap to quickly end it."

"Do you think she'll manage?"

"No, her only choice is to chip away at their defense."

"And Rick?"

Deneva shifted her focus to the human. He was still on the chair, his aura all but invisible to her senses under the assault that was breaking out around him. The man was staring intently in the direction of White Claw, however, as if he could see through the knights that were standing in the way. It wasn't until she focused on his face that Deneva noticed something was off. His brow was drenched in sweat, furrowed deeply, and his lips were moving. Whatever he was saying, it was impossible to make out with the ringing of the shields.

"He is talking."

"He is telling the knights where Monica intends to attack."

Deneva looked at the Earl in surprise. "You can hear him, my Lord?"

"It's only a guess." The man spoke, smiling in amusement. "Think of this fight politically, Deneva."

"Politics is not an aspect I would dare presume myself able to understand, my Lord."

"I am well aware, but try anyway. Who is fighting who?"

She turned back to the unfolding battle. White Claw had not relented, only grown faster. Her aura moved like a whip, growing more and more precise with her increasing speed. She would attack with it certain knights while her claws aimed for another. Deneva could only frown at the tactic, even she would have had a hard time against it. Yet the knights had yet to reveal a single opening.

Deneva would have answered the Earl's question with the fight being between White Claw and the knights, but it felt too obvious. Her Lord would not have made the question were it as simple as that. So she focused further.

Her knights were moving flawlessly, they reacted to White Claw's attacks without hesitation. Feints were ignored, empty attacks blocked with minimal expenditure. The movements were fluid, responsive, White Claw and their shields danced at an unheard tune. As if the knights knew exactly how and where the attacks would come from. A degree of performance she would've praised them for, even by her own standards.

And then she looked at Rick as the man's gaze met White Claw's determined glare with one of his own.

"No."

"Yes." The Earl nodded with an amused chuckle. "It appears he had another lesson he wished to teach."

Deneva looked on as the battle continued, and frowned.

Chapter 176 [Barry]

Barry stepped into the prison cell.

It was a repurposed guest room. The windows had been closed, leaving the only source of illumination the enchanted lantern Barry had in his hands. The room had been cleared of furniture, there were only two occupants inside, both prisoners. Pan and Kajou sat on opposite sides of the room, both strapped to their respective chairs.

The guards had wrestled them into their chairs when Barry had come to visit. The arms of both of them were covered in lightly glowing tattoos, both their ankles adorned by rings of metal. Curses meant to sap their power and disrupt their abilities. Apparently there had been some prisoners before that had managed to escape because they'd relied too much on the protective enchantments of the room.

The two maidens had found Barry out in the wild, rescued him from a feral den where he'd been eaten. Kajou had been the kind one, insisting on Barry's status as an otherworlder. Pan had not been so kind, to her, Barry had been little more than a human, and thus a threat they would be better off without. The result had been torture while being forced to traverse the forest, a constant threat dangling over his head like a sword. The experience had been months ago, yet it still felt fresh in his mind.

Barry would've loved to claim he could summon anger, perhaps hating them would make things easier. But looking at them, sunken eyes and pale, both battered black and blue, the only feeling he could muster was pity and regret. A part of it was the regret that he hadn't been able to work up the courage to enter the cell in two whole days, already he could see they were both deteriorating.

Pan screamed into her gag, the sound almost entirely muffled. The moment Barry stepped closer to Kajou, the muffled shouts were muted entirely. The Amazoness looked up at him from her seat, eyes focusing for long enough to

frown, then losing that sharpness ever so slightly. Barry removed the gag, expecting a string of insults and screams.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't convince Embla."

The Court leader had been impossible to reach. They still shared a room, but Barry barely ever saw her anymore. She went to bed after him and left before he woke. The one time he'd intercepted her she'd refused to change her mind over the matter.

"It doesn't matter." She spoke with a raspy throat. "You shouldn't... shouldn't..." Kajou shook her head. "You shouldn't let her manipulate you."

"What do I do? Let you die?"

Dark orbs looked up at him from the chair, frowning. "What do you want, Barry?"

Barry had the words forming on his throat, but they did not make their way out of his lips. His fists clenched, stepping forward and directly in front of the Amazon. "Tell me."

"About what?"

"About you."

"Is there a point?"

"I... I've been thinking about... things." Barry lowered his head, clenching both hands together. "You just want to help your people, and you're caught in this mess because of me. I just... you don't deserve this."

Kajou had been absently nodding at his words, closing her eyes. "And Pan?"

"She... she surrendered to save you. She's not nice, but... execution? That's..."

There was no answer. Kajou lowered her head, her body slumping against the chair and the maiden shaking her head. "Don't you see?"

"See what?"

"What happens after you bond us?"

"You go back to your people."

She sighed. "Will the Lady really allow it? Or would she get rid of us?"

"If she kills you after the bond forms, I'd know."

"And would you know it was her and not ferals? What happens if the bond reaches its limit half-way to Coven and we are forced to turn back? After she attacked us, we can't..." She paused, grunting, shaking her head. "We can't trust she won't finish the job."

"And you'd rather just get killed?"

She breathed deeply, raising her gaze to look at the only other occupant in the room. "I..." Her eyes unfocused again, and Kajou grit her teeth. "I'm not going anywhere without Pan."

Barry's gut wrenched into a knot. "I'll just bond you first, and-."

"No." Kajou shook her head. "Not without Pan"

He turned to look over his shoulder, the Valkyrie had been glaring at them, struggling against the restraints. A shiver ran through him, a soft pulsing pain made its way through his chest. A dark cave in the forest, a scream, a soft voice calling his name as brilliant blue eyes dimmed, the life taken from them. "I... I..."

There was no response, only Kajou's silent stare. It was clear there was not much else she wanted to say.

Barry swallowed the lump in his throat.

Stepping out of the cone of silence, he could hear the words Pan was trying to throw at him through her gag. The next step felt heavier as he moved closer

to the winged maiden, his chest feeling uncomfortably hotter as he had to struggle to meet those pristine blue eyes so full of loathing.

Six short steps and he was left standing in front of Pan. His heart was beating like a drum, cold sweat ran down his back. "... hey." He croaked out the word, averting his gaze from Pan's own.

The seat creaked as she tensed against her restraints, the metal digging into her skin, the immaculate brow creased into a deep glare.

"I'm not... I'm not going to remove the gag." Barry coughed, avoiding to meet her gaze. "Just, hear me out, ok? You... you care about your sister, right?"

The response to the question was a heavy rattling as Pan thrashed against the bonds on the chair, trying to break free. Her voice was let out in a scream against her gag. Barry waited until the struggling came to a halt, awkwardly not looking her way and praying that the chair wouldn't just break. The part of him that would've jumped away was tempered, at least a bit. Orion was in his shadow, he could feel that comfort permeating through him, dulling the fear.

With deep huffs, Pan finally stopped her fighting, hair wild and eyes searing into him even as she struggled to catch her breath.

"You... I don't want you." Barry spoke with a whisper. "I... if I never see you again, I'd... I'd appreciate it." His hands tightened into fists. "And... and Kajou cares. You're sisters, I can... I lost my brother, and..."

"Barry."

Orion had spoken from his shadow, her hand had emerged out of the dark substance, fingers caressing his ankle. Barry noticed his hands were shaking, he stuffed them into his pockets to regain some control over them.

"She... doesn't want to leave without you. If you... if you keep doing this, she will die. Because of you."

He spoke in a harsh whisper, meeting Pan's gaze.

It was as if she'd been slapped, eyes widened, fear and incredulity. It was only a second, a moment of vulnerability as she stared at him in disbelief.

The anger returned right after she screamed into the gag, tears running down her cheeks as she fought against the chair with renewed strength. It rattled and groaned, Barry threw one look at Kajou as she watched Pan, and then back to the Valkyrie fighting against the restraints.

"... think about it." Barry whispered, turning to the door and leaving.

Chapter 177 [Noah]

Noah squeaked against the gag. Neither from pain nor panic, but from how Shery's shoulder kept pressing against her gut with every lunge the gray-skinned maiden made. The dark streets around them were a slush of mud. Every step her handler took was another loud splash that betrayed their location to their pursuers. And the guards weren't too far off.

They'd tried to get into the city of Aubria unnoticed.

They'd failed. Mark had been too tense, a stink of nerves prompted the guards to look more closely into the fake documentation. They made a run for it before their chance of escape was lost entirely.

And now, the only reason they'd yet to catch up was Bbye.

Noah couldn't sense the fox, but she could certainly feel the illusions that were being liberally cast all around them. Screams, flashes of light, crunching noises, odd nauseating scents. It was coming in a sensory cacophony that threatened to overwhelm even her. Each wrong turn the guards took bought them precious seconds. Each meter they could put ahead of the chasers was another gasp of air.

For Mark.

Bound and gagged, Noah could do little more than pay attention to their surroundings. And if there was one thing her powers were picking up on, it was the sense of desperate self-loathing from Mark. The human whose thoughts and emotions were usually a simmering storm had constantly been panicked in some way. Fear of ferals, fear of guards, fear of Bbye and Shery, even fear of Noah. He'd likely sleep with one eye open if he could.

After weeks stuck with little to do other than sit around and endure the effects of the lepi berry three times a day, Noah had had the chance to focus a lot of her effort into the psychic abilities her breed was renowned for. And Mark

was the perfect target. The powerful bond that kept them connected was a good starting point. And right now, she could read him like a book.

Right now there was no hesitation in his emotions.

Mark's thoughts were a blade aimed at his own throat. He had put them at risk. His actions raised the alarm from the guards, made them suspicious. Now they were running, hoping to lose them before slinking off into the safe-house. And the human was slowing them down. Thank the drowned gods that the city of Aubria was so stretched for resources, or this chase would have ended already.

With not much to do but fight back against the instinctual panic of all mice, Noah tried to look at the city around her and see if there was anything about it that would feel familiar.

The last time she'd been here, she was human, and a male for that matter. These very streets had seen her grow from the half-starved homeless man all the way to someone working for the Boss. As a human, Noah had made many enemies. Very few were left alive. What would happen if any found her as she was now? Would escaping even be possible?

Voices shouted out, Mark and Shery cursed under their breaths, their emotions were so loud Noah didn't even need to put effort to feel the apprehension and fear. And suddenly Noah felt herself falling. She shrieked against the gag, mind reeling as she slammed the ground, mud splattering all around.

Shery had dropped her, sprinting harder.

Dead weight.

Noah could hear the pursuers catching up. They'd spot her, imprison her, and then who-.

A hand yanked her from the mud, dragging her out of the way. That same hand covered her mouth as flickering lights and screaming ran past.

Noah didn't register the pursuers, eyes wide, glued to the man that was currently pinning her to the wall. Mark was focused on the guards that had barely missed them, his hand pressed against her gagged lips, his other hand pressing her firmly to the wall as he loomed over her. This close, she could see the stains of mud on his fiery red hair under the hood, she could count the freckles of brown in his green eyes. His scent was all around her, overwhelming that of the dirt and grime and blood and shit. His touch was a firm pressure against her skin, his heart beat so fast she could both hear it and sense it in his touch.

The world began to shrink, blurring around the edges.

Mark turned to meet Noah's eyes and suddenly there was nothing else around them. The question of why he'd saved her just then vanished. There was a burning possessiveness in his mind that snuffed out any doubt. Noah's chest tightened. Her heart skipped several beats and proceeded to return faster than before. Across her mind flashed every time he'd fed her lepi, the burning arousal in his eyes as her hands trailed over her desperately sensitive body.

They were running for their lives and she couldn't stop thinking of wanting to remove the gag that separated his hand from her face.

Noah tried to give the emotion reason, to control it. This was the bond messing with her, this was the insidious nature of a maiden's curse, doubly so as she was a Tigermouse, possessing a body that craved to be touched. The bindings around her wrists and legs bit into her soft skin and everything inside Noah roared in complaint at her inability to reach out to her human.

If they were going to catch them, if they were going to capture them, then...

"Don't move."

The command was a leash, stiffening her limbs and turning them to stone. Out of sheer habit, Noah fought against the command, to break it in some small personal way to prove she could. But the effort felt like a token gesture that was quickly forgotten. Noah realized her wrists had been released only a moment later, her ankles followed, and her gag was removed without much

fanfare. Dimly she noted this was the first time nothing had been restraining her ever since the waterfall.

Ever since her attempt to kill Mark and herself, this was the first gasp of true freedom.

The knot and regret that formed in her stomach at the memory was also the bond, she knew, but that one was far easier to push down and ignore.

"Move."

Another order, another little jolt to her heart. Noah tried to ignore the soft throb on her wrists and ankles, or how the cool air brushed against her naked body, or how she could hear Mark's short breaths. He was nervous, but in control. The thought that said control extended to her was savagely pushed aside. They were in danger, she had to remind herself they were in danger, that the entrapment hadn't fully closed around them. That there was a way out.

Noah's steps were unsteady, the mud was cold, and she had not walked on her own in weeks. Her body was ready, but her mind wasn't. Mark did not wait for her to adjust though, grabbing her hand with his own, warmth spreading through her at that simple touch as he pulled them both through the town. She was reeling, trying to get back to her senses. Weeks of lepi and boredom had dulled her, fixated her on Mark, she had to-

"Danger."

She spoke the word before she could consciously make out where the danger was coming from. Her senses had simply sounded the alarm, and immediately she moved to pin Mark against the wall. To protect him. She had to protect him. The command was more like a need inside her, no different to the need for air.

His chest was broad, his body was hot, hotter than hers, the smell of his sweat tickled at something within her. She pushed her focus away from the craving for touch, towards the stomping sounds that followed two streets over. More guards had rushed their way through, entirely ignoring them.

Noah sensed Brye just at the edges of her senses, but the fox was gone before she could even confirm it.

At some level, she knew that Brye was also protecting Mark.

"Let go."

Noah immediately stepped back. She'd been looking straight up into Mark's eyes. His order had rumbled through his chest and down her arms. The adrenaline was thickening in her blood, and her heart was beating harder. Her traitorous mind fed her the image of him pinning her to the wall.

"Move."

Another order. Her instincts began kicking in, and this time she found it easier to follow because she agreed. Moving was better than letting her mind fall into the fantasy. She grasped his hand and pulled, ears moving on their own without her input, feet scurrying across the ground with only instinct to guide them. Conscious thought felt like it had become a luxury she couldn't afford. Each movement was easier than the previous one, her mind stretching and coiling around in search of danger.

The act was so natural it was like falling into a lake and discovering you'd known how to swim all along.

Danger found them all around, all at once. At least a dozen different guards, moving near or towards them. None were aware of their exact location. But the one thing that Noah could sense from them all was that they knew the human was somewhere nearby.

More alarms rang within Noah's mind, and she slammed Mark out of the way as a shadow emerged in the air between them.

"I'm taking you."

It was Brye, the fox's emotion sheltered and invisible, her hand grasping Mark.

"Wait, d-."

He was gone, she was gone, and Noah was left alone in the street.

It took her several seconds to realize she was alone. Conscious thought came back with a rush, a stampede of thought. She was alone, unbound, free. Her head whipped to look around. She was free, on her own. There was danger, but escape wasn't impossible, escape was never impossible.

Finally.

Her opportunity had come.

Chapter 178 [Noah]

Noah was a Tigermouse, and though she had never been exactly the most knowledgeable of people when it came to maiden breeds, even a toddler could tell you the basics. A maiden that wielded psychic energies that craved physical contact, the Tigermouse had the power to establish links with others. And through these links they could help teams to talk to one another, or even share emotions. If the maiden was an experienced one, the link could also be used in combat.

Noah had no clue what she was doing, however, so she could only really rely on her breed's extremely deft hands, sharp senses, and their preternatural ability to detect danger.

With the guards increasing in numbers in the area, she had to move with care. She covered her body in mud and slunk her way between houses, down streets, carefully sticking to walls. Her mind kept screaming danger from all around. The guards weren't picking up on any hot trails, which left them highly alert and moving warily as they attempted to find their prey.

Bit by bit, the mousy woman moved away from the hot-zone.

Each corner was a threat from every direction, each beam of light a potential end to her discretion. Her heart hammered against her small chest with a speed and force that would have killed a human, her every step filled with hesitation before she'd commit and rush from one cover to the next.

Seconds turned to minutes, then an hour, and then two. None had caught her, none had spotted her. They were looking for things that were bigger, noisier. Brye's illusions could still be heard off in the distance. But the fox was clearly winding down, moving the guard's attention far away from...

...from here.

Noah froze as she realized she was looking at the safe-house. Just a building amongst many others, yet the one she'd meandered to without realizing it.

She could tell Mark was in there, probably Shery as well. Her breath caught in her throat. Had she really made this beeline without even realizing it? She was free, why had she been moving closer to Mark? To the true danger? Mark hadn't given her orders to follow or come back. He hadn't told her not to run away either. And it wasn't like she was wearing a restraining black collar. She was free, she could run, she could escape them.

She could... she could go anywhere else.

She could have even handed herself over to the guards. Tell them everything. Maybe hope for an escape.

Maybe she'd get a chance to get revenge on...

Noah shook her head. Maybe she could just see how far she could go before the bond finally broke. She was free, she could get away. Her hands clenched, frozen, heart beating faster.

Free.

Free.

To do what?

She was cold, hungry, naked, covered in mud and who knew what else. She was rancid and... alone.

Alone.

That thought terrified her far more than being caught.

Noah's mind reeled. She'd once walked these streets, hungry, homeless, desperate. She knew she had what it took to get back up, to climb her way to some semblance of power, of control. She'd just have to get out of the kingdom, make her way north, then east, cross the mountain-range through Guenes.

If the bond broke, she was sure she could find someone else. A weaker bond, one that would mess with her head far less. Just get away, run, and-

She squeaked as the door to the house opened.

Mark stood at the doorway, warm light shining behind him and framing his darkened expression with his red hair. His gaze peered into the darkness of the street, looking for something even if he didn't know what. Weak human eyes that couldn't see.

Noah had taken a step forward and into the beam of light shining from the house before she'd been able to stop herself.

Their eyes met. He was surprised, and she froze in place. She could run, she could still run, just cover her ears and run. Ignore any orders he gave. Escape that bubbling concern and possessiveness that was now pinning her in place as if she'd been chained to him.

Rather than run, she took another step closer.

She was waiting, anticipating, breath held tight and heart deafeningly loud.

"You made it."

Those three words ignited something inside Noah.

She didn't want to be alone.

Her senses pulled her closer to Mark, her mind brushing against him and sensing his emotions. The storm had returned. Out of all the swirling mass of confusion, she locked onto the relief he felt for her. Her feet took another step forward. Noah nearly fell, but froze back in place when Mark moved out of the house to cover the remaining distance.

He grabbed her hand, there was no fight inside her.

Mark pulled them into the house. The door closed behind them with a certainty that locked Noah's fate. Shery spoke with irritation, but the mouse wasn't listening. Her heart was a drum, her body was hot, a strange warm hunger was growing within her as Mark practically dragged her through the house.

The entirety of her focus was on his hand. So big and warm, wrapped around her own, guiding her. The rest of the world just slipped through her fingers. Dimly she realized she'd been taken to a washroom.

"Clean up."

The door closed with a thud, Noah squeaked, alone again.

With the immediacy of Mark's presence gone, her thoughts came back to her in a whirlwind. Too many words, too many thoughts, too many conflicting emotions. Her body moved, obeying instinctively, but her mind was in a thousand places at once. She moved the cold wet cloth across her body while she tried, and failed, to fight back against the tide of images of the past month. Of the sensation of Mark's desire aimed squarely at her, yet him holding himself back each time.

Were their roles reversed, she would have jumped him. She would've used her short slender figure to drink in everything. To share the hot pleasure of release as they joined and-

Noah hastily shook her head, realizing the direction her thoughts had taken. She'd wanted to think of the scene as she'd once been, human and male, yet that was becoming an increasingly foreign concept to her. It was a knowledge that felt more academic, something she'd read in a book. Noah the human would have raped Noah the mouse in a heartbeat, that was what would have happened.

Noah the mouse felt a degree of abhorrence to the notion. Again, instincts warred within her. The bond, her body, her mind, her very soul felt like it was trying to fight against the tide.

She was a Tigermouse, she knew, her breed craved the physical contact of others. She knew, deep down, that she'd been starved of that. Mark had starved her, unknowingly, he'd sought to humiliate her for her transgression and instead she'd become ravenous. She was a mouse, but she felt ravenous, almost desperate. Her instincts ate away at her, a need she had no control over.

It made it no less effective, however.

She turned her thoughts to her past, to the anger she'd felt at him. Back when she'd recently turned, back when she'd yet to bond. Mark had promised her an end to the torture, the shame, the fear. And then snatched it away from her. He'd used her.

But...

Noah shook her head.

No.

No, she couldn't. She couldn't let herself follow those thoughts down that path. Her skin ached, Mark's eyes dancing within her mind. The naked desire and self-restraint.

Hadn't she learnt her lesson already? Everyone was there to be used by someone else, usually by someone better. That was how she'd ended up working for the Boss. The man was never seen, but his power amongst the gangs and criminals was absolute. Having that power backing you up was a strength in of itself... wasn't it? Noah the human had used the Boss' power to add to his own.

That was how it always worked.

Another shake of the head. No, that was the bond talking, trying to trick her, to push her. Her head stopped as her eyes landed on the only reflective surface in the room. A mirror, a luxury that had likely been added for whatever fat-cat happened to use the safe-house.

Standing in front of the mirror, she looked at herself properly for the first time since she was hit by the Curse of Eve.

She was a perfect representation of her breed. Noah the maiden had a face devoid of the burn scars that had once been a mark of pride, a sign of the monsters Noah the human had fought and survived. She had a pretty face, almond shaped, wide expressive eyes, a button nose, and a small cute mouth.

Her body screamed weakness. She was short, barely five feet tall if one counted the large round mousy ears atop her head. Her metallic gray hair had grown out down to her shoulders, swaying against her almost porcelain skin.

She was unmarred. Nearly twenty years of hardships had once upon a time covered her old body in scars and old burns. Proof of the life the old human Noah had lived, of the tests and trials that had been overcome. Now there was nothing, only the smooth perfect skin of a woman, a maiden. Of bare, tender small breasts and modest hips, almost as if a doll.

As she looked into her gray irises, she tried to find the memory of the appearance of that old human Noah, of an image of who that person was. To try and, perhaps, compare herself to that life that felt more distant every time she thought of it.

Only the barest details bubbled to the surface, the memory of that old body like water slipping between her fingers. A jolt of fear rushed through her. She turned away from her reflection.

What else would slip? Already the thought of that old male burned face was too vague to remember anything other than the scars.

She moved to leave the presence of the mirror, with moisture still clinging to her skin as she stepped towards the warmer living room.

Her hesitation grew when she spotted Mark lounging on a chair in front of the fireplace. Her mind reached out to his through the bond, not finding any resistance in his distraught state. His thoughts were troubled, his emotions turbulent, his body tense and tired. She read his concerns like one read a book. It had been a long and dangerous chase, needless risks caused by his own mistake. Even if they were safe now, they couldn't know if they would be tomorrow.

The longing for his touch came back to her, a desire for mutual comfort that found no rope or wire to restrain her. Like a moth drawn to a flame, Noah quietly stepped closer, her small feet quiet against the otherwise creaky floor. The thoughts coalesced as she felt his eyes turning to her, desire mixing in with the rest of his thoughts.

The doubt vanished instantly. She... was a maiden. Whatever that meant, Noah the human was gone, no more than a memory.

Noah the Tigermouse sat on the floor in front of Mark's chair. Carefully, she leaned back against his leg. The heat of his skin seeped through her more deeply than the fire. The gnawing ravenous thirst for contact was soothed, if partially. She waited for Mark to shove her off, push her away, or to at least react in some way.

He didn't. He acknowledged her presence for only long enough to recognize she wasn't trying anything and turned back to look at the flickering flames and focus on the troubles ahead.

Noah let out a sigh she hadn't realized she'd been holding onto. She relaxed further into the feeling of his skin as she crossed her legs to get comfortable, the nakedness forgotten in favor of the man she was bonded to.

She too wasn't sure what awaited for them in the future.

Chapter 179 [Barry]

Barry stood in front of the room where Kajou and Pan were imprisoned. The door was closed, so he couldn't hear what was going inside, but he could readily enough guess that the guards were putting both maidens into the same restraints as the previous time around. His thoughts turned to the piece of paper in his hand, a full page of densely packed words and black smears. The eighth draft he'd been working on all night.

He hadn't been able to sleep, not when his thoughts went straight to Pan and Kajou.

It had been a long night of mad scribbling on the paper, trying desperately to put into words the things that were needling at his mind. The fear, the anger, the... everything. A desperate dash with charcoal stained fingers, an attempt to rip the things inside his mind and plaster them on the paper, to get rid of them for good. But now that he stood in front of the door, he was of half a mind to start running and never turn back. But the image of Embla raising her axe and bringing it down on the two sisters turned into a knot in his gut.

Was he doing this for the Court? Embla? Kajou? Himself?

Barry couldn't find the answer by the time the doors opened. With a heavy breath, he stepped inside. Pan and Kajou were in the same chairs as the day prior, only their sides had been switched. They both glared at him, one far more intense than the other, but there was an unfriendly edge in their eyes all the same.

"I... I'm going to remove the gag." He said, approaching Pan. "And... you can say whatever you want. Okay?"

She had no answer, only a glare and a snarl.

"Okay, then."

Reaching for the gag, he tugged at the knot, letting it fall from her mouth.

"You should be the one tied up, not us." She spoke with a dark, slow hiss to her words.

"Yeah, well, that... is a valid opinion to have, and I respect it." He coughed, shifting his gaze to the papers. "I... I wanted to tell you something, so I'd..."

"I hope your soul burns along with the other human filth. You are just as bad as all the other humans." She spat.

"That's... that's wrong, but coming back to the-."

"You tricked Kajou, played her for her kindness. You used us just so you could trick the Court."

"H-hey, that's not a-."

"And that's what you do. That's what all humans like you do. You are weak and pathetic, so you pretend to be harmless." She pressed on. "But you aren't, are you? You just look for the opportunity, when they lower their guard, when they're defenseless, and you stab them in the back."

Pan glared at him. Her gaze was fury and flames, she might have been bound, but the power behind those eyes would have turned him to ash there and then. Barry took half a step back, hesitating.

She didn't stop.

"That's what you are, filth. You betray everyone. You don't know what loyalty is, you don't know what love is. You slither and only see how to get what you want."

The image of Veronica flashed across Barry's mind. His eyes widened, a gasp escaping his lips and a cold sweat running down his back.

Pan was emboldened by his stunned silence. "That's right, I can see through you. You might have tricked the others, but you'll betray everyone. Like all the other humans, you'd kill your own family if-."

Her words had come to an abrupt stop as Barry's hand slapped her clean across the face.

There was no wound, no redness in her face. Yet it was hard to discern who of the two was more surprised.

The Valkyrie took it as vindication, sneering. "See? In the end, you are all the same."

"What would you know about family?" Barry's hands clenched. "You, you of all people."

"Don't you-."

"No, SHUT UP!" He roared, stepping towards her. "You don't know what loving your family means. I saw you, I saw it with my own two eyes. I spent weeks in that hellhole you made for me and the only thing I saw from you was disdain and hate for your own sister!"

"Liar." She hissed.

"Really? REALLY? Because I remember Kajou being terrified of you, afraid that you would attack her or abuse her physically if she said something that would push you over the edge." His voice was shaking as his tone voice. "That's not love, that's control. You'd attack your own sister over a disagreement."

"I'd never kill her."

"AND WHO GIVES A SHIT!?" He screamed. "You can heal her back up, so who cares? Just cut and cut and cut and cut her some more. Carve everyone into tiny little pieces. So long as you can put them back together. WHO CARES!? There's no scar, no wound, no bleeding, so of course it means nothing. CUT THEM UP, WHO CARES!? JUST TORTURE THEM FOREVER!"

The color was draining from Pan's face. "I-."

"You know who gives a shit? I do!" Barry's hands were shaking. "You are a horrible person. You made me spend every waking moment in that forest fearing for my life! I should be ecstatic to see you die, to be rid of the nightmares of you stabbing me through the fucking heart like I'm some glorified pincushion!"

"You d-."

"SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!" His ears were ringing, his chest hot. "Justice isn't killing everyone you don't like! Fairness isn't determining someone's merit based on what they are! Having the power to shut up the people that don't agree with you isn't being right. It's being a tyrant!"

Barry panted heavily, glaring. Every part of him was alight with adrenaline. His whole body practically trembled under the sheer emotion and pressure that was exploding out of his chest like a sun.

"I'm fed up with this as much as you." Speaking with a shaking whisper, he shook his head. "No one deserves to be treated like they're trash or expendable. No one deserves to be oppressed or mistreated, even less just because they were born a certain way. I just want to help fix this. Is that too much to ask?"

"Then why save me?"

Pan whispered the question. Her eyes held a glare, but she looked as drained as he was.

"I don't know." Barry's shoulders slumped. His throat felt hoarse. "I just... I don't think Kajou deserves that."

As he spoke the words, a jolt ran through his body. The sensation was one he was growing to recognize, of a bond forming. Confusion crossed his features as he stared into Pan's eyes. She looked back at him, but there was no recognition or reaction, only a long distant look, as she was lost in thought.

Barry turned to look at Kajou, her face contorted into shock as she met his eyes. The cloudy, unfocused edges were gone entirely. She was bonded. And

that only confused him.

"A bond, at its core, is a connection."

The voice came from the entrance of the room, all heads turned. Embla stood at the door, arms crossed. She was not wearing her armor.

"It requires both parties to be willing to reach out for one another."

"I didn't..."

"Barry, you've had your hand extended to both these girls." Embla stepped closer, looking at Pan and Kajou. "All they had to do was reach out for you. And one of them has."

"Kajou?" Pan's voice trembled, pain clear in her eyes.

"No, Pan, I-."

Pan shook her head, snarling. "You... you've betrayed me!"

Barry froze, reaching out and grasping Embla's hand. "Don't. Please don't. Don't kill her."

"She has time to change her mind, if she so wishes." She replied, though she did not move.

"She might be a bad person, but she doesn't deserve to die."

Embla tightened her grip on his shoulders. "I gave my ruling, it will not change."

"So she just gets to suffer your cruelty?"

"If she does not accept your kindness, then she will, yes."

Looking down at Barry, her thumbs slowly traced circles on his shoulders, ignoring the screaming sisters behind him and focusing on his eyes.

"I am strong. This is how the strong rule."

Barry moved to speak, to say something, but did not find the words. He barely got the strength to frown at her. And in return, Embla smiled, a soft, lonesome smile, a mere hint within the corner of her lips and a glimmer of something in her eyes.

"Take the throne from me. Only then will you be able to make the decisions." She let go, turning to leave. "But the Valkyrie's time will run out before then."

He flinched, lowering his gaze. "What... what should I do?"

"Kindness is a powerful tool, and she's clearly turned it down." She whispered, leaning down, kissing the crown of his head tenderly. "What remains are unkind things."

Letting go, she turned to leave.

With a gesture of her hand, the guards entered to release Kajou from her seat. The Amazoness didn't put up a fight. Tears streaking down her cheeks as Pan hurled insults and screams, thrashing against the bindings of her chair furiously.

Everything grew silent when the door closed shut.

Chapter 180 [Helga]

Helga woke at four in the morning sharp. The first thing she did was check on the alarm spell. Miss Alice's room had not been intruded upon, and her spell had remained untouched. With a nod, she rolled over, careful not to squish her wings into the mattress as she hopped out of the bed. With the water from the basin she prepared the previous night, she splashed her face and rubbed off some of the sleep.

She made her bed, dressed up, and did another check of the spell on Miss Alice's room before removing the spell before it fully ran out, and placing a fresh one. Helga went back into her room and opened the window, carefully perching herself on the sill before closing it from outside. A little rustle of her wings, and she jumped.

Morning take-off was always the worst. The air was cold, and it took extra effort to struggle against it. If the building were taller, she might have been able to just glide, but as it was Helga had to beat her wings with everything she had until she started to get some altitude.

Spotting the other hunters and guards, she gathered some radiant energy on her hand and flashed a quick, silent greeting. They all returned it, meaning none of the maidens flying overhead were ferals. That brightened Helga's smile. It meant she wouldn't have to be worried of Miss Alice's safety and she could focus on her training.

Beating her wings with everything she had, she pushed herself higher and higher. There were no thermals for her to use since the ground was cold, so she kept flapping harder and harder. The strain was good. It burned in her wings and back with the sting of effort. Higher and higher, she kept rising into the sky, only switching to gliding for the brief reprise to catch her breath.

Up and up, she kept going, focusing only ever on the dark sky above, on the clouds. An eager smile came to her lips as beads of sweat started to make their way down her back. Higher, higher, up and up, her wings were

trembling, and as she was starting to reach her point of exhaustion, she began pouring her radiant energy into her strained wings, urging them to go harder, harder, up and up.

And suddenly, she saw sunlight.

Helga spread her wings with a gasp, breathing hard. It was sunlight.

She quickly looked around, finding the clouds underneath, still dark, not yet touched by the sun. A loud whoop escaped her. She cheered, throwing her hands in triumph. She'd beaten the clouds again. She'd watched the sunrise before anyone else in the village.

A quick look downwards. Astunes was so tiny from this high up, she could cover it all up with her thumb!

Taking a deep breath, she began to dive. The smile was plastered all over her face as she plunged down through the chilly air. Wind blasted all around her until it became a deafening roar. Faster and faster, the ground was rushing up to meet her, inexorable, unrelenting, a foe she could one day crush.

Snapping her wings open before she reached close enough to really get close to the village, she had to signal her greetings to several others when they'd reasonably sent beams of light on her way to check she wasn't feral. Now that she'd warmed up properly, Helga began her aerial combat drills. There were several other aerial maidens mid-training like herself, but she couldn't really match their speed or agility mid-air, so she had to train on her own so she wouldn't hold them back.

Swirls, loops, lunges, she moved through each combat technique and ability, picturing a fight against another Valkyrie, an imaginary spear flung in her arms as she twirled and thrust, blocked and dodged.

Once the sunlight reached the top of the radio-tower, Helga stopped her training, doing one last fly-by around the village. She greeted several other hunters, this time with friendly waves since she was close enough to more easily recognize the various people. Right as she was about to turn back to

the Baroness' house, she spotted a banner in the distance, signaling for her to approach.

Considering it was the Earl's banner, Helga didn't see why she shouldn't.

Getting closer, it was clear this was a contingent of knights from the Earl. Their pale blue armor glimmered magnificently. Helga could only marvel at the dignity and poise the knights held as they marched up the road towards Astunes.

"I greet the knights." She landed, careful not to raise too much dust as she did, bowing her head. "May honor follow you."

"And you." The banner-woman said. "Are you a hunter?"

"No longer, ma'am. I am owned by Lady Alice." The words swelled with warmth and pride within her as she spoke.

There was a quiet scoff. "Guide my second in command to the Baroness' estate. We will secure the area and prepare for the departure."

"Certainly."

She glanced at the only other winged maiden in the contingent. A Valkyrie, much like herself, one wearing a lighter variation of the knightly armor. The maiden was older. However, there was an air of quiet dignity that was no more than a veil over the ferocious determination within her eyes.

"Lead the way."

"Yes, ma'am."

Helga turned to leave, taking to the air. A quick look over her shoulder revealed the knight was keeping pace without much effort, even while weighed down by the armor. The younger maiden could only look in awe at the elegance the knight flew with, as if the metal surrounding her chest, legs, and arms was no more than an illusion.

Inwardly, Helga wondered how she trained to fly like that. Maybe she flew carrying weight? She would have to test it out and see how much she could handle.

"You serve a Lady? Is she one of the visitors?"

"Yes, she owns me, ma'am."

She raised her chin as she spoke, revealing the worn blue collar. The knight's was green, technically of lower standing, but she was a knight. There was no way Helga could compare herself. Just flying alongside her made it clear she had a long way to go.

"It seems we should have come sooner."

"Sooner is always better. Any help fighting ferals or rebuilding is always good." Helga nodded in agreement. "What is your name, if I may ask? I am Helga."

"No, you may not ask."

"Oh, ok. I guess it's a protection against certain spells? It always confused me, what with how some spells used someone's name."

"We should not waste energy in useless conversation."

"Completely agree, I was about to finish my morning training, so I'm going to need to clean up before I greet my Lady. If she wakes up late, I might be able to help with her breakfast too."

Ignoring the bewildered look from the knight, Helga beat her wings faster, working up speed to reach the manor sooner. They landed near the gate, and the Baroness' knights came to greet their fellow. While Helga jumped up to her window. No one had locked it, which was good because she didn't think she had the time to go through the top entrance. The manor was a maze, and she'd definitely get lost again on her way down to her room.

Helga locked the window behind herself, humming a little tune and stripping off her training clothes. She thought back to the armor wearing Valkyrie.

Maybe she could sew some pockets into her training clothes and add weights like rocks? Though that would have to be for later.

With a washcloth and some cleaning spells, she freshened up, then put on her uniform. A quick check in the mirror so she could comb her hair properly and smooth out her clothes, and a comb to carefully go over the feathers on her wings that the spell had missed. Everything was perfect, so she turned towards her roommates. "The knights from the Earl have come. Today looks like it will be busy."

And suddenly the whole room became a whirlwind of activity as five other maidens were rushing through their morning preparations while Helga stepped out. Another quick check on the alarm spell. No one had stepped into Miss Alice's room. Helga listened intently. Her owner was still breathing deeply, slowly, asleep.

Cheering quietly, she hurried down to the kitchen where the morning meals were already being prepared for both the humans and the maidens in the household. "I have news, the Earl's knights have arrived."

"Already know!" The head-maid spoke while frantically working on four stoves at once.

Helga took her own corner of the kitchen, picking up Miss Alice's favorite foods, but putting extra focus on the coffee. She knew it was her favorite and today was going to be a big day so she would definitely need the energy.

She took the tray with the food all the way up to the Lady's room, quietly entering and leaving the tray near the bed. With her wings she tugged the curtains open and glanced at Miss Alice. The woman was older than her by nearly a decade, yet her face was fair, soft, and she always seemed to somehow manage to get her hair to perfectly frame her sleeping face like a halo.

"Good morning, ma'am!" Helga cheerfully, nudging her awake.

Miss Alice yawned, sitting up and rubbing the sleep from her face. "Morning." She muttered, sniffing at the air and spotting the hot cup of coffee.

She took the beverage and slowly sipped at it, sighing pleasantly and smiling softly. "This is good."

Butterflies fluttered inside Helga's stomach as the room became a little brighter.

"Thank you!" She beamed a little too hard, her radiant energy seeping through her and making her wings glow. Helga very quickly reined it in, feeling a burning in her cheeks as she turned to bring her Lady the wash basin. "The Earl's knights have come and are currently in the process of greeting the Baroness. The expedition to Balet is likely to depart in two or three days."

"Oh joy."

This time Miss Alice did not sound quite so happy, Helga wondered whether she should have held back from sharing the news until after breakfast. A rumbling sound interrupted them both. Helga's cheeks turned from slightly flushed to intensely blushing. Embarrassment washed over her like an avalanche. She'd forgotten to eat!

Miss Alice looked at her in concern. "Are you hungry?"

"No ma'am!" Helga spoke hastily. "I just forgot my mid-training snacks. I'll manage."

"You are a terrible liar." There was no sting to her words, only a smile. Miss Alice glanced at the tray. "Well, you happened to bring me too much, again. How about we share?" She smiled at Helga with that disarmingly mature smile.

She gulped, nodding. "Thank you, ma'am." Miss Alice might not have worded it as an order, but Helga had learnt that was just how she spoke. Soft words and never imposing or commanding, tender like a very warm blanket.

Helga knew it was improper, but the butterflies in her gut told her it was oh so perfectly right.

Chapter 181 [???

South of Vasia existed a tiny hamlet. It was deep enough in the forest that, by all accounts, it was invisible for anyone who didn't know of its existence. Only one road connected it to the capital of the kingdom, no other road led to or from the place. An inexperienced onlooker might have dismissed the hamlet as nothing more but another tiny conglomeration of huts, just like every other budding seed of civilized existence in otherwise feral infested lands. It had only a dozen houses, some farmland, a watchtower, and a radio beacon.

But the longer one observed, the clearer it would become that the nameless hamlet was anything but ordinary.

The hunters that guarded the hamlet carried themselves with the discipline of knights, the farms were tended by maidens that would have been more commonly seen in specialized guilds, even the radio tower itself was connected to an electricity generating facility that was far more powerful than what such a hamlet would ever need. If one possessed the proper senses, it was possible to detect the elemental magic that had seeped into the soil, the earth, tainting it and betraying the nature of something underground.

But even if one possessed the ability to see underground, it would have only raised further suspicions rather than revealed the truth. All the individual would have been able to see would have been barriers upon barriers, obscuring detection of anything and everything underneath the hamlet. The best one could have guessed would have been at the size of the area being protected.

Something larger than the hamlet itself, deep underneath.

In the end, the only way to truly and innocuously reveal what occurred within the depths of the hamlet would have been to pay close attention to the singular tradesmen that would enter the hamlet once a month. His cart would be loaded with mundane things, food, leather, wood. And on his pocket there

would be a single white and red sphere, containing a Mimica, a maiden capable of creating spaces to safely store objects into.

And hidden within this maiden's storage space would be chock full of a singular item. An item crucial for the continuous existence of the kingdom, a reason why there were many other such sites spread across the territory, tucked out of sight, secret.

Today was the day a tradesman would come to gather the cargo and take it to the next secure location, a transactional if tense affair. He was not flanked by his maidens as he made his way into the hamlet. They were royal knights pretending to be his own. Or so it would have normally been that way.

Under the watchful eye of the two fake royal knights in disguise, he walked towards the smallest building within the village.

"Stay calm, nothing will happen." The taller of the maidens purred, shadows flickering across her form, her striped tail hidden under the guard cloak.

The man nodded, stepping into the shop and towards the counter. A friendly maiden greeted him with a smile. "I've... come to buy the usual." Fishing into his pocket, he brought out a pokeball and the royal seal.

The maiden nodded, taking the pokeball and putting a different one in place. "Have a nice day, sir."

"S-Sure." He turned around and left the shop, gulping as he glanced at his two escorts. "I... it's done."

"Good. Now, we wait."

While the human gathered the other items for his trip back to the capital, the maiden within the shop walked to the back, opening a small panel behind the door in the storeroom. The panel had a hole, round and of the exact size of a pokeball. Taking the one the merchant had left on the counter, she dropped it down the chute.

The device traveled a hundred meters straight downwards and landed softly at the end.

Nana startled at the sound. She sat up straight as she reached for the pokeball. Was this it? She prayed it to be so, or all of this would have been for nothing. She walked out of the room, pocketing the white and red sphere. Marble corridors dimly lit by soft orange light illuminated the way. On her way to her destination, she passed over a walkway that oversaw one of the larger work areas in the underground facility.

Underneath her forty maidens sat in front of wooden tables. They were paired in groups of two, a Minimouse for every Enchantress. Blank empty eyes worked on the task at hand with single-minded focus, carefully taking the synthetic leather and slowly remaking them, inscribing the enchantments onto every inch without a single error or mistake. Seated in the center of the room was the cause for the impossible concentration each maiden showed, a psychic, her power pulsating through the room like waves washing on the shore.

The maidens, once exhausted, would step out of the room and remember nothing of the work they had done, the details of the magic or the weaving of the magical tool. They would become people once more and exist, breathe, play, enjoy. Only so long as they never stepped out of the facility.

The only way out of the facility, to the outside world, was through the proving. If you worked hard enough, fulfilled your goals, and did not misbehave, you could get out once you had gathered enough points. But it was a lie, Nana had learnt so. Any maiden that left the facility would have their mind fived, all memories erased.

She quickly shoved down that horrible thought, hurrying across the walkway to the other side. Everyone ignored the mousy maiden as she moved through the corridors, she was an errand girl, her skill in manufacturing had been wanting, but they'd found use for her in assisting in the things others needed.

"Halt."

The command from the guards made Nana's feet freeze in place. She glanced from one to the other, and then back. "I bring the new Mimica."

"Oh, that was today wasn't it." The armor-wearing maiden slumped her shoulders, sighing.

No more was said, no more was needed, the door opened and Nana hurried inside, walking into the containment center. It didn't take her long to reach where the Mimicas lived, a series of plain and empty reinforced rooms. Each room was occupied by a feral Mimica, the ghostly maiden would possess the coffer within the room and, when presented with enchanted collars, would store them. The feral would remain in the room until her cargo capacity reached its limit, at which point she would be returned to her pokeball and sent to the capital. Only once back at the capital would they be bonded and broken out of the feral state.

It was a failsafe to guarantee none could get their hands on the enchanted collars, for a feral Mimica would never allow their storage space to be opened. And killing them would only make the storage space to implode, its contents spewing out highly damaged, for the enchanted collars, it would be irreparable. Each room was a box without doors or windows, merely slots in the concrete.

Nana put the pokeball into the only spherical slot and pushed the door, the device released its contents inside the concrete room. But this pokeball did not have a Mimica in it.

Nervously, she waited for the shadow to step through the rock solid wall as if it were no more than smoke. Ruby red eyes looked down at Nana and every fiber of her being withered under the power of the Vampire. "Where."

Not a question, a command.

Nana whispered words, the direction to the destination she'd been instructed to provide, and the Vampire melted into the shadows, gone as if she'd never been there. The mouse waited for several seconds before she moved again, taking the now empty pokeball and making her way back to the room she'd

been occupying while waiting for it. Again, unobstructed, unseen, invisible to the guards and wardens of this place of suffering.

She sat back on the wooden stool, it was still warm. With her hands on her knees, she closed her eyes and tried to imagine what she'd do once she was out of there. She knew very little of the outside aside from the conversations from the knights, there was something called chocolate that was supposedly the best food out there. Food had always been one of her few pleasures, that felt like something she would want to at least try once.

What would it taste like? Chocolate could melt so perhaps something like cheese?

Shouts could be heard outside, her hands clenched into fists. "It's going to be alright."

Gulping, she nodded to herself. Everything would be alright. The alarm wasn't going off, so that meant everything was going as it she'd been told it would. She nodded again, lips curling slightly. The silence that had followed the screams was worse than the screams, everything in the back of her mind was sounding alarms, that she was in danger.

The ground shook around her right as shadows curled and bloated, the vampire emerged. She held three spheres. Two were pokeballs, much like the one Nana was holding, the third was also a sphere, but it was black, made out of something that felt wrong to Nana's senses.

The curse of Eve, that which forced a human to become a maiden.

"As agreed." The Vampire offered the pokeball she'd been holding.

Nana hesitated as she reached for it. "Will... will I go outside?"

"I will take you to my Mistress' domain." The maiden's eyes gleamed with power. "There, you will be rewarded for the help you've provided. An offer to continue helping us, and freedom."

Nana nodded, touching the pokeball and feeling the world vanish around her.

The vampire glanced at the occupied pokeball and placed it on the chute next to the empty one, placing the cursed also occupied black sphere next to it. She glanced at the remaining pokeball, hers. She placed it last, and chanted a small simple delayed spell for movement, casting it upon all four before recalling herself.

The room was left empty.

All four spheres began to move up the chute and back to the surface.

The shopkeeper was waiting for them in the end. She headed to the back of the shop, bringing a basket of apples and placing three of the spheres at the bottom. Then, she allowed herself to be captured on the fourth. Her world vanished into darkness, her now occupied pokeball tumbling into the basket. Several minutes passed and the taller of the false knights entered the shop, taking the basket with all four occupied spheres, and walked outside to load it onto the merchant's cart.

An hour later, the merchant and his cart walked out of the hamlet, flanked by the guards.

Six hours later, the guards would attempt to rotate with those on the lower levels and discover the communications had been cut off, and the tunnel collapsed. Alarms were raised and a hunting party sent to find the merchant.

But the only thing they would find of the man would be his bloody remains right next to those of a dead Mimica, the surrounding area littered with torn enchanted collars. The magic saturation from the destroyed magical items saturating the area and obscuring whatever spell had been used to hide the thief's trail.

Chapter 182 [Barry]

Barry sat on the edge of the bed, his gaze distant and unfocused, his hands clenching and relaxing in a slow, irregular rhythm. In his mind, he tried to go over the conversation with Pan again. It was like watching a train-wreck in slow motion. It had started with the slap, a loss of control, a derailment that began the domino. His emotions had flash boiled into an explosion and everything afterwards turned into a tumble down a canyon with slippery walls.

And now he was here, wondering how he could have done it differently, how he could do it differently. Was there even a chance? He'd go back, talk to her, and... He held his head between his hands, fingers digging into the red hair as he felt the weight falling on his shoulders like a slow avalanche, creeping its way down to squish him against the ground.

A heavy weight settled on the bed next to him. He didn't need to look at her to know who it was. "You're going to kill her."

"Yes."

"Because I failed."

"No. Do not mistake my ruling with your responsibility." Embla said. She was naked, leaning against her knees, looking off into the room. "The condition for her survival was my mercy. You offered her a way to live, and she has not taken it."

"She doesn't deserve to die."

"That is not for you to decide."

"It doesn't make it right!" He rose to his feet. "She's a bad person, yes, but-."

Embla was standing in front of him before he could even take a step. Her eyes were cold, startlingly so. The dark skinned woman that stood a full head

and a half taller than him leaned down, calloused fingers tilting his head upwards so their gazes would meet. "You are the most important person in this whole Court."

"Those are your emotions."

"Yes." She leaned down, kissing him, her other hand pulling him against her hard naked scarred body. "But it's far more than that. With you we stand a chance, we have hope. You do not realize your importance, but you will, in time."

"That... that does not make this right." His hands reached out to push her away, there was no resistance to be had. He stumbled a step back and caught his breath.

"It is simple, Barry. Only by accepting you does she get to live." Embla's eyes glimmered in the darkness, peering at him with intensity. "This is not a test for you, but for her."

"But I could force her."

"If that is your wish, then do so."

"Decisions are meaningless if you're forced into them."

There was a long pause, a tense silence. Embla stood before him as she peered at him. For a moment Barry felt as if she were about to pounce, to attack, a cold chill of certainty. But one that bore no fruit. With a sigh, she sat down on the bed, closing her eyes and lowering her head.

"You still have much to learn, Barry." She shook her head. "You will attempt to bond her tomorrow, again."

"How!?"

"Ask for my help."

"What?"

"I am your leader. Ask for my help."

"I... I want you not to kill Pan."

"I gave my ruling, and the conditions were set. Ask for my help, Barry, not my capitulation."

"..." His hands clenched. "Please help me."

At his words, Embla raised her gaze back to him and then turned her focus to the door. A simple gesture of her head and it opened. A single figure stepped through before it closed. Her black hair was tied into a tight ponytail, her body barren of clothes save for a long brown gown. Kajou stepped further into the room, her face turned downward, eyes heavy with regret. The Amazon dragged her feet as she approached the center of the room.

"Kneel."

Embla's command shook the room. Kajou stumbled to the floor. A long slow sigh and her shoulders slumped further.

"I don't..." Barry looked between the slumped Kajou and Embla. "What is the meaning of this?"

"She wishes to help." Embla answered, crossing her arm. "Use her."

"You make it sound as if-."

"As if she is a tool, yes." Embla's words made Kajou and Barry flinch at the same time. The Lady didn't acknowledge their discomfort, however.

"That's not... that's not how I want to do things."

"That is fine as well."

Barry glanced at Embla as she leaned back on the bed, keeping her eyes on Kajou. It was clear she wasn't about to leave or give them privacy. If anything, it felt as if she was gauging Kajou more than anything else. It left

the Amazoness on her knees with her head lowered, and with a bad taste in Barry's mouth.

He didn't know how to proceed, so he just went for the basics.

"Could you tell me about Pan? About her past? Who she is?"

"... yes." Kajou spoke with a small voice. "She didn't grow up in Coven. She'd run away from the kingdom back when she was a Warrior."

"Warrior?"

"The base form. She later shifted into a Valkyrie."

"Sorry for the interruption, please continue."

"Her family tried to sell her while she was still a kit." A slight shake of the head followed. "Pan rarely ever spoke about them."

"You are skipping details." Embla spoke with a frown. "Barry is not of this world. He does not know of the things you've left unspoken."

"Oh."

The maiden was so... meek. Kajou's weak nod felt like it just didn't belong on the maiden that had been so fiercely combative in Barry's memory.

"Pan's family was poor, and they had sold her as a kit. Maidens cannot form bonds until they've reached full maturity. Those willing to buy maidens that young are usually those with..."

"They are monsters." Embla interrupted with a snarl.

Kajou nodded.

"And the kingdom does nothing?"

"Sometimes they do, most times they don't. Justice does not matter, power does."

"And... what happened? To Pan?" Barry asked.

"She escaped after a year with... them. Still a kit. She managed to cross the eastern mountains though barely. But..." Another shake of the head. "We taught her our ways, we gave her shelter, trained her, showed her how to be strong and how to protect herself. But it always felt as if a part of her had never truly left that place."

Barry nodded, perking up slightly. "So... so that's it, right? I just need to help her see I'm not like that monster." He glanced at Embla and Kajou as he spoke, neither reacting to his proclamation. The silence that stretched on had a weight to it, a pressure. "... right?"

"Are you asking us, or are you making an affirmation?"

"I'm... asking."

Kajou stirred slightly. "Perhaps that could help. Pan... Pan is a good person. Her anger gets in the way of it. I've seen her jump into danger to protect innocent people. She's saved me more than a few times."

"Hopefully we'll think of something." Barry nodded enthusiastically, turning to Embla.

She met his gaze, but did not speak, the quiet pressure of her presence no less forceful even as she sat as the only naked person in the room.

"What... about you? What do you think?"

"I think you tried to reach out for someone floating in the river who thought they'd prefer the waterfall ahead." There was a cadence to her words, unrelenting. "My thoughts on this matter are that people become far more willing to take your hand when they're drowning."

Chapter 183 [Rick]

"It isn't the newest model for boar hunting, but it's the most reliable I've found." The Earl spoke with confidence as he walked around the table. "Based on some of the firearms found from before the pre-catastrophe, the design has been improved over the centuries."

Rick, with his hands on his back, leaned down to look at the two rifles that lay on the table. The shape was immediately familiar to him, which sounded alarms all over. It was eerily similar to a Remington hunting rifle, the same kind of rifle his uncles used in the farm.

The design was somewhat different though, the barrel was shorter and slightly wider, the metal a light blue and carved with ornately placed symbols of some sort. The wood of the stock was similarly decorated, though the thumb-sized symbols were part of some kind of artistic design, almost hidden in the intricacies of countless other lines.

"I've found that Gelly and Smith are the more reliable makers." The Earl continued, speaking excitedly. "Their queue is of two years, but the quality is worth the wait."

"I... see." Rick swallowed, trying to parse through what he was seeing. Somehow he felt Tomas would be exploding with questions right about now. But he wasn't Tomas, and he had to play things carefully. "What kind of bullet does it use?"

The Earl perked up. "Are you familiar with firearms?"

The image that flashed through Rick's mind was not of his younger self shooting down cans on the farm, but of a man with armor boring a hole through Monica's gut. The smile was forced as he pushed the memories away as best he could. "I've handled a few when I was younger."

"I would certainly be interested in knowing more about the kind of firearms your world uses." The Earl was all smiles, reaching down to one of a small

metal magazine and showing its content to Rick.

They were bullets, but they did not have... anything, they had no cartridge, only and exclusively the bullet itself. They were the size of his pinkie finger, made out of a dark blue metal of some sort.

"Murisium silver alloy ten millimeters, maximum penetration. Each magazine has eight bullets. They will go straight through the boar. Perfect to avoid ruining the meat." A nod . "It is also a mark of skill to bring down the boar in a single shot." With a little squeeze, he pulled out one of the bullets, showing it off. "So long as you don't shoot them at something reinforced with elemental energy, they won't deform, perfect for reusing them."

Rick made sure to keep his hands behind his back, eyeing the bullet piece of metal warily. "Shoot them... how? What makes the bullet move? Magic?"

"Oh!" The Earl perked up, putting it back into the magazine. "Do bullets in your world come in a cartridge? Some of the more modern designs have those, but I've found them cumbersome. This model uses fire-disks."

"I can't say I'm familiar with the term."

"These are fire-disks. Each container holds a hundred and twelve disks."

The Earl snatched a metal tube that'd been laying next to the rifles. Tilting it forward, he revealed red disks within the tube, each the size of an oreo. With his thumb, he pushed one out. The disk was paper thin but appearing as sturdy as cardboard.

"These are fire-disks. These were made to be non-reactive without a murisium alloy present. Very safe." He snapped the disk in two. A plume of smoke and sparks followed, reducing the disk to nothing. "You just need to put the disk into the slot once the round is chambered, and pull the trigger. The magic in the disk transfers to the bullet with explosive results."

Rick nodded, holding back on the commentary. As far as he could tell, the weapon appeared to be designed for over-penetration, which wasn't exactly something you'd seek when hunting. Ideally, you'd want all the bullet's

momentum to be transferred to the target. This looked like something that would make hunting harder, not easier. To say nothing of the risk of hitting anything or anyone behind the intended target.

"What about safety?"

"That is what these are for." He pointed at two medallions. "They have enchantments that will prevent potential accidents. A mere bullet would not be able to harm anything other than, perhaps, an extremity."

"I... I guess I can see the sense, but I was asking more about the rules on how to safely handle the weapon." Rick's smile was tight. "Where I come from, we have some rules already, and I wouldn't want to assume they're the same ones here."

His words snapped the Earl into a more serious expression.

"Right, discipline and respect are important." A tight nod and he patted the stock of the rifles. "Never aim at anything you don't intend to shoot, always be watchful of the things that are behind the target, don't put your finger on the trigger until you are ready to shoot, and never ever handle the bullets while there are fire-disks outside of their container."

Rick nodded, watching the plump man return to giddiness, picking up the rifle and aiming it at the wall on the opposite side of the courtyard.

"This would be the proper procedure." He put the magazine into the gun, and the bolt moved on its own, moving forward into position. The Earl took a fire-disk from the container and slotted it from above the chamber into the small gap in front of the bolt.

Pressing the stock against his shoulder, he took aim. The symbols on the rifle lit up, and he pulled the trigger. The bullet had shot out of the barrel, leaving a streak of light in its wake like a tracer round. There was no immediate bang or recoil. The projectile had escaped the muzzle with a soft 'thunk' and was instantly followed by the bang. The wall he'd been aiming at burst a tiny chunk of rock.

With a click, the rifle's bolt pulled itself back before slotting itself back into place, chambering the next round with a click. It had been as if some small engine within the gun had made the parts move, but Rick suspected it was magic.

"If you aim down the sights without a fire-disk loaded, the rifle will point out the location of previously shot bullets. And it can help you pull them out of tricky locations. You try."

Rick moved slowly, picking up the other rifle and keeping the muzzle pointed at the opposite wall. The weight was familiar in his hands, but there was nothing comforting about it. The wood tingled against his palms as if the whole weapon was electrified. It was the magic, no doubt. He ignored it as he pressed the stock against his shoulder and leaned to look down sight.

The tingling spread to his face, and suddenly he could see a glowing spot on the wall slightly to the right of where he was aiming at. In the crater, the Earl's shot had left. Slowly he lowered the barrel to the ground, reached for the tube with fire-disks and slotted one into the weapon before raising the rifle again.

This time the glowing spot was not there, instead a red dot painted on the wall, following the trail of the barrel. "Aim assist?"

"That is one of the enchantments, yes." The Earl nodded.

"And if I decide not to shoot?"

"Just take the disk out and break it. Once it's out of the cylinder, it's best not to put it back since it could contaminate the rest."

With a nod, he moved his finger to the trigger and squeezed.

It was not like he remembered what shooting a rifle had been like. The push-back had not come like a kick, but it was more akin to a slow shove. The bang came a moment later, and the bullet burst into the wall right next to the Earl's own shot.

"How do you find it?"

"Peculiar." Rick commented, carefully returning the rifle back to the table. "I've never fired a weapon like this."

The Earl's chest puffed with pride. "I believe you will enjoy the hunt, then. Everything is ready, so we can get started right away. Barely even has any recoil as well."

With a nod, Rick glanced over to the side. Monica had been sitting munching on a pile of boar meat, watching him and the Earl with narrowed eyes. Deneva remained between Monica and the Earl, with Dia calmly reading from a book next to the feline.

Rick could only nod. After the training exercises, Monica had been a bit less pushy on sticking around him all the time. Even if she was certainly far more insistent on dragging him back into the room. He hoped her good behavior would keep up.

Chapter 184 [Rick]

The Earl owned a small forest that existed just outside of the city. The whole thing was walled off, and though left mostly unsupervised most all the time, whenever the Earl wished to hunt, the knights would mobilize. The process would be tedious, but they fulfilled their role with extreme discipline. A sweep of the walled area, followed by the knights positioning themselves throughout the perimeter as well as having several flying knights also keeping watch from high above.

Unlike what Rick had imagined, he did not have a need to leave Monica off in the castle while he came here to... spend time with the Earl. Instead, a retinue of maidens followed them from a distance. The retinue was mostly split in two. Monica, Deneva, and Dia on one side. And everyone else on the other. Monica was being bribed by liberal amounts of ham and pork.

Although her eyes did not leave Rick for an instant.

The hunt had begun easily enough. At the gates of the hunting range several dozen cages with many many boars were set loose. The beasts made a run for it towards the forest, and Monica made a sad whimpering noise of complaint at not being able to follow. From there began their walk.

"The boars are trained." The Earl spoke as he led the way, the rifle slung on his shoulder. "Every three months they are brought here, under the influence of a psychic, and taught to feel safe in certain areas."

"So that's likely where we'll find them." Rick rubbed at his chin. "Why not just let them roam? Wouldn't it be more of a challenge that way?"

The Earl laughed. "Wild boars are very smart and are very good at hiding."

Humming a little in agreement, Rick's eyes kept trailing through the surrounding area. There were no bushes, the trees were relatively thin, this place felt new compared to... everywhere else he'd been. If the forest they'd arrived in felt older than the dirt they walked on, the trees here felt younger

than the boots he wore. Yet there were no bushes. It was an off feeling, of a place that was trying to pretend to be natural yet was clearly being groomed through careful constant efforts.

"Do you know how important otherworlders are, Rick?"

"I can guess." He responded, gaze on the forest ahead and not on the retinue behind. "Having a law put in place forbidding everyone short of the king from giving orders to otherworlders does hint at several things."

"The last otherworlder in our kingdom showed up roughly three hundred years ago." The Earl spoke, glancing at Rick. "There are very few records remaining about him, other than the noble families nearly started a civil war trying to monopolize him. Similar situations have occurred all over the world."

"How often do... people like me show up?"

"Once every twenty years has been the average, at least if you care enough to listen to the rumors from the rest of the wide world. But not all otherworlders cause waves when they appear, and oftentimes distance twists fact into myth."

The portly man stopped walking, shifting his shoulder and pulling up the rifle to point at something in the distance. He stilled for a second and lowered the muzzle, scowling in distaste.

"The king asked you to gauge me. Us." Rick commented.

"Not directly. But he did insist on learning what sort of change you would represent."

"I think you may be overestimating us."

"Do you know how one could keep the peace?"

The question caught Rick off balance. He looked at the back of the Earl's head as the man once more raised his rifle to aim at something in the forest.

"Can't say I do."

"There are many ways, but my personal preference is by anticipating change." There was amusement in his words. "And excuse my manners, you stink of it."

"And what change would I bring?"

"What would you want?"

"I don't think I follow."

"I think you do." He lowered the rifle and glanced at Rick. "If the king wished to send you off to do something for him, what would it take to convince you to do it? Knowledge? Maidens? Power? Gold?"

"Are you going to claim everyone has a price?"

"My claim is that things work better when all parties are willing to negotiate."

Rick frowned, spotting movement between the trees. He remained still, observing the piglet as it sniffed around the area.

"Are you going to shoot it?"

"Hm?"

The Earl gestured at him. "You spotted the animal."

He nodded slightly, pulling up the rifle and taking aim. His face tingled and the marker pointing where the bullet would land popped up. There were several highlights on the boar, areas he figured were ideal targets to aim at. Rick adjusted his stance and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened, but something appeared to startle the piglet as it scampered off.

"Oh." Rick frowned at the rifle. "I forgot about the fire-disk."

"Happens to the best of us." The Earl nodded along.

They continued walking across the forest, slowly making their way in what was clearly a leisure stroll.

"What would be expected of me?"

"It depends on what you can do. Very few things are clear in that respect, I'm afraid." The noble chuckled. "Though regardless of what knowledge or powers you bring, having White Claw at your side already makes it fairly likely you may be asked to deal with certain kinds of problems."

"Can't say I'd put a price on killing people."

"And that includes tamed maidens, I am aware."

Rick nodded, looking off through the trees. "I was a teacher. Chemistry, but by the looks of your alchemy books, the use of what I know would not work without scaling production to something more than what maidens could handle on their own."

"Oho, that does seem curious." The Earl perked up. "Care to elaborate?"

"Industrial chemistry is... dangerous, complicated, and needs a very large amount of supplies. Industrial anything, really. But it wouldn't make sense to help create a machine that makes three thousand shoes a day if people would only ever buy a hundred." He waved his hand aimlessly around. "And trying to make it so it only makes a hundred shoes a day wouldn't make sense, since maidens could make those shoes better and cheaper."

"A kind of production capacity that only would make sense when maiden production reaches a point of diminishing returns... or when there are no maidens involved at all." The Earl rubbed his chin in thought. "Does your world have elemental energy?"

"No."

"Then your knowledge may not be as fruitless as you think."

Rick didn't comment, continuing his steps through the forest. He spotted another boar, but didn't react, waiting for a second. The Earl spotted it and

took aim, slotting the fire-disk and pressing the trigger. A clean shot, the wild pig fell dead on the spot. From the bushes sprung eight others, sprinting into the forest and out of sight.

"It's refreshing."

"What is?"

"When I hunt with a guest, either I have to congratulate their shots, or they loudly congratulate mine." He nodded as they headed towards the corpse. "Politics that's devolved into ego stroking is tiresome."

"At least it's not with swords."

"True." Another careful nod, eyeing Rick. "Does your world have war?"

"We do. But the whole world is occupied by one country or another, and there's only a handful of hot-spots where war has happened throughout the past fifty-odd years." He shook his head. "Most of the wars have more to do with money than land, someone trying to turn a profit or some-such."

"And what happened before then?"

Rick's brow creased. "A group of stupid men with a stupider mustaches thought it would be a good idea to wage war with the rest of the world."

The Earl eyed him for a moment, nodding. "And how did that turn out?"

"Eventually, they lost. But it got millions killed along the way."

There was a stillness to the Earl's nod, a furrowing of his brows. "What happened to the kings and queens?"

"Kings?" Rick shook his head. "There were two great wars. The monarchies mostly came to an end with the first one. The royal families that survived have mostly been little more than a token presence in the handful of countries that still have them."

"I... see."

They came to a halt near the corpse of the pig. The blood pooled around the corpse, its head deformed from the bullet that had penetrated through the bone and exited the other way. A splatter of brain and bone covered the area next to the corpse. The Earl looked at the body and nodded absently.

"A clean kill." Rick commented.

Chapter 185 [Tomas]

"Are you sure I can't convince you to stay in bed for another hour?"

Tomas shivered as Kat's finger trailed across his shoulder. He smiled a little, shaking his head. "I'm going to take a look around the city. Wanna come?"

"Do you have any idea how uncomfortable it is to be a woman out there?" Kat grumbled, pulling the bed-sheets against her chest. "Every single person I talk to is just slobbering over me like I'm meat." A deep sigh. "And there's nothing to do."

"What do you mean, nothing? We've barely seen the city."

"These people call sitting around and taking drinks in a stale room without music 'fun'." She groaned. "The music is slow and boring, and yeah, sure, the alcohol packs a punch, but drinking in a quiet room is just sad drinking, not happy drinking. And everything is so fucking sloooooow."

"It certainly feels like the city is... quieter than what we had in our world." Tomas nodded. "But isn't it better that way? Could you imagine maidens just going wild? Actually, pause, I read about maidens going wild. They called it a civil war."

"So what, because four out of every five people out there can punch holes through solid rock, the rest of us can't get some nice music going on?" She was pouting now, crossing her arms dejectedly and rolling to the side. "I miss May's phone. She had a couple good songs."

"Come, please? At least walking will do you good."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "I'll take the nap option, bed's comfy."

"I still don't understand how the extrovert is the one choosing to stay indoors." Tomas said.

"That's because you're more fun than the rest of this over-sized town."

Tomas flushed a little, sharing her laugh and nodding along, turning to leave before she could tease him further.

"Remember to get back so we can continue where we left off!" She called after him.

"I suspect her family will be a very large one."

Freya's voice rang out, startling Tomas. The Elf had been leaning against the door frame, arms crossed and dressed with something far more casual than what she usually wore. The dress was modest and simple, light green, reaching all the way to her calves, the hem and edges were adorned with small flowers. She glanced at him as he fought to put on the shirt, expression bemused.

"Don't think Kat's the kind of person that'd want children."

"And you?"

He froze a little, chuckling nervously. "It feels a bit too early for that kind of decision."

"Perhaps."

Tomas led the way, with Freya close behind. The Elf had been, so far, the only maiden he owned. But it certainly didn't feel like she was his property, which was a welcome thing for him. The maiden was respectful and deferential, but it felt more like having a wise adviser at his side than a slave. And that impression was exactly why Tomas felt a little out of balance seeing her with the dress.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, no, just... is that new?"

"This?" She glanced down at the white floral garment. "Miss Hyung helped me mend it." With a slight shift in the skirt, Tomas spotted the hunting knife

strapped to her thigh. "Now that summer is coming, it felt appropriate."

"Huh." Tomas nodded, rubbing the back of his neck a little. "It looks nice."

Freya bowed her head slightly. "Thank you." She didn't smile, keeping her expression mostly neutral. But Tomas got the distinct impression her mood had improved a little.

Not feeling particularly sure of his destination, Tomas took to the streets as he tried to figure out if there was anything he should be looking for. The city was not like those on earth, the streets were always wide, the houses and buildings either cobbled together into a larger structure or well apart from one another. Though it would've given the city a feeling of being planned beforehand if one tried to look at it from above, from the street, it looked more like people took personal space quite seriously.

"It's for safety."

"What?"

"The street." Freya spoke up. "The larger the city, the likelier it is a maiden might go feral somewhere within the city itself. And many maidens have powers that can cause damage in a wide area." A little pause. "Additionally, sometimes even normal maidens can have accidents. The extra space makes it less likely to affect many things at once."

"What would happen if you had an accident?"

"I wouldn't."

"But what if you did?"

"I wouldn't." She smirked ever so slightly.

Tomas pouted a little, marching down the street. "I guess it also helps to avoid crowds getting too cramped. Wouldn't want a maiden panicking."

"That as well."

With a little nod, he kept glancing around, trying to figure out where they were relative to the city. The fortress loomed to the right, so that had to mean they were moving closer to the prettier parts. Sure enough, their steps soon took them through buildings that had been built with an almost ornamental flair to their exterior. Though prettier, they also felt older. Some of them had motifs to the flourish, most were based around plants, but there was one building in particular that looked entirely out of place.

The building was burnt up and torn down. Half in ruins but clearly having been left in such a state intentionally. There was little Tomas could readily recognize about it other than the thing looked to be away from the main streets. "Wonder what this was."

"A temple."

He glanced over at Freya. The Elf had an odd look in her eyes. "Temple to what?"

"To gods that are no longer welcome in the kingdom."

"Huh. How did that happen?"

Freya approached the ruined structure, looking at it closely. "The rebellion was said to have started because of the temples and their beliefs."

"Were you alive back then?"

"I was young back then, working on a small farm in a small village that no longer exists. I never did know anything about the rebellion or the battles." Her hand slowly caressed the burnt wood. "To maidens like me, the only thing we knew was that both sides blamed the believers of the thousand armed God. The kingdom has since made... examples, of anyone known for following the faith."

"Guess it's a touchy subject."

"I did not share their faith, if that is what worries you."

"Just... I guess it's the feeling that this isn't something I have any right to comment on."

"Perhaps. It would not be my place to decide that for you, however." Freya said, shaking her head. "I also know you probably have many questions about the religion itself."

"I mean, who wouldn't?"

With a sigh, she gave him a flat look and continued walking. "You'll have to find someone else to ask, then."

"What, you don't know anything about them?"

"I grew up in an isolated farmland at the edge of the kingdom. It took me a long time to realize many of the things I'd been taught about the world were false." Her shoulders slumped. "And I've never found someone who knew of them to properly ask."

"I'm guessing what you heard was a bit outlandish?"

"Indeed." She nodded. "The wildest of the claims being that they sacrificed humans."

"And that would be... outlandish, right?"

Freya startled, staring at Tomas with wide eyes. "Is human sacrifice something normal in your world?"

"No, no, it's just that there'd been a civilization that did that, once. It's long gone, now."

She eyed him as if there was some doubt on the claim. "To answer, yes, it is outlandish. Had such a group of people been killing humans, the kingdom would have eradicated them long before they set roots."

"I guess that's reassuring."

They continued their walk, slowly making their way back towards the main streets, meandering their way through the various houses. Some of the smaller ones had small gardens behind them. The sense Tomas got out of it was a sense of security. Freya seemed to slow down each time she approached one such garden, looking at them with an expression that seemed both critical and full of longing.

"You know, we could make a short excursion out of the city." Tomas declared.

"And what about she who lusts? Surely she'd tie you to the bed rather than let you leave for days at a time."

Freya chuckled lightly when Tomas' face lit up with a slight blush.

"Do not worry, I was thinking back to my own garden." She smiled slightly. "Just something to look forward to once you've chosen a place to settle."

"Oh." Tomas blinked a little, slowly, then rapidly. "Oh!" He coughed, cheeks reddening a little. "I... huh, um... I hadn't thought that far ahead."

"Of course you haven't." She wasn't chiding him, her tone was soft, merely an acknowledgment. "And now you have the opportunity to do so."

The scream drew both of them to look at one of the shops further up the road.

A young maiden had been knocked over, falling onto the street. She had mousy ears and a terrified expression plastered across her face as another maiden dressed in leather armor glared her way. Both maidens were frozen in place, the larger of the two stood while keeping the shop door open for a woman. There were no words, comments, or threats, merely silence as she followed into the shop and closed the door behind her.

Meanwhile, the mousy maiden began to fumble back to her feet.

"Can I help you?"

Tomas had approached, offering a hand for the maiden to take. There was a quiet complaint from Freya, but he just took the hand of the downed maiden

and helped her up to her feet. The girl stared up at him in surprise, blinking slowly until she caught her wits.

"Th-thank you, sir." She bowed quickly.

"Don't mention it."

He'd been just about ready to turn away when a new voice drew his attention.

"Has my little mouse caused you any problems, young man?"

It was soft, smooth like silk, sultry with a smoky cadence. The sound sent a shiver through Tomas, one leaving a warmth through him that, for a moment, drew his thoughts to Kat and the bed and how quickly he could make his way back. Instead of running, however, he turned to look at the woman who'd spoken.

And she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Chapter 186 [Tomas]

Tomas was slightly dazed, his thoughts hadn't quite managed to properly parse through what was happening. Some part of him had declared it impossible to be real, that this had to be a dream of some kind. It wasn't, he knew it, but it still felt very much that way. Somehow the very act of sitting in a small tea shop was thrilling in ways he had never thought it possible. The air smelled crisp, rich in the aroma of a thousand different herbal teas, coffee amongst the things being brewed within the busy little spot. The cushions were soft but sturdy, perfect to lean against the chair.

He might have bothered to look around to more carefully enjoy the sights, but it did not feel as if there could truly be anything more beautiful than the woman seated across from him.

Her face was a masterwork of sharp statuesque angles on high cheeks and diamond shaped jaw, yet round plump red lips. Her nose was straight, noble and poised, a perfect cliff for her to look down upon anyone she so wished. Not Tomas, she was looking at him not with a raised nose but rather turning her head downwards to peek upwards in his direction. It turned the statuesque nose into an arrow pointed down to the cleavage contained within a dress that on any other woman it would have been prim and proper. But on her, the large cleavage pushed the cloth and strained it, revealing a valley of flesh and temptation as the woman leaned over the table ever so slightly.

"You were saying?"

Tomas caught himself staring, sputtering and trying to desperately remember if he'd said anything at all in the past several minutes. He was mostly sure he'd almost been drooling.

"I..."

"About where you came from?"

"Oh!" He nodded, straightening up. "Yeah, I'm an offworlder."

The woman raised her chin slightly to stare more directly at him, her light brown eyes glimmering slightly. "You already mentioned that. I'd asked what kind of place you grew up in."

"Oh." He flustered. "Well, I'd... the whole offworld thing is, I thought, erm..."

"Otherworlder."

"Excuse... me?"

She leaned back, crossing her arms under her bust. "The term, offworlder, it is a rather vain thing, is it not?"

"In... in what sense?"

"Is it not a myriad of worlds? Offworlder may be correct, but it implies a... centric position to things." The smile was slightly amused. "Otherworlder is also more commonly used in those places that aren't quite so full of themselves."

"You travel?"

An acknowledging nod. "I rarely stay anywhere for long."

"Too much attention?"

"Something like that."

"Must be tough." Tomas nodded, his eyes flickered to her neck, noticing it barren of a collar. "My... uh... friend, girlfriend, kinda? She always complains about how people behave around human women."

She arched a manicured brow.

"Your relationship seems complicated." She tilted her head slightly. "But I'd rather not pry. You were saying about the world you came from? What is it like?"

"Peaceful, I guess?" He replied, shaking his head. "Technology is sort of more advanced, we don't have any magic over there, so we rely on computers and industry and things like that."

"No magic? That... huh." The woman leaned forward again, turning to the side and speaking to the mousy girl.

Tomas barely acknowledged the maiden's existence until she pulled out something from her robes and placed it on his hand. He turned downwards, noticing a glowing stone, just barely larger than his thumb, and pulsating with a soft reddish glow. "What's this?"

"An elemental stone, perfectly safe." She spoke, pressing the rock down against his palm. "I just want to test something."

"Test wh-?"

His eyelids fluttered, heat poured from the stone and into his hand. It swept its way up his arm and through his body. It was gone right after, leaving him panting, straining against his clothes and desperately wanting to remove them. Everything was so hot, so... Everything blurred for a moment, words were spoken but none mattered, he just reached out for the glass of water, taking long gulps, his body cooling off within minutes.

"Peculiar."

"What... what was that?"

"Just a bit of fire elemental energy, harmless, but it does explain why you've been so clear headed."

"What?"

"I... have a condition, you see." She pulled the stone out of Tomas' grasp. "My ancestry is quite strong, and I was born with a powerful aberrant aura."

"Aberrant?"

"It is a kind of elemental energy. If it were ice, the air around me would cool, or if it were fire, it would heat up. Aberrant is different in that on its own it does nothing, only reacting in the presence of other elemental energy and altering it. The specifics obviously varying per individual." A slight smile, a slight touch against the palm of his hand. "I usually wear an enchanted item to contain my aura, but I removed it half an hour ago since I was curious."

"Curious?"

"Yes, who wouldn't be? You are an otherworlder. I'd hoped that would mean things would be different." She smiled with a hint of sadness at the edge. "The lack of elemental energy within you mitigates it, but it appears you still have just enough for a mild reaction."

Tomas looked down at his hand, where the elemental stone had been, clenching it closed and open again. There was still some heat underneath the skin, diffusing itself slowly. "Does the aura make other people... hot and bothered?"

"Yes." The woman nodded. "As you can imagine, many... inconveniences have emerged because of it."

"Oh geez, I'm... I'm so sorry."

"Don't be, the improper one was me. I should have told you beforehand."

As she spoke, she revealed her thin wrist, moving a silver bracelet onto it. Tomas noticed the difference right away though barely, she was still incredibly beautiful by every conceivable measure. But there was something missing all of a sudden, something he couldn't put into words and made him able to look away for the first time since meeting her.

"Even now, the enchantment is, sadly, incomplete. It is prone to leaking, and maidens can still be affected sometimes." She shook her head. "I must admit it has been an ordeal."

"Why is it incomplete?"

"To make the enchantment, it needs a base on how it should interact with another. And as you might imagine, it is hard to find someone who is entirely immune to my aura." She sighed, her shoulders slumping. "I am guessing it would require for the person to not just have little to no elemental energy, but to also have gotten used to the presence of a powerful aura."

Tomas nodded. "I guess that would be very hard to find. I wish you good luck."

She stared at him for a moment, blinking slowly, she turned to the mousegirl next to her as they both shared a look.

Coughing, she adjusted herself in her seat. "I guess it is quite the shame that there are no more otherworlders." A loud sigh, glancing at Tomas again.

"I mean, I can't really tell you anything? I'd been told it could be trouble."

"I wouldn't want to impose." She laughed slightly. "I can imagine the news of there being multiple otherworlders would stir the same sort of trouble as when the infamous White Claw came to the city. Now that is a maiden with a very powerful aura."

"That's what I was told, yeah."

Tomas sipped from his glass.

"I do wonder what sort of person managed to bond such a powerful maiden."

"That was Rick." He nodded. "He was a chemistry teacher, over at my world."

The woman looked at Tomas, arching an eyebrow slowly.

He sat upright with a jolt. "Oh! Rick might be able to help!"

"You don't say?" She batted her eyelashes, leaning forward and reaching across the table, taking his hands in her own. "I know it's a lot to ask, coming from a stranger, but I would really appreciate your help."

"I... um, I'm not sure how to contact him though?" He hesitated. "I mean, he's been with the Earl and the castle, and..."

"You'd just need to leave a message at the gate."

Her smile remained on her lips but left her eyes.

"That makes sense, I'll try that." He nodded enthusiastically, standing up, turning to leave. "I'll see what I can do."

"Don't forget your Elf."

"Who?" A pause, then he glanced at Freya. Tomas' eyes widened, she'd been sitting right next to him this whole time, face flushed and eyes unfocused.

"Freya!"

"Not to worry. She got hit by the aura, a bit." The woman spoke, twirling her hair. "Just kiss her and she'll be back to her senses. Might be worked up, though."

The woman moved to stand up.

"This is my address." She put down a piece of paper. "If you do learn anything, I would be ever so grateful." She made sure to lean a bit further and squeeze her cleavage, the gesture drawing Tomas' attention and rendering him temporarily mute. "Best of luck, young man."

Chapter 187 [Mark]

The house was, in a way, a prison.

Mark had quickly come to start thinking it as such, at the very least.

It was a nice place, all things considered. The amenities were mostly comparable to the two taverns they'd managed to rent a room at, perhaps a little better since it had its own wash-room rather than it being the bedrooms. The kitchen and basement were fully stocked, and the place had all the signs of having been kept in good condition.

And for all that was worth, none of them could leave.

The city of Aubria, if one could call it that and not an over-sized town, was still looking for them. It wasn't an active manhunt. The disturbance they'd caused had not merited such, but just about everyone knew to look out for their faces by now. In any other place, such a thing would not have been possible, but Aubria in particular was tricky to deal with due to the noble in charge of the place. The viscountess owned a particularly annoying maiden, one with the power to indiscriminately spread snippets of information to anyone within her range.

And the psychic had been quite dutiful in spreading the faces of Mark, Shery, and Noah to everyone within Aubria. If any of them stepped outside, they could quite immediately be seen and reported. Brye had been the only one that'd gone unrecognized thanks to her usage of illusions.

The fact that the ones that had helped them enter the city were also the ones keeping a close tab on them was not helping. Now they were stuck there with nowhere to go until the "Boss" in charge passed a ruling regarding what was to be done with Mark.

But what was gnawing at Mark was how things had so abruptly changed.

He'd been given a single room for himself to use, and neither Shery nor Brye set foot inside. They both kept to themselves, the most Mark would get out of either were teasing comments from the fox in regard to Noah and little else. Whether it was because they were as tense as he was or something else, he didn't know.

Meanwhile, Noah too had begun to show signs of things having changed. She no longer spent her time bound or gagged, but her presence remained near Mark at almost all times. Some of it made sense. Brye and Shery weren't keen on Noah's new freedom. So sticking to Mark ensured some measure of protection in a way. But some of that same closeness was not making much sense either. It had started without him really noticing. Small moments of physical contact. At first she'd just seat near enough they'd touch. But as the days started rolling through, the number of excuses used to get close was increasing.

She'd brush her tail against his ankle when passing him in the corridor, and she'd approach and touch his shoulder rather than call him out. The fact that Brye looked mighty amused about this was unnerving.

Mark hadn't cared, so long as he got Noah to behave, that was that.

Or so he thought.

"What are you doing here?"

Standing at the entrance of his room, drying his hair, Mark looked at Noah as she lay on the bed. She wore a simple light brown piece of linen that covered her whole body. The mousy maiden had been laying on her back, snoring lightly. She'd only stirred awake after he'd entered the room.

"Sleep." She replied with the barest frown, as if it was the most evident thing in the world.

"On my bed."

"Yes."

"What are you doing in my bed?"

"The sheets in the common room are uncomfortable, and the other two aren't going to sleep."

"And you couldn't just go to the room with the three beds."

"Not unless I wanted to wake up covered in bruises."

Mark leaned back to stare at the common-room. The fireplace was still on, the fox and the gray skinned maiden were seated on the table, playing cards or something along those lines. He sighed, as he could only acknowledge Noah would be an idiot to share the room with those two. And at the same time, he didn't want to be the one to share the room with Noah, either.

"I can just kick you out right now."

"Or you could just kick me out once the two bitches go to sleep."

He shrugged

Mark moved through the kitchen, grabbing one of the purple berries and putting it on his nightstand before he moved to lie on the bed. "You know how it goes." He intoned with a warning. He didn't expect her eyes to linger on the purple fruit with... anticipation? It wasn't fear or apprehension, but she looked away fast.

Laying on the bed in his briefs, he didn't bother to attempt falling asleep, just wanting to count the minutes off before he could kick her out. The lull of the resulting silence was only interrupted when he felt Noah's back pressing against his own. Mark tensed, but nothing else happened.

Until Noah interrupted the silence again.

"I need something."

"If it's a piece of cheese, you can go get it yourself."

She huffed loudly, clearly wanting to throw a retort, but holding her tongue in check. "It's not that." She finally declared after a long moment of silence. "Just... turn around."

Not entirely sure what was going on, he obliged. Noah was lying on her side, not having moved, her back turned to him. And without turning to look at him, she reached out and grabbed his arm, draping it over her shoulder before she curled against his chest. The angle made it hard to see her face, but her ears turned an intense red.

"You're kidding." Mark frowned, confused.

"Tigermice crave contact." She stated in a low voice. "Something about the psychic power needing touch to work properly."

Mark tensed, eyes wide, moving to yank his arm away. Despite her diminutive size, Noah was faster and stronger. Her hands grabbed his own and locked them in place.

"Don't." Her voice was a soft plea.

He was mentally checking his thoughts, his defenses, his mind, measuring how much he'd have to move to throw her off properly.

"If I do anything, bite my ears, or tug my tail or..." Noah whispered the words. "Or..."

Still grasping his hand with an iron hold, she moved his palm from laying on her shoulder down her body. The movement was slow but tense, her hands trembling as she used her free hand to tug her dress upward and placed Mark's hand against her inner thigh. The tip of his finger felt the presence of something slick just within reach.

To say he was surprised would have been an understatement.

Noah gulped loudly, trembling a bit more than she let go of his hand, hugging herself and pressing against his chest. The gray locks of hair hid her face, but the heat in her large circular ears could be felt against Mark's face.

His finger twitched, and she responded in turn, quietly twitching.

He should have kicked her out, kicked her off, thrown her out. This was a trap. Someway, somehow, this was a trap. Even if he couldn't consider how or why. His mind jumped to everything he'd wanted out of Noah, to the maiden that had tried to kill him, whom he owned.

Retrieving his fingers from her thighs, she let out a whimper, but froze as Mark moved his free hand under her, pulling her against his chest, his palm pressing against her lower stomach.

Grabbing the purple berry, he pulled it up to her face.

"Eat." He whispered into her ear, slowly moving his hand back down her body.

With a silent nod, she bit into the berry. The moan was muffled by her own hands. She took the berry from him, biting again, swallowing, shuddering. Her tail wrapped around his calves as his free hand moved back down her body.

Without any prompting, she opened her thighs to give him easier access.

By the time Brye and Shery finished their game, a hazy-eyed Noah stepped out of the room, dragging herself to the pile of cloths laying in the corner to curl up and collapse, asleep before she could even register the feeling of the rough cushions against her face.

Chapter 188 [???

The room was a quiet corner of the manor. Wood and glass covered the walls. Each window was a cabinet door, books and scrolls littering every available surface on every available wall, save one. The floor was tidy, devoid of either a stray book or so much as a speck of dust.

The man lounged next to the singular window in the room. His muscular frame was barely contained behind a soft white linen shirt, his hair was short and combed meticulously backwards. In his left hand he held a small pen, tiny for the hand that held it. On his right was a notebook, a rather empty one, only the first dozen pages containing information.

With a precise stroke of the pen, the head of the science department underlined the first two words written on the first page of the notebook.

Rick Cross.

The sound that escaped his lips was not a happy one.

Behind him, the shadow of the curtain cast bulged and grew, a hooded figure emerging into the material plane. "Something bothering you?"

"For a man who'd caused so many ripples upon his arrival, he's been annoyingly cautious." He answered.

"Hm..." The Vampire leaned closer, approaching the side of the couch, stepping into the beam of sunlight to cast a shadow over his shoulder. "No word from the earl of Balet?"

"Tylen has been uncharacteristically quiet. Normally he would have sent word to the King." A slight frown as he wrote another note into the notebook.

"Has this offworlder warranted your frustration?"

"He tamed a Tigress on his own, and she shifted into a Sabertooth shortly after." He contemplated the words for a moment, glancing over his shoulder and meeting the blood-red eyes of the ageless maiden. "But you knew this."

"That I have." She reached out to the notebook, her hand being swatted away by the man before she'd snatch it out of his fingers. "But is it worth your personal time?"

"Tylen's silence has prompted it. After confirmation of Mister Cross' arrival in Balet, no further news has been shared." His finger tapped against the card cover of the notebook. "That means something about this offworlder has made Tylen extremely cautious." Another pause, brows furrowed. "If I am to use Mister Cross, I need more information."

"Do you have to, though?"

"He is a pure-blooded human, and has already shown potential. The subjugation of White Claw is proof enough. He is a prime option out of the offworlder group."

"Then, perhaps, I may have something for you." She wrapped her arms around his neck.

The man remained calm, even as the Vampire licked his throat.

"You?"

"There was a change of plans on our end."

"I figured that would be the case. The King deployed the royal knights."

"I wonder how he found out a Vampire was part of the attack?" Her voice was cold, her fangs scrapping his flesh.

"What makes you think he did?"

"The knights deployed to block all routes south from the capital. My agent and her companion found no safe way to move through undetected." The

pressure increased, her mouth locking against the pulse of his artery. The rhythm was steady and calm, unperturbed. "They are headed eastward."

He didn't nod so much as affirm the words. "Planning to trick the knights into thinking they're going to leave the kingdom towards Coven?"

"It is so much fun talking with you, you catch on quickly."

"Does this mean they will head to Balet?"

The Vampire traced a finger up to his jaw, pushing his head to lean to the side. "The revised plan would have them avoid such a large city, but..."

"But?"

"But I might change their orders... for a price."

A sigh. "I cannot promise I'll be able to put a gap on the net for them to slip through."

"And yet you've not denied me."

"Your stunt in the collar production facility went too far. You were supposed to only take a maiden."

"And I did."

"It wasn't meant to be a human forcefully turned!" His eyes burned with an angry chill, his heart pumped faster for only a second.

Her tongue tasted his skin, cool, wet and slimy. "Was that why you informed the King how he could block my girl?"

"You haven't paid from your end yet." His heartbeat had not changed, slow, in control. "Your stunt would not warrant that loss, not when I can use it to charge you more."

She pulled away, leaving behind a wet patch on his muscular neck he ignored. She sauntered back into the shadows of the personal library. They

seemed to swallow her, reducing her body to a silhouette and two red eyes. "You're asking to have my agent put herself at risk with no benefit."

"That would be unwise of me." His gaze returned to the notebook in his hands. "But she is traveling with someone else who is not a part of your little... clan. A Sabertooth. I take it you've made friends with the tribes?"

The eyes widened ever so slightly. "How...?"

Whether he had an answer to her question or not, he gave none. He kept his gaze on the pen, slowly marking the passage of time with quiet taps. Until, finally, the Vampire spoke again.

"Not while he is a guest of the earl. And it cannot delay the operation."

He flipped the notebook open once more, flipping to an empty page as he began to write. "I do hope to hear news of your half of our deal. Soon."

Within seconds, he was the only one left in the library, and he could return to the focus of his attention. His time, however, was interrupted by a soft knock at the door. He closed the notebook, loud enough the one outside would hear. Three seconds, and the door opened. The maiden wore the standard maid uniform. Carrying a simple envelope, she placed the piece of paper on the small table next to him. A respectful bow followed, and she turned to leave.

The envelope's color, yellow, betrayed the importance of its contents. But he did not open it, not right away. He already knew what was contained within. Its presence was more of a formality to signify the beginning. The stone that had been thrown, one that would trigger the avalanche that had been building over the past thirty years. The solution to ...?

He wanted to savor the moment.

What were the odds? He dared not even try to guess. There was little doubt it would be anything other than an infinitesimal number proximate to zero. It was hard to not believe in some destiny when presented with such a fortunate turn of events. The unwanted guest was removed from his thoughts before he could indulge them.

It did not matter what fate had in store, he would push onward.

Reaching out, he opened the envelope, confirming its contents.

It was little more than a simple written message. The confirmation, an update in status, of a contingency of knights having reached their destination and begun their journey with some very special guests.

The man grinned as he savored the irony.

Earl Tylan Vitchatt, lover of peace and one of the strongest proponents for a peaceful reform of the kingdom's laws, had just lit the fire that would consume the kingdom.

A grand pyre to save humanity.

Chapter 189 [Barry]

The door creaked open to show a single occupant within. Bound gagged, stripped naked, and tied to the wall, Barry felt Pan's glare against his skin like a physical force. She might have been immobilized, her powers suppressed, but the pale blue eyes glared at him with a deep loathing that made his skin crawl.

She wasn't all there, however, the maiden clearly was losing her mind. Pan's eyes were wild at how they lost their focus. There were signs of the maiden Barry had grown to fear and hate, but there was now something else, something that was not in control of itself, or fully aware of everything else, only of its anger.

Barry had been told about the feral state of Valkyries. They were maidens that became highly aggressive, territorial, and entirely unwilling to back down. It was a prospect that would not help them with their goal. They had to get Pan to see that she could at least trust Barry, wouldn't be like she expected him to be.

"Pan." Kajou called.

Pan glared quietly.

"I'm not here to argue." Barry said, moving closer. "I'm here to prove you can trust me."

The glare turned to him. "I am bound."

"Exactly."

Barry made the proclamation while stepping forward, reaching out to the padlock that kept her wrist held firmly against the wall. With a simple click, the padlock opened, and with it, Pan's hand was liberated. She couldn't quite move it, but the rest of her arm remained immobile due to the other restraints.

"I need you to listen." Barry whispered, nodding to himself slightly. "I'm going to set you free, but... but you need to listen until the end."

Her brows furrowed, but she kept quiet. Her eyes went back to boring holes into him as he moved to start working on the other locks and restraints. He was making sure to move slowly, to give himself time to think and just... talk.

"The world I come from, it... there are no maidens, no ferals, only humans. We are all humans." He started off, nodding along to himself. "It's not a perfect place. We've had wars over slavery, and some places still use them for cheap labor. Even if they call it other things. And there's been so much... death over slavery and killing people just because of what they were born as."

Pan only gave the barest frown at his words, remaining perfectly still as she kept her focus on him.

"It might not compare to how things are here, but they are similar. I grew up in that world. People are people, and, to me, maidens are people too."

"I can attest to that." Kajou affirmed. "I can feel his emotions through the bond. It's... it's like nothing we've ever experienced. It's as how the elder described it."

That earned a glare from the Valkyrie, the blond woman tensing against the remaining restraints for a split second. The gesture startled Barry, making him jump back a bit, keeping his distance until Pan relaxed back down.

"I've seen some of the things the kingdom does, and heard the stories from the survivors. What the kingdom is doing is wrong." He nodded slowly, unlocking another padlock. His voice grew in conviction. "Maidens should be free to choose who they're with. I want to help Coven create collars that help maidens bond with one another. Hell, if this whole feral curse can be fixed, I'd go for that too. If possible, while I help Embla free other maidens, the slavery can't... it's wrong."

One last lock left, the one on Pan's throat. Barry hesitated as he met her eyes, trying to look into the depths of the blue irises. She was looking back at him, her face a mask of neutrality. Fear gripped at his chest, the tension felt like it would rip him in two.

"I... think this is what you think, too." He said in a whisper, holding the lock. "Kajou trusts you'll do the right thing and... so do I."

With a click, the collar opened, leaving the prisoner entirely unbound.

Barry stepped back, putting his hands behind his back to hide the shaking. His smile was uneasy as Pan looked at him and then at Kajou in mild surprise. She took a step forward, checking her body over, ruffling her wings, slowly rubbing her wrists and throat.

"If... you know a truth spell." Barry said, drawing her attention. "Cast one on me."

Pan's brow furrowed further, opening her mouth to speak and pausing, frowning and shaking her head. A slight grunt followed. "I..."

"Just a truth spell."

"I can't..."

Pan frowned, gaze losing its focus for a moment, brows creasing into a glare.

Kajou tensed, moving slightly closer to Barry. "Pan?"

"Kajou?"

The Valkyrie stared at her sister in confusion. "Why...?"

"Pan, I need you to cast a truth spell."

Kajou spoke softly, raising one hand to reach out to her sister, the other quietly gesturing at Barry to move away. He obliged, taking a step back.

"Just a simple truth spell."

"Just a truth spell." Pan nodded, frowning further before closing her eyes and waving her hand a little. Her hands began to glow, but it wavered and flickered half-way through. Slowly, her eyes opened again, turning to focus on Kajou. "You... betrayed me."

"What?"

"You... you are tricking me, the human? The human." Her gaze swept across the room, locking on Barry. "He wants to trick me, too." Her hands began to glow.

"Just cast a truth spell!" Kajou hesitated. "Please don't make me do this."

"His Lady is an aberrant. She could use her powers to alter the spell!"

"No, Pan, there's no one else here!"

"He will not hurt you!"

Pan lunged, wings flapping and pushing her higher. The light in her hands takes a quantitative heat to glow. Blue eyes turned and focused into a murderous determination, her pathway clear. But Kajou moved faster, leaping to intercept. The ceiling wasn't high enough for Pan to avoid, even with her wings. The two maidens tumbled and fell.

Barry couldn't follow what happened as they became a heap of limbs and feathers. But it quickly became clear Pan was at a disadvantage, too tired, worn out, starved. While Kajou had had a chance to recover her strength and focus. Pan was pinned down before she had the proper chance to escape.

"The bond is controlling you!"

"Pan, you don't need to do this!"

"It's the only way to save you!"

Pan's whole body began to glow, her skin turning iridescent, and then blindingly hot. Kajou shrieked as she was thrown across the room. The glow sputtered and died, and Pan returned to her feet, panting. "Just... step aside."

I'll... fix this." Her hands began to glow, aiming her palm at the downed Amazoness.

"STOP!"

Barry stood between them, arms wide. His gaze locked onto Pan's with a cold, hard stare.

"Siblings shouldn't fight, not like this."

Pan hesitated. She looked at him, eyes going wide. A tingle ran down Barry's spine as the shock only appeared to grow on both their faces. Panic followed as Pan was clearly feeling it, too. The light in her hand flickered, her aim turning in his direction.

From her shadow emerged a figure, tall and lean, glaring.

"No!" Barry screamed in dawning realization.

The canine had reached up to Pan's neck with her claws. The Valkyrie realized what was going on, turning towards the Hound. Claws met flesh, and the glow from her hands flashed with intensity. Both were sent flying in opposite directions, Barry's chest exploded in burning pain.

"Orion!"

He dove for the dark skinned maiden, eyes adjusting to the light enough to quickly spot the burn marks all over her torso. The canine cringed and coughed, breathing hard as she struggled to get back up and failed. The wound was deep, dangerous.

A cry tore through the room.

Barry turned to see Kajou kneeling next to her sister.

Pan lay on her back, eyes wide, empty.

Dead.

Chapter 190 [Barry]

To Barry's mind, Kajou's cry for her sister tore at his soul. A deep rending within his chest, a gaping bleeding wound that was threatening to spill everything out and leave him hollow. It was a battle to turn his gaze away from Pan's corpse and down to Orion. The Hound was damaged, badly, conscious but struggling. She could live.

The door to the room exploded in a rain of splinters. Embla hadn't just knocked the door, she'd traversed it as if it hadn't been there. The gleaming armor rushing inside before anything or anyone could move.

Barry reacted faster than anyone else. His voice came out in a below as he focused his attention entirely on her. "Save Orion!"

It was as if Embla had been physically struck, her momentum arrested within instants. The large war-axe in her hand dropped. Her visored helmet barely acknowledged Kajou and her sister before she took Orion into her arms.

"GUARDS, TO ME!" Her command shook the building to its foundation. Within seconds three guards had entered. "Take Barry with me."

Her command left no room for rebuttal or complaints. Her steps were swift as she moved out of the room with the dark maiden in her arms. Four more guards were rushing in within the seconds that had taken them to walk out.

"The Amazon does not leave the room." The command was cold, the growl of an angered beast.

Whatever thoughts he had on the matter were fighting against a tidal wave of sorrow and grief that was not his own. The further away he was dragged from the room, the clearer that distinction was becoming. But it was like a tide that threatened to drag him off. He could barely pay attention to his surroundings, to the growing number of maidens that were following them.

Embla, still carrying Orion, was throwing orders like a machine-gun.

Barry was dropped on a chair inside the apothecary while Embla proceeded further in, putting the Hound onto the old woman's table, much to her complaints. She grew pale as she stared into the armored visor and began working faster than she'd likely ever had.

Embla did not wait, turning to Barry and bodily lifting him from the chair. "Hey!"

His complaint fell on deaf ears. She pulled him out of the apothecary and all the way into a different room. One with twelve guards standing at attention and waiting for them. The door closed behind the two of them with finality. Barry recognized the room. It was the one with the stool that doubled as a throne, the place where Embla had attacked Pan and Kajou before locking them up.

He was put on the stool.

"What is..."

The slap from her naked hand stung his cheek with a fiery bite.

"Never." Embla spoke, reaching up to tear her helmet off, throwing it across the room. "Ever." She removed the second glove. "Do." Her breastplate complained. Straps tore with a shriek of broken buckles. "That." Her hand shredded what was not there, her face contorted in rage. "Again."

The last of her armor was gone, the metal parts in pristine condition, but everything else shredded in Embla's rush to take it all off. Her hands fell on his shoulders with a death-grip that made his bones groan.

"Am I understood?"

Her eyes were wild.

Barry could only nod.

She pulled him into a hug with one hand, the other ripping her own shirt off. Her skin was flush, hot, her hands were trembling as she pinned him against her own body in a hug that threatened to break him into fine powder.

Too many things happening at once, too many confusing things. "Orion?"

"Will survive." She spoke into the nook of his neck. "And I will punish you for releasing Pan from her restraints without permission. Later."

Barry could only grimace. "Are you... alright?"

"No." she stated flatly.

He had done this, somehow. He trembled, wrapping his arms against her as the emotions from Kajou did not stop. Was Embla suffering something similar? What had happened exactly? It was a swirl of unresolved things that were coming too fast, too quickly, too soon. He couldn't process it all. He could only tackle one thing at a time. "How... do you feel?"

"Like I just lost my mother." Her voice was strained in ways he'd never heard before. Her body was shaking slightly. "When you gave the order, it had power, and it was..." She slowly pulled him away from her embrace, looking into his eyes once more. "You must never use this on me. Ever."

"I... I understand, but it's... everything is..."

"I can sense it." Her large palm pressed against his chest. "Like a psychic I cannot defend against. It will take time to learn."

"Kajou..."

"Fuck her."

The brusque response startled Barry.

"We are the Court. She is not. You put your life at risk for her and her sister. She is fortunate I do not march there to finish the job."

"Embla-."

"No." She stated, more firmly now. "I do not need to read your mind to know you did something incredibly stupid. She was almost fully feral, you could have died. I am sure you would have if not for Orion."

"She killed Pan."

"And I'm sure she would do so a thousand times over, not just for her concern over you but also for the things those two sisters did to her." Embla let out a slow, shuddering breath, releasing him further.

"I... she didn't jump in until I... I killed Pan."

This gave her pause. "Yes."

He hesitated. "But if... I..." His words stuttered and faltered.

"Your actions resulted in her death."

"But... you would've killed her."

"Yes."

"No, I, you..."

Her hand rose, patting his cheek with a firm but soft pat. It didn't sting, but it felt like every thought in his head had been rattled loose. A well of emotions exploded through him, meeting her eyes and finding them firm.

"Let them out."

"What?"

"Let them out, as I had." She replied. "You must allow your emotions to exist. You must be true to yourself."

"I don't..." He stumbled back, out of her grasp, slumping onto the stool. "I just... I don't know what to think, I... I failed? Kajou's hurting, her grief-"

"Is her own, not yours."

"I got Pan killed." The words repeated themselves, weary, heavy, dull. His eyes widened. "I should... I should feel bad. We bonded, right before-." He swallowed, his hands began to shake. "I should feel bad."

Embla, slowly nodded. "Do you?"

"There... there was a bond."

"It might not have had the chance to fully form before it was cut off. Perhaps it had no depth yet." She was wary, watching as Barry's gaze was becoming lost in something only he could see.

"I... Orion almost died."

"Yes."

"... because of me."

"Yes."

His voice caught in a hiccup. "I... that stings."

"You care for her."

"But... I tried to save Pan, she didn't deserve..."

"Did you care for her?"

"No, she was... I-."

"You are in shock right now, Barry. Whatever your feelings and thoughts, they will come later." She remained standing next to him, her hands pulling him closer. "I will stay here. You are safe."

He found himself leaning against her body.

The room was silent, but he could hear it.

From the other side of the palace, Kajou wept.

Chapter 191 [Monica]

Monica lay on the soft bed next to Rick. Monica's eyes were closed. The night was fresh, her human's body was warm, her belly was full. Dia was not hugging Rick. Monica had him all to herself. And the annoying hard-hard one Deneva had left. Sleep should be easy.

But Monica could not sleep.

It was strange.

There were few times when Monica couldn't sleep. Times when there was danger, or when there was hunger, or when there was cold. But this was different. Monica closed her eyes and sleep would not come. Something bothered Monica.

With a sigh, Monica pulled away from Rick, though not before placing one of the big soft things between him and Dia. Carefully, she kept herself quiet. Like she was hunting, except without prey. She knew that if she wasn't quiet, the other hard-ones would notice, and they'd start bothering her. Or worse, they'd think that her not being with Rick meant they could occupy her place in the bed.

Monica had smelled the interest, she knew she had to be careful.

As she noticed this thought, she stopped.

Why SHOULD she care about her spot being taken? She could hurt them and win and show them their place! This was her spot! No one took it from her?

But what if Rick brought the shiny-hard-ones all at once? What if he had them all take her place at once? The thing inside Monica was similar to what was keeping her from enjoying her sleep.

She turned away from the bed and to the not-there door. She'd seen Dia open and close it, and Rick had said it would break easily. It was hard to open

with her large paws, but she knew how to be careful. The air outside the not-den was cool and refreshing, full of all the bad and wrong scents and only one good one. Monica could track the good one, it was a food scent, but that was not her food.

"Eep!"

Monica snapped her head to the sound.

Someone else had been there! And so quiet!

It was not-food-brings-food not-soft one!

She did not have the white and black cloths on her, but she was not naked like Monica either. Not-food-brings-food wore some dark gray cloth, ones very right and very close to her body. Strange cloths Monica had not seen before. Why did she wear strange grey cloth? Why was she quiet near not-there door right out of sight?

"Miss Monica, excuse my-."

Monica loomed closer, sniffing. Nothing! No sniff, no scent, no sound. Strange! She grabbed not-soft one's arm and raised it, sniffing more closely. Ah! It was the not-scent juice. Why?

"Food?"

Not-soft one might not have smell, but Monica knew she was afraid. Which was good, because Monica was not in a good mood and soft-one not being afraid of her would make it worse mood.

"Food." Monica confirmed with a nod, snatching meat. She'd been about to move, but paused, frowned at not-soft one. "You no here."

"Yes!"

Not-soft one jumped down to the green area with not-really-real plants. Monica didn't like that she couldn't hear or sense her so quickly. But at least not-soft had shown proper fear. So many soft ones thought she was weak. So

many hard ones had stopped showing fear. Monica didn't like it, it felt wrong.

Munching on the tasty meat, she bounded over to climb the not-mountain to get a better view. There were strong-hard-ones around, so she moved carefully. If Rick found out, he...

Monica frowned, coming to a stop on a not-rock and perching herself out of sight from the hard-ones. She chewed on the meat, looking off to the not-forest with lights and hard-ones and soft-ones. Too many in such a small place, more many than Monica had ever seen, all in one place. Hard ones always fought when there were so many, Monica had thought hard-hard one Deneva controlled this place, that was why they didn't fight, because... because?

More things that didn't make sense.

Someway, somehow, this not-forest was not hard-hard one Deneva's even though she was the strongest before Monica came. It belonged to the VERY soft one, that Rick treated with fear! FEAR!? Monica had wanted to growl, but there were so many things that didn't make sense she didn't understand. She still didn't understand. But at least she knew Rick, knew he wanted her, needed her. She was strong, and she'd protect Rick from everything, but...

But then he beat her with that not-fight.

He hadn't done it directly, the shiny-hard ones had been the one to do it. But they'd done so thanks to him!

Monica ripped the meat with a snarl, chewing on it. She'd tried so hard, she could have used the not-fair things, but then so would the shiny-hard ones and then it would not be a game and would be a fight. She knew she could have won. Hunt prey, that was what she was best at! But Rick had...

Were the shiny-hard ones his? No, they didn't smell like they were his, and his scent was not on them, nor did they smell of wanting to claim him. But the shiny-hard ones moved like...

Like barons. But they weren't barons... were they?

Monica's brow creased. They didn't smell like barons, they had many of the same weird smells, but the smell of baron wasn't there. The anger, the rotten dizzy fruit, the bad sex, the wrong-hunger smells, none were there. Monica had picked a bit of that scent, from the not-forest, but not from the hard-ones in the not-mountain. And Rick was NOT a baron.

So why did she feel wrong? What was this thing inside her chest that shouldn't be there?

Rick had challenged her. And won.

Was that it?

Monica almost took the last of the meat and stopped as she looked at it.

Every day food she had not hunted was given to them. The den they slept in had not been chosen by them. Rick and Dia talked and moved with others that were not strong but were being treated as strong. Monica was strong, but more and more she was seeing the others not looking at her as strong. And Rick was happier because of it!

Why!?

Because Rick was the stronger one?

No! She was strongest, she knew she was strongest!

Fuming, Monica kept her growl quiet, she had to remain quiet... why? Because Rick would get angry if he found out she'd been outside? Because she'd made others afraid? They were MEANT to be afraid! How else could she be sure things were safe? That they knew who was strongest? Who not to anger? Who not to dare raise a claw at? How could she protect Rick if everyone thought she was weak!?

But...

Monica flopped back down against the hard surface. Was Rick strong? Why was Rick strong? Why had the shiny-hard ones fought as Rick had... Rick had told the shiny-hard ones how to beat Monica in the game!

Monica's back straightened, eyes wide.

Shiny-hard ones did not fight for Rick, they fought against Monica!

Rick had been tricked!

That was why the shiny-hard ones thought they were stronger than Monica, because they'd tricked Rick into helping them! They feared Monica less because they thought THEY had won! That she was weaker than hard-hard Deneva who owned but not-owned the not-forest.

There was only one way to fix this.

Monica dug her claws into the not-stone and began making her way up to the cusp of the not-mountain. This time she did not care for being quiet, no, she was loud, as loud as she could. All around her the smell of shock and fear. Many many hard ones had not detected her and now they could. Monica pushed to be louder, to be loud enough anyone in or near the not-mountain would feel the challenge.

The hard-ones above that could fly were startled, scared, some wary and thinking they could fight, but Monica didn't pay them any mind. She had only one goal. Reaching high enough she could see all the not-mountain in its hard flat ugly surfaces with no trees and no prey and no nice hidey-holes, she inhaled deeply and let out the loudest roar.

Today, the not-mountain would be hers, and she would show them.

She was the strongest.

Chapter 192 [Rick]

Rick found himself standing before he was awake.

His heart hammered against his chest, the echoes of Monica's roar a distant ringing in his ears.

It took a split second for his brain to process what had just happened. He was awake, out of bed, and every part of his body shook with the adrenaline of a man that was ready to run away from a monster. Except the feeling within his chest was not one to run, it was one to fight.

He wanted to fight, something... he was angry.

Angry?

Rick's eyes whirled around the room. Dia was waking up. The bed was empty.

Monica.

The emotions weren't his.

The second roar shook the room, the very castle. It was like nothing he'd heard Monica do before. It was like a bomb had gone off outside and the whole place had shuddered from the impact. How far off was that? No, something was wrong.

Deep inside his chest, anger, determination, fight. **Fight. FIGHT.** Eyes wild, he knew it was Monica. Something was wrong, deeply wrong. He'd not felt her determination swell up like this since the fight with the Baron.

Someone was going to die.

"Sir, what's-."

Dia met his gaze and recoiled. It took him a moment to realize he was snarling.

"GO!" He roared, hands shaking as he ran to get his clothes on. "Whatever's happening, help!"

To Dia's merit, she snapped instantly. The maiden moved faster than he'd ever seen her, out the door before he'd managed to finish getting his shoes on. His own mind was reeling as he strapped the short-sword to his hip. Things had been going so well, what had put Monica into this state? Was Monica being attacked? The Earl couldn't have ordered such a thing, or could he? It wouldn't make sense, if he wanted to attack Monica they'd all be captured. What was going on!? Rick stepped outside through the balcony and couldn't see anything of importance. The situation was happening somewhere on the other side of the castle.

Ducking back inside his room, he rushed into the castle. It was pandemonium, maidens were moving left and right, breaking world record human sprint speeds as if it was nothing. Some doing so while wearing a full plate of armor. Rick should have bounced back into the room, the maidens left to continue their maddening rush at blinding speeds.

He didn't, the fire inside him burned. There was no time to waste or hesitate.

"MOVE!"

And they did. As if he'd grown a forcefield that repelled them. The maidens moved, keeping clear of his way and sometimes looking warily as he began to walk towards the center of the castle, certain that from there he could find a way to the other end.

Rick's steps faltered, head swimming, a burst of pain exploded across his shoulder.

"Sir!"

A small woman reached out to him before he could stumble. It took him a second to recognize her. "Mouse?" He muttered, turning his focus inward. He

had to push Monica's emotions away. The fight had begun and his eyes were having a hard time keeping track on anything that was still, like everything was moving too slowly, every single detail being sought out and scrutinized. *Danger behind every corner, prey was rushing right within reach, the air stank of fear, he-*

"Sir!"

A door opened, and he was hurried into a room. Darkness all around, and for a split second, he was blind. Panic swirled with anger. He kept pushing the emotions away, blocking them off, but something was wrong. Monica was pushing back, trying to shove everything at him at the same time. She was fighting against someone that made her blood pump and boil like a nuclear reactor that was reaching a critical point.

"My, you look like you need to take a breather."

The voice spoke from the shadows. A figure stepped forward into the beam of light, a figure of plump and generous proportions. Her face was obscured in the darkness. What little illumination entered the room hinted at her large breasts and generous hips, of a flawless body built for one thing and one thing only.

"Why don't you come and relax?"

His skin tingled like he'd been thrown into a thunderstorm. The fire in his chest swelled and spread across his body. The words struck chords inside him that were all the wrong things, not when he was teetering at the edge of just punching someone. Worse still was that Monica had not relented in her insistence; she wanted him to feel her emotions.

Consciously or otherwise, she was fighting against him. Rick grunted, the tingling had very nearly made him slip.

"Wrong guy."

Rick's gaze locked on the window, marching straight towards it. If going through the castle the normal way wasn't viable, he'd have to move around it

from outside. The figure seemed to hesitate as he blew past her, opening the unlocked window.

Ground level, good. He hopped out, head on a swivel and trying to orient himself to find how close he'd gotten to Monica. From behind him there was a startled gasp, probably the lady realizing he wasn't who she'd thought he was. He'd apologize if he saw her again.

The area he'd come out on was near some sort of stables. It looked unprotected and right next to the wall that led to the town. There were large cages with pigs and boars that were going absolutely wild with their squealing. It was likely the things were quite aware there was a monster in the loose, one with a taste for...

Rick stopped mid-stride, turning to stare at the pigs.

The beasts had abruptly gone quiet, staring at Rick as he stared back.

Had Monica started this? Someone else? Regardless of either, did he need to stop Monica or help her? Why was she pushing her emotions toward him? It was all coming into a blur of aggression and anger. His hand grasped the hilt of the short-sword. If he had to stop her, then some juicy bait could...

Rick realized the pigs had scurried away from the doors and into the very corners of their cages. Another roar, right as pain blossomed against Rick's arm.

He didn't have the time to waste here. He practically ran out of the area, following the castle wall in the general direction of Monica's presence. The closer he got, the more knights he started to see moving around, nervous, preparing or organizing for something.

Each and every single one of them moved out of his way as Rick continued his approach. The sound of fighting became apparent soon after, screeching shivers and powerful thuds. It was like someone was setting off grenades inside an industrial sawmill.

The air trembled and shuddered, and Rick continued moving closer.

One knight moved to block his path, her armor betraying her rank being higher than that of the normal knights, perhaps a captain, perhaps a royal knight. He didn't care. Rick's gaze moved from his destination towards her, locking on the visor.

She flinched. But she did not move out of his way.

"Sir, your weapon."

Rick followed her gesture. At some point he'd unsheathed the blade and was currently holding it as if he were just about ready to jump into a fight. His brows furrowed. He knew he didn't stand a chance against any maiden, let alone whatever might be making Monica feel like this. But he'd be damned thrice over if he was going to passively sit back and watch.

The grip tightened.

"No."

That, apparently, was not what she'd expected out of him.

Rick stepped past her. The maiden rushed to catch up. "We cannot let you approach the earl while armed."

"Good, I don't have plans to talk to him right now."

Rick marched onward, not bothering to head in the direction of where the knights were tightly clustered together and instead moving straight ahead, to the volcano of emotion that was Monica. The blaze in his chest was turning into a pyroclastic flow searing its way through him, the hand grasping the sword was shaking. The knight that had stuck to his side was eying him every other second.

And as he pushed forward, he finally caught sight of the battle.

It was a one on one.

Monica stood, wreathed in shadows that flickered as if she were exuding wisps of smoke. Her naked figure was littered with dozens of tiny cuts and

several deep ones, dried blood covered her skin. With her claws fully out, she snarled, muscles tense. Opposite her was Deneva, wearing her full armor regalia. Her body glowed with a faint reddish glow. On each hand, she wielded a weapon, a sword on her right, a spear on her left. The armor was chipped and dented in a couple of places, but otherwise untouched.

They jumped at one another, moving faster than Rick could follow. Monica weaved around the weapons as if she were no more than an illusion. Her blows landed on the armor, but each one gave an opportunity for Deneva to slash, poke, and prod. The ground cracked under their feet, each blow a concussive blast that Rick could feel against his bones.

Monica moved with fierce, unrelenting determination, anger.

And Deneva was moving defensively, countering and blocking, restricting Monica's movements but never chasing after her.

Never taking the offensive.

"Who started this?"

He spoke with a low whisper.

The knight hesitated. "You should step away, sir. It's dangerous to be this close."

"If Monica stops, would your captain do the same?"

The knight didn't speak, and that was all the answer he needed.

Rick moved forward and past the knights.

Chapter 193 [Captain Deneva]

Royal Knight Deneva had been resting peacefully until her senses had caught the presence of White Claw. There was no in-between, she was awake, alert, and away from the Earl's embrace within a single heartbeat. The second placed her out of the bed, assessing her surroundings. No threats. There was only one, outside. She moved to strap on her armor without a moment to lose.

The aura the maiden was projecting was not passive, it was aggressive. Someone was going to die if they hadn't already. The fact that White Claw had gotten this far out of her room without an alarm raising could very well mean she'd been intentionally targeting something or someone.

"Den?"

"White Claw is loose, and looking for a fight."

Her guards had begun sounding the alarm within half a second of the roar, a chime and a blinking red light within the Earl's room. They were getting sloppy.

The doors opened and four knights stepped inside with their swords drawn.

Deneva had her own sword in her hand as she threw her aura at them, testing their intent. They didn't flinch or deviate, they confirmed the Earl was alive, and that there were no threats in the room before sheathing their blades and kneeling in front of their captain. "Our orders?"

"Lock down the fort. Total state of emergency. Check every nook and cranny for dead or injured. Protect the Earl."

"And you, ma'am?"

Deneva had not slowed in arming herself, putting on her helmet and, with a gesture of her hands, drawing her weapons from the corner. "I'll handle White Claw."

"Do not kill her." The Earl commanded. "Keep her movements contained."

She nodded. "May I use the pokeball?"

"According to Rick, it will likely push her aggression. And it might fail anyway if Rick used his own. Avoid it unless you see no alternatives."

"Yes, my lord."

She stepped outside through the balcony. The knights locked the meter-thick safety shutters behind her, turning the Earl's chambers into the safest place in the city. Deneva hoped her lord would stay there, but she knew he'd inevitably want to confirm what was happening with his own eyes. She had to contain the target by then, at least partially.

White Claw's aura thickened, snapping in reaction to Deneva's presence, focusing on her. The roar that followed shook the air around her. Instinct made her move, raising her arms protectively.

In the split second between realizing the fight had already begun and hearing the roar, the stone masonry exploded around her. The blow against her forearms had been heavy, powerful enough to throw her through the balcony floor. Her body bounced against the slanted fortress wall, instinct and training kicked in, her sword lashed out to cut into the stone to give herself some control, to slow down.

White Claw did not give her the room to regain her footing. The feline had used what remained of the balcony to launch herself downwards. Her claws slammed against Deneva's raised sword. She'd reinforced the weapon with her own aura, but inertia still won out, her body thrown downwards, her other blade remaining embedded on the fortress wall. A curse escaped Deneva's lips. She twisted, preparing to unleash a burst of energy to correct her position. The aura from White Claw slammed against her like a tidal-wave, strong enough even the armor's protective enchantments had not been able to avoid the temporary disruption.

The energy faltered and Deneva realized she would not be allowed the opportunity to wield her elemental energy outside of her body properly. Was

this how White Claw hunted? By surrounding her target with her aura to disrupt their abilities?

White Claw bounded between the balconies as if the verticality of the castle was nothing to concern herself with. Each leap turned rock to dust, followed by a powerful blow that would knock Deneva away from any opportunity to regain her footing.

She was being juggled, kept midair by a foe that was aiming each blow with extreme killing intent.

Deneva had been dutiful and read about the Sabertooth and how they fought, what little there was available anyway. Yet White Claw did not match any of the descriptions. This was more like fighting a flying maiden, and her armor wasn't going to protect her indefinitely. With her left, she blocked the next attack, and with her right, she summoned another sword. The instant she confirmed where White Claw would land next, she threw the blade. An explosion of elemental energy turned the balcony to rubble before White Claw could reach it.

A split second of delay from her next attack, and exactly the amount of time Deneva needed for her feet to meet the castle wall. Rock crumbled under her as she launched herself away from the fortress, a cloud of dust trailing behind her. She did not need to glance over her shoulder to confirm White Claw was following in her wake. Instead, she focused her elemental energy into the soles of her feet, condensing it, and then letting it out in an explosion to give herself more impulse. She'd need to get to the ground before her opponent did or-

A series of bursts startled her. This time she did turn to look. Her eyes widened from within her helmet. White Claw was mimicking her technique, and she was using her absurd aura to apply it repeatedly. She was gaining on Deneva. It couldn't be, shouldn't be. If White Claw had known this technique earlier, she wouldn't have stumbled when she'd blown the balcony up.

Had she been keeping it hidden? Or... it couldn't be. Had she learnt it just from watching her use it once?

Deneva grit her teeth, preparing for the ground that was rushing up to meet her. Dismissing her swords, she summoned two shields in their stead. One aimed at the incoming White Claw, the other at the ground. She rushed her elemental energy to her arms and braced.

But the blow never came. White Claw's aura had vanished, and with it, her presence.

Deneva hit the ground, pushing against it and leaping in search of the feline. Darkness, that was the Sabertooth's greatest tool according to the books. It was clear White Claw had lunged into the shadows. The question was from where she'd emerge. Was she stalling to recover her breath from the extreme expenditure of energy she must have been pushing through? Deneva replaced the shields with a sword and a spear, careful as she ran towards the training fields. She could attempt to root White Claw out of her hiding spot, but if the fight continued, that would be the closest space to move the fight to. Anywhere else had the potential to harm-.

Deneva spun. The attack had come from her own shadow. Her sword met flesh, but the cut was superficial. The feline's limbs were thick with elemental energy, protecting her from most of the bite from Deneva's swords. And she recognized the technique, the exact one she'd used to prepare for when White Claw attacked her mid-fall.

This was no coincidence.

Again, the feline disengaged, diving into the shadows and emerging at a relative distance, watching Deneva.

White hair glowed under the moonlight, her claws glimmering, sharp as swords, her blue eyes piercing and angry. Wrathful.

The feline's aura surged back, and this time the knight knew exactly what to expect as White Claw jumped back into the fray, the aura lashed towards her left, and the claws came from the right, the aura came down on her like a hammer and the blow would be as an uppercut. This Deneva knew how to handle far better, weaving her way through the blows and trusting her armor to absorb the damage to give herself an edge over the feline.

Deneva was faster and with longer reach. Her blade would land two shallow cuts for every single strike White Claw made. The feline was pushing aggressively, however, her aura pushed harder, stronger, and thicker. Every blow was just as fast but came with ever greater force. The creak of metal betrayed the power as the shadow wreathed maiden was pressing through the counters and defensive cuts through sheer grit.

Every time their blows met, the ground would rumble underneath their feet.

The royal knight did not hesitate, but she felt something was off. White Claw was trying to bring the fight to a quick end. Blue eyes glinted with desperation, flinching but not from Deneva's own sword. Something else was happening within the maiden. But it was not something she could focus on. If White Claw kept pressuring her like this, then it wouldn't take long before Deneva would start losing too much ground and she'd be forced to bring out all her blades.

But her lords' orders had been to contain, not to kill.

Maybe if-

"Monica!"

The shout startled White Claw, and determination turned into desperation. She reached out in an attempt to grasp Deneva, looking just about ready to let herself get stabbed if it meant she could throw the royal knight somewhere else. Deneva weaved around the grasp, punishing the ill-timed attempt with her blade, slicing the palms, but her blade didn't dig deep enough to sever the tendons.

"Monica!"

A figure was moving closer, and White Claw had switched from claws to fists. Shoving Deneva back even as the cuts on her forearms were multiplying with every strike. The knight's own armor cracked with the concussive force.

Deneva had a chance to spot who had been calling out to Monica.

Under her visor, her eyes widened in shock.

Rick Cross, the human, bare chested and holding a sword. His body was littered with a dozen bloody scratches, places where the debris of their battle had struck him.

"Monica!"

His eyes blazed.

And Monica hesitated, her gaze filled with dozens of different emotions.

To Deneva, it was the perfect chance to bring the fight to an end. Her spear spun as she lunged to attack with its blunt end, intent on striking a debilitating blow.

Yet her instincts warned her of danger, and her eyes looked back at Rick Cross. His eyes glowed with a dim blue light, his aura a ghostly reflection of White Claw's.

Deneva felt as if fangs were sinking into her throat.

She froze, eyes wide, obscured under her visor.

Rick held her gaze as he continued his approach, each footfall made White Claw flinch, her shoulders trembling and head lowering. The blade in his hand swung amateurishly, he had no discipline or control, he was human, weak.

And yet Deneva felt her focus on him as if he posed as much a threat as White Claw had moments prior.

Rick grasped Monica's hand, her claws were sheathed, the contact drained any fight left within her.

"Come."

White Claw nodded slowly. Her shoulders slumped, head lowering, her tail drooped and her ears flat. The aura was gone, the fighting was over. It was as

if she was an entirely different being than the blood-thirsty entity from just thirty seconds ago.

Deneva could only observe in shocked silence.

Rick took White Claw by the hand and marched out, followed by the white haired maiden.

Silence reigned over the courtyard. The knights quietly made way for them.

Deneva felt more than one set of eyes upon her, dimly, she realized she'd frozen mid-strike and not relaxed her pose until the two had been entirely out of sight.

Chapter 194 [Rick]

Rick had not spoken a word, not looked at Monica, he only kept his gaze on the path ahead. He couldn't bring himself to stop moving until his thoughts were clearer on what he had to do, and that was currently impossible with the anger burning through his veins, pumping a thousand miles a minute. He wanted to drag her directly to the room and use the pokeball on her and keep her in there and scream until he stopped, feeling like his head was about to explode.

Which was exactly why he was walking in exactly the opposite direction of his room.

The knights at the gate to the gardens tried to stop them as he marched. One look and they practically jumped out of the way. Monica tried to say something, or do something, and Rick turned his gaze back to her and she flinched, lowering her head again, trailing behind him morosely.

With his hand grasping her paw, he stepped into the long tunnel of vegetation that hung in an illusion of privacy. Monica padded after him without making a sound. She didn't say anything, but he could barely feel her emotions through the bond right now. Anger gone, she was now sullen and frustrated. He wanted to scream, to shout, to shake his finger and consider how to punish her.

Which was exactly why he continued walking.

In the dusk, it was hard to really appreciate whatever beauty the garden had. Not that he would have tried to pay attention. His focus remained on the pathway, visible enough for him to just barely keep his footing stable while dragging Monica along. The minutes ticked by, the fire began to die out. He kept walking. They'd made their way through the same spot at least four times. Monica's attention was starting to wander away from him, but a singular look put her right back to her lowered ears.

Another three loops, Rick could properly think words and control his breathing.

Four more, he could actually slow down and unclench his grip.

Two more, his hands weren't shaking from the crash of adrenaline.

In the next one, he slowed enough he could finally bring himself to stop, moving to one of the fountains.

"Sit."

He sheathed the short-sword he'd been carrying in his free hand the whole way.

Monica plopped down to the ground without much fanfare, looking slightly upward at him. Their eyes met, and she lowered them, ears flattening. A frustrated grunt followed, full of indignity and many other things. Leaning forward, Rick took her paw and raised it so he could take a closer look. Blood stained the white fur, but most of her wounds were already closing. Even the deeper ones were scabbing over.

Rick turned to the fountain, removing his shirt and dipping it into the chilly water. With the drenched shirt, he began to slowly scrub away the fresh blood from Monica's arms. Her own blood.

She looked at him, surprised and confused in equal measure. The maiden tried to shift and pull her arm from his grasp.

A quick glare made her stop.

The work was slow but methodical. First one arm, then the other, then he began doing the same with the blood on her torso. Monica didn't look away from his face, not flinching even as the chilly water touched on the wounds that were still open.

Neither spoke, both trying to figure the other out, emotions swirling within them. She tested the bond, he could feel her focus through it, and he blocked

her with what was left of his anger. It was enough to make her flinch and back down.

Her focus shifted to his own wounds, barely scratches but that were still bleeding. Monica leaned forward, placing her lips upon the larger one, slowly lapping at it. The gesture stung, and Rick slowed with his cleaning of her body. He waited, however, until she was satisfied, and returned to the work he'd been focused on, keeping her from focusing on his other scratches.

Finally done, Rick dropped the bloodied shirt to the ground.

"Stand."

Monica nodded, slowly going up to her feet. Her eyes lingered on his other wounds, but their gazes met again.

Rick let out a sigh, patting the back of her fluffy, drenched paw.

"I know you're scared."

Her face narrowed with a frown, shoulders tense and her tail swishing in annoyance. "Monica no scared."

She barely moved, however, her paw in his hand as he gripped her fingers. She looked down at him as he held her there, his hand pulling her to press against his chest.

"Rick protect Monica."

Her ears flattened. Monica growled, scoffed, shook her head. But she'd have to fight if she wanted to pull her hand away. She huffed, cheeks puffing and her head shaking wildly. But he waited, watching her as she clearly wanted to say something about that, complain in some way.

"Rick protect Monica." He repeated, watching her growl again.

Slowly, she huffed, and deflated, lowering her head. "Rick... protect Monica." She conceded.

"Rick protect Monica, here." He said, making sure to stare into her eyes.
"Monica protect Rick... out there."

The last two words had not been ones that were part of her vocabulary just yet, but he hoped the message was clear as he gestured at the horizon. Monica looked slightly less sullen at that, nodding.

"Monica protect Rick." She nodded enthusiastically.

"Rick protect Monica, here."

The maiden faltered, far less energetic. "Rick protect Monica." She muttered, almost a mumble, looking away, petulant.

"I'll protect you."

Reaching up with his free hand, he took her cheek in his palm and turned her face so their eyes would meet. She mumbled, nodding slightly. "Rick protect."

Rick let out a sigh he hadn't been aware he'd been holding onto. He nodded, a mountain of exhaustion suddenly dropping on him like a hammer. He tugged her, bringing her face closer. Monica hesitated for only a moment before leaning into the kiss. She lowered her body slowly, kneeling so she could look up at him when their lips parted.

The maiden wrapped her cold drenched arms around his chest and she pressed her head against his chest. He hugged her back, patting gently and sighing a second time. He'd have to talk with the earl about this, apologize, and probably look for how to repay the damages. It didn't look like they'd be able to stick around for much longer either, not when Monica could get another moment like this one.

He just hoped the extent of the problems would only go that far.

Rick wasn't sure what had brought about the whole thing. He'd have to pry it out of her later, but he suspected she'd not be very collaborative about it.

This whole thing had worn him thin, drained him, and left him half-way to figure out how-.

Another kiss interrupted his thoughts. Monica pulled him into her lips with hunger. Her gaze was chastising, a reproach he had lost any energy to deny. He rolled his eyes at her. "You did bad, Monica."

She pouted.

"Small bad."

"No, Monica, big bad."

"No hurt, no kill. Little bad. Little little." She tried to argue, the look in her eyes was hopeful.

Rick just shook his head, pulling her head against his chest and just trying his best to recover the strength he'd lost. He'd have to think about what to do later once he could better understand the extent of the consequences.

She petulantly hugged him.

They embraced one another for several more minutes. Monica's head slowly turned, releasing him and leaning into the biggest scratch that he'd received from approaching her fight. She licked his shoulder, making him wince.

"Monica sorry."

"Yeah, well, Monica has to apologize to the others."

"No." There was a hint of fire there.

He stared at her intently. "Yes."

A low grumble and a growl, but she didn't try to refute him. Her lips moved to the next wound. She was tender, only doing small probing licks to each of the wounds that were still bleeding. "Dia heal Rick." She spoke with annoyance, almost begrudgingly so. She sniffed at another one of the light cuts and her nose was scrunching up. "Dia heal."

"Yeah, later. I don't think we should stay here any longer."

With a sigh, he picked up the drenched shirt, scrubbing out some of the blood, and squeezing it dry as best he could before draping it over his shoulder. Monica took his hand, and they made their way out of the garden.

Deneva was waiting for them, escorted by four of the other high-ranking knights, but the captain was not wearing her armor. The green-haired maiden stood statuesque and poised, her gaze sharp as she took one long look at Rick in what felt like an attempt to assess his physical condition. But her brows rose ever so slightly as her focus moved from his exposed chest to the shirt.

The knights behind her weren't as stoic. A few of them blushed severely as they looked from the shirtless Rick to Monica and back. The feline had picked up on it and started to inflate, looking smugly.

"Monica."

His voice chided her, and she flinched, tail falling limp.

She grumbled, sighed, mumbled, and her shoulders slumped. Stepping towards Deneva, she lowered her head just a little, a mimicry of a bow. "Monica sorry."

Deneva's eyes widened further in the first full show of actual emotion Rick had seen from her throughout the weeks he'd been staying here. And rather than wait for Monica to add anything else to her statement, he stepped forward.

He bowed properly, following protocol a bit more strictly. "I will be taking Monica to my room. This was a breach of trust and I would want to apologize to the Earl in person once I've had a chance to regain my strength."

"..."

Deneva was still looking at Monica and then at Rick. She didn't react until one of her subordinates coughed loudly. With a quick nod, she bowed in

acknowledgment. "I will convey your words to the Earl. You will have his response tomorrow."

"Thank you, captain Deneva." He smiled wanly. "And I am sorry Monica attacked you, tonight's events should not have happened."

"I fought her as I should have." She declared almost reactively.

The royal knight turned to leave, her subordinates followed in quick order.

Rick wondered why they'd all been sent there in the first place rather than just a messenger, shrugged, and just chose to drag himself to bed before he fully collapsed. Whatever was going on could wait until he didn't feel like he'd run a marathon.

Chapter 195 [???

The Vampire clans and the Tigress tribes had made for uneasy neighbors over the past hundred years. Their presence during the war had been well known to be firmly in support of the rebellion, and the victorious kingdom had paid them in kind, taking whatever warriors they could get their hands on before they could. The intent had been to turn the fangs of the two groups as tools in their subjugation, but too many of the captured maidens chose death over dishonor.

And though the kingdom might have been able to try to subjugate the territories occupied by these two groups, it quickly became evident it was an impossible endeavor. The very war that had guaranteed their victory had poisoned the land with elemental energy so thick it was debilitating to the weaker maidens, and poisonous to humans altogether. It was the perfect place for their respective groups to retreat to and remain outside the reach of the former king's wrath.

The two very different groups of maidens were forced to share space very close to one another. The Vampires retreated further west and nearer to the shores, constructing high impregnable fortresses in the cliffs, using the ancient world trees the Elves had made during their first war with humanity. Meanwhile, the Tigresses kept a more nomadic lifestyle, moving across the dead-lands and the crooked forests, places where the elemental energies had corrupted everything and where even the average ferals were fierce enough to be compared to the Draconid flocks of Kilmere, or the Orc hordes of Stagfair.

And their alliances had only ever been of convenience and trade.

The tigress tribes would take humans and sell those they weren't interested in to the Vampires. But it would not be strange for either group to take resources from each other when given the opportunity. A recent commodity they'd been very quick to rob from one another being the new domination bond collars that had begun flooding the kingdom's underground markets.

Things had appeared to be turning for the better until the collars started to fail.

Soon they were trading all their resources in exchange for the collars, both sides unwilling to return to the submission variants, quite aware these collars gave them too much range of movement they'd been sorely lacking. If only they could stabilize the collars, they could turn their focus towards massing power and properly removing the kingdom's influence from their lands. Rather than continue hiding within the more toxic regions.

The opportunity presented itself when the queen of Vampires proclaimed she'd planted a spy within the human controlled territories and now they would have the chance to collect on what they needed. Mainly someone with intimate knowledge of the internal workings of the collars that they could use to fix whatever was wrong with the domination collar and made it fail so quickly.

The operation itself had gone smoothly. Everything afterwards had not.

The royal knights had been deployed in force. Hundreds of the most powerful maidens in the kingdom swarm the forest and roads. Ferals were eradicated by the hundreds, and no doubt their presence would trigger south-bound feral rushes, but the king had made clear that capturing them was more important.

And now, heading east to take the long way around. By kidnapping a couple of humans here and there, forcefully bonding them, and then dropping their corpses somewhere visible, they intended to trick the knights into believing their destination was to escape the kingdom and reach Coven. But their goal would be to take a southbound direction before reaching Balet.

In their mad dash across the kingdom, the hope was to give the slip before the royal knights caught up with them. They were confident in their fighting abilities, but not against a handful of fully geared royal knights, let alone dozens of them. The idea had been to only throw clues, clues that would be tied together over time. Clues meant to hint at their presence without outright revealing it.

Apparently, the plan had changed.

"We need to make a scene in Balet."

As the ritual circle of blood died down, Shal glared at it with narrowed eyes. Her ruby red eyes held no small amount of disdain at the prospect.

Opposite to her in the clearing, Throag used her claws to clean dirt from under her other claws. Her feet rested on the back of a man, their latest tool to keep them from going feral, and likely soon to be discarded.

"Problem?" The Sabertooth asked, not amused, but not quite unamused either.

"Orders from the Queen."

"Good luck, then." Tossing the fleck of dirt away, her claws stroked her stripped orange fur. "I'll wait for your return for... two days." With a smirk, her ears canted in amusement, as she could hear the glower under Shal's breath.

"It'll open a chance to head to Aubria. We need this."

"You need this. I can take this sad lump of meat and trek straight to the deadlands."

"The king sent the sky blues." Shal spoke with poison in her lips. "If we try to move across the wilderness, we'll be spotted."

Throag growled. She hated the sky blues. The two maidens that flew from so far up not even she could discern their presence. And despite the altitude, the maidens' sight was so powerful they could spot figures moving through a forest or down a road. The only way to get rid of the things was to pretend to be just some other weakling sticking to the roads as if afraid some ferals might eat them.

Throag's paw touched the leather pouch at her hip. The fact that both had been sent their way meant their catch had indeed been worth the risk. Her brow furrowed.

"What is this 'scene' that needs to be made?"

"There is a man in Balet." Shal spoke, ignoring the scoff from the muscular brute.

"Politics."

"Don't be so quick to dismiss this." Shal frowned. "He is bonded to a Sabertooth."

Throag's hackles rose. "A traitor."

"No, a feralborn."

"Bullshit."

"This one was a Tigress until recently." Shal said, her lips curling slightly upwards. "A white Tigress. Feralborn."

That put a stop to the glare. She snorted. "Some mutated stray that picked up a human."

"Ah, it is often hard to remember you weren't even born during the rebellion."

"Yes, my cunt doesn't have cobwebs. What's your point?"

With a glare, Shal crossed her arms. "If you're ignorant of your own tribe's history, I'm not going to give you a free lesson." She said, smugly grinning at the maiden glaring back at her. "What we have to do is have some fun with the human, rattle him around, maybe take an arm as a souvenir. No killing."

"Politics." Throag rolled her eyes. "And if this white cat thinks-?"

Both her ears perked. The maiden bolted to her feet and spun around, staring into the darkness of the forest. Her ears canted backwards, fangs clear as she snarled at the dark, every muscle in her body suddenly tensed.

"How far away are we from that Balet place?"

"A couple days." The Vampire tilted her head in curiosity. "Did you sense anything?"

"Yes." The voice dropped into a snarl, her grin turning cruel. "Someone that might be fun."

Chapter 196 [Little Mouse]

The room was quiet, eerily quiet, which was a bad sign. Little Mouse knew only of a handful of times when the Mistress had been so quiet. Fury and anger were loud, very loud, they were roaring and crackling flames. Not this quiet, not this silence. It was unnerving to her, unnatural. She would have avoided the door entirely if she didn't risk disobedience by doing so.

Little Mouse approached the room carefully, opening slowly. There was a lone occupant within. The Mistress sat next to the house's window, her perfect glorious naked body floated under the moonlight, her wings spread wide behind her and still, the room sweltering with her power. It seeped through Little Mouse's skin, a sweet poison. The maiden moaned and fell to her knees, flushed and becoming hotter by the second.

"So I had not been imagining it, it did not affect him at all." The Mistress declared, frowning, her body quietly gliding over Little Mouse as the maiden wriggled and groaned, desperately fighting against the feeling seeping into her. "Or perhaps not quickly enough."

With a snap of her fingers, the feeling was gone.

Little Mouse laid on the floor, panting. "Th-thank you, Mistress." She whimpered, breathless, hands clenching the hem of her dress. "This servant begs for forgiveness."

"You did as you were told flawlessly, Little Mouse, as always. This is a reward."

The Mistress purred, lowering her heel so it may touch Little Mouse's stomach. The small maiden squeaked and muttered thanks with breathless gasps. The effects of her Mistress' powers might have dissipated, but her body was still aflame with blissful sensation.

"What... what should I do, Mistress?" Little Mouse panted, wriggling under the weightless heel of the Succubus.

"Continue observing them, of course. That brute did something drastic, and the situation might change depending on how the Earl responds." She spoke with an amused hum. "Meeting Rick in person didn't bear the fruits I'd hoped. But it was worth the risk."

The Mistress was not angry? Little Mouse felt elation within her heart. She smiled brightly and nodded in affirmation, wriggling further until the Mistress lifted her foot. The Succubus landed back on the floor, languidly returning towards the window, her steps light. Her gaze was distraught, a perfectly manicured finger caressing her lips seductively.

"But something is missing."

Little Mouse had managed to recover herself enough to stand back up, keeping herself bowed as she flattened her dress.

"Tell me, Little Mouse, are you sure he barely had an aura?"

She quickly checked her memories as best she could. "At first I'd thought he had none at all. But that was because White Claw's aura was overwhelming."

"I felt it too, quite the... beast. Continue."

"I spied on him while he was outside of that overbearing aura's range, and his aura was almost invisible to my senses."

"And last night?"

That gave Little Mouse pause, and she quickly grimaced. "I am sorry, Mistress, I'd been too focused on the wrong things. This servant begs for forgiveness."

The Mistress scoffed, and a simple gesture of her hand indicated the dismissal of the matter. "If you did not pay attention to it, then you must not have been able to sense it."

Little Mouse hesitated. "... *it*, Mistress?"

"Something most... tasty." She spoke with an amused grin, reaching out for the window and opening it with a push. "I am feeling peckish, make sure to inform little Nico I might be late."

"Yes Mistress." A bow. "And if Nicolas has to depart to work in the castle?"

"Don't rouse suspicion, stick to your roles."

With a flick of her wings, the Mistress flew out of the window and into the darkness. Little Mouse waited for her to depart before closing the window, but making sure not to lock it. THAT had definitely made Mistress mad when it had happened and it was something she would not want to repeat.

Carefully, she inspected the room for errant trash or stains. A couple deep sniffs and she confirmed that Mistress had certainly been in a good mood. With nothing to clean or tidy up, she hurried downstairs. After the work in the castle and before Nicolas came, she had to check up on the owners to make sure they were healthy.

The human male and the Ingenue were currently laying naked in each other's arms. They were both asleep, exhausted. The smell of sex permeated all around the room, Little Mouse started working. First check that the restraints are well placed, then check on the Mistress' bracelet to confirm it's been charged up. Once those were secure, she knocked both of them off of the bed, changed the sheets, and pulled them back on top. A check of their pulse, and a little healing spell for the bruises on the man's hips. She hurried out with the dirty sheets and returned with water and food for when they woke up.

The two would undoubtedly consume the food before getting back to focusing on each other's pleasure and nothing else. The Mistress' curse was still strong, it would last perhaps another week before it had to be renewed. Little Mouse sighed, remiss of the days when it was her who was cursed, wriggling and gasping and moaning.

Maybe Mistress would find what she'd been looking for, and she'd reward Little Mouse in celebration. She sighed wistfully at the prospect, shivering at the echoes of pleasure.

The knock at the door drew her to the front of the house. She quickly rinsed herself with the scent remover and closed the guest room. Her fingers brushed against the doorknob as she cast a spell of silence, one of the few the Mistress had deigned she'd need to learn for her work.

At the door was Nicolas, the young man pale and drenched.

"Sir Nicolas!" With a squeak, Little Mouse helped him inside, hastily pulling him to the fire. "Dry up, I will bring something warm and towels."

"Th-The mistress." He stammered.

"Is not here." Little Mouse proclaimed from the kitchen, grabbing everything she could carry and taking it to the man she was bonded to but did not serve. "What happened?"

"Just a mishap, a kit learning her abilities. It-It's not important." His declaration came with shivers, stripping naked in front of the fireplace and drying up as best he could. "I have news! Important news!"

Little Mouse hesitated, frowning ever so slightly. Nicolas might have been a human, but his presence in the Earl's castle had remained away from many of the important places where maidens with hearing like her own could pick up on secrets. She glanced at him while nodding.

"Must the Mistress be called? Is it an emergency?"

Nicolas grimaced at the question. "It's... important, but not urgent, maybe, I'm not sure if it's urgent or not. But the Mistress will most definitely want to know about it. And promptly."

He smelled excited, happy, doubtful, afraid, and his heart was beating so fast he might as well be running. "Tell me."

"He scared Deneva."

Three words, and they gave Little Mouse pause. "He scares me too, most of the time. He smells of Sabertooth all over; she never lets him go out without her scent all over him. Ever. Her fur gets on everything too."

"No, you don't understand. The knights won't stop whispering about it." He grasped her shoulders, looking into her eyes intently. "Right in the middle of a deadly fight with White Claw, and with just one look, a human made *Royal Knight Captain Deneva* hesitate."

Little Mouse's eyes widened.

"Then the mistress..."

"She might have found the one she'd been looking for."

Chapter 197 [Alice]

The day was sunny, the road was dry, not a cloud in sight and the wind was fresh. Under normal circumstances, it would have been perfect to go out on a walk or for a lengthy stroll. Maybe even a hike up a mountain or through a forest. Spring was in full swing, and it almost felt like things were as idyllic as they could be.

If not for the shrieks, howls, and moans that sometimes came out of the woods, Alice would have agreed with that impression. That, and the platoon of knights that were escorting them down the road, felt like they were in some sort of military parade.

The clanks of armor were not exactly reassuring. It was a marching rhythm that had not relented. Every knight marched perfectly in step with one another, reducing the days into a clank-clank of boots that clearly served to scare off potential ferals that might feel curious about the several dozen bodies moving down the road.

The human women were being kept in either carriages or wagons, saving them from the hardship of the march. And yet, Alice could only watch in awe at the knights, the maidens keeping up with their transports as if it were not much of an effort. From one of the two carriages, she'd only been able to look out the open window at the passing scenery while they rolled their way down the road.

The group of women had been split into two groups. The 'elder' women occupied one of the carriages, Ms. Dodson being the unofficial 'head' of the group. Alice was in the second carriage, with May, Natalie, and a few other former students. They were the ones that had been considering the options for not joining the academy, to pay off the tariff to remove their 'mandatory service' as a part of the Kingdom's feral-fighting force.

To avoid participating in the slavery that was owning and selling maidens.

And that had made the Baroness furious, of course. Alice had half-expected the noble to lash out, but she'd been firm in that regard. She could try becoming the unofficial leader of all the women who'd come from Earth, but that would involve playing political games she was not going to be prepared to handle. So why not establish their own presence in their own way? Make themselves separate from the machinations of the nobles and put themselves as their own power?

The people that were on the wagons were the rest of the women and the few men that had come. Those that were looking forward to potentially joining the kingdom's military academy in Balet, and had remained unconvinced of Alice's plan. But that had, fortunately, also seen Ms. Dodson as the hateful shrew that she was and didn't want anything to do with her. Alice was still unsure what the old lady was potentially looking to pull off, but at the same time, she expected the old lady would seek to carve out some small corner to terrorize and make herself eventually irrelevant once she kicked the bucket.

If Alice never saw the old crone again, it would still be too soon.

The woman could only sigh.

"The trip won't be much longer." Helga's voice drifted from outside of the carriage. She was right next to the door closest to Alice.

The Valkyrie had spent hours flying above, and was 'resting' by walking.

"We will be reaching Seledo soon. The Lord there has had more than enough time to prepare for our arrival."

"It feels like it will be one of those situations that the Baroness warned about." Next to Alice, Natalie let out a long, tired sigh. "Think he'd try something shady?"

"The Earl's knights are with us." Alice shook her head. "If anything happens, it would have to be with the Earl's approval. My bets are on trying to tempt someone to stay, but that's about it."

Unless the Earl had plans for them he'd not shared. Alice didn't want to think about that too deeply. Last she'd heard, Rick was currently over with him in Balet. And the Baroness had pointed out that not getting any news at all was a good sign of things going smoothly.

"There will be a feast for sure." Helga hummed from outside. She was clearly in very high spirits. Someone coughed, and the Valkyrie perked up at the sound. "Oh, I have to return to my watch."

"Don't overexert yourself." Alice called out, only catching a glimpse of the maiden's white wings as she leapt up into the air. "And... she's going to work herself to the bone again."

"Does she have any other settings?" May giggled.

"She does not." With a slight groan, Alice leaned into the cushions that served as her seat. The carriage was moving through bumpy roads, though she doubted there would ever be such a thing as smooth ones. "What are you reading?"

"Oh, it's a story about the fall of the chevaliers." May lifted the book to show its cover, of a woman with dark skin and white hair holding a glowing staff in one hand and a sword in the other.

"Anything interesting?"

"They were a knight order from before the rebellion, so... about a hundred something years ago." May muttered. "They were a part of one of the major religions in the kingdom at the time."

"Sounds interesting."

"It is!" The younger woman gushed. "Their order consisted of maidens from the genus of Dark Elves exclusively. Apparently, Dark Elves are a species of maiden that was brought to the kingdom hundreds of years ago by a traveling merchant, and they were bought and raised by the church of the thousand armed God. Their powers in disrupting elemental energies allowed them to work as peacekeepers amongst maidens."

"And how did they fall?"

"I haven't reached that part yet." She giggled. "The book starts with their rise as peacekeepers, and I'm at the part about how the chevaliers had become corrupt, attempting to impose their law over that of the nobles and knights."

"Sounds like politics." Alice shook her head. "The book wouldn't happen to have any details over how to earn money, right?"

"It does say that the chevaliers and the church of the thousand armed God earned money through their services in helping maidens form bonds." May declared, then shrugged. "But that's about it."

"I don't think we're going to be able to monetize that." Natalie sighed, shoulders slumping.

"Bonds do weaken if the maiden and human feel distant enough from their partner." Alice pointed out. "Maybe we could start a consulting office to help them work through grievances?"

"A marriage counseling office doesn't seem like the sort of thing that would gather much attention when a worn out bond can be just reapplied like a coat of paint. But why not? Add it to the list."

"It's a very short list."

"We don't exactly have a broad repertoire of applicable skills."

"Not ones that aren't outmatched by super powered women."

Groans all around from those that weren't, somehow, napping. They slumped further into their seats, wandering gazes, focusing on the world outside and the problem within. Humans weren't competitive in most markets when compared to maidens. Just what sort of work could they do to earn money?

Chapter 198 [Rick]

Unlike every other meeting Rick had with the Earl, this time there were other humans present. Rick and the Earl both stood within a simple small room if, perhaps, lavishly decorated. The others inside this room were well within earshot, but had the decency to pretend they weren't listening in on the conversation. None of the faces had a name. As far as Rick was concerned, he'd barely seen a handful of them in passing.

If these people were of importance, he'd not known why.

Rick needed to only take one look to make all the others stiffen and look away, but he knew it would be fruitless to ask for privacy. This meeting was clearly intended to be a public display of sorts. And the objective of it was obvious. Dia had already warned him that hospitality was a big thing. Throwing someone out of one's home was generally frowned upon, even in the harsher contexts.

Which meant Rick's role in this whole spectacle was clear. He'd been studying up on what to say and how all night. Now was the time to rip off the band-aid.

"I'm ashamed my maiden had such an outburst." Rick reached out to shake the Earl's hand. "Thank you, again, for allowing me to properly handle her."

His words were met by scoffing sounds around him, but not the Earl. The man nodded placidly. "Your way of doing things is... atypical, but the results you've shown have been nothing short of extraordinary. None here would have been able to stop a rampaging feralborn maiden the way you had. My hope is that you perfect your methods so that one day you may teach them."

Rick's lips thinned in a courteous smile, ignoring the gasps going around, instead nodding along. "If there is any need for reparations."

"Please, don't concern yourself. The only damage was to some of the structures. No one was seriously hurt either. Except perhaps Captain

Deneva's pride at not having been able to properly measure your maiden." The Earl's gaze twinkled as he smiled. "She nearly asked for a spar."

"I would be humbled to allow such a thing, but after Monica has learnt proper self-restraint." Rick bowed his head. "Though I believe that, even without proper harm to any, my maiden's actions were a severe breach of etiquette. One I cannot forgive myself for."

"No need for you to bow."

"No, there is a need." He countered. "You invited me to your home, shared bread, and were nothing but an excellent host. I, however, have been a very poor guest." A slight strain to his shoulders as he bowed lower. "I have procured arrangements in the city."

There was a slow silence that fell on the room. The Earl spoke. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Rick raised his head, nodding. "And, due to my maiden's poor behavior, I've chosen to move to the restricted district. To ensure your citizens are not put needlessly in harm's way."

It was also because the area was the ones with the cheapest rent and Rick had no stable source of income right now.

The silence turned into a series of surprised gasps. Even the Earl's eyes widened ever so slightly, but only nodded. "It is an honorable thing to think of others. Allow me to gift you with a proper farewell. When will you depart?"

"My intent was to move before night fell."

This time, he visibly blanched. "Everyone, leave."

It was Rick's turn to hesitate as the others in the room had begun moving towards the doors, murmuring and whispers abound. "Should I...?"

"No." The Earl waited, staring at the former teacher with a frown. It wasn't until they were the only two people in the room that he let out a sigh. "Is there

something pertaining to your circumstances that requires such an abrupt departure?"

Rick was slightly surprised. He grimaced. "Yes and no. It's become clear that Monica doesn't handle well sharing... territory with others. To her, this is Deneva's territory. She feels trapped, and it has been pushing her in strange ways. Moving to the edge of the city would give us a chance to take her outside where she can properly move freely and release some of that stress."

"And is it normal for... your world to leave so quickly?"

"Yes." A quick nod. "When we say we're leaving, we just take whichever date is soonest and most convenient. Short of having complications with our possessions, there's not much that would normally delay such a thing."

"I see." The Earl nodded, appearing relieved as he rubbed his chin. "Here it is usually at least two weeks, unless the guest feels their lives are at risk."

"Oh." Rick's smile was tight. He did feel uncomfortable when surrounded 24/7 by what was effectively a small army, but he wasn't about to tell that to the Earl. "If such were my situation, I think Monica would've just kidnapped me in the middle of the night."

"A very odd statement."

"No less true."

The Earl looked at Rick from head to toe. "I was serious when I said that you should perfect your technique and teach it to others."

"I don't have a technique." Rick laughed. "I just grasp at straws and try to keep everyone happy and not killing anyone else."

"Have you ever witnessed the methods used to bond a powerful maiden?"

Rick's face stilled. "I heard of what the Baron attempted to do."

"It is a needlessly brutal technique that has gained root since the rebellion." The Earl scowled. "Ferals of great strength, once captured, need to be made

to feel helpless and thus submit. But you... did not do that. White Claw, Monica, trusts you, even though she is not obedient." He quickly raised a hand. "And I do not mean this as an insult."

"It's..." Rick's shoulders tensed. "I just don't tell her to do what I know she wouldn't be willing to do. I treat her like an equal, it's..."

"It is something not many can afford to do." The Earl stated with a sharp nod, the fat in his neck wobbling along the gesture. "And fewer consider it, as they see it as a stain to their honor and the kingdom's history. Needless to say, your... actions so far have drawn attention from exactly those people."

"And I'll happily step away from politics."

"Power is politics, and you have power, one wrapped in unfortunate... symbolism."

Rick grimaced. "Monica has something to do with that, right? It's not just because she's strong."

"You must understand that, in one way or the other, the people tend to gravitate towards things. And maidens are no exception. Particularly maidens of a similar genus will often find themselves shoulder to shoulder with one another... or butting heads." The Earl stated. "Something the history books won't mention is that Tigresses and those of their ilk have not always been at odds with the kingdom. Their abilities made them powerful when it came to dealing with strong ferals, and their love for a challenge had placed them as a core to the Hunters. Well before the rebellion, that is."

"The rebellion changed things?"

"No, Tigresses, amongst several others, had become detached from the kingdom over the centuries. Personally, I believe it was tied to a lack of recognition for their help. Whether it was the case or not, only the elves of the first maidens might be able to answer that." He shook his head. "Either way, the symbolism is due to the rebellion itself. The Tigress tribes had openly opposed the kingdom and aided the cause. We defeated them, drove

them into the wilds, and for the most part, they have become forgotten relics of the defiance they once posed."

"And now I show up at your castle while a Sabertooth Tigress follows me." Rick frowned. "People wonder whether it's a sign that I'm in favor... or against the kingdom."

"Precisely. Regardless of happenstance, there are those that would see the partner that walks next to you as a representative of the enemies that we fought against." The Earl nodded. "And you not imposing your will upon her in the manner many are used to is... seen as a potential sign that you are no conqueror of our foes."

"I will keep that in mind."

"Do that. Those who've inquired about your esteem and character are people even I hesitate to engage with."

Rick could only nod a bit more grimly this time.

Chapter 199 [Rick]

Moving out of the palace had felt like a military operation.

Rick had prepared for it with Dia and had also requested some assistance from the Earl. The plan was a simple three-step plan. Part one was getting Monica to gorge herself on so much food she'd be halfway into a coma. Part two was to march straight out of the castle with a grumpy and sleepy Monica in tow. Part three was to go all the way through the city and to the restricted area, where their rented house would be waiting for them, and where Monica would go straight to sleep.

Of course, the plan did not survive contact with the enemy.

Monica had eaten her fill and then some, all the tasty meats she could've ever dreamed of, and she'd particularly enjoyed the potatoes and breads. Unfortunately, she also caught a whiff of something else.

"Chocolate?"

Her ears had perked up, pupils dilated, tail stilled.

Rick knew right away they were in trouble.

It hadn't been the Earl's intention, of course. Their host had wanted to give them one good meal before sending them off. The man had explained something or another about how the cocoa seeds could only be grown by specially trained maidens. But it was mostly lost to the sound of Monica effectively becoming a living shredder.

No pastry survived the encounter.

Rick suspected the cat had eaten half her weight in meat and thrice that in sugar.

By the time the meal had been done, Monica was on the verge of puking. Not wanting to make things worse for himself in the Earl's house, Rick rushed the goodbyes. Next to him, Monica grumbled her way out, being dragged around and very unhappy about it. She'd insisted on wanting to return to the room to go lay down, holding her tummy with the paw that Rick wasn't pulling.

The knights had done a salute and some pretty marching to, basically, close the door behind them as they left. But Rick knew they were on a countdown now and had started to march straight through the city. He'd started seeing the signs of trouble quite soon, Monica's complaints of a rumbling stomach had vanished within the minute, her hand leaving her gut and soon she was walking right next to him rather than lagging behind.

When the feline had started to audibly sniff at the air, they had, thankfully, reached the restricted area. But the troubles were not over.

The change in scenery had been drastic. The previously generously spaced houses were more compact, with very few streets and most of the apparent population following three main streets parallel to one another. The buildings weren't made of stone but wood, and looking at the dirt road and the roots that dug from the house structures into the ground, Rick had to guess these had been made with plant manipulation. There was no metal or stone or glass to be found. The windows had large planks to block them when closed. The doors were flimsy thin planks of wood.

The whole place was walled off from the rest of the city, contained much how the Earl's palace was separate from the rest of the population. In this place, though, coming in and out was far less tightly controlled.

Either that or the guards had gone to hide the moment they'd spotted Monica.

Actually, that appeared to be the case for just about everyone.

The silence had been deafening.

Doors were shut, windows blocked by curtains, and Monica was vibrating next to Rick. The smile on her face was manic, ears twitching this way and that, her body straightening and her shoulders squaring off in what was

clearly a swagger. Her tail lashed back and forth with every step, licking her lips as she looked this way and that. The feline was bouncing on the balls of her feet, claws scratching at the dirt.

"Food?"

"No. No food." Rick glared. He gave Dia a hopeful glance as she discreetly pointed at one house in particular. "Home, sleep."

Monica looked at the three story high building with a '2-25' on the front and her nose wrinkled at it. "No."

"This is what happens when you do something bad, Monica." Dia muttered under her breath, not being discreet of the glare as she shot the feline.

The glare was returned, but Monica would not be persuaded to remove the look of skeptic disgust from her face as they approached. Dia pulled out the set of keys she'd gotten from the house's owner that morning. The inside was... sparse, which was a nice way of saying 'empty'.

"Is... it meant to be like this?" Rick muttered, closing the door behind him.

There was no glass, stone, or metals, the house was entirely made out of wood,

"This... is what it means to live in the restricted area." She declared. "The bedroom is in the basement. It's where the humans are meant to sleep since it's the safest place."

As she spoke, she summoned an orb of glowing light and moved where?

"..." Rick rubbed at his temples, marching further in and muttering under his breath. "It's cheap, at least."

"For us." Dia replied. "These buildings are made to have a dozen or so maidens sharing accommodations."

He blanched. "Have you lived in a place like this?"

"No. But healers get a chance to practice with those who live in the restricted zones since there's always an injury to be patched up." Her mood increased a little at that proclamation. "I think I should be able to help trade some healing with a plant-type to get some proper furniture... here we are."

There were some stairs leading down. "So why in the basement?"

"Safety." Dia commented, both ignoring the disgusted sounds Monica was making behind them. "Feralborn girls can sometimes get out of hand, and if they happen to knock something down in the middle of the night, being underground is safest."

It was a room, with a simple bed-frame with no cushions. The walls were made of solid stone, and there were wooden columns and beams reinforcing the structure. Shelves littered every wall other than the one with the door.

Dia dropped the two large backpacks she'd been carrying, proceeding to unpack the cloths that were to be their bedding. "This will have to be our bed tonight, but we can purchase something better tomorrow."

"This makes me think of my days as a student." Rick muttered with a deep groan. "Do you think I fucked up by renting this place out?"

"I think you did well in considering your financial circumstances and not wanting to depend on others." She replied. "With what we have, we could hold out for months. A wise move when the objective is to seek stable income."

"So long as Monica doesn't do anything to punch holes in that."

Said feline woman was currently poking the ceiling of the room with her claw and sniffing her claw right after. Something about the smell didn't seem to mesh well with her, frowning and glaring at the stone that surrounded the room in every direction.

"Indeed." Dia replied. "Though she is likely to be, ironically, the greatest asset."

"I'll have to think about that." Rick grumbled, shoulders slumped. "I'm not even sure I'd want to stay in this city. But that's a concern for later. I think I'll talk with Tomas and the others once we've settled down. He sent me a letter about wanting to meet and help someone."

"Rick." They turned to Monica as she poked the door. "Go back to sleep, good sleep. Bad sleep here."

"This is where we sleep now, Monica." He replied, pointing at the mantle Dia had laid on the ground. "You fought, you caused a problem, so here we are."

She frowned. "Monica sorry?"

"And being sorry isn't enough."

"New words."

"Monica bad." Dia stated. "Monica fight, no ask. Earl angry. No good sleep. No good food."

The feline's ears canted sideways. She glanced from Dia to Rick as he nodded in turn. Her lips pursed slightly as she glanced at the door.

"Monica... sorry? Monica no hurt shiny bad lady!"

"We'll talk tomorrow." Rick began helping Dia in setting up the cloth on the large bed-frame as they unpacked and prepared to sleep for the night.

Chapter 200 [Lala]

Lala's chest stung. It had been stinging for a while now. The pain was familiar but strange at the same time. She knew what this sensation was, and for anyone who knew what to look for, it was also the easiest way to spot those who were bonded to Him. Even the Lady had the curl of her lips falter whenever their human was near. It was akin to witnessing an eclipse, the very light dimming until Barry moved elsewhere.

"Do something."

The Lady spoke with iron in her voice, and Lala bowed.

"I am not sure how I can be of help." The tinkerer responded, shivering.

"You are the second closest to him. Be honest, and hopefully that will be enough." The Lady's temper faltered as they both could feel the man with flaming red hair approaching.

"And if..." Lala hesitated, lowering his voice. "... it's not?"

"Then remind him of the mission. He is our best hope to obtain the aid we need to heal the great Lady through non-violent means."

Lala grimaced, but nodded, sauntering off while the Lady left to avoid meeting with Barry. The relationship between their leader and her bond-partner was one many would speculate upon, but Lala knew none would really understand until they were bonded to him.

She knew it had come as a surprise when she had first noticed it.

A slow, almost hesitant touch of emotions. A sensation not unlike warmth. It had only been fleeting the first time she'd felt it, a day or so after the bond had formed. Back then, Lala had merely dismissed it as nothing more than her imagination, but it had returned, slowly but surely. The more time she spent with Barry, the greater the warmth, the more frequent the sensation that

spurred her into action. It, somehow, made training less taxing, and her focus sharper.

The boost in... everything had not been the only effect. She'd felt closer to the others, even to the Lady herself. It was an unspoken thing, a look in the eye, a little secret. Some removed their collars as a way to openly boast to the rest of the Court. A few kept their old useless things for propriety, or perhaps to keep the truth hidden. Lala herself hadn't much cared, and often would put it on out of habit, but many days she'd forget.

But they realized this gift came with a risk the day the Valkyrie had been killed.

At the time, the Lady had roused every guard and soldier with her commands, but a third of them had spurred into action before she'd even spoken the words. They had felt it in their bones, the danger to Barry. And the blow that came after, of his sadness, of his pain.

Lala knew, deep inside of her, that this was something that went past what the Lady herself appeared to realize. A third, a third of the court's fighting force, was bonded to Barry, and they had been unflinching in coming to his aid like the clap of thunder. What would the great Lady say when she woke and realized so much of her Court was in such a state?

It was a consideration Lala suspected not even the Lady herself had given much thought. The great Lady was many things, but kind to humans was not amongst them.

"Barry."

The young human with flaming hair had been wandering off towards the edges of the Court. Again. Lala had stopped him this time, rather than just watching him leave again.

"Do you need anything?"

His smile was a struggle, his gaze distant. If the bond hadn't been there to remind her of the sting inside her chest, she would have still felt it. "Yes.

You."

"... why?"

"Because you're like a Doggirl that was left out in the rain." She pulled at his hand.

"I was going to talk with Kajou..."

The girl from the Coven, who'd locked herself away from the rest. Lala found no pity for the Amazoness, nor empathy. Not when she and the Valkyrie were the cause of this whole mess to begin with.

"Then I stand corrected. You're a Doggirl that's intentionally going to meet the rain and then locking herself out."

He put some resistance in his steps, but she didn't slow any. "Lala, I appreciate the gesture, but-."

"She's grieving her sister's stupidity, and you're just sucking up the sad because you feel guilty."

"Lala, I-."

"Did I ever tell you about my family?" She ignored his attempt to talk. He was too kind in that regard, but she would use it. "My mother was born back when the Court was still being chased, when they were nothing more than scattered refugees. Do you know how maidens avoid being captured or going feral when we only have submission collars?"

Barry shook his head.

"Humans can't form many bonds, not unless they happen to be nobility. So when maidens are on the run, they usually have to share a single human amongst all of them." Her fingers touched her throat, raising her chin to show him the lack of a collar. "They kneel, they grovel, they kiss the human's feet and pretend to beg, enough to feel a twinge of defeat, and then, minutes after the bond forms, they remove the collar and pass it to the next maiden."

"But wouldn't the bond...?"

"It would break instantly, yes." Lala nodded, holding back the sigh of relief as she realized Barry was relaxing and paying attention. "But it would buy time. A week or so before they went feral. That's how my mother lived. One week after the next, the curse pushing her to insanity before she'd have to grovel to whatever human they'd managed to kidnap. Beg for another week of sanity."

"That's..."

"She was pregnant with me at the time." Lala continued, eyes roaming around. "She told me that I was the only reason she found the strength to keep going."

"What... happened?"

There it was, that kindness, that concern for others.

"The shakes took her." Lala shook her head, dismissing the emotions stirring within her chest. "She didn't manage to recover and eventually she... withered."

"I'm so-."

"My point-" She interrupted, breath fiery as she turned to face him, pulling his hand closer to herself. "-is that my mother was perfectly aware of what she was doing. She was nearly feral half the time, and she fought on because it was her conviction."

His eyes widened. "If-."

"No." she declared. "Barry, the Valkyrie hated humans, all of them, yourself included. She had her chance to live, and she threw it away over stupid blindness."

"And my actions put her in that position."

"And will you back off if doing the right thing means someone will get hurt?" Lala responded in turn. "If I were enslaved and freeing me meant someone lost their livelihood? Because that's what you're fighting for."

Barry blinked.

"There are thousands upon thousands of humans out there whose life depends exclusively on maidens being crushed under them. Will you stop trying to free those maidens because those people will starve when the girl uses her freedom and leaves?"

He became quiet, but Lala knew she didn't need to say anything else. The heavy darkness in his heart that had stung in her chest was dissipating as his emotions stirred in a different direction.

"The Court needs you." She spoke. "We must find a healer for the great Lady, and the alternatives are dangerous. I don't like having to tell you this, but the Lady asked me to remind you."

"When?"

"We leave for Seledo as soon as you're ready."

Chapter 201 [Mark]

The strange tension in the house had grown. Brye and Shery had been keeping their distance, but Noah had not. The mouse visited Mark's room once a day, usually when she thought they weren't being watched too closely, and always for an hour or so before she'd leave. The mouse might have attempted to avoid attention, but the others had caught on pretty quickly.

Mark was sure the fox would make a move soon, but in what form he wasn't sure. He could feel her gaze on him whenever Noah was around. Was she reading his thoughts or keeping her distance? It felt ironic that there would be distance when all three of them were practically locked inside the house. The militia no longer actively patrolled every street in the city, but the psychic that had spread their face across the minds of everyone in the city had kept at it. For the time being, it seemed the heat was still on them, and would take a while longer before they shifted their focus to other things.

And as far as Mark knew, that just meant being in a home with Brye, Noah, and Shery and only so much he could do to spend the time. Reading had quickly become boring, and Noah's presence in his bedroom was becoming somewhat of a highlight of his day. At first the mice just wanted physical contact, and sometimes it devolved into more. But within a couple of weeks it had turned into nothing else.

No feelings, no affection, just raw tension finding a release valve. Mark's doubts whether Noah was looking forward to it had mostly vanished when she'd begun entering the bedroom naked. And soon after, she'd stopped holding back the squeaks and moans. Something had still felt slightly out of place, however.

the situation with Noah hadn't fully clicked for him until the day she'd walked out naked of the washroom and sat at his feet while Brye and Shery had been eating at the opposite side of the room. The mouse hadn't done anything, even as he shooed her off. But he'd seen it, in Brye's eyes, and Shery's. The two maidens had stared fire onto the mouse that did not recoil.

Mark's eyes widened slightly at that.

And the moment the epiphany ran through his head, Noah winced.

His brows now climbed all the way into his hairline. "You...!"

"Now now." Brye spoke with a mock chiding tone. "Psychics do love to swim in their owner's heads when they start getting a feel for their powers."

Noah didn't so much wince but glower. Which was something that felt entirely nonthreatening considering she was a pipsqueak of a woman and naked. Thought it was clear now the only reason she was in the position and location, was to use Mark to shield her from the other two.

"Don't be too angry at her." Shery calmed down visibly once she noticed the poison in Noah's eyes. "Or do get angry, guess it depends on how good a cocksucker Noah is."

"To be fair, she got us good, didn't she?" Brye exaggeratedly turned to glance at the gray maiden. "Here we are, playing patient and nice, and Noah just pulls the rug."

"Noah did love getting us to kneel. Maybe he was compensating for something?"

Purple light began to glow around Noah's body. Mark reacted, reaching out for her ear and squeezing. "No."

She froze, lowering her gaze.

"Girl gotta learn her manners." Shery laughed.

"Do you plan to start her training soon?" Brye asked, twirling a piece of bread between her fingers as she looked the mouse over with amusement. "Psychics, particularly those who like being in the heads of their owners too much, can do quite a bit of harm unintentionally if not properly educated."

"You'd know, as a threshold, right?"

Noah's words came with all the amusement in Brye's gaze to vanish. The piece of bread in her hands exploded like a miniature grenade had gone off. A snarl began to peek onto her lips, the energies that pooled around her were not the light purple of Noah's, but darker and more sinister.

Noah had frozen solid.

There was a knocking at the door.

All heads snapped in focus, and the air had abruptly shifted every ounce of danger in its direction. Mark was almost transfixed as he realized both Noah and Brye had shifted to point their focus and aggression at the door. Neither had reacted to the potential visitor before the knock, and that meant they'd managed to avoid both maiden's very sharp senses.

Another knock.

"The Boss sent me." A woman's voice spoke. "Brye, Shery, Noah, I am to see to our guest."

Hesitation, Brye was the one to move. She appeared in front of the door, pulling it open. Her eyes widened, tails falling like someone had tied weights on them, ears flattening. "Joyce." Noah paled at the name, Shery looked grayer.

Brye was moved aside as a blond woman... no, maiden, stepped inside. She had a canine tail as blond as her hair, her skin was pale like chalk, and her eyes a deep amber. She wore a cloak with a hood she pulled off, tossing the brown thing at Brye without even looking in the Nogitsune's way.

Cold hard eyes fell on Mark and he shot to his feet on reflex, hand reaching for the knife at his hip. If Noah was visible to her, she didn't seem to take notice. "Catch." She tossed something from within her robes.

The word was followed by three shrieks.

Mark's brain reacted a moment later, when he saw the glass black sphere fall to the ground, inert. Everyone in the room held their breath as nothing

happened, Mark instantly recognized the device as what had turned Noah into her current form.

"Good."

Joyce was right in front of him, not having even broken her stride. Her hand reached out for his head and plucked a hair, her movements faster than he could react to let alone avoid. Mark's gaze moved to the others. All three maidens were staring at the floor, fists clenched, gazes hard, pale as if they'd seen death and not daring to turn in Joyce's direction for more than a flicker of their eyes.

"What are you-?"

"Wait a moment." She cut him off, staring at the hair before pulling a tiny metal box and dropping it inside.

Mark could have heard a pin drop from the other side of the house while Joyce's focus was on the box. Then, the metal turned a deep verdant green and the first emotion appeared on her face.

A smile.

A simple smile.

She raised her gaze from the metal to him. Only then did he realize she had canine ears much like Brye's, they stood, pointed at him, her smile growing and a chill running down his spine.

"You are *pure*."

It was a breathless whisper, the woman reached out and he stepped back, now knife in hand. Joyce's hand froze mid-way to his chest. The smile vanished, the impassivity of her features returning in a snap.

"Young Master." She bowed, lowering her head deeply. "I will be coming back in a week's time. With some equipment."

At that, the others flinched.

"What do you want?"

"Me?" The woman laughed, a chirping sound not much unlike nails running on chalk. "Why, to save humanity, of course."

Chapter 202 [Barry]

Barry had spent so much time with the Court that, when he spotted the tiny city of Seledo, he'd been forced to reassess his perception of the kingdom. As well as that of the scale of the Court itself. He had heard that the group of 'rebels' were not really much more than a ragtag group of maidens scrapping for survival. But things had looked far better than what he'd expected it to.

There weren't crippled maidens, or starving ones, there was a well built prison, a well built palace, the defenses were meager, but the sense of discipline he got from the Dark Elves and the non-dark counterparts had mostly left him feeling like it was just a tiny Queendom in some far-off place.

One look at Seledo and Barry suddenly realized the urgency and tension from Embla whenever she spoke of 'interacting' with the Kingdom. Seledo must have had maybe ten thousand or so souls. A town with proper houses, a wooden barrier, watchtowers, proper cobblestone streets. And by contrast, the Court was, perhaps, a thousand. With small single or double room houses built into trees, meager barricades, the trees themselves were the only option for a watch-post.

And that was if he was being generous.

Their survival depended on remaining something the Kingdom considered not worth paying attention to.

"Can I really do this?"

"You will." Lala replied, tightening her hand on his own as they walked. The Dark Elf's skin was fair, and her hair was dark green. The change was not from some spell, but from dyes one of the old ladies from the Court had used on her. And it would last only a handful of days before it started wearing off.

Because Dark Elves would draw more attention than regular Elves.

As would Barry's red hair. Thus why it'd been dyed black as well.

"You remember what to say?"

Despite her earlier reassurance, the maiden still looked more nervous than he did.

"I lost everything to the feral wave, including my other maidens, and we..." His gaze flickered to the copper collar around Lala's throat. "We're married."

She didn't blush or react to that, merely nodding and tightening her grip on his fingers ever so slightly. "And you inherited me from your father."

Barry coughed a little. "Why is that important?"

"Because if either of us slips, it makes sense I'm not a maiden you raised yourself."

"Slips... how?"

"Like walking hand in hand."

Barry froze, pulling his hand out of hers and watching the amusement in her eyes. "Is it really a problem?"

"It's not a problem, just something that will look odd." The maiden replied leisurely, her normal teasing mood gone. "And the less attention, the better."

"I'm still queasy about it."

"Everything should go smoothly."

"You should be introduced to the laws of Murphy." Barry muttered under his breath.

Lala snorted loudly. "Unless this 'Murphy' was a sage in curses, I don't see why they should be going around making laws."

"Huh."

"What?"

"Now that you mention it, I do think Murphy was a sage of curses."

The Dark Elf perked immediately. "Really? I thought your world didn't have magic or enchantments?"

"We don't, but Murphy's law is famous." Barry muttered. "Everything that can go wrong will go wrong."

Lala immediately deflated. "Bah."

"What?"

"That's just a seller of acro-dust."

"A what now?"

"Fake things. Tricks that take advantage of superstition."

Barry leveled a glare at her. "You're kidding. You can literally enchant objects to be magic and you're talking about superstition?"

"Seen it with my own two eyes, yes, yes." Lala was talking with a strange slurred accent, clearly mocking someone Barry didn't know as she held up a pebble she'd picked up. "This here fine gem in disguise is nothing more and nothing less than a miracle. Yup, yup. All it needs is a little polish and a little shine, and you will only encounter the most docile of ferals. Bonded a Tigress and all, made her soft like a puppy."

"But maidens can detect the whole spells and enchantment."

"And if someone could make an enchantment that actually controlled fortune, nobles would hoard the thing." She shrugged.

"I saw you give a bracelet that made people trip."

"And it worked by messing with their sense of physical self-perception." She waved off, a proud smirk on her lips. "The bitch totally deserved that one."

The chuckle that followed was a dark one. "She still thinks it's meant to make her tireless."

"Does it?"

"Sure, but not really enough to matter. It mostly makes her not feel her tiredness. And that's what counts." Lala scratched the tip of her sharp ear. "With subtle curses, there are lots of things that are more powerful by just making the person know they exist because you just sabotage yourself a lot better than any curse could."

"Like breaking them from the 'flow'." Barry pipped up, earning a curious look. "You know, like when someone is totally focused and moving or doing stuff without thinking, like it's automatic, and you mess with that."

An impish grin grew on her face. "Do tell."

"Well, it's just something I caught on when playing online games." He scratched his cheek. "If someone on the enemy team was doing really well, I'd just ask them how they were doing it. And sometimes that would throw them off because they'd focus on their own actions." A slight nod. "Kind of like telling you that you're breathing or that you have a tongue."

"That's a cute idea." She laughed, very slowly licking her lips. "I do know what I'd want to do with my tongue, though, I ha-." Her face stiffened, and the smile vanished, her head bowed slightly.

"Wh-."

"It's time to start pretending." She whispered in a very hushed voice. "Dear owner." She added a slight strain to her lips and a plasticity to her smile.

Barry had been just about ready to look around when he felt the barest sensation pointing upwards. His head snapped, and he saw two shadows approaching. Flying maidens that looked like they were trying to pretend to be tough. But there were bags under their eyes, and a slight paleness to their complexion. It spoke of long nights without rest.

"What's your business in Seledo?"

Their gazes were on Barry, and it took him a second to compose himself. "We-." He coughed, feeling a pinch in his throat. "I lost my farm. I am traveling and looking for opportunities."

"Traveling rather light." The winged one spoke, her eyes narrowing with suspicion. "You have money and food?"

Barry quickly nodded, patting the pouch on his hip. "Yes, we had to sell what had survived the ferals."

A slight nod of approval, their shoulders relaxed at that proclamation. "Name?"

"Barry Dodson." He'd been told to give a different name, but Barry had just blurted the words out, feeling a bit too under pressure.

And the tension returned. The leader grimaced, about to say something before her companion patted her shoulder. "There's no way they're related." The wing was pointed at Barry's black hair.

"Excuse me?" He asked, blinking.

"Nothing of concern." The maiden shook her head. "Don't cause a ruckus and don't expect to be able to meet with the Lord."

Lala tensed at that proclamation. "My owner may be seeking to buy a maiden."

"If it's one owned by the Lord, then he will have to wait until after the Lord's guests depart."

The duo of maidens spread their wings and, with a powerful set of flaps, threw themselves upwards into the sky.

"FUCK!" Lala cursed under her breath, stomping her foot, glaring at the town.

"Everything will go smoothly, huh?"

"Shut up."

Chapter 203 [Alice]

Alice leaned over the veranda that oversaw the town of Seledo, taking a long deep breath and trying to not look as frustrated as she felt. The invitation of the local Lord to "celebrate" had been exactly what everyone suspected would be: an overt attempt to get into the pants of one of the women from the group.

It had been a very tiring night involving more alcohol than Alice would've found agreeable. The morning had come with new challenges of its own.

"It's like a cheap buffet getting called high cuisine in there."

The voice startled Alice. She glanced over her shoulder at Natalie. The woman was, as far as Alice was concerned, the closest thing to a friend from her group. She'd been one of the chaperons to come with the group, the mother of one of the students that had not survived.

"Tell me about it." Alice muttered with a heavy sigh. "Is he still trying to talk about the golden boar?"

"I still can't believe he's doing that in front of his son. Poor kid looks like he's getting stabbed."

Alice's lips curled into a grimace. "Whoever the mother is, she must be rolling in her grave."

"One of the maids."

"What?"

"The guy never married, the son's from one of the maids. Bastard child made legitimate." Natalie shook her head. "And don't ask me how I found that out. This place runs on gossip."

"Oh, that explains the kid." Alice sighed heavily. "Looking for a more 'legitimate' heir, it seems."

Natalie didn't respond to that, her gaze turning distant, lips pursing into a slight scowl. Alice could only guess of what her friend would think of someone tossing their son aside when she'd lost her own.

"Want to take a walk?" Natalie broke the silence, her head made a motion to the town. "This place doesn't feel like some tiny village, been wanting to take a look around."

"Anything that gets me out of this box."

Though they agreed, leaving was still going to be a pain, and they both knew it. Once they'd navigated their way through the 'not-a-bunker' mansion, four knights popped up, seemingly out of nowhere, to begin quietly walking behind them. Alice had spotted Helga circling them up above and felt like she was some sort of ambassador.

"Could you all just keep it discreet or something?" Natalie spoke up at the knights. "I know it's your job to keep us safe and all that, but we're trying to avoid drawing attention."

"We're human women. That's going to happen no matter where we go. And it's going to get worse, I'm betting." Alice patted her companion's shoulder, turning to focus on the armored maidens. "Just maybe not something that goes clanking around?"

"If you give us a minute, ma'am, we can change out of our armor."

"That would be appreciated."

They nodded and hurried off, leaving Natalie to give Alice an odd look.

"What?"

"And where did you learn to speak like that?"

"Helga." The former psychology teacher sighed, pointing at the sky. "I swear she practices making puppy eyes."

"I thought you'd have an easier time overcoming it. You being a teacher and all that." Natalie chuckled.

"She's a golden retriever with wings. No one can escape that."

They both glanced at the knights as they'd returned. This time they were all wearing dresses, a rather odd sight considering they still had swords, maces, and shields. The leader of the group made only a small salute to indicate they were ready. And thus, with a weary sigh, they set off.

Seledo was a larger place than Astunes. Not by a considerable margin, but enough so that both Alice and Natalie had been able to easily pick up on how the town was a bit less homogeneous in terms of its population. The hospital... or "medicen" was a larger, newer building smack in the middle of the houses closest to the Lord's manor, with the construction quality slowly deteriorating the further away they went.

Stone turned to wood, and with it the houses had started to stick closer together to one another.

And as they walked, their presence had not gone unnoticed. Maidens with black or green collars would start to emerge from their homes. Some would only peek, but others would look as if ready to approach them up and until their eyes landed on the four 'not-obvious' escorts trailing behind them.

Within minutes, Helga had drifted down from her flight, quietly landing next to both of them. She didn't speak, only giving Alice a cordial bow before taking point in front of the group. The knights grumbled at that, but didn't make a move or say anything. The group, as a whole quite tense with very pointed stares, met the eyes of anyone who stepped close to either Alice or Natalie.

"My Ladies."

A small voice spoke up, an older woman with a black collar. Next to her was a little girl with a white collar. The two had moved to stand next to the group, the woman bowing as the younger girl looked at the ground with a grimace.

"I am owned by elder Vincent. I beg of you, my Ladies, our daughter, she-."

Helga took one look at Alice's tightened expression and put herself between her and the woman. "Please, move along." She spoke with a soft voice, her wings spreading to block the mother and daughter from Alice's view.

"My Ladies!"

Alice glanced at Natalie. The woman's face was a mask that'd turned itself down to the ground, lips tight and shoulders tense. Her hands had tightened into fists as they walked in silence. They continued marching on, continuing all the way to the edges of the town. They were left standing in front of the farms that surrounded Seledo. Only then had she broken the uncomfortable silence.

"That mother was offering us her daughter, wasn't she?"

"It's..." Alice took a deep breath, hands tightening against one another.

"Yeah." She glanced at the knights. "That kind of thing is normal, isn't it?"

"Life in service of a Lady will be a better future." The red-head stated with little hesitation. "If you want to get the girl and the father cares for her, he is likely to only ask for a token price. Would you wish to acquire her? The Earl made sure you would be well funded for the trip, though under such circumstance, I would suggest a green-collar maiden, they-."

"Stop." Alice shook her head, looking at Natalie as the woman's fists had clenched tightly enough her knuckles had turned white. "Just... give us some privacy."

"Certainly."

The knights didn't leave, only spreading out and giving them a more comfortable distance. Natalie's eyes were locked on something distant, lips

curling as she turned to Alice. "How can you be so calm?"

The former teacher gave a sad smile. "While you were with the Baroness, I... had talks with some of the maidens in the village. Kyly wasn't kind in her descriptions of how bad things can be."

"And did she tell you what the core of the problem is?"

"In her ever wise words, 'not enough humans, not enough gold'." Alice replied. "Maidens need humans to bond to. Your average human can bond about ten, while a noble can bond about a hundred or two. But the maiden to human population is five to one and humans tend to only keep two to three maidens."

"You're shitting me." Natalie glared. "The blood purity thing actually matters?"

"Elders help, a lot, apparently." Alice continued. "They bond feralborns, and whatever other maiden hasn't found an owner." Her tone was neutral, as if she'd read them from a book. "Community helps the elders, while the younger men go about with a couple of wives in hopes of building something up for themselves. Or they get lucky and inherit the stuff gramps had set up, which is unlikely unless you're a human woman or the firstborn male."

"And here I wasted my time spending time with the Baroness and being told how to drink tea properly." Natalie eyed Alice as the teacher grimaced.

"It's... I just figured I wanted to learn about the culture. Look at the source."

"The source?"

"The causes." Now it was Alice's turn to sigh. "People don't just do things just because, not all the time at least, a lot of the stuff we take for granted about how society works has a source somewhere." She gestured at the town behind them. "They talk about respecting the elders as if it's just a given, but if you scratch the surface, you start seeing things. Like, feralborn maidens come from a world where everyone dies early because it's just that dangerous. So they're naturally going to feel respectful towards people

who've managed to thrive and reach an older age. And tamed society will go out of its way to protect them because that old man in the corner has a dozen maidens that would go feral if he kicks the bucket." She gesticulated with her arms, expanding to point to the world around herself. "Those kinds of things combine and it becomes clear why the Kingdom itself has sunk no small amount of gold into ensuring old people can live comfortably without needing to work. In exchange for them to teach the younger generation."

Natalie nodded along, frowning. "And the cause for mothers to sell their daughters is because there aren't enough humans or gold?"

"Simply put? Yeah. If you're feralborn, you have nothing. And if you have a maiden daughter, she's not going to inherit anything." Alice nodded. "Chances are you-" Her words cut off as her focus turned to someone walking in the town.

A freckled young man with messy black hair.

"What is it?"

Natalie followed Alice's gaze to the town.

Alice wasn't sure why the young man had caught her attention. Her eyes lingered on the young man and the blond elf walking next to him, both talking amicably. "Just one minute."

Something in her gut clenched as she felt she needed to talk to him. But the two had vanished before she could catch up, gone between the streets of the town and lost in the crowd.

Alice had moved quickly, her gaze focused on the dark-haired young man and the blond maiden walking next to him. It had been only a moment, a split second, where the former teacher had seen their faces, and now there was a gripping feeling inside her chest that she had to talk to him. Behind her trailed the knights and Natalie. Alice ignored their questions as she took a turn at the first intersection, trying to catch up as the duo had vanished in the crowd. She froze the moment she'd lost sight of them.

"What's wrong?" Natalie asked when she caught up.

"Do you need help, ma'am?"

Helga's question gave Alice pause for half a second. She weighed whether sending the Valkyrie to scout ahead was something she actually wanted to do. The thought was quickly discarded. She shook her head. "No, it's just... I thought I saw someone I knew." She waved it off, her eyes lingering on the street. "Yeah, just probably my imagination."

"I'd say." Natalie laughed, but it was a tense sound.

With a slight nod, Alice glanced back up the hill at the manor. "Let's head back."

Chapter 204 [Barry]

Barry's heart was thumping in his throat. Lala had yanked him through the village and into a small corner to hide in. For a fraction of a second, he'd wondered what was going on until he'd caught sight of her. It was only a brief moment, barely enough time to process it before he lost sight of the crowd.

Miss Smith.

"What the-."

"Shush!"

Lala had dragged him into a second alleyway. Her hands moved fast, pulling out a medallion from a pouch and slinging it over his neck along with a second one for herself. She then draped a hood over both their shoulders, fingers ruffling his hair right as she continued to pull him further away.

They zigzagged their way through the narrower streets until Lala finally let them stop. Barry's chest was about to burst and his lungs were aching from the exertion, his eyes shooting questioning looks at her.

"These to hide scent and most other traceable things... there were knights." She declared. "We absolutely cannot allow them to catch us. Things would get ugly fast."

"What? Why?"

"If I tell you, you're just going to get more nervous."

Barry's blood ran cold, his eyes widening. "We didn't come alone... Embla's near, isn't she?" The moment he spoke the words, he could sense it at the edge of his focus. Embla was near, not within Seledo itself, but not all the way over to the court.

"We can't let you get caught." Lala stated. "And what was that look you had on your face back there? You looked like you saw a ghost."

"I... think I did." Barry said. "I saw miss Smith."

"Who?"

"My psychology teacher."

Lala froze, her eyebrows rose. "Otherworlder?"

"I thought they'd died." He grimaced. "I should-."

"Barry." Her hands reached out to grasp his shoulders firmly. "Think what you're about to say very carefully." The fingers dug slightly, making him wince. She immediately recoiled, pulling away but lowering her voice. "Do you think it'd be a good idea?"

Slowly, he shook his head. She had a point, and he hated it. The thought that Miss Smith was alive was... immense. He couldn't just sit still and do nothing, but at the same time, he couldn't just walk out and wave at her. Not when they were in such a delicate situation, to say nothing that if Miss Smith was with knights, then approaching her could very well be dangerous.

How had she come to be with the knights? Who else had survived? Was it possible that Mark...?

Barry quickly shook his head. No, he couldn't let himself be distracted right now. As soon as the mission was fulfilled, he'd tell Embla what he'd discovered and ask for help. "We're going to have to cut our stay here short." He said, feeling Lala nod and relax a little. "Where's the girl I was..."

"Medicen." She immediately pointed him down the street.

"What does that word mean?"

"Medical center."

"Oh." He blinked, nodding absently, trying to turn his thoughts to the goal. The sooner they were done, the sooner he could look into Miss Smith's situation. "How...?"

"The girl in question is called Marianne. Rapha, so pink hair." Lala nudged him forward.

"That part of the plan wasn't ever really explained too well." Barry frowned. "Like, I just walk up to her and tell her I want to buy her?"

"It's exactly that." There was a slight look-over at Barry and a smirk. "But I'm guessing you're going to want to bond her somewhere along the way."

"... in case the purchase doesn't go through."

Which was unlikely to go through anyway because the Lord was occupied with... guests. Barry blinked at that thought. Was Miss Smith that guest? It would explain the knights, but why would she be a guest to the Lord? So many questions.

Rounding the corner while carefully keeping an eye out, Lala had moved to walk behind him as they approached the medicen building. It was a large stone and concrete box that had been covered in a beautiful wall of green vines on every side. The building looked as if it was being overtaken by nature, but the concrete and stone were untouched, while the vines were covered in white flowers. The design as a whole almost made it look like it was a garden. Yet the front doors broke that aesthetic, heavy gunmetal blue doors, opened like the entrance of some vault.

"Be brave."

Lala's whisper came with a little nudge.

They were greeted with a cool breeze as they entered the building, a bored looking dog-eared maiden sitting behind the desk and twirling a pen. She barely registered their presence until they'd stepped closer to the desk.

"How may I help you, sir?" The smile was customer-service.

"I'm looking for Marianne."

A slight pause as she looked down at the papers on her desk. "She's with a patient right now."

"I..." Barry swallowed. "... was looking to purchase her. So... I wanted to meet her first?"

The canine woman perked immediately at that, her attention turned to him in full. "Certainly. Do you have a forward deposit?"

"Here, Master." Lala handed Barry a leather pouch, and he passed it on to the receptionist.

The dark brown ears perked as she confirmed the contents. "I will clear Marianne's schedule for the day."

"I was... wondering if I could meet her right away?"

His question got a half-nod in response. Her hand gestured towards the double-doors to the right. "She is on the second floor, room two zero three. But you'll have to wait until she's done with her current patient."

"Sure, thanks."

They followed the instructions, moving through corridors that didn't feel like ones belonging to a hospital. The walls were stone, and the floors were wood, with nothing painted in the standard sanitized white Barry had been used to expect from such a place. His gaze caught on several patients, humans, most of them, and the nurses going around. The uniforms were like some sort of dress taken straight out of a world war two movie.

And right as they walked up the stairs to the second floor, they both froze at the sight of two armored knights standing right on the other side.

"State your business." The duo declared.

Lala froze, going several shades of pale. Barry couldn't blame her. "We... visit, um, I want to meet nurse Marianne...? I was, am, erm, I am going to

buy her."

The two knights didn't bother to react, only a slight nod to let them pass. The corridor had four other knights, and Barry felt his stomach drop at the realization he couldn't start running now that they were there. What was going-.

One of the doors opened, a voice carried over.

"I hope you can do your job properly next time, young lady."

Barry's blood froze, eyes widening, grip tightening on Lala's hand as terror gripped his chest.

A woman stepped out of the room.

Red hair, craggy wrinkled skin, a richly decorated black and gold camisole and baggy pants that felt entirely out of place on the woman he'd known for just about every minute of his existence. She turned to leave, adding some berating word or three, turned and looked at Barry. Her expression was just as shocked as his was.

"Barry?"

And the world became ice, his feet rooted in place, his body a singular slab of metal that refused to move from the spot it had been bolted onto. A thousand and one memories and thoughts jumbled together through his mind.

"Hey aunt Erica."

Chapter 205 [Rick]

Rick sat on his chair, a severe stare aimed directly at Monica.

Monica's expression was equally severe, staring down at her paws, brow furrowed in steep concentration.

The air was thick, the tension could be cut with a knife.

"Well?" Rick prompted, crossing his arms, watching as Monica stuck her tongue out.

"... Li..." She muttered. "... tit..." A scrunch. "... le?" She glanced up to his face, then back down, and then back up again. "Li-tit-le?"

"Little."

"Litit-le." Next to her, several others broke into giggles. Monica's head snapped in the direction of the sources, face severe. The silence became deafening.

"Monica." Rick spoke with an admonishing tone.

The feline deflated. "Sorry." She muttered dejectedly.

"Not to me, Monica."

Her ears flattened, but she turned to the others all the same. "Sorry." She mumbled.

"Jean sorry too." The maiden gave a slight smile. "Tits funny." She proceeded to reach up to her chest and squeeze, giggling again.

Monica appeared vindicated, nodding enthusiastically. "Rick tits grab good good."

A hand raised from the opposite side of Monica. "Sir? They're being indecent again." The diminutive young maiden with a white collar declared airily.

"I'm aware Anette, thank you." He rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "Have you finished your task?"

"I have, sir."

"Could you read it for the rest of the class?"

The little girl stood up proudly, puffing herself up, unaware of the feline tail that was inching towards her ankles. Monica froze when Rick's glare focused on her entirely. In response, she stuck her tongue out at him.

"She. Sells. Sea. Shells. By. The. Sea. Shore. The. Shells. She. Sells. Are. Surely. Sea. Shells. So. If. She. Sells. Shells. On. The. Sea. Shore. I. Am. Sure. She. Sells. Sea. Shore. Shells."

"Very good Anette."

"Runt." Someone whispered in the back.

Whatever Anette was going to reply, she didn't get the chance, Monica's tail struck. She collapsed, right into the waiting paws of Monica. The feline pulled the little girl on to her lap even as she squealed in indignation. Her tail then lashed twice in contentment before she pointed at the word that was scribbled on her chalkboard. "Word, read, please?"

"Little." Anette grumbled.

"Litit-le." Monica replied.

"Lit-le."

"Lit-le." Monica's ears perked up. "Lit-tle." Her gaze went up to meet Rick's, and he smiled back.

"Please let go of Anette." His lips thinned, gaze moving to the back of the room. "And we do not appreciate insults here."

"No hurt words." Monica nodded with a growl. "Bad words."

The maidens in the room paled, heads nodded in haste. "Monica." Rick chided again, watching her flinch. At least this time she didn't add a death-glare... little steps. His gaze shifted to the beam of light that was making its way into the room through the open window, it had reached the foot of the table. "Ok girls, time to wrap it up."

There were several long sighs and muffled cheers.

"Before you go, there's homework."

Now there were groans.

"I'd like you all to try to see how quickly you can say the seashell poem. Just practice it a little here and there." He put his hands on his hip, grinning at them. "Whoever can say it properly the fastest will get candy and no homework."

Every pair of ears in the room perked at that.

"Monica?" The feline asked, pointed at herself. "Monica candy?"

"You get special homework."

The enthusiasm deflated right out of her, shoulders slumping as she grumbled the loudest. All around her there were small laughs and giggles, the maidens filing their way out.

"Good luck, Monica." Anette patted the feline's head and hurried out, stopping at the door and bowing to Rick. "Thank you for the class, sir."

"You too, be careful out there."

The door closed, and Rick glanced at Monica, the maiden pouting more severely now, arms crossed and leveling a half-hearted glare at him. He

rolled his eyes. "If you help me pick up, you can go out until lunch."

Her enthusiasm came back instantly. By the time it took him to bend over and pick up the first slab of smoothed wood, she'd picked up the rest and stacked them neatly next to the dinner table. The feline was out the door before he could even confirm she could leave.

With a weary sigh, he picked up his notebook and scribbled down a handful of things before he picked up the bucket and began scrubbing the charcoal markings off of the wooden slabs. He'd have preferred chalk, and chalkboard, but money money money. His mind ran through the maths, Dia's healing was getting a trickle of coins in, but-

Someone knocked at the door.

"Class is over, if one of yours was here, she ran off only a minute ago."

"Any lessons for some old students?"

Rick's gaze rose from his work, Kat and Tomas stood at the entrance. Behind them, he could spot their respective maidens standing on guard duty outside. The teacher could only grin. "If you're looking for a re-evaluation, I'm afraid all scores are final."

Kat immediately grimaced even as Tomas chuckled. "I'm really not going to miss that part of the old life." A quick shake of her head and she was right back to a smile. "We heard there'd been a commotion at the castle, Earl took it badly?"

"It was tense, but we parted on good terms." Rick shrugged, standing up to give each of them a greeting hug. "Where's Gabriel?"

"Old man's enjoying doing whatever old men do when left alone with a young and nubile mouse and centaur." Kat made a show to visibly shudder.

"He's been taking strolls around the city." Tomas rolled his eyes and snorted loudly. "Not even the rumors about the attacks slowed him down."

Rick tensed. "Attacks?"

"Just some rumors about people not showing up." Kat rolled her eyes. "I too would vanish from the face of the Earth if things were this boring all the damn time." She frowned. "You look nervous."

"I'm just hoping no one thinks it's Monica. We've had enough... excitement for the time being." Rick scratched the back of his head. "Anyway, either of you want something? Miss Angus and elder Pirro give us food for teaching their girls. It's really good stuff." His shoulders slumped. "Their help means I don't need to worry about Monica's infinite pit too much. And that's going to have to be enough until I find something else."

"Chemistry a bust?"

"Chemistry is a joke." Rick snorted. "Alchemy is the big bucks, and whatever chemistry I mock up would have to be in service of it. There's a market for substances that have low elemental-energy density, you know, cleansed of the physics-breaking-stuff. So that's a potential ticket." A flick of the knife, and some wood was flung off. "But to do that I need to figure out what substances they need, how to make them in laboratory conditions to ensure high purity, and to do all of that I need materials, which means gold, which means..." Another flick, he put down the 'H' he'd carved on the table. "That I need to find someone willing to finance a money sink that has poor prospects of an immediate favorable outcome."

Tomas squirmed. "Thought about talking to Victor?"

"More than once, but I want to have something more concrete in mind before I start talking about money." He frowned slightly. "How's the whole 'living with a merchant' part going?"

"His wife has not been very happy when she realized we meant it when we said we weren't interested in taking in their daughter." Kat rolled her eyes. "We're probably overstaying."

"I've got two floors above my head devoid of furniture, feel free to crash there if you'd like." Rick shrugged.

"Small change of topic, but have you thought about Kiara?"

Rick noted the subtle glare Kat shot at Tomas. "Who?"

"The cursed woman." Tomas commented. "She'd wanted to meet you but I figured with the mess and everything..."

"Oh, sure." Rick shrugged. "I guess I could talk to her in between classes or something. Area's pretty safe too, so here seems fine."

Tomas perked up at that. "Wait, really? We kept hearing how this part of the city was the most dangerous."

The teacher shrugged. "I'm not going to jinx the peaceful streak."

Chapter 206 [Monica]

Monica walked down the hard-stone smelly street with five kits. The kits were trying to run off, again, but Monica made sure they would not. It was important to get them to their burrows. Rick said so.

"Wrong street."

Anette the smart kit tough-one pointed to another street. Monica hesitated, sniffing the air, the scent of one of the burrows was close. It was clearly this way, and not the other way. "This way." Monica proclaimed, pointing forward through the smelly street.

"Mom says it's dangerous."

Dangerous? Another deep sniff, no, nothing here but prey. She shook her head. "Monica here."

The kits were afraid, huddling together and following. Monica wasn't sure what they were scared of, she wasn't going to eat them, she wasn't hungry, and Rick had said that eating kits was very bad. Even the ones that didn't speak words. Thinking about meat made Monica grumpy, she grumbled and rumbled, Rick had sweets, and she'd have to do the hard stuff to get some.

Monica's eyes flickered towards the large black rock.

She'd fought without asking, that had been bad.

"Hey, out of the-."

A tough one barked at Monica, Monica sighed and shoved them out of the way. She wasn't in the mood for playing with weak-tough-ones. There was a shriek and a complaint, and the kits stuck to Monica as she followed the scent to the closest burrow.

Monica didn't roar, she knocked, because that was what she was supposed to do.

Rick said so.

"Oh, Monica! You're... uh, early." Prey spoke and quickly hurried their kits inside. "Thank you!" A fearful squeak, afraid, nervous.

"Bye Monica!"

"Bye!" She waved, even when the door slammed shut. Monica wanted to growl, but didn't. She checked the kits, three left. She sniffed them to check, then followed the trail towards the burrow. "This way."

"Bye Anette."

"Thank you, Monica." Anette nodded, hurrying inside her burrow.

The mother looked at Monica without as much fear as the others. She smelled of courage underneath. "Thank you." The older tough-one declared, lowering her head. She had a small bag she gave Monica.

Blinking, Monica glanced at the bag, sniffing it. "For Rick?"

"For Monica."

That perked her ears, she opened it and reached inside with a claw. Dried fruits, sweets, not the tasty tasty kind, but tasty. Monica quickly stuffed the bag into her important pocket and paused right before leaving. "Thank you."

Without waiting for Anette's mother to change her mind and ask for the bag back, Monica hurried off. She didn't head back to Rick, she could feel he was busy and going back to the not-burrow would be boring.

And Monica had tasty sweets.

She knew a place where she could eat without being bothered, there was a street where others didn't go to and there were only ever a handful of prey. It was out of sight, and there was a nice warm spot with good light.

"She's back!"

One of the prey shouted off, and they ran off, which was better, they left Monica her spot to comfortably eat her tasty sweet fruits. When the bag was empty, Monica tucked it back into her important pocket and lay down on the warm spot, yawning. After all the reading her head was hurting and she could use the rest.

She might have had 'homework', but it could wait.

Monica woke to the scent of blood.

It had been subtle and soft, not the blood of an accident or the blood of a fight. It was the blood of a hunt, someone scared, frightened, prey that had been hunted and killed. One of the soft-ones. Monica sniffed again and stretched, looking over to the sky, the sun was still up, which was odd, this was the first time she smelled hunt-blood during the day.

Monica felt inside her chest where not-Rick-feelings were, to check that he was still busy. Not-Rick-feelings were focused and hungry, but quickly focused on Monica, and Monica felt he was a bit worried.

Monica sniffed again. Hunt blood wasn't close, outside of the nice place and where the stuffy other smells were. With a huff, she went back to her not-burrow. But she wanted to go check, but she had to stay and be good. Because Rick said so and Rick was still angry at her sometimes.

But it was Monica that should be angry at Rick.

She could smell the food Rick had not hunted but was trying to make tasty. It was... not as tasty as the bad-good-not-burrow in the not-mountain. Monica's shoulders slumped as she stepped inside.

"Oh, you're here."

Rick smiled at her and Monica grumbled, pouting. "Food bad." She proclaimed, arms crossed and sniffing loudly in annoyance. "No meat."

"Meat is expensive."

It was the only thing he said, a word Monica didn't understand but she hated. '*Expensive*'. They said meat was hard to find, but Monica could find meat easily. But it was bad meat, and Monica knew there was good meat she could also find, hunt, but Rick was angry at her, he didn't say it, he tried to hide it, but Monica could smell it.

Monica hated that.

Angry but trying not to be angry and still being angry.

And it was hurting Rick. Inside.

But Monica would fix it, she didn't like the food, but she ate it.

"Thank you." She mumbled, eyeing her mate as he stared at his half-empty food.

The anger that wasn't angry, it was in his gaze. If he hated the food, he could ask Monica to hunt, she knew he knew. But she didn't know why he didn't ask for hunt. Probably another wrong '*complicated*' thing.

"Nap?"

Her offer snapped him out of the silent glare. Startled into finishing his meal. "Sure."

Monica's ears perked as he grabbed her paw and pulled her towards the nest. Her grip in his hand tightened as she smirked, moving forward and scooping him into her arms.

"Hey!"

He complained but wasn't angry, which was good, Monica hurried them both into the soft not-cave and made sure to close the door behind herself. Rick tried to struggle again, but she had practice, she knew what to do, her claws carefully undid his clothes and her mate was nice and still so she wouldn't tear anything.

Removing her pants, the only clothes she wore, Monica pulled him into the almost-soft bed and wrapped him into a tight hug with her furry claws. The smell of tiredness was strong, and though Monica could have given him sex, she just let him nuzzle into her.

Her soft-one.

"Rick good." She patted him, stroking his soft hair and hearing his half-complaints.

"Monica good... sometimes."

She snorted, she was good all the time. But Rick already knew that. His not-anger was leaving him and he was falling asleep, and Monica held him tightly.

With a sigh, Monica waited until he was asleep before she reminded herself of her 'homework'. So she left him nice and warm in the bed, he needed the rest. She went up to the learning room and brought out the box with the wood in the shapes of the letters. Slowly, she put them together and sat down, making sure to organize them.

She hated 'homework'.

But there was something else that bothered her mate, something '*complicated*'.

And she had to learn the complicated things if she wanted to help.

Chapter 207 [Barry]

Barry squirmed in the chair as he kept his gaze on the floor, wondering how had things come to this? Well, he knew how. There were six knights, one Lala and one Orion, and Embla was somewhere outside Seledo with a retinue of unknown size ready to jump in and save him if things went south. Oh, how desperately he wanted to be saved right now. The only reason he hadn't told Lala to ask for the backup was because he knew how bloody things would get.

He had to escape this problem on his own.

It would likely take a miracle, however, as he was currently trapped in a room with his aunt. One Miss Erica Dodson.

"Your hair is all silly. Why did you dye it like that?" The woman spoke with the derisive tone of voice that was practically a trademark. "You wouldn't happen to have gotten in with some bad crowds, have you, little Barry?"

"No, aunt Erica." He sighed, slumping as he sat on the stool.

"Good heavens, at least you survived. Do you know how much anxiousness you've caused me? I swear, I must have aged a decade!"

"I'm sorry, aunt Erica."

"As you should be. Going off with that troublesome brother of yours like it was some kind of picnic!" She huffed, making a gesture at the nurse. "Bring us some tea, girl, quickly."

"Aunt, I don't think-."

"You clearly don't know how things work. Don't worry, you'll get a chance to learn now that you've come back from whatever horrid place you were in." Her nose wrinkled at his clothes as her hand sent the nurse to run off.

"What is it with your clothes? Were you put to work on a farm?"

"No, aunt, I-."

"And the hair. Why did you dye it all out? You look like someone dipped you in tar! I hope it's not something that toxic. It can be scrubbed off, right?"

"Yes, aunt, but-."

"Good, then that's going to be the first order of business. Lord Hevron is a minor noble, but he knows generosity and hospitality. We'll get you cleaned and properly dressed." She scowled deeply, shaking her head. "And the girl you came in with, she wouldn't happen to be bonded to you?"

"Lala's with me, and-."

"Goodness, no, no, that won't do at all. Bonded to some farmer girl? Don't worry, I received some of the Earl's generosity. I'm sure we can convince him to part ways with one of his knights. Now those are good and proper girls. They know their place and show respect as they should."

"I'm not parting with-."

"Well, fine, I guess. Keep the farmhand if you must." She made a dismissive gesture with her wrinkled hand. "Maybe she can be trained into being a good and proper maid. The pointy eared ones have some ability to grow herbs and that is worth at least the pity."

"Aunt-."

"Listen, Barry, you might not know it, but we are very important here. You should start acting like it or you will get people to take advantage of us." She frowned a little. "Where is that girl? The tea-." She paused as the door opened, the pink haired nurse entering with a flustered expression. "There we go, see Barry? By the way, where is your insufferable brother?"

Barry's lips thinned, his face fell as he lowered his eyes. "I thought he might have been here."

"Heavens, no, that would be such a disaster. That boy never learnt proper manners." She took the offered cup of tea from the nurse. "This is heavenly,

soothing, well done, girl. Barry, you should try it. I'm sure it will help you relax. You always tense up too much."

"Mark's dead."

"Oh." The woman halted, her brows furrowing. "That... is a shame. I never did like him, but I would've never wished for such a thing to happen to him. He has always been a troublemaker though, mixing in with the wrong crowd. It's a shame no one curbed that boy's bad habits."

Barry looked at his aunt as she drank another sip of tea, his eyes widening ever so slightly. "That's... it? Mark's dead and... that's it? That's all you have to say? *'It's a shame'?*"

"Don't get me wrong, Barry. I am saddened by his passing, but I thought both of you had been lost months ago." She replied, shaking her head. "Now at least the good nephew is back, which should be a cause for celebration. Now that I've finished my rejuvenation session, we-."

"No."

Erica Dodson's wrinkled brows rose ever so slightly. "Excuse me?"

"I said *no*." Barry stood up, inhaling sharply as he stood tall. "I'm leaving."

"You will do no such thing." Her lips curled downwards. "Your absentee mother is not around, making me your legal-."

"I'm not a kid anymore, aunt Erica." He turned towards the nurse, his eyes flicking to the nametag on her shirt for a split second. "I came here to buy you."

"Sir,-."

"You can either stay here or come with me."

"Barry!"

The nurse glanced at the old lady's expression as it was starting to redden, and then at Barry. There was a very brief moment of panic before she reached out to grab his hand. "I'd be honored, sir."

"Young man, you will listen to me!"

Barry turned on the spot to look at her, expression stern, anger bubbling in his chest and pushing him forward with the resolve he might not have been able to sustain otherwise. "No, I won't."

He stepped out of the room, turning to the knight.

"Stop!" the voice shouted out before he could say anything. Miss Dodson stepped through with her wrinkled face contorted into rage to a degree that gave Barry pause. "You are tearing everything apart, acting childish. You might not care one bit about family, but I will do what's best! Knights! Apprehend him!"

No one moved. There was a startled silence, heads turned to look between Barry, Lala, Marianne, and the six armored knights. Hands reached down for the pommel of swords. Stances shifted, and the air tingled.

"I've done nothing wrong." Barry stated, raising his hands, voice faltering. "Are you going to arrest me for disagreeing with my aunt? Would you like me to explain that to the Lord? Or the Earl?"

They flinched, but they did not relax.

"We were sent to protect and serve Elder Dodson." The one in charge leaned slightly. "Please do not make this more complicated than it has to be."

"Fuck this."

Lala stepped in front of Barry, dropping a satchel of leather and stomping on it. There was a sound, an impossible sound, of wood and glass shattering into tiny bits, followed by the sound of the world creaking like an old floorboard. The energy washed over them like a tsunami, and suddenly everything

became dark. The floor vanished from under their feet, and they fell?, screaming.

A split second, and Barry blinked back in reality.

One floor below the one they'd been occupying an instant ago.

"Run!"

Lala hissed angrily, grabbing his hand as well as the nurse's and starting a dead sprint out of the building. From above, he heard screams and shouts of alarm. And when they stepped outside, Barry's eyes widened. Seeing the windows on the second floor had been blown out as if a bomb had just gone off.

But there was no time to stick around and wait. They ran.

Chapter 208 [Embla]

Embla startled the moment she felt the flare go off. "We move."

She did not wait for her maidens to respond, strapping the helmet in place and moving forward. She was the first to step out of the forest and to the road. Her war-axe swung once, twice, and she began to draw in her power as she didn't bother to hide from the maidens above.

If they killed the fliers, those below would know. And if they didn't, they would know all the same. Better to preserve their energy for the objective. The five maidens behind her were the fastest amongst her fighters.

Her eyes locked on the fortifications. Wood, temporary, hastily put up. The feral rush had hit this place hard. The twelve guards wore the Hunter's uniform. Maidens that were there to fend off ferals, the town had never been approached by the kind of danger Embla represented.

The Dark Lady prepared the first spell, pooling her power on to her helm.

"Ferals! Sound the alarm!"

The roar rang out in an explosion, and immediately the horns rang out, warning the city of a potential incoming feral wave. Still, the guards shouted out for Embla to stop and identify herself. But she didn't even bother to slow down.

"I have orders! Where is the knight captain!?"

Their hesitation was all she needed to cut the remaining distance. One of them shouted for the large wooden door to close. But Embla jumped, heaving her arms backwards and reinforcing her whole body. With a solid *'thump'* against the ground, her feet planted themselves firmly, and she threw the massive war-axe, charging it with as much power as she could pump into the weapon.

More sounds of alarm, shrieks, screams, and the wooden door exploded in a rain of splinters, knocking away the weaker maidens and clearing the way for Embla and her own. A few managed to toss some ability or technique or spell, but they washed off of Embla's armor like rain over stone as she picked up her weapon and continued moving.

With a heave, Embla leapt to the closest rooftop, locking on to Barry's location. She did not bother to slow down for her fighters, instead leaping towards her target without slowing down. Her senses stretched out, looking for threats. She found eight knights, their powers flaring out and dancing in a beat of panic and determination.

But only one was chasing her beloved.

A growl lingered on her throat, the war-axe charged with power, hackles rising as she pushed her aura out in every direction. A threat, a beacon, a call for anyone to dare come after her. A distraction. A very loud distraction. Maidens all over the town ran for cover, while those with power moved to protect their homes. Neither was of concern to Embla as she'd detected the knight chasing Barry had hesitated.

That was good enough. She lifted her great battle-axe and with a roar, threw it in the direction of the Lord's manor.

Her steps slowed as she focused on the projectile she'd thrown, her arm screaming in complaint as the piece of wood and metal soared across the sky in a beautiful arc. It left a trail of sparkling iridescent aberrant energy.

Out of the manor, eight figures emerged. Embla guessed them to be knights, but they were too far away for her to be able to properly sense their power. Though that doubt went away when they collectively cast a spell of some sort, a barrier, thick and humming with power. The axe impacted against the barrier, the sound of glass shattering rung across the town, and the weapon exploded, taking the shield with it and scattering the knights that had made the barrier.

For a brief moment, Embla lamented the loss of her favorite weapon.

She'd get Lala to make her a new one.

The knight that had been chasing Barry had very quickly changed direction towards her, and Embla nodded to herself. This would surely be a very fun fight.

Barry's emotions lashed out, fear, anxiousness, and determination. A desire to leave, to avoid the fight. They made Embla's brows furrow, taking a step back from the glee of a prospective fight and considering the future of the Court.

With a grimace, she turned, heading in the direction opposite to the one Barry and her fighters were taking. They would run out the hole she'd left on the town's defenses, and in the meantime, Embla turned to make a new hole in turn. It didn't take her much time, and she had a considerable head start on the knights.

A part of her roiled at the thought that she'd miss out on the first good fight in a while. But it was her mission.

So she ran. It would take her several days to be able to make sure none could follow her trail back to the Court.

The girl Barry had brought with him was a meek thing, a healer, a proper one. Her pink hair marked her as a rapha, and the girl had been knocked out cold the moment she'd bonded Barry. The young man had complained, but Embla pointed out that if he wanted to give her the option to return to civilization, then she could never know the Court's true location.

Lala and Barry had been quiet while walking through the forest, and from the young man's aura, Embla could read flickers of distress within an otherwise determined facade. Embla pondered on this matter as she carried the healer towards her mother's room, not broaching the subject with her human.

If something troubled his heart, he would share it when he was ready.

The smell of salves was thick in the air, something very close to mint, but with a great deal of things that made the smell wrong. Embla's senses prickled at the sensation of power in the room, the many spells that had been woven in attempts to stimulate the Great Lady's body to at least not worsen. To hold out for longer. For a strong maiden, these spells could save their lives. They'd need only wait long enough and all wounds would heal. But not the Warlock. Her body was too frail, too old, too weak.

The nurse was laid down on the floor next to the cot, and the curse of slumber lifted.

"Let me."

Barry stepped between Embla and the nurse, kneeling next to her and looking at the pretty young thing with those calming eyes. The nurse woke, startled, but it did not take Barry long to calm her down.

"It is simple." Embla made a gesture at the cot. "She dies, you die. She lives. You get to choose if you leave or stay with Barry."

"Who..." The nurse paused, gaze turning from Barry to Embla, and then to the cot. Slowly, she nodded. "I understand, ma'am."

"Good." Embla sat down on the floor. "You may begin."

"I'll stay here too." Barry said sheepishly, pulling up a chair and sitting next to Embla. "She's intense, but she means well. It's her mother."

The healer nodded slightly, reaching out to touch the hand of the sleeping of Dagmar. Instantly, her eyes widened in shock and fear, pulling her hand away and glancing from Embla to Barry, and then back to the unconscious matron on the bed.

"She is... what kind of maiden is she?"

"A Warlock." Embla declared. "They are maidens of great elemental powers, but weak physiology."

The healer hesitated, shaking her head. "I have read of Warlocks, but she does not feel as one would, not entirely."

Embla growled, but stayed her hand as Barry gently laid his touch upon her shoulder. "And what is she?" He asked.

"I don't know." Reaching back to touch on Dagmar's hand, she grimaced. "It feels as if she has been changed by something, or someone, fleshcrafting of a high degree." A long pause, and a grimace. "There is something else within her, something that is also alive, but barely." Again, she pulled her hand away, realization dawning on her features. "A... plant?"

The word made Embla freeze, eyes widening.

"Oh." She stood up slowly, turning towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Barry asked.

"I know what is wrong with the Great Lady." Embla declared. "We were wrong. We'd sought a healer, and what we'd needed was a gardener."

Chapter 209 [Dagmar]

The event played itself within the Warlock Dagmar's mind over and over again. She was trapped within the meditative trance of self-recovery, her senses dulled by drugs and spells as well. She could feel herself like a puppet that was clutching at the last strings. And within her mind, the scene played itself again and again.

The ritual, the spell, the fox, the sword.

The pain that exploded within her as the dagger buried itself into the kernel close to her heart.

The one thing that had kept her alive far longer than any Warlock had the right to live. The last gift of an old friend. With every passing day, the kernel weakened, and with it the thread that had kept her alive frayed just a little more.

Was this meant to be the end? Dagmar roiled at the thought. Her gut churned in anger. They were so close, so close to be able to come back, to rise! The emotions burned in defiance to all else. She would not go without a fight, at least there was enough clarity within her thoughts for her to be certain she'd not yet gone feral. Small miracles in times of storm.

The hours bled in this way, her thoughts scattering and regrouping before becoming diffused once more. The sense of time was dim but constant, days, weeks. A month? More? It wasn't until her body pulsed with a vibrant feeling of... strangeness that she realized something was changing.

The kernel churned, and the life it received pierced into her flesh with renewed vigor. Dagmar wished to scream but her body did not move. The only thing she managed was a sharp gasp and a shudder. Her own flesh trembled with healing magic, but it did not remove the pain, not as the kernel's roots dug ever deeper.

The seed had taken a hundred years to root itself as deeply through her body as it had, and within hours, it was doubling in size. The seed brought power, however, and life, even if the remainder of her existence was drained away more and more. Dagmar's eyes opened and she let out a soul-piercing shriek.

"Hurry!"

Words, actions, power.

Everything turned black.

Dagmar did not know how much time had passed before she stirred awake, feeling drained and frail, but alive. Far more alive than she'd remembered feeling in decades. Slowly, she sat up, looking down at her body. Her obsidian black skin was marred by white scars, spreading across her body like the roots of a tree.

The kernel.

With a soft breath, Dagmar pulled from the powers inside herself. How much had her lifespan been shortened? The kernel had fed its fill, and her magic had been diminished for it. Dagmar could only grimace, there was so little left... the old Lady felt a marginal sense of panic. Months, she only had months, perhaps a year at most. Not enough time, barely a blink of an eye.

"Not enough time."

She'd have to help her daughter to take the reins of the Court in full, to stamp out those who might outmaneuver her. The Court couldn't be allowed to dissolve into in-fighting, and Embla would have to prove her strength. Would they have to move again? That would be a great strain on their resources, but where else could they go that may be defensible against a feral rush? Against the humans?

With a flick of her wrist, she summoned her clothes. What once had been a simple manner now strained her, she grimaced and nearly fell back to the

bed. That fox had done a number on her. It would take time before she regained full control over her powers. Time she did not have. Slowly, she walked to the door, pausing only long enough to pick some fruit from the offered dish left near the entrance. She sensed five guards, and with a simple wave dismissed them.

The corridors of the wooden palace were mostly empty, allowing for Dagmar to comfortably walk without any distraction. She could sense Embla was nearby, and she sought her daughter out. The Dark Lady was, as usual, training. Armored from head to toe, she swung a long piece of wood that was likely five times as heavy as Dagmar was.

The old woman felt pride mixed with a twinge of envy and reminiscence, to the days she'd been strong and agile, the days when she'd need not fear blades or spells. The days when humans knew her name and paid their respects to her. The days when speaking of the thousand armed god did not bring scorn and hate.

"Mother!"

Embla dropped the wood and launched into the Warlock. The strong, powerful physique held Dagmar with a gentle squeeze. The gesture was far too kind for a leader, but one Dagmar would not rebuke as she did her best to return the gesture.

"It is good to have you back."

"It is good to be back." Dagmar nodded, inhaling deeply and glancing at her daughter intently. There was a slight frown as she felt a disturbance within her daughter's aura that had not been there last she'd looked. "Something's changed."

"Much has changed. There is much I must tell you."

"You..." A pause, a frown. This sensation... it could not be. "You captured the human."

Shame crossed Embla's face and aura, shaking her head. "No, he escaped. But fortune smiled upon us. There was another."

"Another... this..." Dagmar's thoughts stirred, and a sense of danger loomed over her like a shadow. More than one human being able to make powerful bonds? The enormity of the thought felt like the preamble to a storm.

Clouded skies and the roll of thunder in the distance.

She scowled. "You must tell me everything."

The more Embla spoke, the more Dagmar realized something was wrong, very wrong. Her daughter had bonded a human, and at first, she'd thought this bond was one of dominance, of control. What human could control or force her own daughter to submit? And while the bond was not one of submission, it still had trapped Embla within the clutches of the human's... weakness.

Dagmar knew of the trappings of such bonds, how they twisted and turned logic and reason against the maiden's own interests.

But was there anything she could do? No. The bond was powerful. Just looking upon it left Dagmar feeling a slight sense of awe. Never in her life had she seen something that was so entrenched, so strong. The idea of killing this... *'Barry'* was discarded immediately. The blow-back alone could very well cripple Embla, if not drive her into an enraged frenzy or insanity.

If there was something she could do, it would have to wait, however, as there was one more thing that perturbed her. Far more than even her own daughter being compromised by a human's influence.

"There are other humans like him."

"Yes, Barry couldn't ascertain the exact number, but if his guess is correct, there might very well be dozens of them."

The consideration made Dagmar's blood turn cold. "Have you kept an observer on them at least?"

Embla nodded. "Yes, there is an entire knight squadron from the Earl, as well as the local Lord's own forces. After our attack, they holed up in Seledo."

"But they cannot stay there, not forever. If the Earl sent his own forces to protect them, then it means he expects them to reach Balet." Dagmar frowned deeply, feeling her powers waver. "Do you understand the situation, daughter? The threat the humans pose?"

The younger maiden hesitated. "They would be powerful assets to the kingdom."

"It would be more than that, girl, think!" She made a gesture. "Think of the enemies of the kingdom, maiden forces, independent, free. The kingdom never dared go after them, for they had no way to reliably bond them quickly or reliably!" Anger flared, her powers bubbled, and the kernel churned under her skin. "How long before they begin hunting us again? Before they turn our own sisters against us? The draconids, the orcs, the tigress clans, the vampires!"

Embla nodded grimly, bowing her head. "What must be done?"

Dagmar held back from sighing in relief. The human's influence on her daughter was concerning, but at least it appeared he had not won against her daughter's better judgment. That issue would need to be corrected, in time, but for now, there was only one course of action they could take.

"We need to inform the others of the threat. I had a deal with the vampire clans and they will keep their word. But that is secondary, we must mobilize. These humans must be captured or killed, and we must act before they reach Balet. Once within the Earl's castle, it would be near impossible to touch them."

There was a nod and a moment of hesitation.

"Barry may be a human, but he has proven useful. He must not be told of this." Dagmar continued. "We have a greater need for him. I will take him along with some guards to attempt and rouse the elves from their eternal slumber."

Embla's eyes widened, head snapping up to meet her mother's eyes. "Do you think it is possible?"

"There is hope." Dagmar nodded.

A hope that the ancient warriors that had once brought the human armies low could be awakened once more.

The question was, of course, if Dagmar had the time to devise a way to break the bond without harming her daughter in the process. If worst came to worst, she would have to find a way to make sure the human her daughter was bonded to would not threaten their plans.

Chapter 210 [Alice]

Alice sat on the balcony, her gaze lingering over the town and the destruction that a singular, extremely powerful maiden had unleashed upon it within the span of a dozen minutes. The attack had been quick, brutal, and efficient. In their wake, they'd left the external defenses crumbled as if two bombs had gone off on either side of the town. Several dozen houses had their rooftops crumble, and the medicen had looked like the upper floor had had a fire.

The psychology teacher carefully remained quiet, her ears straining to the conversation that was going at the entrance of the manor.

"The farmer whore did something to my nephew! They must have kidnapped him!"

"Ma'am, if it was an elf-."

"They were clearly in cahoots with the monster! And you failed to save him! I will have your head for this!"

The voice was shrill, like nails on glass. Ms. Dodson was intentionally making a scene, pressuring the knights to inform the Earl. To inform him that her nephew had been 'kidnapped'. It was a consideration that had concerned Alice as she'd heard of it, as none of the people she'd talked to had ever mentioned there being some independent group of maidens within these parts of the kingdom.

It didn't bode well.

"Miss Smith?"

The voice came from May. The young student who'd lost her cousin that first day they'd landed on this world. The quiet girl who'd stood in the background and gone with the flow. She reminded him of Barry, in a sense, save she looked far more eager to spend time on her own than anything else.

"Something troubling you?"

May nodded absently, taking the seat opposite to Alice's.

"I think I've changed my mind."

"About?"

"About the academy."

Alice was half of a mind to follow through, merely nodding to prompt the younger woman to continue at her own pace. The thought of the military academy was something heavy on everyone's mind, since it was the current destination they were set on.

"After the attack, I think I'm not fit to... being in a fight."

The tone in May's voice caught Alice's attention. "You were there?"

"I was near the western gate." May nodded, her hands laying on her knees.

"And I... was paralyzed. I saw her coming, knew she'd be close, and... the knights protecting me asked if they should fight."

"Oh dear." Alice stood up, pulling her seat around the table so she'd sit next to May. "You asked them to stay put?" May nodded at the question. "That's ok, you kept them safe." She grasped May's hand, squeezing reassuringly. "So no military academy?"

"I don't think I'd make a good fit." The younger woman shook her head.

"And... when we were sitting there, just... waiting for the attacker to leave, hoping she wouldn't notice us, I'd been thinking."

"About what?"

"Pokeballs."

There was a pause. Alice blinked, thinking back to the device the Baron had used to contain Monica. She held back the grimace, looking at May and focusing. "What about them?"

"I'd been thinking about the fighting, and the hiding, and... just trying to run, escape from it, you know? Look for someplace safe. Couldn't pokeballs be used for that? If things are ugly, just... put the ball someplace safe, with the girl in it."

"I guess that could be one use for them, yeah." Alice nodded reassuringly, sighing wistfully. "Shame humans can't go into them. The knights and villagers had been very worried over that, too."

"Hm? How so?"

"Oh, it's... you know." May said, sighing. "During the feral attack, a lot of maidens lost their families and home, and had to travel so they could find someone to bond with. So they'd been feeling the pressure because there weren't that many humans they could bond to."

"Yeah, that's certainly..." Alice's eyes turned to look away, her brow furrowing. "Huh."

"Miss Smith?"

"Helga?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

May squeaked in her seat, jumping slightly as the Valkyrie dropped to the balcony's railing, her wings spread wide for a moment before folding tightly. "You were listening all this time?" May spoke with a tiny voice.

"She's always within earshot range." Alice declared. "She's got a great memory, so she can help me remember details if I forget anything."

Helga didn't respond, her cheeks taking a slight blush as she bowed her head. "Would you need anything, ma'am?"

"The situation with the maidens, those who survive feral rushes." Alice replied.

"It... is an unfortunate truth, yes." Helga nodded grimly. "Maidens who've lost their owners in a rush usually are left with little more than the clothes on their backs. The kingdom requires all families that have lost their homes to travel to the larger cities."

"To avoid maidens going feral and to have the humans help ensure all maidens have a partner." Alice replied. "Right?"

"Yes."

"That's part of the reason why there's so many ferals... I think? I remember reading the ferals could reproduce."

There was a quick nod. "Parthenogenesis. A maiden's body can self-impregnate under the right conditions. Ferals grow in number because of that." She slowly shook her head. "But getting back to the matter, I think I was wrong about Natalie and the business idea. I was looking at it all wrong. We might just need to-."

"DID YOU NOT HEAR ME!?"

Everyone paused, glancing over to the edge of the ongoing argument that had, apparently, escalated while they hadn't been paying attention. Alice looked over the railing, but the angle was a bad one to spy on what was happening directly, though judging by the number of knights present, she suspected Ms. Dodson wasn't talking to the knight captain anymore.

"Are you sure there was a charmer?" A male voice spoke, tense. The Lord?

"It's the only way. Barry wouldn't have disrespected me so. He was always such an obedient boy." Ms. Dodson proclaimed with that air of self-assurance she always carried whenever on a tirade. "Something happened to my nephew and I'm certain the bond had something to do with it. She was no elf!"

"Is this true?"

"She wielded aberrant and magical elemental energies." Another voice spoke out. "This is indeed true that it would be very odd for an elf to use such powers."

"It would be impossible! It must be a charmer."

"What's a charmer?" May wondered, speaking in a low voice.

"They're... threats. Very dangerous ones." Helga spoke darkly. "Maidens that were specifically made to twist the hearts, souls, and minds of others. It varies on the breed, some have the ability to break bonds, others can use the bond to control their owner. Overall, they were hunted down long ago, before even the rebellion. There being one this far into the kingdom is a very bad sign."

"Really?" May looked surprised, to which Helga gave a grave nod.

"Charmers are very dangerous maidens. They have abilities that allow them to directly manipulate emotions of others," she said.

"That kind of does raise the question of nature versus nurture." Alice declared with a curious look.

"... ma'am?"

"No, it's just something academics would blow a fuse over." The former teacher declared. "Though relevant, I guess. If you're a maiden breed made to be a farmer, and you work as a farmer, was that your choice? Or were you locked into that path by what you were born as?"

"The circumstances of one's birth are irrelevant. It is what you do with the gift of life that determines who you are." May spoke, and immediately shrunk as the others looked at her. "It's just a neat quote from a very old movie."

"Sounds familiar." Alice frowned.

"Yeah, it's just something from the late 1900s, so I'm sure you would know."

May giggled, and Alice leveled a glare at her.

"That was a low blow." The older woman replied with a heavy sigh, glancing at Helga, the Valkyrie having merely stood there and nodding along. "Thanks for the help. By any chance would you know where Natalie is?"

She preened at the praise. "I don't know, but I'm sure finding her shouldn't be a problem."

"Then could you pass on that I want to meet her?" Alice smiled slightly. "She might like the news."

"News?"

She smiled at May's question, nodding. "I think we might have a way to help. And make a living out of it."

Chapter 211 [Dia]

Dia yawned, stretching as she began taking off her uniform.

"You seem in a rush." The voice was teasing, but Dia could only really roll her eyes, her fellow nurse was rushing to remove her own uniform just as quickly.

"If I don't, Rick will start making dinner. What about you? Date?"

"Oof, that's rough." The shirt was practically thrown into the wooden locker. "And yes, got my own little date."

"Is he handsome?"

"SHE is." There was a waggle of brows.

Dia whistled. "Prestigious little skank. From the academy?"

The fellow nurse preened, shoulders squared and chin raised. "You know it!"

They both shared a quiet look, Dia only raising a brow.

"You know the rules."

She rolled her eyes, of course it would come to that. "Fiiine, I'll cover your cleaning rounds tomorrow. Now out with it."

Her companion lowered her voice to a whisper. "There's apparently going to be a bunch of women coming to the city. It's been whispered about here and there, a bunch."

"Oh, so she's looking to use you to get into Miss Alice's good graces?"

There was a pause, brown eyes widened. "What? Who? You know who's coming?"

"They were in my village, I took care of them." Now it was Dia's turn to eyebrow waggle. "And if you want more details, you're going to have to cover my cleaning duties for two weeks. That includes the green floor."

The hesitation was apparent, and understandable. Green Floor was where the nastier operations took place, and it was the worst place to be for anyone with a sense of smell. "I-uh, why would I need such a thing?" There was a nervous laughter, but Dia knew she'd caught her.

"Ok then." There was no immediate response, Dia just grinned. "Think about it, though if you take too long, I might bump the price. See you tomorrow!"

Not waiting for an answer, Dia put on her street clothes and hurried on out of the medicen, waving goodbye to the other girls as she made sure to break into a good jog back home.

Mentally she estimated Rick must have still been finishing up the afternoon class. The thought of him working still made Dia's stomach churn, she had to reassure herself that eventually they'd earn enough he could just take things as a hobby and not out of a necessity. Dia's lips thinned at the consideration of Monica, a girl like that could be earning a lot of coin as a knight, even if she definitely did not have the discipline for it, the strength should be more than plenty to compensate for such.

But that was a hope for later, for now she should probably start looking into some of the slum girls. Maybe she'd be able to snag one and put her on Rick's sights. The purchase cost would be affordable if she was from the slums, all that mattered was the drive and brains.

Fighting back from wanting to sigh again, Dia redoubled her pace instead.

She felt Monica's aura oppressing the whole damn district shortly after she passed the guard post. That Dia had to smirk at, if there was one good thing about the over-zealous cat was that her very presence cowed the worst dregs of the city into keeping their head down.

Lots less work in the medicen for everyone if there's less brawls and muggings.

A quick peek at the aura, Monica was moving out of the house and that was a clear sign the class had ended. It meant she was right on time. She slowed down as she reached the door, she combed her fingers through her hair and smoothed her clothes, using her key to unlock the door.

"I'm ho-." Dia hesitated, looking at the woman standing in the room. "-me?"

It was a beautiful woman, with flawless porcelain skin and sky-blue hair. Her hair had been tightly braided and her neck was shown to be devoid of a collar. Every sense within Dia told her this was a human, she couldn't detect the faintest flicker of elemental energy.

Yet Rick stood behind the table, tense. Not the tension of someone under a threat but the tension she'd only ever seen him show when alone with an unknown maiden.

"Oh, hey Dia. Welcome home."

Rick didn't hesitate to walk around the table and past the blue-haired woman, drawing Dia into a tight hug. His finger pinched her shoulder blade, and Dia knew something was wrong. But what?

"This is Kiara, an... acquaintance of Tomas."

Light brown eyes and an impossibly sharp gaze locked onto Dia. The air of superiority oozed out of the lady just like every other human woman. Dia's first reaction was to start a bow, but Rick's hand on her shoulder stopped her.

She could only look at him from the corner of her eye. But when in doubt, follow your owner's lead.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, miss Kiara."

There was a subtle twitch of brows, a hidden sign of annoyance, no doubt at the insult of not being treated as a human woman should be. But it was quickly obscured behind a brilliant smile. "I assure you the pleasure is all mine. I was talking with your owner over some potential deals, would you mind preparing something to drink for us?"

That was certainly typical human woman behavior. Dia almost nodded.

But Rick's hand remained tightly on her shoulder. His heartbeat was fast, blood pressure high.

"And I'd been about to show you the door."

That was about as shocking to Dia as it had been to the blue haired woman. Wide eyes and rapid blinking followed. "Have I done something wrong?"

"You've been trying to use your powers on me."

This time there was a scowl. "I can assure you it was merely the curse. I had hoped we could-."

"Dia, if there's such a thing as a cursed person, would they have control over the energy?"

She startled. "Certainly not."

"Then that means you're a maiden."

Dia looked from Rick to Kiara, and tried to make sense. Was she a maiden? She couldn't feel anything, the energy was feeble and-.

And suddenly it was not. The power suddenly struck out in every direction like a raging fire. Its very presence was hot and heavy, making everything feel like it was sweltering in an inferno.

Dia's hand shot out and shoved Rick behind herself, taking a step back.

"Oh please, if I wanted to fight, you wouldn't be able to slow me down."

The brown eyes shimmered and turned gold. Kiara did not move from her spot but Dia could tell it wasn't a bluff.

"Jesus, thank fuck."

Both maidens hesitated, glancing at Rick as he let out a long sigh of... relief?

"Sir?"

"At least now that the cards are on the table, could you tell me what this whole thing is about? You're not really cursed, right?"

"I..." The blue haired woman faltered, the pressure died out somewhat, her eyes turning from Rick to Dia and back. She appeared to determine the nurse didn't pose enough of a threat, and relaxed her shoulders marginally. "Yes, I'm not cursed. I seek to bond you."

"Why?"

"I've got my reasons." There was a slight shrug, she crossed her arms. "I can't say this is going how I expected it to."

"That's nice, how about we try this again tomorrow?" Rick clapped once. "I don't want a fight to break out, and if you stick around, things will get ugly."

Dia glanced at Rick, then at the maiden pretending to be a human, their gazes met, and Dia squirmed, if this became a fight, her only choice would be to buy him time to get away... however few seconds that would mean. "Sir..."

"Not you. Monica."

It was only then that Dia realized the pressure from Monica's aura was gone. The realization seemed to come to Kiara at the same time. The blue-haired maiden's eyes traversed the room until they fixed onto a specific shadow, one that was darker than the others.

Monica emerged from it, blue eyes and a severe snarl on her lips.

"Monica."

Rick's word didn't stop the feline from growling, but she did move to stand between himself and the blue-haired stranger. Dia immediately felt a wash of relief over her, with her here, she could drag Rick off and make sure he stayed alive.

"It seems I underestimated you, again."

Kiara did not seem put off, she dropped her aura and let out a short laugh.

"I will take you on that offer, Rick, I will be back tomorrow."

The next instant, she was gone.

Dia recognized the teleportation spell for what it was, and quickly moved to remove any possible traces of the lingering energy. She'd heard how practitioners could potentially return to the same spot if the energy wasn't disrupted properly and she definitely did not want that maiden having an easy time coming back.

"Sir, I-"

Her words stopped as Rick grabbed her arm, he gave her a reassuring squeeze. "Let's sit down, think things through."

She bit her lip. Her owner's word was law, that was reassuring, she obeyed, taking the chair and looking at Rick, waiting for his words.

"I think we should hear her out."

Suddenly, she wasn't so sure anymore.

Chapter 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.

Chapter 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.

Chapter 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.

Chapter 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.

Chapter 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.

Chapter 217 [Earl Vitchatt]

The Earl was not an old man, as far as things went, he was relatively young, merely thirty years of age. He had been raised and educated in the ways of nobility and management. It had been a life rife with books and teachers, dusty rooms, and the scent of paper and ink.

Though he'd taken to his lessons as the scion that he was, he never really enjoyed the experience. Sitting down, staying still, focusing on old parchment and long winded speeches... it just wasn't for him. His plump appearance might hint otherwise, but what called for him was outside, in the open air, the soft breeze, the people. Much to his guard's disdain.

It was a blessing and a curse to have to handle the comings and goings of the minor court within his little slice of the kingdom. The nobles were a beast that fed on gossip and greed, carefully balanced against the threat of consequences and the risk of discovery. If only the fellow humans bothered to stop pretending the little 'game' actually mattered, the Earl might have actually enjoyed some of it.

As it stood, it was little more than empty gestures and empty words with little rhyme or reason other than self-interest and ego stroking. Tiny things to bolster influence or income in tiny ways. But the part he loathed the most was when actual dangers lurked under the surface.

There was always somewhere willing to bring a sword into what should have been a nice dinner with barely disguised insults and vapid smiles.

So it was with some trepidation that the Earl looked upon the city of Balet as a thick fog covered the walled district where the feralborn maidens lived. The fact that the spell had been cast was a sign of the attacker's temerity, but that it had spread out so much before anyone detected it? That was a sign of the skill they possessed.

And yet, the first question that came to the Earl was not on who this attacker was, but who would have sent them? What was their plan?

"It is a vampire."

"Do we know what they're-?" The Earl's words were paused by the sound of a roar. An unmistakable roar. He'd heard it before, not a fortnight ago. The Sabertooth Monica. The Earl's chest tightened. "Of course."

"My Lord?"

"Someone is targeting our former guest."

His eyes narrowed. The timing was no coincidence, for one. They must have known Rick had left and prepared. But what to do? Vampires were known for their ability to cause terror upon their victims. Was the Sabertooth Monica on a forced rampage? Or entirely focused on protecting her owner?

But most importantly, who, and why? The realm the vampires controlled was on the opposite side of the kingdom. Who would cross so much land just to attack Richard Cross? Why? Was it a rogue element or had the vampires chosen to make a move?

In the silence of the night more sounds broke out. Screams, and destruction.

"Prioritize his safety."

That startled Deneva, the knight captain, who glanced at the walled district. "And the other humans?"

"Richard and the other three companions are worth too much. Have the knights aid the citizens, but safely extracting the four must be prioritized above all else." The declaration was firm, and it pained him to admit it. His gut was telling him that if a vampire was involved, then someone with far reach and influence had made a move. "They must be brought to the fort under the guise of a lawful operation, perhaps pretending they're being arrested under suspicion of inciting the attack. No doubt someone will claim it is his maiden's fault."

"But if it is..."

"You have your orders, captain. Do not concern yourself with who is responsible for what until the situation is under control."

"The vampire?"

"Kill on sight."

He was not going to bother pretending he'd be able to break a vampire in for interrogation. No, the fog was proof this was no fledgling. If it was one of the older specimens of the breed, then any attempt at capture would put Deneva in far too much risk.

Deneva bowed and left.

The Earl kept looking upon the fog in the walled district.

Someone powerful enough to bring a vampire half-way across the kingdom.

Someone powerful enough to get them to start trouble within Balet itself.

Someone powerful enough they were certain they could get away with everything.

The Earl drew blanks; those who had this level of sway within the kingdom were not his enemies nor would they have done such a bold move without gloating over it.

Slowly he stroked his chin.

Who? And what was their goal with Richard? Unless it was a diversion? An attempt to remove a potential future threat? Or was the target Monica? The Sabertooth presented an unfortunate iconic reminder of the war, and Richard, her owner...

The screams began, and the Earl could only grimace.

He remained on the balcony, this far out it was impossible to see any details other than the odd flashes of light. Of maidens unleashing their powers. His fingers gripped at the railing and his knuckles whitened as he could do nothing more than observe.

Such was the weight humans had to bare.

To sit and watch and hope that the orders had been the right ones. To put one's trust onto their maidens and their skills.

If there was one thing about all the time he'd been made to spend reading, the one thing that had stuck to him the most was the idea that once upon a time humans could fight along maidens. A legend, from the times of the first maidens and their attempted conquest of the world. Myths of human armies putting a halt to the maiden armies. Stories of great battles with tens of thousands fighting to hold and protect that which they held dearest.

Of the first partnership, the first human to bond with a maiden, of how it changed the world ever after.

The human's name and the maiden's breed had been lost to time, each nation having their own variation of the tale. Yet they all held the same core. A simple man, lost and afraid. And a maiden, wounded and lonely.

The Earl turned away from the city, his eyes lingering on the massive boar pelt that hung above the fireplace. He contemplated, gazing back, there was a fire, and it was spreading. The knights had been deployed, the guards were all doing their jobs.

And the only thing he could do was stand still, watch, and trust in Deneva's success.

Chapter 218 [Rick]

The burning had been slow to subside, and with its passing, Rick was left sweltered and exhausted. His mind could barely grasp consciousness, keeping his eyes open was a struggle. But he couldn't let himself fall, no matter what. For one, slipping would mean becoming lost.

The feline maiden had been lugging him like he weighed nothing. She didn't speak or bother hurting him, she merely carried him as she jumped and ran. She left Balet as the city was filled with screams and fire. There had been guards, maidens, that had tried to stop her.

And none survived the encounter.

Now the maiden was sprinting across the farmland as if she had wings on her back, and Rick was nothing more than the sack of potatoes she was carrying around.

He had a second reason for fighting the weight in his eyelids and strain against his chest. Rick wasn't sure if Monica would be able to find him if he passed out. It was a reasonable fear, all things considered. While Monica was conscious, he'd been able to find her general direction even if not the distance. But whenever Monica slept, the feeling was muted, quiet, harder to notice.

And unconsciousness might result in that feeling being all the harder to notice and track.

So he endured.

His body was lead, his eyes weighed and his limbs too exhausted to even move, but he struggled, fighting to keep himself as awake as he could, as observant as he could. Monica and Dia were out there and they were looking to get to him. At the very least, if the nameless feline wanted him dead, she'd have killed him already.

There was hope.

And so he waited.

He tried to keep himself focused, on the golden fields shimmering under moonlight, on the glowing lights in the distance, on the snarl that seemed to emanate out of the maiden with every step she took. It would be an hour before he was tossed to the ground, Rick didn't have the strength to stand back up. His body felt like it had been burned from the inside.

The maiden with orange stripped fur and claws only barely looked at him.

She left.

At first Rick suspected she'd left in search for something, maybe they had a camp somewhere, or maybe there was something she was looking for. Why bother bringing him here and dropping him off and then just... leaving? Maybe she was certain he couldn't go anywhere with the hole she'd made in his leg?

Slowly, clenching his teeth, he managed to sit up. His head was spinning, it was hard to focus on anything other than the... where was he? It was far from the roads, a grove of some kind, at the foot of a small hill. There was little else in any direction other than some trees and grassland.

Panting as he moved, he confirmed the injury in his leg. The shadowy attack had punctured through his calf but not the bone. Everything below the knee was drenched in blood, but it seemed the bleeding had stemmed.

The pain helped stay awake, however.

That was good, stay awake, stay focused. He grunted, pressing down on the injury and trying to pay more attention. Where was the feline? Where had she gone? His brain sluggishly started to pick apart the details, they'd been attacked. The why was important, but he didn't have enough information for that.

So now he was left wondering what was going to happen now.

The feline couldn't have just taken him here out of amusement. It's not like she didn't have a chance to kill him. But she hadn't.

He looked around again. Dawn was approaching, the meadow had only a couple dozen trees, and not a sign of anyone or anything within the immediate vicinity. Grimacing, Rick turned his focus inward. Monica was... focused on him, she was coming. From where he lay he couldn't see the city, but he could sense her emotions, even if at a distance.

He needed to figure out what was going on.

They'd entered the house, the fight started, but neither the shadowy figure nor the feline had aimed to kill him. Granted, the former didn't get much of a chance, but the latter certainly had opportunities to spare. Why would she bring him here?

Monica was getting closer, her focus was sharpening, her emotions becoming clearer, mild apprehension and a great deal of concern. She could tell where he was, and no doubt she could sense him, but also the other maiden.

The other maiden that was like Monica.

She could hide in shadows.

Rick's eyes widened, looking around wildly, and then focusing. A singular idea, as clear as he could make it. He grit his teeth and tried to pass the idea to Monica as best he could.

It was a trap, and he was the bait.

"Monica!"

His voice didn't stop her, instead, she only seemed that much more determined. Within moments he could see the streak of white that was dashing in his direction at a dizzying speed, going on all fours to keep herself low on the ground. Monica was leaving a trail of torn earth and upturned soil, a storm of movement. Her blue eyes weren't looking at him, they were scanning the area as she approached, the closer she got the harder she ran.

She wasn't slowing down.

Rick's eyes widened.

Was she...?

Her gaze locked on him.

Everything happened so fast.

A split second with too many things happening all at once.

Rick's heart beat once.

Monica entered the meadow, a shadow sprung from between the trees, a spear of darkness. Monica didn't even look to dodge by jumping over it, a second spine emerged, and she ducked under, a third thrust directly from below and she side-stepped.

A second beat, his breath escaped in a gasp.

Monica vanished into the shadows, emerging half a meter ahead, three spikes tore at the air where she would've been otherwise. Her claws dug into the dirt, throwing it behind her explosively.

Third beat, his voice caught in his throat.

She was airborne, a pounce, a mistake, two more spikes thrust downwards from within the foliage of the trees. In response Monica kicked at the air as if it were solid. And her trajectory changed as if there had been an invisible wall for her to bounce off of.

Fourth beat, his eyes widened.

Like a heat-seeking missile, she rocketed straight towards him, her body shrouded in wisps of shadows and darkness. Blue eyes gleamed with focused determination, claws prepared to reach out and grab him.

Fifth beat.

Something emerged from the shadows in front of Rick. It was not a spike, it was not an attack, it was the feline. She seemed to be intent on saying something. The very first notes of a word had rang out, a smug proclamation that came with a sharp sensation against Rick's neck.

Monica didn't stop.

She tackled the now shocked feline, shoving them both into the shadows.

And then they were gone.

Rick's head whirled around, trying to find them.

He saw nothing but the grove and the first rays of sunlight.

A full second later, there was a roar several hundred meters behind him, just outside the meadow.

The fight had begun.

Chapter 219 [Monica]

Monica ran towards her mate, Rick was hurting, Rick was in danger, she was going to protect him. This was a fight, and she was good at fighting. She could smell the hunter, a tricky hunter, a strong hunter, an experienced hunter. Monica knew by scent alone she could not underestimate the hunter.

She saw Rick, she pounced.

She would get him out of there.

Except the hunter came out, and Monica changed tactics. She tackled the hunter and pulled her into darkness. The hunter's strength was great, comparable to Monica's, and she forced both of them out of the shadows.

But they were further away from Rick, Monica could fight.

So she did.

"Wait!"

The hunter spoke, but she moved to fight as well. Monica clawed at the hunter's arms, testing defenses and reactions, seeing her pulling away and raising her paws. Scowling, ready to fight, but not fighting. Though she smelled of fight, it was a trick, a fake not-fight to trick and then strike.

"I said wait!"

Hunter growled, Monica growled louder.

Monica jumped into the darkness and came out on the tall grass, this time she jumped for a kick. The claws on her paws grazed the clothes the orange hunter had, she dodged, twisting sideways and clawing at Monica's face. The strike was deflected, Monica elbowed the wrist and tried to claw her gut, she deflected the claw and stepped slightly to the side to punch at Monica's head,

Monica raised her arm and grasped the other's. A mistake, the right knee came up and smashed against Monica's chest.

The exchange of blows had been fast, and it would not be the last. Monica pounced right back into the extremely close range, claws slashing and being deflected just as much as she deflected the other's attacks.

A flurry of claws and fur, each swipe potentially deadly or critical.

And with every exchange, it would come out the same. The orange hunter would kick or knee or hit Monica. Monica could only growl in frustration, she had to beat this enemy, but it was fighting like Monica. Except better than Monica.

"You're nothing but a cub, you can barely know your powers. Stand down."

More strokes, growls, threats. The words didn't mean much to Monica, but the annoyance in the voice said enough. The orange hunter wanted to show Monica she was inferior, weaker, smaller, that she should withdraw her claws.

Not after Rick had been hurt.

Monica dove in, she remembered the bad tough-tough-one in the castle, she saw her fight. She stopped clawing, instead she punched and kicked, copying what she'd seen the other one use. Monica's foot knocked the orange hunter's knee away, she lost balance, Monica punched her face.

It knocked her down but she was back to her feet, Monica couldn't punch again.

The orange hunter became angry.

Monica jumped as darkness extended all over. One of the tricky tricks. Monica stared, frowning, watching the shadows come out and try to hurt her. She could see now how the orange hunter controlled them. Monica jumped and kicked and tried to jump into the shadows, but the tricky spiky shadows were not for her to jump into.

"Do you really want to stay in that city with the filthy humans?" Orange hunter roared, extending claws, glaring. "I smelled your frustration, you stink of it, you don't want to be there."

Many words, some Monica understood, but many she did not. She understood some of it, yes, she was frustrated. She leaped between the spikes, dodging, keeping her distance, conserving her strength. Better to let orange hunter tire.

"You hurt Rick. My mate!"

That makes her angry. The shadows darken, more spikes emerge, like sharp trees with sharp branches that hurt. Monica cannot dodge them all, she has to run, she has to move, and even when she runs and moves, it starts to hurt. The spikes are scratching her, but not enough. Superficial.

"He is a pathetic human."

The words are about Rick, and it has a new word, but Monica heard the word before, it's a bad word, even if she doesn't understand what it means exactly, she remembers it's a bad word.

"Rick strong."

"He's weaker than a normal human!"

Large black spike shoots from the shadows, no longer remaining sticking to ground. This new trick comes too fast, the darkness hits Monica's shoulder and she holds back from crying out. She would never show weakness, not after the Baron. She was strong now.

"Rick my mate."

Her roar declared it as true, her power declared it as true, her chest was hot and warm and true. She glared at orange hunter. The orange hunter did not like Rick, Monica did not care, she did not like orange hunter either.

And yet.

The shadows went away.

Orange hunter glared. "Then bring him, whatever, keep him as your pet. You are young and naive, you are weak."

"Am strong."

"No, you are not." Orange hunter crosses arms and glares.

"Am strong."

"No."

"Yes."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Fine, then prove it!" Orange hunter roars challenge and steps back, opening arms wide, snarling. "Make me bleed."

Bleed? Monica frowned, looking at the orange hunter. She did not have a scratch. Monica looked down at herself. She had many many scratches and bruises. Her lips thinned, orange hunter was strong. But Rick taught her, he had said so. One could be stronger or strongest, and other could be strong too.

"If you can't make me bleed, I'm taking you to the village."

"Monica not understand. New words."

That angers her. "Your owner treats you like a pet." She snarls. "How many years has he had you, and you can't even talk properly?"

"Year." She understands the word, this one Rick taught her. Each year was ten and two months. Three months made time of rain. Three months made time of hot. Three months made time of sleep. And three months made time of cold.

"One cold snow, one year." The orange one touches her chest, thinking Monica did not understand. "I am twenty and five cold snows."

"Monica and Rick zero cold months." She proclaimed proudly. "Monica and Rick months of rain, and months of hot. No months of sleep or months of cold."

Surprise, wide eyes. "Someone else must have taught you."

"Rick mate, only mate. Rick teach Monica all the words, every day."

More surprise, more wide eyes, arms fall and orange hunter looks in forest direction. There is a frown of thought, Monica knew that frown, she had it when learning new complicated things.

"Then take him with you. Come with me." Orange hunter speaks with soft words now.

"You hurt Rick. Monica hurt you now."

There were words, there was talk, orange hunter was confused and didn't want to fight.

She copied the dark shadows, letting them grow and expand over the ground and cover area bigger than orange hunter had. She copied the spikes, and she made them large, and she pounced.

More surprise and shock. "How!?"

Monica did not answer, she did not hesitate. She struck. Too fast for the surprised orange hunter to completely stop her. Her claws drew blood over the orange hunter's arms, deep and red.

She screamed, she roared, and the spikes Monica made scratched at her.

Then she roared, and Monica was pushed back. Her ears were ringing, this was a roar louder than any she had heard before, louder than her own. A trick? Or just strength? It gave her pause and she jumped back.

But the orange hunter did not attack.

She looked at Monica with strange eyes, not angry, not sad, determined, but different. Dangerous. Monica understood, very dangerous.

"If he's so important to you, then..."

Shadows, this time they were not spikes. They were vines, and they formed not around the orange hunter but ahead of her as she began running. Monica chased right away, because she knew that was the direction Rick was in. The shadows latched onto her, however, slowing her down.

She wouldn't make it in time.

Monica broke free from the vines, she ran into the shadows, emerging where she knew Rick was.

There was someone else.

Two others.

One she knew, the tough-tough one from the not-mountain with green hair and the name Monica refused to remember.

The other was a new one, but Monica noticed her scent was on Rick recently.

The two stood still, along the orange hunter, and now Monica.

Tough-tough one was pointing one sword at New-one and another at the orange hunter. New-one was kneeling next to Rick, holding his neck. Orange hunter was growling.

Only one sound broke the tension.

Laughter.

Rick was laughing, laughing hard. Monica stared as Rick laughed louder, and louder, holding his gut and coughing and laughing some more.

Everyone stared.

Chapter 220 [Rick]

The only thing he could do was suffer.

He lay on the ground of the meadow in the outskirts of the city of Balet, Monica was fighting, and she was getting injured. Nothing serious, nothing intense, but she was in a hard fight against a stronger opponent. The notion was making her nervous and anxious.

And all Rick could do was sit and take in the distractions away from her.

Like the forest and the injuries, he drew them in, took her pain, took her anxiousness, took her nerves. Or at least as much as he could. His body felt like it was well past his limitations. It was an exhaustion that went past the point of tiredness. As if he'd run a marathon and been forced to run two others, everything ached in a way that left him just barely able to move.

And he kept focusing on Monica. The scrapes and bruises, pulling everything he could, to help her fight.

Because there was nothing else he could do.

"Richard Cross."

It was an instant. One moment there was nothing, the other there was a soft breeze and a presence. He glanced over to... his vision was fuzzier than he'd realized, but the green hair and armor cinched it. "Captain Deneva... right?" He coughed, drawing in breath and doing his best to sit up. "I'd stand up, but I think I'm in no condition."

"You're dying."

The words aren't so much a question as a statement. Rick could only groan. "Certainly feels like it. Blood-loss?"

"No, your body's taken too much elemental energy, it's breaking down." Her gaze seemed to furrow in focus. "And you're still drawing in the energy." Despite her words, she makes no move to approach, staring at him intently.

There's a lingering question in that silence, 'how?', and Rick had a hunch about the answer. "Monica needs help."

"I can sense that." She stated. "If her opponent gets serious, however, I would not be able to ensure your safety."

"So help de-escalate it."

He couldn't quite see her expression, and he doubted he would've been able to read it anyway. But he did sense a slight shift in the way she stood. "That is not how it works."

"Forgive my manners, but the fuck it isn't." He drew in a sharp breath. "Just because there's a bunch of people with big sticks doesn't mean they should be swinging them around."

"She attacked the city."

"And I don't want to die." Another groan, his eyelids fluttered, threatening to close up. Rick bit into his cheek, the pain didn't help, not much, just barely. Why wasn't the captain doing anything, though. He'd half expected her to have kidnapped him by now. "Something's going on."

"There is another maiden hiding here. A vampire."

She was holding a sword. Rick hadn't seen her unsheathe it. But his vision was blurring and the forest around him was turning more into an abstract painting in his eyes.

Something soft and soothing touched his neck.

"I killed the vampire. You're welcome." Streaks of blue hair, and Rick sucked breath again, trying to focus. The touch against his skin was warm, it drew away the aches and fatigue. "Though I am sucking at his energy. Wouldn't want him to die unduly."

"Step away from him."

"Attack me and I use him as a shield." Kiara's voice spoke coldly, her grip tightening ever so slightly. Rick choked a little, but she loosened her grip just enough. "Or I can just kill him. I'm not as fast as you, but I don't need to be."

Lying on the ground, staring between Kiara and the captain, Rick wanted to sigh.

"What do you want, Captain? What are your orders?"

"To retrieve you, Richard Cross, and ensure your safety." She did not waver, she did not move, she raised her blade and kept it pointed at Kiara.

"And yet here I am, the only one able to keep him alive until the nurse reaches here." Kiara spoke smugly. "For all your skill, you can't really safely extract elemental energy from a frail human, can you? How fortunate that I am here."

Deneva does not move, but her voice carries a sharp inflexion to it. "I can get him to the nearest medicen within minutes."

Rick didn't doubt that.

He didn't exactly feel clear of thought, but he was certainly sharper than a minute ago. His gaze moved from Kiara to Deneva, and then considered the fight that was going on right outside the meadow. A fight could break out, so easily it hurt to think, just one wrong move and someone's head would come flying off.

His, most certainly.

There was a roar, and Monica's feelings shifted abruptly. The tenuous grip he had on things slipped as she panicked. Rick could only lay there and stare as the orange-furred variant of Monica emerged into the meadow, followed shortly behind by Monica herself.

Deneva raised a second sword she'd apparently drawn out of nowhere.

The tension could suddenly be cut with a knife.

The maidens shared glances, measuring each other. Each of them took a turn to look at Rick, and he could only feel like the situation was quickly slipping. The question was lingering in the air, it was in their eyes, it was in their tense bodies. Who'd fight who?

It wasn't a question of whether there would be a fight or not.

The laughter came abruptly. It wasn't funny, not really, but Rick couldn't help himself. He laughed. He was going to die because a bunch of super-powered women were fighting over him. And in doing so, they'd get him killed. He laughed, until his chest hurt.

All eyes were on him.

He looked at Kiara. "Take me to Dia."

"I cannot let you leave."

"And you can't stop me either. Monica? Come."

That startled the orange maiden, she moved to approach but slowed to a stop when Deneva's blade remained pointed directly at her. "The Sabertooth is staying."

"Then you better team-up with the captain." He groaned, closing his eyes and trying to stand. Kiara aided him to his feet. "Failing that, you two can talk or fight it out. Preferably somewhere I'm not accidentally turned to paste."

The two stared at him as he began to limp his way forward. Monica was at his side opposite to Kiara within moments. Her claws reaching out to pick him up into a bridal carry. She glared at the Succubus as Kiara in turn kept her hand firmly on Rick's throat.

"I'm not going to let you go back to the city, you know." She declared.

"They're going to want to kill me."

"Too bad for you, I guess." He growled, having recovered just the slightest amount of energy. "I appreciate lending a hand, don't get me wrong. But you're fucked if you stick around me."

Kiara's brows creased, scoffing. She glanced over to the meadow. Deneva and the orange maiden had yet to leave, both were glancing in their direction, even when there was one of them pointing a sword directly at the other's throat.

"You think I need to run away... and that I would not be able to if I were carrying you." The Succubus proclaimed with a frown and a slow nod. Her golden eyes glanced down at him, ignoring how Monica's fangs were bared and the growl fresh in her chest. "I killed the vampire. I'm not sure what makes you think I'm weak."

"I'd rather just not have a fight to begin with." He sighed, uncaring. "You can always find me when I leave the city."

The Succubus becomes quiet, her eyes lingering on him and then turning ahead. She was clearly deep in thought. "I will bond you when we meet again." Her words came out as a statement of fact, she wasn't even looking at him as she said this. "That is the price for me saving your life."

"I-."

She was gone before he could even start his answer. No pop or blast of air or flash of light. Just gone, vanished as if she'd never been there. Instantly his body felt as if it were plummeting into the deadliest sugar-high-crash in existence. His mind spun and blurred, thoughts turning into a whirlwind of molasses.

Faintly, he heard Dia's shouts.

Behind him, the meadow exploded.

Chapter 221 [Throag]

Throag was a mighty Sabertooth. She had been born in the tribes and she'd grown to learn many things. The elders trained her, taught her how to fight and how to hunt, and like all Tigresses, she was then tossed against the death of the great ferals.

Throag had risen to the challenge.

The great ferals of the dead forests weren't dangerous in their strength but in their wits and cunning. They moved as teams, fought as if they were clans in their own right, they hounded and killed. To be able to survive on your own was a sign of great strength and wits.

Those who did not live were weak. Those who survived would make the clan stronger.

Throag had been the youngest Tigress to shift into a Sabertooth within living memory. Many had claimed she held the potential to one day become a Panthress, the culmination of the genus, the very peak. The ultimate predator.

With such strength, perhaps, she would have the clans join once more, and rally against the human kingdom. The hunger for revenge was fresh and strong, few had been alive during the first war, but they knew of the raids. Humans trespassing into their lands and killing kits and warriors, they knew of how the humans had pushed them towards the dead forest and the ferals therein.

Thus the acceptance to plans of revenge, to steal the secret of pokeballs from humans before they began making them in full. The clans knew that the moment humans could make enough pokeballs, they wouldn't just be killed, they'd be caught. Getting their hands on someone knowledgeable was not just to use the devices against the humans, but also to learn how to protect against them.

Things had been going more or less well, until they'd been told to 'test' Rick.

An 'order' she'd been ready to dismiss until she'd heard the roar. Another Sabertooth.

They'd rushed things, not that they could remain hidden for long. They'd moved intent on kidnapping the human and seeing whether the maiden was under human control willingly or not. Throag would have helped free her from the humans.

But things had become complicated.

She had found a Sabertooth worthy of joining the clans, someone who would be a great asset. With just one look she'd learned how to use the field of shadows, and best of all, the Sabertooth was one who'd clearly not been contaminated by human lies. Yet was willingly partnered to an individual human. One the human kingdom was very interested in, apparently.

Now there was a knight captain before her, the human and the fledgling Sabertooth having run away with their tails between their legs.

Throag's first instinct was to fight.

A knight captain was a mighty challenge, she wasn't sure she'd win. Not that it would have stopped her, normally. Were things different, she would consider it a worthy thing to do, it would surely be a serious blow to the human kingdom. And if she won, she'd be able to take the fledgling Sabertooth and her human to the tribes.

But things were not so.

She'd heard the Succubus' words. The Vampire was dead. Considering the damn blood-sucker was nowhere to be found, she believed it.

That changed things, it meant Throag had no communication with the ones helping their mission, and she still had a mission to carry out. She had to carry the human that had been cursed, take the new maiden to the clans and the Vampires. The information would be crucial. Throag was proud, but the clans' success came first. Too much was at risk.

Having the promising Sabertooth and her human slip her grasp was... regrettable, however. She allowed them to leave, focusing on the only remaining maiden instead. The knight captain had been looking in the direction the human was for several long moments, then, she nodded.

The green-haired maiden turned to face Throag. The two blades she wielded glowed with her power, a soft white glow. "I am Deneva, Captain of the royal knights under service of the Earl of Vitchatt. And you will die here."

Throag wrapped her claws in shadows. "You will fail."

Deneva scowled. "What is your name?"

She didn't bother to answer, she'd heard of weird magics that took someone's names and placed great curses upon the victims. This could be a trick or a trap, and she wasn't going to bother taking that risk.

Instead she spread the tendrils of darkness, to slow down the maiden.

"Very well."

Deneva leapt at her, slashing at the air and missing her target.

Or not.

Throag felt aura impacting against her like crashing waves. She was forced to pull back on her darkness and condense it on the front of her body tightly. The knight captain was throwing some kind of invisible technique, and only Throag's instincts were able to pick up on the faintest trace of the incoming attack.

Aura as a weapon, not sharp enough to cut, but concussive.

With a growl, Throag summoned a sliver of her power behind the knight, a spine of darkness thrust up against the maiden's exposed back...

... and crumbled as it touched the enchanted armor, barely registering to the maiden as she continued slashing at the air.

Throag cursed, no point in remaining close enough to get smacked around by the aura. She leapt away, using the trees and their shadows to weave her way between the world of light and the world of darkness. She put distance between herself and the armored maiden, even as she did not bother to stop her rain of attacks.

Any tree that stood in the way of her abilities were crushed and toppled. Suddenly the number of usable shadows were being reduced. Clearly the terrain being forced to change to ensure Throag would keep moving away from the human.

The attacks were missing her purposely.

The knight thought Throag would fight seriously and attempt to get to the human.

Good.

It bought her time, time to put more distance.

This time she didn't bother with shadows, the armor would stop her attacks. The knight was fast, but Throag was faster. She was not burdened by armor, and she was of the Sharp Fang clan, when she needed to run, none would catch her.

It was a shame she could not fight and enjoy it.

The captain threw attacks at her as she ran. Each sharper than the last, but it was clear the threat she posed was not from a distance but from up close. That, and Throag was aware the captain would not give serious chase.

She had her orders.

Maybe she would have attempted to follow more seriously and fight if she weren't a willing slave to the humans.

As it stood, Throag managed to escape, though with some cuts.

She kept her pace, not bothering to slow down, running across the meadows and hills and hurrying southwards. She would turn east once far enough from Bastet and where the forests began. If the Sky Blues were roaming overhead, then it would be the only way to avoid being spotted from afar.

She needed to take care to get back to the clans without detection and capture.

It would take her several days before she realized there was one crucial item missing from her bag.

Hundreds of kilometers away, within the safety of the city of Balet, Dia looked at the half-destroyed remains of the house they'd been living in. Her owner was a guest to the Earl once more, and Monica had opted to stick to Rick's side yet again.

So it had been left to her to pick up everything of value they had to bring back to the fortress.

The maiden hefted Rick's travel bag and found it to be heavier than she remembered. Perhaps it was only her tiredness of a very long day. The day had been long, and it would take a while for things to be cleared out.

She just hoped things would become peaceful again.

Chapter 222 [Barry]

Barry glanced at Kajou, the Amazoness sat at the edge of the court. Her eyes stared into the distance as she seemed to be lost in thought. Her black hair swung with the light breeze, her face a serene mask that hid the turmoil underneath.

She'd been more responsive and willing to lend a hand with things, but Barry could see the redness around her eyes. The young woman kept looking down at the blade that sat on her lap, the blade that belonged to Pan.

"What do you think, Orion?" He asked his shadow, the Hound that hid there didn't answer, only her head popping out to look up at him. "Yeah... nevermind." He crouched and patted the bed of messy hair, giving her a bit of bread she greedily gobbled up.

Orion glanced at him for another moment and sank back into the darkness.

Barry hadn't managed to get her to socialize much with others, but if she was happy like this then maybe that was alright.

"Let her be, Barry, you should be worrying over other things." Lala gripped his elbow and nudged him to follow. The dark-skinned maiden grinned at him and squeezed a little tighter.

He could only smile bashfully as Lala walked next to him standing as proud as she could, exposing her bare neck and raising her chin whenever someone looked their way. Barry could spot several of the guards he'd bonded going about also sans a collar, they were the ones that were likeliest to shoot dirty looks at Lala.

"Do you know why Lady Dagmar called for me?"

"Not a clue, but it seems everyone's a lot more active now that she's back on her feet, don't you think?"

Now that Lala had pointed it out, Barry did notice everyone seemed to be very active. The trees that made up the houses were being reinforced, and the handful of elves that lived in the Court were moving around and summoning thorny plants to weave around the walls of every structure available.

"Looks... fearsome."

"Probably preparations for an expedition?"

"Expedition?" Barry quirked a curious brow.

"Sometimes we have to send our people out to gather needed resources. Like some medicines. That leaves the Court vulnerable, so those that stay behind try to bunker down." Lala nodded along as she kept looking about. "Though I hadn't been told anything."

"Me neither."

"Oh, maybe we'll be part of the expedition?"

Lala pulled harder, directing them towards the massive tree conglomeration that made up the palace. It had been left untouched by the preparations, but Barry figured it would only be a matter of time, right now the work was focused on the periphery.

They wandered into the colossal trees and marched through corridors that had been carved out of their insides. It always surprised Barry when he tried to take into consideration just how large the trees were. It reminded him of when he'd first appeared in this world and the trees that were larger than skyscrapers.

Sometimes he had nightmares about it.

They reached the royal audience chamber. Within, there was a large wooden throne with a crown of branches. The seat was empty, the one waiting for them sat next to the throne, on a heavily cushioned chair. The woman looked far younger than she was, Barry knew, her coal black skin was smooth and

devoid of wrinkles, the only blemish upon them the chalk-white scars that had developed from the healing process.

But her eyes felt old, ancient, and exhausted.

They were the eyes of someone who had lived through several lifetimes and was barely holding on.

"Lala, Barry." Lady Dagmar bowed her head in greeting to them as they bowed in respect. "We will be needing your help in an expedition we will be conducting. Eastward, into the ancient groves."

The silence that followed gave Barry a chill. "Wait." He spoke. "Isn't that... where I showed up?"

"It is in that direction." The older maiden nodded absently. "From what my daughter told me, the place you appeared in was at the edge of the ancient grove."

"Lady Dagmar, you couldn't be..." Lala swallowed. "Is it true?"

"Yes, Lala, I believe Barry might be able to awaken the elves."

"Right, the elves." He nodded a little. "Embla talked about that, said that elves that go feral... gather there? Or something?"

There was a strange look in the older woman's face, her eyes focused on him as if she could look through his skull and directly into his mind. "When a maiden goes feral, they often lose their sanity. To certain degrees, some breeds manage to retain some of it. But not elves."

"Elves slumber." Lala nodded. "When an elf's bond breaks, they start feeling an urge to head to the ancient grove. The closer to ferality the stronger the urge. And once they become feral in full, they fall into a deep hibernation. None have been able to wake them."

"The humans of this world have lost the ability to make strong bonds." Dagmar declared. "Humans once did not need enchantments or spells to form a bond."

"Why has that changed? Something happened?"

"We do not know. I am sure many have sought the answer and failed."
Dagmar shook her head. "What matters is that you can make bonds like the humans of old. And hopefully that is strong enough to pierce the dreamless sleep of the elves."

Though Barry nodded along, his thoughts turned in another direction. "What happens if it's possible? How many elves are we talking about?"

"There must be thousands of elves sleeping within the grove. The oldest of whom were the very creators of this wooden palace we stand on." She stated, gesturing at the wooden walls around them. "If we were able to awaken them, then the forests of the kingdom would become our very allays. Nothing would be able to pose a threat to us ever again."

Lala nodded enthusiastically. "We'd live in peace."

"I'm not... sure." Barry frowned as he said this. "Wouldn't the kingdom see it as a threat?"

Dagmar waved her hand dismissively. "Of course they would. But what option is there to be had? They will kill us for what we are, or worse, enslave us. The better option is to have the strength to defend ourselves."

"I guess I could understand that." He nodded. "I'll help however I can."

The words made Lala preen, nodding and sticking a bit closer to him. "I'm not sure how I'd be able to help, but I would like to join in the expedition."

"We will certainly need your abilities, Lala, that is why I called for you." The old woman spoke, slowly standing up from her chair, her lithe figure was clad in a white sash. "You might have to work in the field. Prepare yourself accordingly."

"Work?"

"The grove is not without its protections. Some of them are of the enchanted sort, those I will have you help with."

Barry's back straightened up slightly. "And there's... other kinds of protection?"

Dagmar's expression soured. "The guardians of the grove. Let us hope they allow us passage."

"They sound dangerous."

"The kingdom attempted to take the elves from the grove, once upon a time." An amused smile came upon the woman's lips. "They failed."

Chapter 223 [Embla]

She'd been avoiding Barry. The bed had felt empty without him.

But her mother had a point: Embla was too earnest at times.

And though she knew she could keep from telling him anything, she also knew he would be able to detect something was amiss. For all his ignorance, Barry had shown an unnerving ability to know exactly what to say to calm her down and lower her defenses.

And right now, Embla was preparing herself for war.

They were preparing to attack the humans that had come from Barry's world and their escort. Knights, well prepared and equipped. There could even be a royal knight amongst their numbers. It was a bad situation, but one they could not afford to ignore.

And yet Embla felt they were making a grave mistake.

Her gaze coursed over the maidens that were to fight with her. Their gear was made out of salvaged leather from the boars and deer they hunted. Useful to avoid small scratches, but useless against a maiden's true powers. Their weapons were ones stolen over the years from the corpses found in the forest or roads. Some they had made themselves, most they had not.

Most worrying was that the maidens under her control were descendants of those who'd run from the kingdom's clutches. They'd grown in the wilds, they'd fought ferals and learned to sneak and avoid trouble. They were no knights, raised in training for combat against fully conscious and capable maidens.

They could do it, but there were limits.

The attack on the city to rescue Barry had been viable because it hinged entirely on her shoulders. But an attack against a coordinated knight force

would need far more than that. More so when their goal was to wipe them out and take the humans with them. Failing that, killing the humans.

That was the other part that bothered Embla.

In the privacy of the storeroom, her fingers brushed against her throat.

Were these people humans like the others in the kingdom, she would not hesitate at the thought. Her skin still burned at the memories she'd sought to forget.

Most of these humans, however, were like Barry. They came from a world where freedom was considered an unquestionable aspect of life. A world that had gone to war to free others from the chains of slavery and they had won.

Donning her armor, Embla moved through the words her mother had spoken. The horrors that might loom on the horizon if these humans were to make it to the heart of the kingdom where they would be untouchable. By no fault of their own, they would become tools of conquest and subjugation. Tools that would see free maidens everywhere chained and turned against one another.

But was such a fate as certain as Lady Dragma had made it out to be?

Would Embla be able to kill Barry were he about to fall into the hands of the enemy? Even if doing so meant safety to the Court and other free maidens out there?

The thought made her scowl, were these thoughts brought about thanks to the bond?

She heaved a heavy breath and put on her helmet. The new battle-ax lay next to the door. A wicked edge that had been enchanted to make healing harder. Still, it was crude, far too crude. A piece of elder-wood with metal that had been hastily melted into the shape of a fang that had lost its point. The magic within it was weak, barely a paltry trick that would only be useful if the fighting took long.

If the fighting took long, they'd be doomed.

The heft of the weapon forced her to adjust her balance, Embla looked at it with an edge of disdain. The thing was barely passable as an improvised weapon. It would serve its purpose, but she doubted it would survive long enough to see a second battle.

Perhaps they could gather the gear from the knights? Lala could likely find a way around the protections. But would she be able to do so before the kingdom could use those very enchantments to track them down?

Questions upon questions, risks and dangers, actions and consequences.

A part of her loathed this role, this duty, this responsibility. She longed for the days where her concerns only went as far as her ax's reach. Of a time when she needed not concern herself with the future and the world was entirely reduced to the now. Of when she danced at the edge of her blade.

Those days were long gone.

Now she was a rebel.

An enemy of the kingdom.

Lifting the ax, Embla stepped outside. She was met by her maidens. Loyal to the last, they would follow her orders, she knew this without a doubt. But were the orders she was about to give the right ones? Was this truly the path forward? To freedom?

She wanted to touch her throat once more, but her armor was in the way.

And Barry was not here. He'd left that morning with Lady Dagmar and their own protection. They'd left in search of an answer to their problems. To awaken the elves of old.

Though Embla marched north through the forest, her mind was elsewhere. It was upon the books she'd once read. Of the first war of maidens. Of the maidens of old. The elves, and their power to turn forests and jungles into nightmares to any that trespassed. Of humans raining fire upon them and yet

unable to stop the forest as it expanded, swallowing cities and leaving the world in a lush green landscape. She had met Elves and even a single High Elf, she'd known of their prowess with vegetation, even used it to help defend the Court. But none had seen an Elf Queen, and the books never specified.

How much of it was exaggeration? How much was the truth?

Half-way to the ambush point, she realized she'd been trying to distract herself from the task ahead, from the real questions she should be asking. Embla forced her considerations back to the humans, the people that were friends of Barry. Of everyone there, he had spoken ill of but one, the single human that shared blood with him.

Embla grimaced under her helmet. Mark, Barry's cousin, had been the one they'd captured first, and the one that had run away. Another secret she'd never tell him. She clung to that thought, that feeling. It went against the bond but it had been exactly the right choice. As Lady Dagmar had taught her, she used that reasoning like a tool, to sift through her thoughts and separate what was fact, and what was illusion.

The humans posed a potential threat to the Court, in the long term. And they represented a potential asset in the short-term. Barry being bonded to everyone within the upper echelons of the Court was inconvenient at best, dangerous at worst. The more maidens bonded to him, the more weight his opinion would carry.

Just how many could he bond? Embla knew of nobles that had managed hundreds of maidens, Barry no doubt could-.

No.

Embla shook her head, focus.

They needed more humans able to make strong bonds, and they needed to bond them under their own terms. They were outsiders, Barry had shown they do not understand that idealism is nothing without the power to enforce and

protect it. Their opinion should not hold sway in matters that pertain to the freedom of maidens.

So was this attack a good idea? Was this the proper course of action?

A slow nod was the only show of her inner thoughts. The attack followed their goals and objectives.

But was it pragmatic? Strategically sound? Did they have the power to do what had to be done? Or were the risks too great?

Embla's mind focused on the present. They were approaching a stretch of road the knights would be passing through tomorrow. It was the best place for an ambush, they had good cover, and the road had poor visibility. And flyers would have a tough time due to the amount of foliage. They had brought every fighting abled maiden in the Court that hadn't left with lady Dagmar and Barry to the grove.

The maidens were working to remove their scents and presence, to hide and obscure and make the ambush that much harder to notice. They outnumbered the knights three to one, and they had the element of surprise. Even Kajou was here, merely because she was another pair of hands with a blade and they would need every single one if they wished to succeed.

But was it enough?

Did they have the power to see through the consequences?

Chapter 224 [Alice]

Ever since the attack on the city, ever since Barry had shown up and vanished, Alice had felt something deep in her gut. The Lord had made claims that it was impossible there were some group of independent maiden rebels in the area, let alone one with a member as powerful as the one that had smashed through the gates.

His claims had continued on, telling that it was doubly impossible Barry would be with such a group. Only a coincidence that the two would show up within minutes of one another in the tiny city.

The knights had not been convinced. They made it clear, they suspected a potential attack, and would only take volunteers. The goal being to reach Balet and drop them off before heading back with reinforcements to get the rest. Over half of the group had been left behind in Seledo, and now, each of the carriages had two knights within.

The inside of the carriages were supposedly protected from detection.

A trap.

There were far less knights outside than what a simple glance might reveal.

Alice still wasn't sure why she'd volunteered. Because Helga had given every indicator she wanted to help the knights? Because May had volunteered first? Now she was stuck in a carriage with two armored knights that were paying a lot of attention to the outside of the carriage and very little to Alice or May.

It was suicidal, risky, dangerous, dumb. The carriage wouldn't protect them from a determined maiden. Much less from a powerful one. It would buy time at most in case something did happen.

But then again, Alice did have an idea of something she thought might be necessary to do by getting to Balet earlier than the rest. Earlier than Miss

Dodson at the very least.

"I know that you wouldn't consider speaking ill of the Earl." She broke the silence, glancing at the two knights. "Though I am curious as to his public service policies."

The knights shared a glance, a quiet moment of wordless conversation before one of them turned their focus to Alice. "I'm not sure what information you need, my Lady."

"Public service policies, the... are there any projects meant to help those that don't have the resources to help themselves?" Alice explained. "I'd heard of the relocation program from the king, about those who lost their villages to the ferals being brought to the larger cities."

"The Earl guarantees any human woman is given a fair chance to join the Academy." The knight nodded quickly. "A month of tutoring and the standard test. Those who pass can join without needing to pay for the entry fee."

Alice hid the grimace, nodding along. "And what about maidens?"

"The elders are given a stipend to own maidens if they go over the usual two. It's very rare for a maiden to not be able to find someone to bond to, though, since only a dumb girl wouldn't have several emergency options at hand." She shrugged. "Worst case scenario is a maiden that's bonded to someone that doesn't own her. Such circumstances tend to resolve themselves easily enough, however."

"No drama?"

The knight smiled slightly, the gesture invisible under her helm, but clear in her voice. "Only in the romance stories."

"There are some horror stories about destroyed villages and villagers unable to bond everyone that survived." The second knight spoke, keeping her head looking out the window through the visor in her helm. "Those are always... horror stories, exaggerated beyond measure."

"How?"

"Humans tend to only be able to bond ten or so maidens, unless they happen to share some noble blood. The Earl himself can bond seventy or so. And there are rumors that the king can bond up to two hundred." The knight's shoulders tensed. "When a village is overrun by ferals, if too many humans die, there might be too many maidens to be bonded."

"Oh, so they..."

"No, of course not." The knight shook her head. "In such situations what happens is that the maidens rotate, removing their collars and breaking the bond so that their sister may remain tame. Since it usually takes a week, they can sustain themselves this way... even if it is tense." She sighed deeply. "The real horror is when the collar is broken or damaged. Unless someone has a spare..."

"So maidens carry spares?"

"If they or their owner can afford it." The knight patted her belt. "I have my green and black collars right here. They're old, but useful in an emergency."

"So normally they sell them."

"Or pass them on to their daughters."

Alice's back straightened a little, thinking back to the worn blue collar Helga had insisted to use for herself. It had clearly held emotional weight for the Valkyrie, and there was little doubt how much care she put on making sure it remained in as good condition as something so old could be kept.

"What about inheritance?" The question came from May, the young woman speaking up for the first time in the day.

The knights shared a look. "From mother to daughter?"

May nodded.

"Legally speaking everything we have is owned by our human, but only monsters would keep a maiden from being able to give their daughters something useful or important to take with them."

"What if the human dies?"

"If there's no next of kin, it becomes property of the immediate overseer of the land. If you owned a house in Seledo, it would have gone to the Lord, even if it's under the Earl's protection since he would be the immediate overseer. Nobles tend to ensure that whoever buys the maidens also has to take ownership of the property. But whoever buys the property often will only be allowed to if they also take ownership of the maidens."

"And what if they can't bond any more maidens?" Alice quickly brought up.

"Then they hire someone to do so in their stead."

The answer felt easy enough, but Alice bit her lip in consideration. What if someone lost everything and only had their maidens and enough gold for a house, but the only ones came with maidens of their own? What happened if a city had too many maidens and too little humans?

She thought back to the time limit. They had to find a way to pay off the kingdom so they wouldn't be forced into either military academy or standard conscription. There were some ideas, but... how viable were they? It seemed plausible enough in a large enough city, but would they be able to bond as many maidens as she suspected they'd be able to? Would the Earl...-?

Something gave her thoughts pause. A flicker of movement outside.

Alice turned her head to look at the forest and frowned.

"GET DOWN!"

The knights had moved so fast, so impossibly fast. Metal gloved hands shoved Alice and May down to the floor. Suddenly they weren't just kneeling

there but it was as if their whole bodies had been glued to the cloth covered wood. Power thrummed all around them.

The realization that it was a barrier of some sort came a fraction of a second before the whole carriage lurched.

The world became a blur of movement.

They were under attack.

Chapter 225 [Kajou]

Kajou had been sure this was the right decision.

She could not let herself think otherwise.

After Pan's death, her sister's words kept assaulting her. Traitor. She'd bonded Barry almost by accident, she hadn't even considered how easy it would be, an agreement with his words that had come from within the depths of her heart and...

And now she stood in the forest, waiting for the knights of the kingdom to come. Because she couldn't stand the thought that she'd betrayed Pan. Their cause was the thing that mattered the most to them, even if they hadn't seen eye to eye on many things, but the one thing that mattered the most was helping the Coven.

It had been the purpose for them crossing the Craggy peaks. To solve the problem of the failing collars, to prevent the curse of ferality to fall upon their sisters. They'd hoped the Court had an answer and now...

And now Pan was dead. And Kajou was bonded to the potential solution to their problems: Barry. An otherworlder, a human with a capacity to form such strong bonds it was only comparable to the stories of old. Of the Kings that had raised their blades after the Great War, using armies of maidens bonded to them to conquer the wilderness and bring civilization back.

A story of equals, of the army splitting to find partners amongst the many humans that were saved and protected.

Now Kajou crouched in a bush, looking upon the carriages that were approaching, and her mind desperately clinging to that story. There were humans there, special ones. If she could capture one, then she could take them with her to the Coven. Barry might stay with the Court, and a part of her might desperately wish to remain here with him, but... but she had come here with a mission and she could not ignore it.

The days might not be counted for a solution to be found, but the future was bleak until one could be brought forth.

She had to do this. She had to prove Pan hadn't died in vain.

"It's a trap. They're trying to pretend they have their guards down."

The words came from the leader of the Court. The Dark Lady in armor, the strongest maiden in the forest. Her gaze looked upon the carriage, the maidens flying overhead, and she spoke the words that made Kajou's chest tighten.

"There is no alternative." She declared, hissing.

Pan's sword feels heavy in her grip. Kajou can feel her sister's memory within it.

She would rather be gone, away, on her way back to the Coven with her mission fulfilled. Not here, not with... her. Not with the woman that a part of her hated almost as much as she hated herself. But there was no other way to solve this, to accomplish their mission, to do right by her sister.

"We cannot win this fight."

Kajou's lips thinned. This was the woman that had so cruelly crushed them to prove a point to the human they were both bonded to?

"Then make it worth the loss."

She'd lost Pan already. She couldn't back down, she'd charge the carriages herself if she knew she'd be able to get something out of it. She needed just one human. Just one. Pan's sword was practically vibrating within her grip, her eyes locked on the visor of the maiden she should be trying to kill by all accounts.

Slowly, the large maiden glanced at the others. Embla's intentions were impenetrable through the helmet, her body was not even tense, no, she was relaxed. She was considering facing off over a dozen knights and she was calm.

"Stay hidden, wait for my signal. Prioritize taking the humans, kill them if you cannot. Do not fight the knights unless they are attacking one of ours. Do not bother to shoot at them until it's time."

That was as far as her orders went.

Kajou could barely believe what she was hearing. Was the intent to fight the knights on her own to buy the others an opportunity to fulfill their mission? Watching the Dark Lady grab her gigantic ax and raise it, everyone else had moved to hide.

Lady Embla did not roar or shout, she merely tensed and took aim.

And in a single surge of strength, threw the ax at the carriage in the front. The centaur that had been pulling it screaming as she got yanked along. The massive weapon flew with the power to knock it over to the side of the road and roll further off. Embla had followed after it, even as the knights surged into formation.

Embla was a Dark Lady, a maiden whose power specialized in neutralizing the abilities of other maidens. In doing so, the large armored woman had prevented the more dangerous kinds of retaliation from the knights. Her powers had surged over them and destroyed both spells and abilities that had been about to be used.

A split second that was all she'd needed to pick up her massive ax and strike the first of the knights. The maiden had raised her shield. The very same shield that dented by the sheer force of the impact, the maiden not just getting knocked back but being sent flying towards the centaur that had seemed ready to pull her own carriage out of the area.

And even as the knights tried to take formation, Embla would move in to avoid it. Her strikes were dangerous, but she was clearly keeping them from being able to box her in or block her out. It was forcing more of the knights away from their carriages and into the battle.

Even out of formation, the knights tried to fight her off. Swords and lances thrusting and spinning. But the maidens were never quite able to get close

enough to make a blow decisive enough to pierce through the armor.

The dance continued, Embla pushed her way forward to the other carriages. Her ax sought the centaurs, and the knights would only barely be able to stop her. Every time they tried to use their powers to reinforce their shields or attack, Embla's own powers would lash out and turn their attempt into emptiness. An ability that couldn't so much target a group of individuals but an area.

Kajou was left in stunned silence and begrudging respect for the Court's leader powers.

The second carriage was knocked over. Then the third. Kajou heard faint muffled screams within each one. Her heart thundered within her chest and Pan's blade tightened in her grip. She eyed the carriages, two of four had been knocked over, the centaurs pulling on them were prioritizing their protection since any attempt to get them out of the combat zone was being met with extreme violence.

And yet, even as the knights were being battered and tossed around like rag dolls, something felt off.

They weren't panicking. There were knights in the periphery, focused on everything that was not Embla. And Kajou could spot the ones overhead flying in circles, waiting. She grimaced, this was what it meant to face off against a trained and coordinated force.

This was what it meant to fight the kingdom. Even with Embla occupying the majority of their force, it would be a tough fight.

The signal came in the form of a roar. The maiden that had quietly attacked the knights with a deathly silence had unleashed a shout that made the knights hesitate for a split second. And in that split second, the Court's fighters and Kajou surged from both sides of the road. Arrows shot into the air and forced the flying maidens to dodge and stay out of the way, some of the maidens unleashed their powers unto the knights, others like Kajou ran forward with their blades.

The Amazoness felt the desire to fight, to cross blades, to meet the knights, test herself.

But she had a goal. She sprinted past the knights and to the nearest carriage, intent on opening the door and pulling off the first human she could reach.

The door was opened for her.

Two knights stepped out of every carriage. And suddenly their numerical advantage was not as great as they'd thought it had been.

Gritting her teeth, Kajou gripped Pan's sword, feeling the memory of her sister that remained within the blade empowered her. She could not back down any more than the knights.

She had to win.

Chapter 226 [Helga]

Helga circled over the battlefield. Her orders were clear. In case the carriages were ambushed, she and the other flying maidens that were not knights were to pretend to dive to draw away any potential arrows or long-range abilities from the attackers.

That was their job. Exactly and explicitly. The knights did not trust they could fight with the coordination and skill they held, and trying to help them could just as likely result in them getting in their way.

So that was exactly what she did. Once there was confirmation there were more maidens than the armored one, Helga would dive, lance in hand, and then swerve every time arrows and elemental energies surged upwards in an attempt to stop her and her fellow flier. They would take turns, ensuring a constant diversion of attention from the attackers.

And they watched, nervous.

The armored maiden was well beyond what any of them had expected. Someone this powerful had been just living near Seledo and no one had known about her? And the armor was eerie, not because it was unlike any Helga had seen before, but because it had clearly been custom made. It fit the maiden exactly, it flowed and moved without impeding movement and the large maiden needed only to adjust her position to ensure any blow she could not block would be intercepted by what was clearly enchanted equipment.

Helga didn't like it, not one bit.

Such a piece of armor was expensive beyond belief, and the maiden was experienced with it.

Who was she? Why was she here?

The other attackers were far closer to what she'd expect from wildlings. Old and worn weapons, armor that was only useful against animals, not maidens.

And crude movements that allowed the well equipped knights to fend them off even when outnumbered. If not for the larger one ensuring the knights could not take a formation, the entire fight would have been won already. By virtue of the attackers not being able to pierce through.

And when things seemed like they would start turning in favor of the knights, the large armored maiden managed to strike one down.

It had been a simple slip. A small trip while trying to pull away from the reach of the crude massive ax. The knight had stumbled, and her sisters had not been close enough to help. And just like that, the ax had come down upon her with enough force to cleave its way through the breastplate.

There hadn't even been a scream. But Helga gasped all the same.

The attacker had paid for her small victory, several of the knights had landed blows upon the uncovered parts of her body, drawing blood. It hadn't been enough to even slow her down, the fight returned anew, but things had shifted. The knights were wary, their discipline kept them from attacking in fury, but with one less of them to hold the attacker back, some of the knights that had yet to engage were forced to join the fight.

Helga struggled with the desire to dive down. She could only grit her teeth and pretend to dive once more. Just like the knights, she couldn't let herself be distracted from her role, from her task. They depended on her just as much as she depended on them to protect Lady Alice and the others.

But the question lingered.

Were they able to take down that beast of a maiden? Her ability to neutralize other's abilities was clearly ensuring none could land a definite blow on her. Something she did not have to concern herself with as her ax was definite enough.

Did the knights know how to deal with this? Could they? Helga didn't know. She'd heard of the knights and their great skills, and yet she doubted. It didn't look like they were managing to stop the large armored maiden, or even slow

her down. Only barely keep her from reaching out and avoiding the other attackers from being cut down.

The scream snapped Helga's attention towards the carriages. She saw three of the attacking maidens had reached Lady Alice's carriage and yanked the door open. Helga didn't think, her wings folded around her and she dove.

Behind her, someone screamed for her to stop.

Pain exploded from her wings, arrows piercing through, drawing blood.

Helga's body began to glow as she pulled out her power. She raised her spear and with a scream, threw it. The three maidens jumped away, and the spear missed. Half a second, enough for Helga to land and yank her weapon from the ground.

Her injured wing slammed the door shut. The carriage was enchanted and reinforced, Lady Alice was safer inside than outside.

Every instinct and every minute of combat training told her this was a mistake. She had wings, she should fly, she should engage from where she held the definite advantage. And every fiber in her body and heart burned with the determination that not one of them would touch a single hair in Lady Alice's flowing auburn hair.

Three enemies, dark skin, sharp ears, white hair. According to the Hunter's manual on feral combat, they were most likely dark elves? Their powers were... energy neutralization. Aberrant. Abilities to unmake other's abilities, stronger individuals were...

Oh.

So that was what the armored maiden was.

Helga did not care to reinforce her body with her energy, relying on such a thing would mean the moment they took her power away she'd suffer. She took just one look at the short swords they wielded and lunged with her spear

at the closest one. A simple direct thrust, her wings spreading wide and blocking the swords of the other two.

The pain sent a surge through her. Helga did not slow, thrusting again in rapid succession, her injured wings serving to give her steps a bit more forward distance. The dark skinned maiden tried to dodge and block, using her sword to parry the spear while the other two aimed for Helga's back.

But her wings were large and bulky. They hurt, the blades dug into the feathers and flesh, and Helga would not be able to fly during this fight but it did not matter. She pressed forward, tightening her form and pressuring the dark elf. The maiden could not keep up.

A blade sank into Helga's side. She grimaced and kicked at the attacker just enough to push harder. Push harder. Keep thrusting her spear, harder. Helga's arms moved faster, even as her wings kept taking the brunt of either of the other two. Helga pushed, and thrust, and thrust and thrust.

And the instant the dark elf stumbled just a little, when her footing had wavered just a bit, Helga spun the spear. The impact sent the sword flying from her enemy's grip, and the dark elf's eyes widened just a fraction of a second before the sweeping turned into another thrust and Helga had pierced into her gut.

The attacker fell.

Bloodied wings and a dripping flank, Helga spun to face the other two.

Shock and anger. They charged at Helga, aiming to stab at her torso.

Helga squeezed her wings around herself and tightened them to take the brunt of the blow, their blades bit into her flesh and her body buzzed with the pain. They had not expected for her to so freely allow herself to be stabbed like this. They clearly had not read the Hunter's manual on how to fight a Valkyrie. Valkyries felt pain differently than normal maidens, their bodies meant to heal from a thousand injuries.

The error cost one of them a leg. Though Helga could not finish her as her companion put herself in the way. It was still a losing prospect, they were not well trained for this kind of fighting, the maiden could only defend as Helga pressed her attack harder, ignoring injuries and pushing her back further and further.

"PAN, STOP!"

Helga would not have stopped if not because the shout had come from too close to the carriage. To Lady Alice's carriage.

Upon its roof stood a maiden with black hair and a glowing golden sword.

"Who's Pan?"

Chapter 227 [Kajou]

She was fighting a Valkyrie, and with every move she made, she had to remind herself that the maiden with blond hair and light gray wings was not Pan. No, Pan's memory was leading her blade as she weaved and swung at the winged maiden.

Kajou was an Amazoness, and her power let her pull at that sensation. Of Pan swinging her sword, fighting until she could not move at all. Kajou would never be able to fight like her, she knew, but her opponent was a Valkyrie just like Pan. And for all the good her experiences should have given her, every time she tried to strike, she'd hesitate.

Because the best way to fight a Valkyrie was to only ever aim for severe blows, something that would disable or kill. Anything less they could ignore.

Kajou dodged the spear thrust, pushing herself closer to the leather-armored maiden she saw the chance to cut away at her thigh. And yet her body would not move, she barely tapped the leg, too shallow, she could only jump back and fight against her own doubt.

Pan was dead. Pan was dead.

Why did she see Pan's face in a Valkyrie she clearly did not know and had never met? She had to focus on her goal, her objective, but her eyes could not move away from the spear-wielding maiden. Kajou felt as if under a spell, her mind a twister of scenes and thoughts.

Suddenly it was as if she was back in Coven, training in a dirt-covered field. Her sword rushed up to meet the spear, deflecting it. The maiden's movements were precise but predictable. Someone who lacked experience against maidens who knew how to fight.

No!

She had to do this, she had to end it, she had a mission, she had a goal. She had to get a human and take them to Coven. She had to put a stop to this maiden or else the fight would turn too much in the knight's favor.

Kajou grasped at the spear with her free hand and used it to yank the Valkyrie off balance at the right moment. Her blade swung, she would cut the maiden's throat out, simple, direct, immediate.

And then she was back in that practice ring. Pan laughed and danced around her, and Kajou's feet rooted on the spot, her eyes wide. Her attack slowed, slow enough for the Valkyrie that existed outside her memories to let go of the weapon and step back. She said something, but the Amazoness recovered, shifting her stance to hold the spear and the blade at the same time.

Her abilities kicked in, familiarity coming to Kajou while holding the spear. A weapon the previous owner had trained with plenty. That same owner now stood before her without weapons, wings dripping with blood, body covered in slowly healing lacerations. The fight should have been over, Kajou had the advantage, she-

She was not alone.

The ringing in Kajou's ears cleared up enough for her to hear the sign of retreat.

No, something didn't make sense, they'd been winning, they'd been...

Kajou's head snapped sideways. Some of the Court's fighters were running, but the others were trying to stop them, pointing. Pointing at a knight that held the horn meant to signal retreat. The maiden carrying it had fallen, her blood staining the ground.

A diversion, to sow confusion.

Embla? Embla was too busy with too many knights, she'd downed three of them, the only real loss the knights had suffered so far, and it did not look like their advantage was dwindling fast. That snapped Kajou out of the memory, her eyes tore away from the Valkyrie and to the toppled carriage.

She should have kept her eyes on the blond maiden.

Kajou felt rather than saw the Valkyrie tackle her away from the carriage. There was a scream, but all the Amazoness heard was a ringing in her ears and the sensation of fists raining down on her face as if she'd entered a brawl.

Pan's voice rang in her ears. The words were blurred but the meaning clear. She'd lost, she had to acknowledge Pan as the stronger of the two. The fighter, the one who got to use the sword during their journey to the Court.

Dropping the weapons, Kajou raised her arms, trying to protect her face. The punches were hard. She needed to break free, she had to-.

Kajou screamed. Her arm pierced by the golden blade, Pan glared at her, chiding. What had she done wrong? What had been her mistake? Her sister didn't answer, not at first, merely waiting until she stopped grimacing before speaking up, pointing at the torn supplies.

Kajou blinked through sweat, heaving air, fists raised and glaring at the blond Valkyrie that glared right back. There wasn't much of a chance to wonder what was going on, how she'd stood up, how they were now in a fist-fight. Her body was moving on its own, punching into the exposed gut and getting an elbow to the temple as retribution.

Pan sang a tune her adoptive mother loved. A tune about kings that fell and humans that bled. It was her favorite, and Kajou would often sing the lyrics. What were the words again?

Her ears were ringing, vision blurring. She didn't want this, she didn't want to fight Pan. She'd lost her sister. Lost her to a monster that pretended to be merciful but strict. Barry... The bond. Something was off. Kajou felt like her head and heart were tearing apart. The pain wasn't going away and she'd betrayed Pan. Staying with Barry, staying with the Court, it had been a betrayal.

Something was screaming inside her and Kajou realized it wasn't just inside herself. She was screaming and punching at Pan. The blond maiden was trying to defend herself but Kajou kept punching. Why couldn't Pan have swallowed her pride for once? Why couldn't she see past the fact that Barry was a human? Pan had made them fail their mission.

But...

But...

Kajou panted and heaved, exhausted, too tired, something was wrong. She shouldn't be this tired, not this soon, not this quickly. Or had she been throwing out every bit of energy she had?

Something moved quickly, approaching the carriage with a gigantic ax. Pan moved to intercept, arms wide, prepared to take the blow for the carriage instead. And Kajou moved in tandem, trying desperately to protect her sister. It was a split-second decision, the spear had returned to her hands and she'd thrust it at the attacker.

She barely felt the weapon as it tore through the metal, biting into her flesh and bone.

The world rang, a bell that thundered all around her. Was it her imagination? Kajou couldn't tell, she found herself on the ground, bleeding. Her eyes were unfocused, but she could tell Pan had survived.

There was screaming, all was chaos.

But Pan was alive.

The tearing sensation inside Kajou's heart snapped like a twig.

The... bond... broke?

It didn't make sense. Nothing did.

Pan knelt next to her. Soft glowing hands making the pain go away, leaving her numb and tired. Where were the others? Kajou's thoughts were slow to

form, even as her eyes focused on Pan.

The face that met hers was angry and unfamiliar.

It wasn't Pan. But she'd known that.

The realization brought Kajou's attention back to their surroundings. The Court had retreated.

She'd failed.

Chapter 228 [Barry]

It had felt like a whisper to Barry. A soft little voice in his ear that had been speaking to him suddenly went quiet. It had barely been felt at the time, but it had been preceded by pain.

They'd been walking across the forest, and Barry had suddenly felt a stabbing pain and... something else. He'd seen it, a road, dirt, a sky, someone in armor. Pain, so much pain. His eyes widened in realization of what he was experiencing, his steps stumbling against a root as he clenched at his throat.

"They're dying!"

The proclamation was loud and clear, and instantly the others stopped. Lady Dagmar turned to look at him with a scowl, while Lala had been the first to reach his side. Her hands glowed and the pain began to numb. But Barry's mind was swirling with confusion and agony, neither of which were his own.

"They're dying."

"Who?"

"The others." He stated, holding his head, trying to hold back the fear and panic that was pouring into him like a waterfall. "They're dying. There's a road, forest, and... some people in armor, screaming..."

It was so much information, all of it hyper-loaded with emotion. With sensation. As if someone was trying to shove everything they were feeling into his brain. They were dying, and they were desperately clenching at anything they could grasp. And the bond was right there for them to hold.

"They're dying."

His words bounced within the dark forest.

He was kneeling beside a tree that was taller and larger than any skyscraper he'd ever seen. He should be nervous, awed, afraid. Instead he was in pain, his thoughts suddenly somewhere else entirely.

"They must have been ambushed." Dagmar declared.

"We have to help." Barry pulled himself to his feet with Lala's help, face pale and his brow drenched in cold sweat. "They need help."

The elder maiden, the Warlock, looked at him and shook her head. "There is nothing to be done. We are too far, even if we hurried, we would not get there in time to matter. What of my daughter? What of Lady Embla?"

"She's..." Barry scowled. "She's alive, but I can't tell much else. She's angry."

"She will do what's necessary." Dagmar nodded. "Let us not wait. The grove is near."

"But-."

"You are needed here, Barry." The tone was scolding, her brows snapping together.

"My Lady." Lala quickly spoke up, keeping her hand on Barry. "We should not rush him. If some of our sisters are dying, then the bond..."

Dagmar barely gave a nod, signaling they were stopping for the time being. Not that Barry was paying much attention, he was leaning against the tree and clutching at his chest. The memories of the feral in the hole came back to him and this... this felt different, muted, it wasn't as raw and visceral. He could vaguely sense what was going on, but it wasn't as if he were within their skin.

Instead, it was as if he stood besides them as they died.

He could not see their eyes, or hear their voices. Their thoughts were no more than fear, pain, and darkness.

Barry heaved, knuckles turning white. He couldn't tell what their names were, or rather, he wasn't sure who was who. It was a jumble. Was it because of the distance? Because he hadn't gotten to connect with them as he had Embla? What did that say about the feral he'd been bonded to for more than a day in a hole?

He could only weather it out and wait, his heart beating a mile a minute and his gut full of rocks. They were dying, and all he could do was watch. He couldn't even figure out how or why. A road, knights, fighting, anger.

"I should be with them." He whispered under his breath, his cheeks were wet.

The only one to react was Lala, drying his face with her sleeve and holding his shoulder, giving what little support she could provide.

It took an hour, probably less, before the last of the maidens had passed away.

Only then did Barry's senses allow him to turn back to the forest. The mammoth trees that towered over them, the roots large enough to be carved and allow houses to be built within. Everything about the place felt eternal in a way that the mind refused to comprehend or conceptualize properly.

"I... I think it's finished, it's over."

"Then we move." Dagmar declared, turning forward and pressing on. For a maiden that looked one strong gust of air away from toppling over, she set a remarkably hard pace.

There were so many questions Barry felt bubbling in the back of his mind. What had happened to the maidens? Why had they died? Was there an attack? Dagmar and the escort looked remarkably calm about the whole thing. Lala, on the other hand, had grown pale and tense, her hand holding his tight as they continued their march through the umbra of the forest.

Even though it was midday, they'd summoned some orbs of light to ensure their paths were clear. The roots presented treacherous terrain, some hiding

holes one could fall through and vanish into whatever lay beneath.

Barry remembered hiding in one such hole. The ferals, Mark, and...

With a sigh, he focused on his shadow. Orion was there, but she was tense, far more than the others.

"We are here." Dagmar declared out of the blue. "Do not speak. The only reason we are alive is that they know of me."

Barry had been about to ask who 'they' were, when one of the guards pointed upwards.

All eyes rose to the massive branch a hundred meters off the ground. Upon it was a woman, no, a maiden. Her skin was a pale moonlight pale, her hair obsidian black. She wore a simple green toga, and upon her hand was a bow that was almost twice her height. On her hand was an arrow that looked closer to a spear.

"They are the guardians of the grove. Show them their due respect. Any weapons you may carry, leave them here. Do not raise your heads until I instruct you to."

Dagmar moved slowly, lowering her head and kneeling. She became still as her forehead touched the ground. The others were soon to follow, hesitant, they put down their swords, spears, shields, and bows. Leaving them on the ground.

Barry was without a weapon, but he was the last from the ground to lower his head.

Silence followed, and none moved.

There was a soft breeze, and the sound of ruffling.

"Move slowly, do not reach for your weapons, do not attempt to fight, do not say a word. Break this and you will die. Raise."

Obliging, Barry raised, and froze.

There were hundreds of them.

On the branches. On the roots, all around them, some barely a handful meters away. At least fifty maidens that looked very nearly exactly the same if not because some of them were shorter or taller, their clothes slightly different here and there. Each of them was armed with the same kind of massive bow and spear-like arrows.

A hundred black eyes staring at them in deathly silence.

One of the guards screamed in shock.

Barry hadn't even seen what happened next.

One moment the maiden had been standing there, shocked.

The next she was gone.

There'd been a heavy sound slightly behind him. Barry, slowly, turned. The maiden was there, pinned to the tree, a dozen arrows piercing her body. Dead so fast none had even registered it, perhaps not even the maiden. There hadn't even been so much as a whistling sound.

Just silent brutal death.

He looked back at the maidens wielding bows, each of them holding the weapon at the ready, the arrows aimed at them. Barry felt himself starting to tremble and sweat.

"They are feral." Dagmar hissed, raising her hands, exposing the white lines marking her body. "But even in insanity, they protect the grove. No threats, however minor, are tolerated. The only reason we are still alive is that they recognize me as a friend."

The closest of the ferals approached, bow still at the ready even as she stared at the white lines running through Dagmar's skin. The seconds ticked by in silence, Barry noticed the maiden's eyes were unfocused, as if she were not really looking at anything and merely staring into infinity.

As if none of them were really there.

After what felt like an eternity, she lowered her bow. So did the others.

One by one, the protectors walked away, vanishing between the trees like they were nothing but an illusion. One by one they were gone from sight, but Barry knew better. The quiet lumbering forest suddenly had eyes and threats around every corner in ways he couldn't have imagined even in his worst nightmare.

All of them, but one.

The maiden turned, walking slowly but purposely.

"We follow." Dagmar declared. "Do not pick your weapons, do not make sudden movements. If you trip, stay on the ground, do not stand until I tell you."

"Are... are they elves?"

"They are and they are not. They have forsaken their connection to the forest and the trees. It is a path taken only by those willing to sacrifice that part of themselves for the sake of their duty."

Dagmar spoke in a slow voice, keeping her steps measured.

"It is much like the Warlock. Though they are of the genus of dark elves, the only way to become one is to give up that which dark elves cherish the most."

Those words made Barry frown as he glanced from the old maiden to the guards and then Lala. "What is it that dark elves cherish the most?"

The only response he got was a smirk from the others.

Chapter 229 [Barry]

Barry walked quietly, slowly, following behind Lady Dagmar and followed in turn by the others. Their guide was a woman, an elf that wasn't an elf, it seemed. Her hair was long and black, combed into a ponytail that reached all the way down to her calves. Her clothes were a simple set of green leather that had all the signs of repurposed foliage. She held a bow on her right hand, one that was twice her own height.

Barry didn't see any quiver with arrows.

The maiden did not speak, she was feral apparently, but there was an air about her that didn't feel wild. She felt... in control.

"Why... do they all look the same?" Barry dared break the silence after they'd been following.

The guide eyed him, and he felt movement in the corner of his eyes. But that was all.

Dagmar was the one to scowl at him. "Did my daughter not teach you how ferals reproduce?"

"I mean, I remember she made an offhand comment that young maidens could become pregnant on their own. Particularly ferals." He declared defensively. "But that means they're copies of one another?"

"Close enough. Now hush and follow, we are straining their patience enough already."

Despite the vitriol in her words, the Warlock spoke with a calm gentle touch that Barry found equal parts reassuring and eerie. A part of him could probably prefer it over the more detached tone that always made him feel like she was speaking to a thorn on her side.

Though she was still doing that.

Barry was pretty sure it had to do with him being bonded to her daughter. Or maybe it was because he was human? The chiding tone never really felt that way. Always personal in some fashion, which he couldn't really blame her much for.

A streak of color drew Barry's attention away from the inner monologue.

They'd rounded past another of the behemoths of wood that made up the forest and entered somewhere... different. It was the woods, it was made of gigantic trees that stretched up into seemingly infinity, but it was different. The somber darkness was gone, now light streaked down all the way to the forest floor, beams that made the three large trees in the center seem that much more... surreal.

Where the forest of giants had grown tall, these trio of trees had grown wide. Their branches were thicker than buildings, spreading at least a hundred meters from the massively thick trunks if not more. They entwined with the taller trees at the very edge of the...

This is the grove. THE grove.

The realization feels like a physical force striking him.

Barry's eyes widen and he realizes he's not alone in this shock. Lush green thrives in every direction. The formerly chaotic and wild roots the size of small houses were spread evenly like spokes of a wheel. There are cottages on those very roots, small constructions that had seemingly been grown out of the very trees. And between the roots, where the ground was exposed... grass, flowers, and shrubbery. So much of it, a rainbow of colors that dots every available inch.

"Only walk on the roots."

The warning brings a chill to the group, and everyone obliges, following, marching in a single line. As they approached, Barry began to notice something was... off. The shrubbery and flowers and grass were spread about in a way that appeared to have a design to it. Oblong shapes of vegetation that were spread uniformly with one another, forming irregular

rows and rows. He could only frown at it as he tried to discern what he was looking at exactly.

They continued walking, marching up the root, each wide enough to work as a highway, and towards the massive trunk of the tree. And Barry's eyes could not move away from the area that lay between the roots. Something about it felt familiar.

It didn't click until they'd reached the trunk.

"It's a cemetery."

His eyes widened. Rows upon rows.

"They are alive, boy. That is why you are here." Dagmar hissed at him as he stared.

How many were there? At least several hundreds, maybe more, definitely more. He was just looking at a fraction of the entire grove. What had Dagmar said? Hundreds of years of elves coming here whenever they started going feral.

"How are they alive?" Lala couldn't help but ask, equally stunned as Barry had been.

"The plants keep them alive, it is part of their power. But these are the weaker elves."

Dagmar gestured for them to continue, and so they did, marching. And Barry realized that each of the areas between the spokes of the wheels had different vegetation. While some had been shrubs, others had small trees, and a few even appeared covered in thick vines.

Each of them an elf, sleeping, slumbering, right under the vegetation, being kept alive, waiting... waiting...

Barry felt a slight shudder. The thought of it was depressing and morbid and exciting in equal measure. So many people just laying there, for hundreds of years. It was as if it had been plucked straight out of a fairy-tale.

If that was the case, what was he, then? He was no prince charming, and if he squinted at Dagmar, he was fairly sure she'd be a passable evil crone. That almost made him laugh, he made sure to keep quiet.

They circled around the trunk of the tree, walking over the roots, and walking down towards the tree closest to the center of the grove. It was much like the other three, but Barry couldn't help feeling a sense of anticipation as they approached. The dark-haired protectors had emerged, on the branches, on the roots, atop the small huts built onto the trees.

Each of them looked at their group with those unfocused eyes that seemed to stare into infinity. They were staring through them as they approached, smooth treebark under their feet a clear sign these roots had been used innumerable times over the centuries. A place so old Barry felt like it was no different to one of those ancient cathedrals in Europe.

Except this was not dead stone. It was alive.

The air felt thick enough to leave a light taste in his mouth. Something that smelled of earth and tasted of wildberries. Barry's body was tingling, his goosebumps ran over his body the closer they got to the main tree.

He saw their destination. It was a groove within the tree's massive bark. Sunken like an alcove, and adorned in moss and flowers that were growing out of the tree itself. From a distance it seemed like a door, but the closer they got the clearer it became it was no such thing.

There was someone within the groove.

Her body rested into the tree, slightly inclined, the only thing about her that was visible was her face, the rest covered in moss and tree bark. It was a stunningly beautiful face that was just as severe. Her hair was a pool of gold, a wreath of red roses adorning her like a crown, her skin fair but healthy.

She looked like she were sleeping.

That she could, at any moment, open her eyes and stand.

"Who is she?"

"The first Elven Queen. A motherless maiden. Her name was lost to time."

Gasps were heard all around, Barry could only frown. The question was apparent in his expression.

"It means she was amongst the first maidens created. Perhaps the only one left alive in this world overrun by humans and greed." Dagmar nodded slowly at him. "It is our hope that you will wake her."

"How?"

"Touch her and you will know." The old woman's eyes twinkled. "You must submit to her. Her power is great enough even in her sleep it should be possible."

He gulped.

Suddenly all eyes were on him, and not just those of Dagmar and the travel companions. The dark haired archers were looking at him as well, there was something to that look that felt dangerous and... hopeful. However feeble, however distant those eyes were, there was a twinkle of light upon them as Barry stepped forward.

He looked upon the sleeping maiden, and reached out.

His skin was buzzing, jolts running through him as if he were being shocked by the very static in the air. Barry's breath caught in his throat the moment he made contact with the bark covering the nameless maiden's resting place.

The world spun around him.

He was suddenly not in a grove.

Barry stood upon a hill.

He looked down upon a city. It was not of stone and wood but of cement and steel and glass. A modern city, he saw cars and people, he saw pavement and

street lamps. Barry could only gasp and stare as the city stood, smoke and smog mixing in with claxons and the normal bustle of civilization.

And the next instant something happened.

A singular massive tree sprouted from the center of the city, towering over everything else, its roots spreading like snakes. More trees grew, and suddenly there were explosions. Fire and screams as the roots kept growing, almost as fast as the cars could attempt to escape.

The concrete broke, the roots squeezed the buildings to powder, vines grew and bent steel. The people screamed, moss growing over their bodies like slick oil-stains, they'd fall, and the grass would swallow them whole.

"Well?" The word startled him, and he turned.

The woman, the Elf Queen, stood next to him. Eyes of green peered through him, she was beautiful and terrible all the same. In her eyes he could see deep enduring anger. Impatience, expectation, and unwavering determination.

And held in her hands, was a collar.

Barry felt the grass under his feet reaching up, tensing around his legs, tugging him down to his knees.

He didn't wait, he fled.

The illusion broke around him.

The world spun back into existence.

He was on his back, drenched and trembling, his mouth had opened in a silent scream that had never managed to escape his lips.

"Barry." It was Lala, her voice was a hiss, tense. "Do. Not. Move."

It took a moment to realize what was going on. The protectors had their bows at the ready. Every single bow tense, arrows ready. Barry lay on the bark,

hands open and eyes wide even as the closest of the elves had been aiming at him specifically.

"We will leave now."

Dagmar's declaration startled them.

"Wait, I-." Barry couldn't just walk out, not like this, not when there were other elves he could try and wake up.

More reasonable Elves.

"This is not by choice. You are no longer a guest." The Warlock declared, her face a mask of calmness but her eyes filled with fury. "We have failed."

Chapter 230 [Earl Vitchatt]

The Earl approached the gardens at a slow pace. Normally such a trip was for leisure thought or maybe a small escapade with his partner of choice. But today the air was tense, the guards stood at the ready. The garden was being guarded, for there was someone within the Earl wished to speak with, without any interruptions.

Captain Deneva remained out of the gardens as he'd asked her. Her complaints had already been spoken in the privacy of his room. But there was nothing to be feared in regards to this particularly troublesome guest.

Or so he would have thought under normal circumstances.

He found Rick sitting on one of the benches that observed the small fountain. The man was weaker than the average person, that the Earl knew very well. A pureblooded human, devoid of both intense training as well as the gifts that maiden ancestry could have provided. Even the Earl himself had some minor boons from some unspoken predecessor several generations back.

And yet, he could only look at Rick with apprehension.

The man had changed in some imperceptible way.

He remembered when Rick had come to his city the first time. A man that was of quick wit and cautious steps. A man that understood, at least in some way, the dangers of the noble game. There had been fire in those eyes.

Now it seemed as if he were more feral than man.

He clothed like a human, he moved like a human, he talked like a human. But there was something wild within him now. Something sharp that lay right behind that fire. It reminded the Earl of the stories he'd been told as a child, of the monsters that hid within the darkness of the forests.

Of things worse still even than the ferals.

"Sorry for making you put up all this hassle, Lord." Rick stood and bowed in respect to him. Yet it did not feel like an expected behavior but a deliberate decision.

As if bowing were something he had to ponder upon.

"I was told your condition was stable, and it felt important." The Earl returned the gesture, following the standard protocol and not allowing himself to be perturbed by what he thought he was seeing.

Rick's gaze turned towards the fountain, his whole body tensed, as if he were ready to pounce at the clear liquid.

"I was the one who killed the Baron of Astunes."

The Earl realized Rick's eyes were boring into him the instant he'd spoken the words. There was little room for doubt, but the struggle was in trying to keep a straight face, to avoid showing any signs of shock or any other emotion.

"So it wasn't you." Rick stated.

That caught the noble off guard, he frowned at Rick as the man turned to look at the fountain once more.

"You suspected I sent those maidens after you?"

"Would you blame me for suspecting the possibility?"

No, he couldn't. He knew too many who would have done exactly that to others. "What makes you sure it wasn't me, then?"

"The surprise is genuine."

"I could be shocked you dared to reveal it so plainly."

"True." Rick shrugged, relaxing. "It's a gut feeling."

That was it, just... nothing, so casual, so... The Earl scowled at this, he did not enjoy being toyed with, much less tested. "To kill a noble is a serious crime. Even if done in self-defense. I've sentenced people to hang for less."

Rick stared to look at him once more. There was something in his eyes, something... blue. A flicker of it that gave the Earl pause.

"Will you?"

The question was simple, and it was something worth considering given the circumstances. He'd have expected Rick to make claims he would not, but it felt more like the man was prepared to deal with the consequences of either option.

"Was it legitimate?"

Rick turned to look at the fountain. "I was bonded to Monica well before even knowing the Baron existed. And the prick was trying to break that bond so he could make her into his toy. I wasn't going to let that happen."

Simple and direct.

"During the fight, the Baron tried to destroy my brain with the cursed coin. Dia didn't let it come to completion, but it still took something. And..." His lips thinned. "... nevermind."

The Earl didn't quite gasp, but his brows did shoot up in horror. To put the curse of the five upon a human was a punishment that only the truly heinous would undergo. It was a tool only used in the most extreme cases regarding maidens.

There was little else he could say about the subject, especially when Rick was clearly leading the conversation. To where?

"You intend to leave, I take it?"

Rick nodded. "This doesn't feel like home." He gestured at the garden. "No disrespect, but though the luxuries are nice, I don't think they're worth the risk. Whoever sent the attack clearly had an agenda of some kind. It wasn't

just random happenstance." His brows furrowed. "I don't want to be a part of it."

"And you're sure it was revenge for the Baron?"

"I can't think of any other legitimate reason someone would go through that trouble." He gazed at the Earl with a weary look. "Unless you happen to know of one."

This time it was the Earl's turn to frown. "The only other reason I could think of would be Monica. But even that does not appear to fit. Deneva confirmed the attacker hadn't tried to kill her. Your maiden certainly would not have been able to avoid such a fate at the time."

"She only sought to capture." Rick looked weary as his shoulders slumped. "I plan to head south. The kingdom is less developed there, far from... everything, especially politics."

There was something else about his destination that Rick was not saying, but the Earl did not pry either. Instead he moved to sit on the bench next to him, crossing his arms and turning to look at the fountain.

"And the Succubus?"

"That's something I'll have to figure out if I ever meet her again."

The Earl scowled. "She needs to die, Rick. Charmers are threats that have brought ruin to kingdoms. Some on purpose, others on accident, but always the case. They prey on the hearts of humans and maidens."

"I'll keep that in mind." Rick shrugged nonchalantly. "It's not like I can do anything about it if I never see her again."

"I have a feeling you will meet her."

"Probably." This time he laughed. "In the meantime, does the kingdom recognize bounties? I'd like to report a slayed Vampire. I'm going to need some funds for the trip."

Chapter 231 [Alice]

The instant they had reached Balet, only one of the knights went towards the castle. Just about everyone else was dropped in the Medicen building. Or rather, they went to the Medicen building and it was cleared out of all non-emergency cases and only then were they allowed to go inside.

It had been a miserable week after the attack.

But right now was not the time to be miserable. Now was the time to be angry, furious, hysterical if need be. It was the time to tear things asunder and destroy any who stood in her way.

Alice found herself wanting to tear off the head of two particular people. They just so happened to not be within the Medicen. Thus she marched up to the "palace" that looked more like a fortress. So far there had been four failed attempts to stop her, but having learnt how women like Miss Dodson got her way, she wasn't about to relent.

"Get moving!" She proclaimed at the poor guard that she knew too well did not deserve what she was throwing her way.

"Alice?"

A single word, surprised, shocked, and it made the former psychology teacher whirl around to look upon the first of her targets. Her brain had been already half-way through her prepared rant that she nearly stumbled as she saw Rick standing in front of her. It took her a fraction of a second to recognize him for who he was.

He'd cut his hair short.

That was the first thought that came to mind.

The second was he was dressed like some sort of medieval soldier. A poor one. A strap of leather covered his chest, with several others protecting his

arms and shins. There was a short-sword at his hip, and he looked like he was about to go stand guard somewhere.

"Rick." She stated. It was a declaration of the name just to make sure she believed she was looking at the man she'd once known as a fellow teacher. "How... I mean." A very quick shake of her head. "They have May."

Suddenly, there was something in his eyes that gave her the briefest moment of pause.

"Let's get something to drink. And you can explain from the beginning."

"Talk to the Earl."

And just like that, the twenty minutes worth of conversation and explanations of the ambush and the trap, of May getting kidnapped, of the black-haired maiden that had both attacked them and protected them... it all came to an abrupt end.

"What?"

"Talk to the Earl." Rick replied, setting down the glass he'd been drinking from. "Or rather, I expect he knows about it already and is going to see what can be done."

And just like that, the wind got knocked right out of Alice's sails. She'd expected some sort of reaction out of him, not... this.

"And... you?"

"I'm leaving. South." Rick said. "I need to... check on some things. And I'm likely going to have to deal with my own kind of problems. I think someone's trying to stir trouble and I'd rather nip it in the bud."

Alice leaned forward. "Rick, what's going on?"

"I was attacked, one of them was a Vampire, the other a Sabertooth... like Monica." He frowned. "Something's wrong, and Monica's been... off ever since. I don't think we can stick around for much longer before she can't stand it anymore."

"Stand what?"

"The maidens, the sound, the smells, the rules, the tight constraining self-restraint that she has to keep going day in and day out, the horrible food, the timetables, the..." Rick paused, then grimaced. "Something's off. About her, about me. I need answers, and my only leads are the Tigress clans."

Alice leaned back as she heard this, grasping her hands and looking down at them as she tried to put together the pieces. She found there was one missing. "You suspect something else."

"I do." Rick nodded somberly. "I think that what the Baron did to me, those... that damage to my mind. It left holes. And I think my bond to Monica has helped, somehow, I don't know. It's like I know new things without knowing them." Grimacing, he shook his head. "All I'm sure of is that I need to know more about Monica as a maiden, and not just as... Monica. Maybe she needs to know more about herself too. Either way, the answers aren't here."

How could Alice answer that? She couldn't. She wanted to ask him to stay, to help. She wanted to tell him about her project, that the other students were on their way. Maybe... no. She shook her head. She'd never seen Rick this determined.

"Tom and Kat and Mister Gabriel doing alright?"

Rick grimaced. "Yeah, they want to tag along. Or more like Kat wants to tag along and the other two are getting dragged into it because of her."

"You planning on slipping away in the middle of the night or something?"

"I think they could do more good for themselves and others staying." Rick scratched his chin. "But that's not really my choice to make. I'm just hoping more reasonable voices prevail."

"You're one to talk."

They shared a laugh at that. Rick ordered another drink, taking the chance to look around the bar that was almost entirely humans. A great of them men. The former chemistry teacher leaned back against his chair, something in his eye appearing to get drawn to the bartender. A maiden with light blue skin.

"I want to find a home. For Monica and Dia. I want to settle down." The words came out of nowhere, he took a long sip from his drink. "Maybe I should just... ignore everything, find a corner to lay low and vanish. It feels like trouble is chasing us and I don't like it."

Settle down.

Now there's a thought Alice had not allowed herself to consider for months. Her former boyfriend, her former life, her former career, her former... everything. She looked unto the idea of the world around her and...

"I don't think this world could be my home even if I tried." She proclaimed with a loud annoyed snort. "Too many things to fix."

Rick looked at her sideways, raising a brow. "You planning to start making signs and starting rallies and protests?"

"Something like that."

There was a moment of pause as he considered this.

"Don't let your ideals blind you from reality." He said solemnly. "That black haired girl you mentioned? If I were in your shoes, I'd look to bond with her."

Alice almost recoiled at that. "What? Why?"

"Because she'd know where May is. That, and she attacked her own leader. You said as much yourself, something doesn't seem right."

"But why me?"

"Why not? If you have plans to change the world, then having someone with an outsider's perspective to things would be useful."

That made her scowl. "You're talking as if she's a tool."

"For now, she might as well be." He shrugged in response. "It's up to whoever owns her to decide if she ever gets to be anything else." A small laugh escaped him. "I'm also betting you'd thought about doing that already."

Alice half considered emptying her cup on his face. But resigned herself to growl instead. "Yeah, I had. Helga's... weird about her. Said the girl seemed more confused and lost than actually trying to fight. Maybe she was under the effects of something."

"That and you might make her talk without needing to torture her."

Her lips thinned. "That too."

The sigh was a tired one.

"Got lots to do, it seems." Rick nodded. "I'll be hitting the road sometime next week. Have to finish preparations."

"You're just being a coward and running away before Miss Dodson shows up."

They shared another laugh. "You got me." He declared between chuckles. Then nodded along, and stood up, clearly ready to leave. "Take care of yourself, Alice. Things are a lot more dangerous than we thought they were."

"I was ambushed, Rick. I think I know what's up."

Rough hands grasped her own. "Alice." Rick looked into her eyes, and for a moment, Alice saw a flicker of blue within them. "I got a hitman sent to my house, for reasons I don't really yet understand. And it doesn't seem like I'm getting away from this mess any time soon."

A chill ran down her spine, and she could only assent slowly.

Things were going to get complicated.

Chapter 232 [Rick]

Rick tended to the flames of the small campfire, poking the coals with a stick. Lying on the ground in front of him was a glass orb, black as night, and tingling so intensely to the touch that there were no doubts, the thing was magical. Just looking at it gave Rick shudders. Dia had found the thing in the backpack. It was something Rick had taken from his attackers by accident. He'd forgotten entirely about it until they found it in his back while trekking down the road.

"That is a very dangerous thing you've found. A Curse of Eve is nothing to scoff at."

The voice came as a purr, soft and silky, smooth beyond measure. There was an amused lilt about it. The figure that spoke emerged out of the darkness, naked save a cloak, the piece of cloth looking like a sin upon the beauty of the curves held beneath. The woman herself was sin personified as well.

Her long blue hair flowed freely as she made a show to look around. "You knew I was coming."

"Monica caught your scent days ago." Rick shook his head.

"And yet you did not hide." She stepped closer, foregoing the cloak, revealing the pink skin underneath, plump and sculpted straight out of a master-sculptor's very dreams. "I see you sent your girls off as well. Should I call you brave or wise?"

He tore his eyes away from her body, looking up into the sky. The mantle of stars hung overhead. "Back in my world, the stars were never this bright." His words and deflection of attention gave her pause, the Succubus stopped next to the fire, looking at him as he sighed. "The cities are so large, with so much artificial light, and the pollution so thick, it even reaches out into the furthest corners of the wilderness."

With barely a kick of her foot, she doused the flames with a small spray of dirt. The darkness of the forest swept across the camp, leaving in their wake the pale shadows of the maiden's curves, a soft red glow illuminating her from underneath. Rick glanced at her, feeling a wave of heat from her that was both natural and not.

"I don't care what world you come from." She proclaimed, silky red lips cooing as she took another step closer. "You will be mine. Whether you make this bearable or not is your choice."

Rick shrugged. "Everyone seems to want a piece of me." Nonchalantly, he picked up the glass orb, the Curse of Eve. "I am curious as to why you're on that list."

"Power."

"I have little of that."

Gold eyes looked at him, glowing as they pierced the darkness more brightly than even the stars above. "I seek to shift into my genus. A Succubus only has so much power, I am to become a Dark Queen." There was a severity to her words, her tone, a finality and determination. Like it wasn't just a foregone conclusion but also the culmination of some great effort.

And Rick shrugged.

"Sure."

Kiara nearly stumbled. Her eyes widened ever so slightly at him, a gesture of surprise she was quick to suppress back into smooth determination. "I take it you don't even know what that means."

"There's little about Succubi or charmers in general, even in the Duke's library. But it is easy to piece together what's there." He glanced at her. "The conditions for shifting aren't well known, and vary from one maiden breed to another. Maidens that shift always do so into more powerful forms, until they reach the cusp of their genus... if they ever actually get that far. Charmers have abilities that let them manipulate those around them." His gaze locked

onto hers. "You seem certain that I am, somehow, the key to you becoming stronger."

"Not just stronger, I-."

"More super powers, so long as it doesn't involve me getting squished, then it doesn't really matter to me." He waved her off, almost enjoying the look of shock followed by irritation. "I want to make a deal."

She scoffed, crossing her arms under her hefty bust. "You aren't in a negotiating position."

"Then consider it a request, I don't care. You want my collaboration, I want yours. You don't want me being complicated, I'd rather not have to go through the effort. It's a simple enough concept." He rolled his eyes, sighing as he picked up the glass orb. "The ones that attacked me were carrying this with them."

"It is occupied, probably feral by now." Kiara scowled. "What about it?"

Now it was Rick's turn to be surprised. His eyes fell back on to the sphere, and was instantly reminded of the pokeballs. Someone was inside this thing? That certainly changed matters. But his attempt to keep a calm exterior was perturbed just enough.

And the Succubus had picked up on it.

"Ah, I see." She cooed, stepping closer, hand darting out and snatching the glass orb from his grip. "You want me to break her in, make her into a tool for your revenge. Here I thought you'd ask for something actually complicated."

Rick looked at her and frowned. "What? No. What I want is knowledge."

Just like that, the half-step she'd been taking in his direction hesitated once more, she was glaring now, but there was an edge of caution.

"You're old." He broke the moment of silence.

"What."

"You're old. Succubi have extremely prolonged lives, and every source I could look on the matter claims the youngest maiden to become one ever recorded was eighty. That means you're at least double my age if not far more than that." He leaned back, hands laying on the dirt for balance so he could more comfortably look up at her. "And it's years spent outside this kingdom. I want to know more."

Kiara's tone became more guarded, contemplative. "More about... what?"

"Maidens. Humans. The bond."

After the fight, it had been clear as day to Rick. The bond was not what the locals thought it was. It'd been the second time he'd been drawing in pain from her, he'd even felt as if she'd lent him knowledge in some way. And all he could find about the matter was that maidens were restrained and bound, made subservient by the bond.

The maiden looked at him, slowly bouncing the dark sphere from one hand to the other, considering his words. She decided with little fanfare. Her movement was smooth, practiced to perfection, her plump thighs caressing his legs as she came to occupy his lap. With a flick of her wrist, the glass orb was tossed aside, forgotten, her golden eyes consuming the entirety of Rick's vision.

"You do not seem to comprehend what I can offer." Her husky whisper brushed against his ear, it sent delicious spicy shivers up and down, all over his body. She reached down, pulling his hand up to her breast.

The skin was pliant, inviting his hand to sink into it, her nipple the only hardness therein, pressing against his palm like a little nub of texture within the pillowy embrace. The effects were easy enough to predict, his pants had been strained for a while already, and now they felt like he'd rather tear them off.

"All the pleasure you could ever want or need. For yourself, and your girls. Addicting pleasure, none would tell you no." Kiara reached to his chest, a

single finger tracing a line down his chest, burning the shirt, but leaving his skin unblemished, unhurt.

She lingered over his lips, close enough for her warm breath to brush against his cheeks. There was something spicy in the air, the temptation burned hotter, his mouth growing dry as his body urged him to seek moisture from her mouth.

"No."

The word took more out of him than he thought it would. Like a parched man having crossed the desert and refusing the fountain of cool refreshing water.

"If you need sex to live, I'll provide." He swallowed, prying his hand off of her breast, glaring into her gaze. "But that's as far as it goes."

"Really now." Her hand pressed against his chest, slamming him against the dirt, forcing him to lay on his back as her hands pressured his shoulders tightly. "And what's stopping me from taking what I want?"

"Nothing, really. I'm just human, after all." He laughed, Monica had been rougher than this even when she'd been gentle.

This time her glare was serious, lips drawing thin. It took her a second to look away, glancing around the camp-site, clearly searching for something. Rather than wait for her to comment, he laughed harder, feeling as if the spell had broken. Laying on the ground, pinned, darkness all around, his every nerve screamed he should be running, that there were so many things in the shadows that could get to him.

"That's right, I'm alone, defenseless. Feel free to prove how capable you are by overpowering me with those superpowers of yours." And what a challenge it'd been to get Dia and Monica to leave him alone. Even now he could feel their concern, nearby but not enough to be easily detectable, definitely not close enough to be able to stop anything.

"I could kill you."

"Big whoop. Every maiden on this planet can do that, hell, a well motivated child could do it." Snarling, he didn't even struggle, glaring right back up at her. "I sleep with one who can kill me with a sneeze. You don't scare me."

She reacted brusquely. "Really now." Her hand reached down, burning away a hole through his pants, her fingers reaching for his crotch. "Let's see how long that courage lasts you."

It was on.

Chapter 233 [Rick][🍷🍷]

"I'm going to make a meal out of you."

Her proclamation brought a sharp gasp out of Rick. He was not going to deny the appeal of her body, she was sexy, and the sensation of her touch was a rush of layered sensations. His body relaxed under her caress, not from any power or magical ability but because she appeared to know exactly where to touch and how. Muscles melted under the silk of her fingertips. At the same time, her soothing touch brought heat and tension, pooling it away from his limbs and bringing it into a singular point in his groin.

Within barely seconds of starting, Rick knew he was harder than he ever remembered being.

If Monica was designed to fight, Kiara clearly was meant to fuck.

Rick knew he stood no chance against her in terms of skill, endurance, strength, or even capability. Even without using her powers, in any kind of direct confrontation he had little doubt she'd chew and spit him out without breaking a sweat. She expected him to be little more than a morsel. Odds were Kiara was already thinking of her 'real' challenge, the feline.

His better approach would be to not play the game how she expected him to.

He chuckled, inhaling sharply. "Maybe a little lower." There was no move to restrain himself, hold back, or even fight her.

Kiara didn't make a sound, merely a flick of her fingers, tightening against his thigh and digging slightly into the skin. The mantle of pleasure was broken by a jolt of pain that lasted but a split second.

"Kinky." Letting out another chuckle, Rick hadn't even flinched. "Don't get me wrong, I can appreciate a good massage, but am I going to just lay here all night or...?"

Gold eyes pierced up at him through the darkness, brows furrowing. He could almost see how the Succubus altered her plan on the flick of a dime. A saccharine smile spread across pearly white teeth, the maiden leaning away, easing the pressure that kept him pinned to the ground. She pressed her chest out, heavy breasts jutting out proudly. "Perhaps you can return the favor."

"Sure."

And in the twitch of her eye did he find the flaw in her plan. She'd been expecting something else entirely. Well, that was what she got out of ignoring the kind of world Rick came from.

He took one of her nipples into his mouth, and without waiting for confirmation, bit down on it hard.

"What the-!?"

Kiara didn't wail in pain, no, she shuddered, gasping sharply in surprise before pressing more of her tit against his face. The pillowy flesh became the entirety of his world, and the human suddenly found himself devoid of easy access to air. But he wasn't about to lose the advantage, bringing up one hand to reach around and grasp her ass while the other mauled at her free tit.

He was not gentle. And yet, no matter how hard he grasped at her, his fingers found only pliant welcoming flesh. The Succubus's ministrations of his body had taken a momentary pause at the shift in focus, but she recovered quickly, apparently having changed her plan once more as she reached straight down to his cock and squeezed.

It wasn't tender, but it was exactly the amount of pressure to cause him to hesitate. A simple stroke of her fingers and a tingling followed, he nearly came there and then, his spine lighting up like a christmas tree that'd been plugged into a nuclear reactor. Rick's entire body tightened, electrified, jaw clenching shut, teeth groaning, sparks flying across his vision.

Rick was holding on to her body with a white-knuckled grip, his teeth ached around the nipple, and Kiara didn't even flinch. She just stroked again,

pushing him all the way near to the edge and leaving him there, his body wracked with jolts that curled his toes.

"Atta boy."

Kiara cooed, using her free hand to keep his head pressed against her breast.

Lungs burned, and the need for air started to claw at his chest. His body fighting between the urge to cum and breath. The electricity of her fingers kept cramping his every muscle. The fight was impossible to keep going.

So Rick let go, allowing his body to explode and focused on pulling away for breath. Dots of light blinked around his field of vision, his body screaming at him to relax and fall onto the pulsing pleasure. An act that Kiara clearly wanted as well. And all the more reason he couldn't let himself falter.

He leaned forward, tipping her to fall onto her back. With her falling back on to her own bat-like wings, it was the one moment that caused a sound of complaint out of her. Her curves lay on the dirt without discomfort, the underside of her left thigh stained by Rick's release. Not that the orgasm had appeared to drain his libido any, he was still rearing to go, and seeing her lay on her back, legs open wide, his hind-brain spoke of the next move.

Rick promptly ignored that, as well as the smirk that glowed on those golden eyes of hers. He bent down, moving to bite her navel. "Huh?" Her question was spoken right as his hands reached out to caress her thick, welcoming thighs.

The sound of confusion came back, louder this time when he refused to follow the urging of both his body and her caress. No, he went down. His mouth found his target easily enough, she was drenched, hot, the scent of her sex a spicy mix of cinnamon and apple. It took effort for him to remind himself she was indestructible as far as he was concerned.

So with another bite, this time he got her to let out a squeak.

An honest to God squeak.

The maiden froze, her body shuddering, groans of surprise quickly followed as Rick tasted her. Out of all the things she'd expected out of him, this had clearly not been on the list.

"Cute."

It was the one thing he managed to let out between greedy licks. He half expected her to try and choke him again, but she... didn't. The maiden had gone still, deathly so, her hands hovered near and around his head, but never touched. He sought for the little nub of flesh hidden between her folds and her fingers moved to accompany his own on her thighs. Her grip dug into her legs, pressing them down as she shuddered.

And she stared at him every second of it, eyes wide like saucers, biting on her own lower lip, body tense like a spring. Gasps and moans betrayed she was approaching her own release fast, and that was exactly the cue for him to slow down, teasing with his fingers up her thighs, goosebumps running through her body.

"Are you insane!?" She gasped in a harsh whisper, groaning, her sharp nails digging into her skin.

It was the voice of someone caught doing something they shouldn't, of someone about to be dragged into something dangerous. And Rick could guess the danger was not to her but himself. She was a maiden, her thighs alone, despite their plumpness, could crush his skull faster than he could pull away. "Do you want me to stop?"

"This... you...!"

"Rick." He leaned closer, licking again, drawing a slow shuddering breath. "My name is Rick." Her attempt to draw indignation or even anger came to an abrupt end with it, the maiden fighting not just the sensation but herself.

She couldn't let go, because if she did, he could very well die there and then. He'd found her line. Right here, right now, she needed him alive, wanted it. But he had one more ace up his sleeve.

"You can push me away." He continued, moving a finger into the velvet embrace of her pussy. "Or just ask me to fuck you."

The shock turned to determination, the woman grit her teeth, lips tightening shut, challenging him to do his worst. And he did, teasing and edging her, working her up and letting her cool, never giving her an inch to spare or a second to rest. Despite his best efforts, however, he could not keep it going forever.

Within minutes she writhed and became impossibly tense, the orgasm washing over her. Once she let out a slow winding sigh and relaxed, Rick knew this was as far as he'd be able to go. The Succubus was well aware of it too, she bothered with neither teasing words or fanfare, the moment she'd regained her breath she used her unstoppable strength to push him to lay down.

"I'm the one doing the fucking here."

A promise and one she fulfilled right away, lowering herself onto his achingly hard cock with no further wait.

Both of them moaned at the same time.

"Oh shit." Both of them had spoken in unison.

Her pussy wrapped around him tightly, an iron grip with velvet folds. Kiara's hands reached up to his shoulders and her nails dug into his skin, drawing blood. Her eyes were wide in shock, mouth parted, gaze locked with his own. He choked on his breath, unable to hold his body still, she dove for his lips with a ravenous kiss.

There was nothing behind it, neither of them bothered to play or maneuver or do anything other than to lay claim as much of the other's body as they could. Hands grasped, flesh yielded, her tail wrapped around his left calf as she bounced relentlessly on his lap. They barely bothered to draw in air or to break the kiss, she mashed her tits into his chest, he pulled at her hair, she clawed at his back, they thrust into one another.

And something snapped into place.

Something unseen, but felt, felt more strongly than everything else. Their eyes opened wide in shock, meeting brown eyes with gold. He felt her, the emotions within her, brilliant and intense, surprise, fear, anxiety, lust, desire, hesitation, anger, pain, and so many other things that swirled and snapped. A realization that ran through her features in dawning horror, quickly mixed in with an overwhelming desire to hold back.

The orgasm rocked them both, breaking any such attempt.

Thunderstorms rolled down his gut and up into her eager embrace. Tension that led to exhaustion. Rick would've collapsed if not because she'd reached out to grab him. The move surprised her, and she let go right after, leaving the human to crumble to the ground as she sat on his lap, flushed and panting for breath.

Rick, for his part, could only barely hold consciousness. The blow had been intense, everything was swirling all around him. He barely heard Kiara speak in a worried barely audible whisper.

"The fuck was that!?"

He only chuckled, groaning and laying on the ground. "That's the bond." With a slow shake of his head, he closed his eyes. "I hope this was enough to feed you, I don't think I have more in me right now."

"What?" She shot him an asane look. "Just what have you been reading? Sex is how I get energy, and you barely-." There was a pause. "I'm... not... that hungry? Huh."

"Glad I was of help." Rick just lay there, every inch of his body aching. "It's your turn to keep watch."

He ignored the glare, moving on to the bedroll and collapsing onto it. Mentally, he called out for Dia and Monica. Frankly speaking, so long as they didn't murder each other while he slept, he didn't care. He'd handle things... tomorrow.

Chapter 234 [Mark] (Volume 3 End)

They'd come in the middle of the night. Noah and Brye had almost sounded the alarm, Shery prepared for a fight, and Mark had already been prepared to sprint out one of the windows. But it turned out the visitors were exactly the people they were supposed to meet with. In a flurry of hushed secrecy, the group was taken away through the empty streets of the city.

Dragged out of the wall, down the road.

Not a word was spoken, and it was clear the guards did not expect any either. The group of four moved quietly, urgently, and nervously. Noah stuck to Mark's arm, Brye led the way, and Shery closed in behind them. All in all, it was the walk of a group that expected things to turn violent very quickly. The twelve other escorts did not provide any sense of protection.

They felt like jailors, taking them to the execution block.

By now Mark had brought himself to not care much. This was exactly what he needed to survive. It was futile to ignore the tools and opportunities presented to him. And this was no more than the next step, the next shit-show to adapt to. So whatever it was that was coming his way, he'd do everything in his power to survive it, like all the shit that came before this.

After what felt like two hours worth of walking, the darkness of the road came to an abrupt halt.

There, parked right in the middle of the road, was a coach wagon. The wheels were made of rubber and steel, the walls and roof were wrapped in black silk, ornately decorated with lines of gold that pulsed under their own light. There were no windows on the box, and only one door, outlined by silver threads.

The coach was surrounded by maidens wearing large black cloaks, hoods hiding some of their features. But Mark could see glints of metal armor underneath, the shapes of the hoods themselves altered by horns or strange ears.

"Only the human."

The tallest of the 'guards' spoke, blocking the way and peering at them from under the hood's shadows. None of the three maidens accompanying Mark dared to speak, their faces were stuck to the ground, unmoving, pale, trembling.

Whatever pressure was keeping them in place had not been aimed at him, however. "I'm bringing Brye." He stated, as much of a fact as the words the hooded figure had spoken with.

Red eyes poured into him, daggers of flickering flames, piercing the darkness. The maiden needed neither to move or speak; her glare alone was as good as placing a blade to his throat. A silent promise that he could instantly find himself surrounded by hellfire if she so felt the whim for it.

And though Mark hesitated, he did not move.

"Let him."

The voice came from inside the coach, the door slightly ajar. The demeanor changed, the figure bowed and gestured for Mark to step forward. He did, though not without noticing the half-glare he got from Brye, the two tailed-fox maiden looking paler with every step. They quietly approached.

Inside the coach was just one man.

A man that barely was contained within a suit, his body rippling with the kind of musculature you'd see from an Adonis. He occupied half of the coach by himself, his face masked in shifting shadows, making it entirely impossible to see any actual discerning features other than his sculpted body.

The moment Mark and Brye were inside the coach, the door closed, yet the illumination did not change, dark leather seats and shadowy corners. It was a place of luxury, yet not meant for comfort, a meeting place of some sort.

Brye sat on the floor of the coach. Her head bowed deep, almost touching the large man's shoe with her forehead. "Boss." She declared the word in cold reverence, almost fear and admiration in equal measure.

The move shocked Mark, but he hid it, lips drawing thin, eyes peering into the darkness that was the man's face. "What do you want?" He stated at the man who apparently currently held control over his circumstances.

"Direct, I like that. You picked well, Brye."

The fox did not speak, did not move, she remained frozen on the spot, tails limp behind her.

"I read the reports. The matters of your transgressions will be overlooked, no need for theatrics, little fox. You may leave."

"She stays."

Mark would've shot to his feet if there was the room for it. His glare did not leave the man for an instant, fists clenching tightly.

"Brye?"

"Yes, Boss."

She was gone without so much as a sound, not a puff of smoke, not even opening the door. Just teleported, vanished, and left Mark alone. The human was left clenching his fists and glaring all the harder, lips curling into half a snarl.

"You can try to hit me, if that would make you feel any better." The man, Boss, taunted, goading with a rumbling chuckle that shook the coach cabin.

Mark did not respond, remaining where he was, too aware this was some game for the other guy. "What. Do. You. Want." He snarled through gritted

teeth.

The man leaned back into his seat, spreading his arms wide. "Humanity needs a champion, and sadly you're not the best candidate available."

"And what makes you think I care about humanity?"

"True, I suppose." The chuckle returned. "But maybe you care for Barry Dodson?"

Mark's mind stilled, a sudden lack of emotion followed with a lack of thought, his eyes widened and suddenly there were a thousand different things he wanted to say, to ask, to claim. With it came indignation, anger, and with a snap decision, he flung at the man.

And exactly nothing happened other than him slamming against the wall opposite in the coach. He'd gone right through the man, finding no resistance to his fists nor anything to arrest his inertia. The impact caused him to crumble and spin, but he recovered just as fast, bouncing away and raising his fists out of sheer aggression if nothing else. "A fucking illusion?"

"I have several of these coaches, they're meant to address the simple matter of wishing for a private face-to-face without really needing to travel. Convenient, are they not?" The man laughed again, clapping his hands just once. "I will allow this little... outburst, to slide, it is family we are talking about. Would you think the same for your aunt, I wonder?"

"Fuck her. And fuck you too."

"Shame." The Boss shook his head. "Oh well, that's that, I suppose. You may leave." The door opened without a sound, the figure made a gesture towards it. "You may take the mouse with you if you'd like. I will give you... say, two months worth of a head-start."

He did not move. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You are valuable, willing or otherwise." He shrugged simply. "But if I am going to take you by force, I'd rather give you the chance to run. I am nothing

if not curious as to how far you would make it, will you manage to escape my reach? Would you find a way to fend off your pursuers? Would you prove worthy and turn the tables on me?"

Mark looked out the open door, into the darkness of the road outside. Just a handful of meters further out were three maidens. Shery, Brye, and Noah. The three he was bonded to, the only three he'd had any prolonged contact with, the ones that had taught him that not just ferals were monsters.

"I want my cousin."

Slowly, he turned away, glaring at the man whose head was wreathed in shadows. There was a strange coldness inside of him.

"I do not have him under my care. Too much hassle." There was a dismissive wave of his hand as he spoke. "I will, however, tell you this: if you prove to be the champion I seek, I will give you the tools to save him by your own hand."

"Save him... save him from what?"

"The Court you escaped from. My sources have informed me that the wildlings apparently found and... ah... *'acquired'* your dear cousin."

Mark growled, his brows knitted together, hands clenched into fists. He remembered the meeting with the crone whose skin was midnight black. How could he forget? The threat, the words, the total lack of...

"What's your proof."

"A little over a week ago there was a group of offworlders that were being escorted to Balet. They were attacked by the Court. The knights won, in the end, and captured several of the wildlings. During interrogation, two of them kept talking about Barry, the young boy with flaming red hair and glasses. This information was further corroborated from a report by Miss Dodson, claiming she saw her nephew and that he'd been brainwashed into helping the Court."

The words brought back the memory of the crone, her promise of influencing his thoughts to force the bond onto him. His blood boiled and his lips thinned. "How soon."

The man that called himself the Boss shrugged easily. "The sooner you prove yourself capable of the tasks that must be done to save humanity, the better." Though his face was shrouded, there was a distinct manic undertone to his words.

Mark's anger gained a hint of caution, of apprehension, he could not see the man's eyes but the tone and body-language spoke to him of something far more dangerous than either thing should have been able to.

It reminded him of the crazy bitch that had shown up to draw some blood from him, and the words she'd spoken before she had left.

The young man did not care about humanity's supposed fate, but deep inside, he knew that he did not want to stay within this man's reach an instant longer than it took him to get to his cousin.



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