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## [072-073] [Rise (Kiara)]

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Kiara woke to the throes of starvation.

It was denigrating to be reduced to such a state; she might as well have been feral. Her body moved like an automaton through an endless orgy, surrendering herself to a mindless frenzy of sex. There was no taste, no nuance, only raw energy mattered. Fingers, mouths, hips, groins, crotches, and breasts — it didn't matter, it was everything. Pet after pet, she drained and fed, then drained some more. So much had been lost from recovering from that elemental bomb... she felt like she'd lost a century of her life.

Succubi barely needed sleep, which allowed Kiara to take short naps between the waves of delicious raw energy. It was during these brief respites that a flicker of consciousness would emerge, and in them, she could do nothing but appreciate her foresight. Though the healer might call them "whores," her pets had been her lifeline. They were agents, but they and they alone could be trusted to eagerly jump into her bed whenever she needed them. Months of careful application of her powers had guaranteed that her pets found incomparable pleasure when she fed from them.

Trust, loyalty, dedication—these could push someone beyond their limits. But they were fickle and inconsistent. Addiction, however, was the most potent tool, reliable. It was something she'd learned from other ageless maidens with similar powers. When the dice hit the table, the unprepared died.

Rick had insisted, repeatedly, for her not to use her powers on the unwilling. Of course, she respected their agreement — she was a maiden of her word. But there was never a shortage of individuals eager to poison themselves if it would numb their heartache. And it was a Succubus' role in life to take advantage of such vulnerabilities.

It was all part of the pattern of their design.

Because unlike everything else in this world, maidens had been created. Though the details changed depending on who you asked, they all agreed that roughly five hundred odd years ago, the "Creator" had come upon this world. How or why was a matter of debate for people who spent too much time stinking of either booze or parchment. What mattered was that there was a purpose behind their design, a goal. Perhaps that goal had been long since lost or made irrelevant, but they marked the road a maiden could use to ascend higher in their genus.

One just had to look for the patterns.

Patterns like how Doggirls, with their endurance and keen senses, could easily track prey for kilometers. And how they could ascend into Hounds, maidens with powers that made tracking and hunting that much easier. This culminated in the Warhound, the embodiment of relentless, implacable, single-minded predatory obsession. In this way, it was easy to see the progression: Doggirls who hunted often would be likelier to become Hounds.

Succubi, she had concluded, were not 'charmners' as the great northern empires insisted on labeling them. No, they were 'domesticators', of maidens and humans alike.

In this way, only Daimons that saw the utility and power that sex held over others could become Succubi. It was the necessary groundwork that would lead her towards her ascension to Dark Queen. She just needed to figure out what having a human partner immune to her powers meant in this process.

That was the question that bubbled into her mind as she lay on the pile of exhausted and sweaty pets.

Her mind wandered to the ruins of the Empire of the Sands. It was a place blasted by an accursed sun, too dead to hold much life let alone sustain the dozen nations within. How long ago had she stepped upon the boiling sand, digging her way through buried towers of stone? What had happened to her guide, she wondered, how long had it been? With a soft sigh, she mentally traced the map of her life since she had unearthed Djamila's diaries. It had been... thirty nations or so since? The rough equivalent of a hundred years.

Kiara's lips pursed, her age weighed on her bones like the sands that had once nearly crushed her. A web of hairline cracks from a thousand near-deaths hid under her skin, aching like fresh bruises. In less than a whole season after meeting Rick, she'd added two new cracks, one of them particularly deep. It would take months to recover fully to her prior strength.

She would not have been able to live as long a life as she had if she had taken needless risks. Was this truly the path to take? Rick had shown himself to be a magnet for danger. Kiara didn't believe in fate or destiny, but she would be blind not to spot the pattern.

How much of this was necessary? Could she afford to distance herself from the risk? The Vampire brat would come back, and in Kiara's current state, she wasn't sure she would have a decent chance. She could still taste the ashen wine of pride and anger the young ageless maiden had been pouring like a waterfall.

She dispelled her doubts.

So long as the brutish cat was around, then Kiara could focus on her own safety without consequence. Until she figured out how Rick's immunity played into her ascension, earning more of his trust and nudging him down the right path was crucial. She had a hunch he didn't need to become a literal king, but he did need to have the mindset of one.

The reassurance eased the pains and aches, allowing her to focus. With a sigh, Kiara pulled herself out of the pile of maidens and made her way to the cleaning quarters. It was a new addition she'd commissioned, bringing an edge of proper cleanliness to this otherwise backwater nation.

It was a stone bath the size of a proper bed, deep enough she could submerge herself fully if she so wished, and hot enough that it was nearly boiling, filling her lungs with searing steam and seeping deep into her core.

Perfect.

Kiara cleansed her body, listening to her pet Hound explain the comings and goings since she had fallen unconscious. Several things caught her attention; there were more than a few events that needed further details.

Of particular concern was Rick's creation of an apparently cheap explosive, one that could be produced in high quantities and could cause severe damage to the unwary. It was the kind of creation that would have kings and queens alike frothing at the mouth. "You'll start guard duty for his laboratory."

"My Lady?"

"Your attempts at getting close to him have mostly failed, haven't they?" Kiara glanced in the direction of her kneeling pet. "This way you should have plenty of opportunities to engage him undisturbed."

Eli hesitated, the taste adding a sour note to her emotions. "What about the wildlings?"

The Succubus scowled. "What about your future? Have you changed your mind about my plans for you?"

The comment brought a moment of silence. Eli lowered her head, properly scowled, and tentatively caressed her stomach with one hand. There was a sickly kind of sweetness coming out of her. Kiara just rolled her eyes, stepped out of the bath, and the water's heat dried her in seconds.

“If the task is important, then find someone capable. If you cannot convince them, then I will see to it. Preferably not someone among your sisters.”

Kiara scoffed at the thought of Eli volunteering to run around in the wilderness. The whole point of having pets was to take care of them; it wouldn't do to have the people she depended on the most just throwing their lives away. She would properly scold the woman in due time.

There were more important concerns at hand. “I need to find the leech.” It was time to put into motion a project she had dropped. “Where are my rings?”

Eli jolted, red-hot jalapeño panic exploding out of her.

Kiara didn't need to hear the answer; her lips pursed. “How?”

“The fire.” The Hound bowed her head profusely. “The house where you and Monica had been kept burned to the ground. We couldn't find anything in the rubble.”

The rings had been enchanted to contain storage spaces. They had been gifts. Their contents were useful, rare little treasures she had brought with her half-around the world. The thought of having lost everything for good made her shoulders sag and her wings droop. With a weary sigh, she waved Eli off. There was little sense in blaming her. “They would've broken down eventually anyway,” she spoke in a low voice, in a half-hearted attempt at reassurance.

It was a truth, in the end, that everything turned to dust given enough wear and use.

“Let's get me dressed.”

Getting dressed was a bit of a chore; nothing ever quite fit, so she always had to adjust something about herself to make them fit the “right” amount of snug. Eli was more than happy to assist her in the task either way, and the snack provided Kiara with a much needed morale boost.

Her costume of choice for today was a “humble commoner dress with a cleavage”, and she made sure to make her complexion a bit paler than it should be, to properly pretend she was a frail human who had spent a long time convalescing in bed.

The first task while hunting for the little blood-sucker was to wander around and play the role of the “Lady of Sinco”. A chore, but a necessary one to build some rapport. Her skirt whispered down the cobblestone streets as she made her way through the heart of the small city.

Her first stop was determined easily enough, a knock at the door drawing out the owner. “Good day, Mister Gregor,” Kiara greeted the baker with a soft smile. “Is your daughter doing alright? Has she recovered?”

“My Lady!” The man’s face lit up with a smile, his emotions boiling over with a sweet mix of shock and joy. “My daughter merely had a fever. What about you? There have been no shortage of rumors about your condition. I hope everything is alright?”

“It was poison which kept me bedridden,” Kiara shook her head. “Fortunately, our healer could handle the damage, even if not the toxin itself.” She reached out, caressing the man’s arm and offering a soft smile. “If things ever turn sour, our door is always open.”

“With the upcoming festival, there’s very little time for worries!” The man laughed, warmly holding her hands. “But we thank you all the same, my Lady. It is good to have you back.”

“It is good to be back, Mister Gregor,” came the droll reply, hidden behind a courteous smile.

The conversation carried on a bit further, with empty pleasantries and words of gratitude. This particular human was one of a few dozen miniature “king-makers”, voices that spread wide in the city and could help shape the opinion of others. They held no real power of their own, mostly being the epicenter of gossip.

Kiara bored of this necessary dance, but duty called, so she ventured her way around the city. She made sure to greet each one, share a few words, provide a few gestures of kindness or favors, and then hop on to the next.

Some would provide her with small gifts, baskets, food, perfumes, soaps, and the like. Here and there she’d get little snippets of the city’s true thoughts and concerns. There was plenty of praise for her “husband”, but everything would come mixed in with thinly veiled “warnings”. Sinco had been a city made by people loyal to the king, and it was a belief that was still strongly held to this day.

It was all so tiresome.

“Is something wrong, my Lady?” Eli’s question was soft and lemony, tentative and hesitant.

The Hound was carrying several baskets that had been filled with the gifts Kiara had been given throughout the day. At this point, the pile of stuff was larger than the maiden herself, barely maintaining a semblance of equilibrium as they walked.

“My weakened state has left me thinking much about my past,” Kiara kept her words measured, aware there was no true privacy in the streets. “I would have found these meetings easier to handle back then.”

She had taken over the odd village before. It was a simple enough process; once she got some private time with the right people, she would have them wrapped around her tail within the span of a month or two. Those had been the days she thought she could fight back against the Daggers of the Northern Empire.

Back when she was so full of spite she could not plan for anything further than the next month, let alone the next year or decade. The trick, she had found, was to set a goal and adapt the strategy to the ever-changing circumstances.

Kiara gave Eli another glance. “Go and give those to the orphans. Something to remind them who to be thankful to.”

'Orphans,' in this case, referred to the maidens Rick had bonded with but who had no families to call their own. Her own pets formed the core of that group, arranging living spaces and food, and making sure everyone was pulling their weight.

Originally, the intent had been for them to become the core of Rick's future army. But Eli had reported on the severe blowback the bond caused. The army idea would need to be changed to something else, but what that would be, Kiara wasn't entirely sure yet. There would be plenty of time to reconsider; Rick's new weapons were sure to change many things.

“Has the Lord ever spoken of how war was fought in his world?” Kiara wondered out loud, glancing at Eli as they made their way through the streets.

The Hound assumed a thoughtful demeanor, ears perking slightly. “He made a point of keeping his involvement in the strategy meetings minimal. I believe his words were that warfare in his world didn't involve blades?”

No blades, and there was no elemental energy either... “Thank you.” She would need to sit down, get some answers out of him. What he knew might not be directly applicable, but there were always insights that could be gained from such things. “What of the-?” A whiff of cherry anxiousness and bitter anger wafted her way. Kiara's steps slowed; her head turned over her shoulder. “Keep going, find me once you've dropped those off,” she commanded Eli.

“My Lady, do you...?”

“No need, I can handle myself.”

She waited for a moment for her 'guard' to leave before taking one of the side-streets. Her destination was somewhere more private, away from prying eyes, the presence following her doing a half-decent job at hiding. If only they could keep their feelings in check, they might have gone unnoticed for longer.

"I was looking for you, little leech," Kiara proclaimed once they'd reached the shore. "I didn't expect you'd come looking for me instead."

Eva emerged from the shadows just a few paces behind her. "I thought I smelled something rotten and came to check."

"The leech grew a spine." She sampled the emotions a bit more carefully. Underneath the anger was caution; the maiden was spilling the bitter emotion all over the place. But Kiara sought out the maiden's defenses and slipped past. What she found within was a core of bittersweet confusion, uncertainty, and a sickeningly sweet spicy flavor of feral infatuation. Kiara wanted to gag. "Why are you here?"

The emotions were wrong and clearly not directed at her. If anything, it was a surprise that the Fledgling had sought her out.

Hesitation joined the plate, ruining the flavor further. "Rick sensed you woke up; he wants to speak with you."

"You stink of excuses." Kiara cut off and pulled out of Eva before she could taste any more of the sickeningly sweet emotion.

The shorter maiden hesitated again, her lips curling into a scowl. "Rick's nicked himself today, and blood smells different. Just a little different, just enough." She bit her lip. "I remembered a text about Succubi, and how they could make anyone fall into depravity even after they're long gone. I wanted to know if..."

The words hung in the air. Kiara cocked her head for a moment. "You've stopped drinking his blood, haven't you?" Her words were met with wide eyes. The Succubus shrugged. "It was the only way for the effects to start wearing off."

"You...!" Hackles rose, bright ruby eyes flared with power, fangs peeking past the lips.

"Me." Rolling her eyes, she made a slapping motion, sending a wave of power to crush the little Fledgling's display and leave nothing in its wake. "It was a safety measure I put in place when we woke you from the feral curse, I've barely touched it since."

Staggering back a step from the sudden absence of her power, the leech was left gawking. "Why!?"

“Because it’s how Vampires control Fledglings.” Kiara shrugged. “The thing drives you wild, slobbering all over the place, weak in the knees, and set to gushing.” She shook her head. “This isn’t my first time dealing with a coven of blood-suckers, I’ve had plenty of chances to practice replicating that kind of pleasure.”

It was another pattern she’d spotted. There were very few maiden breeds capable of turning a human into a maiden. The few Kiara had met always appeared to have powers that let them reign in their converts, some being more brutal or risky in the process than others.

“You... changed me!?”

Red eyes widened further, panic and horror mixed into an acidic taste. More potent than lemon, it left delicious tingles on Kiara’s tongue. Yet it was missing something. “You’re not angry.” It wasn’t a question, but an observation; she cocked her head a little, hands on her hips.

The leech flinched. “I don’t know what to feel about... this.”

Emotions did not work that way, but Kiara wasn’t about to correct the maiden. “I only made a particular flavor more enjoyable. It was you who followed him around, coming back for another bite. As you’ve well seen, cutting off was the way to have it wear off.” Though she said this, the truth of the matter was that the leech never really had a chance.

Out of all the maidens Kiara had met, fledglings were the maidens that reacted more strongly to addiction. Their hunger was empowered, as if they’d been purpose built to be enslaved to it. Perhaps it was part of the pattern as well, of the original purpose the “Creator” had made for them. To make it so the humans that have been converted be left trapped at the whims of their attackers.

“While we are on this topic...” She flicked off some grime from her fingernails. “Do you know how to ascend?” Her words caused the leech to blanch, spilling shock and confusion all over, along with what could undoubtedly be a dozen other flavors if Kiara bothered to focus on them. “I will take that as a ‘no’.”

Her counterpart in the conversation stepped closer, glaring. “Why or how would you expect me to know such a thing!? How is this relevant to anything!?”

It was understandable; the secrets to ascension were often tightly guarded. Very few maidens were willing to share their wisdom in the matter, and vampires in particular had a vested interest.



“Since the cat is crippled, I figured you might want to slide into the spot of being his protector.” Kiara’s tail swished under her skirt, brushing against the fabric. “Obviously not as a fledgling, you’d need to become something... stronger.”

“Not interested.” The answer was instantaneous, a flat refusal that carried all the turbulence of hesitation and doubt behind it.

Kiara wanted to purr. “I’ve been told you fought during the attack, against both a Malumari and a Seraph. I’m sure you understand the importance of having a battle-ready champion.”

“Urtha is champion enough. She’s the one who defeated Embla.”

“That must be the Malumari.” Kiara waved off. “Urtha is strong, but she’s no champion.”

The other snorted. “You would know?”

“Yes. I’ve met one before.” Her name had been Bana, and Kiara had been unable to put so much as a scratch on her even when unleashing a surprise attack. It had been a fight she’d been forced to flee from. The fact that Urtha had lost an arm to her was as good a sign as any that she had still plenty of room to grow. “Urtha is strong, even by normal standards, but there is a gap between what she has and what we need.”

"And you think I'd become strong enough to compete?" This time, the question came laced with amusement, and laughter followed soon after. "I thought your lies would at least be more believable."

Kiara bit her tongue before she said something she'd regret. Of course, becoming that strong right away would be impossible. Of course, the leech would take years to ever grow into anything worth remembering. But a Hound would always grow faster and reach higher than a Doggirl. It was why Urtha, having been born an Orc, had let her get so much further than the rest of the tribe.

Instead of saying any of this, she smiled. "The powers a Vampire wields make them rather talented in rituals and spells." Her lips curled as she grinned a little further. "I would've thought you'd prefer taking a form that lets you put your knowledge of spellcraft to use."

A moment of silence followed. The Fledgling squirmed under her gaze, looking away. "There are other ways for me to help Rick."

The Succubus felt revulsion coursing through her at those words. "I'm sure you'd love staying on a balcony, watching the barbarism from afar, like a good little noble bitch." If she wanted to use their human for support, then it would make things easier for Kiara.

"But is that what would keep Rick alive? What was the score again in terms of saving him against putting his life at risk?" Her words struck a nerve, and the leech flinched, shrinking into herself.

"Going deeper into this curse wouldn't solve anything," the maiden whispered, despondent.

Now it was Kiara's turn to laugh. "I can think of one thing it would solve: your hunger."

It was amusing to see the maiden choke on her own words, her eyes bulging and her face twisting into a knot. Her emotions were all over the place, practically a bomb of flavors that made recognizing any singular one hard to pinpoint. It wasn't hard to imagine this was a rather complicated topic for the maiden.

"There are two ways for you to ascend," she didn't wait for the younger maiden to stutter her way into some sort of denial. "The first is to kill your hunger entirely, learn how to suppress it, eschew it. Through this, you would become a Ghoul," Kiara raised her finger. "The second is to let it become a part of you, to indulge until it is truly and fully satiated and controllable. This is how you'd become a Vampire."

"That can't—"

"Words will always be easier to speak than the actions they describe," Kiara stopped her before she could mount a defense, waving her hand dismissively. "The usual method to become a Vampire would involve the Fledgling drinking a Vampire dry. Between the power in the blood and the pleasure, the maiden usually ends up beginning her ascension on the spot," she chuckled. "My blood happens to have plenty of energy I'm not planning to use anytime soon."

The pale maiden looked up at her, mouth agape, swallowing hard and trembling.

"You'd..."

"Better you take a good sip from me than jump Rick again, no?" Kiara purred, stepping closer, bringing a nail up to her wrist and pricking it. A single gem-like drop pooled against her silken skin. "It'll be intense, and might take the rest of the day, but overwhelming you isn't exactly a challenge. By the time we're done, you'll have begun your ascension, and we can keep loathing one another."

Ruby eyes fixated on the drop of blood. "It... it can't... I... this..."

She refrained from pushing her power into the Fledgling and flooding her with desire right away. This was not something that could be forced, and no doubt Rick would sense something through the bond. She did send a flicker though, enough to get the younger

maiden's breath to hitch and her face to flush. "It's a little abrupt, I know, but better now than when it's too late. Besides, this way you'll never want Rick's blood. Wouldn't want to hurt him, right? You love him, after all."

The word burned her tongue with its acidity. It made her insides twist into knots, and brought back memories she'd sooner forget. But it needed to be said, pushing the leech over the edge was the best course of action.

A flare of wrongness flickered above all other emotions, a taste of something rotten. The Fledgling jolted back, blinking rapidly, energy flaring out in warning. "I refuse." She declared, plunging into the shadows to quickly jump away before anything else could be said.

Kiara was left alone, blinking at the spot where the leech had been. She... had turned her down? Where did that burst of determination come from? The Succubus scoffed, pressing her thumb against the dollop of blood and sealing the wound shut.

"Odd."

Maybe the leech had grown more of a spine than she'd expected, or maybe it was something else. Whatever the case, putting too much pressure too soon could spoil things. Better to take a slower approach, it shouldn't be long to convince the leech on the proper course of action.

It wasn't as if Kiara was wrong, her logic was solid. Rick had lost protection and they needed to add to it to compensate. Throwing more maidens around him wouldn't do much. An army of a thousand Mousegirls could no better protect him against a determined Seraph or a Sabertooth than just one. That is to say, not at all.

Throwing the thought away, Kiara was really left with just one thing to do for the day.

The prickle of apprehension within herself left her unmoving. Her gaze lowered to her shoes, maybe she needed more time to compose herself before she met Rick. Dealing with him was always like dancing on a knife's edge.

Maybe she could leave that for later.

With nothing better to do, she turned to face the sea and took off her shoes, digging her feet into the warm sand. After a moment, she sat down, carefully folding her skirt underneath her. The shore beckoned her, the waves lapping at the shore and spraying foam into the air.

"Today, I've been lost in thought a lot," she whispered to herself, staring as the sun made its way towards her right, heading for the horizon in inexorable progress.

She could stay this way for a week. If she didn't move or use her powers, then she could just remain exactly where she was, staring at the sun rise and fall seven times. By the end of it, she'd feel miserable, hungry, and thirsty. Judging by the clouds overhead, some powerful maiden or another was stirring the weather into action. It would rain tomorrow or the day after. Could she guess what maiden it was? Kiara was sure she'd heard the breed at some point or another, but she tasted the air all the same. There were faint hints of ice energy, which didn't narrow it down much.

She was stalling, she realized.

Her body was heavy.

The crunch of sand drew her gaze back to the city. "Of course it's you," she grumbled at Rick. The taste of the leech lingered somewhere nearby; she'd likely ratted Kiara out and told him where to find her.

He didn't say anything, just stepping closer and taking a spot a meter or two to her left. She could feel his eyes lingering on her, then turning to the sea, as if looking for whatever she was focusing on. "I've put the Neigix to try and keep the sky clear as long as they can. Should keep up until sunrise or so."

"Anything important?" she wondered out loud.

"The tribe's been complaining about the lack of sun." His voice carried a shrug with it. "I figured flying through clouds would be a miserable experience. Being wet and cold doesn't seem fun."

Kiara snorted, rolling her eyes. "You'd be right."

The sun kept its descent, moving closer and closer to the horizon, the warmth of the sand slowly becoming the main source of heat. Rick didn't say anything, his presence remained exactly far enough so it didn't rub against her senses. Somehow, this made her want to laugh. Was this something he'd been able to do before, or was it new? What other details had he been keeping secret?

With the last rays of orange light, the sun finally set. Darkness took over, the stars only barely starting to glimmer above.

"I'll tell the patrols to keep the skies clear."

His words were accompanied by shuffling. Rick stood to leave, his entourage following along. Kiara was left alone once more, watching the black waves and the foaming sea. Slowly, she worked up the energy to move again, standing up and shaking off the sand.

It had been a few hours since the sun had set, the city was slowly crawling to a stop as the nocturnal maidens were awakening.

Kiara had been about to walk up the shore and back to spend the night with her pets when a glimmer caught her attention.

There, right on the spot Rick had been occupying, was a black piece of cloth.

On top of it was a ring.

Her breath caught in her throat as she picked up the silver piece of jewelry, caressing the familiar grooves and edges. She quickly set the ring onto her index finger where it belonged, feeling the energy of the enchantments reaching out and latching onto their rightful owner.

She pushed her energy into the item, and out popped a single featureless copper coin.

"Still there," she whispered under her breath, reactivating the enchantment and returning it to the tiny storage space. With a sigh, her shoulders relaxed, caressing her cheek with her free hand as her thumb rubbed up and down the metallic edge.

Kiara's gaze shifted to the cloth. It was a small black square, barely large enough to fit her palm. With the square was what could only be a simple insignia of some sort. She would've thought the symbol to be the earth, the moon, and its orbit, three simple golden circles. Yet within the circle representing the earth there was a cross splitting it into four, while in the one representing the moon, there was a dash splitting it in two.

For a moment she wondered what it might mean, or why he'd left it here. Then she remembered. "Only someone like Rick would think this would be a valid emblem."

The Succubus took half a step in the direction of his house to scold him, then stopped.

Looking over her shoulder at the black sea and dazzling sky, she put the thought aside, stuffing the cloth into the ring, a soft smile playing on her lips.

"Maybe tomorrow."

She slimed her body enough to make stripping down easier, then let go of her restraints. Her wings grew wider and longer, her horns stretched out over her head, ears lengthening and sharpening, tail elongating until it caressed her ankles, eyes blinking away the brown irises and leaving only gold.

Kiara's fingers brushed up against her throat to remove the collar, but found nothing there.

The smile grew ever so slightly.

With a single bound she pulled herself up and away from the ground, the rules, the constraints, the world.

And she took to the sky.