
[116 Alice]

“Thank you.”

“There is no need for thanks, ma’am, it’s my pleasure.”

Alice’s smile tightened as the maiden bowed and stepped back. The teacher held the cup of coffee gingerly in her hands, feeling the warmth through her palms as she inhaled the rich aroma. Her eyes moved to linger on the only other human present. The Baroness sat with a glass, and the contents had a slight green glow that appeared to seep into her hands.

Both were seated on the rooftop of the manor, looking out on to the village. The sun shone through the cloudy sky, streaks of light that illuminated the world below. Some of the houses still smoldered, a few had been cleared out, reconstruction efforts were underway already.

“Are you... going to tell me why you called me over?” Alice broke the silence, not feeling quite able to enjoy her beverage while the question lingered over them.

“The Earl sent a message this morning, requesting Rick Cross’ presence in Balet.” A slight sip of the green liquid, the glow seemed to trail its way down her naked throat.

The meaning of that clearly flew over Alice’s head. Still, it was clear there was some issue regarding this development. At least considering the expression on the noblewoman’s face. “That’s bad, I take it?”

“It’s... complicated.” The woman turned to glance at Alice for a quiet second. “The official report was that my husband valiantly fought and lost against the feral White Claw, with Rick managing to bond her while she was debilitated from the encounter.” The sharp gaze darkened. “If the Earl believes this, then the invitation makes sense, as it would be a congratulatory meeting. But...”

“But if he doesn’t?”

“Then it also makes sense, since it would give him the perfect chance to get rid of a noble-killer.” A slight hesitation. “The Earl never did care much for my husband, but he does have a strong esteem for tradition.”

Alice felt a cold chill, nodding slightly. She had to stop for a second. “Wait, you’re using me to deliver a message?”

The Baroness looked slightly surprised at the directness. “Shouldn’t I? Your relations with him are far better than my own. The ‘aiding my husband, as my role dictated’ is also a nuance the... Sabertooth, might not be able to grasp just yet.”

“You...” With a frown, Alice rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I guess I can see where you’re coming from. I’ll give him the heads up.” A little pause. “... he can’t turn down the invitation, can he?”

This time, the woman turned from surprise to full bewilderment. “Doing such a thing would be no different from directly insulting the Earl. The best hope to be had would be to attempt to stall, under the excuse of needing time for his recovery.”

A long pause followed, Alice’s brows furrowed. “I think we will all need some coaching on how not to accidentally anger locals. Before we consider where to go from here.”

“That would be the other reason why I had called you over.” The woman composed herself, opting to display a look of amusement as she leaned back against her chair. “I intend to promote the military academy as one of the solutions for your group. I wish to recruit your assistance in this.”

“Why me?”

“Because you are the better alternative.” The response was smooth, cold, even. “Having seen the people who have vied for leadership amongst the offworlders, I can safely claim that you are a far more reliable element to promote.”

There was nothing in that string of words that Alice found agreeable. She could only frown. “I don’t think you’ve really answered my question.”

The Baroness regarded her for a moment, taking another long sip from her glass.

“You’re a better option than Ms. Dodson.” This time she turned to look ahead, towards the burning building. “For one, I can trust you would uphold your promises.”

“And that’s going to be important because...?”

“Nothing specific currently.” She smiled tightly. “Suffice to say that, for those of us who work in the upper echelons of society, knowing the right people is a survival skill. And there is no small amount of favors to be garnered from introducing someone to said right person.”

That prickled Alice ever so slightly. She felt her back straighten out. This felt awfully familiar. “You want me to play matchmaker.”

“You’ve interacted with the worst side my late husband had to offer.” The Baroness spoke with a scowl. “I’d have thought you’d be eager to prevent one of your former students potentially experiencing the same thing.”

A frown followed. “Are you implying someone would sell one of our own?”

“Can you honestly claim there’s no one that wouldn’t sell out one or several of your group for the sake of greater benefits?” That snapped Alice’s mouth shut with a snap. She certainly did have at least one person that fit that description quite well. The Baroness only nodded along.

“But you can’t control who people get along with.”

“Don’t try to sell the Hound for a Doggirl, she might bite you.”

“What.”

“Don’t underestimate me.” She replied with a deadpan.

“You can’t force someone to like someone else.”

“No, but it’s perfectly possible to only ever expose someone to people you want them to get along with. Eventually at least one of them will prove a match.” A slight shrug followed. “That is how nobility works. You’d do well to learn that.”

“So you want me to... block other nobles from meeting those of my group?” Alice scowled.

“No, things will be far less forceful than that.” The Baroness shook her head. “I intend to spread the word that you are their guardian. Thus, most people wanting to... meet... someone from your group, would seek your blessing. At its most benign, you’d be able to at least give your friends a forewarning.”

There was a slight nod at that proclamation, her gaze turning upwards to the sunny sky as she tried to chew through the proposition. “What’s in it for you?” She couldn’t help but ask, fully aware this was not something done out of the goodness of her heart.

“There are only really two things. One, I have some friends who might be interested in meeting your group. My only request would be for you to give them a fair chance.” A long second followed, with what looked like a moment of hesitation. “The second is more important, however, if less tasteful.”

“What is it?”

“You cannot allow anyone to realize you and yours hold the power to bond without a collar.” She set down the glass, half-empty. “At the very least, you must make sure to stall this revelation as much as possible.”

That had not been what Alice had been expecting. Her brows furrowed further, gaze turning to look at the Baroness in full. “Could you explain why?”

“At first I had considered it was merely a power exclusive to Rick. He had bonded White Claw without there being a collar involved. But now miss Catherine has as well. This is...” A slight sigh. “If my suspicion that all of you share this ability holds true, then the revelation could very well start a civil war.”

“WHAT!?” Jumping to her feet, the psychology teacher could only stare at the dark look the Baroness held. The woman staring back at her blankly, impassive. Alice couldn’t leave the subject unanswered. “What do you mean, civil war? Why? Are we some sort of political bomb?”

“It is not a simple subject. The current balance of things is very fragile, and this variable could break that. You will understand once you properly comprehend how our world works.” The Baroness’ eyes darkened, arms crossing tightly. “One way or the other, you are one of the few offworlders I can trust this detail with, and the only one I can ask for this secrecy.”

“I...”

“As of right now, consider it an order.” The woman gave a short nod. “I am giving you this order because I need time. Ideally, time spent to prevent catastrophe if the truth is found out. If not, at least time to soften the blow to the people I am meant to protect.”

Raising her gaze up to Alice’s, the teacher felt a slight surprise as she saw the pleading edge hidden within the woman’s eyes. She felt cornered, unable to do much more than nod. “I’ll... try to see what I can do.”

“I appreciate it.” A firm nod and a friendly smile.

Somehow, the teacher felt like she’d just signed a deal with the devil.

[117 Dia]

Dia O'Four looked at the wooden room door and hesitated. She knew what waited for her on the other side and needed to take a minute to gather the strength to pass through the threshold. Self-conscious, her fingers lingered on her throat in an attempt to calm down. The sensation of the leather collar had once been soothing, almost comforting.

Now it felt alien and out of place. Like a dress that was tailored for someone else.

With a shake of the head, the Rapha made one last do-over, eyes glancing down at herself. Shoes were polished, uniform was nice and smooth, her hair was nice and brushed. Nothing out of place.

Reaching out towards the door, she pushed it open.

The first thing to greet her was a growl.

But she was prepared, pushing aside her desire to growl back. "Good morning to you too, Monica." She put up the brightest smile she could summon, reaching into her pocket and pulling out some dried boar jerky. "Want some?"

Dia's gaze paused in 'her' two patients. Rick was currently in a forced coma, and the feline had refused to step away from him for so much as a second. Said feline, naked and currently turning the room into a hairy biohazard, was doing her best to keep the glare on the pink-haired nurse. But it was failing whenever her attention moved towards the generous piece of meat Dia was holding onto.

Meat wasn't exactly cheap, a good thing she'd managed to sneak the jerky-costs into the hospital's budget.

With a quick toss, the Sabertooth snatched the piece, finally stopping the growl and starting to chew on her snack. But not for an instant had Monica stopped glaring at Dia. "I'm here to help Rick, you know." She mumbled to herself, approaching the unconscious patient. There was a tightness in her chest, seeing him like that, hurt, pale, weak. The world felt like it was wrong if he was in such a state.

Dia's lips pursed as she approached Rick's wounded side, making sure her movements were deliberate and slow as she was under Monica's watchful gaze.

No pressure, just one slip-up and the feralborn cat could maul her.

With extreme care, Dia focused on increasing the protective barrier in her hands. Slowly, she removed the bandages that covered the stump that was Rick's right arm. She made sure to put the soaked cloth on the tray and made extra sure they would not touch anything else. Her fingers lingered on the discolored skin. The regeneration was going smoothly, the elbow would be forming sometime tonight. It would mean she'd have a long shift to make sure the bones and cartilage were connecting properly.

And despite how smoothly it was going, Dia still felt frustration within her.

Rick was pure-blood human, and their tolerance for elemental energy in every form was horrible. If they'd tried healing him the same way, they had the Major when he'd lost his leg... Rick would've likely died ten times over. They'd had to dilute the potion and slow down the treatment, which put him at higher risk of developing osteoporosis if there wasn't very tight supervision.

It would take at least another week of this. And the human wouldn't be able to be conscious for even a second. The pain of reforming nerve endings would be no different to torture.

"He suffered, just to rescue you." Dia's eyes moved to Monica, meeting the feline's glare for only a moment. "If it weren't because of you, he... none of this would've happened."

Her hands clenched the fresh bandages.

"Rick."

Monica spoke a single word, drawing Dia's attention back to her. The feline leaned over the human, placing her paw on his chest, her head on his shoulder, her other arm wrapping around it. Her naked body leaning over him and leaving the larger, taller woman practically enveloping him in her embrace.

The only way to be more possessive would've involved shoving Dia away.

The message could not be clearer.

The nurse felt hot anger boil within her, fingers trembling slightly as her heart began to beat ever so faster. "You..." How many people had the feline maimed since showing up in the wilderness outside their village? How many wounded had Dia had to treat? How many dead? Her eyes fell on the black collar the feline wore. The black collar Rick had put on her before they'd returned. The simmering inside her chest turned into fire. "You!"

The growl returned. The room became a degree colder and Monica's claws extended, fangs bared at Dia. But the nurse wouldn't back down. She clenched her fists, tightened her jaw, anger overcoming fear.

“Ugh.”

Both flinched as soon as Rick made the sound. Monica leaned back to get a better look at his face, and Dia leaned to touch his bare shoulder, muttering the small spell to confirm his status. His vitals were stable, adrenaline slightly higher than two hours ago, blood pressure rising.

Had the bond done this?

Not important right now. Dia had a job to do. She reached out for the bandages and soaked them in the medicine, carefully making sure none of Monica’s fur or hairs were present on Rick’s skin as she applied them. She made extra sure the bandages had enough give to account for the growth that would happen before the next shift.

She was methodical, working out of habit from hundreds of times she’d done exactly this. Feline and nurse shared a glare as neither moved away from the human. One protective, the other healing. The clock ticked slowly, and Dia’s work might have intentionally been slower than it should have, though she wouldn’t be able to tell whether because she wanted to spend more time with Rick, or just to keep the glare with the feline.

When she finished, she picked everything up, making sure to give one last check.

Monica leaned over him protectively the moment the nurse’s gaze had lingered a second too long on Rick’s face. Blue-green eyes and sharp fangs bared at her, blocking the view of the man’s sharp features.

With a scowl, Dia turned to leave the room, closing the door behind herself with a sharp snap.

The instant she was back in the corridor, she felt the breath she’d been holding back release. Her fingers tightened around the clipboard as she stiffened her lips into a tight horizontal line. The wood groaned in complaint.

“Just one more week.” She whispered under her breath.

Slowly, she swatted at her clothes to make sure none of the fur had been left on her. Her thoughts were a turmoil. She was slowly trying to calm back down.

“You sure you don’t want to add some sedatives to the jerky next time?”

Dia was quite sure that particular trick, if it worked, would only work once. “What’s next on the schedule?” She asked without removing her focus from cleaning her dress.

Bana let out a bark of laughter. “For you? You’ve got a talk. The Doctor called.”

That caused Dia’s neck to tense. “R... right...”

The dark-haired nurse didn’t miss the shift. Stepping closer, she grasped Dia’s hand tightly. “Hey, don’t worry. It’s probably only be him telling you to get a session with Irene.”

“What do you mean?” The nurse blinked in slight surprise, brain not quite entirely caught up.

“Some of the girls of the skeleton shift complained about having night-terrors, probably caused by the Baron’s death and the bond snapping, so...” She shrugged. “You know, the usual, get your head peeked at and prodded, maybe patched up.”

“Oh.” The Baron’s death. “Oh.”

Dia’s shoulders deflated, her smile faltered ever so slightly, her hands tensed at the hem of her dress uniform.

“You’ve been giving off all the signs of burnout, you know?” Bana’s voice was becoming distant. “Everyone’s concerned, it must have been pretty tough seeing White Claw kill the Lord right in front of you.”

The dagger was cold in her hand, warm blood drenched her fingers, her bond screamed at her, burning, searing itself as it crumbled. Her mind could pick out as the human’s body failed and collapsed, its internal systems deprived of impulses stopping his lungs. She could still heal him, she-

“Yeah... it... it wasn’t...”

“Mustn’t be easy having to look at her face every other hour, I...”

Dia stopped paying attention. Her steps felt heavy, feet stuck in the mud. “Could I... could I have a moment? Gotta clean up a bit.”

The door to the bathroom opened with a creak. Dia locked it behind her. Fingers were numb. Cold water ran at full blast. She drenched her wrists, splashing her face liberally. In her mind she still held the blade, felt the warm blood, the same blade she’d used to cut Rick’s arm off to stop the Nuptia from spreading and claiming his life as well.

“That’s an order.”

A shudder ran down her spine, fingers reaching up to the collar, hastily searching for the latch and freezing in place. Every instinct and every rule she’d lived by told her to stop,

that she was about to start her way down the path to going feral, to losing her sanity. No, she mustn't do this.

With a click, the collar came undone, and Dia took a deep breath of cool air, her lungs filling out and her legs going weak. Her reflection stared back at her, collarless, afraid. Light purple eyes with contracted irises, lips pale, and mouth slightly agape as she breathed hard.

She should feel it now, the bond breaking, the 'snap' followed by that void of being alone, truly alone.

But it never came.

He was still there, within her. Rick. His words echoing across her mind the moment she focused upon them.

"That's an order."

She... she was bonded, truly, fully, in a way that shouldn't be possible. If she focused, he could almost tell where Rick was, exactly how many steps away. She should've been terrified, scared. This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

But it felt like a warm blanket all the same.

"Rick." She spoke his name, breathing slowly, focusing on the other memories. His smile, his laugh, the little ways he treated her like... like...

Looking at herself in the mirror again, her gaze moved downwards to her exposed throat. If not for the slight discoloration to mark it, she might have almost fooled herself into thinking she was a human. Maybe pass for someone with strong Rapha ancestry that miraculously hadn't gone through the threshold.

The thought summoned a ball of fear within her. No, this wasn't how she should behave.

Dia's lips pursed as she quickly pressed the green collar back into place, clicking it shut before anyone could notice she'd taken it off at all. She tightened it enough to keep herself strictly aware of its presence, that it wasn't gone.

That everything was normal.

[118 Major Huge]

Major Gabriel Huge hated chairs.

Some might claim the distaste was born out of chairs and his size not making for a good combination, but to him it had always been more than that, unless food was involved, using a chair would universally precede something bothersome or uncomfortable.

Or both.

“Please Major, take a seat.”

Today was undoubtedly going to be both.

The man opposite of him was an old man, older than Gabriel by at least a decade. His hair was a coal black, but he could spot the bright pink roots that were showing, betraying his ancestry. The doctor had all the signs of someone who cared more about their blood purity than what they actually did with their lives.

He never did like Doctor Hale, and the feeling was undoubtedly mutual.

“This is only a formality, Doctor.” Gabriel kept his voice tight. “Her Ladyship already gave the order.”

“I cannot fathom why her Ladyship would have asked to requisition one of my nurses.”

Gabriel’s lips curled, inhaling sharply through his nose to make sure he didn’t say something that would only complicate things further. Turning inward, he let out the single question to bounce through his thoughts. “Irene?”

“He’s not the owner of the hospital, even if he acts like it. But he could get to become the owner if he plays his cards right. Lean into that.” The telepath spoke back without missing a beat.

A slight nod to his head. “The hospital is owned by her Ladyship. This is not a question but a command.”

The Doctor visibly bristled at his words, and Gabriel realized he’d fucked up. Why was it his job to be the messenger, anyway?

“... dullard.”

“Look.” Gabriel leaned forward before the Doctor could speak up. “We both know the Baroness is the one holding all the cards. All I’m saying is that, if you want to be in charge of the place, she’s the one you’re going to have to work with.” A tight, courteous nod. “At least she’s more agreeable than her husband.”

That visibly calmed the man. There was a moment as he appeared to consider the idea, leaning back into his large chair and stroking that tuft of a beard slowly. “I guess that would indeed be advantageous to me.”

“Remind him that the Baroness is a widow now.” Irene quickly threw his mind. “But don’t mention anything else, or you’re going to get gouged by the Minotaura. Repeat these EXACT words.”

Huge nodded again. “And let’s not forget that there is no husband for her to lean onto.”

Hale perked up at that proclamation. “That does seem like an unfortunate thing.” The smile he had been one that Gabriel wanted to punch.

Hale pulled open one of the drawers. “I’ll see what I can do for her Ladyship, then.”

“Glad that’s been cleared out.” Gabriel could not lift off of the chair any faster. “Good day, Hale.”

“Doctor Hale.” The man openly shot a glare his way.

And he ignored it, ducking under the door and closing it behind himself. The Major shifted his shoulders to relax them as he removed the most annoying item of the list of things he had to do today. “Why the fuck do they make office doors so small...” he could only grumble under his breath.

“Because it’s for purebloods.” Irene quipped.

Gabriel rolled his eyes, not feeling argumentative enough to want to point out how most maidens weren’t that tall to begin with.

“But if you happen to be taller than the normal human, you’re made to feel uncomfortable.” The thoughts projected into his head came with a smug edge. Of course she’d know more about this than he would. “Take a right in the next corridor.”

That wasn’t the way out, though. Gabriel’s brow furrowed slightly but obliged, coming to a halt right as he’d been about to get run over by a nurse with pink hair. The exact one that had been the talk of the village. “Dia.”

The word jostled the maiden. She straightened up and looked up at him. “Sir, I mean, Major, Major Huge, sir, hello?” There was a tiny squeak to her voice, as if she’d been caught in the middle of a thought. “May I help you?”

“Her collar’s too tight.”

“Your collar.” Huge frowned, seeing the piece of leather pinching into the maiden’s throat. “It’s tight, and you look a bit out of breath.”

His mind screamed out alarms as he saw her shrunk pupils and pale lips.

The maiden was one shock away from panic.

“Oh, oh! I... I must have done it without realizing it.” A nervous chuckle followed as she reached out to fiddle with the item. Her fingers were shaking slightly.

Gabriel frowned. He’d known her for long enough to know the maiden was certainly not in a good place. To say nothing that letting her work herself up could result in someone getting hurt.

Reaching out, he grasped her hand. “Follow me.”

“Next door to the right, empty.”

“Sir!?”

His steps quickly led to the door, opening it up and pulling Dia inside, closing the door behind them. “Irene’s here.” His words caused the Rapha to tense, eyes wide as he tapped his forehead. “What’s bothering you?”

There was hesitation, and another quick look around. “I... I’m bonded to Rick, sir.”

“We know.” A nod. “So what’s bothering you?”

Dia opened and closed her mouth several times, trying to speak but not finding the words. He could see the thoughts running rampant right until she hung her head low. “... am I a good maiden, sir?”

“Yes.”

Dia looked at him in confusion. “You didn’t let me explain myself, sir.”

“You saved a life, several lives. You helped someone in need. How does that make you bad?”

"I... I'm a bond-breaker, sir." Her shoulders shrank downwards, shuddering like there'd been a chilly wind.

"You keep having as much tact as a Minotaura."

"You keep my mother out of this." He thought right back, reaching out and gently patting Dia's shoulder. "Look, you've patched me up more times than I can count-."

"Fifty three, though if you count every time you came to get healed at the hospital, it'd be two hundred and twelve."

"Shut up." He inwardly grumbled at her. "-and, let's be real here, the Baron was a down right menace."

The nurse gasped at the insult. "Sir!"

Gabriel flinched slightly. He might have let his emotions slip a bit there. But this wasn't the time to back-down. "He was going to kill humans for the sake of his pride and ambition. I know you girls can become jaded because of the bond, but Rick would not have been his first victim."

"Sir?" Dia hesitated, looking up at him in confusion.

"Don't over-think it, ok?" Gabriel quickly shook his head, ending the conversation before it could go somewhere he didn't want to dwell on. "Right here, right now, what do you want?"

The nurse hesitated. "I don't-"

He crossed his arms and stood as imposing as he could. "None of the 'deserve it' crap. I want an answer. Consider it an order."

The nurse gulped, lowering her head, a creeping blush. "I want to be... with him, sir."

Gabriel let out a bark of laughter, patting her shoulder. "Great. You're going to come over to my place for dinner tomorrow."

"SIR!?"

The Major only laughed. "Look, I've read the reports. The Sabertooth's stuck to that guy's side every minute of the day. You're going to need every bit of help you can get." He laughed. "And I happen to have two wonderful wives who started out by trying to kill each other, so I have hopes their wisdom will be of use."

"... oh... ok." Dia nodded, her shoulders relaxing. "Thank you, sir."

“Don’t mention it.” He patted her back reassuringly. “Now go, before you get into trouble.”

The nurse nodded, quickly leaving to continue on her work.

“It still surprises me how you can be so dense when it comes to humans but not when it comes to maidens.”

“I had fifteen sisters. This stuff’s easier than trapping a Mousegirl.” A moment of pause as he tapped his chin. “Also, if you don’t play games with the poor lass, I’ll make sure to fuck you like a Succubus put a curse on me.”

“...!”

This time he laughed loudly, turning to leave as he indulged in the feeling of surprise that he’d caught out of the wordless telepathic impression his second wife left behind right as she pulled out.

It was nice knowing he still had the ability to surprise her from time to time.

[119 - ????

THUD

The room was dimly lit, large and empty, a concrete box large enough for a low-born family and their dozen children to live in if they so wished. In the center, there were two people, a human and a maiden. They circled one another, equal in height. The man was at least twice the weight as the woman, his body sculpted to perfection, muscles tense and taut, his movements methodical, calculated, slow. There was a growing bruise right under the man's right, just above his ribs. Dark green eyes stared at the maiden with coldness.

The maiden moved more leisurely. Red eyes wandered over the man's sweat-addled chest, three scars adorned it, running from shoulder to hip. Vicious black things that made her senses prickle. She turned towards the four hooded figures that stood at each of the corners of the room.

"Do not pay them any attention." The man spoke with a scowl, his brows lowered as his hands clenched into fists. "They will not interfere."

She didn't believe him, but that didn't mean she had an alternative. She raised her fists, the dark blue scales covered her forearms, her hands closer to talons than anything else. Rushing in, she dodged his jab, the maiden's closed fist punching upwards and into his sternum.

THUD

His feet lifted off the ground, but he did not fall when he dropped back down. Large, powerful hands grasped at her horns. With a grunt, his forehead barreled down against her own, the force of impact more than enough to send her a step backwards in confusion and pain.

He growled, wiping the blood off of his eyes, clenching his fists. "If you don't fight me seriously, I will have to reconsider your potential freedom."

The maiden scowled, opening her fists and revealing the wickedly black claws. Her draconic tail shifted slightly as she prepared herself. What would she do once he was dead? The door was exactly thirty steps away. Her main concern would be the species

of the other maidens. She couldn't tell what they were, and that could prove deadly in a fight.

"Don't distract yourself."

The man had approached, a powerful forward kick she instinctively sidestepped. He was wide open for her counter, claws swinging at his exposed, chiseled chest and pulsating black curse. But the attack never landed. The man continuing forward and rolling under her claws. She bristled, suddenly aware he was faster than he'd been showing until now.

Snarling, she followed, adding two more swings to tear his torso to ribbons. The human moved barely the necessary amount to avoid her attack from being truly lethal. Still, claws met flesh, and the scent of blood oozed heavily in the air. The maiden didn't relent, unwilling to give the human so much as an inch as her attacks came faster. Each one should have gouged him straight through, kill him on the spot.

But he was reading her movements, well enough that even with the speed difference, he could avoid most of the damage. The strategy was not indefinitely sustainable, however, as each failed attack still incurred injury. The human was losing blood and flesh, each slash left behind bloody trails in their wake, yet he pushed forward harder with each one without hesitation.

His mass and size were pushing her back. His attacks were fast, for a human, but not enough to hit, but it was his dodging, stepping into her attack, that kept her off balance, unable to properly do much more than a half-effective counter-attack. And right as she'd been expecting a punch out of him, his large clenched fist ready to pummel at her... his foot swept her leg from underneath her.

The world spun, she fell, and the man jumped at her. The maiden tried to recover, but again he knocked her feet off from under her. She might have been stronger, but she weighed less. And the moment she began falling in full, the human had wrapped his arms around her wrist, pulling tightly against her chest right as his legs pinned her head to the floor. A dead-lock. The man put everything he had into the lock, and the maiden felt the pressure on her shoulder increase into a searing pain.

Before she could find the leverage to fight back, the pain exploded, and she screamed. Elemental energy coursed through her body on instinct. The arm that should have been numb from being dislocated surged with strength at an awkward angle. Still, it managed to throw him off of her and to the other side of the ring. Grunting, the maiden knelt, huffing, holding her shoulder. The pain throbbed.

“You used your powers... good.” The man had rolled with the toss, standing back up and glaring at her as he breathed heavily, sweat and blood pouring to the floor. “We can finally start in earnest.”

He lumbered towards her, a dead sprint, his gaze icy cold determination. The maiden couldn't let him overwhelm her with his weight again, she breathed in, letting out a jet of hot fire that exploded outwards in every direction. Her arm was limp at her side, but so long as she'd manage to keep him-

“Not enough!”

The man had pushed through the flames. Her eyes widened in horror, unable to react as his boot met her jaw with enough force to knock her to the side. Stunned, she moved to stand up, but he'd knocked her down again, and this time she was not able to properly use one of her arms. The man was clearly intent on taking the other this time.

The visage of his half-burnt face and searing hateful eyes were like a vise in her heart.

With a scream, she plunged her claw forward.

A moment later she realized she'd pierced straight through his throat.

The man collapsed, blood sputtering out of the wound, and the maiden rushed to get him off of her, scrambling to her feet. She looked around, arms raised and ready for a fight, expecting to be attacked by the others..

“You may leave.” A voice spoke from all around her all at once. A screeching sound and a single door opened. The maiden looked at the man that glared at her with cold hateful eyes, then at the door, and then back. She ducked, breaking into a full sprint towards the exit, the metal closing behind her with a heavy thud.

The four maidens that stood at each corner sprung into action, rushing to surround him, glowing hands pouring energy into his body. Spells were sung, thickening the air with power. They focused on his injuries, starting with his throat. The man gasped for air as soon as the throat had regained its structure. They moved further down towards his injuries, each one closing and leaving only unblemished skin in its wake.

He did not move or complain, barely showing pain as he waited for each strip of torn flesh and muscle to reattach itself back into place. The process was silent, methodical, the maidens caressing his skin as if in worship, glowing hands traversing every inch of his physique.

Like sculptors building a masterwork, the man's body had no blemishes left by the time they'd finished their work. The only exception the three dark glowing scars on his chest.

With their work finished, the maidens quietly stepped away from the man, returning each to their corner as he sat up, drenched in sweat. Any trace of the blood gone, his body naked and pale.

The metal doors opened, and he stepped into the sunlight, the balcony overlooking a hill covered in lush green. The warmth seeped into his cold body, his eyes adjusting to the brightness as his golden mane reflected the sunlight. The man took the white robes offered by the maiden that stood next to the door, donning it as he looked onto the prairie.

The only thing ruining the visage was the single blue dot running across the fields in a mad dash for freedom.

“So you can’t handle a Draco just yet.” The voice spoke from his left, the man did not need to turn to look at the owner.

Instead, he frowned. “I hope you did not interfere this time.”

“She’s not going to be hunted down or anything.”

“But?”

“But she’s three days away from going feral.” A small laugh followed. “And the nearest town in that direction is a week away.”

“Then it is her fault for not knowing better.” With a slight nod, the man turned to follow the stairs down to the large patio. “Since you’re here, I take it you bring news.”

“Just some little interesting things, here and there.” The maiden’s presence was a shadow, trailing behind him as he walked. “A Baron died.”

“Any I should care about?”

“Your cousin. The one you banished to that little village as far East as the kingdom goes.”

The man’s brows furrowed ever so slightly. “And this is worth my attention, why?”

“A human bonded the Sabertooth that turned him into feral-food. On his own. The feat might be diminished because he’s an offworlder.”

“It was about time a new one emerged, though it is fortuitous to have occurred in our kingdom. Do we know what his power is yet?”

“None.”

The man nodded, moving down the stairs, heading towards the metal doors leading into the rest of his estate. "Then send someone to-."

"No, Master, he has no powers. He is a pureblooded human."

The expression soured, his steps coming to a halt. The man turned around and looked upon his informant for the first time that day. The maiden was covered in a large black cloak, meant to protect her from the sunlight. Red eyes gleamed through the shadows underneath the cowl. He met those eyes with a silent glare.

"The report says he lost an arm in the confrontation, the healing will take nearly a month since his body can't tolerate elemental energy. The blood-work confirms purity." In the unnatural darkness that hid the maiden's face from him, he could sense a smile. "Earl Vitchatt has extended an invitation to meet him."

"Of course he would." The man turned around, changing the intended destination. His eyes shone with determination.

"There's more."

"More?" That was... surprising. She always teased with the most important things at the end of their little conversations.

"A report has been sent, mentioning two dozen humans, political refugees, men and women alike. The report claims they escaped Coven. They showed up in the same village as the pureblood human." A small laughter followed. "But it's the oddest of things, the number of human women is practically the same that of the men. Don't you find it very strange, my Lord?"

The man's eyes widened slightly, his steps began moving quickly, what had been a leisure walk turned into nearly a sprint. The cowled figure followed with ease. Not a sound to betray her movements, but he could feel her mirth as he crossed his house and entered his office.

There were three maidens there, each with their own desk, each surprised to find him entering at this hour of the day. "This is urgent." He claimed, and the instantly stood at attention.

"Your orders, sir?"

"There's a report of political asylum for some humans that showed up in Astunes." He spoke loud and clear. "Muddle the waters, make it impossible to discern if the story is true or not without us finding out about it first."

“Should we tag their profiles?”

“Yes.” He walked towards his desk, sitting on the leather surface. His attention moved away from the assistants as they pulled out a series of enchanted mirrors, each tied to different people, to different parts of the kingdom.

Communications that didn't rely on radio, that couldn't be traced.

The man's gaze turned towards the figure and frowned. “Is there anything else?”

“I want the value of q .” The maiden pulled back her hood, pale chalky skin, long blond hair, red-blood eyes. The fangs peeking over her lips betrayed her species. “Using these new variables.”

The man hesitated, nodding. “I don't need to run a simulation. If these humans are as pure as you claim them to be, then the value is no longer zero. But it is a fragile situation at best.”

The Vampire smiled, a twirl of her wrist, a cup materialized out of thin air. “Then the vampires will move.” The smile turned into a smirk. “What must be done to avoid humanity's extinction, oh great leader of the science department?”

He looked upon the golden choker that adorned the Vampire's throat.

An idea slowly taking shape.

“War.”

[120 Freya]

Freya's eyes narrowed as she stepped out. The reason for it was because her view of the little garden she called her own was interrupted by a single tall broad man.

"Major, what are you doing here?" She could only ask in an attempt to sound polite. Her gaze flickered to the plants, some of the little ones were thirsty. But none had been stepped on, that was good.

"Feel free to work if you want, I just came to talk a bit."

"With all due respect, sir, this is the first time you have ever come here." She spoke cautiously. "And I've known you for quite some time."

"Let's not mince words, Freya, you've known me since I could barely walk." He glanced her way with a slight frown. "And you've been a wonderful teacher in many things."

"But you are going to ask something of me." Her brows narrowed further. "Should I start guessing?"

"Am I your superior officer, Freya?"

That shot a bolt straight through the elf, her lips pursed. "You are, sir, without a doubt."

"I'd like you to spend a day as the bodyguard of one of the offworlders."

Shit.

"The Tomas boy?" She needn't wait for him to answer, now scowling all the more.

"Gabriel, I'm not going to be a Catgirl chasing her tail." The Elf tried her best to level her gaze with the human, not that it would work considering the height difference. "I don't want you to pretend to know what I want. A partner is not something I need."

"But he does."

Freya's ears drooped slightly. "Are you going to give me the order?"

The lumbering man shook his head. "Rick will be heading out to the Earl's place, I've no doubt the other three will follow." He crossed his arms. "If you don't want it, I'll just look for someone else."

The choice of words startled her, the Elf couldn't help but frown. "Why would I want to leave all of this?" She gestured at her garden. "You know my opinion on this matter already."

"I've certainly heard it enough times, yes." The man smirked. "Yet imagine my surprise when you were the first to volunteer to help protect them from the Baron."

Freya shut her mouth before she could respond to that, looking away right as her cheeks took an uncharacteristic level of coloration. Coughing, she pushed her feelings under control. "Merely doing my job."

"Suuure." The insufferable man laughed. "You have a week to think about whether to do 'your job' some more or not." As he stepped towards the fence, the Major paused, glancing at her once more. "Oh, and if you don't want the role, I've heard more than a few names willing to jump at the opportunity."

"I'm sure you have." She growled, watching him leave and grinding her teeth for a minute before she managed to properly calm herself down.

With a huff, she focused on her children. It was easy to fall into the rhythm. The tomato seeds had taken properly and were growing in nicely, and she had to trim at the blueberry bushes since they were planning to kill their neighbors... again. Each of her children sang to her with their woes. Some had too many worms, others needed a bit more sunlight, the soil would be too dry, or too damp, she carefully tended to each of them.

The hours just melted away after that, and when she'd finished, it was time to go back inside and clean up. Freya picked out the ripest fruit and vegetables, and made a mental note on which plants were due a little boost. Maybe she'd visit the apple orchard tomorrow? With a basket full of fresh produce, she dropped it off at the kitchen and headed to the communal shower.

"Someone's been having fun."

The words snapped the Elf out of her internal reverie, her eyes staring at the Thundrix at the opposite side of the showers.

"Miss Ana." She gulped, nodding quickly and very abruptly reminding herself to keep an eye out for the maiden's wings. The last thing she wanted was getting a little jostle during a shower.

"Do we get any onions?"

"Yes, I made sure we'd have at least two for tonight." The Elf replied with a nod.

“Great! Yours are always spicier. Tomorrow’s lunch’s going to be great.” The maiden smiled, soaping herself up and singing a little tune.

It was contagious, and Freya couldn’t help but nod along, keeping her own shower succinct. “You’re in charge of cooking today?”

“Nope, my turn got moved to tomorrow. Got a hot date.”

That caught Freya by surprise, the Elf nearly whirled to look at the maiden as she was scrubbing her wings. “Who in their right mind would date you?”

“Haha, very funny.” The maiden blew her a raspberry. “The Major finally lifted the ban on trying to get some otherworlder action, what with Dia having managed to bag the big hero and all that.”

The Elf’s movements slowed down ever so slightly, taking a moment to frown. “I thought the ban was because of the rush?”

“That too, I guess.” A little pause followed, the woman looked over her slim shoulder, taking a second to tend to her wing’s elbows, the feathers crackling with tiny sparks. “Gah, these always stick out, mind giving me a hand?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Oh, come on, the shocking thing was only one time!”

“If they care about some rustled feathers, maybe they don’t deserve you.” Freya smirked.

And Ana could only roll her eyes. “I’m looking for some fun, not a partner. Get on with the times, old hag.”

“Fine, be that way.” The woman twirled a finger, unleashing a tiny amount of elemental energy, the power washing over the feathers and causing some of them to take a slight mossy green discoloration.

“Hey!”

Freya had made a retreat before any retaliation could occur, the maiden keeping her head held high as she hastily dried her lithe figure and dressed up with her usual off-hours uniform. Quite aware that Ana might find some assistance in her attempt at minor revenge, Freya stepped outside. It wasn’t her turn cooking tonight, so she could burn some hours and eat late after Ana had left.

The first thing she picked up on was the scent of smoke. Part of the village had burned, and the fact the debris hadn't been fully cleared out bothered her greatly. One more reason why she'd always keep her distance from lady Miranda. Too many things had the bad habit of catching fire when near the Phoenix.

With Freya's steps leading her away from the smoke, she meandered her way into the small park near the center of the village. It was a popular spot for getting some food, what with the only two biggest taverns being right there, but since it would be a while longer before anyone started eating, she could use it to just let her thoughts wander about.

That is, if not because the lights suddenly went out.

Freya sighed. Another blackout, the girls at the power-station must be having it rough with their main source of power gone.

Killed at the hands of White Claw. The knight captain's death had hit many far harder than the Baron's. Freya certainly wished the mad-man hadn't involved Bronte in his mess.

With a flicker of her focus, she chanted a small spell for illumination under her breath. The orb of light emerged, a dim green little glow that made it at least possible to move around without having to fear tripping over something.

A rustle drew her attention. She reached for the dagger on her belt, stopping as soon as she realized the one approaching was a human. Her throat tightened the second after when she realized exactly what human. "Tomas."

"Mind if I share the light a bit?" The young man laughed nervously. "I'd use my phone, but it ran out of juice."

"I'm not sure what a 'phone' is." She didn't refuse his approach, instead turning her senses elsewhere. With a human nearby, she would have to be more careful if anything unexpected got close.

"Oh, it's an electronic device, and we call-."

Freya tensed slightly. "I did not mean it as an actual question, sir. You... don't need to explain."

"I don't mind." His response was earnest and direct, shrugging before shifting his weight. "It's more of a bit a breath of fresh air, really." A shy smile emerged on his face. "So ask away."

It wasn't an order, Freya knew, still... it would be rude not to... right? "And... what use do phones have?"

"Lots of uses!" The young man perked, finger rubbing against the bridge of his nose and pausing. A little laugh left him. "No glasses, right. Erm, so phones, they originally started off mostly to be able to talk with people far away."

"Like the radio messages?"

"Exactly!" He bounced slightly. "But it's portable, and it allowed to talk in real time rather than only use written messages."

How?

"And it has other functions?"

"Nowadays? Yeah, lots, it also lets to send images, moving images, with sound. And it has access to the Internet, or, well, had, and... well, I was using it to store up the codex."

Freya's ears perked up slightly. "The Maiden codex?"

"Yup." Tomas nodded, hesitating a bit and scratching the back of his head. "It's a whole lot of text, so I was storing a copy so I could read while traveling."

"You can read." The maiden felt a little twinge of pride, nodding at that. "Who taught you?"

"Oh, reading's not... we were all taught how to read at school, since little, like, school starts at age... seven? Six?"

Freya crossed her arms for a moment, pushing away the little questions and glancing back into the surrounding movement. Most Hunters had summoned their own spell-lights, and she could spot more than one flickering source of illumination within. It cast the village in a soft starry glow.

The Elf tensed as she felt something warm drape over her shoulders, her head whipped back towards Tomas. He'd put his jacked on her. The young man blushed and looked away. "You looked chilly."

Of all the ways she could have reacted to that proclamation, Freya chose to let out a small curse under her breath.

Tomas hesitated. "Did... I do something wrong?"

“No, no.” The Elf caressed the jacket, it was made of wool, yet was softer than any she’d ever seen before. And it was very warm. “Just... would you find it offensive if I were to invite you to have dinner with the other maidens and myself?”

“Wait, offensive, what? Why would I-?” Tomas froze, blinking rapidly.

“I will take that as a ‘no’.” She gestured with her head in the direction of the communal house. “We are having vegetable stew tonight.” Like most nights in fact.

But she had a feeling the human wouldn’t mind.

[121 Rick]

Stepping into the shower, Rick held back the grimace as the warm water washed down his right arm. The feeling of the water made his nerve endings light up and become hyper-active, as if the whole limb were ticklish in all the wrong ways. As if he'd fallen asleep on it and just woken up.

It would take a while to get used to things again.

Still, this felt like the only moment when he could actually relax.

Every other second of the day had been spent with a certain overly clingy cat holding his hand.

In quite the literal fashion.

He wasn't even sure how he'd managed to work through the documentation and paperwork let alone keep her from kidnapping him. Again. Fortunately the attempt had stopped short at the village's edge.

This was draining, Monica was not... getting along well with civilization.

And the Earl's invitation...

There was so much going through his head, so many things to worry over, so many...

Click.

"Monica, no." He grumbled, of course he'd forgotten to lock the damned thing. "Out."

The door softly closed.

Dismissing the thought before he groaned himself into the next century, the young teacher leaned back against the wooden wall, letting the warm water run over him. How much time did he have before it would run out? Probably best to wrap things up before the impatient cat barged back in.

He tensed as he heard the rustles of the curtains. "Monica, I-." Frowning, he pulled back the curtains with indignation, ready to bark something at her.

But Monica wasn't the one standing there. Rick froze.

“Dia.” And just like that, a whole new series of problems began to emerge to the forefront of his mind. Words failed him, why was she here!?

The maiden seemed uncaring for his lack of anything else to say, she smiled. “Sir.” Slowly. Purple eyes and pink hair, the maiden almost looked like she was glowing. Her hands reached up to her shoulders, fingers tracing outwards, the white frilly dress she wore falling down and pooling around her ankles and revealing that there was nothing beneath.

The woman stood before him, naked, cheeks gaining coloration that spread all the way down to her chest. Her modest breasts stood proudly, milky white skin and light pink areolas, the shape of her figure flavoring ample hips, there was a softness about her shape, a homely ‘next-door-neighbor’ appeal to her figure that with curves drawing his attention down to her shaved crotch.

Rick felt himself flush. “Dia, I-.”

The pink-haired nurse stepped forward, soft thighs rubbing against each other as she placed herself right in front of him. Her finger softly pressed against his lips as she entered the shower, closing the curtains behind her. “If you don’t want me, tell me to stop.” There was hesitation in her eyes as she spoke, a hint of fear. “I want you.”

Her cheeks went from pink to red, flushing hard as she pressed him against the cold wet wall.

A moment of concern shot through him. “Monica...”

“Monica is distracted right now, sir.” She spoke with a hushed voice. “We better stay quiet.”

He hesitated. “Why weren’t you there when I woke up...?”

“I didn’t work in the hospital anymore, sir.” She proclaimed in a hushed whisper, pressing her breasts against him, face inching closer. Her purple eyes were wide, her skin soft, there was a lingering scent of lilac.

“Then-.”

She leaned forward, and he grew silent, her gaze met his own, white pools of violet, intense, determined. “Kiss me, sir, before I lose my courage.”

That snapped him to move, leaning forward and meeting her soft lips. Dia’s arms wrapped around his neck, biting down on his lower lip in need, fingers tracing through his hair, one leg rising and pressing against his hip, her crotch against his thigh. The

maiden didn't lose a single second, hand reaching down to his loins, fingers brushing against his shaft.

There was a pause, slightly surprised.

"You're this hard, for me?" Her voice was a husky whisper. She giggled a little, moving with an unexpected urgency as she pressed her hips against his own. The nurse's fingers stroked his length, squeezing it tenderly, just enough to draw a slight gasp out of the human.

"Dia, I-."

"Shhh." The maiden silenced him with a finger. "Let me do all the work, sir." The leg that pressed against his hip slowly took the weight off of him, and he slipped. The Rapha showed a great deal of strength, keeping him from falling altogether and slowly moving him down to sit on the floor.

With his ass grounded, she didn't waste a single moment to straddle his hips. She leaned forward, taking his lips in an impassioned kiss once more, using one hand to guide his hardness into her, the other using the wall to brace for support.

"I've... wanted this... so bad." She whimpered, moaning as her pussy stretched every inch of the way. Slowly bottoming herself out on his shaft. "So bad." She whimpered, biting his lip, fingers brushing into his hair until her clit was firmly pressed against his pubes.

Then she tightened, squeezing down on him. They shared a moan, her body hot and ready for more.

"Richard." Dia spoke his name almost with reverence, her hands traced over his chest, pulling him into another kiss.

"My arm." He complained, trying to move his right but needing to focus too much on it to do so effectively.

The woman froze, glancing at his pale right arm and then shaking her head. "This is all for you, sir." She caressed his shoulder gingerly, using her other hand to pull his left hand up and against her modest chest, the flesh fitting perfectly into his palm. "All of it, all of me."

That appeared to click something in him, his gaze lowered to her neck in realization.

"Your collar."

Dia's smile faltered slightly, biting her lower lip and easing herself further into his embrace. Her tight sex quivered. "Just imagine it, Rick, I'm your human woman." She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. "All yours." She kissed his cheek, his chin, his ear. "All ready to be bred."

A million and one thoughts ran through him, and they came to an abrupt end as she squeezed down on him, moaning and thrusting her hips down in impatience, friction and warmth. She began to bounce slowly, working herself faster and moaning louder into his shoulder. Gritting his teeth, Rick found the strength to lean forward, Dia gasped as she was pushed back, falling and laying on her back while he pressed down on her.

He couldn't use his right, but his left was enough.

"Just like that." She beamed, legs wrapping around his hips and locking in place. "Take me. Claim me."

He thrust, and she whimpered, quivering as she pulled him into her arms, kissing him needfully. Her body was burning up, hot and eager, and Rick completely forgot of the running water, her skin a smooth pliable eager hot receptacle for his hands. Or hand mostly, his left was all he had to keep himself stable, his right resting gingerly against her ass but unable to properly summon much strength.

Thrusting into her at a maddening rhythm, Rick lost himself in her lips, her skin, her softness. There was only enough presence of mind to pull out before he could finish, not that the maiden missed a beat. Dia's hand reached down to his shaft and stroked him, her touch tingling against his skin and pushing him over the edge. Orgasm came in thick white rivulets, and a cooing smiling nurse. Breathless, he collapsed into her, feeling her kiss his shoulder and neck as he did the same in turn.

The hot water washed it away, and Rick was left with the sense of suddenness in all of this. "This..." He pulled back to look at her.

Dia was one step ahead.

The maiden took his hand, pulling it upwards and leaving it to caress her throat, naked, devoid of the green choker, a discoloration mark the only proof there was ever one to begin with. Her eyes twinkled as she did so, something about the gesture carrying a meaning he couldn't quite puzzle out.

"When a maiden gets an owner, a specific owner, they wear a blue collar." She spoke in a whisper. "I... want you, Rick, sir. I want to be yours."

"And if I say no?"

“I... I don't want to beg.” She squeezed down on him, making him groan and shudder, feeling the blood quickly flowing back.

“You... don't need to-.” She silenced him again, placing a finger against his lips.

The quiet confirmation made her smile, the hand stroking him squeezed a bit, and a tingling sensation overcame his whole lower body. Rick felt surprised as his cock rose back to attention within instants.

“I want you to fuck me, Rick. As hard and often as you can, as many times as you want, in every way you want me.” With a face that regained its intense blush, she smirked. “At least until Monica runs out of catnip.”

“Wait, what?”

[122 - ?????]

There was a strangeness in the air as Miranda's wings took the warmth of the sun, her gaze coursing through the forest in search of potential signs of dangerous ferals. The fact that she could spot mice and dogs going about was a strong clue there wasn't anything in the immediate vicinity that might have scared them off. Still, the Phoenix kept her gaze sharp, the report had mentioned the Pyrebear had run in this general direction, and she'd definitely want to at least catch a trail.

If the feral opted to leave for good, that would be nice, but the bigger concern was that she'd remain sulking about. The last thing they needed was a smart feral sticking around and watching them. Who knew what it might learn? It could very certainly end up being far more dangerous next time it opted to show up.

A flicker of light caught Miranda's attention. Her eyes turned eastwards, towards the mountain. There was a spot of light that was shining her way. For a moment she thought it to be just some random object, but the light was keeping track of her. And she recognized the flicker-pattern for a request for help.

Someone daring to go through the pass during spring? Trouble indeed. "Shit."

Turning towards the village's direction, Miranda charged her flames, letting out four quick upwards bursts, a pause, and then two more. Within seconds a flicker of light from the village acknowledged they'd received the message. Miranda turned towards the original source and beat her wings faster, summoning her heat to push her higher into the air.

The location was a fourth of the way up the pass, whoever they were, they must have barely spotted the village. Miranda frowned as she wondered what kind of threat she ought to expect, she wasn't seeing anything flying nearby, so that should make her job easier. It would take her quite a while to get there, however, so it would take her at least an hour before she could properly ascertain the details.

Following protocol, she made sure to check for other fliers every handful of minutes, using her own portable mirror to send some flickers towards the source of the emergency signal, requesting for details about the threat. The response only appeared after half an hour, the same pattern as before. The people were likely unfamiliar with Hunter code.

So not a merchant.

What other kind of lunatic would dare the pass then? The list of options was growing shorter, and Miranda wasn't too sure of the prospects.

A quick look from overhead as she approached confirmed three people. At least one was a human male, considering how he'd taken off his shirt to signal at her. Miranda ignored them for the time being, checking the surroundings for potential threats.

No ferals.

The cliffs nearby also were devoid of the kind of dangers that might attack from afar.

Something was off.

Better not risk it, she descended but only enough to keep herself within shouting distance. "What's the emergency!?"

"She's hurt!" The man gestured at the one next to him. Miranda spotted some blood. "Do you have medical supplies?"

A few. Miranda descended, glancing at the two other figures. Maidens no doubt, the second one was a mouse, her skin was pale, so unlikely to be a Tigermouse. But the wounded one... it was hard to discern her breed what with how much clothes she wore, probably weak against the cold? The Phoenix touched down on a nearby boulder once she was sure there was no one else near the large rock. It gave her a vantage point, easy access to fly away, and enough distance that if she were attacked by these strangers, she could protect herself.

Still, she could feel a trickle of unease, a strangeness in her flames. "What sort of injury?" She pressed on.

"We were attacked by an Ursine, she had to block them off, got some deep cuts." The human spoke hastily, not moving to approach the Phoenix but urgently gesturing at the hunched over hooded figure.

"We would also like some information, ma'am, if you have any to share." The mouse pipped up, moving to stand between the human and Miranda. Brave for a mouse to try to defend her human like that. "We saw the village smoldering, has it been overrun?"

"No, we got battered a bit but we're doing mostly alright." Reaching into her satchel, Miranda tossed a potion. The mouse caught it right away, hurrying to approach the heavily dressed maiden.

Miranda's eyes narrowed as she spotted horns peeking out of the cowl, their shape not one she could immediately recognize. The feeling of strangeness increased within her. "What's your business in our kingdom?"

"We're just travelers." The human quickly stepped forward, arms wide with a disarming smile. His eyes focused on her with measured concern though. "Has anything else occurred besides the rush?"

"The Lord died during the fight." Miranda straightened slightly at the feeling of a shiver running down her spine, turning away to confirm there was nothing else around them. Her gaze caught sight of three dark spots above the village that were flying their way, reinforcements.

"That's a shame." The man nodded slightly, glancing at his two companions and then in the village's direction. His lips curled ever so minutely, and the hooded maiden shifted slightly, muttering something the Phoenix couldn't make out. The human tensed, almost jumping in place, nodding emphatically. "Seems you've got everything covered, we thank you for the help."

The Phoenix glanced at the hooded figure, frowning. "If you're going to come into the kingdom, you will need to check your documentation and get approval from the Baroness."

"We will keep that in mind." The male nodded again. "Thank you for your help, my mi-maiden wouldn't have made it without it."

With a frown, Miranda ignored the human, using a flicker of her wrist to send a small fiery spark of power to bounce off of the dirt in front of the hooded maiden. "Take off your hood."

The trio hesitated, mouse and human sharing looks of concern.

And the maiden under the cape spoke. "Could you let us continue on our way unperturbed?" Her voice was sweet, melodious, a song that tickled the ear and left goosebumps running up and down Miranda's wings.

The wrongness within her grew.

Alarm bells rung in the Phoenix's mind, her wings spread wide, heat instantly growing all around her until the air was shimmering from her flames. "Take. Off. Your. Hood." Her feathers glowed with power, ready to unleash them in an instant. There was something wrong here, something that made her heat feel weird, out of place, hot but in all the wrong ways.

The human and the mouse froze, looking between Miranda and the hooded figure.

“Alright.”

Slowly, the maiden rose to her feet, both hands raised in the air. Clawed fingertips and flawless pearly pink skin. Power pooled within the bulky clothes and everything within Miranda’s mind screamed at her to attack. So she did. Fire exploded in a stream to the maiden.

There was a shriek, but it did not come from the hooded figure. It came from Miranda.

Something had rushed into her, through her, taking the very flames she’d been using and locking them within herself. The Phoenix screamed, the fire exploding within her body as the elemental energy brought a completely different heat to her.

Falling to her knees, Miranda gasped, eyes turning towards the hooded maiden. The clothes had been burnt away, leaving behind only naked flesh.

She was the very definition of sex made flesh.

Child bearing hips swayed with every step of the maiden’s plump thighs, her waspish waist a perfect pinch to the hourglass that her body had been sculpted to have. Large heavy breasts swayed with every step, dark pink areolas capped with nipples that made the Phoenix’s mouth water. The pink skin glowed against the flames, granting a natural beauty and an ever present blush to the maiden whose golden eyes burned with alluring determination, long locks of azure blue swaying with the wind brought about from the flame’s heat.

Miranda’s knees faltered, a hand reaching for her chest, arousal burned in her body, her own fire turned against her. “A charmer.” She grunted, unable to look away, gasping as her fingers brought tingling burning pleasure against her skin.

“I’m a succubus, dear.” The maiden spoke, bat-like wings spreading behind her as she flapped once, reaching Miranda’s location with a single beat of her wings.

“You...”

A shriek escaped her as the clawed fingertip caressed her neck, trailing over her golden collar but not breaking it. Instead the digit continued its way down, slicing through her clothes with razor-sharp precision.

And the Phoenix could do nothing but moan, the Succubus’ touch was igniting an inferno within her, and it was making any attempt to think become harder and harder.

“You shouldn’t have attacked me, what a naughty little woman.” The Succubus spoke.

“Aberrant.” Miranda closed her eyes shut, trying desperately to purge the invasive energy out of her system. Power meant to twist and disrupt, weak on its own, but once it took hold...

“Don’t worry, I won’t kill you.” The horned maiden spoke, the finger reaching down, pinching a nipple. “No sense in having the Hunters going after me.”

With a moan, fire burst all around her, searing her clothes away, leaving her just as naked as the Succubus. Her legs completely crumbled under her own weight, collapsing onto the glowing hot stone. How was this maiden not being burned? Everything was spinning in an ever escalating need.

“I am going to have a lot of fun with you. I’m hungry.” The Succubus’ finger continued trailing downwards, gripping Miranda’s flushed body with the familiarity of a long-lost lover. “But first...”

A single digit penetrated into her snatch, and all thoughts scattered in a single moment of searing white fire. Miranda bucked her hips, head pressed firmly against the rock as her eyes rolled up into their sockets. Pleasure and euphoria like she’d never felt before burst through her like a volcano, instantaneous and without any capacity to prepare, the orgasm hit her with a force that knocked the air right out of her lungs.

And another one followed.

And another.

Choking on her breath, the Phoenix screamed until she choked on her own breath. Only collapsing into the boulder as she could feel she’d been allowed respite from such powerful a sensation.

“I...”

“We’ve only started.” The horned maiden smirked down at her, and Miranda felt fear course through her as she did.

“No, wait, I-!”

The words ended, a moan erupted forth, white noise searing itself into her mind until she collapsed again. Her hands had melted into the stone, her body was red-hot and glowing. But the Succubus had not even been scalded.

“We’ll start with some questions.” The maiden spoke softly, stroking Miranda’s neck and making her shiver, pulling the red-head’s face against her breast. “You’re going to tell me everything you know.”

Her attempt to summon the ability to resist shattered with the next orgasm that was forced upon her body. Teeth bit into the offered tit with everything she had, but her tormentor only moaned into it, digging her finger deeper into Miranda’s cunt.

In an instant the Phoenix knew, she would be unable to resist. Each explosive burst of pleasure was followed by supplication for it to stop.

Soon enough, everything she knew began to spill out from her lips. The kingdom, the village, the Hunters, his husband, her family, the Baron, White Claw, the offworlders.

And Rick Cross.

When the reinforcements arrived, they found an unconscious and exhausted Miranda floating atop the pool of cooling magma that had once been a boulder. With no sign of their assailants to be found other than the Phoenix’s own lust-addled memories.