



Monsters and Maidens Volume 2

by Ravnicrasol

Chapter 057 [Rick](Volume 2 Start)

To Rick, waking up to the sight of an ugly light green ceiling was, perhaps, what allowed him to stay grounded. There was no way an afterlife could have such an horrid sense of decor. And it just so happened that this mild sense of reality was, in the end, what kept him from immediately panicking. Despite the wakefulness of his thoughts, his body was numb. He could barely feel anything. He could barely move. In fact, he couldn't move at all. Arms, legs, head, not even his fingers responded to his command, not even a twitch. All he could do was blink and shift his gaze around the featureless ugly green ceiling.

The momentary lack of panic was slowly receding, and Rick was now having doubts whether it was time to start internally screaming or not. Why couldn't he move? Why couldn't he speak? Why did his whole body feel numb and distant? The sense of detachment kept receding one inch at a time.

There was a beeping sound next to him. A machine? He couldn't see it, but the device was definitely electronic, the beep insistent. And it was speeding up.

He heard a door open, there were steps approaching. "You're awake." The voice was soft and soothing, and with it came the sight of a face. The face was young and female, with pink hair and warm purple eyes. A green choker adorned her otherwise bare neck. "Sir, I'm going to put you back to sleep for a bit."

Rick wanted to protest, to speak, to ask what was going on.

His body did not respond.

Darkness followed before he could even think of what to do.

It was as if he'd blinked. He opened his eyes again and saw the same green ceiling. A part of him knew he'd been unconscious up until a second prior,

asleep for an indefinite amount of time. The sensation was weird but hard to miss, a soreness from not moving. Had it been hours? Days?

His whole body twitched and an aching pain wracked his every bone and muscle. Agony despite barely having moved. Groaning, he tried to shift position again, his body was one gigantic bruise. Tenderized. Rick's voice faltered, throat dry and parched.

"Shh, please do not push yourself, sir." It was the voice from before. It came with a soft caress of his wrist.

Rick closed his eyes. "Water."

"Just one moment, sir."

And as promised, relief washed down his throat. It was slightly sweet and cool. It hit all the right spots. Rick could only lay there and suckle on the trickle of fluid that was being carefully poured into his lips. The bottle was pulled out once Rick had taken his fill. A pair of warm hands pressed gingerly against his chest. An uncomfortable heat blossomed from the touch, spreading across his body and washing away the pain.

"Your body is still recovering, sir, please do not force yourself." The woman leaned over and entered his field of vision again, giving him a determined look. "I was warned of how head-strong you could be, sir. I must insist that if you need anything, ask. I am here to help."

"Who's..." A hesitant pause. "Who survived?"

The pink-haired woman's smile warmed ten times over. Her hand reached to reassuringly caress Rick's shoulder. "In regard to the group you traveled with, Mister Tomas and Miss Catherine are the next room over, and Mister Gabriel at the other side of the corridor. They are all in perfectly healthy conditions."

A wave of relief crashed through him. Rick nodded. "And... the others?"

"As far as I can tell, most everyone was brought back from the deep forest. Though I've heard your group had sent a second scouting team the Hunters have yet to find."

Another quick nod. "We made it."

"Yes, you did, sir." The young woman's smile dazzled, the warmth from her touch receded slowly. It left a tingling in its wake that almost tickled. "Now, I cannot heal you further right now. Your body is already close to saturation. But do not worry, you will make a full recovery."

"Saturation?"

"A body can only take so much elemental energy before it starts breaking down. And humans have a lower tolerance for it."

"Elemental... energy?"

"Ah." She let out a small giggle, cheeks reddening slightly. "Your students told me you were a professor in chemistry. I'm unfortunately not very well versed in that kind of science." She shifted a little, standing closer to the head of the bed. She moved her hand, so it'd be in Rick's field of vision. It was wreathed in a soft, white, flickering light. "We have many uses for elemental energy. Mister Tomas called it 'Magic', but to us that is just an aspect only some maidens can use."

The flickering glow vanished. She twisted her hand this way and that, showing off there were no tricks. There was little to be found, nothing out of the ordinary. Also, she'd painted her nails a light blue.

"That's... a lot to take in." Rick mumbled tiredly, frowning ever so slightly. "Can I sit up?"

The smile waned slightly. "I'm sorry, sir, not currently. I do expect you will be able to once I've properly finished healing your ribcage and spine."

"... excuse... me?"

"Your body received a great deal of trauma, many of your bones still have fractures, and your organs are still... tender."

A very long pause followed. Rick frowned, trying to move again, only managing another twitch. The gesture was immediately met by a slight look of concern from the nurse. Her hand moved to press against his chest. The warmth from earlier didn't come, only a light tingling that ran from head to toes. "Please... don't. If you move too much, it will worsen your condition, and I will have to put you back to sleep, sir."

"I... that should have hurt? Right?"

"We dulled your pain receptors to avoid a potential shock to your system." She nodded slightly. The concern wasn't quite gone. "I returned part of your mobility since you've recovered consciousness. It's best to allow your brain to reconnect at its own pace. Otherwise you would still be in an artificial coma."

It went unspoken that she'd take his wakefulness away if he started being dumb about it. "It sounds like a lot," His voice came out raspy and hoarse. The young man did his best to close his eyes and relax back on the bed. "How long have I been out?"

The young woman squirmed, scratching her chin and looking away. "Two days."

For his part, Rick had almost jumped. "Two... days? Two?"

"There was a lot of work to do and your physiology is abnormally sensitive to elemental energy," she replied defensively. "Fortunately there was nothing missing, so most of the effort was in putting things back together where they ought to be." Her awkwardness was gone, the young woman winked, her hand moving to his forehead, and pulling back a loose strand of hair. "Some of my companions have given you the moniker of Humpy, sir." There was a light blush on her cheeks as she quickly retrieved her hand from his face. "Fortunately we put you back together."

"How... how did I even survive?"

"Miss Icary managed to keep your heart beating and brain oxygenated on the way back," she said, nodding reassuringly. "She said you'd gotten the brunt of a Tigress attack because you protected Miss Ginny." There was a little smile that was followed by a frown. "Though that was very brave, I must warn you, sir, you shouldn't do that. We maidens are far tougher than we look."

"Monica."

The word left his lips and, quite suddenly, Rick felt as if he was just about ready to attempt jumping out of the bed and towards the nearest exit. His heart had started beating fast in his chest, his mind flashed with the image of Monica's large panicked eyes, and his mind quickly followed the memory with darkness and pain. The young teacher shuddered.

"Where's Monica?"

"The... Tigress? Sir?"

"White hair, tan skin, scars all over, yes." He tried to nod, but his body ached in warning. He was pushing himself too far.

"I don't know, sir." The nurse frowned slightly. "The Hunters have probably caught her, if Ana's mood is anything to go by."

"I don't..." Rick frowned, his heart feeling like he'd just come back from a marathon, aching inside his chest. "Can I talk to the Hunters? Whoever they are?"

"I... certainly, but not quite yet." The nurse's composure was quickly regained. Her hands moved to touch his chest once more. A slight scowl followed. "You will need a while before you can safely be moved out of the bed, sir."

Begrudgingly, Rick nodded. Not like he had an alternative.

Chapter 058 [Rick]

Rick had expected to need weeks to be able to be allowed out of the bed. Instead, the pink haired nurse had given him a series of light healing sessions, a short minute-long thing every hour. By the fifth hour, his body had at least stopped hurting from merely existing.

Apparently, that had been enough to earn him getting dropped in a wheelchair. Not that he could do that on his own, no matter how hard he wanted to. Which was why the pink-haired nurse was currently in the process of helping him into said wheelchair. She moved him with an ease that made him feel like he was a rag-doll and weighed so little he was filled with fluff.

"Dia," Rick spoke out, reading the name tag. "So that's your name." He gave her a slight smile. "Had me at a disadvantage for a while there."

"Oh, the Harpy flew over the nest on that one, sorry about that, sir." Dia beamed, tucking a strand of pink hair behind her ear. "My name is Dia O'Four. My accent might not show it, but I've lived in Astunes most of my life. I'm domestic through and through."

He tilted his head slightly at her proclamation, if there was an accent to be had, he was clearly not picking up on it. Not that he ever had the ear for such things. Still, there were several words there for which he wasn't all too sure what they meant. He at least figured which one was in regard to their current location. "Rick Cross." He offered a hand to shake. Just lifting his arm proved a struggle. "I'm definitely not from Astunes though."

"That much I could tell, sir." She winked, holding his hand with both of hers, pulling it and kissing his wrist. "I would've definitely remembered meeting you before." Her tone had a husky edge to it and a cocky smile.

His back straightened slightly, eyes widening. "Wait, do I have scars?"

The edge vanished and panic emerged. "No!" Dia quickly replied. "No, no, it... was a... compliment, sir." She flushed, noticing his smirk. "Oh, you

were selling a doggirl for a hound."

"What?"

"Tricking me." She quickly declared, a slight pout as she let go of his hand.

Before he could reply to that, she'd hurried to stand behind him. Her hands pushed the wheelchair slowly forward. Though Rick felt tempted to bring back up the topic, he opted to remain quiet and focus on the world around him instead. The place had a certain "hospital" feel to it, though there were differences that kept drawing his attention. The doors were wooden with glass panels to peer inside. Most of them had a tiny black curtain drawn though to block sight. There were also benches at either side of the corridor, made of dark wood and black metal, and small tables for apparent decoration.

Some of the tables had small books. Most of these magazines had rather well-proportioned males on their cover. But they were worn, the pictures lacked color, and there was a roughness to their design that made Rick think of old paper.

"Oh, taking your favorite patient for a spin?"

The voice came from behind them. Rick couldn't see it, but Dia slowed down just barely. "He's meeting the Major."

"He came in five minutes ago, he's in the sealed meeting area."

"Sealed?"

"It's the meeting place for patients under quarantine," Dia replied offhandedly. "Basic precaution with off-worlders. We need to make sure you don't have anything that might hurt humans here, or that we might have anything that could hurt you."

"Is this... normal? To have off-worlders?"

"Not really, no, it is very rare in fact." The nurse hummed. "But there was a rather horrid outbreak long ago, so there's been basic protocols in place to

minimize risks." She hummed. "I heard that the last confirmed off-worlder was in the country of Gretia about a decade ago? This is certainly the first time a whole group has shown up, though. Village this small? I'm betting they'll still be talking about it a hundred years from now."

"Wait." Rick frowned. "If we could be infectious, then you..."

"I'm a Rapha, but besides that, Mister Gabriel's Mousegirl came back clean. If you had anything that could pose an immediate harm to a maiden, she would've shown signs of it. So the quarantine is mostly to protect local humans while we run the analysis." The wheelchair swerved to the right. "Ah! Mister Tomas had mentioned it, that in your world you need special gear to avoid infection? With the proper training, we Raphas can create a sterilization barrier around ourselves to avoid contamination." There was an edge of pride in those words.

"I... see..."

There was more and more to take in. Rick felt like he was trying to grasp at straws, so many details to think about, so many things that were not working under the rules he thought they should. The chemist in him was certainly screaming out for more information.

But the time to ask questions came to a quick end when she rolled him into a baby blue room. It was split in two, with a wooden wall in the middle, and a large window squarely in place. There were chairs on either side, all of them made out of the same dark wood and black metal.

At the other side of the glass stood a very large tall man. Large enough that Rick was unable to see him entirely due to being larger than the window.

The man was at least two meters tall and his shoulders almost seemed half as wide. His black hair was cut to an exact flat surface at the top of his head, his face a featureless mask of stern determination atop deeply tanned skin. He had a clean shave, and Rick half-expected he'd intimidated his own beard to jump off and make a run for it. Wearing a deep brown uniform with leather armor, Rick couldn't recognize any of the insignias that were on it, but it

looked formal and important. Despite the dark brown armor, it almost seemed like a dress uniform more than a practical one.

Rick's chair wheeled to a stop in front of the glass.

And Rick had to look upwards at the man standing there. The insignias made him out to be important, and his physique was nothing but imposing. This guy had come over to talk to him just because he'd asked for a chat?

Rick kept from squirming, meeting the steely blue eyes of the larger man. "Major Huge," Dia spoke behind the chemistry teacher, releasing the wheelchair. "If you need anything, sir, please don't hesitate to call. I will be right outside."

"Thank you." He nodded, holding back the gulp as he turned back to the Major.

"Professor Cross." The man thrust his chest slightly outwards, tensing. His voice boomed, loud enough it almost rattled the glass that stood between them. "I am Major Gabriel Huge. I am the one in charge of the Twentieth Hunter division. I am the commanding officer of all Hunters within Astunes."

"Please call me Rick," the young man quickly said.

"Certainly, Rick." Major Gabriel Huge took a long look at Rick, frowning ever so slightly. "If I may ask, am I right to assume you are a... civilian?"

"Yes."

"So the position of professor is not one that forms part of the military command, correct?"

Rick nodded more slowly. "Correct."

"Oh thank fuck." The man deflated, shoulders slumping as he sighed. The Major slumped down onto the chair on his side of the wall with a thump. A nervous chuckle left him. "If I'd wanted to play politics, I would've asked to be sent elsewhere. This saves so much hassle."

"Excuse me?" Rick quirked a brow. "Did I miss something?"

"Nothing, it's more to do with how we run things here. It's honestly better if you're not like the local average 'professor'. They tend to be uppity pricks." The man snorted loudly, rolling his eyes and leaning back. His chair groaned in complaint.

Rick couldn't help but feel as if he'd been slapped. "I'm sorry?"

That made Huge squirm. "Erm, right, fuck, I'm always bad at this." The man sighed, shoulders slumping further as he scratched the back of his head. "I was told you wanted to talk to me? What can I do for you?"

"... yeah..." Taking several seconds to organize his thoughts. Monica, right. "I wanted to know about the white haired... Tigress?"

"She's caught and contained. The Baron commandeered that... particular situation," the Major spoke with a growl and a shake of his head, pointing over his shoulder. "And let me tell you, what you did was damn impressive. Saving little Ginny like that? I'll definitely pay however many beers you might need to share how you managed to survive White Claw."

"The what now?"

"White Claw. Local folk call her that, she's been sort of a slippery headache for us... for five years, give or take." A scowl followed. "Baron's lost some good people trying to catch her." There was a long look on his face as he sighed further. For a man that looked like a mountain, he seemed about to crumble. "We've all lost some good people."

"I'm sorry to hear that." It felt like a decent thing to say, considering the circumstances.

"Not much you could've done about it short of showing up sooner." There was a slight smile there, his energy quickly coming back up. "I have to know though, kind of an important question, really. How did you manage to handle her? Is it one of those weird other-worlder powers? Did you bond her?"

"Bond?"

"You know, to break the feral state." Huge moved one of his meaty hands to point at his neck. "Over here we need one of those fancy collars to pull it off."

Now it was Rick's turn to frown. "I'm not sure what you mean."

That appeared to surprise the Major, and the man leaned back, crossing his arms slightly. "Hm... are you sure you don't have a bond? Irene hadn't had the chance to properly check, but she did mention it was likely you were bonded. Maybe you've noticed odd things? Like sensing White Claw's emotions? Words seeming to pop into your mind?"

"I don't..."

The frown deepened. Had he felt anything weird around Monica? Rick could've sworn he'd heard her voice inside his mind back when he was in the river. Had that been a hallucination from the lack of air? Maybe if he could-

A flash of cold shiver swept through him.

Darkness, locked, trapped, hungry, scared, angry. Pain. Claws scraping against cold stone.

"Nurse!" a voice rang out. It felt far away, as if Rick's ears were under water.

The voice rung distantly. Rick realized he'd fallen off the wheelchair. His body was drenched, his breathing hard. Pain throbbed through every inch of his body, everything was becoming blurred. The tingling warmth of Dia's hands pressed against his shoulder, and the cold dread was instantly gone.

His mind cleared, his senses coming back to him in quick order. Breathing hard, the young man did his best to regain control of his breathing.

"I think we'll have to postpone this until you're in better health." Huge spoke, looking at him with a deep frown, turning to Dia. "Take care of him, please."

"I will, sir."

The nurse lifted him up, carrying him in her frail arms as if he didn't weigh almost twice what she did. The nurse had a smile that hid concern as she glanced at him only briefly, blushing and focusing on putting him back in the wheelchair.

His eyes lingered on the green choker that adorned her throat.

Chapter 059 [Rick]

Rick lay on the bed and stared at the green, ugly ceiling, trying to focus on the tingling warmth from Dia's touch. Her hands lingered on his shoulders this time around. Another healing session, and though it was certainly relieving, it also made him feel like he had less energy to use than a minute ago by the end of it.

"We'll take a break to let your body recover before the next session," Dia spoke with a slight smile, nodding at herself. "It would be best to avoid pushing too hard and let things recover a bit on their own now that everything is properly stable."

"It feels like I've run a marathon," Rick groaned.

"Healing can be rather exhausting for the patient, yes. Your body is burning through a lot of energy to assist in the process. We will have to update your diet accordingly."

Dia spoke with such certainty he could only blink. "Most nurses I've met only ever went 'take this' or 'sit there'."

"I'm sure they had their reasons." She threw a pout his way. "Would you rather I quietly treat you in such a way, sir? Just handling you however I wish without explaining or asking for permission?" She reached out to poke at his chest, and her lips quirked ever so slightly into a grin. "Maybe I should start with a sponge bath?"

The unexpected boldness and coy tease in her eyes brought a flush to Rick's cheeks. "I'd... rather wash myself."

"Shame." Dia gave a little pout. "But if you wish to be able to wash yourself, sir, then you'll have to focus on recovering." With a little wink, her touch lingered on his shoulder. "Maybe I could bribe you, sir? If you do your best to help in your recovery, I know where they sell the best pastries in town."

She leaned slightly closer, lowering her voice to a whisper. "Your diet needs more calories, but nothing says it shouldn't be delicious."

"Are you offering a date?"

The words escaped him faster than he could hold them back, and as soon as he spoke them, Dia's cheeks moved from light pink to bright red. The young woman hesitated, gulping and leaning a bit away. "M-maybe?"

There was a knocking at the door, and Dia recoiled away from Rick so fast it'd almost been as if she'd been physically yanked by a rope. Within the blink, she was three whole steps away from the bed, looking down at a clipboard she'd definitely not been holding a second prior as if it were the most important exam in history. And she reacted just in time because the door had opened and two familiar faces peeked in.

"Rick!" Kat proclaimed, barely acknowledging Dia was even there as she rushed in, arms wide and ready to throw a hug his way.

"Ma'am." Dia's voice was cool but soft, her hand having grasped Kat's shoulders and stopped the young woman in her tracks. "The patient is in a rather delicate condition, please be mindful."

"Rick was almost dead just yesterday, don't push it," Tomas sheepishly agreed, eyes lingering on Dia as he gave her a friendly smile. "Thanks for taking care of him."

"It's my job, sir, please think nothing of it." With an air of cool detachment, Dia stepped towards the door. "I will come back in an hour with Mister Cross' lunch. If anything happens, there is a button next to the bed to call for assistance."

She left quietly, her steps barely making a sound once the door clicked shut.

Kat turned back to look at Rick and smirked. "You lucky dog, none of us got a dedicated nurse at our beck and call."

The young teacher coughed, putting his thoughts in order. "You seem perfectly able to move on your own. There's a wheelchair next to the bed for a reason."

The words made her grimace, and she nodded. "Yeah, that sucks. They've told us everyone is expected to make a full recovery at least." A little laugh, it was so easy for her to lighten up. "You're certainly the one that's worse for wear." A little roll of the eyes. "Though the others are in a bit of a mood for whatever reason, they won't talk about it."

Rick's eyes lingered on his two guests, the smile souring ever so slightly. "How... did you survive? I thought you'd died in the river." His throat tightened at the words.

Kat leaned back a little, her hand discreetly reaching out and grasping Tomas'. They shared a long quiet look. For a split second, it was almost as if Rick wasn't even there. "He hauled my cute butt to the shore, passed out then and there. We were found by a maiden working on a farm. The farmer was kind enough to take us straight to the hospital." She made a vague gesture over her shoulder with her head, focusing back on the chemistry teacher. "The Hunters immediately sent a representative, asked me a ton of questions. Who was with me, where, and how many? Apparently, they take rescue missions very seriously around these parts. They sent scouts within the hour it took for me to get my busted up arm patched up. Did I mention how insane this healing shit is?"

"What about you?" Tomas nudged, his free hand leaning against the foot of Rick's bed. "We saw the whole house fall down on you. We thought you were a goner."

"Monica got me out of the river."

The proclamation brought an immediate smile out of Kat. "HA! I knew that girl didn't really run off. So she's your guardian pussycat, huh?"

"Something like that," Rick muttered, rubbing the bridge of his nose in an attempt to hold back from sighing. "Apparently there's a Baron in this place and he has her right now."

"Good to know she's alive, so how do you plan to get her back?"

"I don't..."

"You ARE going to get her back, right?"

"Don't push him like that," Tomas muttered. "You're asking whether he wants to enslave Monica or not, and that's... not a comfortable question."

"What? Enslave?"

"Well, yeah, that's what they do to maidens in this kingdom, apparently." Kat shrugged, pointing at her neck. "Those choker things keep them from going insane. Protects them from an old-ass curse or some such."

"The Major had said something about the chokers." Rick scowled. "But what does that have to do with slavery?"

"The kingdom considers maidens property. The choker color has some symbolism, but they're all owned. I think green chokers meant they were owned by the kingdom itself?" Kat made a dismissive wave with her hand, glancing at Tomas. "But really, you shouldn't try to paint this like some sort of moral dilemma. 'When in Rome' and all that, it's not like they're getting whipped. Did you miss how those nurses kept checking you out?"

"I mean-" Tomas flustered. "It's slavery. This isn't something that should be taken lightly."

"And who would you rather 'own' Monica? Rick, or some random noble we don't know anything about?" Her brows creased. "Like, they're definitely not going to let her go back to the wilds and start killing people again."

The weight of the words fell down onto Rick's shoulders like a sack of bricks. The teacher could only grimace. The image of her attacking the ones that had come to help them clear in his mind. "Do you really think I should be the one to weigh in on this, Kat?" His eyes turned to meet her own, weary. "She's dangerous, maybe not to me, maybe..." His hand lingered on his chest, a phantom pain, the sound of breaking bones. "...but definitely to others."

"Wait, what? What's this shit about? Of course Monica's dangerous, it's like half of what makes her cute."

Rick's gaze lowered to his hands, clenching them tightly. "Back when they came to rescue us, Monica started fighting them. I couldn't stop her, at all." There was a sour taste in his mouth. "It's the reason why I almost died in the first place. She was about to kill one of them. I stepped in the way."

"Oh fuck."

"'Oh fuck', indeed." The teacher nodded slowly. To say his mind was starting to be overcome by turmoil would be an understatement. "I don't think I'm qualified to be in charge of Monica. Let alone 'own' her."

The hesitation was short lived. Kat yanked her hand from Tomas' grasp, crossing her arms and glaring at Rick. "Who do you think she'd rather be with? Some pompous stranger? Or you?"

There was little doubt about what the answer to that question was. All three of them knew it well. And yet another question nagged him, an apprehension that hadn't been there before, but that grew the more he thought about it. The certainty from earlier wavered.

His jaw tightened. "And is that what would be best for her?"

Chapter 060 [Mark][👤]

Mark grunted, Brye leaned over his shoulder, breasts pressing against his back as her hand squeezed his throbbing cock. The fox was methodical and slow, stroking him in a rhythmic motion that caught his breath and pulled it right out of him. Just fast enough to keep him at the edge, slow enough not to push him over.

"Hm... this is fun," she cooed. Both of her black tails had a slow wag to them that was almost amused. Her breasts pushed more firmly against his naked back, her could feel her nipples poking at him. "Are you ready to cum yet?" Both of her vulpine ears were perked, aimed squarely at him, the young man having the whole of her attention.

"Fuck off." Mark grit his teeth, fighting against the hemp rope keeping him bound against the chair. He couldn't do much else, he was helpless. And Brye knew what she was doing, his whole body was flushed.

Her fingers caressed his shaft, teasing the base and working their way back up to the glans, she blew cool teasing air into his ear. "You'd love me to fuck you properly, wouldn't you?" A mirthful chuckle left her hand clenching slightly, just enough to make him grunt. She leaned in to nip at his earlobe, using her other hand to tweak at his nipple. "These collars are amazing. Just some fun and the bond snaps in place like a glove." She licked his neck, kissing the flushed skin as Mark fought against the rope once more, snarling. "Shery? You sure you don't want some?"

"Don't see the point. Bond's there, let's get the job done... whatever it is," the gray-skinned woman spoke with a bored droll, taking one of the smaller crates and prying it open.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to figure out what Noah had planned... This one's filled with fivers."

"No shit!?" Brye vanished from behind Mark, appearing next to her companion.

Mark grunted, his mind relieved with the cessation of her teasing, his body complaining from the lack of stimulation. His shaft bobbed to his heartbeat, straining against the cool air of the cave. Mark growled, closing his eyes tightly as he fought against the arousal. The fox had given him something, blew some dust onto his face, now the stuff burned within his veins, hot enough he'd be having a hard time holding back had he not been tied up. Every breath felt as if he were exhaling fire and inhaling ice. Arching tingles coursed through his body, fueling the arousal and keeping him unable to calm down. He could barely keep coherent enough to stop from calling out for her to come back.

Gritting his teeth, Mark pulled on the rope, the pain giving him enough clarity to hold on. His ears strained, he couldn't let himself become lost to the fog.

"Do you think that asshole planned to use one of these on us?"

"He used it on his own girls. Why do you think the Boss sent us?" A sigh. "... Should we open the cursed thing already?"

"Do you figure she's marinated enough in there? Maybe she's close to being feral already. That's going to be fun."

She? The word brought the image of Brye's wide hips and modest breasts, of Shery's athletic figure. Mark shook his head to push the ideas out, the gesture catching their attention. "You gave him more dust? Fuck Brye, we don't need an addict."

"But it's so much fucking fun." The fox appeared right on Mark's lap, naked soft thighs spread wide, her pussy pressing against his cock without any ceremony. Her eyes shone with amused glee when Mark's body responded instantly, trying to hump himself into her hot wet pussy. She returned the gesture, slowly grinding out her lower lips and coating his shaft on her juices. "Come on, you can't deny it. Noah kept fucking us like we were feral mutts, it's a nice change of pace being the one in charge."

She wasn't even looking at him, staring over her shoulder at the gray skinned woman.

"Shame it won't last."

"My point exactly." Brye laughed, reaching down to grab his cock and begin pumping him in earnest. Mark's back tensed. His mind wanted this to stop, his body wanted more. The sensation knocked the air out of him and he could only pant, tearing his eyes away from her body. He couldn't lose to the fog, not again.

"Once we get back to the Boss, it'll be goodbye to being on top and straight back to our knees with some other guy shoving it into our mouths. Why not enjoy it while we can?" The fox's golden eyes turned back to the human, meeting his flustered growl, her free hand caressing his cheek. "Come for me, my naughty pet. Come for your foxy mistress."

Letting go of his cock, she pressed her thighs at either side of his cock, rubbing her pussy against him as she humped in earnest. Her face flushed and smirk widened. Humiliation burned inside his chest. The human couldn't stop his body any more than he could hold his breath indefinitely. With a strangled cry, the orgasm wracked through his system like an uncoiling spring. It whipped down his spine and out of his cock, spurts of white erupted outwards, Mark's breath knocked right out of him as his juices coated the monster's thighs and flat stomach. His mind turned into white noise, the heat within his core finally finding escape.

Brye cooed, stroking him still, urging several more spurts. "That's a good boy." She patted his head with her free hand, leaning down to claim his lips in a kiss.

Mark's mind snapped back into place, he growled, biting down on her tongue with everything he had, jaw clenching tight enough to hurt. Hard enough he was sure it should have hurt.

She moaned, leaning further in, pressing her soft lips with his own, pulling her tongue from his death-grip as if it were nothing more than a love-bite. "Oh that's good." She cooed, grasping his hair and yanking his head back,

forcing him to look up into the featureless dirt and rock the cave had for a ceiling. "That's very good, are you sure you don't want me to give you more?"

Pulling back, she moved her hand down to caress the jizz coating her lower body, pulling it up to lick at her palm, cleaning it with a tongue that was slightly too long to be human. "Shery, mind getting me some food? Our pet deserves a reward."

Mark was left panting, burning anger and impotence coursing through him, a bile that burned inside his chest. He wanted to hurl insults at them, kick and scream and bite and scratch. And then what? Get gagged again? A growl escaped him instead, and he grit his teeth and fought against the restraints once more, the heat in his body not quite gone but enough it gave him clarity of mind.

The gray-skinned woman looked at his struggle and chuckled. "There there." She caressed his cheek, forcing his head to look down so their eyes would meet. The golden irises felt as if they could stare right through him, there was something in them that glimmered in the dark. "I like it when you struggle, it's fun. That's all it is, just a little fun." She cooed hands moving down his chest, caressing his ribs. "Come now, boy, bite me again."

She leaned for another kiss. Mark's body reacted right away, biting again as a snarl rose in his throat in his attempt to rip her tongue off.

But, as was to be expected, no such thing happened. Brye just moaned, pushing herself against him harder, pushing his chair back. Mark held back from yelling as it tipped over and fell. Their combined weight pressed down against his own hands. "Nasty," the vulpine woman proclaimed, straddling his stomach, her tongue freed the instant Mark had gasped for air. She shuddered with equal parts amusement and enjoyment. "Do that again."

"What the fuck are you!?" He spat up at her. It should have at least hurt! Damn it, she barely looked phased- more like it had only turned on more. "You freak!"

For the first time since his imprisonment, Mark's words had an effect that had not amused the monster. She flinched at the proclamation, a moment of pain that wiped away her amusement. Anger came flooding right after, she growled, her fangs flashed as she snarled. Those golden eyes locked onto him and suddenly Mark felt a twinge of fear, wincing as her sharp nails sank ever so slightly into his chest. The pain, however, gave him focus.

He glared back.

"Brye, don't!" Shery had stepped in, putting a wooden plate right in front of her face, blocking her golden gaze. "If you want to play, play, but don't damage the goods. Boss might forgive us about Noah, but not without this guy."

A long grunt escaped the fox, her claws pulled out from his skin, leaving ten little droplets of blood where they had vacated. "Fuck, right. Give me that." Brye snatched the plate from Shery's hands, and looked back down at Mark, the threatening edge she'd shown a moment ago gone, replaced back with a thoughtful look. "I think we've been unfair with you. All locked up like some animal, no wonder you lashed out." A deep sigh, her shoulders relaxed, the amused smirk came back to her lips. "How about a little gift? I'll give you something I'm sure you'll enjoy. How does that sound?"

Turning her gaze towards Shery, she plucked a raisin off the plate, and shoved it against Mark's lips. He bit her finger, and she cooed as if he was suckling on it.

"You can't hurt me, but don't stop." With a widening grin, she blew him a kiss. "So do it, bite hard, yank, fight. I'll love every second. Do you even know how these collars work? They're not the usual shit." Her finger reached out to the gray choker, hooking the finger into it and tugging. "Whoever's buying these better be paying ten times their weight in gold."

"Drop dead." Mark spat the raisin at her face. "Bitch."

"I think I have just the outlet for that anger, a proper outlet."

The gray-skinned woman just rolled her eyes, putting her hands on her hips. "Look, I get that you have a new toy you want to play with, but this shit is getting too far."

"Oh, come now, don't be like that." Brie smirked. "Here I was thinking about giving our little guest a chance at revenge for what happened to his human woman."

As soon as she spoke the words, Mark's breath hitched, his eyes widened, but it was followed by suspicion. Still, the involuntary act was not missed; Brie's ears twitched in his direction and Mark could only curse at himself. Of course she was messing with him.

"No tricks," she said as if she'd read his thoughts. "What would you say about getting the chance to kill Noah? He did give the order to murder your broad after all, and back then we were bonded to him, so it wasn't like we could disobey."

She traced a finger down Mark's chest, smirking.

"And as a bonus, we take away the rope." Her lips bent into a smirk, golden eyes glowing with amusement.

Chapter 061 [Mark]

Mark stood with his back against the wall, away from anything that could easily come into his reach. He was untied, but it wasn't as if it mattered. Where would he run? The metal door at the entrance of the cave wouldn't open for him, and the ferals in the forest would just eat him.

That did not make the situation inside the cave any better.

He was trapped with the two monsters until whatever business that held them here came to an end. Fortunately, their focus was not on him this time around. They were holding the black crystal sphere that had caught Noah in that horrifying light-show during the time of their meeting. Mark had thought the device had killed the guy, but apparently it wasn't the case.

Because they were going to open it.

"Get ready," Brye commented with a growl, looking serious for a change. "Last thing we need is a fuck up here."

"Ready when you are."

The fox leaned forward, naked body becoming still, her two black vulpine tails rising into the air. Her whole body vibrated with a dark energy, tension creeping through her as her hands glowed a deep purple. She looked just about ready to explode in a shower of black sparks.

"Go," Shery spoke right as she smashed the black sphere, her grip making the glass ball shatter into a million little pieces.

Several things happened at once.

First, a blast of purple light surged out from the point Shery had been holding onto the device, shooting straight forward and coalescing into something that was becoming more solid by the second. It was something in a humanoid form, with hands and legs.

Second, said form didn't even wait to fully solidify before it was hauling itself towards the metal door at full speed. It was a short figure, but fast. Incredibly so.

Third, Brye vanished into thin air.

No matter how quick the glowing figure moved, Brye had been faster. She'd popped into existence squarely between the door and the glowing figure, jumping to tackle the still-glowing creature to the ground while her body glowed with the dark power. Her claws came down upon the being with ruthless abandon, one claw, then two, then four, then five. In quick succession she shredded skin, blood splattering in every direction. "Shery!" The fox called out, not stopping her assault as the one under her was somehow still able to wriggle and desperately fight back, clawing as well.

Cuts appeared all over Brye's front, her chest, her face, shallow and light compared to what she was doing to her opponent.

"Mousegirl," Shery proclaimed, moving forward to assist.

All the seriousness in Brye's face melted into a sadistic grin. "HA!" She balled her hands into fists, striking the creature's face. "Did you hear that, Noah? You're a fucking rat now!" There was a snarl hidden in those eyes, anger and resentment that burned bright, her fists now moving to pummel away at the body that was becoming increasingly unable to fight back.

Mark could almost feel her sense of vindication; it frothed and bubbled like a soda bottle that was ready to pop. The fox's tails were wagging madly, her fists bloodied and her grin unperturbed.

Brye didn't slow down, and five punches became ten, then twenty. The creature underneath her had stopped moving entirely, each blow driving it into a greater state of stillness. "Bitch. That's what you are now, Noah! Enjoy it, you fucktard!" More and more, she laughed, punching and punching and punching some more, blood splattering on her face and chest, wild eyes and an unhinged grin playing on her lips. "This is for every little..."

Mark shuddered, a jolt of fear ran through him.

She was a monster.

Brye's words stopped suddenly, both hands raised in the air and ready to come down once again, blood dripping down to her elbows. Her head snapped towards Mark, gold eyes meeting his own. Her brows furrowed ever so slightly, the grin loosening, confusion and surprise briefly crossed her face, the manic smirk gone instantly. The scowl deepened, she turned to look down at the state her victim had been in.

The creature had a faint resemblance to a female form, but it was hard to tell considering how much of it had been bruised or clawed. To say nothing of how much closer to a mulch she appeared to be. Brye snapped out of the fugue, her tone clear and calm. "Shery? Give me some of the good juice."

"Aye, aye." The gray-skinned girl tossed a glass bottle at Brye. "But don't go wasting too much of it, I'm going to want my turn."

"Yeah, yeah." The fox rolled her eyes, pulling the cork out and turning the bottle upside down, pouring the purple liquid down on the creature she'd been assaulting a moment ago.

The liquid splashed all over Noah, the reaction was instantaneous- a gurgled squeaky cry followed by a deep gasp, then a shriek. Mark could not believe his eyes, the area that had been drenched in the fluid seemed to move on its own, springing to action. The creature's face was pulling itself back together, the blood washed away by the juice. It was becoming clearer it was a woman as her face became more and more recognizable, the swelling receding and bone snapping back into place. It took a little over three minutes of the juice being poured onto her, but it was becoming clear the wounds were quickly vanishing.

The monster was of a breed Mark had seen before in the forest... short, barely a meter and a half tall. Large round ears were atop her head, gray hair, and she was a lithe figure that lacked in curves compared to the fox that was currently straddling her. A mouse woman. Her skin was mostly a chalk pale color, but a great deal of it was tainted in the same purple the juice had. As if the juice had made up for the missing flesh.

"Fucking fuck, Brye, you bitch," the short woman spoke with a shrill tone, her voice practically a squeak. "When I get out of this shit, I'm going to tear your throat out." She was panting, pinned to the ground and heaving hard, grimacing as the juice kept doing its job.

"No luck for you, rat, you're a maiden now, welcome to the cock-sucker team." Brye splashed some of the purple juice on her own body, the scratches that had been left on her body closing, leaving thin purple lines behind.

Corking the bottle and tossing it over to Shery, Brye wasted no time to move off the mouse and forcefully twist her around, face down against the ground. "Wire?"

"Right here." Shery was prepared, offering the metal coil.

The fox moved with purpose, taking mere seconds to hog-tie the mouse and leaving the naked girl entirely unable to move, hands and ankles almost joining together behind her back. The metal wire dug into the monster's flesh and kept her from being able to struggle too much against her bindings without risking cutting herself in the process.

"There we go." Brye threw a kick at the smaller woman's gut, the mouse coughing and groaning, the smaller woman's eyes were livid. "Now, Noah, we have some questions."

"Up yours, if I talk you'll just kill me."

"Good guess, but I'm not really that interested. We do have someone who might be more invested in choosing your fate though." Brye pointed over her shoulder at Mark.

The mousy woman took a moment, looking over her shoulder towards Mark. The glare had a hint of confusion lingering there before the anger came back in full. "Fuck him too." Gray eyes locked on him fully, a snarl on the diminutive woman's lips. "What kind of freak is immune to the Eve's Hex?"

Mark frowned in return, arms crossed and keeping close attention on the exchange, trying to figure out where this was headed.

"And that's exactly why we're taking him to the Boss after this mission," Shery commented coldly, moving to crouch next to the struggling mouse. "You've made us do this kind of thing before, so you know how this will go down."

"You'll break my fingers first, then my arms and legs, then heal and repeat." Noah growled. "And it's not going to work. I'll go feral before I say anything." A smirk showed up on her lips.

"I don't really see the fucking sense for theatrics." Brye stomped Noah's head against the dirt. "We don't really want to kill you, it would cut our fun short, but we are gals of our word. We promised the cute human over there your head."

"You hexed me, what else do you fucking want!?"

"Did you forget the punishment for harming a human woman is death in this here kingdom?" The fox laughed, turning towards Mark. "What do you say? He gave the order to kill your woman, sorry, 'She'."

Mark scowled at the fox, suppressing the urge to jump when she vanished and reappeared in front of him, her face mere inches away. A broad smirk on her lips as she grasped his hands on her own.

"Here."

The human looked down at the item that had been put on his hands.

It was a disk, a piece of metal about as thick as his thumb and as wide as his palm. Dull gray, the object weighed more than it looked, enough he almost dropped it. On both sides of the disk there was a single inscription, '5'.

"What the hell is this?"

"It's a fiver." Brye smirked. "Press it against a maiden's forehead, and they go... poof. You kill them."

"I... what?"

"It's a powerful curse, it erases all memories and personality." Shery eyed the human warily, but more specifically, the item he was holding onto.

"Boss must have found a stash, kinda surprised there aren't alarms going off all over the place." The fox chuckled. "Anyway, you interested? All you have to do is press it against this one's head, and Noah will be no more."

"You bitch," the mouse sneered.

"You were never going to tell, anyway." Brye shrugged, grasping the mouse's hair and dragging her towards Mark. The mouse tried to fight, but with arms and legs tightly bound with wire, it was fruitless. "Go on, beg."

"The thousand armed God flay you one strip at a time."

"You never struck me as a believer, nice tidbit to find out about near the end." With barely an effort, Brye yanked the mouse up, leaving Noah kneeling, looking up at Mark with wide gray eyes. The fox caressed the smaller woman's cheek, avoiding the attempted bite that was thrown towards her fingers. "Now." Brye looked at the human. "Make your choice."

Mark's grip tightened on the disk, eyes flickering between Brye's forehead and the mouse's. The mouse that had been a human only a couple days ago. That had ordered to get him shoved to the ground and to have Veronica killed.

Noah glared. "If you five me, you'll be fucked, I'm the only one that can help you. These two will ditch you the moment they find something better," she spoke with a squeaky voice, using slow and deliberate words.

Mark's eyes flickered to Brye.

Would he be able to press the thing against the fox's head before she stopped him? Would the device work quickly enough she couldn't just yank it off? And if he succeeded, what then? The gray skinned one would still be there, and the ferals outside would not be gone.

"And this squeaky toy was the one who wanted to turn you into this." Brye gave a condescending pat to Noah's cheek. "You wouldn't be the first he's done this to. He'd have his fun with you, get all the information he would've wanted, and then pressed the fiver into your forehead without a second thought," the fox whispered with a wide smirk. The words made Noah scowl. "Go on, fuck her up, she knows she deserves a whole lot more than just this. Do it, little boy, become a man."

Those words made something inside Mark snap. "Fuck you and your games." He threw the disk away, the piece of metal bouncing against the far wall. "Play your games with someone else."

For the briefest of moments, there was a flash of disappointment in the fox's expression. It didn't last long. "You heard him Shery, suggestions?"

"I haven't gone a round yet." The gray-skinned woman approached with a scowl.

"We'll five her when we get bored, then." Brye laughed, tossing the mouse at her companion and turning to focus on Mark entirely. There was a dangerous glint of those golden eyes as she smirked.

Chapter 062 [Barry]

Barry Dodson had been rescued from the pit and healed, but so far, he regretted that fact. There was a constant dull pain in the center of his chest, one that stung his heart with every beat. His breaths were short and shallow, his mind would cloud from the oppressive feeling whenever he exerted himself too much.

And every time he closed his eyes, a singular clear image would appear before his eyes.

Fiery blond hair, green eyes sprinkled with motes of brown and gold, a beautiful face of smooth features and high cheekbones. And a look of utter disgust as the winged woman impaled him with her blade.

Barry couldn't keep his food down. Trying to sleep was a similar struggle, cold sweats and screams, nightmares he would not remember but that left him drenched and short of breath.

The waking world was no easier. The only reason the one haunting his nightmares had yet to turn them into reality was Kajou.

"It's been days, he's looking more pathetic by the hour," the blond monster named Pan commented idly, her hand never leaving the pommel of her sheathed sword. There was not one moment where Barry was ever truly outside her line of sight either.

The human sat away from the warmth of the flame from the campfire, his back turned away from the two and peering towards the forest that surrounded them. It was no longer the sea of wooden behemoths; the forest they were currently in was much lighter, almost... normal. Barry glanced at the hemp keeping his ankles and wrists bound so he wouldn't be able to run.

Would it make a difference? He could barely walk without feeling winded.

"This is normal." Kajou's voice rang heavy, as she sighed. "You cut down a strong bond through death."

"Don't bullshit your way through this, he's just playing you."

"Sister," the fellow woman spoke with a growl. "Would it kill you to hold your anger in check for once? He can't hurt us."

Pan bristled, shooting to her feet. "Maybe I should spar with you to remind you to never underestimate your opponent."

The silence was bitter, the tanned woman turned away from her companion, lowering her gaze. "All I'm saying is that there's little worth in these spats. He's an off-worlder, and we should hurry to bring him back to the Coven after we've finished with our business with this court."

"You keep saying that, but every day you speak that word it feels like it has less meaning, sister." Pan glowered. "Off-worlders have always brought with them impossible feats of power and technology. I heard the one that showed up in Greta had brought a feral rush to a grinding halt with words alone."

"I was the one that told you that story," Kajou grunted. "And there're many things we don't know about off-worlders, some might be weak of body but have other strange abilities. I know what I saw, Barry tamed that feral. The bond was strong and it had barely taken a night to get there."

"Something I still do not believe." Pan's hand reached up to touch her chocker. "For obvious reasons."

"And that is why he might prove the solution to the problem." Kajou replied. "And do not change the subject, you killed that feral unprompted."

"She was a feral, a flying one," Pan snapped, gesticulating wildly around herself. "What would you do if she opted to fly off with the human and he managed to get back to one of their cities? Half the bloody kingdom would be hunting us down." A growl followed. "And what's this about giving a shit for some feral, anyway? It's a feral, they're not people."

"It was still a good lead towards what his powers are. We need to understand what Barry-"

"I don't care what his name is... But if you want to understand his powers so much..."

The sound of stomping boots made Barry flinch and shrink, tightening into a ball and lowering his gaze to the ground. He couldn't run, couldn't fight- what could fight such a monster as Pan? His chest ached with pain, throbbing, his heart sending lances of pain through him, the sensation only precluding the light kick that shoved him to fall on to his side. Suddenly the prospect of impossible odds was looking better and better.

"What are you doing!?" Kajou growled, moving to get Pan away from Barry.

"He'll lie if you ask him to do something, if he has powers, he'll just use them to protect himself. And... oh, he's trying to run."

The young man had heard enough; even with his ankles tied together too closely to be able to move, even with his chest screaming for air, Barry had pushed himself to do his level best to run. It was a half-stumble that got him a whole five steps before he collapsed on the forest floor, tripping on the rope.

His pathetic attempt at escape might not have managed to get him away from the blond demon, but it had been just narrowly enough time for Kajou to get between the two, blocking Pan's path. "Enough!" The dark haired maiden declared, her voice snapping like the crack of a whip.

Pan's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You're compromising our mission, sister. I will remind you who was put in charge here."

The dark-skinned woman hesitated, lowering her gaze. "Do you not trust me anymore?"

"It's him I don't trust," she replied almost defensively, recoiling slightly until she could focus on Barry. "He could've played some trick, a feral saying a name is no sign of them not being feral anymore. You're seeing patterns where there are none."

"I swear on the elder I know what I saw. That feral was tamed without a collar," she proclaimed without hesitation. Her gaze flickered towards Barry. "And... if you give us the chance, it shouldn't be impossible to do it again."

Pan huffed, hand tightening on the pommel of her sword. "I'd hoped you would have changed your mind about this human if he stuck around for long enough, it seems I was wrong."

Kajou raised her hands quickly in an attempt to pacify the angel. "I will not fight you, we both know I wouldn't win. But could you at least let me have this? If it doesn't work, then it just shows he's a normal human."

"We were tight on time before you got yourself kidnapped, now we're short on it." Pan glowered. "Shorter still because we have to drag that pathetic thing with us. Need I remind you what's at stake here!? We cannot fail this mission."

The words struck the tanned woman, and she lowered her hands, shaking her head. "I know! Alright? I know." She gestured towards Barry. "But if it's true that he can break the feral state without the collar's help... then wouldn't it mean we've found something better than what we were looking for?"

That proclamation appeared to hit its mark, and Pan hesitated, lips thinning as she glared at Barry. Her hand squeezed the pommel of her sword tightly. "I will not delay our march for this, you will prove this yourself, Kajou. Find a feral and..."

The angel stopped her words, glancing over her shoulder into the forest and frowning.

A howl pierced the silence of the camp, and its sound brought about a storm of fear to run its way down Barry's spine. He struggled against the bonds all the harder now. His panic did not go unnoticed by the angel, and her pristine white wings twitched as the barest hints of a smirk fell upon her lips.

"Better yet, little sister." She pulled her hand from her sword, turning to look at Kajou in amusement. "It seems some mutts are on the hunt. I think we should give them some nice bait, and you will take one of them for this feral

experiment of yours." Her lips pulled into a tighter smile. "If you can't handle them, then I will just take you with me and retreat... only you though." The monster's hand made a gesture towards Barry. "Not him though, he I will leave behind."

Chapter 063 [Barry]

Barry was tied to a tree. This had been despite his best attempts to escape. Pan had only needed to twist his wrist to render him unable to do much else, the ache within his chest handled the rest. She was not kind when using the rope to tie his wrists to the branch that hung overhead, the human was left almost standing on his tip-toes. It strained his whole body, and he was unable to properly settle down into a comfortable position.

Not that it mattered, as he would have been entirely unable to calm down, anyway. The dogs were coming; he could hear their yips and barks, and the lone howl from time to time. His mind pulled back to the trek through the forest when the pack had kidnapped him. The large dark-haired one had broken his left ankle before they'd made it to their burrow.

Grimacing, Barry looked up at the rope around his wrists once more. His hands were reddened; but it was too tight for him to be able to slip out of. Maybe he could try to pull himself up? The notion left him making a half-hysterical laugh. He'd not been able to do a single pull-up in his life and he was almost fighting to breathe right now. What was going to change this time around? His arms felt like jelly, his whole body more like dead weight.

Barry's thoughts came to a grinding halt when he saw something shifting in the shadows ahead. With the darkness of the forest it was hard to tell what was going on, especially without his glasses, but he could tell something was there. "Hello?"

There was the snap of a twig, and a figure emerged into the clearing.

Slender tanned legs, black furred claws, tall, covered in mud and dirt, muscular. A fierce glare. And a splotch of worn-out white paint that had been sprayed on her face.

Barry's eyes widened. This was from the original pack. They'd been hunting them all this time? Why!? He'd seen the corpse of the leader that first night

after being rescued from the pit. Pan had certainly...

He froze.

Could it be... Revenge? No.

"Please stay away," he muttered, watching the monster approach. Her ears were perked and rotating this way and that. The look on her eyes was careful, attentive, her head on a swivel as she sniffed the air again and again. She knew this was a trap, in some shape or form- she knew. And she still approached Barry one step at a time, undoubtedly she'd detected Kajou's scent and was trying to determine her location.

The human gulped, eyes flickering above.

The feral reacted instantly, looking upwards right as Kajou had fallen down between the branches. The feral jumped back, avoiding the initial strike. "Curses," the Amazon muttered, having lost the element of surprise. Her hands glowed a dull blue and orange as she launched towards the canine anyway, throwing a simple straight jab.

Snarling, the canine had stepped back and lunged the moment the glowing fist had missed, claws extended and ready to rip the dark-skinned woman's throat out. "Duck!" Barry proclaimed. His words were ignored as Kajou spun forwards, into the attack and avoiding it narrowly. Her elbow struck straight against the monster's chest.

The impact was enough to send the canine a step back. Kajou pressed forward with a follow-up uppercut to the ribs powerful enough to lift the feral off of her feet, then launched two punches in quick succession to the face that knocked the feral flat on her ass. Kajou didn't wait a single instant and moved in to stomp on the feral's leg.

But she was a second too slow; the shadows had swallowed the creature faster than she'd been. They only left an empty spot where the dog had been moments prior. "Well this isn't good."

"Keep your senses sharp, sis, the rest of the pack's there," Pan mirthfully laughed from her spot near the top of the tree Barry was hanging from. Her wings were spread wide, a halo of grayish white that would've been almost celestial if not for the cruelty in those eyes when she flickered her attention towards Barry.

He squirmed and shrunk, looking around the clearing, all too aware that Kajou failing would mean he'd be abandoned to his luck. And his luck had run out days ago.

There was movement from the corner of his vision, and Barry turned to see two of the smaller canine ferals approaching the edge of the clearing. They were barking loudly at Kajou, approaching quickly, and Kajou turned to face them. "Behind you!"

The warning startled her; she glanced at Barry right as the black one tackled her from behind. The monster had emerged out of Kajou's own shadow. The dark-skinned woman cried out as the feral's claws sank into her back, rending flesh. The other two canines had not stopped their approach, ready to jump in to finish the deed quickly.

A burst of blue came out of Kajou, a flash of power that made a THUMP against the very air surrounding her. It hammered against Barry's chest. The power it packed had been enough to send all three ferals stumbling away; this bought Kajou the time she needed to stand up and raise her guard. Despite her readiness however, she looked quite winded from what she'd just done, sweat falling down her temples.

"You know, you never did handle having multiple opponents that well," Pan spoke idly.

The words made Kajou flinch, tightening her arms.

"Are you sure that's where you want to be standing at? Weren't you going to protect the human?"

The proclamation made them peer at one another. They were at opposite sides of the clearing. Not close at all. But more importantly, the ferals were

right in between them, all three quickly recovering from the blast that had sent them sprawling. And though the black one and one smaller one were focusing on her, the other had turned to look at the human and growl.

A new form of panic blossomed in Barry's chest. His arms fought fruitlessly against the ropes. The feral was approaching, the anger in her eyes clear. She wasn't there for a meal; she was there for revenge. There appeared to be little doubt in the monster's mind that Barry was just as responsible for what had happened as the other one.

Kajou lunged towards the bigger feral, throwing a big swing that the monster avoided with ease. Not that the purpose was to hit- the tanned woman rushed past and straight towards the one that was approaching Barry. The canine didn't have time to react as Kajou punched the back of its head hard enough to send it straight to the ground. When it attempted to move, Kajou reacted quickly, stomping against the back of its neck.

With a crack, that was one less feral.

Breathing hard and raising her hands, Kajou spun to face the remaining two, ready for more. Both ferals appeared to oblige, the smaller one jumping in while the larger one vanished back into the shadows. "Where?" Kajou barked; it wasn't so much a question but rather a command.

Barry reacted without a second thought, head swiveling. "To your right!"

She nodded, throwing a quick kick forward to the incoming canine and immediately following through by throwing herself towards the right. The one that was emerging from the shadows had not expected to get a boot to the face, her body sent sprawling and rolling across the ground.

It bought Kajou the time she needed to focus on the smaller one that had just recovered and attempted another attack.

There was a savage anger in how she punched the feral's throat. The gesture had been so fast Barry had almost missed it, the feral clutching at her throat and gasping the moment after, falling to the ground in a coughing fit that was followed by a slow wheezing.

Kajou brought the feral's suffering to a quick end.

And then there was only one.

The dark canine snarled, spittle dancing from her lips, and fangs gleaming in the darkness. She threw herself towards her opponent in full. There was a clear intent to bring everything to an end here and now regardless of who was on top, and to the feral's credit, she reacted far better to Kajou's attacks than a minute ago, dodging the first several quick jabs and landing a nasty looking scratch.

But she couldn't keep up with Kajou's fists, as one punch to the face turned into five, then ten. The minutes bled by as the dark-skinned woman was doing her best not to kill her opponent. From Barry's perspective, it was like watching a slouched sloth trying to fight against Mike Tyson. Every punch Kajou threw at the feral's chest or gut would lift her off the ground.

And each time she fell, it would take longer to stand back up.

Until she couldn't.

There was clapping from above.

"Well done, sis. I almost thought I'd need to rescue you again."

"This time the big one wasn't around to fuck me up," Kajou spat, cleaning the blood from her lips. "She's still alive, we got the damn feral." Her eyes turned upwards to glare at the blond angel. "Now will you keep your damn mouth shut about killing Barry?"

"Did you forget? He has to break her from the feral state, without a collar."

The smile on her lips turned into a cruel smirk as she focused on Barry.

"Good luck, human."

Chapter 064 [Barry]

Barry stood at the edge of the clearing, looking off into the forest. The urge to start running straight through the trees was a voice that lingered in the back of his brain like a hot coal pressed against his neck. But each time it surfaced, he dismissed it. There was no doubt the fake Angel would catch up and, most likely, kill him.

But those thoughts were coming back to him with vigor. Because if he didn't start running, then he had to face off against the second most dangerous thing in the clearing.

She'd been heavily restrained against the tree, the... feral. Not quite human, a monster that almost looked like one.

And this feral, in particular, was one that had very nearly killed him.

The creature was naked; she had the figure of a young woman, a beautiful one at that. Her face was a near perfect almond shape, her skin smooth save for a couple scars near her right cheek, honeyed in color, interrupted only by the blotch of white paint that stuck to the bridge of her nose and around her eyes. Barry couldn't keep looking into those seething dark green eyes, turning further down.

His eyes lingered on the monster's naked figure, the slim breasts capped with dark nipples, the roundness of femininity that permeated her tanned form. The growl she let out kept any consideration of such beauty out of his mind, turning his attention to the wires that were holding this creature in place.

The metal wires kept her restrained against the tree. They were taut enough to bite into her flesh, through the fur covering her wrists, as well as into her throat. The feral was bloodied, her whole body battered and bruised, and it was clear she had difficulty breathing.

The injuries had come from the fight with Kajou, Pan having added a few of her own. By all accounts, the feral should be either dead or at least unable to

fight against her restraints.

But she was a monster.

Her teeth were sharp enough her smile looked closer to a shark's, her bite meant to tear flesh, the blood stains on her chin and neck clear proof of this. Barry might have considered cleaning them, but even when she was gagged with cloth, he feared she'd rip his hand off at the first chance. Maybe even if it was at the cost of her own limbs. The way the wire bit into her throat was proof enough of this.

"Less staring, more doing," the voice was accompanied by a sting of pain that jolted through Barry's left calf. Barry jumped a step ahead in shock. The human looked over his shoulder to find the angel pointing a finger at him and smirking.

"You don't need to do that." Kajou scowled from her spot next to the fire. Despite the complaint, she didn't move. Instead, she turned her focus on the flustered Barry. The smile she put up was plastic, a rather feeble attempt to reassure him. "Just do the same thing you did back in the feral den, and everything should be fine."

The look Pan was shooting his way added to the subtext 'or else'.

Gulping, Barry turned back towards the feral. Trying to focus on what he might find the least threatening thing about her. It turned out to be the two furred ears atop her head. Almost cute if he ignored the claws she had for hands, or the superhuman strength she could wield, or the murderous gaze she was shooting his way. "I don't..."

His thoughts turned to the cave, the hole, the nameless girl with wings for arms that was in pain and afraid and scared. The image was so vivid, so clear. His chest burned, the pain shortened his breaths and knocked the air out of him. A groan escaped the young man as he fell to his knees, clutching at the mental flame that burned through him. His ears rang with the girl's misspoken attempt to call out his name. She'd been so scared, so afraid, so...

"Pan!"

There had been the sound of scuffling next to him. The young human's blurry eyes turned to see the demonic Angel had stood up and moved to approach. Kajou had moved to block her off.

"I tire of his acting. He is fine," the blond maiden snarled, her blade glowing with an ominous white light. "I'm just going to give him a damn reason to whine about."

Barry moved with urgency, scurrying away from the pissed off angel as fast as he could. What else could he do? Wait and see what might happen? Dirt moved under his hands and feet, body clenching tight in panic as his gut twisted into an ugly knot. So focused was he on Pan that he did not see the direction he'd been moving in until his half-backwards-crawl made him collide against something soft and uneven.

The human looked up and found the snarling face of the black-haired feral. Her face lunged for him, an attempt to bite through the gag that ended when the wire around her neck grew taut. The piece of metal sank against her honeyed skin. Barry barely had the time to leap away, heart thumping against his chest.

Hate burned in her gaze as she pulled her head forward and desperately attempted to fight against the wire around her neck. Blood began to dribble down from where the metal cut into her flesh. Another handful of seconds and the creature had to stop, breaking into a coughing fit, wheezing for air through the cloth.

"I told you he's just human."

"It takes time, even with a collar. Do you expect him to do it instantly?"

"It's your claim that he made a bond with that other feral overnight." Pan spat into the dirt.

Barry turned to stare at the two of them, his chest tight like a spring about to break. "What do you want from me!?" He let the cry out, heaving, breathing hard, aching chest as he glanced between the feral and the two.

"Shut up, y-"

"Barry." Kajou raised her hand, blocking Pan's view of the human. "Just do what you did in the cave. Don't let Pan scare you into rushing. A job well done slowly is better than one not done at all." A slight smile, not quite as forced as the last one. "I know you can."

The only effect her words had on him was to lower his face down to the ground, hands clenched tightly as his heart stabbed through him with every beat. Were they just toying with him at this point? He hadn't done anything important in the cave, nothing worth writing about. He'd just been scared to death, sharing a dark hole with other things that made him scared, and the woman with wings had... Gulping, Barry shook his head, turning away from the memory as the heat and pain were becoming more intense.

It was a hard realization. He'd escaped the hole, but he was going to die all the same. This was just delaying it. He was powerless again. They were just waiting to get bored before they opted to finish it.

His eyes lingered on the black-haired monster, the restrained feral. Those green eyes were still locked on Barry in a glare. A tear streaked down her cheek, dampening the gag. The emotion being held there made Barry's hands clench. "Why do you hate me too?" he whispered under his breath.

If the creature understood his words, she showed no signs of it, keeping her struggle against the wire. Dimly, the human noticed she'd already stopped bleeding from her previous attempts to escape. How long until the wound was completely gone?

Truly, she was a monster.

They all were.

Chapter 065 [Alice]

Alice winced, mostly out of instinct. She'd expected a poke, a prickle, a little pinch. She'd never been comfortable around needles. Instead, a friendly hand patted her knee and drew her attention to the nurse that sat across from her. "We're done, ma'am." There was a whimsical smile on her face as she said this, doubly so when Alice turned to glance at the fellow nurse removing the needle from the syringe and tossing it into a bin.

The psychology teacher almost gawked. She hadn't felt the jab, not even a twitch. Nothing. "Was that...?"

"Ah, first time receiving a vaccine? We numb the area a bit, then heal it," the black-haired nurse replied.

"No, no, it's... no, this isn't my first, just..." Alice shook her head, dismissing the slight wonderment. "Is this it? Or do I need more?"

"Do not worry, Ms. Smith." The nurse helped Alice to her feet. "There might be a need for a booster shot since you're a pure human. You should have a blood-test in a month to make sure everything took as it should have."

Alice nodded slightly, focusing on that odd term. 'Pure human'. It made her squirm slightly. It was uncomfortable to consider on so many levels, especially considering the historical context back in her world. There were faint hopes it was unrelated to the context in this one. "So I'm free to go?"

The nurse with the name-tag that read 'Nana' laughed lightly. "So long as you do not plan to jump out and start kissing everyone you meet, then yes." She smoothed her skirt slightly. "That said, you might feel a bit feverish tonight. Please take care not to over exert yourself." Pausing, she nodded a little. "Ah, we heard the Hunters are offering free lodging. I'm sure you'll have plenty of opportunities to meet up with your friends."

'Friends'. Another term that made the young teacher squirm. She'd kept herself in the room along with Mia ever since they brought them there. All so

she could avoid the others. After what had happened back on the bus, she couldn't bring herself to meet their gazes, let alone share the same space. Disgust kept welling within her each time. What could she hope to do now? Smile, nod, and shake hands?

Alice rubbed her shoulder where she'd received the shot. They had used that weird magic to heal it up. There wasn't even a drop of blood to be had. The gesture was mostly for reassurance. It made her want to sigh, but she held back on that too. Her mind was digging itself deeper into the memory. The rain, the mud, the burning sensation in her hand.

With a look down at her right hand, the teacher knew she should have had burn marks from what she'd done in that fight, scars. There was nothing. Her hand was perfectly healthy. It almost didn't feel her own. There'd been a tiny scar near her thumb. Caused by a butchered attempt to make sashimi. That, too, was gone.

The young teacher's thoughts came to a sudden stop when her eyes focused on one of the doors. Alice's brain took a second to kick in, recognizing the '#2' and wishing she could bolt.

Alice's arm twitched as she almost reached out, but held back. All of a sudden, her thoughts were scrambled all over again. If there was someone she wished to see less than the other survivors, it was Rick. Even if for a completely different set of emotions. Should she? She'd heard he'd woken up. It should have been at least courteous to go and greet him. It should have been the right thing to do.

Her time to choose whether to open the door or not was taken away from her when it swung open on its own. The young teacher froze as she saw a pink-haired nurse stepping away from the door. A split second, Alice stepped away, her body ready to get out of there before...

"Alice?"

Her shoulders tensed. It was Rick, of course.

The sight of him in the wheelchair made her grimace inside. She made sure not to show that emotion outwardly. He looked... healthy, but there was something off, a careful sluggishness to his gestures, as if his body weren't quite right.

Rick appeared nonplussed by his own state, chuckling loudly. "Don't worry, it's just going to be another couple days." Sharp as ever, he'd caught her thoughts before she had the chance to hide them. "I was told you were all cleared to leave?"

"Yeah, we got the vaccines and everything." Alice awkwardly smiled, gesturing with her head back towards the hospital entrance, trying to avoid rubbing the spot on the shoulder that had received the injection. "They're preparing someplace to put us in, apparently." She noticed the dim half-nod Rick used in response and the distant look in his eyes. "Something's bothering you."

"Could say the same to you," he deflected.

As much as he had a point, she didn't really want to talk about it. "You've got wheels, you have the priority here."

Rick gave her a good, long stare. Alice could almost see the cogs spinning. He was all too likely considering whether to call her out or her own deflection. "It's about Monica." The declaration was followed by a moment of silence. "The cat-woman, tigress, White Claw, they call her."

It was hard to forget who he was talking about. White hair, two meters tall, razor-sharp claws, and quite willing to literary tear people to shreds at the slightest instigation. The image was very much vivid in her mind. The young teacher was amongst those with a front-row seat when Monica had stepped onto the bus that night.

Alice nodded, mostly to hide the other expressions she would've rather shown. "What about her?"

Rick regarded her for a second longer. "Without her, we'd all be dead. But at the same time, she's the reason why I'm... well..." His hand tapped the

armrest. "And they have her."

"They?"

"The... count? lord I think it was?" Frustration flashed through his features. "The guy in charge of the village."

No, it couldn't be. Alice frowned as she took a closer look at Rick's expression. Was he insinuating what she thought he was? "And that's... bad?" How could this be bad? Monica was an extremely dangerous creature, and as-

"I don't know if that's bad or not. I've been thinking a lot," Rick replied, rubbing the back of his head awkwardly. "She doesn't want to be there."

"And you know this... how?"

The glance he gave her spoke of not wanting to answer that particular question. "Let's assume it's the case." He quickly proclaimed. "And... let's assume I could try to get her back."

"Get her... wait." Alice took a deep breath, reaching up to rub the bridge of her nose. "Did you hear about the... slavery thing going on?"

"Yes."

"And you want to participate in a slave system, why?"

"I don't think I can forcefully bash my way into wherever Monica is and pull her out of the cage," Rick replied, tilting his head. "And they certainly won't throw her back into the forest."

And it was obvious why; Alice was quite sure that thing had a body-count no less than three digits in size. "So you want to own her, as your slave, the creature that could-"

"Person."

"Excuse me?"

"She was learning to talk," Rick said.

There was a soft gasp behind him. Both turned to look at the pink-haired nurse, the one with "Dia" on the tag. The young woman was quick to bow and mutter something under her breath, hurrying into Rick's room. Alice was surprised she had forgotten the nurse had been there at all.

"Monica is a person. A... maiden," Rick pushed the conversation forward. "Just like the other maidens here, just... learning, she was learning. She could learn to be... better."

It was easy to see where this was going. "And one wrong move would get people killed. Rick, this isn't a hypothetical, she's done exactly that." Alice made a vague circular gesture with her hand. "She is a murderer."

"She didn't know better, she was feral."

"She killed Ronald."

"Who?"

"I..." The young teacher bit her lip, hand clenching slightly as she looked down at Rick's serious expression. "Rick, you can't be serious. You met her... what? A week ago?"

"I don't know if I am serious about this, my thoughts are too... muddled," he replied. "I just wanted to hear your thoughts on this."

Her gaze flickered at the wheelchair, long enough for him to notice. "I think you won't survive the next mistake."

"What about ethics? She's a person?"

That knocked the wind out of Alice. Her jaw tightened. Closing her eyes, she growled. Of course he'd pull that card. "I hate you."

"No, you don't."

Her lips thinned. "You know the ethical thing should be to give her the help she needs to stop being a threat to society. And we both know you're not equipped for that."

"Except she's going to be enslaved. Already is, I'd argue."

Alice leaned down. She wanted to strangle the man. She knew him too well. He'd made up his mind, and this was just solidifying that. "This should not be your hill, Rick."

"I want to hear it." He had the first hints of a grin.

"You just want to convince yourself that what you want also happens to be the right thing. Rick, slave or not, she's a threat to society, a murderer. She can't be trusted to be free. Not right now."

The grin turned sly. "And why should we consider she should be free?"

Alice's shoulders slumped. "Because no matter what their laws might claim, slavery is unethical. If she were a person in full, a member of society in full, then the ethical thing to do would be to set her free." A glare, a raised hand. "BUT that should be AFTER she's gotten the help she needs to become a member of society. A help you can't provide." Leaning closer, she put her hands on his shoulders. "Rick, you're trying to convince yourself you're the best thing for her."

It was the right thing to say... and the wrong one. Her fellow teacher flinched and scowled. "She saved me, it's... the least I owe her."

"She needs professional help."

"From who? The people enslaving her?" He showed only the slightest hint of anger. "They're not going to enslave her for her own good. They're going to enslave her to use her. Make her their property, permanently."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Alice wanted to scream at him. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. He owed the cat his life because she saved him? The teacher wanted to shout at him

that it didn't matter to this situation.

This was a trolley problem where his feelings were on one side and everything else on the other. And he was aiming the train down the wrong tracks.

She couldn't let him do this. "You're not being logical, you're looking for justifications. Rick, this isn't you." Her hands tightened on his shoulders. "This isn't what's best for her."

"I..." And just like that, the expression cracked, his shoulders tensed. "I have to try."

And just like that, Alice knew he'd already made his choice. The whole conversation had been an attempt to look for a logical reason to do so.

There were several choice words Alice wanted to scream into his face right now. Instead, she sighed, letting go, leaning away. How long had she known him? Two years? Three? This was the first time she'd wanted to throttle him this badly.

Instead, she felt her shoulders slump in turn. "At least don't go at this blindly."

"Yeah, that.. Was the plan."

"I'm going to go now, before I opt to punch you." Alice sighed.

"That seems reasonable." Rick nodded with a slight smile.

"And..." A pause, her eyes traversing towards the entrance, her escape, then back at Rick. "Thank you. For..." She scratched the back of her neck.

"Thanks for saving us."

As Alice spoke the words, she saw the complicated look on his face. There was no humor or joy, only a pained silence. The young chemistry teacher quickly hid behind a smile. "I owed you so many coffees I'd call it even."

She couldn't help herself. She laughed.

Chapter 066 [Alice]

Alice stepped outside the hospital and into the outside world.

The sky was cloudy, the air was fresh. There was a promise of rain lingering in the air.

The young teacher turned to look at the building she'd been in. Stone and concrete, its entrance a wooden arch that had a very heavy looking metal door. The door itself looked like something they'd use in a hangar, heavy enough there were rails on the ground for it to roll over. The whole thing was just waiting to slam shut and seal the entire structure from potential intrusion.

There was a wooden sign hanging above the entrance. 'Medicen' it read. On either side of the name, there were two symbols. One a red apple, the other a green infinity symbol.

From the inside, the structure and its halls had reminded her of an old hospital she'd visited once on her trip to France. A structure built out of an ancient castle older than several countries. Built to withstand war. Thick stone reinforced with concrete. Except these had shutters, cold, grey, and metallic, ready to swing close and lock at a moment's notice.

A shudder ran down her spine as she turned to glance around to the rest of the village of "Astunes".

To Alice, it looked like a village plucked straight out of some mountain in the English countryside. But the comparison was flawed in so many ways. It lacked many of the things she'd expect of such a place. The houses were not close together but rather generously spaced apart, each one no taller than two stories, made out of the same mossy cobblestone and concrete, each with windows that had metal shutters much like the hospital. And between each house, enough space for another one.

The sense of spaciousness was contrasted by the eerie sense of looming danger and emptiness.

This felt less like a homely picturesque mountain village and more like a series of tiny home-sized fortifications built by zealous owners unwilling to allow their neighbors to get too close.

"Miss Smith?"

The voice made Alice whirl around, coming face to face with a wall of flesh and muscle. She squeaked and jumped back, looking up to focus on the eyes of Gabriel Huge, or 'Major' Gabriel Huge. The man had been so quiet she'd not heard his approach. Or perhaps she'd been too distracted?

"Oh, Major." She gave a curt, tight smile, taking another step back and putting herself out of his immediate reach. Not quite comfortable this close. "I was wondering where everyone had gone."

If her adding some personal space bothered him, the man did not show it. The only gesture that came out of his stiff, serious face was a small, brief nod. The man put his hands behind his back. "The Hunter has procured accommodations for everyone, ma'am." His tone was curt and solid, his shoulders stiffening as his gaze didn't so much meet her own, but rather stared off into the distance.

Alice was about to reply, taking a moment to notice there were two other figures present she'd not spotted earlier. Both were women, wearing a tight looking green uniform. One was a blond woman with her long hair braided and hanging over her shoulders, a green collar locked around her neck. The other was a red-head with a short pixie cut. She wore a blue collar. So these were 'maidens', bodyguards perhaps?

Huge noticed Alice's stare and was quick to speak up. "If their presence bothers you, ma'am, I could have them walk further behind." The Major bowed his head slightly. "But I give you my word, my girls are far safer than the ferals you had the misfortune to encounter."

Alice bristled when the man had spoken those two words: 'My girls'. Her jaw tightened as she did her best to also push away the weirdness of how this hulking human being was being almost... deferential. "No, I'm fine, thank you."

Huge nodded. The gesture made his powerful neck tense like a bowstring. "This way, please."

Turning to walk down the street, the man took large, lumbering steps that should not have been as quiet as they were. Alice hesitated, noticing the man's guard had remained in place, looking distantly ahead. Anywhere except at her. And as soon as the young teacher hastily moved to catch up with the small giant, the two uniformed maidens had set their pace to match theirs while keeping themselves a good three meters behind both of them.

Alice glanced back at Huge. The man kept his hands behind his back as he walked, staring right ahead. From where she was, she noticed how the man's muscles were taut under his dark blue uniform. His back was tense, like a bowstring ready to let an arrow loose. Now that she paid attention, Huge looked like he was one wrong sound away from jumping out of his skin. It made her frown.

"Why are you tense?" The words left her before she could reign them in. Alice immediately wanted to curse at herself.

The Major twitched and looked over his shoulder down at Alice, letting out a nervous chuckle and turning straight ahead, hands still behind himself. "I guess you'll find out soon enough, but human women are very... rare."

Wait what? Alice had been about to press on this point when she noticed Huge's whispering steps had come to a halt. They were standing in front of a building that looked different from the others. It held quite a bit of space between itself and its neighbors, more than the others she'd spotted. Being three stories tall, the building was more cement than cobblestone as well. It definitely appeared more modern than the others. That, or at least the coat of white paint, was fresher.

Alice's eyes lingered on the twelve or so women that stood around the building. They formed a kind of living outline of the perimeter. Each of them wore green collars, and most of were clearly maidens even if without the collars. Animal ears, wings. One was a centaur! Alice couldn't believe her eyes, watching as each of the twelve or so uniform wearing creatures stood still, backs turned to the white building.

"Please don't mind the security, it's standard protocol." Huge's words, though soft, were not reassuring in the slightest.

They approached the perimeter. Huge gave a slight nod to the closest maiden. The woman's posture tightened, and she threw some sort of salute, placing her right hand against her left shoulder. For a fraction of a second, her eyes lingered on Alice. There was a marginal shock, a tiny rise of eyebrows. "Ma'am!" She stated with a bang, then turned to Huge. "Sir!" She added, adding a second salute. It was immediately followed by turning to look straight ahead.

As if on cue, every one of the maidens tensed and straightened their shoulders. A dozen hands impacted shoulders in a series of claps.

Alice felt an oppressive shudder run down her spine. Was this what she should be looking forward to from here on out? Why had they saluted her first and Huge second? She glanced at the tall man who'd not even blinked, just moving forward and through the perimeter.

Hiding the grimace, she followed behind the tall man. Two more guards stood at either side of the building's main entrance, opening it for them as they approached. Huge stopped right at the threshold of the door and not a step further.

"Miss Smith, it's been a pleasure. There should be a maiden to assist with any need you might have." A curt, stiff smile lingered on his lips as he nodded slightly to the inside. "Tomorrow you'll be all debriefed. Take the time to acclimate yourself with your room and amenities."

As if it had all been coordinated from the start, someone emerged from within the building's baby-blue foyer. Another maiden, wearing a blue collar and a long, flowing white dress. The woman approached and bowed at Alice. "Ma'am? I will show you to your temporary accommodations. This way please."

"Good luck." Huge waved, trying to relax his shoulders and failing.

Alice numbly nodded. Inwardly, the word 'temporary' kept repeating itself over and over again inside her mind. If there was solace to be found, it would likely be in the privacy of her new room.

"Hey teach!"

The voice made her stop and turn around, looking at two familiar figures. One was May, quietly standing to the side and slightly behind the source of the call-out. The other had dirty blond hair that glistened as if it had come out of a shower recently, and an eager smile. Alice's eyes widened slightly, recognizing the face. "You... were one of the students that left with Rick."

"Kat." The young woman extended a friendly hand excitedly. "I heard you wrestled a fucking spider! Arach...ne? Nae? The big murder bug." A chiming laugh followed. "Mind sharing the deets?"

"I..."

"Come on, teach, please?" Kat smiled slightly. "And I'll tell you about how things went on our side?"

There was a prickle of curiosity that struck Alice. She remembered how sure Rick seemed in the direction he wanted to take. Maybe this could give her some better context? "... sure." A little glance and a pause. "Is your grandfather ok?"

"Oh, him? He's fine and dandy, over at the other place with the guys. Probably having a blast playing puzzle crosswords or something." Kat rolled her eyes, her right hand moving and lightly brushing against her left elbow. Alice noticed the gesture of nervousness. There seemed to be more that was going unsaid. "Anyway, that means more room for us!"

Chapter 067 [Alice]

Alice sat next to the window and looked outside onto the street below. It was early enough that the cloudy sky had yet to lose its orange glow. There were people mingling through the streets right past the perimeter that had been set around their building. The people walking past were all female,. each and every one wearing a collar.

Maidens.

Their collars gave them away as such, put prominently in display for everyone to see. The coloration of these items varied, and it was hard to guess at why. Black and red were the most frequent in the early hours, but as the sun began to peek over the horizon, greens and blues were starting to make their way through the village.

The psychology teacher couldn't help but pick apart their behavior as they moved. Blacks were always in a hurry, usually carrying things that were far heavier than a woman of their size should have the ability to carry. Reds often handled lighter loads, foodstuff and cloth sacks. Some even stopped to greet one or several of the maidens that were in the building's perimeter. Meanwhile, the greens and blues were more leisurely in how they moved, stopping to make small-talk with the guards more often than not, some even pointing at the building and appearing quite inquisitive about the whole thing.

Laughs and little spats occurred, only ever harsh words or loud chuckles. The guards would always have someone ushering the guests away. Perhaps trying to avoid being spotted by their superiors and getting into trouble for it.

Not once did Alice see a male, or a human female at that. The two times she'd seen a child, they'd been barely ten. Both were little girls with mousy ears atop their heads, and their collars were the purest white, helping the mousy mother to carry groceries down the street.

It all seemed so strangely... normal. They moved about, they talked, they smiled or looked tired or both. Some more energetic, some less so. But Alice's eyes lingered on those things that weren't quite as normal. Animal ears and tails, wings, odd hair and skin coloration. Most seemed to be canines or mice. Out of every dozen, they made up half. There were patterns to be found, behaviors.

The more scandalous part was the clothing, or rather, the lack thereof. Many of the blacks and reds were almost completely naked. Shorts or shoes sometimes were the only piece of clothing they wore save the ever present collars. Greens wore revealing dresses, short skirts, exposed cleavages. Blues were closer to what Alice would've expected, more conservative skirts or even pants.

It made Alice's hackles rise. There was something very wrong with all of this.

A knocking disturbed her thoughts. She waited for a heartbeat, pulling her eyes away from the street. "Come in."

Much to her surprise, it was May that stepped through. The young woman bashfully smiled and bowed her head a little. Why would she...? Alice blinked and saw the one who'd been pushing May into the room. "May, Kat, what can I help you with?"

The dirty blond girl beamed at the psychology teacher. "Nah, May wanted company, couldn't work up the courage so here she is now." The proclamation made the quiet woman lower her head slightly and nod marginally.

Alice took a moment of pause, catching the glint of humidity in Kat's hair from the reflection of light that came from the corridor. The young woman had showered? This early? And yesterday too... "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a log." There was a very quick forced smile. "Anyway, let's get some breakfast? I'm dying to find out what the hell these people plan to do with us."

"Catherine." With a pause, Alice glanced out the window, back down to the street and those passing by. "Have you noticed anything... off about the... maidens? Besides the option in clothing I mean."

"Other than the animal bits and superpowers?" Kat quirked a brow. "Most of them are one olive oil accident away from turning themselves into a playboy cover shot."

The teacher's lips pursed slightly, that... was not what had been gnawing at her, but now that it had been pointed out to her, she couldn't avoid from realizing Kat was right. The women in the street all looked pretty, some stunningly so. The teacher narrowed her eyes slightly and turned away from the window. "Let's have breakfast, it should do us some good."

May seemed the most enthusiastic of the three at the prospect, even if quietly so. With a slight, she followed the group out and down towards the mess hall that had been put in place for them. The smell that reached them was sweet and enticing, Alice couldn't pin down any one thing, but her mouth watered all the same.

The room was large, but with a long table in the middle dividing it into two parts. Around it there were a dozen round tables with four chairs each. The middle table had a flat long stone surface, slate by the looks of it. Three women worked as chefs on one side of the slate, while the other had an array of already cooked dishes waiting to be picked up.

"Wicked!"

Kat had been the first to notice the cooks and rushed ahead, her focus not on the food but on the trio of maidens. And these three were unmistakably not human. The first was a woman with chalk-pale skin and long green hair that grew all the way past her hips. The hair was thick and littered with small white flowers. The second was a woman with fiery red hair and a pair of angelic wings that were equally red, both flickering with flames as if she could combust at any second. The third had no traits that were quite so impressive, but she had short purple hair that almost seemed to glow.

All three wore collars, blue, save the fiery woman who wore a collar Alice hadn't seen before: gold. She was the only one also wearing a white hat. It was rather easy to guess at the hierarchy.

"We have an audience," the purple woman proclaimed, smiling from ear to ear as her eyes flickered at Kat. "Show time?"

The other two quickly shot a tired look at the woman, and the redhead spoke up, fiery wings rustling. "Do you want to go have a talk with Irene again?" As she said this, she reached down to the slate with her bare hand, pressing her palms firmly against the slate. There was a burst of steam as she caressed the black surface, heat and redness spreading through the rock, trailing behind her hands as she was very clearly heating up the entire thing.

"Gah." The purple-haired woman flinched away from the steam, lowering her head a little.

"I want a show." Kat said, pouting. "Please?"

It was like a jolt, the two maidens hesitated, a glance of preoccupation was shared before they glanced at the third one, who became all smiles and smugness. There was a quiet conversation carried out by their shared looks.

"You don't have to do anything." Alice quickly spoke up, throwing a glare at Kat. "We wouldn't want to cause you any trouble."

"Thank you, ma'am." The red-head bowed quickly, going back to work, pouring batter onto her portion of the slate and preparing what looked to be small pancakes.

That gnawing in the back of Alice's head bit down slightly more into her.

"Psst." The third cook made a little come-hither gesture at Kat with her free hand, taking a bright red apple and placing it against the black slate stone.

Instantly it began to sizzle, but the purple-haired maiden was quick to bring out a small knife. Her hands moved with such speed Alice had a hard time following the gestures, each flick of the wrist cut another slice out of the

apple, as if it were pie. And with each cut, the slice would wobble off, do a somersault, and land on its side against the heated stone. In a flurry of movement the apple was gone, leaving behind a prismatic circle of apple slices.

The violet haired maiden lightly slapped the table with the palm of her hand, and the slices flipped themselves over.

"Tada~!" She spoke in a little voice and a grin.

Kat clapped her hands happily, but Alice's focus had shifted to the other two. There was a deep sigh but neither said nothing, only rolling their eyes at what looked like an antic rather than whatever it was that they'd worried over.

The teacher's stomach rumbled, and she found her focus shifting towards the plates that were littered with already prepared food. A strange feeling washed over Alice as she realized she could recognize almost all of it. Cheese, a bit of ham, there were a great deal of bread-based meals such as muffins and pancakes, and a lot of fruit. Actually, the fruit was almost all of it.

"Huh, they have kiwi," Kat muttered under her breath, taking some of the slices and serving herself.

"Oh yes, they are very tricky to grow naturally in this weather." The green woman beamed. "Would you want some more? We'd only made a variety serving since we weren't certain what might be more appetizing to you."

"Sure!"

The green-haired woman reached up to her hair, a finger idly caressing against one of the little white flowers. In an instant, it closed up, its petals falling off as it began to grow bulbous. Everyone's eyes widened as the bulb quickly expanded, little flecks of brown hair covering its surface. With a happy little hum, the maiden plucked it out of her hair and offered it to Kat.

All three humans stared at the fruit as if it were about to sprout wings and fly.

With her knife, Kat cut it in half, revealing the green and white interior. "Holy crap." She glanced at the maiden that had vines for hair with wide eyes.

There was a giggling sound from the purple-haired woman, a mischievous grin on her lips as she looked at their faces. "If you guys are this excited over something like that, maybe a show might have been a bit too much of a shock."

Alice could only nod quietly and wonder.

Chapter 068 [Tomas]

Tomas sat down on the wooden chair, grimacing a little as the sharp flat surface dug against him. The chairs were clearly meant for utility, not comfort. The young man cast his gaze about. The room was packed with the other survivors- the other male survivors to be precise. They sat with tired and distant looks in their eyes; there was a quiet chatter that buzzed amongst most of the people there. Tomas sensed it was mostly apprehension and anxiousness.

Most, at least.

With the unflappable Mr. Gabriel at his side, Tomas considered himself fortunate in a way. The old man was more like a constant. Like gravity, Mr. Gabriel's existence would always be a stern lecture in not giving a shit about others. Quite reassuring when you're trying to figure out the very frightening "what comes now?".

Tomas and Mr. Gabriel sat at the back, and the others had been quite content on leaving them alone there. The feeling that hung in the air was of an invisible curtain that split them from the rest, a quiet separation that left the bulk of the group not quite sure whether to talk to them or not.

For their part, their focus was mostly on the Major. The man appeared to be a big-shot in the village and behaved like all big-shots, imposing and demanding attention with just his presence as soon as he entered the room.

Tomas idly wondered how the Major could get that muscular. The man looked like a bear, muscular and ready to rip someone's arm off if the need for it came up. Or if he just so happened to shake someone's hand a bit too enthusiastically. Where did he get all that protein from? Tomas had barely seen any meat on the breakfast menu.

"Ahem." Huge coughed loudly, drawing everyone's attention. "So, for a start, some good news. Last night we found one of the members of the second

expedition team. He is now receiving intensive care, but... it does not appear there were any other survivors." A stern glare followed. "We would have begun hunting for their remains, but our spotters noticed that a large chunk of the mountain came down North-East of here, and that's triggered an initial feral rush that is coming our way. So as of right now all further search and rescue operations have been called back."

"The what?"

"Questions at the end." The Major waved off the person who'd attempted to speak up. "Anyway, order of business here. First the legalities. As off-worlders, the Edogia kingdom extends their warm welcome, yada yada yada..." He flipped through some papers scowling before he tossed it over his shoulder. "Look, I am not good at formalities. Short of it is that the kingdom is happy to have you, and you will be given citizenship after some formalities." A weary sigh followed. "If you don't want to be a citizen, you're free to walk East through the frozen peaks since that's the quickest route out of the kingdom from here. Or you can try to act like a more sane person and head on over to Cuenes before doing that."

"Wait, what?"

"Questions at the end." Huge declared, rotating his shoulders to loosen them up. "Now, like all other humans on the planet, you need food, and to pay for the food, you need a job." His eyes swept over the crowd. "Law says all citizens of Edogia are to spend at least a year in service fighting ferals, potentially also helping in their domestication and getting them used to the whole 'society' thing. This can start right now, you can postpone it for up to three years, or you can pay the kingdom a small mountain of gold and have your mandatory service waved off."

A little pause as his attention moved to Mr. Gabriel.

There was a slight smile there, and a curt nod. "For people nearing Elder Gabriel's age, that service is automatically waved off in exchange of spending a year in the Inheritance program. Which is a fancy way to say that you get paid for sitting on your ass all day barraging a bunch of brats with whatever wisdom you've gathered in life."

"Can't say that sounds like a bad idea." The old man chuckled, rubbing his chin in thought.

Tomas was mostly thinking over the 'pay-off' option in the earlier deal. Considering what they'd gone through the forest... did he have some way to gather that much money?

"Trust me, it's not. My pops spent most of his late years doing just that. Lots of kids got a taste of his cane." A hearty laugh escaped the Major, he took a sheet of paper and raised it, on it, written in bold letters, was the word 'Major'. "Now, quick question, who here can read this? Show of hands please. And don't lie because we're going to do some tests later."

When all hands rose, the man hesitated, the serious expression broke into shock. "That's... ok, that's... um, that's great!" Another laugh followed, his mood quickly lightening. "Ok, so I was going to give a little speech about the importance of reading and writing and... hm... skipping that part I guess." He glanced at the discarded pile of papers he'd tossed earlier, giving it a forlorn look and a sigh. "Anyway, we'll do some basic tests, questions, try to figure out what you know, and suggest some options for the team you should probably build up."

"Team?"

"Of maidens." The Major replied offhandedly. "If you want to earn money, you're going to need to work at something. No better option than to get your hands on some maidens to start your own thing and go from there. Train them from the ground up." A moment of hesitation. "Ah, unless you want to apply to the army. Those suckers will probably give you something nice and comfortable since you're pure humans and all that." He waved his hand dismissively. "But I personally prefer the reclamation program. You get to pick out some nice land to claim as your own, settle down, and so long as you can pay the rent fees for a couple decades, that land and everything you put in it is yours to keep."

Tomas' thoughts wandered to the abandoned farm they'd nearly drowned in. The young man held back the grimace.

Hesitating, the Major made a face. "Anyway, that's about it. If you plan to start the service fighting ferals, then we'll get you started, give you some gear, a partner, and all that jazz." A light shrug. "If you don't want to take the mandatory service right away, then the best the Hunters can offer is an escort service to the bigger cities West of here. Questions?"

Tomas' hand shot up instantly; Huge arched a brow and pointed at him. "Is there any way for us to go back to our world?"

"If it exists, I don't know about it." The man shrugged. "I'm sure you'll be able to find more than a few page-lickers that would eagerly talk about the theory behind it over at the capital. More questions?"

Tomas didn't miss a beat, speaking up before the crowd could get rowdy. "What are the chances to earn money without owning slaves?"

A long pause as the Major scowled at him. "Kid, maidens are our partners." His brows furrowed. "Out there? With Wildlings and ferals out to eat you or worse? Your maiden is your lifeline. If you think about them as property, I can guarantee you, you're going to die."

"But they are," Tomas replied, then hesitated. "No?"

"On the books, maybe." Huge shook his head. "Look, at the end of the day what the law says doesn't matter, half the assholes who should care don't; and the other half only use it to stick a knife in your back." His fist clenched tightly. "Maidens might not have a say in many things, but even a bond can rot."

The Major took a moment, glancing around the room and noticing the quiet. A little chuckle, he relaxed. "Look, my wife is a maiden, and if you told me she's my property, I'd laugh in your face. We're partners."

That seemed to ease the crowd a little, nods were shared, even if hesitantly.

"Erm." Tomas raised his hand. "What about the... money part of the question?"

"Money? Ah." Huge nodded a little, chuckling loudly and rubbing the back of his head. "Yeah, forgot. Hm... how to explain this..." His eyes moved around the room for a moment. "Someone tell me a job, from your world, one you think you're great at. One you think you could use in this world."

There was a chuckle from someone in the front-row. "Programmer."

"Programmer." The man arched a brow. "You mean that fancy thing with the circuits and electronics and blinking screens?" There was a sudden silence, and the people shared looks with one another. Huge noticed Tomas nodding a little, and he nodded in return. "Pitbelle."

"What?"

"Pitbelle," the Major repeated. "It's a species of maiden of the Doggirl genus. Fluffy dog-ears, blond usually, nasty bite, can shock you hard enough it stops your heart. They can interact with the electronics stuff without touching them." He pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. "Last month we had some ferals trying to get to our radio beacon." His eyes swept through the room. "Unless any of you can use several computers with your minds, a Pitbelle is likely able to do that job better. Another example, you."

His finger pointed at one on the opposite corner to Tomas. The young man hesitated. "Ehm...?" His eyes glanced at those around him. "Farming?"

"Give me a patch of land and a hoe, and maybe I'll be able to get a tenth of the annual yield you'd get if it were some rookie Elf." The Major snorted loudly. "Want to try fighting? There are literally hundreds of relatively weak breeds of maidens that can put my ass on the cobblestone in two swings. Maybe shoe-maker? There are maidens that can turn plants into leather. Tracker? My niece can follow a week-old scent in her sleep. How about smith? My wife can melt steel with her bare hands."

A deep breath, he shrugged, leaning back and crossing his arms.

Slowly, his stare steeled as it swept across the room.

"Now." He frowned. "Unless any of you have some form of superpower..." There was a pause, his eyes flicking over the crowd- no one reacted to his words and Huge deflated slightly, apparently disappointed. "... then the one thing that sets you apart, the one job you can do that no maiden can, is making bonds."

"What the fuck is a bond?"

The Major smirked. "Good question. I guess we might as well go over the basics."

Chapter 069 [Rick]

Rick grimaced as he tried to stand up on his own. His legs felt like jelly, almost instantly giving out underneath him but barely holding on. With a grunt, his hands clenched against the railing that was embedded onto the wall. Deep breaths. Calm down, focus.

It was like everything underneath his hips was having a severe case of pin-pricks-and-needles. Like someone had forgotten to return circulation to them for a month and had now opened it all at once.

"It's all in the mind, sir." Dia was half a step away, arms half-extended and ready to catch him if he stumbled. "Your legs are perfectly functional, it's just your brain getting used to being fully connected to them again."

"Easier said than done," he muttered through clenched teeth.

The nurse leaned slightly closer, her hand pressing softly against his stomach, there was a slight warmth spreading from the point of contact. His legs felt slightly less fragile. "How about five steps this time? I've got something nice if you do it."

Rick cocked a brow and glanced at the young woman. "A reward for my efforts? I wonder what it would be?"

"Something nice." She smiled teasingly.

"More than your company?"

Her cheeks took a slight pink hue, her lips parted, and she seemed about to say something, but no words came out. Dia's head snapped straight ahead and her other hand abruptly reached out to nudge him a step away from the wall. Rick almost stumbled, caught off guard by the soft application of force against his back. His jaws clenched shut with the first step; the second one had to follow or else he'd really fall down.

It was at the third that he managed to grab hold of his balance. The sensation was like someone was lightly stabbing the sole of his feet. But he powered through, sucking in air sharply through his nose and taking his fourth step to avoid the sensation from becoming unbearable. Hands reached out to the sides as his body almost spun.

"Just one more, sir," Dia whispered, her hand never touching but ever close and ready. Her gaze was firmly aimed at his hips and avoiding meeting his eyes. Her cheeks still held that pink hue, her lips a hint of a smile.

A little wobble, a deep breath. And... step. His knee almost gave out, but he managed to compensate just in time. It was only when he'd let out the breath he'd been holding that he felt Dia's hands caressing his stomach. Her touch was firm, stabilizing him. She twisted him around, the motion was fluid, almost as if accidental, and Rick found himself back in the wheelchair right when his legs were giving out.

Something pressed against his lips, the touch surprising. The young teacher pulled his head back to glance downwards, spotting a little white pastry the blushing nurse was quietly holding right in front of him. With a quiet chuckle, Rick leaned forward, wrapping his lips around the treat as well as the tips of her fingers.

There was a soft milky flavor to it, with a touch of a fruit he couldn't quite identify. It was sweet in an almost aromatic kind of way.

"WOOT!"

The shout came from the hallway. Rick's body froze as his eyes flickered in the direction of the hollering. There were two nurses there, both wearing the same pink uniform Dia had, one with black hair, the other green. "You go girl!" The black-haired one proclaimed with a thumbs up.

It took Rick a fraction of a second to remember his lips were wrapped around Dia's finger.

With a pop, a severely blushing Dia pulled her digit right out of his mouth. "Why you...!" She proclaimed, hurrying towards the door, the two nurses

vanishing in a fit of wolf whistles and giggling. Dia closed the door and used the tiny curtain to block the view entirely. Not facing him quite yet, she huffed.

Even from behind, Rick could see the blush had extended all the way to her neck. Rick wasn't sure whether to chuckle or not, though he definitely wasn't able to hold back on the amused grin.

"I swear, they're so immature." Dia turned around, her face a deep crimson, her eyes glancing everywhere but at him. She hurried past him and to the table, towards a small wooden box she'd brought. "Did you... like it? Sir?"

"I think it was very sweet," Rick said. "And the treat was delicious too."

This time he did chuckle; Dia's ears were practically glowing now. There was something weirdly transfixing about watching the young woman reacting in such a way to his words. He would've never guessed that reciprocating her not-so-subtle attempts at flirtation would work her up this much. It was... refreshing, even if he wasn't quite sure where this was headed to.

His eyes lingered on her green choker and a slight worming hesitation made its way through him. "You're... not going to get into trouble over this, right?"

"Sir?"

"You're a maiden." His brows furrowed slightly. "That means someone... owns you. Right?"

The nurse hesitated, touching her throat. There was a moment of silence that was followed by a coy smile. She leaned forward a little, presenting the collar to him. "Would sir snatch me away if that were the case? Spirit me away in the middle of the night?" She fluttered her eyelashes. The blush wasn't going away, and the little hesitation in her wandering eyes made Rick think this attempt at a banter might have more to it.

"Maybe, if you can get me more of those pastries." With a little chuckle, he glanced at the table.

Dia took the cue, a little nod as she caressed her neck. Her other hand reached into the box and pulled out a blue pastry. "Green collars means we are owned by the kingdom, but are currently seeking an owner. Some might use the term 'public property', but that'd be... quite rude."

"Oh... oh!" Rick's face suddenly paled, then became beet red. "Wait, you I, no, wait, but-"

The nurse giggled, her hand reaching out to stop his words with the blue pastry. The taste was fruity, but Rick couldn't recognize what type exactly. The maiden giggled. "It's not illegal for a maiden to have some fun, sir." There was a little hesitation there, but an earnest smile. "Though I might change my opinion if I end up bonding with you."

"Wait, it can happen... accidentally?" His brows arched upwards, glancing at Dia as she broke into a fit of giggles. "You're pulling my leg."

The giggling stopped, looking at him slightly confused. "Pulling your leg? Is that an idiom where you're from, sir?"

"It means that you're tricking me."

"I would never do such a thing!" She put her hand against her chest as she put a face of mock shock.

"You're prettier when you're blushing."

And just like that, her cheeks returned to a beet red that was dark enough her pink hair almost looked white by contrast. "You're mean, sir."

"I try."

"To answer your question, no. A bond cannot overwrite another, the first must break before a new can be made." Her fingers brushed against her choker. "I'd need to take my collar off to break my bond."

"So the bond wouldn't survive without the collar?"

"If you believe in the tales for little children, then a sufficiently strong enough bond can survive even that." She shook her head, moving a strand of pink hair behind her ears. "For us greenies, when we find an owner, they take off our collar, breaking our previous bond, and then put on the blue collar." There was a wistfulness in her voice. "At that point the maiden is meant to express her trust in her new owner, a small ceremony of sorts, and that's when the new bond forms." Dia spoke with a little chime to her voice as her blushing cheeks dimpled with the smile.

The moment lingered as she sat down at the edge of the bed, her fingers traced circles against her skirt.

"You look like you have something on your mind," the young teacher proclaimed with a chuckle. It made her squirm a little, snapping her of the whimsy that had claimed her.

She looked at him for a moment, lowering her head slightly. "Would... would it be improper to ask about your world, sir?"

"Not at all, what are you curious about?" With a little pause, Rick felt a trickle of amusement. "Or are you curious about me specifically?"

Like a deer caught in headlights, Dia's eyes opened wide, and she quite suddenly found that the wooden box in her hands was something she should definitely focus on. "I mean, um..."

"Tell you what." He pointed at the bag. "One pastry, one question."

There was an abrupt change in Dia's expression, brows furrowing. "Five."

"Are you haggling with me?"

She tensed. "...may I? Sir?"

"Knock yourself out." He tilted his head. "Two."

"Five questions," she replied quickly, sharp like a knife. "But you can say no to one beforehand."

"Two, and I call you cute."

She flustered, but the brows did not waver. "Four questions, and you can say no to two."

"Isn't that just two minus the cute part?"

Dia almost stumbled through her words. "And a kiss."

The moment the words left her lips she went pale, then red, and then her grip on the box tightened enough it groaned as she half opened her mouth to say something else but clamped it shut. Her eyes were firmly fixed on Rick now, and her breath caught in her throat.

The teacher felt his own face warm up slightly, a part of him quite sure she'd suffocate if he waited too long to reply. But at the same time there was a hesitation at the offer. Should he? Flirting was one thing, this... felt like something else entirely. His mind flickered backwards, looking for a reason to stop himself.

The only image that came to mind was a small blue box that was gathering dust on a nightstand, a dead relationship on a world he could not go back to.

But...

The next image was of a stream, water cold but his body hot. A naked woman clutching at his body in desperation, his name on her lips. Dark skin and white fur. Monica.

"I... I'm sorry for ruining the moment, sir." Dia's voice broke the silence and Rick's train of thought, ready to stand up and leave. "Just two answers will be just fine."

His hand reached out, grasping her wrist.

"Wait."

He wasn't sure why he said the word; it escaped him before he could contain it.

"Yes?" The nurse tentatively asked, the look in her eyes clearly cursing herself for offering a venue of escape.

"I mean..." Rick hesitated. What did Monica mean to him? Should he even take this situation so seriously? "I... it's complicated." He muttered. "But... let's not force things, please?"

Dia's shoulders slumped a little. Was it relief on her face? Disappointment? She gripped his fingers lightly and a slight smile emerged. "Certainly, sir." There was a slight waver in her voice as she said this.

"Two questions, then."

They nodded in agreement.

Chapter 070 [Alice]

Alice squirmed in her seat as she glanced ahead to the pair that stood at the front of the room. It was a duo, a man and a woman. The man was tall and thin, at least two meters in height. He wore a purple tunic made out of silk, with wide loose sleeves yet rather tight at the chest and stomach. His torso was a reverse triangle that had been squeezed in place, and his hips barely existent. The man's pants were bleached white and started tight around the waist, becoming looser the further down they went until they turned into bell bottoms, hiding his shoes entirely.

It felt like something that had been ripped straight out of David Bowie's closet.

The woman next to the man was no less... extravagant. She wore a pair of black leather pants and a loose form-fitting equally black leather jacket. The look was almost masculine, especially with how her black hair was tightly wound into a knot on the back of her head. What marked her as human was the lack of a collar, her long slender pale neck was devoid of any trinket or decoration, the clothes designed exactly to expose this fact and make it clear as day.

"The nineties called, they want their wardrobe back." Kat snickered under her breath, earning a scowl from Alice and a suppressed giggle from May. "I feel like they're about to break out and start singing greased lightning."

"You should be paying more attention."

"He's trying to tell us his family tree isn't a fucking donut even though it's more inbred than a sandwich." The young woman hissed in response. "I don't need to know the twelve royal families or why it's important that he's related to all of them."

Alice grimaced, as much as she loathed to admit, that did seem to be something that wasn't exactly immediately important or of use to them right

now. Better try putting things into motion in the right direction. "Um, excuse me, Baron?"

"Please, call me Matthew." The man's head had snapped in her direction so quickly Alice suspected he'd been keeping an eye on them. "Were you going to ask anything?"

"Yes, I believe you'd mentioned about the professional outlooks we might have readily available?"

"Oh, don't worry too much about that." The man waved off with a sly smile. "If you apply to the army, you'll be given an administrative job befitting to your skills. And if I add in a letter of recommendation, I'm sure you'd enter as a captain at the very least."

"What if we don't want to be part of the army?"

"Why wouldn't you want that?" The question came from the wife, quick and simple as she smiled with a row of perfect teeth. "The army is the way to make contacts with the nobility. I myself was a Lieutenant General before I married Matthew."

A shudder ran down Alice's spine, she kept it from showing. "I see, and... what if I don't want to be part of the army?" She repeated, a bit more punctuated this time.

"Ignore her." A voice barked from the front, a cold dusty voice that made nails on chalkboard seem like a pleasant alternative. "You were saying about the academies?"

"Bitch." Kat whispered under her voice.

Alice held back from nodding in approval, her polite smile frozen in place in favor of the alternative. She spoke in a low hiss. "I think we will have to seek alternate information sources after this... I really hope they have a library."

"How long do you figure we'll have before they start asking what academy we'll enroll in?"

"I think I'd like to go." The statement had the duo swivel their heads and look straight at May. The young woman shrunk slightly in her seat at the sudden pressure. "I just think it's... better, than nothing."

"There are always alternatives," Alice quickly pointed out.

"There better be," Kat growled in a whisper. "Those two are a slip-up from saying human women are meant to make babies."

As if on cue, the man's voice drifted over their way. "... and we have to make our bloodlines pure, the purer the human, then the greater the responsibility to be held to help society grow." The man had spoken looking in Alice's direction in particular even if his gaze moved back to the smug looking Ms. Dodson.

Alice shivered. "Fuck." Kat and May looked at her in shock. The teacher sent them a dirty look. "Don't look at me like that, I'm not your teacher anymore."

"I'd definitely want to revisit that. You sure you can't teach me spider-fighting kung-fu?"

Alice had been just about ready to make a retort against the little joke when she noticed Kat's using her right hand to rub her left elbow. "I'll consider it if I ever open a dojo." The young teacher opted to let it slide and showed a slight smile instead, hoping it would reassure the former student.

"Cool." Kat's smile became a little more authentic, nodding a bit.

Alice could understand how frightening things could be when it seemed you'd lost all control over your life.

The moment passed in relative quiet, neither really paying much attention to what new thing it was that the Baron was trying to boast about. The three women just shared slight nods and little jokes. And for a moment it worked.

That is until there was a bright flash of red light and a series of shrieks from the front of the room.

All heads whipped towards the source of the light, Alice's eyes opened wide and her breath caught in her throat. Besides her, Kat and May gasped far more audibly.

"No way." The May whispered.

"Do not worry, I can assure you this is perfectly safe. It's been properly restrained," Baron Matthew declared.

"What. The. Actual. Fuck?" Kat spoke under her breath.

There, right next to the podium, occupying a spot that had previously been empty, was the most dangerous creature any of them had ever encountered. The feline was kneeling, restrained by so much iron its very presence likely multiplied her weight by ten. Curled into a ball, paws held behind her back, locked into place against her ankles, forehead pressed firmly against the ground.

The only part of her that could move were the two triangular white ears and her long feline tail.

Monica.

The creature shuddered and moved. There was a sound she'd tried to make, but it was muffled through a gag of some sort. She tried moving her head, to no avail, as the steel held it firmly in place against her shoulders. The feline maiden could barely twitch.

"As you can see, the feral is unable to escape. Its commonly known as 'White Claw' in this village... you can guess why." The Baron chuckled, patting Monica's wrist.

A blood curdling snarl escaped her, her whole body shaking as the room became colder all of a sudden. Alice felt herself going pale.

Matthew had jumped away, but was quick to recover his breath. "This feral has claimed many lives over the years. But finally, she's been captured. I've heard she was no less friendly with your group." A loud chuckle, the man nervously glancing as the bound naked maiden was trying to rock her body and move, even if a millimeter. "You will never have to fear her, as the Lord of this land, I can-."

"Monica!" Kat had lunged out of her chair ran straight through the gathered chairs towards the front

The feline reacted to her name being called, attempting to raise her head to look in Kat's direction. Monica huffed, tail going still. Abruptly, Monica's arms and legs began to tense, fighting against the heavy restraints, a dull glow covering her fur.

"See? She cannot break through the restraints. It's perfectly..."

There was a groaning sound from the steel, Monica's growl becoming louder.

"Monica!" Kat jumped ahead, trying to reach out to her.

One of the restraints popped open, releasing Monica's elbow.

The Baron leapt back, hand pulling out something out of his pocket and aiming it at the feline. There was a flash of red light, a beam that connected the device and Monica. She began struggling all the harder, her body shimmering and glowing brighter and brighter, a second restraint popped, metal crying in surrender.

The next instant, she was gone.

Kat stood in front of the empty space in total silence, mouth agape. Her head wiped left, then right, and then focused on the Baron.

"See? Perfectly safe." The man stepped back onto the podium, ignoring the daggers that Kat was shooting his way. The tall man puffed his chest out in pride. "As you can see, there is no longer anything to fear," he claimed with a wide smile and sweeping arms, the paleness of his face took away some of

the apparent confidence. "This device is a new miraculous item brought by an off-worlder not ten years ago to the Verdant continent." He raised his hand high. "Made after years of relentless research, the king himself gave me one of the very few prototypes created by the department of industry. To test this technology's might." A loud laugh followed. "With this, humanity will be finally able to conquer the wilds and bring the feral menace to an end!"

Alice had been too stunned to look away, her thoughts muted as every alarm in her mind had been going off all at the same time. It wasn't until his final proclamation that she barely cared enough to register the object the Baron had been holding up.

It was a metallic sphere, half white, half red.

Chapter 071 [Mark]

For the first time in what felt like... since landing in this hellhole, Mark took the chance to try to more carefully watch things. Being brash had gotten him nowhere, and plans to escape were dead ends. What else could he do?

With a grunt, he glanced upwards, at the rocky ceiling of the large hole that the fox kept calling 'base'. The dirt was compacted and almost looked smooth, almost like it'd been polished. Someone had made this hole in the middle of nowhere and had done a very good job at it.

It struck him as odd. For what was clearly an illegal enterprise of some sort, it was well made. How long ago?

Turning to the side, he saw his two captors as they bickered with each other over some theory or strategy or something. From what he could pick up of the conversation, they were trying to decide on a course of action. It felt as if their time was running out.

Mark didn't feel such pressure.

There was an odd lightness in his chest at this realization.

The time spent locked and tied up in this hole in the ground had given him an opportunity to calm down. What could he do in this kind of situation? Currently, he couldn't escape, not in the true sense of the word. Even if he made it out the door and gave them the slip, he'd go back to the wilds and get eaten by those 'ferals'.

Mark's eyes lingered on the crate with the 'fivers', then moved towards the third party. If those metal disks worked how they'd claimed, then... he shook his head slightly. How to test them? If he fucked up using one on them, it would bite him for sure.

His eyes turned towards the third maiden.

Noah.

The former human male, now female maiden, was unconscious, face swollen and red, legs bent at odd angles. Her black hair had been ripped off in clumps, her thin, waifish body littered with angry red bloody strips. Brye and Shery had yet to heal her from the last round of torture, having left her tied up to the wooden post with wire that wrapped around Noah's wrists and throat.

Could Mark use her to get out of the clutches of the other two? Maybe testing the fivers wouldn't be such a bad idea if it meant a chance to wipe the smirk off of the fox's face.

"You're looking awfully thoughtful, pet."

Brye had appeared on his lap, popping into existence out of thin air, her weight pressing against his thighs. The clothes she'd been wearing a moment ago were gone. Her naked pale skin was fully on display. The maiden's grip on his shoulder was soft but firm, the smile on her lips a promise of amusement for herself and verbal torture and rape for Mark.

The young man held back from doing more than growling. With his arms tied behind his back, it wasn't as if he could shove her off, anyway. He doubted he'd manage even if he wasn't tied up. He'd need her to lower her defenses.

"Brye, come on." Shery complained. "We're not done here."

"It's not like we have a better option." The fox shrugged, gold eyes never turning away from Mark's gaze. Her lips toyed with an ever growing smirk. "We don't know what the plan was and Noah's not sharing."

Mark's brows twitched slightly. "The plan was probably to get a sample out to whoever has been buying these things for the last while." His hips thrust to the side, twisting in a failed attempt to knock the fox over.

Brye's amusement died as she frowned, shifting to standing to keep her balance. "We figured out that much already. Our issue is 'where'." She flicked a finger against his nose. "That is the little tidbit we're missing."

"Didn't you listen?" The young man grunted. "This shit's been happening for long enough. They had a metal bullshit vault door installed."

The proclamation made Noah squeak. The mouse became tense, her chipped round ears abruptly standing up and aimed at them. Brye had not missed it, her eyes having darted towards the Mousegirl and a wide smirk forming on her lips. "Oh?"

"Think you could track a trail?" Shery asked.

"No, it'd be too old." Brye turned thoughtful, tapping her chin.

"Fuck... you..." The mouse squeaked the words, wheezing in a high pitched hiss.

"Don't you have a map?" Mark frowned. "Wherever the place is, it can't be too far away."

"Hm..." The fox's black tail swished back and forth, her ears twitching. "True, if Noah only had me and Shery, then wandering around for too long would've meant some feral could pop up and take a bite out of his ass." Her attention returned to Mark, lips parting into a wide smile. "Handsome and smart. You're quite the catch, pet."

His jaw clenched hard enough to hurt, a light growl playing in his throat.

Rather than answer, she tapped his nose playfully. Mark lunged forward to bite it, teeth pressing around her first knuckle, but stopped when he realized she hadn't even tried to pull away. Brye cooed. "Go on, try."

Mark remembered he'd done this before and failed to do anything but amuse her. Growling, he spat at her, refusing to meet her eyes as she broke off into a loud chuckle, finger running down his throat and teasing his shoulders. Her eyes followed her digits, appreciative of his figure in the same way a wolf enjoyed looking at a piece of beef.

"Hey, cunt for brains, we can't just stay around and do nothing."

"I've got some ideas in mind on how to spend the time..." Brye declared, hopping off of Mark's lap and vanishing, reappearing next to her clothes and moving to put them back on. "Even if we do know that the meeting place must not be too far away, it's unlikely it's in their territory. That would be too much of a liability."

The words made the gray skinned maiden blink, nodding numbly while rubbing the back of her head. "Then I guess this means we go back to square one?"

"No, I think I have an idea. Noah's going to help us."

If the angry squeak and half-wheezed hiss from the Mousegirl was anything to go by, then it meant they had a definite answer in that regard. From Mark's perspective, the constant beatings followed by slow healing sessions had done little to dissuade Noah from her clear desire to sabotage the endeavor. Or rather, it had emboldened her resistance further.

Still, Brye did not seem dissuaded, sauntering her way towards the entrance and diving behind some of the crates. As she rifled through the objects found therein, she eventually appeared to discover what she'd been looking for and vanished, reappearing in front of Noah.

The mouse squeaked and twitched, choking on the wire that held tightly around her throat before she forced herself to calm down or else risk self-suffocation. Brye had her back turned to Mark, but the wag of her tail spoke volumes about how amused this made her. "I've got a gift for you~." She singsonged the words, followed by the Mousegirl squealing and thrashing trying desperately to pull away.

Not successfully, it seemed. The next moment, Brye pulled away, clapping her hands with a gleeful smirk while watching her handiwork. There, adorning the mouse's neck, was a green collar. "What do you think?"

Though the question had been aimed at Shery, the fox's eyes darted towards Mark right as her lips parted further.

"You sure about this?" The gray skinned maiden questioned, quirking a brow and looking between Noah and Mark, rubbing her chin in thought.

"Oh, I'm sure." Brye had vanished again. Her voice spoke from behind Mark.

The human tensed, shuddering as her breath blew against his ear. But whatever his thoughts were, the sound of snapping rope and loosening wrists had him instantly scrambling to stand up. The human wobbled as he hastily put some distance between himself and the fox, her golden eyes almost glowing in the dimness of the cave.

Brye watched in amusement but did not chase, moving to sit down on the vacated chair, crossing her legs with poise. With her shoulder pulled back, she gestured at Noah with one hand. "It's actually very simple. She has a submission collar. All our little pet has to do is bond her. Then we hear her sing."

"I meant whether we can trust him." Shery replied.

"Oh? That? HA! Yes, we can." Brye nodded, tail wagging. "He's smart. He wants to get out of here. His plan is to gain our trust so he can look for a chance to use the fivers on us." Golden eyes lingered on Mark's own. "After that, he'd have three empty maidens to order around and keep him safe from the ferals. Isn't that right?"

Mark's eyes widened. Had it been obvious? How!?

"So this is how it's going to go." The fox gestured at Noah. "She's unbonded, so all our cute little fuck-pet has to do is bond her and order her to answer our questions. Of course, if he waits until she goes feral, it'll only be easier."

A loud clap of her hands followed, the sound a sharp retort that made Noah squeak and curl up slightly.

Shery nodded. "Noah starts singing, we give the goods to the client, head back to the Boss to report, and we get our big fat reward for a job well done." Pausing, she glanced at Mark. "And what do we do with him in the meantime?"

"Keep him nice and shaved?" Brye laughed. "If he gets to put a fiver on our face, we fucking deserve it." She reached down, grabbing Mark's clothes and tossing them at the human. "I'm going for a walk. Need some of the purple to get the rat patched up, no sense in wasting any more of the good stuff." A wink was thrown Mark's way. A cruel edge came upon her lips. "I'm placing bets you'll shove the bond down the rat's throat before she fully goes feral."

The young man's eyes narrowed, a growl forming in his throat as he watched Brye vanish into thin air. It was as if she'd been nothing more than an illusion. A heartbeat of silence, Mark's eyes lingering on the empty spot the fox had occupied only moment prior.

"Fucking finally, privacy."

The words sent a shiver down the human's spine. He turned to look at Shery.

The gray skinned woman sighed and approached, her feet thudding not so much out of a menace but purely from the sheer density of her body. As if she were made out of stone. She wasted no time to reach down and pull off her baggy brown shirt off, exposing small perky breasts capped off with dark blue nipples. The young woman smiled at him with a cock-sure edge that made his stomach drop as she came to a stop only a meter away.

Mark was cornered against the wall.

"I don't do mind games, I just want my itch scratched." Fishing into her pocket, she tossed him something round and purple. It was hard to miss what it was. Mark's jaw clenched. "We do this the easy or the hard way?" Her head cocked towards Noah's battered and bruised form, the message loud and clear before she focused on him entirely.

Mark's nostrils flared, brows knitting as he snarled. He knew he could try running, maybe try making a mess before she caught up. Would she break his bones if he did? Could he achieve anything currently?

"Fuck you."

Reaching for the purple fruit, he popped it into his mouth and bit down. The gush of medicine-like flavor tingled down his throat, warming his body with its unnatural heat, a lance of arousal exploding forth as a tightness in his loins and a sudden fluster all over. He refused to become lost in it, however, anger flaring and forcing him to clench his fists until his knuckles turned white.

Shery grinned. "Good."

Chapter 072 [Rick]

Rick looked at the dusty pale green worn paint that covered the ceiling, trying to find some clear flaw within the smooth surface to focus his thoughts on. With there being none he could readily zero into, he took a deep breath.

Carefully, he moved his foot forward, applying pressure first on the ball of his feet and then extending towards the rest while he shifted his weight. There was only a very marginal tingling to be had, so the next step didn't come with as much apprehension.

His eyes fought to glance downwards, but he resisted, keeping his gaze on the ceiling for the next two steps, eyes slightly spread wide to help with his balance.

"Very good, sir, now look to the floor." There was a smile in Dia's voice, even if Rick couldn't see it.

Complying with the instruction, Rick turned to look at his feet, pressing his chin against his chest. The tingling emerged, rushing down his spine and all over his body. The young chemistry teacher closed his eyes and stilled, waiting for it to pass before opening them again.

"Another step..."

A pair of polished leather shoes blocked his slow progression across the wooden floor.

The owner of the shoes reached out and, with soft hands, caressed the back of his head, tracing fingers down his neck. "Hm... good, everything's working as it should. You're almost ready to be discharged, sir."

Rick slowly looked upwards, following the white knee-high socks that ended in the white and pink skirt of the nurse uniform. It was modest, yet it pinched at Dia's hips, hinting at the curves held beneath. Especially eye-catching was the hint of cleavage that peeked up at him. The chemistry teacher was quite

sure this uniform was a size smaller than the one she'd been wearing until now.

Hastily, he pulled his eyes further up and towards the blushing grin of the nurse. "Almost?" He managed to ask, pushing the question out rather than forget what he'd meant to say entirely.

Dia's cheeks kept their pinkish color as she pulled out a little wooden box. "Yes, you still need to pass a very important taste test, sir."

With a laugh, Rick shrugged his shoulders a little, moving to sit but having his movements stopped by a firm hand as Dia reached out to grasp his waist, keeping him close to her. The look in her eyes flickered back towards serious professionalism before faltering back into a blush, pulling her hand away once he arched a brow. "Please remain standing, sir." Her words were hesitant. She took a step back to focus on the box she held with her other hand, the same one she'd brought the other day.

The box's craftsmanship looked simple enough, polished dark wood with a little piece of string to pull on to remove the cover. The size was just barely larger than a clenched fist. "That... looks expensive." He commented with a moment of hesitation and a little pang of guilt. Had she brought the sweets in a store? What kind of store would hand out wooden boxes along with the sweets?

"Oh, this?" Dia faltered for a moment. "I made the box a couple years ago." Quickly, she pulled out a tiny cupcake no larger than a golf-ball. It was capped by a bright orange pearl. Her hand reached out to offer it. "The first treat."

"What is it?" He wondered, taking it and looking closer at the marble sized sweet that remained on top.

"It's honey infused milk candy." Dia's words held a bit of tension. "The center should be gooey."

Quirking a brow, Rick took the bite. And just like promised, the pearl burst once inside his mouth. His eyes widened at the explosion of taste. It had a

soft, crispy sweetness that felt almost chilly. It washed over him like a cool morning breeze with a scent of cream and lavender. "Wow, this is good."

Dia's expression turned into a billion watt smile. Her whole face lit up, cheeks dimpling as she bounced a little on the spot, nodding eagerly. "Thank you!"

It took Rick a moment to connect the dots. "Wait, you made these?" She nodded as if she were a bobble-head on a bumpy ride. "I think it feels like cheating if all I have to pay for this is a couple of answers."

She opened her mouth and quickly snapped it shut, nodding a bit less energetically than a moment ago, but the smile didn't go anywhere. "What kind of village did you live in?" The question was practically blurted out. Clearly, there was an itemized list somewhere in her head she'd plucked it out of.

"I grew up mostly in a city." He replied easily enough. "Biggest one around, a couple million in size."

Dia's eyes widened like saucers. "A... million? Just how large do your cities get!?"

"Is that your second question?" At his question, she nodded quickly. "Well, we had a couple big cities with almost ten million, but I'm pretty sure there were cities in Asia that had four times that."

"Just... where? How? How could you fit that many people in one place!?" Dia's voice became a little shrill. "And... the disasters? How could they avoid...?"

"It was two questions per treat." Rick chuckled, watching her lunge into the box to pull out a little dark brown confectionery shaped like a star, no larger than a thumbnail.

She'd been just about ready to stuff it into his mouth when she froze. Her eyes flickered to his lips for the briefest of seconds, and Rick felt his throat become dry. He acted rather than wait. His hand reached out to grasp her free

hand, pushing his lips against the back of her wrist before plucking the treat from her slackened grip.

The maiden might not have spoken, but her expression was an open book. She wanted to complain that he'd tricked her, but at the same time, her eyes darted towards the spot he'd kissed and her cheeks reddened.

This treat had a faint taste of oatmeal and something else... definitely not chocolate, how he'd expected. It was a less extravagant taste, down to earth, simple and warm. "Hm... good one, probably better with some milk." He commented, breaking the death stare she'd locked onto her wrist.

"Question." She quickly declared, lips pursed. "Natural disasters, how often? How strong?"

"Not too often. It's rare to have anything that causes too much destruction. Some places would get typhoons or hurricanes once a year or so." A rather simple answer.

"Ah... that explains it." She pouted, looking into his eyes, then his mouth. She bit her lower lip slightly, teasingly. "Male female proportion?"

"Fifty fifty more or less, a bit more males I think."

"Oh." That startled her a little, her finger scratching her chin. "That means things are very different, huh."

"We don't have maidens over there, so that's a definite yes." His words cut off as she stepped closer, turning her head to the side and leaning slightly towards him. "What?"

"Will you... give me another kiss?" She asked, hesitating slightly, turning her head to the side and pointing at her cheek. Her face was turning slightly redder.

With a laugh, Rick leaned down to do as asked. But Dia's head whipped to look at him the instant he'd closed in. In a fast and fluid motion she leaned to

cross the remaining space. Her lips touched his own. Silky smooth and with a raspberry scent lingering within.

Rick's chest seized up, something strung tight like a rope about to snap. His breath caught in his throat as his thoughts abruptly froze in place. For a fraction of a second, his heart forgot to beat.

She had pulled away before he could react, eyes lowering and fixating on her polished brown shoes, locks of pink hair hiding the intense blush. Embarrassment clear all across her features. The young woman mumbled something, fishing into the box and trying to quickly pull something out. A startled yelp left her as Rick stepped closer, one hand pushing away the box.

"I'm so-."

The words died quickly as his other hand pulled her chin upwards. Her startled face was silenced as he took her lips freely.

This time it was her turn to tense, a short-lived thing. The woman melted against him, dropping the box and wrapping her arms around his neck. Dia drew herself closer to him, tongue flicking to taste his mouth just as his own reciprocated.

"Ahem."

Human and maiden leapt away from one another as if someone had detonated an explosive in the space between them. Rick almost tumbled, Dia immediately tensed, expression turning into stony professionalism even as her cheeks burned and her breath was short.

Rick turned towards the voice that had interrupted them.

Kat had the smile of the cat that had eaten the canary. Next to her, Tomas was looking away and awkwardly scratching the back of his head. There was a mix of embarrassment and something else in that expression on his face.

"We rushed here to tell you about Monica and we find you having some hanky panky with the hot nurse? Shame on you." There was no bite in Kat's tone.

But it stung Rick all the same. The warm feelings from a moment ago stopped dead in its tracks. "Monica? Do you know where she is?"

"The Baron has her, duh." Kat rolled her eyes. "You're going to have to rescue that catty princess."

"What... did you see?"

"He's chained her up." Tomas said, tone grave. "Showing her off like some trophy."

"He's torturing her." Kat nodded.

Rick's brow furrowed. His mind snapped into a decision on the spot. "I need to talk to Major Huge."

Quietly, Dia's shoulders dropped, and she held back a sigh.

Chapter 073 [Rick]

Rick looked down at the leather hood that came attached to the cape he'd just been handed over. The piece of clothing was two sizes too large for him and three times too heavy. It made sense, considering it was made for a man that was taller than him and had shoulders a meter across, a man whose frame would make it impossible to walk through a normal doorway without bending slightly sideways.

A man who could look down on Rick as if the chemistry teacher were no more than a gnat.

Major Gabriel Huge was doing exactly that. "I am not going to have a guest drench themselves on the way to the shelter." The large man proclaimed, crossing his arms. "Would you just put it on and walk with me?"

Could Rick even walk properly while wearing the thing? It was wet on one side and must have weighed a third as much as he did. With a grimace, Rick twisted it, putting it over his shoulders and feeling as if he'd been stuffed under twenty blankets. It was warm and heavy, the hood falling over almost enough to shroud his face entirely and leaving him only able to see the wet cobblestone ahead.

"There we go." Huge laughed with a booming voice. "Now no one can tell who you are at a glance."

"Wait, why would that-?"

Huge pulled him out of the cover of the hospital's entrance and into the pouring rain. The sounds around Rick were drowned under the echoing drums of water hitting the leather hood. Still, the Major's voice boomed through the storm with crisp clarity.

"We've recently detected the starts of a feral rush." The large man stated, hand keeping a lock on Rick's shoulder, practically pushing him through the

slippery cobblestone. "So excuse me if I'm brief, we're going to need all hands on deck once it hits."

"A what!?" Rick screamed, trying to speak over the hammer of droplets.

"Mountain-slide up north, displaced bunch of ferals. First wave's going to hit in a day or two." Huge declared. "We're getting everyone ready."

The tension in his grip and voice told Rick otherwise.

"What about Monica?" He barely had time to register where they were going. His focus was mostly on trying to avoid the stream of water and from slipping on the slippery ground.

"The Tigress? The Baron's been slobbering over her for years." The lumbering man stomped his way through, each footstep a tremor that sent water splashing in every direction. "He's the guy in charge, gonna need to convince him and his bloated ego to hand her over."

"And the law?"

"He IS the law." Huge said grimly. "The land is technically his. He's got final say on things. So us rubes gotta suck it up and kiss his boots."

"And if I don't like it?"

"Then you bring it up to the Earl, but good luck there." There was a bitter laugh, there was a strain in the sound, a barely hidden growl. But the noise stopped when Huge's steps slowed. "Wait, you fellas are pureblood humans, maybe you do have a chance..." A rolling thunder crackled overhead. The large man glanced up into the storm, eyes narrowed. His long locks of black hair clumped against his green, drenched uniform. "This rush's going to be a fucking nightmare."

"Why?"

"The storm." He shook his head, turning to continue walking, the large meaty hand not letting go of Rick's and yanking him through the village. "Also, that damn White Claw had laid claim in a very convenient place. Ferals avoided

it, made rushes less likely to come from that side of the mountain. I told the Baron to leave that fucking cat alone but no, he needed to stroke his ego." A growl. He spat to the side, pausing only long enough to glance at Rick again.

Letting go of the teacher's shoulder, he reached up to pull the cowl down, leaving Rick completely blind save for the ground immediately in front of him as he was then yanked forward.

"Sir!" some woman called out as Huge pulled Rick through.

The man was like a force of nature. There was barely any give in his grip, and Rick would've been hard pressed to slow him down let alone stop him. Fortunately, the Major's forcefulness came to an abrupt stop along with Rick sensing they'd stepped out of the rain. The hood was pulled off, and the young teacher found himself just past the entrance of a building of some kind.

This one was well lit. There was a lamp overhead that glowed with what was unmistakably a light-bulb. A dull warm orange bathed the foyer. Stone leading to wood, Rick had a fraction of a second to take things in before Huge's hands quickly shook him. The next second he realized he was missing the leather cape. The large man had put it on without a moment's wait.

"Look, whatever your hassle with the Baron and that Tigress are, it can wait until after the rush." Huge said, eyes blazing holes into Rick. "It's my job to keep this place safe. The last thing I need is the Baron making my work harder. And it's not like you'd have the right to have a maiden, anyway."

"What?"

"You need to be a citizen first." He held a finger up, pointing to the roof. "I'm not a lawyer, but even I know that you guys are technically nobodies right now. Focus on becoming a legal citizen along with the rest of your friends. If you want to have a hope at anything, you absolutely need that first."

Frowning, Rick nodded, noticing Kat and Tomas had followed close behind. Neither looked even slightly damp. Kat was grinning from ear to ear as she walked past Rick, dragging Tomas along the way. "Going to check this nerd's room! Thanks for the trip, Huge!"

The Major stiffened, giving a salute, right hand reaching up to the opposite shoulder. "Ma'am." The chemistry teacher looked from Kat as she walked down the corridor and to the Major as he waited for a heartbeat before relaxing. A nervous chuckle followed as he scratched the back of his head. "The only human women I ever dealt with were either commanding officers or nobles."

"Feels rough."

"You have no idea." The man sighed, shaking his head. "Anyway, this place is the temporary lodging for the men. If you need anything, just ask. The women are down the street, can't miss the building, it has more guards than the King's latrine."

Though Rick nodded, his thoughts were on other matters. "Anyone I could talk about law?"

Huge gave a lofty nod. "I'll throw the question, see what bites."

"Thanks." Rick offered a hand to shake.

Huge tensed, looking down at the hand. "Don't mention it?" There was a brief moment of confusion as he took the teacher's hand and gave a singular firm shake.

"You don't shake hands here?"

"No, we do." A hefty roll of his shoulders and a shrug. "Just not used to it. Be safe."

With those words, Huge stepped out of the door and into the rain. Rick took a moment to watch him go. He'd been about to lean forward to close the door when a bed of pink hair entered through. The human was forced a step back as Dia was the one to close the door behind herself instead.

"What are you doing here?"

"Hm?" She nonchalantly grinned, not looking even a little wet. "I'm giving one of my patients a visit."

"Patient?"

"Ryan Ortyz." The woman grinned at his surprise. "One of your students, I believe, he'd been amongst the patients in critical condition who had to be carried by land rather than flown to the village. It's a customary check-up to ensure everything went as it should have."

Blinking a little, Rick felt his shoulder lower a little.

Dia caught the gesture, her lips parted into a grin. "I also might stay awhile since the weather is so terrible outside. I believe the hostess has the best coffee on this side of the kingdom. Maybe you'd like to drink one with me and share some pleasant conversation?"

Rick arched a brow and grinned. "Laying it on thick?"

The nurse leaned forward, her hand falling against his shoulder and pressing him against the wall. She was shorter, but she was definitely stronger than him. Her eyes were sharp as she leaned closer, looking up into his eyes. "Yes." Her cheeks were flushed as she pulled away, the predatory edge in her gaze vanishing as she smiled politely. The change fast enough it gave Rick whiplash. Her tone came out sultry, but controlled. "I do believe I have a thing or two that might be of interest. I spoke with miss Ana on the way here and there may be some laws that could be convenient for your case, sir."

Rick noticed the flicker of movement from his right. There was a woman... no, she had a gold collar, it was a maiden. "Oh, hello Dia." The woman was slightly plump. It was the first thing the chemistry teacher noticed, which was a slightly odd thing to spot. His eyes moved to the healthy shine on her cheeks and long brown hair braided into all the way to her ankles. The maiden also happened to have a pair of deer-like horns atop her head. The woman's focus was on the nurse. "You wouldn't happen to be trying to sink your hooks onto our local celebrity, would you?"

The nurse's cheeks turned bright pink. She bowed deeply. "I wouldn't dare, ma'am."

"No need to apologize to me, I know I'd be doing the same if I were in your shoes."

"Celebrity?" Rick asked.

"Ah, I take it no one told you, Mr. Cross?" The woman's smile widened with warmth. The words made Dia wince. "Not every day a gallant human steps in to protect a maiden, and from the infamous White Claw, no less."

Rick's eyes bore into the back of the nurse's head. Even from where he stood, he could see her cheeks becoming redder with every passing second. "I think someone skipped on the details."

Chapter 074 [Alice]

Alice found herself looking out the window again. It was hard to tell what time of day it was what with the storm, but she figured it was early morning. How had the weather turned for the worse this hard? This fast? The hostess had mentioned something about ferals, but could the maidens manipulate the weather as well?

Alice's eyes lingered on the sky above as the thunder streaked through the clouds.

As much as she wanted to keep her thoughts on the impossibility that some human sized creatures might be able to make a storm spontaneously burst into existence, there was something more pressing that was trying to gnaw at her thoughts.

Monica.

The image was clear, bound in heavy chains, forced into a curling position, wrists and ankles restrained in iron. A shudder ran through the teacher. Her mouth twisted as if she'd just bitten into a lemon. All the philosophy and logic in the world could not dissuade her from that gut feeling that burned bright within her.

This was wrong.

Not able to just stay put in the room any longer, she stood up, hoping she'd perhaps find something to eat downstairs. Much to her surprise, the three cooks from the other day were there already, apparently starting the day early.

"Not Kat or May?" The purple haired one asked the maiden whose name Alice was sure she'd heard at some point but forgot.

"They have their own schedules." Alice stated brusquely, frowning. "I have a quick question. Who is the Baron? To the village, I mean."

The red-head wearing the golden collar was the one to speak. "He's the village's ruler. He manages the land and helps the village thrive. We're a border town that wasn't even on the map until his family showed up some fifty years ago." Her hand gestured at the ceiling, at the flickering orange light. "It's thanks to his family that we have electricity and running water." A little pause and a solemn nod. "But that was his father's work, mostly."

Alice nodded grimly. "And do you know anything about the current Baron?"

"Not really, he was born in the capital as far as I can tell." The woman stated, her hands flared with flickering flames as she caressed the stone slab. "Only showed up around these parts five or so years ago... showed up looking for White Claw."

There was a nonchalant nod at that proclamation, Alice opted to keep things at that, filling out her plate and turning to sit down to take her breakfast. Or so she would have wanted to, her focus was interrupted as she saw a craggy old woman entering the breakfast hall. A familiar and unwanted presence. The sight of her made Alice's turn and churn, a sense of revulsion that swept through her.

Ms. Dodson looked just about as shocked to see Alice, but her face hid the emotion quickly behind a mask of indifference. Turning away, the older woman approached the chefs, meanwhile, Alice just left her plate on the table and walked out. Her jaw was clenched tightly, feet almost stomping her sneakers down against the brick floor on her way out.

"Miss Smith?"

The voice snapped the psychology teacher out of her internal fuming. The woman turned to focus on the one who'd called out to her. It was a maiden. A blue collar and green uniform denoted she was part of the Hunters. "Yes?"

"The Baron sent a request to meet with you."

If there was anger before, it was jolted right out of her, Alice's shoulders squared off and the one who'd called her out shrunk slightly, lowering her

head in a partial bow. "The invitation is an unofficial one, the lord emphasized you need not come if the circumstances weren't proper."

The proclamation gave something for Alice's mind to focus on, something to do. A target. She had two problems troubling her mind. Might as well address one of them directly.

Her thoughts defaulted into her experience at the university. What to do when told to participate in one of those stuffy meetings that were thinly veiled attempts to gather funding? "I'm not exactly presentable for an official meeting with a... the Baron."

"The Baron said not to worry, and if the madam was bothered, then his wife's personal seamstress would be able to have something made easily enough."

There was no way in hell Alice would want to indebt herself to the man. "If that's the case, is the invitation for right now?"

The maiden hesitated. "I was instructed to bring you at whatever time you found to be most convenient, ma'am."

Fuck it. "Then let's go."

In a blur of movement, the uniformed maiden turned around, heading towards the main entrance, vanishing past the doors, and returning after barely ten seconds. She was now holding a purple silk trench-coat and a nervous smile. "I will be your guard along the way, ma'am."

Alice twitched. "What do I need to be guarded from?"

"Ferals." She replied briskly. "We've observed increased activity as of late. We are keeping a close eye in the perimeter, but better safe than sorry."

The psychology teacher blinked at those words, frowning for a moment. "Better safe than sorry..." She frowned ever so slightly.

"That's how the saying goes, no?" The maiden tensed, fingers scratching the collar lightly. "I've heard it many times. Is it wrong?"

"No, not wrong, just... unexpected."

Something about it had felt off to Alice, but she wasn't about to let herself be distracted from her objective. The young teacher took the offered coat and draped it over her shoulders. Immediately, a wave of warmth washed over her, a toasty heat that seeped into her body through her skin. Had it been near a fire? Alice pulled up the hood and followed behind her currently nameless guard.

Seeing the torrential rain, Alice expected to be immediately beset by a downpour of water all around. Instead, she'd walked a good twenty steps out of the building and had yet to hear the first droplet touch the hood of the coat. Hesitating, she looked upwards, finding nothing above save the cloudy sky. Eyes widening, she pulled the hood off of her head to look upwards more comfortably, and...

"ACK!" A shrill shriek and a coughing fit, one second her face had been dry and the next a deluge of water poured down against her face.

Before she could react, a hand had snapped the hood back in place, the water stopped pouring down on her there and then. The young teacher looked at her guide, the maiden grinning with some amusement. "The coat is enchanted to protect against the rain, ma'am, but the enchantment only works so long as the hood is in place. Or so I was told."

"Enchantments." Alice spoke with a deadpan.

"Yes, ma'am, enchantments. Expensive ones I'd presume."

Looking down at her hands, Alice frowned, reaching outwards and away from her. The air was devoid of rain until it wasn't. There was a line where the rain started, no more than a half-arm away. It was an invisible wall, within there was no rain, outside it was a deluge. "This can't be real." She muttered, reaching to her hood and hesitating.

She opted not to remove it and get herself even more wet.

Her eyes moved towards her guide, the woman looked dry. "What about you?"

"Me? It's just a little trick we learn during basic." The maiden grinned, flicking a loose strand of black hair over her shoulder. There was a hint of pride lingering on her face. "Most maidens can walk around the rain without issue if they learn how to use their energy properly."

"What's the difference between that and this?"

"Yours is more expensive." A little wink and she turned around. "We should move before the enchantment runs out. It likely has a set amount of usefulness per day."

Alice's steps hastened, watching how even the cobblestone dried before she'd step on it. "How much does it have left?"

"I don't know, but would you want to test it out, ma'am?"

Yes.

No.

Alice grimaced.

Her guide took the gesture in a different way, nodding and hurrying her through the empty streets of the village. The young teacher noticed that they weren't moving away from the village but rather towards its center.

Chapter 075 [Alice]

Alice's apprehension of having a potential bodyguard was rather quick to vanish as she approached a house that looked as if several people had attempted to build it at the same time. The first one to get their hands on the thing had clearly been aiming for a prison, and at some point the designs were torn out of the architects' hands and given at someone trying to make a mansion. Only to have had the designs stolen by some sort of lunatic that decided the only thing missing was to put a chunk of metal on top like some sort of birthday hat.

The building was a special kind of ugly, the sort that tried to pretend it was actually pretty but that lacked the proper amount of makeup to be able to pull off such a miracle. The torrential rain certainly wasn't helping make it look any less unsettling.

Four stories high, it was the tallest structure in the village. The first two floors were thick with cement, stone slabs slapped outside walls as if to hastily try to hide the aberration of dark gray concrete. Each window was locked tight behind a heavy metal shutter that had been polished to the point it could almost pretend to be chrome. The next two floors had large ornate windows, littering the heavy dark orange brick walls. And lastly... the roof. It was a metal tower of some sort. Four tilted metal columns that joined at the tip of a very stretched out pyramid that was twice as tall as the building itself.

Alice noticed that at the very cusp of the metal tower there were two winged creatures perched upon its metallic structure, almost undoubtedly maidens, though the storm made it hard to recognize more than the silhouette of their figures. "What is that?"

"The radio tower." Her guide and bodyguard called out. "The Hunters can use it from that building over there too, it's how we send reports and stuff." She'd pointed to a structure not too far off.

Nodding numbly, Alice followed through the empty street towards the ugly mansion's main entrance. Two heavy looking pieces of metal that swung open upon their approach. Two maidens at either side struggled to push them out of the way. These women wore gray outfits, uniforms that had short skirts and shorter sleeves, they showed far more flesh than should have been professional. A mockery that bordered in fetish gear, Alice would not have found it odd if any of the four women there had claimed they'd just recently finished a lingerie photo-shoot.

She couldn't help but notice their collars were a celestial baby blue.

"We'll take it from here." One of them called out, Alice's guide gave a lazy salute.

"Wait." Alice called out quickly, reaching out to grasp her guide's wrist. "Would it be ok if she stayed with me?"

The question appeared to startle all five maidens. Glances were exchanged, a quiet conversation being shared amongst themselves that Alice was not entirely privy to, but she could guess the general content. They were trying to figure out under whose authority it was to decide such a thing.

And she wasn't going to let the choice slip into hesitation.

"I don't expect to be long, and as the Baron's guest today, I would feel more comfortable if my guide... Erm..."

"Stella."

"Stella, stayed around. She's the only familiar face I've got here after all."

That appeared to tilt the balance in her favor, the four nodded. "Of course, ma'am."

Stella looked all the stiffer, and Alice would make sure to apologize to her afterwards for the inconvenience.

But she was most certainly not going to enter the Baron's place alone when the people greeting the door were dressed so clearly provocatively. There

was something deeply wrong about it.

The four guards cleared the path, allowing them to enter. Inside another blue-collared gray-uniformed maiden was waiting for them. This one had short blue hair. "The coat, ma'am?"

Alice didn't make much comment, taking the purple enchanted garment off and handing it over. The maiden proceeded to guide them through a dreadfully oppressive gray corridor that immediately led to a brightly lit marble entrance. Alice's eyes widened as she had too many things to take in at once. The gold plated railings in the stairs that led up to the second floor, the silver on the mirror half that led downstairs, the almost clinical white that painted the walls and ceiling, the checkerboard stone floor, the glass chandelier with light-bulbs that could be nothing else but LEDs. The shine was too white, too intense, too pure.

The phantom weight of the cloak she'd been wearing not five minutes ago spoke of a different possibility. Enchanting? Magic? That weird power the maidens possessed? Her mind had started to stray, but she quickly brought it back in line.

She'd come here for a reason.

Thus her eyes fell onto the void of where the host was not. "And the Baron?"

"Will be here briefly, ma'am." The... maid? Spoke with a low bow. "Your arrival was most urgent, we were caught a bit unprepared." A slight gesture of her hand led them to follow into a small green room. The walls were not painted but covered by glossy cloth of some sort, it looked like silk. Gold was weaved into the pattern, giving the walls of the windowless room the impression of looking at the outline of a mountainous scenery. Within the room there was a grand total of two couches, one leather, one made from the same materials as the wall though in a slightly darker coloration. Between the two a small coffee-table.

"The Lord of the manor will be here shortly."

And the door closed behind them. Alice looked at Stella, the maiden standing firm and avoiding eye-contact. "You don't need to be so tense."

"I... disagree, ma'am, I don't think the Baron will be happy to see me here. Hunters aren't permitted within a noble's abode without a serious enough reason."

The young teacher had been about make a choice comment or two about that, but understood all too well that this could mean the poor maiden was about to get into hot waters. "I understand, I'm sorry about that. If it's necessary, I'll talk to whoever might disagree with your presence. I was the one who insisted after all."

The maiden appeared to want to say something but stopped, just giving a curt nod and moving to the corner. She stood at attention there, becoming quiet and leaving Alice to her own thoughts. A rather not amusing prospect if she were honest, but probably better than what was going to happen once the Baron showed up.

The door swung open, and the Baron stepped in before Alice had even managed to find a comfortable position on the couch. "Miss Smith, a pleasure to see you."

This close to the man, Alice noticed he was plumper than she'd originally thought. He was tall, a little over two meters, far more than she was used to, but there was a slight roundness to his pale cheeks in his otherwise vertically elongated face. On his left hand there was a bottle of wine, two empty glasses held lofty in his fingers. His empty right hand was outstretched into an attempt at a friendly shake.

His face was beaming with a wide smile, his eyes looking at her as if she were a lamb and he the wolf.

Her thoughts focused on a singular clear memory, the spider, the mud, the rain.

This should be a cake-walk compared to that nightmare.

"Yes, well, I had some important matters of my own I wished to discuss, sir."

Seeing the offered hand, she took it, making sure to give as firm a shake as she could. Even then, she also made very very sure to keep herself almost a good step away, the last thing she wanted was actual physical proximity to the man.

Her proclamation and stiffness didn't make his smile falter any. "Ah, indeed? And what business would you have? It would be my pleasure to help however I can." His right hand moved to remove the empty glasses to put them on the table.

Alice hesitated for a heartbeat. "It's about Monica, the... Tigress. You see, my friend Rick-."

CRACK

Alice almost jumped back as the bottle of wine in the Baron's hand exploded into a rain of shards and red rain. The vibrantly colored liquid splattered against the light green carpet, the stain spreading like oil. The Baron's face had gone from friendly to a tight plastic semblance of a smile. Any hint of friendliness was gone, the eyes behind the mask seethed as they bore into Alice with an intensity that made her step away.

"So there is indeed a man named 'Rick'."

A growl escaped the Baron, fists clenching as the shattered pieces of the bottle fell on the carpet.

"Sir? You're bleeding."

The voice came from the corner, and the Baron jolted, looking over his shoulder at the green-uniformed maiden there as if only noticing her now. The maiden herself was looking straight ahead, pale as a sheet.

"You... must excuse me." The anger was gone instantly, the man turned back to look at Alice. The anger was gone, the saddened expression almost looked apologetic. Almost. "It seems I have made a mess of things." A chuckle left

him as he looked down at himself, his clothes drenched in wine. "They don't make bottles like they used to, very fragile."

"Y...yes..." Alice nodded, hand clenched tightly into a fist, eyes flickering towards the door, the only way out.

"I... will have to clean myself." The Baron now laughed, opening his hands and allowing a trickle of shattered glass to fall, his palm was bloody. "And receive some healing." A long pause, his gaze losing focus for a moment. "I don't think I feel all that well. My wife will be here to provide some company shortly."

The man turned around, not uttering another word, walking out the room and closing the door behind him. Alice's eyes fell down to the shattered bottle, and its thick curve, a shudder ran through her as she turned to glance at Stella.

The maiden that stood on the corner was pale, wide eyed and very slowly shaking her head, not daring to even move an inch.

Chapter 076 [Alice]

Despite Alice's desire to make a run for the door the instant the Baron had left, her chance to do so had been quickly dashed from her when the man's wife had showed up. It was hard to imagine she'd been doing anything but wait for the opportunity to show up.

Tea and snacks had been brought along.

Alice made a show of sipping on the beverage, but her eyes kept turning towards the door in the green room. The scent of wine lingered in the air.

"You must excuse my husband." The Baroness spoke. Today she had opted to dress with something far less attention grabbing as she had during the presentation.

It was still going for dark themes, but the leather was only present in her boots. Other than those, she wore a pair of dark blue pants, made out of a material that looked similar to denim, but had a sheen to it that made Alice suspect it was silk. The woman's shirt was akin to a polo, made from the same material and white. Most notably, the woman's hair had been loosened, black strands of coal that draped their way down her shoulders.

The whole ensemble kept that masculine feel, and it accentuated the woman's bare neck. No collars or jewelry to be found there even as she wore silver bracelets and hoop earrings.

"Is it odd?" The question startled Alice, she blinked as the Baroness smiled curiously. "My clothes."

"They... I'm sorry." Alice quickly shook her head. "It's not odd, I'm just not used to the style."

"Too masculine?" There was a sheen within the Baroness' green eyes, the amusement in her lips perked up. "Ah, I was right."

"I... Yes, it did strike me as odd."

With a slight nod, the woman leaned back. "If you'd asked me of my tastes when I was but a little girl, I would've told you that I would very much enjoy frills and skirts."

"Is your style... normal?"

"Yes." The reply was blunt, but the amusement wasn't gone. "At least for those that go through the military. Dress code is strict, but it has its reasons." A twirl of her wrist. "Safety and practicality being the first."

"Safety?"

"Wouldn't want a human to be mistaken for a maiden, even at a quick glance." The woman laughed softly. "The first thing maidens are taught is how to avoid accidentally murdering a commanding officer. After all, as powerful as they are, they are as prone to shock as everyone else." Her hand made a quick cutting motion. "Some are powerful enough a mere gesture could spell a human's end."

The words sent a cold chill down Alice's spine. Her gaze turned towards Stella, the maiden stood at the corner like a statue, staring at nothing at all and pretending quite convincingly that she wasn't there.

A slight sigh left the Baroness. "Must be nice to live in a world where you need not worry over such things."

"We have our own problems." Alice replied, rolling her eyes and feeling her shoulders relax ever so slightly.

"Such is life, I suppose." There was a slight twinkle in her eye. "Before we progress through the pleasantries, I believe I heard that you'd come for business?"

The words led Alice to recompose herself quickly, nodding. "Yes, I'd attempted to tell the Baron as much, about Monica, the Tigress, and that was when he... reacted."

"Understandable, he has been attempting to capture White Claw ever since he found out about the threat she posed to the village. The feral has proven particularly elusive, however." The Baroness laughed, a chime to her tone. "Judging by his recent bout of frustrations, I'd wager she is proving just as hard to tame." With her words, the woman's eyes crinkled ever so slightly. "Pray-tell, why would you be interested in the creature? Revenge?"

Alice almost jumped from her seat. "No! No, no, I..." She quickly shook her head. "You see, my friend Rick had been with her before her capture, and worries over her condition."

The calm expression on the woman that sat across from her was impossible to decipher. A stony edge had made her features a barrier that prevented any emotions to slip through. "I see." Her words were smooth and controlled, pulling up the cup to take a long sip of her beverage. Calmly, she set it down, keeping her eyes on Alice. "I'm not sure what you are expecting over the situation, miss Smith, is Rick staking a claim on the Tigress? If so, why is he not here?"

"He's in the hospital." Alice replied. "Last I checked he'd yet to be discharged, I think he was to be released today."

"Hm..." The Baroness calmly put down her cup. "Unfortunately for your friend, the law is rather clear in this regard. Rick was not a citizen of the kingdom, most likely still isn't. Any stake over capture of White Claw is, thus, void. Especially since laws pertaining to capture are not retroactive." A simple shrug followed, amusement played on her lips. "He might have hope to a claim if a bond had been formed, but such a thing is impossible without a collar."

"And if she were bonded, anyway? Kat and Tomas had heard her speak his name before reaching the village. And you must have seen how she reacted back at the auditorium when they called out her name." Alice hesitate. "Consider it a hypothetical scenario."

The words made the Baroness' brows to knit ever so imperceptibly. The woman slowly crossed her arms and leaned further back into the couch, peering into Alice's eyes and holding her gaze with a cold and calculating

expression lingering in her eyes. "Say, hypothetically, that somehow the bond had indeed formed." She tapped her elbow with a slow beat. "If the bond were still there after he's gained citizenship, then he would still be unable to own her."

"Why?"

"Normal citizens are not qualified to own a maiden as dangerous as a Tigress." The Baroness replied easily enough. "The only way would be or have been a part of the military, part of the feral-suppression force, or the Hunters." Scoffing, she shook her head. "But as far as anyone's concerned, an uncollared bond has not happened within recorded history since the Bloody Wave."

"The Bloody Wave?"

"A catastrophe from over five hundred years ago. Little is actually known about it, other than very very few humans survived." She shook her head. "Most things from before that time were lost either to the ferals or the ravages of time. I personally never did have an interest on such things. But I digress." A slight sigh, nodding her head once. "Now that your question has been answered, would you feel like talking more freely? It has been ages since I've had a fellow woman to talk with. And I am sure you are a rather fascinating person to talk to."

"I doubt that." Alice quickly reproached.

"Nonsense." The statement was waved off quite promptly. "You faced off a feral Arachnae, and I heard... Rick... had received a killing blow while fighting the Tigress. Dare I expect your world is filled with warriors?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that, we've... haha." The psychology teacher squirmed a little, laughing uncomfortably. "No, our society has left its warring period... for the most part. Rick and I were only teachers. He's a chemist, I'm... a bit of a psychology nerd."

"Psychic?" The Baroness tensed abruptly, the hand moving to caress the bracelet on her left wrist. "So you had powers? The report had mentioned no

such thing."

"No powers, psychology, not... psychic? Wait." Alice blinked. "Wait, you have... can minds be read?"

The woman nodded, though did not remove her fingers from the silver bracelet. "Certainly, some maidens possess that ability. Our local expert... Irene I believe she was called, is one such individual."

Alice slumped onto the couch, eyes wide, mind whirling through the possibilities. It felt like a beehive that had been hit by a rock, suddenly everything was starting to buzz. So many arguments, so many theories, hours upon hours tossing and turning and writing. So much ink spent on making assertions and dissertations.

Very suddenly the woman felt a sense of equal parts dread and excitement.

She could imagine the feeling could not be too different to being told one could confirm whether there was a God or not, concrete physical irrefutable proof, by just opening a door.

"You look like a boy his first day of training." The Baroness laughed softly, bringing Alice back to reality, the psychology teacher blushing furiously as she realized she'd jumped off the couch. "I will make sure Irene is the one to aid your citizenship examination. It seems you would have a great deal of things to ask her."

"Would you? I, erm, I don't want to impose."

The Baroness waved it off. "Nonsense, the citizenship procedure requires truth spells and thought scans, anyway." There was a little pause, a hesitation on her words, her lips thinning. "In exchange, would you hear a small warning I have to profess?"

"Certainly."

The stare became cold, her brows lowering. "Join the army." She raised a finger to speak before Alice could interrupt. "The more I observe you, the

clearer it is that you and yours are rather blind to many of the risks our world has in store for human women such as yourself."

"And... why would you say that?"

"A human woman coming, alone, to a household is generally a sign of... strong show of interest." The Baroness took her cup back up, a long sip following.

Alice hesitated, turning to look at Stella and then back at the Baroness.

"Maidens, unfortunately, would not count as company."

"How so?"

The noble woman arched a brow, shifting her focus towards the corner where the pale maiden stood. "Vacate my husband's property, you're not welcome here."

"Yes, ma'am."

Stella shot Alice a worried look, moving towards the door.

It closed with a soft click, one that sent a shiver down Alice's spine.

"That would be the reason why." The Baroness took another long sip from her cup.

"And your husband..."

"Only held the best intentions, I'm sure." The response was a snap, barely a moment of hesitation. "I would suggest, however, that if you find yourself being invited, do make sure to bring fellow humans along. That way we can avoid causing a wrong impression."

Alice nodded numbly.

"I... think I've stayed a bit too long."

"If you feel that way." The Baroness stood, reaching out to shake Alice's hand. "Oh, before I forget." The woman's grip tightened around Alice's fingers, her eyes locked on the woman with severity. "Do make sure to make it clear to your... friend, Rick, that this whole issue with White Claw is one better drowned in the river."

"Excuse me? Drowned?"

The woman hesitated, letting go of Alice's hand. "Ah, excuse me, it is an expression. Swept under the rug, as the maidens say, left to be forgotten or ignored." She smiled tightly. "For everyone's convenience, I mean. I'm sure we can find a way to compensate him for his efforts, however."

"I'll... mention it to him." Her eyes danced on the door.

"I'd expect nothing less, miss Smith."

Alice could not get out of the manor quickly enough.

Chapter 077 [Barry]

Barry looked at the Hound with apprehension. She was tied to the tree, wire dug into the maiden's wrists and throat, dark fur coating her hands and feet, claws at the ends of both, her face still had traces of the white paint Veronica had sprayed her with.

The woman, maiden, creature, monster, she slept. For the first time since she'd been tied up, apparently. Barry suspected it wouldn't take too long before she'd wake again either.

The monster had insane amounts of endurance, healed fast, and barely slept at all. There was no one thing about her capabilities that weren't equally frightening and fascinating. To Barry, she was nothing short than a nightmare made flesh, just ready to break free at any second to lunge at his throat.

She'd tried several times already.

Barry's eyes took a long moment to take in the sleeping face, almost peaceful if not for the half-snarl. Its presence was a constant reminder of how, even if the rest of her might hold some degree of allure, she was all too dangerous.

Perhaps that was part of the allure, he figured, a morbid fascination that lingered at the edges of his thoughts.

"Are you going to wait all day?"

The voice reminded Barry he couldn't just run away from this particular nightmare or stall indefinitely. There was something bigger and more dangerous waiting for him to give up. This other threat was a monster that pretended to be an angel, with wings on her back and a glowing sword.

Holding back from showing his nervousness any more than he already was, Barry scooted closer to the slumbering monster. Legs crossed, he held in his hands some torn up pieces of meat and fruit. The human dared not ask where the meat came from, he'd seen wild hogs at some point, he hoped it was from

those. But the fact that he was hesitating was all too telling. The monster's nose twitched, ears perking. Barry froze as he watched those golden eyes regain consciousness. There was a fraction of a second as she met his gaze and nothing happened. For that singular beautiful instant, he almost believed she would take the offered food.

The next moment he'd squealed, pulling his hand away as her fangs chomped down on the empty air almost close enough to bite where his hand had originally been at. Her snarl was mixed with the sound of raucous laughter that burst from behind Barry. The human turned around to glare at the blond monster as she held her sides, laughing as if all of this was some hilarious joke. Perhaps it was exactly that to her, nothing more than amusement before she grew bored and killed him.

There was little doubt of exactly who was responsible for Barry not getting run through a sword, and that person currently was not present.

"Try that again."

The command made Barry flinch. The young man looking down at the food he'd been holding earlier that had smeared across his grip. What was left of the offering was now mostly paste and crumbs that coated his palm in a fruity smell of overcooked meat. The human could only grimace at this.

"We have trouble."

The words interrupted the glare Pan had been shooting at the human, the winged maiden turning towards the tree-line as Kajou broke through. The dark skinned woman panted, clearly having been running for no small amount of time.

"What trouble?"

"The rush is changing direction."

"Fuck." Pan frowned at this declaration. "Are you sure this isn't some splinter?"

"It might be, seems too large. I'm not the one that can fly and check."

Pan didn't wait a single second, spreading her wings wide and leaping into the air. She beat her wings with power, light glowing out of every feather. She rose sharp and fast, quickly climbing over the treetops. Barry could only sigh in relief as she vanished from view. His eyes turned towards the brunette as she was quickly checking over the items throughout the camp.

"What is a 'rush'?"

"Ferals get displaced or spooked, run off. They displace or spook more ferals. Some rushes are just mass migrations, but if things go bad, it can snowball into a sort of stampede." She said. "The storm must have caused something up at the mountain, so ferals had started migrating down our side of the river. It might turn into a rush thanks to whatever's caused them to change course."

"Why?"

"I didn't care enough to risk and check." Came the brusque reply. She was packing up the camp at lightning speed, shoving everything she could into the backpacks. "We need to start moving, get ahead, reach the Court. We'll be safer there."

"How much time do we have?"

Kajou paused, elbow deep in the cloth bag that she used as a backpack. Her eyes lingered on him, moving towards the snarling Hound and then back at Barry. "Not enough."

"What do you...?"

"Barry, I'm sorry, but we can't waste time dragging an uncooperative feral." The young woman said, shaking her head. "We can find another feral later, right now the important thing is to get moving and put some distance. We can't waste time."

The human froze, looking at the creature that was tied with wires against the tree. The naked woman with bared fangs and pursed lips. There were no

bleeding wounds, only scars of past injuries. Barry's jaw trembled, looking onto the prisoner as his mind connected the dots. They'd leave her here, tied up. It would be a death sentence.

"I don't-."

"Kaj!"

The voice snapped both of their attention upwards, Pan was descending, fast. The not-angel was at a steep dive, straight towards the forest floor, clearly having very little regard of the possibility of what might happen if she were to crash against the floor. And for good reason, Pan's wings snapped open instants before she made contact with the ground, turning the vertical descent into a horizontal flight path straight towards the nearest tree. A sharp turn avoided collision yet again, she flapped, killing her speed and touching down.

The woman wore a nervous expression, the first Barry had seen upon her angelic features.

"It's a rush, it's coming. Probably some territorial feral got aggressive. It spooked them."

Kajou flinched. "Shit. How far?"

"A day. There're some nasties mixed in."

"Blood frenzy?"

"Not yet."

"A blood wh-."

Barry's words died in his throat, Pan's nervousness had snapped into anger as she turned to look his way. The seething heat within those blue eyes was enough to make his mouth snap shut.

"We're dropping the human."

The sister stepped forward, arms wide. "Pan, no!"

"I am not playing games here. The human slows us down. The rush might catch us."

"I'll carry him."

That snapped the angel's attention, eyes narrowed dangerously. Her blade began to shine in her grip. "Don't make me beat you up and drag your body to safety, sis. The human is not worth this."

The dark haired woman stepped forward, hands glowing. "You're making a grave mistake. He could change things for the Coven, for maidens everywhere!"

"You trust this weakling?"

"I trust the Elder." Came the harsh response.

"Myths of old deluded women and a world that never existed." Pan raised her sword. "We don't have the time for this. Step aside."

As if to punctuate the proclamation, a shrill scream broke the silence. It came from the forest, echoing through the trees and drowning out into the distance. That singular sound came with a shift in the direction of the wind. A cold chill ran up Barry's spine as he saw the tied up Hound go very very quiet.

The feral's eyes widened like saucers, nose twitching as she breathed in something that lingered in the wind. Her ears were standing stiff and aimed straight towards the darkness through the forest. Very suddenly she started to struggle harshly against the wires that were holding her against the tree. Choking whines escaped her, thrashing and fighting against the metal string, bleeding as it bit into the flesh of her wrists and not seeming to mind one iota.

Barry's mind raced, breath stuck in his throat. Seeing the woman so desperately fighting for her life...

His feet moved before his brain could catch up, he rushed to the side of the tree, feeling the woman as she kicked and struggled. Feeling half blind from the lack of detail, the young human still reached out for the wires that were holding the feral in place. Someone complained behind him, the sound of metal rung loudly.

The young human froze as he noticed the feral looking into his eyes. She'd gone completely still, ears flat against her skull and the barest hint of a frown. His fingers kept fighting against the metal string, feeling himself rooted in place. She was close enough she could rip his throat out, close enough he could smell the musky earth of her fur, close enough he could see the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest from her breathing.

SNAP

The metal knot had become undone, loosened and broken by the strength of the creature. The feral wasted no time to stand, finally free of the device. She loomed over the crouched Barry, claws wide and ready. Her gold eyes stared into his and did not break away, now wide in surprise.

"He let her loose!"

The words caused the feral to look away, the instant she had, her body had melted into the shadows. And just in time to avoid the sword that Pan had come swinging. The blond woman's face was contorted into confusion and anger, staring at Barry with a scowl. Another expression that was a first for him to see upon her face.

Behind her, Kajou had a look of determination, moving in to stand between the angel and Barry, arms wide. "You saw it. She didn't attack him."

"A fluke."

"I don't care. I'm putting my bets on him Kajou." The woman stated flatly. "And if you don't like it, then cut me down."

Hesitation, a growl that was interrupted by another shrill scream, this time the noise accompanied by several more. Pan shook her head, pointing at

Barry with her index. "If he slows us down, we're dropping him to get eaten by the ferals."

There was a collective sigh of relief from the other two.

Chapter 078 [Rick]

If there was one thing Rick had learned to loathe throughout his years as a teacher, it was the red tape. He would have figured that it being a dinky little village in the middle of what was probably the farthest point from any bureaucracy that the country could offer would mean there would be little need for such a thing.

Apparently, humanity and paperwork were synonyms.

Rick's eyes bore holes into the pile of paper that lay in front of him. A contract. Thirty pages thick, the paper itself was thicker and rougher than what he was used to. It made the whole thing look closer to a book, especially with the flat pieces of wood at either side, using string to bind the pages together.

The fact that it tingled to his touch told him there was also more to it than met the eye. Which made him all the warier to sign without understanding every line of text within.

Thus why he was currently seated in the common room, the only area with electric lighting in the building, a dim orange that did not flicker or wane even as the storm raged outside. It was currently, thankfully, mostly empty of people.

Rick drummed his fingers against the table, glaring at the ink-filled pages. Next to him there was a blank piece of paper he was scribbling notes onto. There were no such things as pens in this tiny village, apparently, so he had to use a cloth-wrapped piece of coal that was making a mess of his hands.

"Don't you find it weird?" Tomas interrupted Rick's inner musings, taking the seat opposite to the teacher's.

"I find many things weird." Rick replied, muttering and writing a few other words. The legalese that was in the contract had more than a few terms he wasn't too clear on.

"I mean, you've seen it, right? It's in English."

"Mhm."

"We're in another world. There're monsters and magic, and they're speaking English and the Baron had a pokeball."

"Pokeball?" A frown followed. His eyes hadn't left the paper. "Ah, the thing Kat mentioned the Baron is using to keep Monica trapped." A growl left his lips as his jaw clenched, his brows furrowed. "Yeah, weird shit."

"But don't you think that-."

Rick's eyes snapped away from the paper, glaring at the young man. "Tomas." His singular word came out with a growl. "I am currently trying to get Monica back. I do not have the time or mental capacity to start playing guessing games. Do you have anything that could help me process this bullshit faster?"

"You could just sign it. I did." The young man muttered, dejected. "It's not like there's an alternative."

"Never sign something without reading and understanding it." Came the harsh reply. "For all I know, this thing says I forfeit any claim to Monica in some convoluted way."

"Do you really think this will help?"

Rick's neck tensed, his hand clenched around the piece of coal. "Do we have any other way to do this? I can't just break into the Baron's house, find Monica, and fight my way out."

"You could have your nurse girlfriend lend a hand. Maybe she-." Tomas rolled his eyes, crossing his arms. The look in his eyes faltered as Rick leveled a glare back at him. "I'm guessing she's busy then... Ok, I'll help. What do you need?"

Rick didn't hesitate to hand him the piece of paper he'd been scribbling on. "I need the definitions for these."

The young man nodded, looking down at the paper, taking a pause. "Do you know where they keep a dictionary?"

A harsh bark of laughter left the young teacher's lips. "Apparently, there's only two in the village. The Baron has one, and the Hunters the other. Neither allow people to take the book, only to show up to look at it, so if I want to use them, I'd have to go on over to where they are at." A growl. "You know, while we're in lock-down, trapped in a building because apparently there's a horde of monsters out there just itching to eat us."

"Then how should I...?"

"Asking around would be the first option." Rick shook his head, pausing as he saw Tomas' look of confusion. "Green uniforms, blue collars."

"What?"

"Green uniform, blue collars. The Hunters." An impatient drumming of his fingers against the table. "The only ones that have been able to answer my questions. Black collars don't know how to read. Green and red are a tossup. Blue collars."

"Oh, ok."

"And Tomas?" Rick looked at the young man as he'd been just about ready to rush through the door. "Thanks."

A firm nod. "Don't mention it."

A weary sigh as the no-longer-bespectacled former student hurried off.

"I take it you don't have a minute to talk?"

The voice startled Rick slightly. His eyes rose from the paper he'd been about to get back to scribbling on. Standing where Tomas had been a minute ago was Victor. The fellow teacher looked ragged, bags under his eyes, hair unkempt, his complexion slightly pale. There was a weariness in that gaze that made Rick feel like calling for a nurse rather than start conversation.

Victor had never been a conversationalist, not with Rick, at least. The chemistry teacher scowled, but kept quiet, a little nod that signaled for his companion to take a seat opposite to him. He waited for a heartbeat. "Is it about Alice?"

The older man paused, blinking, then nodded slowly. "Yes."

Leaning back, the chemistry teacher crossed his arms. "You should probably apologize."

The man frowned. "You're saying I'm to blame?"

"I heard the story from her and confirmed with some of the other students. Personally? I don't really put you on the list of people to blame for what transpired." Rick quirked a cold brow. He leaned forward, lips thinning. "But it's clearly eating at you, so either do something, or sit back and do nothing. Again."

Victor shot to his feet, chair clattering behind him. The man's eyes blazed as he leaned over the table. A snarl played on his lips. "Do you think this is some sort of joke? You pull the hero and now you're better than the rest of us!?" His hand swung to throw the book and papers off the table. A clattering sound that very abruptly drew everyone else's attention.

A quiet spread across the room. The only sound that made it through was the drumming rain outside.

Rick remained seated, not moving an inch as his eyes moved from the tossed book up to Victor's glare. Both teachers kept the glare, one side with a clenched jaw, the other with a cold, unwavering wall of ice.

When Rick moved, Victor jolted backwards, raising his arms, ready to stop any potential attack.

None came, however.

Quietly, the chemistry teacher was the first to break eye contact, moving towards the items that'd been shoved off the table. Without a word, he picked

it up, carefully organizing it into a pile and then returning to the table. With purposeful slowness, each item was returned to their original spot. Rick proceeded to flip the contract open back to the page he had been at before his interruption.

No longer paying attention to the glaring man, Rick grasped the piece of coal and placed his focus on the contract. It took Victor several seconds to react to the quiet dismissal. His eyes turned around to stare at the people present.

A heartbeat later, he turned to leave.

The door slammed shut.

Rick waited until the low-tone whispers died down before putting the full of his attention back on the headache at hand. Thoughts of Victor were summarily dismissed.

Quietly, the chemistry teacher thanked that the whole thing had been printed. The letters weren't exactly small, but they were certainly uniform. The issue was the font made his eyes hurt. The letters were sharpened like knives, given needless squiggles, and some not having gotten all the ink it would've needed to get a proper imprint. Or too much.

So, sometimes, it was a tossup on what exact word was being used, which did not combine well with the existence of, apparently, legal terms he had never heard of before. Even the ones not using words that, to him, looked made up.

What the hell did "statutory disconnection" even mean!? Sure, he could infer some meaning through context, but the document appeared to have been made intentionally convoluted.

And that made him even warier of outright signing it.

Rick paid little attention to the sound of the common-room opening again, nor did he really notice how all conversations had quickly come to an abrupt end. He did, however, notice when two figures had put themselves in front of his table, partially blocking out the light.

Holding back from sighing, he raised his eyes towards the third distraction within the past hour.

Whatever he'd been planning to say flew out the window. It was Dia, and she'd brought someone with her.

She was a maiden, if the green uniform and green collar didn't make it clear, the light gray wings on her back sealed the deal. Her uniform looked crisp, far better kept than the others he'd seen. The green had some golden inlays near the cuffs and skirt, a touch of luxury that had been absent in the others Rick had met so far. His brows furrowed ever so slightly as he met her gaze, blue eyes and blond, her skin pale save a touch of redness in her cheeks.

The connection jumped out at him. She'd been the winged one that had fought Monica.

"Sir, this is Lieutenant Helga." The nurse's tone was formal, crisp. "She was in charge of the rescue operation."

It was only really then that Rick noticed that both Helga and Dia had a slightly serious look on their faces, the sort of forced neutrality one would find on a soldier during a formal event.

Helga leaned forward, giving a slight bow. "I never had the opportunity to thank you properly, sir. Your actions during the fight helped avoid needless deaths that day."

"I'm not..." Rick's thoughts were not quite up to speed, looking between the two. So he defaulted towards cordiality. "What do I owe the pleasure to?"

"I told Helga about your current circumstances, and she agreed to aid in expediting the process." Dia's stony expression betrayed only the slightest of cheeky grins twitching at the corner of her lips.

"Yes. I witnessed the events that day and, if needed, I can testify that the feral behaved more like a recently bonded maiden protecting her partner." Helga affirmed, with a far more serious nod. "More importantly, the citizenship

process requires testimony under truth-spells, and a psychic evaluation. I am qualified for the testimony part."

"Oh." With a slight nod, his mind attempting to process the statement, Rick's gaze lowered to the documentation currently in his hands. "Do you happen to be fluent in legal?"

Not too far away, still looking for help, Tomas sneezed.

Chapter 079 [Rick]

Rick sat in the chair, looking over to Helga and trying to figure out the whether he should be complaining about the odd feeling that had saturated the room since the start of the... inquiry. The feeling wasn't comfortable, it was a similar sensation to when his limbs fell asleep, a tingling that spread and worsened the more it moved. Except it was happening on every follicle of his body, as if, somehow, the very hairs had been the ones to lose blood-flow. A million tiny car batteries plugged into each tiny hair and giving tiny little jolts that tickled more than hurt, but were not appreciated all the same.

"Is that all?" He wondered, drinking from a cup of water after having recounted the events since showing up in this world.

"Almost, all you would need to do is answer a handful of statements." The maiden nodded. Her blue eyes kept moving from his down to his lips, and sometimes further down still. The seriousness of her expression never faltered, though. He couldn't read what she was thinking. Maybe trying to read his expressions and body-language? "Have you ever, directly or indirectly, either through action or inaction, caused the death of a human?"

Rick hesitated, an image crossed his mind, and grimaced. His hands clenched as a cold dread ran down his back. "Yes."

Helga's brows furrowed. "How many?"

"One." The teacher breathed in, feeling a sudden tightness in his chest. "Charlie."

"The student." She nodded solemnly, leaning forward ever so slightly. "You did your best under the given circumstances, sir."

"Next question? Please?" He asked dryly, feeling the tightness inside his chest not quite going away.

"Have you ever stolen or destroyed anything that would have been considered of high economical or emotional value?"

"No to economic, yes to emotional." Came the response.

"What kind of item?"

"Can I skip the question?" He frowned slightly, turning away.

Helga grimaced a little. "I'm... sorry sir, I can't."

Closing his eyes, he sighed. "It was a... loop of copper." His lips pursed slightly, but he didn't feel anything off. His mind flashed to the little black box that had been left on his night stand.

In a world he'd been told he would never see again.

Yet she was looking at him. There was a hint of concern on her brows. "What was the emotional value?"

"It was symbolic, of a relationship." He squirmed a little in his seat. "Next question?" He pressed harder to move on. The subject still felt sore, certainly not one he wanted to bring up.

Helga nodded. "Have you ever engaged in the destruction, or vandalism, of property that did not belong to you?"

Rick's shoulders relaxed, a slight smile coming to his lips. "Worst I can think of is the time I took my mother's car for a ride and crashed it against a fence post. Way back when I was barely a young teen."

A little nod. The angel relaxed a bit as well. "Have you ever engaged in sexual intercourse with an unwilling human?"

Human. The word left a bitter edge to the sound coming from the lips of someone who was not considered human.

Rick shook his head emphatically. "No, never."

The proclamation caused her lips to tweak upwards a little, a shadow of a smile. "Last question, sir, have you ever been in a relationship with a human female? And if so, do you have children?"

"Yes, I have been in relationships. No kids."

"Plural." Helga blinked.

"Excuse me?"

"Erm..." She shook her head. "Sorry, I was just a little surprised. You said relationshipS, plural. As in having been with multiple human women."

"Not at the same time, but yes, that is correct."

"Huh."

There was something in the way she was looking at him that had a new edge. Her eyes moved up and down his body and Rick quite suddenly felt as if he'd just been stripped naked. Squirming in his seat, he coughed loudly, the sound making her jolt a little. Her cheeks reddened slightly.

"Sorry, that was... unprofessional of me." Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a little glass cube no larger than Rick's thumb. It had been glowing a pale white. The color shifted to dark blue, and then it became opaque. "There, this will be attached to your documentation. Now the only thing missing for full citizenship would be the psychic evaluation."

Standing up from the wooden stool, she moved her right hand into her left shoulder, a salute.

"Sure, thanks for the help." He replied.

"It's the least I could do after your bravery, sir. Besides, the Major would have had my head had his little girl died during her first rescue operation."

Off in the distance, there was the sound of a pin dropping, louder than the pouring rain from outside.

"Excuse me?"

"I might not have been meant to say that." Helga let out a weak chuckle, quickly looking her shoulder towards the closed door. "Would you mind keeping that a secret?"

He had several questions, but left it at that, nodding. "That psychic evaluation...?"

"I will make sure it starts promptly, sir." She nodded rapidly, taking a step back and towards the door. "Have a good day."

Her wings slightly fluttered behind her as she hurried out of the room.

With her departure, the soft, glowing white light that hung on the ceiling flickered and vanished.

Quite suddenly, Rick found himself in the dark, blinking at the dim orange light that illuminated the corridor and feeling like he wanted to deflate like a popped balloon. This had been exhausting. Whatever the 'truth detection spell' was, it had kept him tense the whole way through.

Rick's eyes turned towards the only window in the room. Outside was the middle of the day, but everything was cast in a dull grey light due to the ongoing thunderstorm. There was just barely enough illumination for Rick to make out the furniture as he stood, trying to get his thoughts in order.

The rain had not stopped, the streets were wet, reflecting the pale light back up, the houses had a calmness about them. Very few windows revealed activity inside. If there was, it was in the darkness of the house interiors. The town felt... empty.

He could see most all chimneys had smoke. He could catch the flicker of movement from people rushing back or forth from a home, but everything was so still. The image of Monica flickered to his mind and his lips pursed. There were a lot of emotions attached to that he wasn't even sure he wanted to process right now.

"You look handsome when you're troubled." The voice was soft. It came with a hand carefully touching his shoulder. Dia's violet eyes caught the light and pooled them inside. "Are you alright, sir? Helga left in a hurry."

"The angel brought up some uncomfortable memories."

"Valkyrie." The nurse spoke the words and immediately flustered. "Angels have a halo and their wings glow."

"You're kidding."

"Nope." Dia giggled. "They're a different genus entirely. An angel can't shift into a Valkyrie. Not that I haven't seen some try." Her hand rubbed against his shoulder softly. "It's going to be ok, sir. I'm sure the Baron will see reason."

"Yeah..." Sighing, he closed his eyes, not wanting to voice his doubts out loud.

He startled when he felt something soft press against his lips. Dia was blushing slightly, holding a finger up to her lips. A little wink and a smile. "You know..." she whispered, her voice hushed, a hand reaching out to caress his arm. "We could continue where we left things off last time. Help take your mind off of things..."

Her eyes darted towards the closed door. When had she done that? Rick felt a slight stir of surprise at not having noticed her when she came inside.

Rick felt his heart a beat as her touch lingered on his wrist. She was warm. Opening his mouth to speak, he felt the world spin.

"What the-!?"

His balance was knocked right from under him, his body slumped backwards. The world spun thrice more.

"I-."

Dia's eyes widened in fear and surprise. She reached out with glowing hands, holding him as his body was eased onto the bed. The world spun two

more times and things were becoming blurry at the edges. Rick's eyelids felt so heavy...

"This is...? Irene!" Dia called out, looking over her shoulder, staring around.

Rick was fighting with his eyelids. It was so hard to keep them up. His whole body was becoming so impossibly heavy. The sheets were so comfortable, so warm. Dia's voice was ringing as she moved, but even that was moving away, Rick could only barely register that he'd been laid on the bed, that he had to fight against the drowsiness...

His eyes couldn't hold out any longer, they slowly.

The world plunged itself out of existence.

Yet Rick's consciousness had not gone with it.

"Now," a voice spoke out from the surrounding darkness. "Let's start the psychic evaluation."

Chapter 080 [Rick]

Rick stood in the void. There was no darkness. He could see his own body just fine, but that was as far as his senses would allow him to perceive. There was a flat hard surface under his feet, smooth and cool, nothing about it making it any easier to figure out where he was.

And then there was light.

An infinite flat world, devoid of anything save the white floor and white ceiling. Featureless and indistinguishable from one another. Rick looked around, spotting several other people within this white, featureless space. They were too far to identify, though, and before he could move, the white space rippled. Black walls rose from the floor, separating them, forming a box around Rick no less than ten meters across.

A box with no ceiling, walls that were as high as the sky itself. The only trace of an end to the obsidian walls a speck of white off in the infinite above.

"Rick Cross."

The name came from behind him, forcing the chemistry teacher to turn around and face the woman that was now standing where there had once been empty space. Her face was obscured by a featureless mask, long bright red hair fell around her, pooling on the floor around her ankles. The faceless woman wore a business suit, black with thin white lines running vertically from her heels all the way through her dress pants and blazer. The way the lines shifted made it seem almost as if the suit was not really there and was more a hole to gaze into a dimension of black and white stripes.

"I am here to carry out your psychic evaluation."

"This feels like a dream." He wanted to say 'nightmare', but held his tongue, feeling his words echo around the room and all the way up.

"It is. I rendered you unconscious and connected to your psyche. It makes this process easier." The body that was before him was unnatural. It didn't twitch, it didn't move. It was so utterly perfectly still it might as well have been a statue.

"What's the purpose of the evaluation?"

"To determine whether you pose a threat to the kingdom." The woman replied. "And whether you are apt to own maidens."

That perked Rick's attention. He focused on the featureless mask and frowned. "And how do we go about this?"

"It's not really very hard. You only have to answer one question."

The world blurred. The figure remained standing as the constant. White and black shifted. The featureless box he'd been standing in turned into a prism of color before it bled through, shapes forming, becoming more defined. Rick's eyes widened slightly as he saw the trees sprout into focus, the wooden behemoths that were too wide, too tall, mutated, and twisted.

Next came the rain. Falling down on and around him, the light dimming, drowned out through countless droplets. The sky turned gray and opaque, casting shadows that made the trees blur, the shadows under their branches a perfect black, impossible to see through.

"The forest?"

The figure did not answer, nor did it move. It remained firmly in place, silent.

More details poured in, more shapes. A large rectangle of steel and glass knocked on its side. The block gained definition, its shape smoothing out, curves, cracks, bumps. Slowly it morphed, and Rick recognized the wheels, everything else clicking into place as the blob turned into the totaled bus.

His heart skipped a beat, something reaching down to tighten its grip on his chest.

A form emerged from the ground. A featureless brown lump as tall as Rick. The rain washed away the dirt, revealing that someone was standing there. Black hair, blank eyes, pale skin. A trickle of blood ran down his mouth, the expressionless stare turning to stare straight into Rick.

Straight through him.

"Charlie," he almost choked the word out.

Upon the mention of his name, the thing that had taken the young student's form let its jaw hang loose, falling open in a cavernous silence. It drew in a breath, a raspy coughing sound that made the bulge at the side of his neck apparent.

A broken spine, Rick felt cold ice punch through his chest, his lungs unable to fill up properly, cold sweat running down his back.

"Why?"

The question came as a whisper, almost inaudible through the pouring rain. The rumble of thunder shook the ground and Rick's legs felt like they were suddenly about to give out underneath him.

He stumbled a step back.

And the corpse stepped forward.

"Why?"

A howl in the wind, the trees bent, the rain whipping around them and sinking Rick's feet into the mud.

"I-." His voice faltered.

"Why?" The corpse took another step, tears falling down his cheeks. "Why did you kill me?"

"I-."

"You killed my brother."

Rick whipped his head to the side. There stood a featureless lump, mud washing away to reveal the features of the young woman. It took him a second to recognize her. "May." He felt the tightness within his chest, air running short.

Stumbling, he pressed his hand against his chest, gasping for breath.

The water was rising, mud sucked at his feet, the next step he took he sank further in.

"Why?" Charlie's corpse whispered louder, reaching out for Rick.

The only thing he could do was attempt to run. The next step sank him to his knees into the mud. The forest closed in around him, the rain splashing down and drowning out his voice. Short gasping breaths, a tight stabbing pain. His heart hammered against his throat, blocking air.

"Why?"

The corpse leaned down. Rick tried to fight him off, but he was too strong. Cold slimy fingers wrapped around his throat. The man choked for air, body knocked over backwards into the mud. Rick's fingers clawed against the unyielding grip, head submerging under the mud.

He was sinking. He couldn't breathe.

Thunder streaked cross the sky. Rick broke through the surface, gasping for air. His head whipped around, a current dragging him down the river. A whirlpool plunged him under, blackness all around him.

Two more faces appeared from the darkness, their skin pale, their eyes blank. Rick kicked against the water, pushing himself to swim upwards. The surface was so far away.

"Why?" Tomas and Kat's voice spoke in unison, whispers drowned under the current. "Why?"

Rick clenched his eyes shut. No, no, Kat and Tomas were alive. They hadn't died, they hadn't died. His hands grasped at the sides of his head. The currents dragging him further down. His lungs burned, the sound of his heartbeat hammered and deafened everything around him.

THUNK

Gasping for breath, Rick felt his body fall and slam into cold hard ground. Instantly, his eyes moved around. He was in a cave. No, he recognized this cave. A cold shudder ran down his spine. He turned around. The wrinkled face of Mr. Gabriel met him. Unlike the others, his eyes were not empty.

No, there was a boundless fury within them.

The old man stood, taller than Rick, looking down on him with the gaze of a man burn the world. "No, they didn't die."

He spoke with a howl that made the wind around them swirl. "But it was thanks to you that they almost did." His step made the ground shake. Rick stumbled backwards. "Your choice almost killed me as well."

"I don't-."

The avatar of wrath that stood before him swung his fist. Pain exploded within Rick's chest. The world blurred as the man felt himself being no more than a rag doll that had been tossed to the other side of the room.

He hit something with his back, the impact breaking his fall. Even then, pain exploded all around him.

"Rick." Laying on the ground, barely able to move, he opened his eyes and saw a new face. White hair, feline ears, battered and bruised. "Rick?" Monica weakly reached out to him, tears streaking down her cheeks. She stretched her claw towards him, trying to drag her broken body closer. "Rick." She whispered, even as he could not find the breath to so much as make a sound.

A ghostly hand reached down to the cat. Rick's eyes widened.

"Monica!" He shouted, watching, helpless, as a heavy iron collar was put around the feline's neck.

She choked, reaching for the collar, fighting to tear it off. More ghostly hands assaulted her. The feline wailed, weakly kicking and screaming.

"You ruined everything, Rick." The colossus of wrath loomed over the scenery, blazing eyes boring into Rick's soul. Its face had turned into a featureless white mask, only two holes to let the searing gaze to focus onto him.

He couldn't look away from Monica, watching as more pieces of iron were strapped onto her body, her wrists, her ankles. They grew taut, binding her and forcing her to curl into a ball. She couldn't break free, she couldn't escape.

"She begged you not to go," the faceless being spoke.

"Monica!" Rick shouted, watching the ground melt, pulling the feline down into it.

Her eyes met his own, tears running down her cheeks.

"Monica!"

"She could have lived happily without you."

She uttered a single word before she vanished.

"Why?"

Finding himself able to move again, Rick lunged towards the spot the maiden had occupied a second prior. Fingers helplessly scratched against the stone.

He screamed.

Chapter 081 [Rick]

Rick felt himself trapped in a nightmare.

Before him stood the faceless monster of wrath.

At either side of the creature, Monica, Kat, Tomas, Charlie, Mr. Gabriel, and May.

Everything else was dark. Only the eight of them existed within this nightmare.

"You killed me," Charlie spoke, pale blue lips curled into an emotionless mask. May, next to him, nodded.

"You would've gotten us killed too." Kat, Tomas, and Mr. Gabriel proclaimed.

"You abandoned me," Monica spoke, iron collar weighing her down, chaining her body into the ground.

The monster of wrath waved its hand, and the figures on either side went silent. Head bowed, he did not speak. His eyes were not focused on those before him but the nightmare that flashed across his thoughts. Lips trembling, he tried to form the words, but his chest tightened. Only a half choke made its way out.

"Do you really think you're qualified to own Monica?"

The question snapped his attention forward. To look at the source, he found nothing there. He was alone. The world swirled, the void turned into something else. A room with a checkerboard floor. A chandelier hung from overhead, white light shining brilliantly, illuminating the stairs of gold and silver that led elsewhere into the building. But Rick wasn't paying attention to the architecture. His focus was on the figure near the center.

It would've been easy to recognize her, the white hair and cat ears were easy to see. But everything else about her was... different.

Monica stood tall, her body as imposing and powerful as ever. And she was wearing clothes. A light gray uniform, a vest with long sleeves that reached all the way to her elbows where the fur of her claws grew. She wore a long skirt that went all the way to her knees, revealing the powerful fur covered calves and paws she had for feet. The most striking change was in her face, her long hair had been pulled back into a ponytail, her blue-green eyes shining brilliantly.

And on her throat, a green collar.

The young woman paced back and forth, her long white tail lashed back and forth nervously, ears flat against her skull. She eyed the door, twitching as it opened. Her eyes lit up and a half smile formed, but her shoulders slumped when the one to enter was another woman, another maiden. The face of the newcomer was blurred, the scene was focused on Monica.

"You look nervous." The ghostly presence spoke with a chuckle.

"Of course I am."

Rick heard himself gasp as he heard her speak, clearly, fluently. His eyes locked on Monica as she wriggled, pacing again, biting her lower lip and eying the main entrance every other second.

"Keep walking in circles and you'll make a whole."

The feline bristled. "Shut up."

A soft click signaled the door opening, and a figure stepped through. It was a man this time. Tall and slim, his features were sharp. The figure carried poise, dominance, control. No sooner had he stepped into the room that both maidens had reacted, moving their right hand to their left shoulder in a salute.

Rick saw as Monica's tail began to lash in excitement, her ears fully standing at attention and focused on the man that was approaching. Her lips contained

a grin. "My Lord." She spoke, puffing her chest out.

"Monica." The man nodded in acknowledgment.

The man reached out and caressed the feline's cheek.

"This is how her life will be." A voice whispered into Rick's ear.

He couldn't look away, seeing Monica lean into the man's touch. The man smiled.

And Rick's heart felt as if he'd been stabbed.

"Follow me." The Lord spoke, turning to go up the stairs.

The feline turned to follow, the lash of her tail accompanied by a bounce in her step. She eyed over to the fellow maiden and they shared a quiet giggle, moving through featureless corridors as the tall thin man remained ahead of both, not looking over her shoulder.

"Isn't she happy?" The voice softly spoke at Rick's ear.

The Lord entered a room, a small room, there was something off about it. The room tingled with power, it prickled against Rick's skin. The space small enough that it felt personal, almost intimate.

There were only two things in the room.

A window with a purple curtain, casting the room in a low purple glow. And a small wooden step near the center, a cushion laying on top. The walls were adorned with depictions of various women kneeling, presenting their naked throats to tall imposing noble figures. In each one, the nobles held in their hands a collar, its coloration varied from one scene to the next, just as the shape of each woman in each scene was different.

"Elise, you first."

The declaration almost seemed to hit Monica, she winced and pouted, but kept quiet.

"Watch." The formless voice told Rick, and he felt like he couldn't look away.

The faceless woman moved to kneel on the step, raising her head and showing the green collar to the noble.

"A green collar means that they have no specific Master or Mistress, practically public property." The voice told Rick, a hand slowly falling on his shoulder, gripping him, pinning him in place so he could not look away. "Blue means they have found an owner."

The noble cleared his throat, reaching down to caress the green collar. There was a quiet tension as his fingers tightened around the collar. "I will break your collar." The noble spoke. "And in doing so, your bond will break." His eyes bore down onto the kneeling woman. "Are you willing to trust me with your sanity? With your heart, mind, and soul?"

"I do."

A snap, the collar breaking as if it posed no more resistance than paper. The woman gasped, face tightening and her hands clenching. Closing her eyes, she raised her chin, ready for the next step.

"This is your final chance." The man spoke. "From this day forward, you will be mine. Do you surrender?"

"I do."

Behind the kneeling woman, Monica stood, rapt attention and unable to look away. Her face twisted in a mix of a smile and concern, her eyes flickering between the lord and the maiden.

"This..." Rick felt himself falter. "This is an illusion."

"True. But does it matter?" The voice spoke. "This image of her feels real to you."

The Lord spoke. "Now and forever." His hands clasped a blue collar around the maiden's neck. She shuddered, closing her eyes and smiling. "From hence

forth, your name shall be Guinevere."

"I accept this name." The woman spoke, trembling. "Master."

"See how happy she is?" The invisible hand moved Rick's head to stare at Monica, watching as she stepped forward. Her smile was brilliant enough to flood the room with its light. "Monica will be better off here."

"No." His voice shook.

"Yes." The formless voice replied. "All the fighting and hunting she could wish for. All the education and help she could need."

"Kneel." The Lord spoke softly, the feline not needing to so much as wait to comply.

"She'll be happy here." The voice caressed Rick's chest, his heart beat wildly underneath.

The Lord reached out for the green collar around Monica's neck, she bared it eagerly, thrusting her chest forward.

"No." His fist clenched.

"What's the alternative? You? You who sent one of your students to his death?" The voice hissed, Rick felt his strength falter. "You who sent her into a hole to suffer all because she accidentally bonded you?"

"No, I..."

"I will break your collar." The noble spoke.

"Do you really think you're someone who should ever be in charge of someone else? Let alone someone who trusted you blindly because of a bond?"

"And in doing so, your bond will break."

THUMP THUMP THUMP

Rick's fist clenched.

"No, Rick, you're not able to handle this."

"Are you willing to trust me with your sanity? With your heart, mind, and soul?"

The beating turned into a loud ringing.

Monica parted her lips to speak.

"MONICA!"

Rick roared.

The feline's right ear twitched.

"MONICA!"

He screamed again, moving a step ahead but feeling the hands of the formless voice holding him fast, rooting him on the spot.

She blinked.

Confusion appeared on her face, frowning as she looked away from the Lord.

Their eyes met. Her eyes widened, a soft gasp.

"Rick?"

"What the fuck?" The voice gasped.

With the feeling of a rubber band snapping into place, the scene vanished, everything became white, and the hands let go of Rick. The man stumbled forward, almost falling down to the floor. But he had not let go of the hand grasping his shoulder, a vicious snarl on his lips as he swung around, clenched fist. The faceless woman had been standing right there.

And for an instant, her mask held the barest hint of an emotion. Shock.

His fist connected against her jaw, her body crumpled, falling down, the mask shattering into a hundred pieces. A pale red face with orange eyes revealed behind.

"Monica's mine." He snarled, stepping closer to her prone form.

She wiped the blood from her lips. "Make sure to remember that feeling." The strange woman smiled. "You'll need that attitude if you plan to get her back."

With just a blink, he was back in his room.

"You should hurry." The red woman's voice whispered in his ear, the tingling sensation vanishing from his mind.

Rick quickly looked around, snapping his head left and right. His body felt like it was waking from a very long nap. Everything was lethargic, slow, barely clicking into place. Was he really back? He sighed in relief.

"Sir?" The voice snapped his attention, Dia had been seated there. The young woman smiled, but frowned right after. "Are you alright?"

"Yes." He nodded, moving to stand up and almost falling over. He fell ass first back onto the bed. "Ok, maybe in a minute."

Dia approached, leaning to touch his forehead. Her hand glowed softly and right away the odd mismatching sensations and dizziness vanished. "Please breathe. Psychic intrusion can sometimes leave one disoriented."

"Doesn't matter." Rick replied. "I need to go get Monica, tonight."

"Oh." Thunder crackled outside, thunder making the windows rumble. "That... will be complicated, sir."

"A little storm isn't going to stop me."

A loud siren broke through the silence, a long wail that reminded him of the bomb warnings from the war.

"The ferals might pose a bit of a problem, though." She grimaced.

Chapter 082 [Alice]

Alice sat in a small wooden room, it was well illuminated. And really, that was about the most positive thing she could say about it. A light loosely hung from the ceiling, dangling from a piece of what she guessed to be string. The source of the light's power was a mystery to the psychology teacher, but it certainly could not be electricity.

It certainly let her focus on it rather than on to the overcrowded shelves at either side of her, stuffed with papers haphazardly and just about ready to explode in a rain of confetti made out of every scrap of paper that had been shoehorned into its wooden perimeter.

The space available would have been snug had the designed of the room left it devoid of furniture. With the bookshelves and desk, the available free space was quite certainly not enough to hold one person comfortably let alone two.

"You can keep focusing on the lamp, but it's not really stopping the other thoughts."

Alice flinched. "I'm sorry, I'm sure this space is..."

"Cramped? Confined? Constricted? Compacted? Inadequately small?" The black brow was arched in a way that almost appeared permanent upon the maiden's face.

A maiden whose skin was a fire-hydrant red. Not pale white or pink or dark chocolate. Red. It was like watching a walking-talking button just about ready to be poked at from every which direction. Everything about her demanded attention, not just the skin color but also the lack of clothes, naked save for the copper colored collar on her throat.

"Do not worry, I like it like this." The woman spoke with a droll, the two antennae poking out of her forehead twitched. "It makes people uncomfortable, that way they spend less time here." A tilt of her head

followed, her pale orange irises turning slightly left of Alice's head, staring into the emptiness behind her. "But the Baroness made a call, so here you are."

"Am I disturbing you?"

"Yes." Irene answered flatly. "I am currently conducting five psychic evaluations to your fellow offworlders, and if I didn't have to talk to you, I would be doing six." She raised her hand. "And before you offer leaving, the Baroness will catch wind and I would get into trouble."

"Then what would.... How could I help?"

"Just ask whatever you came here to ask."

"I erm..." Keeping her gaze away from the maiden's naked skin, she managed to focus on the little stubble of black hair that coated Irene's head. "Why did you shave your head?"

"Because it draws attention to something I can control about my appearance." The maiden replied, arching an eyebrow. "I can hear no less than eight questions I would rather answer than that one."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because preemptively answering questions freaks humans out." A smirk. "And yes, I am also naked because it's something I have control of. That and it makes people nervous. But the reason why has nothing to do with nakedness but what it represents."

"Why would...?"

"Ferals are naked, almost always anyway. Me being publicly naked makes people think about ferals." She replied. "Are you ready to ask the other questions yet? I can almost hear the arguments inside that head of yours."

"How does that work? The telepathy?"

"You are asking me to describe color to a blind person." She sighed. "It's like trying to read a book where I can only see some pages and the rest are hidden behind fog. I can guess at what's in the other pages based on the ones in front of me, but I won't really know for sure until I turn the page." A slight shrug. "And people can often sense when I turn the page. Some minds are barely a pamphlet, others a whole encyclopedia."

Alice's lip twitched, noticing the dismissive gesture of that seemingly permanently raised brow on Irene's face.

"And is a person's capacity for thought split into two systems that operate differently?" She tilted her head. "Where system one is fast and instinctive while system two deliberate but slow?"

And just like that the brow lowered. Irene's attention focused on Alice in a more abrupt sense. The human had the eerie feeling those orange eyes were staring into parts of her mind she didn't want seen.

"A professor, I see." Had she-? "Yes, I turned a page. It's... strange, I've never found so little resistance before, you didn't even notice it." Closing her eyes, her antennae twitched, the woman crossing her arms. "The two system hypothesis is very proximate to my personal observations, for humans at least."

Alice's back straightened. "And maidens?"

"We are not human." The response was simple, direct. "We look human, we have certain human features, but we are monster maidens first and foremost. The way we think, the way we feel, it is not human." A wave of her hand. "The more obvious example would be the feral state. Which works through what I figure you would call a third system. The Curse."

Alice took a moment to consider that, rubbing her chin. She became quiet, staring at the red-skinned maiden as it was this time Alice's turn to arch a brow. The question clear even if unspoken.

Huffing, Irene rolled her eyes. "Origin of maidens, myth of creation. It goes that this being, called The Maker, popped in one day. An other-worlder, like

you lot. He showed up, saw humans were fucking things up and created the first maidens, six in total. He really juiced them up, made them powerful enough they could level cities. He put them to work helping humanity and went to sleep. At first things were good, they stopped famine and war and sickness. But apparently they weren't made incorruptible, and they grew hungry for power. So they figured out how to steal the Maker's ability to make more maidens and got to work"

There was an insipid roll of the eyes that followed, as if she'd heard the story more times than she cared to count.

"Each made their own army, intent on conquering humans. But the Maker woke and saw this. The Curse was unleashed onto maidens for their hubris, rendering them unable to live without humans. If they tried, they'd just go insane, feral." With a sigh, she made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "There's more... platitudes and preaching to the original tale, but that's about the gist of it."

"And what really happened?"

"As far as the history books and ruins show? There was a war. Big enough no city from the old world was left standing. And there's little proof of maidens existing before said war." Irene replied. "Not that there are much details from the time before the war. Mostly because a plague followed after."

"What does the myths say about the plague?"

"Not much. They call it Red Death and blame an other-worlder for it." She shrugged. "It's what's baked into the medicine books at least. None of it goes into detail about what exactly the thing did other than kill almost every human. Guess record keeping was tough when nine out of ten people kicked the bucket overnight." Her hand slapped down on the table. "Anyway, this got a bit derailed. The fact is that the third system exists in the mind of every maiden. Regardless of whether it was put there or there from the beginning." A snap of the fingers. "Without the bond a maiden's left just a knot of instincts and fuzzy memories, and if you get a bond, your full cognitive abilities kick in."

"I take it you called it a third system because it works different from the other two."

"It is a system tied to a singular person, that is not the maiden herself."

"The one you bonded?"

"There you go."

"But..." Alice frowned. "If the third system is what filters cognition..." She tilted her head.

"It means that a maiden's perception of the world will twist around their bond and the emotion imprinted from it." Irene had an amused smirk on her lips, her finger tapping at the copper collar on her throat. "But that's just how it is for us, maidens. We live and die for those we've bonded, we're taught since young how to-."

Irene's lips twisted in a grimace, her antenna twitched and curled into themselves. The woman doubled over, eyes shutting tightly and groaned, her whole body shuddering. Alice leaned forward with concern, watching a trickle of blood run out of the maiden's left nostril.

"Are you...?"

"Just..." Irene raised her hand, keeping the other grasping the side of her head. She tried to stand, toppling over right back onto her chair. "I had not expected someone's bond to intrude. It caught me off guard."

"Are you alright?" The teacher hesitated.

"It's nothing." Irene leaned back against the chair, sighing heavily, using both hands to cover her face, annoyance flashing through her features. "Just need to-." She snapped at attention, back eyes widening as her focus shifted towards the back of the room. "Shit."

The door flung open with a bang.

"Miss Smith?" Huge peered into the room, eyes barely registering on Irene and focusing on the psychology teacher. He didn't hesitate, stepping inside, a hand reaching out to her. "We need to go. Right now."

Chapter 083 [Mark]

Mark sat on the ground, his back against one of the dozen or so crates that littered the cave. His eyes lingered on the woman that sat opposite to him. Noah. The once male human was now a mousy maiden, in quite the literal sense.

She was asleep, slumped forward, wrists tied behind her back with metal wire. Her body was devoid of any clothing, left naked by the other two that had beaten her black and blue day in and day out. Now the only trace of the treatment she'd been given being the purple lines that adorned her body.

Mark's focus lingered in the black collar that had been strapped around her neck.

His eyes turned to the side, to the two wardens that kept him trapped and were also his only choice to make it out alive. They were playing a game of cards, hunched over a small box, tossing the cards and throwing insults at one another whenever someone appeared to be taking the lead.

Brye's ear was firmly aimed his way, the vulpine appendage almost rooted in place. And Shery would turn to glance his way from the corner of her eye every other minute or so. They weren't attempting to hide that they were keeping a close eye on him.

Growling, the young man turned his back in their direction, focusing on the mouse instead.

He shuffled forward, the sound making the mouse's ears twitch. She opened her eyes and looked at him, twitching and jumping backwards, her head hit the metal pole that kept her rooted in place. She froze, breathing hard, chest heaving air and wide green eyes. A twitch of her ear, her attention snapped towards the two maidens playing games, then at Mark.

It was like watching someone trying to swim through mud. Slowly, ever so slowly, the focus came to her eyes. "Fuck... you..." She squeaked the words,

very slowly making out the sounds with her lips, the snarl faltered.

Sighing, Mark clapped.

The sound made her jump, back of the head banging against the tube again, wincing.

"Hey." He said, keeping himself just close enough he could reach her, but not enough she could kick him if she started fighting against her restraints again.

"Do you want to die?"

The mention of the word caused her body to seize up.

"I'm guessing you don't want to die." Mark nodded slightly, frowning. "But you can't escape. You're trapped."

"Fuck... You..." Her eyes shot towards the metal door, closed, locked in place. She turned back to Mark, heaving air quickly, short fast breaths, hyperventilating.

"You're trapped." Mark replied. "And you're losing your mind, you can barely speak. I've been out in those woods, with the ferals, and you're starting to act like one."

A sharp gasp, the scowl returned. "Fuck...."

"Fuck me, yes, I know." He nodded. "What's your name?"

Her eyes widened. The short breaths became gasps, her focus turned to the side, then the other. The maiden began to struggle against the wire, she screeched, squeaking and gasping, ramming her hands against the wire and pulling, legs kicking every which way. It became louder. "You!" She screamed. "You! You! You! Fuck You!"

Unfocused deranged eyes flung side to side, never fixating on any one thing. Gasping for breath, her head slumped to the side, face growing pale as she tried to heave, pulling as much air she could into her lungs.

With a flutter of her eyelids, her eyes shut, head slumping forward.

A sound behind him made Mark turn to see the card game had come to an end. Shery had shot to her feet, appearing to have almost jumped in his direction. Brye had stopped her, grasping the grey woman's wrist and keeping her there.

The fox did not turn to acknowledge him, but there was a smirk there, playing on her lips.

Grunting, Mark focused back on the mouse, taking the leather water-skin and pouring some water atop the mouse girl's head. Her short brown hair draped over her face as she jolted awake again.

"Hey." He said, moving back to sitting in front of her, watching as she looked around. "Do you want to die?"

Her scattered focus returned to him like a laser, eyes wide.

"You're going feral." Mark spoke calmly. "You're losing your mind." His voice was calm, his attention severe. "You don't even remember your name. It's Noah."

The eyes widened further, a sharp breath, followed by several quick ones. She looked down at herself, eyes widening further. With a grimace, she looked back at Mark, a pained grimace. "F-f-fuck..." She drew a trembling breath. "Y-y-y-you..."

"You're not going to go anywhere, you can't do anything." Mark reached out, patting her foot and watching her recoil, drawing her legs against her chest, curling into a ball as best she could despite her hands tied behind her. "Let's end this."

Confusion crossed her face. The confusion came to an end as she saw the thin metal disk that was on his hand. The disk with a '5' inscribed onto its surface. Noah's expression turned to dread. Her legs kicked against the dirt, kicking and trying to get as much distance as she could, but unable to move so much as an inch.

Hyperventilating, she locked her eyes on the coin the young human was wielding, it didn't take her long to slump again. Sighing, Mark waited for a minute, quietly looking over the naked woman as she sat there, unconscious once more. He waited, moving to splash her again.

A sharp breath, she woke once more.

"Hey Noah." He looked into her green panicked eyes. "You're going feral." He sat down calmly, meeting her gaze squarely. "We've had this talk a couple dozen times already."

"Fuck-"

"You're exhausted." The young man frowned. "You can barely breath, you've been struggling against that post for hours. You're bleeding." His eyes focused on the mouse. "No one deserves to go like that, losing their sanity."

He raised the coin, showing it to her.

"Let's end this, Noah. You won, the bitch didn't get what she wanted out of you." He calmly nodded, watching her mirror his gesture. "Would you rather watch yourself go insane? You're at your limit."

The words made her lower lip tremble, she nodded. The scowl was clearly an effort for her to maintain, her breath coming in and out in tiny squeaks.

"Do you want to die?"

A sharp breath, the mouse closed her eyes, nodding.

Mark's shoulders slumped, he sighed and nodded in return. "Alright." His grip tightened on the coin, watching it for several long seconds. Was this really what he should do? His gaze turned towards the other two, watching the anger and panic playing in Shery's face while a scowl remained on Brye's.

The fox had her hand clenching her companion's wrist with a white knuckled grip. Both ears had flattened against her skull and she was watching him with a singular burning eye.

He turned back towards the mouse, moving to stand and watching her twitch. "I'm going to approach now." He spoke calmly. "You can keep your eyes closed if you want to. Just don't attack me."

The nod was a quick panicked thing, lips curled tightly and eyes shut.

The young man nodded in turn, taking a step, watching carefully in case she lashed out. She only twitched and tightened further. "This will only take a second, it will all be over soon."

Leaning down, he caressed her cheek, her eyes snapped open, looking up at him with wide eyes.

"Do you trust me?"

Gulping, she took in a sharp breath, and nodded.

A tingle ran through the palm, up his arm, and traversed his body. Mark's grip on the coin faltered as he blinked in surprise. Slowly, his arm pulled back, placing the coin into his pocket.

A hand brushed against his back, a soft breath blowing into his ear. "Give her a name." Brye spoke. "Before the bond finishes settling."

"I don't give a shit." He shrugged his shoulders, prying himself away from her touch. With a grunt, he looked down at the wide-eyed mouse that had not so much as blinked. "Noah." He said, frowning as he looked down at her.

She nodded slowly, the tingling in his arm dying down and focus returning to her eyes.

Slowly, the mouse looked at Mark, then at Brye. Her brows furrowed.

"Fuck."

Chapter 084 [Mark]

Getting out of the cave would have felt more like a victory if it weren't at night and if there weren't a metal wire tying him to the mouse named Noah by their hips. The air was damp, mostly due to the light rain. The only light that let him see where he was going a flickering blue flame Brye had summoned, she kept it floating in front of Mark the whole way.

"Boo."

The sound made Mark twitch, but Noah jumped. The diminutive woman leapt a full foot off the ground and latched onto Mark's arm. A moment after, she squeaked, letting go and stepping away, her face turned towards Brye, a seething rage burning within those pale eyes.

"Aw, don't be like that, I'm sure Mark liked you squeezing him like that."

The comment made Noah turn to look at Mark, anger in full swing.

And just as their eyes met, it sputtered. The flame vanished, her brows smoothed. Noah's shoulders slumped, and she turned away. "Let's just get this over with." The mouse breathed out, defeated.

"You heard that, pet? Give the order."

Mark felt his jaw tighten, catching Noah's hackles rising from the corner of his eye, her whip-like tail lashing once. The mouse was seething in her glare towards Brye. "Let's just get this over with."

Noah glanced over her shoulder in his direction. Gritting her teeth, she nodded, stepping ahead and pointing forward. The wire keeping her tied to Mark grew taut after barely five steps, its tension caused her to slow down enough for him to catch up.

"It's still hard to believe she's the same Noah." Behind the group, Shery walked. She was carrying a wooden crate larger and several times heavier

than any one of those present. Yet she was bored, only needing one arm to keep it aloft as if it were no more than an empty cardboard box. It seemed that the hardest part about the task was its size more than anything else. "How much further, mouse?"

The mouse glowered at her, ears twitching. "The clearing, should be close."

"You forget what the good human kept telling us?" Brye laughed. "She's not Noah, she's a mousegirl that has Noah's memories."

"You'd know about that, wouldn't you?" the mouse whispered under her breath.

And just like that, Brye appeared in front of the mouse, her hand moved forward, grasping her by the throat. Noah snarled, hands clawing at the arm holding her in place, sharp nails digging into the fox's flesh. Not that Brye cared, she raised her free hand, black fire enveloping her digits. "Seems you lost your burnt ugly mug, maybe I should fix that."

"Stop."

Mark's singular bark made Noah freeze, her whole body went rigid.

But the word had not been aimed at her, his eyes were on Brye.

"Tch." Her ear flicked in annoyance, her hand letting go of Noah, the mouse dropping to the ground and coughing.

Green eyes peered at Mark, he frowned, ignoring the gaze and just trying to keep moving. His mind kept running in circles, trying to focus. He was tied to Noah, but that was mostly just to ensure Noah couldn't run, she was most definitely faster than him. And by the looks of it, she had no trouble seeing in this intense darkness that surrounded them in every direction.

Mark's eyes kept flickering towards Brye, she was walking ahead. Shery behind.

"We're here."

At Noah's words, the group turned in the direction her finger was pointing. Just a dozen meters to the side or so was a clearing. Just like the mouse had promised. They approached cautiously, eyes peeled for potential threats, but finding nothing at all. They didn't move to the center of the clearing, since the drizzle would've drenched them right away.

Without warning, Noah moved her fingers to her lips. She let out a loud whistling sound. Three short ones, and one long. It had been a sharp retort that pierced through the surrounding forest.

"Now, we wait." Noah slumped to the ground, sitting on the damp soil without apparent discomfort. She leaned against the tree, closing her eyes.

"Mice and their naps." Brye chuckled, her hand pushing Mark against the same tree albeit on the opposite side. "Sit, I want a nice comfy chair."

He remained unmoving, leveling a glare and not moving.

"We're on the job, no playing." Shery commented, putting down the crate and using it as a seat.

"It's just a little playing. Who knows how much longer we'll get the chance? Mark might make a run for it the instant we stop looking." The fox's leg moved swiftly, hand pressing Mark against the tree trunk as she kicked out his feet from underneath him.

He fell ass first, groaning from the pain, and then grunting when the fox straddled his lap. Gold eyes flashed in amusement, her hands draped around his shoulders. Her body pressed against his own, hot, warm, there was something in her scent that tickled at the back of his mind.

"See? Much better." She cooed, hand patting his head.

Mark didn't try to shove her off, not only was it impossible for him to struggle against her strength, it would encourage her to do more. He turned to look away, trying his best to ignore as she leaned down to blow a cool teasing breath into his ear and neck. It made him grimace, but he still fought to keep a straight face.

And that appeared to encourage her too, her fluffy black tail lashed back and forth. Her lips moved to kiss his shoulder, hands moving to his chest and gripping his shirt before her touch moved downwards, teasing at the edge of his pants.

"Brye, seriously." Shery grunted from her box, eyes darting into the surrounding shadows. "Keep your head out of your cunt."

"Why?" She asked, chuckling. "Our clients like the show after all." Her head pulled away from Mark, eyes gazing into the darkness. "A product demonstration, if you will."

The human nearly jumped when several figures emerged from the shadows.

First two, then five, then a dozen.

Maidens, one and all. Monsters that were so approximate to human that for a fraction of a second it had fooled him. But no, his eyes locked on the collars, on the weirdly sharp ears, the weirdly colored hair. Most looked like an elf that had spent too much time under the sun. Tall, thin, lithe and graceful. Each of them a warrior wielding a sword, a bow, or a shield. But there were a handful that were of paler complexion. But such a rule did not apply to the one that walked in front of the group.

It was a woman of coal black skin that felt as if absorbed the very shadows around her. Her features were fair, beautiful even, there was a thin fragility to her lithe figure. She was almost as thin as Noah, but taller. Unnaturally taller. Her limbs slightly longer than they should have been, her fingers like bones that wrapped around her walking staff with a deathly grip. Clothed in long flowing purple robes, she was the only one from the group that looked one strong breeze away from collapsing like a house of cards.

Her eyes, milky and unfocused, half blind, were still somehow able to lock onto Mark with laser precision.

That gaze bore into him and made every part of his mind scream to shove Brye off and start running. To run fast and as hard as he could. Any thought

and consideration to use this client to get rid of his two captors was thrown out the window without a second consideration.

This woman was dangerous, far more dangerous than everything else Mark had ever encountered.

His whole body went rigid, cold sweat running down his skin as she approached.

Brye growled, leaning over him, her body almost a shield. "We have the product, there are more boxes where that came-."

The words died, Brye's body became rigid. Her eyes widened. Her lips moved but not a sound came out. The tall bony figure approached, fingers reaching out to caress the collar on the fox's throat.

She had not stopped looking at Mark, not an instant, not a blink, had she even breathed? "I see."

Those two words chilled Mark's bones.

Slowly, the finger on Brye's throat released its deathly touch, the woman raised the hand above her head. "Take them."

"That..." The fox looked surprised she could speak again. "That isn't how this works."

"Our deal was with the human named Noah. The only human here is clearly not him." The woman's ebony lips parted to show rows of pearly white teeth. "Worry not, you will be our... guests... while we hash out a new deal."

Mark certainly did not like the sound of that.

Chapter 085 [Rick]

Rick felt trapped, and not just in the metaphorical sense. He was inside the common room of the building that they were using as ‘temporary lodging’, and with him were every other male that was staying in the building. The room was certainly spacious enough for them, with people scattered about, but that wasn’t really to his concern nor his focus.

The thing he was focusing on were the five maidens that stood within the room. Each wore the green uniform, a blue collar, and a stony expression of determination. Thunder rumbled outside, and not one of the five maidens so much as twitched.

There was one in front of every possible entrance. With two standing in front of the window. All of them wielded shields; one also carried a sword.

Each faced away from the center of the room, their eyes locked onto the doors and windows, their backs turned towards the humans. It was as if they were expecting for someone to break through at any second. Rick was quite certain that if anyone tried, they would be cut down without hesitation.

But his thoughts were elsewhere, mainly. How could he get out of there? He couldn’t wait any longer. How could he get to Monica? The situation was not one he could afford to delay.

"If you don’t wait, you’ll die."

The voice startled Rick. He turned to see Mr. Gabriel taking the seat next to his own. Seeing the older man caused the teacher to flinch, the first image that came to mind that of the cave, and the burning hateful gaze. Rick had to remind himself it had been only an illusion.

"Why do you say that?" He asked, ignoring the mental picture, and instead focusing on the nearest door and the maiden standing there.

"If we were in combat, you'd be the first to die." That certainly caught Rick's attention. His eyes turned to the old man. "You look just about ready to run at the first gunshot."

"I don't..." His jaw tightened. "Monica-."

"You're useless if you're dead." A derisive snort followed. "Use that noggin' of yours. You're supposed to be smart. You run out that door and then what?"

Rick's jaw tightened. "I'd have to improvise."

The old man chuckled. "True, all plans need that when executing. But if you're going to improvise the whole way through, you better have something to back up your boldness."

"I thought that no plan survives contact with the enemy?" Rick snorted, glancing at the door once more. His eyes then moved back to him. "Where's the mouse, anyway?"

Mr. Gabriel's brows lowered, losing the amused edge. "She was sedated."

"How did that go down?"

"It was not pretty." His jaw tightened. "They couldn't have a 'black collar' near humans during this kind of shit-show. 'Too prone to panic', apparently."

Rick glanced at the older male, trying to gauge the wrinkled face. The frown was almost chiseled into the man's features. "You're calm," he realized.

"I might not like it, but it was for her own good." Crossing his arms, he gave a half nod at the teacher. "Looking at that door is not going to make it open any sooner."

"So, what do you suggest? Sit back?"

"Hurry up and wait." A lofty smirk appeared on his lips. "This is the waiting part. And when you spot your chance, you get to hurry, and then wait again."

"I'm guessing that loop has an ending point somewhere."

"You die. That's where it ends." The grim proclamation made Rick shudder. The reaction seemed to amuse Mr. Gabriel a great deal. The man patted his shoulder. "If you took the right chance, you get to wait again. If you didn't, then you'll get flowers."

"How can I tell which is which?"

The man's eyes turned from him, towards the door. Slowly, his gaze focused on each of the maidens in the room, scrutinizing them for... something. There was a slight quirk upward on his lips. "I'd say you'll get your chance to hurry soon enough." At Rick's confused expression, the man made a gesture at the duo that stood near the window. Their attention had shifted away from the metal shutters and towards one of the doors.

Not five seconds later, there was a knock.

Every conversation in the room came to an abrupt halt. The two maidens near the window moved quickly, taking positions on either side of the door. Their bodies had a soft glow to them, almost threatening.

Two more knocks followed. "The Major has sent orders." A voice spoke from the other side. "Permission to enter?"

Shared looks amongst the maidens in the room. The one with the sword spoke up. "Granted."

The doors opened. Slowly, a single figure stood at the other side, waiting for the trio of maidens to nod at her. Rick recognized the wings and blond hair. Helga the Valkyrie stepped into the room, looking around. She raised her voice. "This would normally be done in a more grandiose fashion, but time is of the essence. First, each one of you has been acknowledged as honorary citizens of Edogia, at least until the documentation makes it official." Her tone was not very congratulatory. "As eligible human males, most all of you are required by law to be enlisted a minimum of two years of service fighting ferals." The steely gaze swept across the room. "By law, you can postpone this service, or pay a fee to not have to partake in it. Those of you who decide not to delay the start of your service, come with me."

Rick didn't wait a second, standing up. "Where to?"

"Major Huge has given orders to bring all who opt not to delay their service to the Hunter's command post." Meeting his gaze, she waited for a heartbeat before turning to look at the others. "The rest stay here."

Mr. Gabriel coughed loudly, clearing his throat. "Would this mandatory service make you part of the same command structure the Major is in?"

"The details were broken down in the contract." Helga bowed slightly. "Someone of your venerable age would not need to-"

"That was not my question, girl." The tone came out harsh, with a commanding bite to it.

"Yes, sir." She reacted instantly. Every maiden in the room stood slightly straighter. "All enlisted can be commandeered by Hunters, but are considered independent actors at the direct command of the crown under any other circumstance."

"And is the Major commandeering the 'enlisted' gathered here?"

"... no, sir, he isn't. You are honorary citizens, and none present owns any maidens they could use to help in this situation."

"Glad that's been cleared out." He slowly stood up, moving next to Rick. "Let's get going, then."

Helga looked about to complain, but kept quiet, turning towards the rest of the men gathered around the room. Slowly, one by one, they began to stand up. Most everyone had decided to join in. Rick noticed Tomas among those that had approached Helga, while Victor was among those that had remained seated.

"This way, please," Helga instructed, turning to leave, her wings fluttering slightly as she had to bend them so she could pass under the door frame.

The hallway had no less than a dozen other maidens on either side, standing at attention, each one wearing the same green uniform, and most of them

armed with swords and shields.

"No armor," Mr. Gabriel spoke with a frown.

Rick wasn't too sure what to say about that particular comment, so he kept quiet. The thought might have tickled his curiosity if he wasn't focused on trying to pay attention to every other detail he could.

Outside, the rain was a downpour. The storm had become stronger. "We need to hurry," Helga commanded, quickening her step.

This time, there would be no poncho or offer for protection from the rain other than to Mr. Gabriel, the old man donning the poncho as the whole group of humans and the maiden escort quickly made their way through the village.

As they moved, another twenty maidens joined the escorts, taking positions on either side. The women said nothing, not even acknowledging them. Their eyes were on the streets around them and the sky above. The tension could be felt. They were looking out for threats. Rick's skin tingled under the chilly downpour.

The rain did not feel natural.

Within minutes, their route down the drenched cobblestone came to a halt as they spotted the Major, his imposing figure and massive cape making it hard to mistake him for anyone else. There were five other uniformed males standing near him, apparently receiving instructions, but what drew Rick's attention was the maiden that stood behind Huge. Her fiery red wings were spread and circled above her head as well as Huge's, forming a sort of glowing umbrella for the man that was at least a full head taller than her.

Steam rose from the red wings, the water that fell upon the feathers evaporating on contact and creating a mist that rose into the sky. The closer they got, the more Rick could sense the heat emanating from them.

The Major spotted the group. His face had no smiles to share. "Men." He gave a single nod. "You are here for one reason and one reason only: to observe." He made a dismissive gesture towards the uniformed men that had

been gathered with him, sending them off. "Today, you will see what it means to fight the ferals. And I hope it may prepare you for the challenges you will face in service of the kingdom."

With a gesture of his hand, the group set out.

Chapter 086 [Rick]

Rick stood inside the "command post" the Hunters used and felt like he'd entered a primitive air traffic control tower. There were women, maidens, seated near a table with a map of the village. Others stood at the edges, peering into the darkness. The wooden watchtower looked quite busy. Rick was very sure he didn't remember spotting this structure from anywhere in the village. And he should have. It was practically as tall as the radio tower right across the street.

But they couldn't have built this overnight, right?

Despite the altitude, the heavy rain and darkness made it hard to see what was happening out and around the village. The fact that the inside of the tower had absolutely no source of light also struck Rick as odd. It was just barely dim enough to be able to make out the details on the map the maidens were muttering over. There were pieces of wood on the map, which Rick had to guess were their forces.

In the darkness, even if dry and with a roof over their heads protecting them from the rain, the wind blew with chilly determination.

"Sir, confirmed sighting, first part of the first wave coming from the North," a maiden in the corner whispered. Her back was turned towards everyone else, her skin a bright red, two antennae bobbing above her head. The lack of clothes on her figure made Rick feel there was something off about her.

"Let them through." Huge nodded, and he turned towards them. There was a moment as his gaze lingered on Mr. Gabriel. The old man was standing near the railing and staring out into the dark.

"A couple machine-gun nests would do you lot some good," the old man spoke with a scowl.

"Small calibers are only effective against humans, larger calibers only work if you catch them by surprise," Huge replied, not missing a beat, moving to

stand next to the man and stare into the darkness outside. "An elemental gun could handle the weaker maidens out there and might hurt the stronger ones, but each bullet costs more than what I make in a year."

Thunder streaked through the sky, and for an instant, Rick managed to see the village underneath. The streets were empty; every house had its windows locked. From this vantage point, he could see the roofs were made of black slate rock, but some of them had flat rooftops that were currently being occupied by what he guessed to be the Hunters.

"Why are you letting them penetrate the village?" The old man frowned as he'd spotted movement in the streets.

"Ferals are not a coordinated force. They're closer to a mob. They are all running away from something, or to something." Huge pointed towards one of the streets below. Rick had to frown to see it, but there were figures running through. And they were moving fast, fast enough Rick almost missed them entirely. "This one is running away."

"From what?"

"Sir!" the red-skinned woman spoke out. "Two flocks, northeast. At least one Thundrix. West-bound heading."

Huge's face tightened. "Wait for confirmation, do not engage." The man leaned forward, staring into the darkness swirling under the howling winds. "Feral status?"

"Two minutes for contact with the main body."

"Frenzy?"

"Not confirmed."

The massive man stood firm, but from behind, Rick could see how his neck tense. Another bolt of lightning streaked through the clouds above, and Rick could make out more figures running through the village. They moved quickly, ignoring the houses. They raced down the streets and out the other

side. The young teacher frowned as he stared in the direction Huge was looking at. He could barely make out the tree-line at the edge of the village. There was too little light to see much else.

"The first dissuasion barrier confirms they're not frenzied!" The red-skinned woman confirmed. "The ferals are not frenzied, sir."

Huge didn't sigh, but his shoulders relaxed a millimeter. "Keep the gates open, do not engage."

With his words came another roll of thunder. "They're here," Mr. Gabriel spoke with a frown.

Tomas gasped, and Rick could see why. Through the dim light of the streaking lightning above, he managed to see them. Shadows, figures- where he had once seen dozens, there were now hundreds. But what drew a chill through him was that even with the rain hammering against the roof above their heads, he could still hear it, the rumbling of a stampede.

From between the streets, a spark of light caught his attention. Rick turned towards the source, but it was gone the moment after, too fast for him to spot anything.

"Come on..." Huge whispered under his breath, gripping the railing with pale knuckles, the wood groaned under his fingers, the man was staring in the same direction the light had come from.

A second spark emerged from a closed location. One of the shadows had been the source, throwing a bolt of fire that made the other figures move away and run all the faster.

"Come on..."

There was a trickle of cold sweat down Rick's spine. The number of flashes of light happening within the village were increasing. The ferals appeared to be using their powers to defend themselves from the stampede.

"The flocks changed direction! Heading our way! Five minutes to contact."

"Shit." Huge grit his teeth. "Wait for my order."

The man turned to stare into the storm.

"Sir, three Thundrixes confirmed."

"Do not engage, hold!"

"But-"

He did not turn to look at the hesitant woman. "I said hold!"

The number of sparks of light within the village increased. The more ferals were being funneled down the streets, the more they were bumping into one another. And the more they were bumping, the more some of them would lash out. They produced fire, lightning, flashes of green and purple, streaks of power that felt like sparks trying to light a flame.

Small bursts that died as quickly as they came, and that urged the stampede onwards.

"Three minutes."

"Hold!" The wood of the railing splintered, Huge's jaw tight.

Thunder rumbled across the sky, and for a fraction of a second, Rick could swear he saw one of the clouds moving. A black mass that was headed their way. A lightning bolt exploded from one of them, and unlike any other lightning Rick had ever seen, it flew diagonally towards the ground, towards the forest. It struck one of the trees, knocking it over, the downed log bursting into flames and casting an eerie red glow onto the mass of shadows that were running down the hill. A quick glance confirmed that most of the ferals weren't even going through the village. Was something funneling the bulk of them away?

"Sir!"

"HOLD!" He roared, turning away from the dark approaching cloud and looking towards the forest from where the ferals were streaming through.

From the darkness between the trees, there was a bright flickering flame.

"Menace confirmed, fire element, two minutes to engage first dissuasion barrier!"

"Open fire! Knock those birds out of the sky!"

And then there was light.

A small sun had ignited atop the village directly above the radio tower. Its reddish glow cast the clouds above in bloody streaks of light, and from this tiny sun, a singular beam of light shot forward at impossible speed. The rain ignited upon contact with the light, a screaming steaming explosion that shrieked as the fire traced a direct path through the sky towards the approaching black cloud. It punched through, and in that instant Rick realized it was no black cloud but at least a hundred flying figures. They scattered as soon as their formation had been pierced.

And at exactly that moment, dozens of rooftops lit up. Streaks of white light arched upwards with such speed they'd impacted against the targets kilometers away, faster than any bullet could have been able to. At first, Rick thought they were no more than giant spotlights flashing into the incoming flock, but seeing the flying figures bursting into flames and dropping from the sky, he figured it was something far more dangerous than just normal light.

Screams and shrieks could be heard down below. All too suddenly, the stampede accelerated. If there were flickers before, it had now become a veritable light show. The screams down below became louder, some of the abilities being used striking with more intent than to merely scare others away.

"Status."

Two bolts of lightning bursts out of the flock of birds, aimed towards the source of the red beam that had punched through them.

"One Thundrix downed, one remains." Another pause. The flickering fire that Rick had seen between the trees was growing closer. "Menace contact

confirmed, Pyrebear. Only one."

"Fuck me." Huge's eyes widened. "Ursines?"

"None spotted."

"Bullshit." The man spun around, leaning over the railing and staring down at the hundreds of ferals running through. His eyes narrowed. "Confirm archer teams."

The red woman tensed. "Team two does not respond." The maidens around the map scrambled to start drawing lines on the surrounding streets of the pieces that likely represented said team.

"There are Ursines in the village! Close the front gate!" Huge snapped. "Start the purge, flush the ferals out before we get a frenzy on our hands."

"But the flock-"

"Miranda can handle some damn birds, get those Ursines out of the village or we're going to have a bloodbath on our hands."

A second fiery red streak pierced through the sky, its shrieking path bringing an end to more of the flying ferals.

Chapter 087 [Rick]

Rick laid witness to a massacre.

As soon as Huge had given the order to flush the ferals out, there were a series of explosions at the northern edge of the village. Loud enough they shook the ground they stood on. Fire started to pour into the streets from the rooftops, targeting the ferals.

These flames were scaring the wild maidens, forcing them to rush all the harder. With the ferals attacking one another as well, it was easy to tell something else had happened in the village's layout. There was a very sudden decrease in movement through narrower streets. Rick could barely make them out, but he could spot fake walls had been erected to guide the flow into the larger streets.

"Seal off the Northwest section of the village and send teams one through four. Hunt those damn bears," the major growled. A bright yellow flame burst out north of the village from the forest. Several trees ignited with the explosion.

The forest was almost a full kilometer away, probably more, and yet, even at this distance, through the pouring rain and the darkness, Rick could make out that the source of the flames was a single individual. Fire was pouring out of the figure like a flamethrower, spreading in every direction.

"Contact!"

"No shit." Mr. Gabriel whistled. "What kind of monster can do that?"

"Pyrebear." The Major frowned. "Categorized as a Menace for a reason. Their whole damn genus are cunning and ruthless, even when feral." His jaw clenched. "And she brought her cubs to hunt."

Three streaks of thunder leapt diagonally across the sky. Two impacted against the rooftops of houses below. One struck the radio tower. And for a

split second, the structure glowed. Some shrieks could be heard from the general vicinity of the metal tower.

"Sir?" One of the maidens standing guard spoke up. Rick could only see her back as she stared over the railing and towards the Eastern edge of the village. "I smell blood."

The fact that Huge's tanned features grew pale instantly told Rick everything he needed to know.

"We need to move to a safer location, sir," Helga spoke with a frown. "A frenzy might start any moment."

"Confirmed. Take our guests out of here."

"But you sir-"

"I have Irene. Follow your orders. Take your team and make sure they're safe."

She became tense instantly. "Yes sir!"

Helga immediately turned towards the stairs. "Follow me, single file." The tone lost any semblance of deference; it carried a hard command and a slight tension. And with her order, six of the maidens in the control tower moved to issue out everyone who wasn't part of the Hunters. The village's map lay forgotten by all save Huge.

Rick, Tomas, and Mr. Gabriel took the rear of the group.

"What do you figure a frenzy is?" Tomas wondered, talking over the muttering of the rest of the group ahead.

"It's when ferals give up on 'flight' and choose 'fight'. It is a worst-case scenario for us."

The voice came from behind them. One of the maidens had spoken up. She was shorter than the others, and her hair was the color of light copper, almost

blond. With a green collar, she had a bow slung over her shoulder and a shaft full of arrows on her back.

She'd be human if not for the sharp ears at either side of her head.

"I take it that's very bad."

"It could easily mean half the village will be dead come morning." She kept urging them to continue walking down the stairs, spiraling their way toward the stone building atop which the wooden structure had been built on.

"Why not just make a wall?" Mr. Gabriel scowled.

"When a feral rush finds an obstacle, it has two options, change course or hammer against it. To build a proper wall would be a monumental effort," she spoke. "A frenzy would immediately break out, and the farms surrounding the village would be destroyed in the process. To say nothing that a feral rush can come from just about any direction considering how far we are from the kingdom's heart."

"That's also why you don't wear armor?" Mr. Gabriel wondered, glancing at the woman and her green uniform. "Because nothing cheap would be as durable as yourself?"

A curt nod followed the question. "Indeed. An especially harsh truth for those who have traversed more of their genus."

"I keep hearing that word, and it doesn't seem to mean what I think it means," Rick muttered.

"It is the road a maiden has, based upon their breed," the elf replied. "I am an Elf. With enough strength, and the proper circumstances, I could gain the powers of a Golden Elf or a High Elf."

Tomas' eyes widened. "Wait." He spoke the word, gasping.

The statement was accompanied by a rumble that shook the tower.

"No waiting, sir. We must hurry," the Elf urged, wide-eyed and clearly holding back a slightly panicked edge.

Through the windows on the stairs, Rick saw more thunder arcing towards the village.

An ozone smell filled the air, lingering along with the humidity of the rain.

His hairs stood on end, and the air became charged.

His head snapped towards the other humans, descending the steps ahead of them. "RUN!" He heard the Elf roar.

The tower shook, and the stairs became a sudden slippery downward slope. Rick's hands reached out for the railing and he held on tightly with one hand, the other reaching out and firmly yanking Mr. Gabriel to ensure the old man wouldn't fall as well.

Behind him, the Elf had done the same with Tomas, her hand firmly grasping his shirt and pinning him to the wall. An odd sight, considering he was a full head taller than her and she had the physique of a gymnast. "Are you ok?" The question came from both the Elf and Rick at the same time.

"I'm fine," Mr. Gabriel grunted.

"What's your name?" Tomas looked stunned as he stared into the Elf's eyes. There was a wide eyed wonderment in that expression of his.

But now was not the time. The tower felt like it was leaning.

"We move!" She commanded, and no one dared to think twice rushing down the stairs as quickly as they could.

There were screams down below. People were practically rushing towards the bottom of the wooden tower as quickly as they could. Something that let them tumble their way forward rather quickly.

Not as fortunate as them was Mr. Gabriel, unable to keep the pace.

The tower leaned further, almost a fully thirty degrees. Attempting to move down the steps abruptly became a harrowing game of slippery slopes. And it was gaining further inclination with every passing second.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit!"

"SIR!"

The Elf had jumped above their heads and lower on the stairs, her hands glowing a bright greenish hue.

Her hands slammed against the wall. The wood reacted to her touch as if it were alive. The wood rippled and bent, molded, and the stairs very abruptly closed in around the three of them from all sides. Rick's got the sudden sense of claustrophobia as the sensation of falling down was becoming more pronounced. His instinct to struggle and scream heightened further as the walls reached out to grasp at his body, pinning him against the wood as they continued to fall.

The only source of light was the Elf's still glowing hands as they remained firmly pressed against the walls of their new tumbling prison.

The sensation of falling was soon replaced with spinning. They had hit something at an angle and it was very clear they'd abruptly become a pinball on its way down to ground level.

"BRACE!" the Elf warned.

Clenching his teeth, Rick closed his eyes tightly.

The world came to a screeching halt when the sphere that had trapped them broke into pieces as it slammed against something hard. Still tied against his own chunk of wood, Rick felt he'd been launched out of a window in a car crash. Except he had the fortune to have the plank serve as the breaks against the cobblestone rather than his face.

It came to a grinding halt. Rain fell down on him and Rick had never felt so happy about it. A hysterical laugh escaped him, heart racing a mile a minute.

He tried to move to stand up. And failed.

Wide eyed, the chemistry teacher looked down at the wood, still holding him fast against the plank. His head whipped around, trying to spot the others. There was a glow to his right, and as he turned to look, his stomach dropped.

It was a naked woman, beautiful by all accounts, her body drenched. The crackle of lightning that danced on her hand accentuated every curve on her naked body as she looked at Rick with confusion.

That confusion slowly turned to a frown, and he realized she did not have a collar. The dots were quick to connect.

With a grunt, Rick began to fight against the wooden restraints that kept him firmly in place. He couldn't find any give on the straps that had kept him from bouncing inside the ball like a maraca.

The creature took one step closer, and the lightning in her right hand grew brighter.

She raised her hand, pointing her palm at the teacher.

THUNK

The sound had been barely a whisper, and with it, the crackle of lightning in the feral's hand vanished instantly. Where her right eye had been, there was now the shaft of a glowing arrow. The maiden was dead before she hit the ground.

"I've got you, sir." The Elf ran towards Rick, legs seeming rather wobbly, but her grip on her bow firm. Behind her were Tomas and Mr. Gabriel, both sporting a limp. "We need to get you all to safety."

The proclamation came with glowing hands. The wood released Rick, and he had a chance to see her pointing with her free hand towards the Hunter's building that had once sported the wooden tower atop its roof.

Said tower was now a pile of splinters and broken smoldering planks, obstructing the road.

They were on the street.

With the ferals.

"Rick."

Mr. Gabriel's word made the chemistry teacher turn his head to see the older man pointing ahead, in the direction opposite to the Hunter's building. The radio tower was glowing as it had been when it'd been struck by the lightning.

And at its base stood the Baron's house. There was a gaping hole in its side.

Rick looked back towards the Hunter's building- the main door was open, and there were uniformed maidens there, fighting off the ferals and clearing a way towards them. Then he looked forward towards the Baron's manor and the dozen confused looking ferals that stood between him and that hole.

He began to run straight towards the manor.

"Sir, NO!"

Chapter 088 [Rick]

Rick ran through the wet cobblestone with a singular objective in mind. The hole that had been blasted through the wall of the Baron's manor.

Considering how the whole bottom floor looked like a bunker that had been pulled out of the earth, whatever had made that hole must have been terrifyingly powerful and destructive. The moment of hesitation about whether this was a good idea or not was gone. This was it.

Rain poured down on him, and he hoped the sound would mask his approach towards the manor. Mostly because there were ferals standing between himself and that hole. And he wasn't going to stop, not when there was such a clear possibility of reaching Monica.

For a fraction of a second, he considered asking himself why he was willing to put himself in this situation. Why risk himself like this to save someone who, for all intents and purposes, he had only met less than a month ago?

And why had she risked herself to save him? He pushed the thoughts aside. The image of her heavily shackled and crying out his name tugged at something inside his chest.

"Duck."

The word had not appeared through his ears, but in his mind. He did not hesitate, lurching low.

THUNK

The nearest feral dropped, an arrow embedded into her skull. The human flinched as he jumped over the corpse, not taking a second glance. Did this mean the Elf was lending him a hand?

"No, she's keeping you alive. If she reaches you before you get to the mansion, she will pull you back to the Hunters."

The voice was familiar, and it took him a heartbeat to connect from where. "You." The faceless figure, the one who'd put him into the nightmare.

"Jump right." The instruction slid over Rick's thoughts as he realized the voice had just told him to head straight towards the next feral in his path. "Either jump or Freya catches you."

Looking over his shoulder, the human realized the voice was not exaggerating. The Elf was closing in fast, eyes glowing as she held her bow at the ready. He complied with the command and threw himself towards the feral that turned around just as he'd approached. She stepped out of his way on instinct, then ducked under the arrow that had nearly brought her to an end.

"You've bought yourself five more seconds. Duck into the street to the right."

And lose sight of his target? "WHAT!?"

"Jump or die."

That sent a cold chill down his spine. He moved towards the side street. The attempt to continue running was interrupted by a sudden tingling all around him. The smell of blood in the air thickened. Without thinking, he dropped to the ground.

BOOM

The wall to his left had exploded outwards, debris peppered him as a monster emerged from the hole. Three meters tall, the creature was the tallest maiden Rick had seen. Her skin was a dark tan, and her back was covered in a thick black fur that looked as if she'd draped a cape over her shoulders. Her hands were claws, each larger than his head, massive paws that dripped blood.

The creature's eyes had swung around to either side and then locked onto him.

"RUN RUN RUN!"

The voice had not needed to say it twice. Rick scrambled to get his feet under his body and move as quickly as possible down the street. Behind him, he heard several THUNKs and a roar that made his legs move all the faster.

"Take a left, NOW! JUMP!"

No questions, only instinct. Something barreled through the space he'd been occupying moments ago. Something that slid across wet cobblestone and slammed against the nearby wall with the force of a truck.

Thank fuck for sneakers.

"Why is it chasing me!?"

"Because you're the easiest meal around." The voice spoke with a growl. "At the next intersection take a right but stop dead in your tracks for a heartbeat. Then turn back to go the way you came from."

"You want me to stop!?"

"You want to die!?"

Compelling arguments, did he trust the voice? Not really. Did he have a choice? Also no.

He lunged towards the right at the next intersection and, without waiting, turned around. His heart tightened, expecting to find the massive woman hot in his tracks. Instead the street was empty. "Wha-"

"DON'T STOP! RUN!"

There was a loud thud behind him, and his brain connected the dots. The monster had, somehow, gone over the building in an attempt to cut his escape. The roar made him feel as if his heart was about to escape his chest, and by the time his brain had kicked in, he was running again. Straight back where he came from.

The Elf, Freya, had been equally hot in his heels, and her surprise was clear when she saw Rick approaching. And in the flickering lights of the

thunderstorm, he got to see her eyes widen in shock when she saw what was right behind him. Rick did not need to look over his shoulder, his hand reaching out to grab her collar and yank her along the way.

For a woman that had been able to pin Tomas with just one hand, she was surprisingly light.

"What are you doing?"

The words had, surprisingly, come from both the Elf and the voice in his head.

"Can you beat that thing?" The hesitation in the Elf's face was all the answer he needed. "Then run!"

"She's going to take you to the Hunters!" The voice warned, right as said Elf had found her footing, her steps overtaking Rick's and her hand pulling him along. "Incoming, from above!"

"From above!"

Freya shoved Rick away, his body slammed against the wall as she pressed herself against the other.

That was going to hurt in the morning.

If he was alive by then.

The massive woman had dropped from the nearby house, claws slamming against the ground with such force the stone cracked. The creature was looking at Rick, and her eyes held an anger within them, a frustration of a predator and a particularly elusive prey.

"Jump towards the outside of her right leg, on my mark, ready?"

"No."

"Too bad. Now!"

Several things happened at the same time.

First, Rick jumped towards his left. Second, the monster threw her claws forwards. Third, Freya had ducked from behind the feral and between her legs.

Rick, in all his glorious lack of coordination, jumped towards his left, flopping rather than tucking and rolling. His body hit the floor like a sack of potatoes right as the monster's claws plunged through the reinforced concrete as if it were a meteorite striking Earth.

And just as she was doing this, Freya rose from her crouching position and jumped upwards, her body like a spring. In her hands, two daggers glimmered in the darkness. Their sharp edges sought to dig into the feral's eyes.

But those eyes were not dull or slow; they were sharp, cunning.

Dangerous. Angry.

The bear couldn't move in time to dodge the attack, her arms stuck to the wall, unable to block it. So in response to the threat, she yanked herself forward towards the wall, using her claws to pull.

THUMP

The feral had slammed herself against the wall. And Freya had become the cushion to soften the blow.

"What the fuck," Rick gasped under his breath, eyes widening, watching the feral pull herself free from the wall she'd just embedded herself into like it was nothing. There was a silhouette of her massive frame.

Freya crumpled like a puppet that had had its strings cut, the rain making a puddle around her. She was twitching, trying to get back up, but it was clear it would take her a while. The bear woman did not even pay attention to her, eyes fixed on Rick. The growl was like rumbling thunder.

"I called in a favor." The voice was surprisingly calm, and Rick was fairly sure it had something to do with how the owner of the voice in his head was not face to face with a nine foot monster of muscle and rage. "You're going to get one chance to get out of there."

The sky glowed orange.

The rain stopped.

"Whatever you do, do not touch the feathers."

An acrid smell reached Rick's nose; it reminded him of burnt garlic. The air became bone dry, and his throat tightened. Something in the back of his mind screamed in alarm, and his skin tingled.

Both he and the bear looked upwards, just in time to see a singular flake of orange light slowly descend from the sky and land on a puddle of water right between the human and the feral. A sizzling sound escaped the point of contact, steam rising into the air with increasing force. Then, yellow flames burst up from the puddle, the puddle gone and in its place a roaring fire that shone with brilliant light.

Rick rolled away, covering his eyes as the heat washed against his face. Blinking back teary eyes, he saw more flakes falling down, surrounding the bear. Wherever it touched, yellow fire erupted.

A fleck fell on the monster's right arm. It ignited instantly. The monster's face went from smug to shocked. As if she expected the fire would not harm her. With a roar, she stumbled back. More flakes were slowly drifting downwards, latching onto her body.

And Rick's eyes fixed on the Elf, crumpled on the ground, right next to the fireworks.

"DON'T!"

"Then stop me," he growled, removing his drenched jacket to cover his left hand. His mind whirled, observing the blindingly sizzling light that was

covering the feral as she tried to desperately slap it off of her body.

He only waited for long enough to remove his drenched jacket, rushing around the flames and straight towards the Elf. Her gaze was unfocused, and her body fortunately light. Gripping her uniform with his unprotected hand, he used the other one to protect himself from the fire the feral was covered in.

Stumbling onto the other side, the sound of rain returned to his ears, and an intense warm tingling sensation from his back.

Not waiting for a single instant, he dropped Freya and yanked off his shirt, tossing it away right as the fleck of fire that had fallen onto it burst into its full brilliance, reducing the piece of cloth to ashes in seconds.

"Is this white phosphorous? Yes or no." As he asked, he looked above. There was a red winged angel that floated high in the sky. Her glowing feathers made the rain sizzle and turn to steam. Those same feathers were the source of the glowing flecks of fire. "Yes or no!?"

A heartbeat of hesitation. "No, it's phoenix feather, it's-"

"Fuck it," Rick growled, leaning the Elf against the nearest wall, and keeping an eye on the bear as she kept flailing around, roaring, the fire burning bright. "Freya, can you hear me?" Through the muddy waters of an adrenaline high, he tried to sift through the safety protocol to follow when burnt by white phosphorous. Her hands were burnt- it was raining, that would help. "Don't remove this from your eyes, some of the stuff might have gotten inside. Wash the burns with plenty of water."

He pressed the drenched jacket against her face, shuddering as he stood back up, looking up and down the street.

There were no ferals. They'd likely run away as soon as the bear had shown up.

He did see several uniformed maidens approaching.

"If they reach you-"

"Yeah, yeah."

He growled, turning towards the mansion. The bear's roars echoed behind him- he hoped enough of a distraction to buy him time. The gap in the wall was still there, still open. With a grunt of annoyance, he approached quickly. The closer he got, the more apparent it was that what had made the hole had pummeled their way through.

"Call out that you're a human in need of help. Don't and you're going to get cut down." A slight pause. "From here on out you're alone, I can't pierce the manor's protections."

That froze Rick's steps right at the lip of the entrance. He hesitated, frowning a moment. "Why are you helping me?"

"Not everyone here is a friend of the Baron, even if we have to obey his commands." A pause. "If you don't go inside soon, you'll get caught up in the mess. The first wave is dying down, but there are still stragglers."

Nodding, the human took a deep breath. "I'm a human in need of help!" He called out loudly.

The silence that followed felt like an eternity.

"Show us your hands before stepping in front of the hole and come in slowly with both hands in the air!"

Rick sighed and nodded.

He was met by no less than a dozen gray-uniformed maidens, each looking more battered and bruised than the last. He was fairly sure he'd seen some of them through the window at some point.

They relaxed as he stepped into the light.

"There's a frenzy," he said, keeping both hands above his head.

They didn't even ask him what he was doing there; they practically yanked him inside.

Chapter 089 [Rick]

"Rick?"

The word made him turn his head in slight surprise, finding none other than Kat and Alice looking at him in bewilderment.

He figured it made sense. He was drenched, scraped, and shirtless. Someone had given him a towel, but not provided the time to get himself dry nor the shirt that he would've needed once done.

Instead, he'd been ushered into the building and practically dragged down the stairs into a luxuriously ornate basement that had blood stains on the walls and ceiling, hairline cracks all over, and a corpse at the bottom of the stairs. A three meter tall decapitated corpse with black fur on its back. Its features strikingly similar to the other bear that Rick had encountered. The young teacher figured they were related.

From there he'd been led to a level further below, a room that had ten very dangerous looking maidens standing watch, armed with spears and swords, one of them heavily armored.

And inside the room were all the human women that had survived the trip thus far and had not been present during the Major's little presentation.

"So you're saying you got to fucking see the battle just because you got a dick in your pants!?"

Rick looked at Kat and former student with wide eyes, feeling slightly startled this was her reaction after he'd explained what happened outside. "I almost died."

The blond woman didn't falter. "I mean, sure, that sucks. Good thing you didn't by the way." She patted his shoulder. "But you do see my point, right? We're being coddled in here like we're somehow more fragile against fire

breathing maidens than the guys. We'd both roast just about the same way I figure, so what's with the sexism?"

"I think... I need to sit down a minute," Rick muttered, blinking slowly and finding himself almost shoved into a wooden chair by Alice. The psychology teacher looked like had several things she wanted to say, but was holding back from commenting just yet.

His eyes moved around the room. There were a dozen women present, all familiar faces. All of them looked his way with various degrees of apprehension, some with hints of horror. Amongst those present, there was only one face scowling at him, wrinkled and angry, and Rick felt a sense of dread hanging over his head at the sight of a woman he'd secretly hoped had been eaten by the ferals.

"What are you doing here?" Ms. Dodson's voice was like needles against his temple.

And he definitely was not in the mood to play friendly. "I'm here because I had to run for my life from a monster that could punch through walls." He shot her an equally intense glare. Her lips pursed, but she didn't press further.

"How bad are things out there?" May spoke up, with some apprehension.

"Hundreds of ferals, probably more." He rubbed his eyes. "But the worst of it passed, or so I was told." Pausing, he turned his focus to Alice. Quietly, without a sound, he mouthed a single word.

'Monica?'

The psychology teacher shook her head, keeping her voice low. "We don't know."

"Baron Von banana-face hasn't shown his creepy mug around," Kat commented, pointing with her thumb over her shoulder at the only door in the room. "We only saw the man-girl Baroness pop in a couple times, looked more like she was counting heads than anything else."

Rick nodded solemnly, pulling up the piece of cloth he'd been given and using it to ruffle his hair. He needed to get his thoughts straight- he was in the manor, safe, but now what? Monica should be in here, somewhere.

Two problems to solve, then. Where was the cat, and how to get to her?

The problem of how to get out would need its own consideration once the status of Monica's situation was confirmed. A part of him hoped it could be resolved peacefully, proof of bonding, that was it, the law was on his side. The law should be on his side. Would that shove the Baron out of the way? Would it be possible to use it to at least get his guards to stand aside?

He only needed to get the proof out, soon.

"The Baron is likely with Monica." Alice's words startled him, he turned to look at the thoughtful expression on her face. "He's... obsessed, if he hasn't shown up it's because he must be occupied with something, and you said he wasn't participating in the protection of the village. I can't think of anything else he'd be doing if he's pressed for time."

"Oh! I've got an idea." Kat's whisper jolted Rick, and he raised his head to look at her smug smirk.

"I don't like that look." His eyes moved towards the rest of the people gathered. The way Ms. Dodson was glaring their way was something that did not bode too well with him. Based on Alice's recount of what happened back at the bus after he left, he was of a mind of throwing her out so she got a chance to talk with the ferals.

"You just have to play along." She replied. "I'm sure this should get you to at least meet one of the two snob-assed pricks in the house."

"Play along to what?"

The sound of a slap just about made him jump, and it took him a moment to realize Kat had faked it by making it an awkward clap. Immediately following this, the young woman shrieked and jumped back, pointing an accusing finger at him.

Already he wasn't liking where this was going.

The door had burst open before anyone could so much as speak, a tall woman wielding a spear had entered and halted instantly. Her eyes darted from one side of the room to the next. Rick could feel how she paused on each woman there, locking onto their throats for a fraction of a second before she finally stopped at Kat.

"Take him away!" Kat spoke with a shrill nasal voice that sounded an awful lot like a bad Ms. Dodson impersonation.

A heartbeat of silence, and the armed maiden looked at Rick, meeting his gaze, and then turned back to Kat.

Not that Kat faltered. "He... he touched me!" She said, now pointing more insistently, covering her mouth. Rick was mostly certain there was a hint at a smirk hidden behind those fingers.

The lance wielding woman turned from shocked to angry so fast Rick almost saw sparks flying out of her eyes. A sense of dread spread through him as the maiden approached. "Sir." Her voice was a growl, a hand reached down to grasp at his arm. "You will have to come with me."

The urge to speak out and call Kat a liar was strong; his jaw clenched and his gaze burned holes through the young student that was hiding a smile behind that hand of hers. No doubt she was proud of herself for the stunt she'd just pulled, smug even as Alice shot venom her way just as intensely as Rick was.

He would remember this.

"Ok," he declared without a struggle, not properly able to stand up before the armed maiden with a blue collar yanked him from his seat. Her grip on his arm was painfully tight.

"Going to take this one to the Lord," his captor stated to the other guards, specifically addressing the armored maiden, only sharing a nod before Rick was dragged further down the carpeted and well-lit corridor and away from

the stairs they'd used to descend to this floor. It didn't feel like a dungeon, it was too lavishly furnished. The subterranean area was more like a luxury hotel, with red carpets, bright glowing lights, portraits at either side of the corridor... definitely not a place that gave the impression it would hold prisoners.

He had to think fast- wherever he was being taken would not be a good place, maybe a cell? How close would he be to where they were keeping Monica trapped? How could he even confirm without being able to see her?

Through his mind flashed a singular response, the river, drowning. And hearing her voice call his name despite being submerged.

Just one way to find out.

With a sharp intake breath, Rick let out a scream. "MONICA!"

His voice echoed through the walls, the woman dragging him halted, flinching and looking at him with a glare. "What are you doing?"

THUMP

There was the sound of something hitting something else, something solid. There was a sound of alarm further ahead. The young man could almost make out the source, somewhere further ahead?

After a split second, a singular muffled cry called out, barely audible as it came from the corridor to his right. "RICK!" The voice came not just through his ears but his mind, and with it he became instantly certain Monica wasn't just there but nearby. Less than a dozen meters below.

His guard yanked him closer, snarling as she squeezed his arm hard enough he felt his bones groan in complaint. "What. Did. You. Do?"

"I came for my cat," he replied, wincing but not backing down.

No sooner had he spoken the words than a large figure came rushing from the corridor. "The Lord has been wounded! Get a healer!"

The cry snapped the brunette's attention away from Rick and towards the approaching armored woman. "What?"

The new arrival wore a copper collar and a dead-serious expression. "Go get a healer, NOW!"

"Ma'am, I-"

"Your Lord is wounded, go get the healer. GO!" Her eyes flicked towards Rick.

"Yes ma'am!"

With the brunette rushing off, Rick had an opportunity to look at the new arrival. The most striking feature was her green skin- a deep emerald, like algae. The second most striking feature was her size, two meters and change, her body muscular enough it barely fit in the gray uniform, with barely a touch of femininity in her curves but the whole of her held a fearsome edge under the metallic breastplate she wore.

She glared at him. With one large green hand, she gripped his arm. Her fingers wrapped around his bicep and kept him unable to bend his elbow.

"You Rick?"

What else was he supposed to do? "Yes."

She didn't comment, only nod, turning around and dragging him along the path she came from with little regard for Rick's inability to keep up. His steps dragged some of the time while he fumbled with his feet, urgently trying to keep up with the hulking woman.

She moved with intent and purpose.

"Always wondered who the human that bonded that feral was," she growled under her voice, tightening her grip on his arm and making him wince. "The greenies won't shut up about you either."

He opened his mouth, silenced instantly when she let out a snarl.

The steps led down stairs, made out of stone. The electric white lighting of the furnished areas did not follow down the dark corridor, replaced by a flickering orange, casting the stairs in shadow, but it seemed this behemoth of a woman knew exactly what she was doing.

"This is going to be fun."

A chill ran down his spine.

The stairs led to a singular corridor, dimly lit; the doors were heavy dark metal.

There was only one open, the only one with light pouring from inside.

"What's this?" Rick frowned.

"You wanted to meet your cat so much? Now's your chance."

She stepped inside.

Chapter 090 [Rick]

Rick was dragged into what must have been the largest cell room in existence. No less than ten meters across and just as much wide, it was carved out of rock and bare of much anything else, like a hole in the ground they'd opted to put a door onto. There were only two sources of light in the room, one next to the open door, the other in the opposite side of the open area.

The cell had exactly three occupants beside himself and the Orc woman that had dragged him there.

At the side near the door, seated on a chair, was the only other male in the room. A man that would've been taller than Rick had he been standing. Currently his face was twisted into a wicked snarl and a hateful glare. A trickle of blood was running down the corner of his lip, and if Rick strained his ear, he was sure he'd hear him wheeze with every painful gasp of air.

Next to him was a woman; the lack of a collar told Rick she was human. Black hair was tied neatly into a bun, and she wore a set of leather pants and what looked like a piece of leather armor atop her chest. Her eyes were lingering on the man, a hint of pain lingered on her features.

But Rick stopped paying attention the instant he'd seen the third occupant.

Kneeling at the center of the prison, the white-haired woman with cat ears was looking at him through blue-green eyes. "Rick," she spoke with a raspy cough and a half-lopped smile.

The joy of seeing her was dwarfed by everything else. She was kneeling, her legs bound by iron shackles to the floor so tightly it would be impossible for her to stand up. Her left arm was chained and held from the ceiling, making it impossible for her to sit or rest. Her right hand was free, hanging limply at her side. The shackle that had clearly once held her arm dangled from the ceiling, the chain broken.

"Monica." He gulped, seeing her half-swollen face and purple eye, the hairline cuts that littered her body, blood painting the snowy fur of her legs and arms, dark stains and dried sweat staining her skin. She was covered in bruises, black and blue, and the way she winced when tugging on the chains told Rick a story that no amount of words could have.

He tried to move closer. The meaty green arm holding him tightened. "I brought him."

"We finally... meet." The man in the chair coughed, groaning. Despite the obvious pain, he held a glare towards the young teacher that would not waver. There was fire inside those dark eyes.

"You shouldn't talk," the woman next to him shushed, hand carefully resting on his leg.

He slapped her hand away. "You've no idea how much I've wanted to..." A deep wheezing breath. "... see you."

"Looked a lot more like you were hiding," Rick growled, anger boiling inside, and he returned the glare just as intensely. The hand gripping him tightened, and he winced as he was yanked down to the floor, forced down to his knees.

"Rick!" Monica's cry came with her struggling against the rattling chains.

"I've been... busy," the Baron sneered.

"Beating up captive women? Very brave of you." Rick's words were rewarded by the one holding him down shoving him face first into the floor with her free hand.

"Watch your tongue," the green woman growled. "Or the next words you speak will be your last. You don't need your tongue to stay alive."

A growl pierced the air, and the room felt a whole degree colder. Monica's fangs were bared, eyes glowing as she leveled her fury at the Orc. The metal holding her groaned in complaint.

For a split second, no one moved.

The Baroness was the one who took the initiative. "As you can see, she's a feralborn maiden, a monster." Behind her, the Baron was pale and wheezing, trying to catch his breath.

"Only monsters I see here are the ones without chains."

The woman laughed. "Does that include you?" She waved the words away. "No, doesn't matter. The only one in this room with a human body count in the dozens is White Claw." She glanced at Monica. "For that crime alone she'd deserve immediate execution."

"HA!" Rick let out a bark of laughter against the floor, the taste in his lips was bitter, but he couldn't help himself. "According to your own laws, whoever catches a feral that has murdered humans is owed recompense. The feral's crimes are absolved upon becoming property." His words gave the Baroness pause, the barest hint of surprise on her features, and he snorted. "You think I dragged myself through a feral frenzy because it was fun? I would've done this the 'proper' way if I had a chance. I fucking did your stupid paperwork, passed your trumped up psychic evaluation. And I have two eyewitnesses ready to testify to confirm Monica is bonded to me." His arms shook, becoming tense. "I wanted to do this shit the nice, peaceful, legal way. Now?" The man spat, growling. "Now maybe I'll add assault charges. I'm sure the Earl will love to hear about it from the lips of a pure-blooded human."

He looked over his shoulder at the Orc.

And for a second, she hesitated, grip loosening ever so slightly as her jaw slackened.

The Baroness regarded him coldly, for a moment she paused, then nodded. "Let him go."

The grip loosened instantly, and Rick did not waste a single second to stand up and rush to Monica. No one stopped him either. "Monica." His arms wrapped around her head, pulling her close against his chest. The woman

reacted instantly, her free arm moving to pull him closer, hugging him back tightly.

A withering sigh escaped Monica's lips, and he felt his chest tighten in pain at the sight of her being left in this state.

"Rick," she sighed. The single word came with something loosening within her, like a house of cards that was collapsing. "Rick." The word came out with the slightest shudder, and she rubbed her cheek against his gut, her whole body trembling. "Rick."

His hand gently stroked her hair. "It's alright."

"Astounding." The sound of claps followed, drawing Rick's attention back to the Baroness, the woman ignoring the man behind her as he wheezed and struggled for air, glaring and desperately trying to speak. "You really are bonded. Even without the collar."

"I'm leaving, with Monica," he said without missing a second.

The woman crossed her arms, quirking a brow. "And are you sure that's the best idea?" The question was rhetorical, and Rick was not about to attempt answering. The Baroness continued. "Let us assume we consider she was yours since before you were rescued from the forest. Which, by the way, would be dependent on your status as a citizen." She waved her hand dismissively. "Your property just attacked my husband, the punishment for hurting nobility in such a way is execution."

Rick's brows narrowed. "She was defending herself."

The woman shrugged her shoulders. "From a human? Who would believe that? Especially when the human is an upstanding noble."

His jaw tightened. "What do you want?"

"White Claw."

His arms tightened around her. "I'm not giving her to anyone."

"Nor should you, she's quite the catch." The woman smirked. "But if we can't keep her directly, then we can have the next best thing: the pure-blooded human that subjugated White Claw with nothing but his wits." Her lips parted in a smile that almost looked genuine. Almost. "You keep the Tigress, we don't press charges, you work for us, and we get to parade you around as the local hero that saved us from the menace. We let you go after a year or two."

"NO!"

The Baron had been listening, wheezing for air and coughing blood, his pale complexion had become increasingly red, his glare ever hotter. The man shook with rage as he sputtered and stumbled to his feet, hand grasping at the Baroness' shoulder and shoving her aside.

She fell over, caught off balance, and the Baron himself groaned and collapsed, vomiting blood. "No," he wheezed. "No." He raised his face, wiping the blood from his lip and slowly fighting to stand back up, eyes fixated on Rick.

The Orc rushed to his side, lending him an arm for him to support himself on. Concern and anger flashed through the green maiden's face but she did not move from her spot.

"No," the Baron said more firmly now, ignoring the bewildered look of his wife. "She's mine." A shaky finger pointed at Rick. "White Claw is... mine."

There were a string of words Rick would've wanted to speak out loud, but he held his tongue. His arms wrapped more tightly around Monica's face as he kept her leaned against his stomach. His eyes quietly moved towards the Baroness, watching her stand up and level a complicated look at the man that had just knocked her over. He knew that look, of someone who also had many things to say but that intended to save them for when there were no others to hear them. The look of hidden scorn and disappointment.

Slowly, carefully, Rick reigned his feelings in and made a show of sighing. What a grand mess this was. He was with Monica, but how to get out? He couldn't rush out, there were too many things between here and the exit. And

what would he do then? No, he'd rushed here, but he couldn't go at this brashly.

"Did you not..." the Baron wheezed for breath, stepping closer. "... hear me?"

"I heard you just fine." The chemistry teacher replied, never stopping the slow petting of Monica's head, paying close attention to her slowed breathing, her gentle purr, the sigh of relief. "I just don't care."

Whatever the Baron was about to say next, it devolved into another coughing fit. Blood splattered the floor, and even with the Orc assisting him, he fell to his knees. The wheezing was getting worse, each breath had a gurgle to it. If Rick were a betting man, he'd put his money on a punctured lung from getting slapped around by Monica.

Rick's gaze turned from the Baron to his wife. She didn't speak, turning from his gaze and focusing on the Baron. There was something in her eyes that felt sharp and cold. It was a look he could recognize anywhere.

Could he further shove a wedge?

"He's holding you back, and you know it."

The woman's head snapped to look at him, wide eyed, mouth opening in surprise, her hand reached out to touch the bracelet on her left wrist.

Still coughing, the Baron reached into his pocket and pulled out something Rick only dimly recognized, it took his mind a second to connect the dots. A sphere half white and half red, a device that almost looked like a toy. The man aimed it towards Monica. A flash of red burst out in her direction, and her body began to glow.

"NO!"

Monica tensed abruptly. "RICK!"

The feline's arm gripped his hip, and he tried to obstruct the light. But it was so fast he'd barely had the chance to think it through. By the time he'd moved,

Monica's body was gone, and he stumbled forward, through the spot she'd occupied a second ago. The red mist she'd turned into sucked into the spherical device and gone entirely.

The chains that had been holding her left arm rattled, swinging from the ceiling now that they were free. With a bloodied smirk, and wiping the blood from his lips, the Baron held the sphere with a white knuckled grip, using his free arm to hold himself against the Orc's larger frame.

Rick felt his hackles rise, anger boiled inside of him.

He didn't think, he lunged, arms reaching out towards the accursed device.

The Orc struck with her free arm, a backhand that caught Rick squarely in the shoulder. It wasn't even a serious attempt from her, more like an offhanded tap, and it had been enough to send him tumbling as his whole body had been shoved sideways. Something felt painfully hurt in the process.

"SIR!"

Rick grunted, moving to stand up, stopping as his eyes focused on the pair of small leather shoes in front of him.

Slowly raising his gaze, he blinked, looking upon the owner.

"Dia?"

Chapter 091 [Alice]

Alice could not stop glaring at Kat.

"Hey, it worked and you know it," the young student spoke, discreetly keeping the door partially open and peeking through into the corridor.

Alice's fiery gaze would not relent, glancing over her shoulder at the other women that had been brought over. The tension had kept them mostly to themselves, with Ms. Dodson not missing the chance to discreetly making sure there were several of them between herself and Alice. Not that the teacher cared much currently; each time she looked at them she could not help but remember the events in the bus and it gnawed at her nervousness.

"Oh shit, they brought Dia."

"What?"

"Dia, cute nurse, pink uniform? She's been stuck to Rick like glue whenever she wasn't working. Or so Tomas won't shut up about." Kat rolled her eyes, pointing at the door. "She just went through in a hurry. Someone's hurt down there for sure."

Alice's stomach felt as if it'd been plunged into a bucket of ice.

"We need to help Rick."

"I don't think they're going to carry you away if I slap you," Kat muttered, rubbing her chin in thought.

"What you did was a stupid idea," Alice snapped, turning towards the others as she felt her determination swell. Her lips pursed as she grimaced. Clenching her fists, she grabbed Kat's wrist and yanked, pulling her towards the other women.

This had not gone unnoticed. Heads swiveled to focus on the duo, the fastest of which being Ms. Dodson's. The older woman stood up, smoothing out her clothes, eyes fierce even if her expression was calm. "Yes?"

"I faced off against a spider the size of a bear. You do not scare me." The words were harsh and direct, Alice didn't care to register her reaction, turning to the others. "I cannot, in good faith, forget what happened in the forest." Her hand moved to point at the door. "But-"

"The forest!?" Ms. Dodson growled, stepping up. "You put our lives at risk. What 'happened' was that you took the minimal amount of responsibility for your actions." Her hands smoothed her white shirt. "And comparing me to some monster, as if I were a thug. The gall of it."

"Fuck it." Letting go of Kat, Alice turned and fully faced Ms. Dodson, stepping closer. The gesture alone knocked a peg out of the older woman's bravado. "You take advantage of people's kindness, you push to have your way and pretend you're some sort of saint. You bully others just so you can feel in control. You know what we called you back at the university? The Dementor."

"Oh shit," Kat whispered under her breath.

Alice's jaw tightened, stepping forward. "You were never satisfied with butting into the life of your legally adult nephew, no, you actively sought for an excuse to take control over everyone else's lives and make them miserable." She took another step forward, a finger lingering a breath away from pushing against the woman's chest. Alice's face was turning grim. "You're so pathetically petty you made a campaign to fire the coffee providers. I fucking loved that coffee."

"Wait, that was her?" Someone whispered.

Alice pressed on. "So I will not give you kindness, I will not let you step over me just because you're a miserable old hag."

Ms. Dodson blinked, stunned silence lingered on her features as she opened her mouth to speak, but no sounds came out.

Huffing, Alice took the chance, turning towards the other people gathered there. "Rick risked his life to save ours. Without him, most if not all of us would be dead." Her scowl pierced into each of them. "He needs our help, and I will not stay still with my arms crossed."

"Ma'am?" The one to raise her hand was May. "Can we even help? We aren't exactly fighters."

"Since when should that stop someone from trying?"

Not waiting for a reaction or a response, she turned around and headed straight towards the door. The woman opened it with a swing, only stopping because there was a tall armored woman with blue hair and a sword blocking it. "Ma'am?"

"Out of my way."

Alice's bark was authoritative, a harsh retort that bounced off the walls. The blue-haired maiden leapt backwards as if burned, shoulders tense. The teacher did not wait a single second to step forward and out of the room. "Ma'am, it's dangerous."

The psychology teacher took only a heartbeat to slow down, finger pointing in the direction they'd taken Rick earlier. "Are there ferals in that direction?"

"No, but-"

"Then do your job and worry about the ferals." She looked over her shoulder, seeing Kat and May had followed. The others were moving closer, but most of the ones who'd stuck behind were the older women of the group. "We are going to talk to the Baron. If you don't like that, then stop us."

The chill in Alice's voice had a cutting edge to it, and her brows flattened into a single line. They made the maiden flinch and look towards the others present. The psychology teacher and those following her did not care to wait for them to come to a conclusion. Alice could only stomp her way down the corridor and towards the fork at the end.

"To the right," Kat informed them with a whisper, and there was a giddiness to her voice as she spoke, closely following the teacher.

A uniformed maiden that had been keeping watch over the corridor quickly rushed past them and down the stairs. The woman had moved far faster than Alice and her entourage could stomp their way down the darkened stone stairs, so by the time they'd reached the bottom, they could see her moving into the only cell that was currently laying open.

"Say what you will, Baron Von banana-face knows his prison decor." Kat whistled appreciatively, following close behind Alice.

"... what do you mean they're coming!?" A familiar voice called out from inside the cell.

Alice moved further into the cell and froze at the scene currently unfolding.

Rick was pinned against the wall, a massive green woman holding him by the throat with a hand that was wide enough it could have covered most of his chest.

The Baron was on a chair, blood oozing from his lips. Kneeling at his side was Dia, the nurse's hands glowed as she pressed them against the Baron's shoulders. Her eyes tried to focus on her patient, but they kept drifting to Rick. On the other side of the Baron was the Baroness, arms crossed, her gaze hardened, hiding a glare she was aiming at the wheezing man.

There were two other maidens, standing at either side of the entrance. One wielded a long glaive, the other a short sword and shield.

"What is going on here!?" Alice spoke with a shrill edge to her voice, her whole body had frozen for a split second before she regained her composure. Her glare focused on the green skinned woman. "What are you doing to Rick!?" She summoned every ounce of anger she could into those words.

The green woman blinked, turning to look at the Baron with hesitation.

"Do not let him go," the man spoke with a glower, the order clear, the hatred all too thick. The glare was gone the instant he'd turned towards Alice, a plastic smile spreading on his features. "I'm sure things can be talked over in more calm circumstances. Please go back to your room while this is being resolved."

"Get out of here!" Rick cried out, grunting as the green hand on his throat tightened. The man was fighting to pry the meaty fingers loose, to no effect.

The two guards at the door had moved to block their path, putting themselves in the way. Alice had moved forward to get a better look around; she was sure Rick had come here for Monica, but where was the feline? The confusion welled within her, but it did not have the time to coalesce as Kat had very quickly used the guard's focus on Alice and the other women to push herself between them and into the cell.

Both guards hesitated.

The Baron made a dismissive gesture with his head, focusing on the young woman with that fake smile. "Miss Garcia, if I remember correctly?" His expression flattened, losing the anger and faux smile.

"I prefer Kat, personally." She was slowly approaching the man, eyes mirthful. Alice noticed the young woman was paying very close attention to the Baron and Baroness, as if looking for something.

"Catherine, then." He allowed only the slightest frown to appear. "We are currently busy, as you should be able to tell."

Kat took a step closer, eyes glancing at Rick and then at the chains at the center of the room. "Just to play a game of... tag!"

She jumped forward, hands reaching out towards the man, the move catching even Alice by surprise. At the Baron's side, Dia had reacted, turning to face the young woman. With a frown, she moved one of her hands began to rise from his chest and towards Kat. The glow had moved from white to a dull grey, something about it felt unnerving, almost dangerous.

"Dia, don't!"

Rick's voice called out, and the nurse hesitated, the glow vanishing. The split second was enough for Kat's inertia to carry over and knock the man from the chair. A shriek of pain followed, his hands flailing and throwing Kat off of him as she jumped off almost immediately after.

"ENOUGH!" He roared, coughing and rolling to stand up. "Nurse, pin her down."

"Yes, Lord."

Dia moved, grimacing as she jumped Kat before she could stand back up. The pink-haired maiden moved with practiced ease, her hands grasping Kat's right wrist and pulling it behind her back. The nurse's expression was pained as she kept the young woman firmly against the floor.

"Kinky," Kat spoke with a smirk.

Alice noticed how the young woman kept her left hand under her gut rather than struggle.

"I'm sorry," the nurse muttered under her breath.

"Shut up," the Baron's voice proclaimed, glaring at Dia before glancing at the others. "I will not stand for this. I tried playing nice, no more." Dusting himself off, only coughing lightly, he growled. "Kill the two traitors."

The proclamation made Alice and the women behind her gasped.

"DON'T!" The Baroness barked the order fast enough that no one had had the chance to move. "They're pure-blooded, do not kill them, if the court finds out..."

The Baron grunted. "They won't, I have witnesses, I was attacked." He gestured towards Alice and the others. "It's within my right as Lord of this land."

"Please." The woman leaned forward, reaching out to grasp the man's hand between her own, her expression grim. "Let us talk... privately."

Yanking his hand from her grasp, the man shot her a glare. "Very well." His focus turned away. "Leave these two here, lock the door."

Alice did not hesitate, turning to May and the others. "Run, warn the others!" Following this proclamation, she pushed towards the two guards that had been blocking her path.

"Do not harm them." The Baroness barked the order.

The one with the sword had merely pulled Alice into the cell and pinned her against the wall while the other pursued the ones that'd left running. Shrieks quickly filled the air, and Alice winced. She could only watch as the green woman tossed Rick into the far end of the cell and turned to leave.

Meanwhile, Dia caressed the back of Kat's head with a hand that glowed white, and the young woman slumped, unconscious. A complicated look crossed Dia's face as she looked at Rick, biting her lower lip in hesitation. The young teacher was still recovering from being launched like a rag doll, coughing as he sat up against the wall.

"Move it, girl," the Baroness commanded the nurse with a harsh retort.

"Yes, Lady," Dia sighed, turning to follow.

The Baron paused as he looked at Alice. "On second thought." He glanced over his shoulder at Dia and the green-skinned woman. "Bring this one to my private quarters." He did not see the wide-eyed expression of the Baroness, nor did he seem to care. No, he looked at Alice and grinned.

"I think our last conversation was cut too short," he proclaimed. "Take this one to my study. I'll... have a talk with her tomorrow."

Cold dread ran down Alice's spine.

Chapter 092 [Alice]

Alice fumed as she paced back and forth. The room was finely decorated, silk and gold at every corner, a show of extreme opulence in a village that was barely scratching its way out of a full-blown 'medieval' status. As far as she was concerned, it was a clear sign of a bloated ego, very likely narcissism.

"Ma'am. Please calm down."

Dia's voice was meek, low, almost a whisper. The nurse stood next to the door, the only exit to the room. The windows were barred, a storm raged outside, and the feral threat had been dealt with... for now, supposedly until the next wave at least.

But Alice couldn't focus on that. Her thoughts kept wandering back to Rick and the Baron. It had kept her pacing back and forth since the moment she'd been put into the room. "I am not going to calm down." She hissed through gritted teeth, throwing a glare at the pink-haired nurse, the maiden squirming and shrinking slightly. "You're aiding a monster."

Dia lowered her head further. "I... don't have a choice, ma'am."

"Everyone has a choice, always." Came the sharp retort. "You know what the Baron is doing is wrong. To lock someone up and just straight up torture them like that..."

"That... is how things are, ma'am." Dia's fingers gripped the skirt of her uniform, lips curling. "Ferals need to be bonded, and sometimes the method can be..."

"It's torture!"

"That is only for the extreme cases!" The nurse answered in return. "If a feral does not bond, she needs to be killed! Powerful ferals like White Claw are extremely hard to capture alive in the first place!" Her voice strained

slightly. "Such a maiden could help save the life of hundreds of people during a feral rush, and-."

"Monica was already bonded. She was calling out to Rick!"

That made Dia flinch, her gaze firmly on the ground. "I know." Silence followed, no further retort, only a hesitant trembling lower lip. Her head nodded slowly in agreement, even if not able to speak the words out.

Alice's eyes glimmered with an accusatory edge. "Did you heal her? While she was being tortured?" She practically hissed the words.

Dia shook her head almost violently. "I only came to the Lord's manor when I'd been called to heal the Baron after White-... Monica, after Monica injured him." Her hands clenched her skirt tightly. "I didn't know."

"And now you do." The words came like a hammer-blow, causing Dia to flinch. "Are you going to keep helping that evil man?"

"I... can't... I can't!" The nurse shook her head, pink hair whipping back and forth. "The Lord owns this land, he provides for it, without our Lord, this place would go back to being a forgotten spot at the edge of the map!" Her voice came agitated, shrill, almost gasping for breath. "I've been to those forgotten villages, devoid of the resources they need to survive any serious feral threat!"

There was a long pause, Alice's eyes narrowed slightly. "Are you bonded to the Baron?"

Dia hesitated, her hand reaching up to touch the green collar, barely caressing it before giving a slight nod, her expression pained. "Almost everyone with a green collar is. Either to the Baron or the Baroness. Unowned maidens are to swear fealty and bond with the Lords. It's the law, ever since Mao's rebellion."

Alice took a moment, pausing, thinking. Her conversation with Irene made her scowl ever so slightly. "And what does the bond do to you? What... does it mean to you?"

Closing her eyes, Dia's voice was reduced to a whisper. "My oath is to protect human life above all else, and as a maiden, I... have to serve the Lords to the best of my ability." The words felt empty, almost a burden on her soul.

The psychology teacher frowned. "But you let Kat tackle him."

The words caused Dia to startle, looking upwards to meet Alice's gaze with wide eyes. Her lips parted with a soft gasp. "I-."

"Is the bond really as powerful as you say it is?" Alice's question lingered in the air, the nurse's expression unreadable, fingers lingering on the green collar, a troubled gaze.

There was a knock, and Dia reacted, instantly moving to stand next to the door frozen like a statue, her eyes peering straight ahead as if she were no more than decoration. "Miss Smith?"

The voice made Alice shudder. Her hand sought anything to grab hold on to but discovered not much of use within reach. The Baron entered the room, accompanied by the muscular green-skinned maiden wearing the gray uniform and a worn dull gray breastplate.

The man moved to sit down on the only couch in the room, smiling with a fake plastic smirk as the maiden took position next to Dia. "I know it is sooner than I had promised, but I do hope you've had a chance to calm down." There was a slight nod to his head. "Just wanting to have a quick chat before we retreat for the night to rest properly."

"Is Rick even alive?" Alice growled, finding a chair and standing next to it, her mind whirling over the potential ways she could use it to defend herself.

"I can assure you no one's done anything to your companion." His smile took a cruel edge. "Whether it stays that way, however, will depend entirely on you."

She didn't speak, eyes narrowed as she gripped the chair tighter.

"I've had a chance to think things through." The man crossed his arms. The smile on his face was almost close to being a real one. "I underestimated the circumstances, and it became clear to me I trusted the wrong people. Thus, I come to you with a very simple proposition I believe can work for both of us."

Alice's jaw tightened.

"Give me an heir."

Her eyes widened, mouth almost going slack.

The Baron continued. "The Baroness and I have been attempting such a feat for quite some time, with little success. Whether it is due to her heritage or something else, I care no longer. Fact of the matter is, I am without an heir." His lips thinned ever so slightly as his eyes coursed over Alice like she was a slab of meat.

It made her skin crawl.

"No."

The Baron didn't even twitch. "You've yet to hear the rest of the proposal, miss Smith."

She growled. "No."

The man shrugged. "Then I can just kill you all and be done with it."

He did not move, remaining seated with that saccharine smirk plastered across his face, waiting, keeping his eyes on the woman as she hesitated.

"No."

"It would be all too easy to pretend it was due to the ferals." He didn't miss a beat.

"The Baroness-."

"THE BARONESS KNOWS NOTHING!" The man rose to his feet, the smile gone, face reddening as it twisted into a snarl. "If the events of the past hours have made anything clear, it was that she does not understand what honor means. She'd rather bow and grovel to the demands of a piece of filth who thinks himself above everyone else because his blood is pure." Fists clenched, he took a single step forward. "The only reason that man is still alive is because of my charity, a grace I do not plan to keep if you refuse me."

Alice had moved faster, gripping the ornate looking wooden chair and raising it. "Stay the fuck away from me." She growled, her arms tensed, ready to swing if he took another step closer.

That appeared to break the anger in the Baron. His eyes glanced at the chair she wielded and then at her. There was a pause as the anger receded, a slight chuckle as he took a step back, returning to the couch. "I am a man of my word, miss Smith. There's no reason for me to harm a woman."

"You tortured Monica." She snarled, not lowering the chair.

"White Claw is a feral, an animal, not a person. Do not let the appearance fool you." There was a slight chiding tone in his voice. "The Tigress is not even a domestic. Creatures such as IT need to learn to submit. You've seen how dangerous they are. They kill humans with barely a thought. They are beasts, monsters, their very existence an existential threat."

"The only monster in this house is you." Alice answered in turn.

The Baron's eyes cooled down, upper lip twitching ever so slightly. Turning his nose upward, the man shook his head slowly. "No matter, I believe we can reach a civilized agreement soon enough." His gaze turned sideways towards the green-skinned maiden, then back to Alice. "White Claw belongs to me." Crossing his arms, he smirked further. "So the question, miss Smith, is only whether you and your two companions will be alive by the end of tomorrow or not. Agree to my terms, and you all live. Rick and the bratty woman will have their memories of the past two days erased, and they'd be allowed to leave."

"And if I don't, you kill us all."

"If you don't, I merely have my guards drop your unconscious bodies outside when the next wave hits. The ferals will make quick work of you three, and I will have lost absolutely nothing." A smirk followed. "If you agree, I can guarantee comfort and an easy life. Once I have an heir, I'll even allow you to leave as well. There are only advantages to agreeing, for yourself and your companions."

Alice glared, tightening her grip on the chair.

"I will give you until the next wave to consider the proposition." The Baron stood, turning towards the door. "If you refuse, then your friends will have to face them on their own."

The door closed behind him with a soft click, leaving Alice alone with Dia. The teacher lowered the chair, keeping her eyes glued on the couch where the Baron had occupied. The desire to light the piece of furniture on fire was a strong one. A part of her regretted not having anything to do it with. Slowly, her gaze turned towards the nurse. The pink-haired maiden's face was pale, her hands gripped her skirt and shook with barely contained emotion.

"Do you want to see Rick die?"

Very slowly, the nurse shook her head, her lips tight.

"Then you better help me, because I am not going to let that monster have his way."

Dia swallowed, nodding. "H-how?"

Alice considered the word carefully, her eyes turning down to the chair she'd nearly used as a weapon. She doubted she'd be allowed to leave. The Baron no doubt had guards keeping an eye on everyone.

"I just need you to send a message."

"I... I can't leave the manor." Dia replied. "I was ordered to-."

"You don't need to." The teacher shook her head, dismissing the idea. "I just need you to meet with the Baroness."

The nurse tensed, nodding slowly. "And... what do I need to say?"

"The truth."

Chapter 093 [Monica]

Monica hated being in the not-sleep. A blackness that was like being asleep, void where she could not feel her paws, her fur, her body, or anything at all. It was a fake sleep that left her anxious and tense. Every time she was in the not-sleep, she would come out and be attacked. No matter how much she prepared to pounce, the hurters would be a step ahead.

And this time it was especially bad. Rick had been there, Rick was in danger, and they had put her into the not-sleep before she could save him. Anger boiled inside her. She tried to move, to fight, to tear at the not-sleep. But she did not have arms or claws or paws or tail.

She would wait until she was out of it to fight.

So she waited.

And waited.

And waited.

There was light, and she did not wait any more. Her feet had not come back to her completely, but she was already jumping backwards. The hurt-man had always been behind her when she'd appeared. This time she would hurt him back, she-

"MONICA!"

Her name rattled inside her head. Monica froze. The voice was familiar. Her eyes looked around as her ears rotated in every direction. Two soft ones nearby, no tough ones? No hurt-man? Confusion, one of them-. "Rick!"

She'd been just about ready to jump at him when she stopped. The not-sleep! She whirled around, meeting the familiar face with pretty yellow hair, Kat. Monica's eyes locked onto the red and white not-sleep, her claws yanked it

out of the soft-ones' grip and crushed it without missing a single second. Never again.

"Wow, careful there, didn't plan to use it." Kat made noises, raising her arms.

"As harebrained as the plan was, I have to congratulate you on it." Rick let out a dry cough that raised alarms in Monica's mind.

"No one expects getting pick-pocketed in a torture dungeon. Doubt it'll take him long to notice she's missing."

Monica snorted, dropping the pieces of the not-sleep stone and crushing it under her paw. Her focus quickly turned to Rick in full. He was hurt, his body smelt hurt, and it smelt of green hurter too, and Monica was hurt too. Her body ached, but that didn't matter right now.

She closed the distance, carefully kneeling in front of him, pulling him into her arms and pressing her face against his chest. "Rick." She spoke his name, breathing in his nice not-smoke and broken-tree scent, her whole body warming to his presence. Monica would not lose him ever again. She tightened her hold further, feeling him gasp and groan, his hand caressing her head and ears in all the right ways that made her want to purr and sleep.

"We need to get out."

Rick spoke sounds Monica did not care about. She could smell his fear and apprehension, she could smell his hurt. Her nose sought out the spots that had blood or that had dark-hurt-skin. Her soft-one complained, but Monica would not let him go on like this. Finding the cuts and bruises, she slowly began licking at the wounds. Rick winced and complained more loudly, but Monica knew that it was better to hurt a bit now than to stay hurt.

She also couldn't let him smell of the green hurter any longer. She would make sure the green hurter would never touch Rick again.

"She's trying to help."

"I'd-agh, Monica!"

"Rick," she answered in turn, frowning at him and holding him in place, licking at his shoulder. Why couldn't he understand he needed this? Monica felt frustration. Rick was no better than a cub. She'd have to teach him the important things when they were safe, later.

That was a strange thought. Later. She'd never thought of it before, during the days before Rick, but now it felt like a new space she could look into that always drew her attention. A place that was not there, but that they would be at later.

As she kept licking and tending to his hurts, Monica's eyes flickered towards the hard gray shiny thing that made the hole they were in impossible to get out of. She'd seen the shiny thing being moved, pulled out of the way and then back. She'd have to get it out of the way to take Rick someplace safe.

Someplace away from the hurters. A safe warm cave, with no one to catch them ever again. If she could hurt the hurters while doing so, that would be even better. Make sure the hurters never hurt again. Dead.

The two soft-ones kept making those noises at each other. Monica noticed a particular sound that made Rick angry each time he made it. "Baron." She growled as Rick spoke it. If Rick was angry, then it was bad. Maybe it was the noise they made for the hurters? That made sense. If Rick was angry to it, Monica would be angry too.

"Baron bad." Kat proclaimed, snarling and moving her head up and down.

"Baron bad." Rick replied, making the up and down gesture, flinching as Monica found a cut on his right arm to lick.

"Bar-ohn." Monica mimicked, growling, letting the rumble through her chest.

She would hurt the Barons, all of them.

Satisfied with having cleaned and helped Rick's hurts, she turned the focus to herself. Monica would have to fight very hard. She could hear the sounds outside, she could pick up on the smells. There were two Barons outside, and

Rick and Kat had the scent of many stronger Barons they'd been near of recently. Very hard fight.

Looking over at herself, Monica found the cuts. They'd stopped bleeding, but she cleaned them anyway, starting with her wrists. Better now before the fight started. The bad part was the hurts that didn't bleed, the spots on her body that felt soft and hurt to move or touch. It didn't take her long to clean and be ready. Unlike Rick, her hurts went away faster.

Caring for a soft one was so troublesome sometimes.

But right now was not the time to think about that. Her gaze focused on the gray shiny thing that was in their way.

"Monica, you need to wait."

Turning to Rick as he called out to her, Monica halted. Her soft-one moved to the shiny thing and hit it hard with his soft fist.

"Hey! We need to use the-."

Monica nodded. Rick had the right idea, but he wasn't strong enough. She would help him, show him how it was done. Monica pulled him away from the shiny thing and balled her fist tightly.

"Wait, Monica, d-."

BLAM

The first strike shook the air. Monica's ears curled backwards from the sharp annoying sound, frustrated she'd not knocked it over. She'd hit it hard enough it would have killed a soft one. This was clearly tough rock. Definitely something Rick would not be able to open. Monica would have to hit harder.

Balling her fist, she struck again.

BLAM

Not even a twitch. Was she weaker because of the hurts? Or was the tough rock too tough? Why wasn't it opening? How hard would she have to hit? Monica's chest rumbled. She could hear the voices outside. She was angry she wouldn't be able to catch them by surprise.

BLAM

Her fist hurt, but she was not going to let some weird rock stop her from getting Rick out of this weird hole and to a safe place. She could not stay and wait for the hurters to come back.

BLAM BLAM

Bits of dust and dirt fell down on them. Monica's jaw clenched. She needed to hit harder. How much harder? As hard as she could hit. Tough rock was only rock. She would break it no matter what.

BLAM BLAM

Not hard enough, she focused, thinking. She'd seen the green tough Baron doing it with her whole body... Monica felt warmth spreading through her. Was she doing it right? She'd have to hit and find out.

BLAM BLAM

Still not hard enough, but closer. Something was close. She had almost found a way to hit harder, she was sure of it.

"Rick, she's... stripes!?"

"I see it. Is... she's changing?"

"What the fuck?"

BLAM BLAM

Monica felt her body tense and coil within itself. Snarling, clenching, she took half a step back. Harder, she had to hit harder. With her whole body,

with everything she had. She thrust her body a step forward, foot first, then tail, then hip, then shoulder, then arm, then claw.

BLAM

The strong shiny rock bent. Weird, it should have cracked, but Monica didn't care, she'd figured it out, she was hitting harder. She took another half-step back.

BLAM

Was the ceiling slightly lower? Not important, too many weird new things. She had to focus.

Monica growled. The gray rock had nearly fallen, just once more. She knew it would be one more. This time, she took several steps back until she reached the opposite wall. She could feel the power as she focused it on her paws and claws. One more and the fight would start. She could smell the fear. She could hear the muffled voices outside, the tough ones shouted things. One Baron, two Barons, three, four, many. Many, many Barons.

It would be a fight, it would be a hunt. Her claws extended, sinking into the stone.

This one would have to be with everything. Using the wall for support, she imagined she was in the forest, jumping from one tree to the next, bouncing to keep the tough ones from being able to hurt her.

Monica clenched her jaw, snarling, growling. Rick and the other soft one moved out of her way. Good. She didn't wait to launch herself towards the door, paws glowing and throwing one more attack onto the infuriating tough rock.

BOOM

It flew off, almost broken. The stone hit the far wall of the hole that connected to the hole they'd been trapped in. Monica hadn't stopped herself, following behind and landing against the wall. Her eyes coursed through the

tunnel while her claws grabbed the bent shiny stone. There were three tough-ones.

The smell of fear was thick.

Not missing an instant, Monica spun, throwing the broken shiny stone towards two of them while she pounced at the third. The tough-one was weak, slow, dull. She tried to hurt Monica, but Monica hurt her first. Claws pierced flesh, a clean, quick kill. There was no time to play. But she'd seen tough ones using funny smelling things to take hurts away, so she made extra sure it was a kill by using her fangs and ripping the hard-one's throat out. There was something off in how easily her fangs had pierced through the flesh, of how much easier it felt to bite through.

Nothing she should focus on right now. She turned towards the other two. One had broken her arms trying to stop the thrown tough-rock. Slow, they were slow. Monica tossed the bloody body of her first prey at the faster tough-one. They screamed, trying to move, but Monica pounced to take advantage of their distraction.

Another clean kill.

Monica turned towards the third one. She'd fallen crying, making the noises they always made when Monica hunted.

She would have considered leaving whimpering the tough-one live, perhaps to play later, but she had to protect Rick. She made extra sure the tough-one was dead, much like the other two.

The taste of blood and fear made Monica feel good. She breathed in the scent. This was how it was supposed to be. Monica let loose a roar, loud and powerful, shaking the very smooth stones all around her. They should know to fear her, they should know to run.

She would be the hurter now.

Chapter 094 [Monica]

Monica was apprehensive about leaving Rick alone. There might be others that could hurt or catch Rick. She might have carried him with her, run to escape, but there was little room and many ways he could get hurt while she was occupied.

So she had to make sure to kill everyone that could hurt Rick.

Make sure the only Barons would be in front, never behind. Rick was too soft to survive the fight with tough-ones.

Taking the shiny bent stone that had blocked the path, Monica held it loftily with her right paw, dragging it behind her as she walked further out of the hole, up the slope with sharp edges and listening closely. The dragging made an annoying screeching sound, but it wasn't her concern right now. She could hear one Baron shouting. The voice was harsh, a tough-tough one? It felt like there was at least one tough-tough one ahead.

"Monica."

Rick's voice was a distraction she did not need. She had to hunt, she had to keep him safe.

"Monica!" His hand grasped her free claw.

She could smell his concern, but there was nothing to be concerned about. She would keep him safe. Her eyes kept looking forward, waiting for the next threat to show up. She could hear they were near, waiting to ambush her. If they showed up, she could at least use the hard, shiny, bendy stone to crush a few.

"MONICA!"

The voice startled her. She flicked a moment of attention forward, frowning, then turned to look at Rick. He was angry now. Angry why? At her? Monica

hesitated. That couldn't be right. Why was Rick angry with her? She watched more carefully, trying to figure out why he smelt so angry, it was an afraid kind of angry, but what was he afraid of?

She'd kill everyone, make sure they'd be safe.

More surprising was that he turned away from her to look towards where the Barons were. "To everyone standing in the corridor!" Rick stepped ahead of Monica, towards the threats. She stopped him, though, grabbing his weird extra skin to keep him within reach. He knew there were dangers there, he had to. Why approach? She might not understand what was going on, but she would not let him get hurt. At least this close, she could pull him out of the way of danger. "If you do not clear the route out, you will die." He kept doing the noises.

"You are trespassing in-." The quivering voice was from one of the Barons, a threat, but afraid, scared.

"And we have White Claw!" Kat shouted. The sound made Monica's ear twitch. "How many of you want to die to try to stop her?"

The feline growled in frustration. So many noises that meant nothing. The ones further ahead wanted a fight. Monica could smell it through their fear. Noises would not change that. There would be a fight, and Monica would hunt.

"We will protect our Lord and the-."

"Two pure-blooded human women came to harm at the hands of the Baron." Rick made the noises with determination. It was a nice tone, not soft at all. Strong. Monica almost nodded in approval, but it was the wrong time for noises, it was time to fight. "And you know as well as we do that if you try to fight against... White Claw... in here, the human women you're supposed to be protecting are likely to get hurt, too. We don't want that. Do you?"

Monica growled, taking a step forward, only to halt when both Rick and Kat grasped her claws and pulled, trying to stop her. Rick was looking at Monica seriously, so she stopped. But she was growing impatient. If they waited too

long, more tough-ones could show up, and that would make the fighting more dangerous. The enemies' stench was thick, weary, and ready for battle.

She'd give it to them. Show them to never hurt her or Rick ever again.

"You have five seconds!" Rick said loudly. "If you do not stand down, there WILL be a fight. And human women will die because of it."

Monica's ears perked as she sensed panic. The tough-ones hearts had suddenly started beating really fast. Her eyes turned to Rick, and frowned slightly. The noise he had made had made them panic? How? It had been a squeak of a roar, a good one for a soft-one, but it hadn't been scary at all!

"Five!"

The hard-one's waiting to ambush them were making more noises, hurried and even more afraid, like the little soft-one's trying to squeak and hide from Monica. She might not have understood how, but she couldn't avoid feeling a strange hint of pride. Rick might be a soft-one, but he could make tough-one's panic!

"Four!"

Whatever noises he was making, it was scaring them, scaring them lots! Rick stank of fear and nervous. Was this a fight? A fight with noises? Monica didn't understand, but he was less afraid than the hard-ones. That was good.

"Three!"

Monica didn't know what the noises meant, but she knew she could help. Taking a deep breath, she growled. Loud and clear, a threat. She could make scaring noises too, she snarled as she locked her gaze ahead, making sure everyone could hear her clearly.

"Two!"

Rick's voice cracked a little, but Monica could forgive him. She was scarier than Rick. It made sense. She'd have to teach him to be less scared, but that would have to be 'later'. First getting out. Later food and safety.

"We agree!"

And suddenly, half of Rick's fear vanished with a sigh of relief. He'd won? Monica stopped her growl, looking at Rick and taking several deep whiffs in his direction before focusing on the tunnel ahead. The others were scared, and... angry? Monica didn't understand how Rick's sounds had made them afraid and angry. They smelt like someone who'd lost, though. That was... good, strange, but good.

"We'll make a path, just... leave."

Monica didn't wait for Rick this time. She stepped out of the corner, carrying the gray stone, still ready to fight. Strange, but good didn't mean safe. She had to be sure it was safe. She looked down at the long tunnel that had hard-one's pointing sticks her way. The smell was clear now, loss. But they were glaring at her, some with more anger than fear. They had lost, though, losers had to tuck their tails. Monica growled, zeroing on the one that smelt the angriest, the tough-one with a shiny stone covering her chest.

"Lower your heads, and don't meet her gaze." Rick's voice was rushed. "She doesn't understand words. You are threats right now."

More noises, Monica kept her gaze sharp on the one that was glaring back. One that growled and... looked down. No tucked tail, but Monica understood since this particular tough-one didn't have a tail to begin with. It was also clear now that Rick's sounds weren't as intimidating as Monica could be. But it would have to do.

Safety first.

Snorting, the feline nodded.

"Just... go." The hard-one spoke with clenched fists and a shaky voice. Loser anger.

Hard-one had lost to mere noises.

It still didn't make sense to her, but safety came first.

Monica took Rick and put him in front of herself. She could not trust having him behind her, where she couldn't see an attack coming as easily. Kat hurried along, and Monica kept her eyes on the hard-ones that stood at either side of the long tunnel. Their eyes lowered, but their hands tightly grasping their sharp sticks. Not a true victory, a weak one. Monica could smell they still desired to fight.

She kept one paw on Rick's back while the other held the bendy stone. If a fight happened, she'd rush ahead and use the stone to protect them.

But no such fight happened.

They made it past the long cave and reached the strange slanted sharpened stone to go up. Monica could smell fresh air, the rain, and blood. She held back from grimacing. At least the dangers outside were not fresh, so nothing to be currently worried about. The bigger danger was the hard-ones that kept glaring at them and that might opt to be too angry to stay losers.

But another scent caught Monica's attention. She paused, stopping on her tracks as her head moved to look up. Not towards the way out, but to the slanted stone that led above. A growl left her the moment she'd lay eyes on the green-skinned tough-one, wearing a gray shiny stone on her chest and stinking of anger. Monica's claws came out. The green hurter, the green Baron, the one who'd hurt Monica and Rick.

Her hackles rose, her tail stilled, fangs out. She'd kill the green one, she'd-

"MONICA!"

The word stopped her. Rick was pulling her claw, pulling her away from the green one. Why? Hurter was right there! Monica might be hurt, but she could still fight. Green one would die. It would not be a hard fight.

"Monica."

Rick caller her again, pulling towards the outside again. His scent was thick with fear again, concern, and it had... anger. So much anger. He was angry, but he didn't want to fight? Monica stilled, her claw in his hand, only a

twitch away from snapping out of his grip. It would be easy, just one fight, revenge, hurt the hurter, make sure green-Baron could not hurt again.

"Monica."

She looked over her shoulder at the green one. Green one wanted to fight. Monica did too. Monica thought to the woods, the river, when she'd told Rick to stay because it was dangerous and he'd left, not knowing, not smelling the danger. Like a kit, too blind to notice.

Her growl stopped, her eyes left the green one. There were other hard-ones nearby, nervous, ready for a fight. Could she fight the green one while keeping Rick safe?

No. Too many of them, not enough space, too hurt.

"Let's go."

He tugged at her gently this time, trying to make her follow. She let him move in front towards the outside, towards the fresh air. She stepped cautiously, keeping an eye on the potential dangers around them since Rick could not.

The scent of rain calmed Monica. She had been trapped in the cave for too long.

Safe first.

Monica would make sure to hunt the green hurter... later.

Chapter 095 [Rick]

Rick could only glare at the man standing opposite to him. "I don't care, I am leaving as soon as Monica's fully healed."

Next to him sat the aforementioned feline. Cross legged, her claw gripped his hand. It had not let go for an instant since entering the Hunter's building. It still wouldn't let go, even as two healers grumbled and fumed over her, tending to the injuries that littered Monica's body with glowing hands and ointments.

"You're safe here." Huge frowned, massive fists clenching tightly as his jaw set.

"Until the Baron makes a move. I'm betting soon." He pointed out. "I'm here mostly hoping some legal charges can be put into motion. Alice is in there and I'll be fucked if I leave her to her luck. I'd have stormed the place if it weren't suicidal."

"If you give Monica the chance to finish shifting into a Sabertooth, it wouldn't be too harebrained an idea."

"Irene!" The Major hissed, head snapping towards the red-skinned naked woman standing in the corner and staring at the wall.

"I was meaning to ask about that." Rick could only frown. "Monica started growing and getting stripes, what's all that about?"

"A shift." Huge made a vague gesture at Monica. "When a maiden moves down the path set by their genus. The process takes a day or so. Like an Elf turning into a High Elf once she's become powerful enough." A sigh as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Look, Rick, I'll be the first to admit that we can't touch the Baron, but your position is in legal limbo right now. As the leader of the local Hunter division, I can at least put you as probationary reinforcement for the upcoming second wave. Not even the Baron would be insane enough to try to go against us during this state of emergency."

"You do that." Rick nodded. "In the meantime, I'll put as much distance between myself and that psychopath as I can."

"He's right in fearing the Baron, that man's obsession with White Claw makes it unlikely-."

"I KNOW!"

Huge's voice rose to a roar, his hand slammed against the wooden table hard enough everyone in the room short of Monica bounced in shock. The feline herself regarded Huge for a long second before she opted to return her focus to the piece of dried meat she was eating. Bribing her with food had been the better way to convince her to let the other maidens heal her.

"I know." Huge repeated, lowering his head, breathing in and letting it out in a slow sigh. "Rick, you understand that you're not the only one in this picture? Miss Catherine is insisting to join you, Tomas and Mr. Gabriel are insisting to join her. I can't just sit and watch four humans potentially throw their lives away like that."

That made him grimace. "I told Kat to stay."

"And she has clearly heeded your words as much as you are heeding mine." The man gave an unamused look. "I'd arrest the lot of you, really, lock you up so tightly the Baron wouldn't be able to touch you until the Earl himself shows up to judge his sins. But with White Claw at your side, it would likely mean I'd have to send half the maidens in this building to their deaths."

"I wouldn't-."

"Rick." The man glared at the teacher, crossing his arms. "'Would' means little in the face of 'could'. Being right means nothing if you're powerless to do anything about it. As the one in charge of my subordinate's wellbeing, it's my duty to take such things into consideration." There was a pause before he frowned, glancing over his shoulder towards Irene.

Rick had to guess the psychic had told him something. Huge's lips pursed as she turned back to face the chemistry teacher.

"Fine, I won't stop you. I will send two maidens to keep Miss Catherine and Mister Gabriel safe."

"Safe from what?"

"From whatever might pose a threat." He rubbed the back of his neck, looking far calmer than a second ago. "Look, if you're going to do this, you better do it right. You're going to need to head hard South, cross the river, and stay the fuck away from Astunes. There was a first feral wave that moved down the river on the Eastern side a day ago, but the scouts haven't spotted a second one." A slight shake of his head. "The river should stir the wave that's going to hit you to continue West. And White Claw's territory is in that direction, so there should be less ferals. It should make it easier to wait things out until we resolve the situation legally."

"I-."

"The instant this feral mess is over, I will be pressing charges of attempted murder of a human woman on the Baron. We'll be sending the claim to the Earl through the radio. And to do that, I am going to need Miss Catherine as well as you. Alive. My word alone is near meaningless against a noble." His eyes grew serious. "Do you understand why I'd rather keep you nearby?"

"I do, and I still think it leaves me entirely at the mercy of that asshole." Rick shook his head. "In this case, the one that cares the most about collateral losses."

"What in the Neigix shit do you mean?"

"Monica being here puts you in check." The teacher frowned slightly. "Because fighting her here would kill or seriously wound many bystanders you care about. Doesn't that mean you'd be in the exact same situation if the Baron showed up with a bunch of his guards and were willing to duke it out? He wouldn't even need to fight, only call your bluff." A scowl. "As far as I can tell, some of the students are here, so if I were in that kind of situation, I'd have to stop Monica from fighting to protect them."

Huge's eyes widened, he shot to his feet. "Are you saying you'd-?"

"I think I'm going to lean into your own line of thought here." Rick answered. "I'm not trusting whether the Baron 'would' and am considering that he 'could'. Because I'm sure he 'will'."

The two men met gazes the silence in the room only interrupted by the sound of Monica tearing into the dried meat. Rick felt his back tense as his eyes remained fixed on Huge's, the larger man staring back at him in turn. Rick wasn't entirely sure he'd been able to hold that gaze if not because of the two meters-and-change tall feline holding his hand at that very moment.

The taller man was the first to relent, closing his eyes and sighing, shoulders deflating. "Do you know the differences between the Hunters and the Army?"

The question took Rick by surprise, the young man shook his head. "Besides status?"

"While Hunters might be trained to protect human life, the Army trains their Knights in combat against dangerous elements... but especially against tamed maidens and humans." His eyes ahead, locking onto the teacher's with a dangerous edge. "In such a fight, the quickest way to bring the battle to a close begins by killing the human." Huge's focus turned towards Monica. "You only have one fighter, the easiest way to kill you would be to have two or more threats coming from different directions. As fierce as Monica is, it would push her to be defensive."

"And that means that so long as they don't know where the humans are, Monica will be able to go all out."

"Do keep in mind that the Major was merely talking about how a hypothetical tribe of smart and experienced ferals would engage someone like yourself and your maiden." Irene's voice rang from the corner, the fact that she'd not turned to look their way at all was slightly unnerving. "Under the hypothetical of needing to bring down such a tribe, the Hunter manual does provide several suggested pieces of gear, such as using a scent-killer."

Huge let out a booming laugh, glancing over his shoulder over towards the corner Irene was currently occupying before looking back at Rick. "And

that's why you should always make sure to keep people smarter than you around."

With a slight nod, the young chemistry teacher's mind flickered through another thought, his eyes moving to Monica as she continued to eat with a voracious appetite. For a long second, he pondered on the thought. "What's the situation regarding guns?"

"Only guns Hunters need would be elemental ones, and those are outside our budget. It'd cost me less to buy a dozen maidens than an elemental bullet." Huge didn't miss a beat, then frowned, coughing. "If... ferals happened to kill a knight and take their armor, then it would be hard to kill them from a distance. Knight armor is enchanted to absorb energy out of projectiles. Nothing absolute, but enough that arrows would just bounce off. Lances and spears could even be deflected to a point."

A slow nod, Rick's grip on Monica's claw tightened as his brow furrowed.

"And how much protection does the armor give against fire?"

Chapter 096 [Alice]

Alice held the chair tightly as she glared at the door. She'd heard the roar, it was hard to miss, and hard to take it for it being from anyone other than Monica. It was hard to forget the sound of it, it had practically pushed her mind straight back into the forest, into the previous nightmare. Now ready to potentially having to fight, her ears remained sharp, paying very close attention to the sounds outside.

A singular masculine voice had been screaming itself hoarse over the past hours. Alice had barely been able to make out some of the words, orders, something about 'knights'. Stomping feet and more than one scream, now the sounds were getting closer. And without warning, the door clicked open, and Alice prepared herself, standing right behind it, chair raised and arms straining against the weight.

"I-."

Whatever the Baron's next words were going to be, he did not have a chance to speak them. Alice swung with everything she had. The chair shattered as it hit something solid and unmovable. The teacher's eyes widened as the green Orcish woman had stood in her attack's way, gray dull armor not even dented from the impact.

Tumbling back a step, Alice barely had the chance to gasp before the tall maiden stepped towards her, a hand grasping the psychology teacher's arm and shoving her against the wall. With a snarl, Alice swung with her free hand, bringing to bear the letter opener she'd snatched out of the desk. The metal scrapped against the Orc's throat.

There was only a scratch in the small knife's wake. Not even a trickle of blood.

Alice's eyes widened as she saw even that meager injury closing up on its own, gone within the span of a second.

"Negotiations are over, I take it?" The Baron spoke with only a hint of annoyance as the Orc woman smirked, using her free hand to pin Alice against the wall.

"You lost your bargain chip." Alice snapped, glaring daggers at the man as he dusted off the shoulder-pads of his armor, a piece of bright silver with golden inlays.

Alice sneered, trying to escape the Orc's steely grasp and failing.

The Baron didn't miss a beat, amused eyes leveled with Alice. "Did you take me for some fool? I caught your little plot." At the gesture of his hand, a figure stepped through the door. Pink hair and a bowed head, Dia avoided looking in Alice's direction, head bowed in shame. "Like the faithful tool that she is, she told me everything once she confirmed my own wife would plot against me."

The words made Alice's stomach drop like a stone, her eyes fixed on Dia, wide and frightened. Gritting her teeth, the teacher leveled every ounce of hate she could muster at him. "I hope you rot in hell."

"Hell?" His back straightened out ever so slightly before he frowned and shook his head, dismissing the word. "I will catch the thief and get what's rightfully mine." A cruel cold laugh escaped him as he spoke. "One way or the other, things will change around here."

"What?"

"Offworlders are valuable, sometimes due to their powers, other times because of the technology. Most look human, even if they aren't in the true sense of the word. But you? Pure-blood, devoid of a single drop of maiden ancestry, human down to the marrow." He leaned closer, smiling, eyes wild. "Like with my wife, I believed you were noble merely because of your ancestry, but it's clear that was a mistake. I will put you and your friends to good use, one way or the other."

He turned to leave, Dia followed close behind, head bowed, never turning to look at Alice. The psychology teacher held her tongue, glaring daggers at

them and the Orc that held her against the wall.

"Behave, miss."

With a smirk, the green-skinned maiden tossed Alice to the side, turning to leave as well. The door closed behind her, shutting itself firmly and leaving the room in the gloom that poured in from the outside. The teacher growled, rubbing her wrists as she tried to collect her thoughts and find her strength.

If she had the power to burn things with her gaze, she would've turned the door to cinders.

What was she to do now? Alice's lips narrowed, approaching the door and laying an ear against it. She tried to pay close attention to movement outside. The heavy boots were still moving around, stomping their way back and forth, moving, voices calling out, orders being issued.

It would be a couple hours before things would quiet down, the noise leaving and gone. In that time she'd organized her thoughts. Alice had to hope it was a sign they'd left the manor, she walked straight towards the Baron's desk and began pulling out the drawers, spilling their content all over the floor. Her eyes sifted through papers and pens, looking for anything that might be of use.

Making sure to make as much noise as possible, she didn't hear movement from outside. So that meant the guards were gone? That would certainly be a boon.

Not that she had a concrete plan right now, but looking for one was better than just sitting and waiting. She had to get out of the room somehow, a likelier prospect now that at least some of the guards were gone.

There were several keys amongst the litter, none the proper shape or size for the door or window. She found another letter opened, not that she could really do much with it, she still pocketed it just in case. There were several letters and pens, an inkwell, and-

There was a knock at the door, Alice grabbed the inkwell with one hand and the letter opener with the other. "Who is it?"

"A friend, I hope."

The voice startled her, the Baroness? Alice frowned. "Come in."

"I will wait here, thank you."

The psychology teacher had expected the woman to enter, perhaps cuffed, but she did not expect the door to merely open and the woman to stand outside, beckoning her to follow. Confusion welled within Alice as she warily stepped towards the door, holding the letter-opener and inkwell, not quite sure what was waiting for her but wary all the same. Slowly, she stepped out of the room and into the warm glow of the corridor.

There were a dozen maidens, three armored, the rest wearing dull gray uniforms, all bowing deeply. The confusion grew further, her eyes returning towards the Baroness. "What's... happening?"

"What do you think is happening?"

"These maidens are under you?" Alice frowned. "But the Baron wouldn't..."

"You'd be correct in assuming my husband took the liberty to breaking the bonds of my knights and reforge them for his own use." She shrugged. "But he forgot the basics of controlling maidens. The bond is a leash, and leashes are more useful to restrict."

"I don't understand."

"A lesson, then." She gestured at Alice to follow her, the taller woman walking down the corridor. "Little boys like to believe that merely because a maiden is bonded to you, they will obey anything you tell them to do." A slight smirk came upon her features, her hand lingering on the stair rails as she walked down it. "Say you bond an unwilling maiden, one who loathes your guts. Where would you believe to be the limitations of your power over them?"

"I don't like where this is going." Alice spoke with a grimace. "Maidens are people."

"I am discussing far more practical things, Alice, do pay close attention for you're going to need to put the lesson to use one day." The Baroness chided, turning the corner and pausing as a maiden stood on their way. The woman was forced to kneel, a dagger held to her throat by two armored knights. "Observe." She leaned closer, reaching out to touch the blue collar on the kneeling maiden's throat. "What were your orders?"

"I was ordered to fight any maiden under your command."

The Baroness smiled. "And do you want to fight?"

And the maiden smiled in turn. "No." She raised her throat, baring it for the Baroness to unlatch the choker. A slight gasp escaped the maiden, and a shudder as the woman waited for only a heartbeat before latching it back on.

The knights released the maiden, and she bowed her head low. "I serve only you, my Lady."

"Help the others."

"Yes, my lady." The maiden stood, marching away with the others.

"Not the example I was hoping for, she always was one of my favorites." The Baroness glanced at Alice and chuckled lightly. "Perhaps we'll find one a bit more loyal to the wrong cause."

Alice shook her head, refusing to be swept up in this woman's rhythm. "We need to help Rick."

"Unfortunately, there's not much more we can do in that regard." The Baroness shrugged.

"Then...?" She scowled. "What? What are we doing here?"

"I am preparing to capture or kill my husband upon his return." The woman replied. "I'll inform the Hunters he likely intends to have the Major executed

under trumped up treason charges, which should at the very least get them to not interfere in my husband's favor."

"Wh-."

"We'll only need to stall for time. The second feral wave should be enough to ensure the fight will be in our favor since they will be outside and we won't." There was a slight pause as she met Alice's gaze, the tall woman's eyes glimmered with anger. "I've done what I could to help your friend's chances of making it out alive, but I will not place my life and that of the other women at risk."

There was a long silence, the psychology felt her step falter before she realized something.

"Help him... how?"

Chapter 097 [Rick]

Rick walked quickly down the road, his thoughts focused on the task that was ahead of him. In his mind there was little room for doubt about what was coming. Every part of him wanted to hope it wouldn't. He wasn't going to let himself get caught up in those anymore. His jaw was shut tight, mind racing through how many ways this could all go to hell.

"Gramps, this is the last chance, you should stay back."

"No."

Kat's irritation only escalated at Mr. Gabriel's dry response. The young woman glowered, glaring at the old man as he had, somehow, managed to keep the pace with them. Rick suspected some sort of magic was involved, but this wasn't really the time to argue about it. The chemistry teacher's eyes returned to Monica and the large backpack she was carrying.

There was a clinking within that came with every step, and each time the large feline shifted in some way that would make it 'clank', Rick felt his hackles rise and a tiny panic attack course through him. A shot of adrenaline that had him wondering how far back he ought to jump. But so far nothing happened, so at least things were moving along smoothly.

Just one more thing that could go wrong.

"How much farther ahead before you start insisting we should split up?" Tomas' voice rung out with a tone that felt equally argumentative to Mr. Gabriel's.

"You shouldn't be here to begin with." The chemistry teacher replied with a harsh bite to his tone. There was little patience to be had, not now. "This isn't something you can help with."

"That's for us to decide." Mr. Gabriel proclaimed.

"What he said." Kat nodded, then paused, frowning after realizing she'd agreed with her grandfather. "Not that gramps should be here to begin with. How the fuck are you walking that fast!?"

"None of your business."

"Could you shut up and stop this bickering?" Rick snapped, glaring at the trio of humans.

Kat and Tomas flinched, lowering their gazes, while Mr. Gabriel merely shrugged, nonplussed by his tone. Rick took a second to breathe in and attempt to calm down, his eyes turning towards the two maidens that were trailing behind them.

One was Freya, the elf sporting her bow and a dead-serious look as her eyes would bounce through their surroundings before halting at Monica every other minute. The other was... Ginny, whose eyes would be on Rick every time he'd glanced her way. The young woman was, for a lack of a better description, the second most fierce looking individual of the group short of Monica herself.

The brunette's hands were covered in thick dark red green scales, hands that were almost claws, black sharp nails and a short thick scaled tail. She wielded a short sword and a round shield, and she looked far more nervous than Rick thought she ought to be. Perhaps a testament of the dangers that lay ahead in his harebrained plan.

"Our job is to keep them safe, sir." Freya's words came out curt and dry the moment she noticed his gaze. "That is as far as our orders go."

"Though... we could lend a hand if a fight threatens their safety." Ginny quickly added.

"This is bullshit," Kat growled, quick to recover her annoyance. "We want to help and the only thing we can do is hope to sit on our ass and play damsel in distress to distract them?"

Rick felt like letting out a scream, instead he turned and began walking faster. Overtaking Monica, he gestured for her to follow as they kept to the dirt trail. If this were up to him, there would be no fight to begin with, but what he felt didn't matter anymore. They had to get distance, reach the forest proper. Monica's biggest advantage was her maneuverability in that environment. It was the exact thing that had kept her out of the Baron's grasp for years.

"This should be far enough." He finally proclaimed as he spotted the river. "Monica." The word jolted the feline, she turned to face him and grinned as she bounced a little on the balls of her feet. Rick cringed at the clanking noise this caused. "Please... don't."

Maneuvering around her, he opened the flaps to the backpack and pulled out a bottle that was filled with a lime green opaque liquid. It was the only water-bottle in the backpack, repurposed from some of the things Tomas had not thrown away.

"So, to use this..."

"Drench cloth, rub cloth on self." Freya pointed out. "It should remove your scent for six to ten hours, approximately."

"Well, this is where we're going to split."

Kat squirmed at this proclamation. "Rick, are you... sure?"

"You want to help? This is how you help." He removed his shirt, tossing it over to Tomas before taking a cloth and drenching it with the green liquid. Slowly he started rubbing it against his bare chest, arms, pants, legs, and shoes. He ignored the look Ginny and Monica were giving him. "You walk straight towards Monica's cave, and don't slow down."

"And what will you be doing?"

"Preparing."

Carefully he helped Monica remove the backpack, rubbing the drenched cloth against it before approaching the large feline. She looked down at him and

scowled as he grasped her claw and rubbed the cloth on it. "Rick?" She immediately pulled her claw to sniff at it, eyes wide as she shook it, then sniffed again.

Rick didn't waste a second, moving up her shoulder, rubbing it against her back, then moving to her other arm. Monica looked too surprised to try to stop him, sniffing every inch where he worked through and then sniffing him.

"Are you sure you don't need help?"

Kat's cocky remark came as Monica was now moving to pin Rick and lick his hair. The chemistry teacher was having an increasingly harder time escaping so he could continue his work rubbing the scent-remover on her.

"Shut up." He managed to huff out as she broke into a fit of giggles.

More than one face cracked up, the only one who managed to keep a straight face being Freya.

"What's in those, anyway?" Tomas pointed at the backpack and the pots left within.

"Phoenix Feathers, don't open them." He replied, wriggling out of the feline's grasp and taking the bottle, using his thumb to cover most of the lid, and then shaking it in Monica's direction.

She leaped away, hissing as he drenched her to the best of his ability. An angry growl that was followed by another hiss when he shook the bottle at her once more, making sure to soak her up and leaving her dripping the green liquid. Monica most certainly was not a happy cat, and Rick had little patience to care, closing up the half-empty bottle and returning it to the backpack before very carefully lifting it up.

Monica made it seem so easy, he grunted, glancing at the others. "Now mush, this won't work if it's too hard for me to predict the route they'll take."

"Should I repeat how much this sucks?"

"You've said that already." He eyed the wary Monica as she stared daggers at him, trying to dry out the liquid that was now staining her fur and hair a light green coloration.

"We will look for a suitable crossing point." Freya declared, stepping ahead of the group and approaching the river.

The chemistry teacher could only glance at the waters and shudder. The torrential rapids that had nearly drowned him had died down considerably, but the river was still swollen with water, and did not look safe to take a dip in at all.

"Rick." Mr. Gabriel spoke, approaching him and giving him a cold hard look. "Don't over-think it."

That made him hesitate, Rick frowned. "What?"

"When you have to take a life, people hesitate. It's normal." He gripped Rick's shoulders and squeezed. "But these are monsters that won't give you a second chance."

Lips thinning, the chemistry teacher could only nod grimly.

"They're coming."

The proclamation made Rick freeze and turn towards Ginny. The lizard-based maiden was looking towards the village. All heads turned to see at what she was pointing at. There was a dim glowing red light above the village, flying in a circle. Miranda. Her glow strengthened then dimmed, three times in quick succession, before stopping for a handful of seconds and repeating the signal.

"The Baron is coming."

Chapter 098 [Rick]

Rick knew how smart Monica was, or more accurately, he had a really good guess. Her ability to recognize names had been incredibly fast, and her self-restraint within the manor had shown she had a good way to discern things. And there was always how she looked at him with that strange sharp focus that seemed to push everything else out, paying close attention to his every word and gesture.

And now, he was placing his hopes on that very same intelligence. If she didn't understand what the brown vases could do, if she took them for granted or ignored them, then they could very well end up dead. The notion ate away at Rick, he could do something to help, improve their odds, but Monica was the only one that could really pull things through, the only one that stood a chance against the threat that was coming their way.

The backpack was nearly empty, Rick took a look around the area, the trees were foreboding in the dusk, their trunks looming over them. Monica stood looking at him curiously, he had her follow him as he lay each clay pot in a different location. Most near a tree, out of sight, barely hidden. Near every single one, he included a piece of dried boar meat, the act catching Monica's attention.

She'd been looking closely, following him as he moved across the area, munching on some of the meat she'd snatched out of his grasp.

Now came the important part.

Moving to the point of convergence, the center of the trap, Rick used his shirt to cover his mouth and nose as knelt down. Slowly, he pulled out the wax seal that covered the lip of one of the clay vials. He used a stick to poke within the murky liquid, and carefully pulled it out.

The tip of the stick instantly ignited the moment the light gray substance came into contact with the air.

The locals called it 'Phoenix feather', the substance the maiden of that same name constantly shed from her wings whenever using their powers. Which, to Rick, it might as well be called white phosphorous. There were differences, of course, this substance produced red flames rather than yellow, water wouldn't work too well to prevent it from igniting, needing oil instead. The thing would also decompose within the next week or so, another key difference with the phosphate.

Miranda, Huge's wife, had offered to fill the bottom of each clay pot and vial. It had taken her barely a handful of minutes. Rick had to hold back from visibly shuddering at the consideration of what this substance could do if it were possible to harvest and store indefinitely.

The flickering flame at the tip of the stick cast a light glow all around them. Rick's eyes danced on Monica's body. The 'shift' had been changing her, subtly, so slow he'd missed it if he weren't paying attention. She was slightly taller, slightly more athletic, the white fur on her arms and legs now had stripes. Huge had told him that Sabertooths could also use the shadows to fight, though that he couldn't really do much about it. Maybe the fire could help her? He hoped it would.

With a sigh, he focused on the now. Rick turned towards the small hole he'd dug out on the forest floor. Sealing the clay vial, he very carefully placed it on her palm. "Monica." He said, tilting her paw so the vial would roll off and fall into the hole. It shattered, and a burst of red flames rose out.

Monica's eyes widened, looking at her hand, then at the hole and the meter tall red flame, and then at Rick. He brought out the next vial, putting it on her hand again. Every muscle on his back clenched tightly as he waited, watching her sniff the vial, glance at Rick, then at the vial and sniff at it again.

"Come on..." The teacher whispered under his breath.

Monica's focus fell entirely on the vial. She flicked her wrist, and the vial flew across the air, landing near the foot of a tree. The piece of pottery shattered and fire blossomed from the point of impact. The feline's ears perked up, eyes widening, looking at Rick, then at the fire she'd made, and

pointing at it. "Rick!" She said, moving closer towards the flames, surprise and wonderment in her eyes as she looked at it from multiple angles.

She moved her paw close, close enough to almost touch, and then pulled it back, circling the pillar of flame, tail swishing back and forth.

"Fire." The human said, nodding emphatically, grabbing her paw and pulling her towards the nearest vase they'd hidden behind a root. He pointed at it. Each vase was at least the size of his fist, and each of them was equally dangerous. "Fire."

The feline looked at it, then turning towards the fire. Her ears remained perked, attentive as she turned back to look at Rick with a slight frown. There was a shift in the wind, and Monica froze. Her head snapped in the direction they'd come from. Her ears rotated in every direction for a moment before they flattened against her skull. "Bah-ron." She growled under her breath.

He nodded. "Baron, yes." He growled, mimicking the sound she'd made, and then pointing at the flames. "Fire."

Please, please, please, please, please.

Rick looked at Monica, trying to convey... everything, the caution, the anger, the concern, the aggression. They had to fight the Baron, escape would only leave the others at risk. The fire was meant to help in this fight.

He met her blue-green eyes and tightened his grip on her claw. He could throw some firebombs at the maidens if things came down to it, if the fight turned ugly, but he couldn't win this, he lacked the power. To kill a maiden with the firebombs he'd need to practically coat them in the stuff. Monica was the only one that could truly help remove the threat the Baron posed. And he couldn't figure out any way to make it clearer for her the tools he'd prepared for the fight.

The preparations were ready, and it all came down to her.

Her fight.

His stomach churned in revolt at the powerlessness that burned in him.

He didn't know anything else he could do. The risk of losing her again a gut-wrenching knot in his throat. The consideration of just running away a tempting one. How far would he be able to get? How much danger would the others face because of it?

"Bah-ron. Fire." Monica nodded, gripping his hand tightly and pulling him in the opposite direction the wind had come from, away from the fire, away from the light.

The determination in her eyes told him everything he needed to know. She wanted this fight too. It dulled the feeling in his gut, even if it didn't help to get rid of it entirely.

Her steps were silent, barely a whisper in the darkening woods. By comparison, Rick's sneakers made loud crunching sounds with every step. He wasn't exactly sure where she was taking him, but it was clear she had a destination in mind. His free hand adjusted the strap of his backpack, he mentally rechecked that he'd indeed left a handful of vials for his own use just in case.

Looking over his shoulder, the darkening gloom of the forest was only broken by the two spots of fire that flickered and danced on the forest floor until they were no larger than pinpricks.

"Rick." Monica stopped him, glancing towards the spot they'd come from and around to the growing darkness of the forest. The feline pointed towards the tree, tugging him closer, and then, gently, pushing him down to the ground. "Rick." She repeated as the human was forced to sit on the dirt.

The feline bustled slightly, moving to the side, ripping one of the bushes off the ground and dropping it on him. He complained as the foliage fell all around him, but he didn't move as he understood what she wanted. His lips tightened as a sense of helplessness took over him. Was this it? The sum total of what he'd be able to help her?

She was leaving him out of the fight just as much as he'd been pushing the others. Because there was no way for them to help without potentially getting themselves killed.

"Rick." She met his gaze once more, nodding.

Her paw lingered on his head for a moment before she stepped back.

His chest tightened. "Monica."

A shared nod, another step back, she squared her shoulders, and took a deep breath. The feline clenched her claws, stomping her foot as she let out a deafening roar. The human could only flinch and close his eyes, covering his ears as the sound rumbled all around him. It was a proclamation of power, a warning to any that got close.

A way to ward off ferals. A way to protect him.

Opening his eyes, Rick glanced at the spot where Monica had been standing on a second ago, she was now gone. Only darkness surrounded him past the layer of foliage that had been unceremoniously dropped on him. Within the darkness, he could only see the two spots of light they'd produced with the broken vials, their light slowly dying out.

It was a strange feeling, gripping the backpack tightly against his chest, his mind bouncing back to the fight in front of the cave. This time he wasn't going to stop her, he... wanted her to kill them.

Somehow that made things better and worse.

Rick's jaw tightened, flinching as a second roar boomed out, further ahead, closer to the flickering flames. The feeling he got out of it was fiercer, a proclamation of war, a call to violence.

Then, silence.

The wait was impossible, a constant cold dread that dripped against his nerves and frayed them just a bit more every time. The only way to measure the progress of time the increasing darkness and the dimming of the fires

they'd started. Bit by bit, Rick's mind started to wander into dangerous territory.

What if the Baron didn't show up? What if they killed Monica? What if the plan failed? What if he was found out and held hostage to render Monica unable to fight?

He wanted to scream.

For better or worse, his thoughts were interrupted when a shriek of terror pierced the silence, followed by bursts of light that were not fire but something else. Powers of other sorts.

The fight had begun.

Chapter 099 [Squad Leader Darcy]

Darcy's nose twitched as the direction of the wind changed. Her eyes peered into the darkness, piercing through the veil and catching every detail. She didn't need the faux-light the other members of the unit were carrying. Hounds could see perfectly in the dark after all.

There was an itch in the back of her head that almost made her tail wag as she sniffed again, trying to catch a hint of their prey's scent. There was an edge of frustration gnawing at her. She could smell the offworlders, but not the Tigress.

"Report." The Mousegirl next to Darcy spoke with a soft breathless voice, her gaze distant, glassy eyes that looked at nothing at all.

Darcy always hated when Mimi spoke through one of 'her girls' like that. "We only caught a whiff of burnt-up Phoenix feather, nothing on White Claw. Yet." That bothered her plenty. The only one that could make Phoenix feathers was lady Miranda. Something didn't make sense. "We're approaching the location where we heard the roar."

"The Lord reminds you your role is not to pursue."

"I read the Hunter's report too, you know. We know how White Claw fights." Darcy hid her annoyance, keeping her attention in the surrounding forest. "Celine spot anything yet?"

"The North is clear. Celine is checking East of your location. Squad three is keeping their distance and waiting for confirmation. They're two minutes out West."

Holding back the urge to roll her eyes, of course the Northern side was clear. It was the direction they'd come from! Still, Darcy kept her retort in check. "Squad four, it's time to shine. Shields up, we're going to see if our prey's feeling protective."

The five Doggirls under Darcy's command quietly acknowledged the order. They raised the heavy tower shields and formed a circle around the Hound and Mousegirl. Darcy gave one last look around them. The forest was quiet, deathly so. She remembered the times she'd been brought to hunt White Claw. The feline had only ever killed one or two before giving them the slip. It had never felt this oppressive.

"Emily, you've got the better lungs of the team. Would you do the honors? Give us your best battle cry."

This time would be different. They knew that coming in with everyone in a large formation would just mean she'd avoid them entirely. Thus why they'd spread out. Darcy's eyes glanced at the brunette behind her.

The Doggirl's brown tail wagged with pride as she nodded, drawing in a sharp breath. Darcy covered her ears right as her subordinate let out her howl. The Hound held back from grinning. Emily could shatter glass from across the room with that voice of hers. Her singing was likely why the Lord had taken her in the first place.

With the howl still echoing all around them, Darcy took a look around, glancing over the heads of her maidens and their shields, peering into the forest. White Claw had to be there. The roar had been a challenge. So where was she? Waiting for a chance to ambush them? The wind changed direction again. Darcy's nose twitched as she caught the faint traces of Squad three. Ray's scent was impossible to mistake for anyone else's. Too much grease.

"DANGER!"

The Mousegirl's shriek snapped Darcy to attention, her ears perked as she heard the swish of something flying their way. She turned, just in time to see a blown blur headed straight for her head. A rock? She raised her small shield to deflect it.

It wasn't a rock, it shattered with the sound of pottery. It contained a liquid, trailing over her shield and splattering behind. A split second after, the liquid burst into flames and shrieks broke out. Several of the Doggirls had been hit by the splash. Darcy's mind sounded the alarms as she instantly recognized

the substance to be Phoenix feather. Her eyes took a moment to adjust to the burst in light. She first had to make sure those burned with-

"DON'T BREAK FORMATION!"

The shout came as two of the ones who'd been splashed with the liquid had tumbled backwards in an attempt to stop the burning that was lapping at their clothes.

"INCOMING!" One of the maidens on the front of the formation cried out, voice shrill with terror.

Darcy whipped around to look ahead and saw the incoming white blur. Tightening her jaw, she pushed her elemental energy through her body, pushing it to strengthen herself. "Shields up!"

The tower-shields slammed together, forming a wall, ready to receive the impact of the charging maiden with everything they had. The spears rose in preparation to intercept. Darcy's own shield, still wreathed in flames, was placed on top to protect them from a potential ranged attack. The blur reached them, and the Hound pushed forward and tried to incline the spear to pierce through White Claw. The feline flowed, dodging with barely an effort. The following attack upon the shields was a heavy impact that nearly knocked the wind out of Darcy and her squad.

There was a collective grunt from the strain. This was a Tigress' strength!?

"Move to-."

"She's above!"

It had been fast. The feline had moved with an impossible grace. The attack she'd landed on the shield barrier had not been an attack at all. She had merely used them as stepping stones, soaring over the flames of Darcy's shield and towards...!

"Emily!"

The Doggirl had been one of the two who'd stumbled out of the formation and had been trying to stop the fire from spreading over her. The Doggirl had been unprepared, barely able to turn to put her shield up in an attempt to block White Claw. The feline didn't even lose momentum, ducking low and hammering the shield at the base with such force it knocked Emily off balance.

While the maiden stumbled, White Claw reached for one of the Doggirl's feet, and then she spun, throwing Doggirl away from the formation. It was a beautiful arch that sent the armored maiden far outside the squad's reach. White Claw followed before Darcy could attempt to strike at the feline.

Though to the rest of the squad it might have looked like both of them getting swallowed up in darkness, Darcy could see it in detail. White Claw overcame Emily's strength and ripped the shield out of her hands, and at the same time, used her other claw to rip the Doggirl's throat out.

Emily fell without a scream, clutching at the wound.

Tempering her anger and fear, Darcy met the eyes of the predator. "Mimi, if you tell me Squad three isn't on their way..."

"Forty seconds!"

Not fast enough. "Quartzal formation!"

The four Doggirls burst into motion. The burnt one had managed to splash some numbing potion on herself to stop the pain and joined the others. Two shields in front, two above. The interlocking pieces of murisium steel would be impossible to punch through, White Claw would be forced to come at them from either side. The spears were ready, and Darcy stood at the back and center of the formation, ready to assist in whichever way the attack would come from.

White Claw emerged from the shadows, standing above the corpse of their fallen pack-mate. Darcy's hackles rose at the sharpness in those eyes, calculating. More so when White Claw leaned down and plucked Emily's tower shield with a single hand as if it weighed nothing.

No Tigress should be able to wield that much strength so leisurely. That and the Phoenix feather that still burned on the surface of her shield... this was not going the way it should have.

"Incoming!" she barked the command as she watched White Claw take the massive shield and break into a full run towards them. They had to withstand just one more attack, fall into the rhythm, let the other squads come, and box their prey in from all angles.

Kill its mobility, and it would only be a matter of time before White Claw would exhaust itself out.

"Tighten formation!"

What direction would the monster take? Left. Right. Above. The sides would have the maiden met with spears, and jumping over would be of little consequence to them. They would just reorient again. So long as they blocked successfully, they could buy the time needed.

But White Claw opposed all her predictions.

The feline pushed straight into the shields, the entirety of its strength placed upon the shield it had stolen, using it as a wedge to force them apart. It was enough to break their formation and split them in two. With a swing of the arm holding the shield, the two Doggirls to White Claw's left were flung aside. The one on the right was slashed through with a glowing claw. Blood sprayed as the Doggirl fell.

Darcy didn't hesitate. Coating her spear in dark energy, she thrust the weapon at White Claw before the maiden could follow up on the attack and finish off another victim. She aimed it at the feline's heart. Following the Lord's orders to take it alive was no longer an option.

But White Claw didn't dodge, swinging the arm, holding the shield into the spear's way instead. The tip of the elementally coated weapon struck the murisium shield. The ring of the impact trembled up Darcy's arm like a bell. But the Hound didn't wait, jumping into the shadows to emerge on White

Claw's opposite side, striking from the shadows before their prey could get its bearings.

Her mistake was jumping into a place that was directly in White Claw's line of sight.

The feline had used its free hand to grab one of the Doggirls and yanked her into the path of Darcy's spear. Horror and fear swept across the squad-leader as she met the eyes of her own subordinate right before the Doggirl was thrown to the side, her body dragging the weapon with it.

Darcy's eyes rose to meet the gaze of White Claw. Green-blue ice crystals split by a pitch black slit stared back, smouldering.

Its lips pulled back into a snarl full of teeth.

"Bah-ron bad." It raised a glowing fist.

The Hound's body reacted on instinct, pulling out her round-shield to protect herself from the punch, summoning as much elemental energy as she could to reinforce herself, to reinforce her armor.

The punch sent her flying all the same. The pain in her arm and the hard snaps told her one or several bones had shattered. Darcy expected a follow-up. She'd fallen prone, too good a chance for White Claw to pass up.

Instead, she found the feline running away, the ground she'd been standing upon littered with glowing arrows and growing moss.

"Squad-leader Darcy!"

Squad three had come to their aid, but the Hound did not feel relieved at all.

Chapter 100 [Squad Leader Ray]

Even with the weight of the armor, Ray found herself running faster than she ever remembered running. She berated herself for not putting more effort into training. She'd shrugged off her combat duties by putting her job at the power station as an excuse too often.

"Darcy!" she cried out, almost collapsing to her knees next to her sister. The Hound grunted, and Ray almost cheered at the fact she was at least alive.

"White Claw..."

"Ran." Ray quickly stated, glancing worriedly at Darcy's flaming shield. It was bent inwards. Murisium was not meant to bend. Had the attack landed squarely on the Hound... Ray shuddered at the idea.

Carefully, she moved the arm wielding the shield, and watched Darcy clench and hold back a scream.

"This..."

"Is bad." Darcy nodded, using her good hand to grasp Ray's breastplate and pull her closer. "That was not a Tigress."

"What?"

"She's a Sabertooth, she must have shifted, there's no other explanation." The Hound winced, groaning. "The others..." There was a tremble in her words as Ray helped her sit up. "Three, fuck."

Ray knew exactly what that number meant. There were only two surviving Doggirls after all. She held back the grimace, reaching into her satchel to pull out a potion. "Drink up." Putting it on Darcy's lips and watching the Hound take a heavy gulp, she used the rest to drench the arm with the multiple fractures. "This should keep you able to fight at least..."

"Won't be using my arm for much."

"The Lord requests an update."

Ray flinched, glancing at the two Mousegirls. One had been in her squad, the other in Darcy's. The duo had spoken in unison, eyes blank and distant.

"Darcy's in need of healing. White Claws retreated."

"I can smell the blood on her." Darcy growled, pushing herself on to her feet, looking around. "Where the fuck is Celine."

"En route. As is Squad two and the Lord."

"Why aren't you closer!" The Hound was already stomping towards the merged squads, looking around and through the darkness. Ray could smell her sister's fear and anger. That made the Pitbelle's every nerve stand on edge.

The two Mousegirls turned to glare at the Hound, the first expression they'd shown all night. "If you were able to hold White Claw off and wear it out, we would have no need to hurry. Watch your tongue."

Ray didn't bother to think of a response to that. Darcy's face was loud enough a proclamation already. The Hound had always cared for her squad, and now... Ray pulled out her crossbow and loaded a flechette, coaxing her elemental energy into the small rod and watching it sparkle with the charge of her lightning power.

"We cannot let White Claw close." Darcy gave the order, looking at the two remaining Doggirls along with the four Elves from Ray's squad. "It's too dangerous. Shoot on sight and block any attempts to get close. We need to buy as much time as possible until Bronte and Kimi get here. They're our only hope to avoid getting slaughtered."

"Do not kill White Claw." The mice spoke with a fierce growl. "The Lord commands it."

Ray flinched at that, seeing Darcy's expression darken, the Hound remaining quiet. The lack of acknowledgement concerned.

Clink.

Everyone froze as they heard the sound.

"North, North East." Darcy said, and as one, everyone turned in the direction she'd pointed at.

Ray took aim towards the darkness, shouldering the crossbow as she removed her finger from the trigger-guard, ready to shoot at a moment's notice. Her hand on the fore-grip held four more flechettes, charging them with her power as she prepared herself in case she missed. She would rather engage in close range, use her powers directly, but there was little option to be had since White Claw was clearly far too dangerous.

Clink.

"What's that sound?" Ray whispered under her breath.

"Jars, they contain Phoenix feather." The Hound replied, the growl echoing through her words. "It's... not moving."

"What?"

"White Claw's just there, not attacking." Darcy clenched her jaw. "Be ready, she'll-." Her eyes widened, choking as she began to wildly look around. "It used shadow dash! East!"

Shadow dash? Ray spun in the new direction. Tigresses shouldn't be able to... no, White Claw was a Sabertooth. They could use the elemental energy of darkness. Where had the maiden learned...?

"Claw copied me." Darcy growled. "South East East." The maidens rotated, keeping the tower-shields between the darkness in the direction the Hound was pointing at.

It was clear White Claw was looking for an angle on them. Ray felt cold sweat running down her back. The maiden had been a myth as a feral, claiming many lives of those who'd attempted to hunt it. And now the creature was stronger, and tame. This would be a tight fight to be sure.

Clink.

"Dodge!"

Ray saw the brown blur, and she'd nearly jumped out of the way as it'd been aimed squarely at her head. It was a close call. Fire burst against the forest floor as the jar shattered off in the distance. The Pitbelle tightened her hold on her weapon. That was Phoenix feather alright. Getting the stuff on her face would... be painful.

Wait.

"Have the Hunters... betrayed the Lord?"

"Not our concern right now. North West. Inco- READY TO SHOOT!"

The order made Ray tense, and she saw White Claw approaching. The feline wielded one of the tower shields, the blue tint of the metal a dead giveaway of it being made of murisium. The way that the feline was approaching, however, was concerning. She was keeping the piece of protection up in exactly the same way a knight would.

"Fire!"

Ray didn't aim for the shield, turning her flechette downwards towards the ground in front of White Claw's feet. The bolt flew true, unleashing the electric power it had contained all around the area it had struck. White Claw hadn't expected this, freezing up as the lightning energy coursed through her for a split second.

It was exactly what the Elves needed. Their arrows struck the shield and the ground around their mark. Vines sprouted from the shafts, latching onto the maiden's ankles and shield-bearing arm. Ray saw the opportunity, the

confusion clear on the feline's face as it continued to try to swipe away at the thickening vines before they could restrain her.

"Keep firing!"

Pulling on the string and prepping the crossbow while the Elves loaded and shot more arrows, Ray put two charged flechettes on the rails. With careful aim, she tensed, looking for the right moment. The feline maiden was fighting the vines while also blocking any direct arrows with the shield with the other hand. Seeing how easy it was to destroy the vines, it was clear their only option was to try to overwhelm her with quantity.

But the Elves didn't have infinite stamina, delaying would only make things worse.

"I'm going to flank. Look for an angle to shoot and bring White Claw down."

Ray's eyes met with Darcy's. The Hound hesitated. "Do not engage directly, keep your distance. Be ready to bolt back."

With a nod, Ray rushed to the left, crossbow aimed directly at White Claw. Her fore-grip hand was charging another set of flechettes. If she was fast, she might be able to shoot twice before having to retreat.

If she could safely close in the distance, then... but no, it was too risky.

The chance to shoot presented itself when White Claw had to turn her back towards Ray to swipe at some vines that were trying to crawl their way up her legs. Pulling the trigger, White Claw roared as the two bolts sank into her shoulder. The maiden spasmed, almost falling, but not quite.

Ray realized two wouldn't cut it, and loaded four more, shooting them just as White Claw had yanked the initial two out of her shoulder. This time, the attack struck true. The Sabertooth spasmed and shook, falling down.

But the maiden wasn't downed, twitching and still fighting.

In that moment, Ray understood there had not been enough of an elemental charge to her flechettes. The maiden would be up in seconds and the chance

to shoot again would likely be gone for good.

"Ray, no!"

Ignoring the order, the Pitbelle rushed forwards, dropping the crossbow and charging herself with as much lightning as she could muster. She only had one chance and if she wasted it, half of them could end up dead before Captain Bronte made it here.

Their prey was lying on its side, twitching even as the vines from the Elven attacks spread up her legs and tried to bind her arms.

Ray lunged, arms extended with every bit of power she could muster.

White Claw spun far faster than someone paralyzed should have been able to. She'd pretended to be hurt.

The last thing Ray saw was a piece of brown pottery crushed against her face.

Then, the world became fire and pain.

"DARCY!"

Chapter 101 [Knight Captain Bronte]

"Squad leader Ray is dead, as are over half of Squads three and four." The words hit Captain Bronte like a hammer. Her head whipped towards the blank-eyed mouse. "White Claw is confirmed injured and having disengaged from Squads three and four. Squad leader Darcy confirms it has run away in a North East direction. Celine has begun a search of potential areas White Claw might have hid in."

Captain Bronte frowned as she heard this, glancing up into the night sky. The wind was blowing south.

"She's coming for us."

"Captain?" Kimi's question came with an edge of concern.

"White Claw knows we're here, our scent must have made that clear. She must think she can catch us by surprise since we couldn't have had a chance to catch a whiff of the bloodbath." A pause and a frown. "She's aware there's too many to fight all at once. She'd rather engage us now than let us join forces."

"Wouldn't that mean that she's-?"

"It means she's sure the other squad won't find her human... and that she doesn't want to run away." Bronte frowned as the words rang out from her lips. "Does the human trust she would be able to fight us all without guidance or assistance?"

"He is an otherworlder, we should not try to guess at their line of thought." Kimi proclaimed with a slight shake of the head. "If White Claw is coming our way... we should prepare."

Bronte turned towards her squad. The maidens carried lengths of metal coil, heavy and cumbersome. It was the main reason for them not being able to keep up with the other squads. Their mobility as a squad was greatly reduced. "Ladies, prep the area, an important guest is coming our way." Her focus turned towards the Mousegirl. "Bring Celine this way, White Claw's bound to appear here, and we need her."

At her command, the maidens dropped half the coils of cable they'd been carrying and hurried to move to tie some of the cables onto nearby trees. They worked fast and efficiently. As soon as their task was done, they'd ready their crossbows and take formation. Bronte was quite proud of her squad's speed.

Mimi's Mousegirl spoke with a shudder. "Orders confirmed. Celine will be here in- DANGER!"

Bronte's hand thrust in a southward direction. She let loose a stream of sparks that flew into the darkness, piercing through the forest and vanishing into the distance. She'd not intended to hit anything in particular, the burst of light that had emanated from her attack had illuminated the dark, and in it, they saw White Claw.

It had been a split second, the feline's left claw was badly burnt, fur gone and the skin on her hand blistered, there were another couple injuries on her side, the bleeding had stopped, but the trail of red had marked its way down her thigh. There was a slight strain to her steps.

But what Bronte worried over was the look on the maiden's eyes.

White Claw was a maiden with a mission.

No wonder the other squads had nearly been wiped out. The Captain inwardly cursed at her Lord at having rushed this. They should have never approached the forest while it was dark and they weren't prepared, it gave the predatory maiden too great an advantage.

"Celine better move." Tightening her body, Bronte prepared the next bolt of lightning, her metallic skin glowing with her power. "Kimi, keep the others

safe."

"Yes, Captain." The Terrielle spoke in a nervous whisper.

Peering into the darkness, the magnetics-wielding maiden tightened her core, sparks dancing across her metallic body. She needed exactly one clue, one indicator of White Claw's position, or at least of her first intended target.

She needn't wait at all.

"South South East!" The proclamation came right as White Claw had entered the range of light of their glow-spells.

The target was one of the maidens still attempting to tie the wire to the trees. And White Claw would have made it to Bronte's subordinate if not for the very ground rising to block her path, courtesy of Kimi. White Claw bounced off of the wall of dirt and quickly rolled out of the way before the crossbow bolts could strike true.

Bronte didn't shoot, keeping the charge at the ready and the aim squarely pointed at White Claw. The feline was moving between the trees and trying to avoid giving her a clear shot, clearly considering her the bigger threat. If she let lose her attack and it missed, the maiden would take the opening to fully commit.

White Claw lunged for another of the maidens handling the wire, and Kimi created another wall of dirt to block her off. As the feline switched target, Bronte saw she'd approached one of the abandoned coils of wire and smirked.

Holding back the attack, she reached out with the rest of her concentration towards the metal. The wire sprung to life, leaping upwards and coiling around a leg. The other end snapped towards a nearby branch and tightened. White Claw tried to break free, but Bronte kept the grip of her powers tight, reaching her hip and pulling out her metal whip.

With a crack, she snapped the whip so it would coil around the wire that had captured White Claw. Only then did she unleash the contained lightning,

letting it flow down her weapon and onto the wire.

A shriek broke out, the elemental energy zapping its way into its intended target. But White Claw managed to break the metal before Bronte could release the whole of her power.

The Squad Captain felt a slight concern pool inside her as she saw White Claw stand back up with barely a tremble to her body as she dipped back into the shadows. The amount of lightning energy she'd poured into that attack would have put lesser maidens out of commission for a day. The pain alone must have been crippling.

Her eyes returned to the darkness, searching for her quarry as the squad had finished preparations. Kimi called them in and prepared walls, the work would let her create a small bunker with arrow-slits so they could shoot outwards. The objective was not to pose an actual threat to White Claw, but to protect the squad while Bronte dealt with the feline with support from Kimi's geokinesis.

The interruption was brought to an end as a beam of light pierced the canopy and down onto the forest. In its center, surprised, stood White Claw, her eyes moving upwards towards the source. Bronte smirked. "About damn time, Celine." The metallic maiden grinned, their guardian angel had showed up just in time.

"Everyone will converge in this location in five minutes. Squadrons two, three, and one will join first to give a chance to heal the critically injured."

"Yay me." Bronte tightened her jaw shut, holding her whip as she pushed her powers outwards towards the lengths of coiled cable that were placed around their location. "This is going to be tough."

White Claw had shifted her focus towards the angel shining a literal spotlight on her location. The feline tried to use the shadows to dash out of sight, but the light followed her. Bronte would've attacked, but her objective was to buy time, for both her squad and the reinforcements.

No need to rush things.

And of course White Claw immediately opted to jump into action, headed straight towards the Captain.

Because things could never go smoothly.

Focusing her control on the cables, she forced them to obstruct the feline's way, intent on tangling and trapping her in place. White Claw tried to dip into shadows to dash and close the distance, but Celine's bright beam of light kept her unable to use those abilities in full, forcing the dashes to be short, which opened up for Bronte to snatch her up and unleash thunder in her direction.

Some of them were connecting, but White Claw's movements were starting to become more and more erratic the closer she got. A desperate attempt to reduce the distance and dodge everything coming her way at the same time.

But it was a game of probability that was in Bronte's advantage, and eventually one of the free-floating cables managed to latch onto the feline's burnt wrist. The metal gave Bronte a point of leverage, and she pushed her powers to the limit to yank White Claw closer to the traps. More cables sprung out, wrapping around the restrained wrist and adding more metal that made it all the harder for her to break free.

There was a pause as Bronte began focusing on the other free-floating cables, she'd have to be careful but fast. The next length of cable was tossed toward White Claw's throat. The feline was forced to block with her free paw, and that allowed Bronte to begin the process of restraining that one as well. She squashed the thought of victory before it could form, this wasn't over, and one wrong move could spell her doom.

Just keep the feline focused on blocking cables, get her further tangled up. Reduce her movements.

"Have we-?"

"Shut up." Bronte cut Kimi's words with a harsh bite, moving the next set of cables to try yanking at the free arm towards the other length of cables, forcing the arms wide apart.

CRACK

Something hit against the Bronte's shoulder, something that barely registered to her metallic skin. Barely a poke. But it was followed by a sensation of wetness, and a sudden burst of warmth and light.

Half her vision was abruptly covered with flames, Bronte's shoulder seared with fiery pain. She didn't shout, fighting against the instinct to duck and roll or do anything to stop the pain. Her hands tightened into fists as she refused to let go of White Claw, doing so would spell everyone's doom.

She could use some of the healing potions they carried with them, but if White Claw broke free...

"Threat, South West!" She chocked, not entirely sure where the attack had come from, the fire blinding her near completely. The roar in front of her snapped her focus back to the real threat.

White Claw's body shone as she clenched hard against the wires, one by one they began to snap. The sound drove Bronte to fight against the fiery kiss the Phoenix feather was bringing to her right side. Bronte grasped her whip and lashed out at the cables, intent on unleashing everything she had to stop the maiden even if it killed them both.

CRACK

The projectile fell onto the side of the improvised bunker that still had a hole, screams were heard within. Her squad! They hadn't finished making the-

The roar in front of her made Bronte realize her mistake, seeing White Claw grasp the whip right as the metallic maiden had begun unleashing her power.

And then, the feline yanked.

Pouring everything she had into the metallic weapon, Bronte's eyes widened in horror as White Claw kept pulling her closer. The feline's eyes were

sharp, snarling, her entire body shaking. The amount of lightning Bronte was pouring into her should have finished her twice times over!

But White Claw kept pulling.

"Nonononono!" There were shouts, but Bronte couldn't look at them, couldn't see in her squad's direction.

She was entirely unable to look away from the blue-green eyes of the predator, there was fire and anger, hate and impossible determination. No pain.

It didn't make sense.

"Bah-ron, bad."

The claw grasped Bronte's wrist firmly.

Chapter 102 [Knight Scout Celine]

Flying high above the treetops, Celine could only watch in horror as the Captain was killed. The wind hid her gasp, and if not for her connection to Mimi, she just might have tried to do something about this, to help, but...

"Whatever you do, do not lose sight of White Claw. Do not engage either, keep your distance."

The telepathic order was clear, and it revolted her. "She's going to kill them all."

"And if you engage, you'll die along with them."

Cold and loathsome, the order went against everything Celine had ever believed in.

And in her horror at the unfolding massacre, she'd nearly missed the singular other sign of life in the area. It had been because the source had been so weak, so meager, barely invisible in contrast to the thick elemental energy in the air.

A human, one whose aura was no more than a flicker in the darkness.

Celine's mind surged at this, shifting her position to get a better view from above while making sure to keep White Claw within her line of sight at all times.

The human didn't just have a weaker aura, he was weakened, greatly. It was hard to discern from up above, but it was a male, and he'd collapsed, either unconscious or close to it. She hadn't seen any attack going in that direction, had the human been hit by collateral?

"KILL HIM!"

The mental screech rattled Celine's brain, she'd nearly folded her wings and dove, but held off as she realized how close she was to White Claw's location. "What?"

"That has to be the human White Claw's bonded to! Kill him now! The shock should push White Claw into a blind rage! Capturing her would be a far easier task then!"

The glow in her wing's stuttered as she turned to refocus on the bunker that had been intended to protect the rest of squad two and was now their final place of rest. Could they even stop White Claw anymore? The other squads were weakened, retreat should be-

"She's exhausted and pushing her limit, now's our chance. Quickly! The Baron commands it!"

That locked it, pushing aside her hesitation, the angel shifted her attention towards the human. He was barely alive, finishing him off shouldn't be hard. She removed her light she'd been beaming down at White Claw and focused it on her hands, slowly shaping it into an arrow.

The roar that exploded beneath her nearly knocked her out of the sky out of sheer shock, every nerve on her body demanded she switch her focus towards the bigger threat. And it became clear why, seeing how the feline was currently climbing the nearest tree at an impossible speed. Celine folded one wing and dove to the side, avoiding the path the snarling feline would've taken to attack her had she spent a single second still.

Diving, she gained momentum, using it to put some distance. She only managed to catch a glimpse of White Claw dropping to the forest floor and picking up the near unconscious human. The glare that was sent her way gave her shivers, she should quickly gain altitude and keep her distance, this way she could freely attack from out of range. Celine's breath grew ragged as she flapped her wings as strongly as she could, increasing her height.

The cool rush of the night air blew past her as she was changing her course, canting to a side and carefully looking down into the forest. A twinge of concern ran through her the moment she failed to spot White Claw. It couldn't

be, had she run with the human? Celine's eyes widened slightly, flapping harder and carefully sweeping her gaze through the darkened forest floor, seeking the aura of either the maiden or the human.

"Did you lose them!?" Mimi's voice burst inside her head and she flinched.

"Give me a- there!"

Celine dove just enough to gain some momentum again, she'd spotted the trail of elemental energy left by White Claw using shadow dash. They were heading further North? That was concerning. If they were seeking to escape the Lord and recover, then that could mean they'd be able to engage the Lord's forces in full once night fell again. Maybe even finish them off.

Bronte had been their strongest fighter, things were looking grim already.

The Angel spotted the feline, running, arms occupied, no doubt carrying her human. Celine mentally confirmed the location and direction, and began charging her arrow.

But the human in White Claw's arms saw her, and all too suddenly White Claw altered her course, jumping to the side and starting to weave her way through the trees. The angel cursed, wings pulsing in frustration, beating her wings as fast as she could to close the distance, the trees were getting in the way. She couldn't lose White Claw a second time.

The feline was fast, using her incredible strength to bounce between the trees as the movements became increasingly erratic. The chances of landing a shot were becoming dimmer by the second, if she didn't kill the human now...

The only reason she'd lasted this long had been because she didn't just blindly charge at every opportunity. Just one shot, one hit, and White Claw was bound to go berserk. The Lord would use the remaining forces to bring her down. The angel aimed, releasing a light arrow. It missed entirely, the human was looking over White Claw's shoulder and through it clearly signaling when the attack was coming as well as Celine's location.

With a curse, she realized her mistake. With the dark sky above, and from this distance, it was too easy to see the attack coming and react to it. Made all the worse by the near unpredictable movement patterns.

"Engaging White Claw, aiming for the human."

She dove closer to the treetops, holding back her light arrow and gathering the power within her instead, focusing so that her wings would not glow as well. It would be tricky, but she should be able to form the arrow and shoot it quickly enough to avoid being spotted by the human.

And at that exact instant, White Claw turned around.

Celine's eyes widened as she saw the feline drop her human and shoot straight towards the nearest tree. The angel hesitated. Only a heartbeat, White Claw would reach her location before she could escape if she didn't change course, but if she changed course, she wouldn't be able to shoot the human.

"FIRE!"

Mimi's voice inside her head snapped the decision in place, her right finger pointed towards the human, the left held the energy. And just as she formed the power, White Claw had appeared on her line of sight. The feline had leapt too early, not enough to reach her, but enough to block her view of the human. It didn't make sense, she should know she'd fall before reaching Celine, at which point-

CRACK.

A vial of brown ceramic, it smashed against the Angel's breastplate, thrown by a mere flick of White Claw's hand. Celine's eyes widened, releasing the bolt right before the Phoenix's fire ignited. Her attack impacted squarely against the feline's shoulder, knocking her ever so slightly off course. Any thoughts to start a second attack were pushed away as fire burst from her armor where the vial had broken. The flames licked at her face, and she could only hold off the pain by using her elemental light to push the pain away while her hands moved to detach the piece of armor.

"RUN!"

The order came right as Celine felt something wrap around her ankle. She gazed downwards and saw a metal cable, a whip. Bronte's whip. The wielder being none other than White Claw. The cat looked smug.

A shriek escaped the Angel, the piece of burning metal armor dropping off right as she was dragged along gravity. Her wings tried to sustain her, but her weight was too great with White Claw hanging off of her leg.

Screaming and shrieking as she fell, all Celine could do was draw every bit of elemental energy as she could to protect her body as the ground rushed up to meet her. She grit her teeth, breath knocked right out of her as the ground met her like a full-bodied hit from Bronte during training.

The dull thud was replaced with agony as she felt the sharp claws sinking into her wings. Celine shrieked, agony exploded forth, blood raining down around her as fear quickly took over. She was going to die, White Claw's grip reaching for her neck.

"MONICA!"

The voice was a male's, and suddenly White Claw's hand stopped.

Celine breathed, holding back the pain, trying to focus her powers to use what little she knew about healing to stop the bleeding. She clenched her teeth and looked up from the ground. The human, the male, was walking towards them with unsteady steps and heavy breathing. He was pale and clammy, his aura shivered with pain, he held his right arm as if unable to move it yet Celine saw no injuries, only exhaustion.

"SHOOT HIM! THE LORD ORDERS IT!" Mimi's voice rang within the Angel's head, but she could barely move, it was impossible to carry through on it.

The human didn't talk, his arms reached down and... Celine's eyes widened as her collar was removed. She felt the weight of the bond vanish instantly

and shuddered. What was he going to do to her? "I'll never surrender." She grit her teeth, fighting back the tears from the throbbing pain.

He crouched, and it was then that she noticed him drop a pouch he'd been carrying. It was a familiar pouch, from where...?

"You're going to bleed out and die." His words were ragged, breathless, the man looking as if he were at the very verge of exhaustion. "I don't know which of these can heal you."

Celine froze, blinking. The pouch, a knight's pouch. And she had a good guess as to who it once belonged to if the badge on it was anything to go by. The angel grit her teeth. "Just kill me."

"The only threat to us is the Baron, if you promise to leave us be, you don't need to die. It's why I removed the collar." He pulled out one of the vials, a red colored one, showing it to her for a moment, carefully observing her reaction. "But I have other uses for you if you don't want to collaborate."

"Wh-?"

Celine's jaw tightened as he poured a bit of the potion on her wings. Relief instantly washed through her as numbness overtook the area, a sigh left her as she relaxed ever so slightly. The human kept looking at her, taking a stick and poking at the area. "This potion helps, right?"

"Numbs the pain." She nodded, no sense in hiding it. Shock came when she saw him empty the contents on White Claw's burns.

A yowl escaped the feline maiden that was keeping the angel pinned to the ground, but what surprised Celine was watching the paleness in the human's expression soften as he sighed. A great deal of tension in his body eased up, his previously almost limp arm moving slightly again.

"Next." He pulled out a yellow potion, but the captured maiden couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"You." She gasped, watching some color return to his features and his aura regain some vigor. Her eyes widened. "You... the bond... you were taking in her pain!"

Without a word, he pulled out the next vial, this one was small, barely a thimble in size, its contents a dark swirling black. Celine's eyes widened at the sight of it, face going slightly pale. She knew she should ask to have that applied to her, to bring this situation to an end and avoid potentially falling into the hands of the enemy, but...

"Not it, then." The human nodded and put the black sphere back into the pouch. "Let's see what else we can use to patch Monica up..."

Chapter 103 [Baron Matthew Flirlai the Second]

To say Baron Matthew Flirlai the Second was angry would have been a categorical mistake. Had he lost a considerable portion of his wealth overnight, he might have been angry. Had he lost a Knight or a Knight Captain in battle, he might have been angry. But no, things were far worse than that.

His Knight Captain and head of the electric generation facility had died, as had the Knight that had been in charge of the radio tower's maintenance. Adding in the total loss of Squadron two, and the partial one from squadrons three and four, his combat capacity had been effectively crippled. It would cost him dearly to regain it.

And it was because no one had done what they should have.

"My Lord, Celine... has been cut off. Likely dead."

The noble's glare turned towards the mousy maiden wearing thick armor that stood right next to him. Mimi the Tigermouse, the only psychic in his service, the tanned short woman kept a neutral look of frustration. Matthe idly wondered whether she was part of the problem or not.

"Did she confirm the kill?"

The mousy Knight knelt, bowing her head low. "No, my Lord."

"We should consider the human's alive." The words pulled Matthew's attention towards Nalda. The Orc Knight being the only one that dared to hold her head high around him. "How long until everyone's healed?"

The question moved towards the nurse, the only dedicated healer they had brought. A sore mistake Baron Matthew was willing to admit was his own. He should've brought at least three more, but with the village about to being

attacked by a second feral wave... The man grit his teeth as he adjusted himself on the saddle of his centaur.

"These burns are severe, ma'am, I don't-." The nurse spoke in a hushed whisper, shaking her pink hair.

"Move faster, girl." Matthew commanded, watching the nurse wince and pour more energy in healing the severely burned Elf.

Burns.

When fighting a Sabertooth.

The snarl was barely held back, Darcy had confirmed it was Phoenix feathers, and the human they were chasing had also been using a scent killer. The Hunters had betrayed them, it made Matthew's lips curl in disgust. The filthy cowson that dared call himself a Major would feel the full weight of the noble's anger once this whole mess was dealt with.

He'd only need to call on the Earl and press charges of treason against the Hunter representative. After that it would only be a matter of time before the brute's own maidens would be requisitioned for the good of the Kingdom and his head made to roll.

"My Lord! White Claw approaches!"

The proclamation from the Hound startled everyone into tense attention, even the equine maiden the Baron was currently riding stirred, turning in the direction of the wind and lifting her lance and shield. "Knight Darcy is right, there is a strong stench of blood getting closer."

"Prepare for combat!" Nalda barked the command, and the maidens quickly moved.

Two Doggirls with tower-shields moved to protect the two remaining Elves. The Hound and Orc armed and ready. Things were not ideal, they'd been destroyed by the monster that was White Claw. But that would make victory

all the sweeter, once she was in his grasp, he'd be able to wash away the shame.

Success was within his grasp.

"BARON!"

The male voice came from the darkness within the forest, and it instantly raised Matthew's hackles as he recognized it. He glanced at Darcy and Mimi, the only two maidens that could see through the darkness, and neither reacted past a slight shake of their head. So the human wasn't showing himself.

"Most of your forces are dead, the rest are injured." The man continued, far off into the distance. A coward. "Give up."

"You are not the one with the most cards to play, thief! White Claw must be exhausted by now, badly hurt too." Matthew's hand tightened on the holster at his hip, the weight of the gun heavy, a reminder of the power at his disposal. "If you surrender, I will be lenient, leave the judgment of your misdeeds to the Earl." A long silence followed, and the Baron wondered whether the offworlder would answer at all. So, instead, he pushed on. "There is no need to spill human blood tonight, hasn't enough of it been lost to the ferals?"

Again, silence, a total lack of an answer that was interrupted by a light within the darkness. It was distant, barely visible to the Baron's eyes, a flame that coated a tower-shield that stood still. The Baron's mind whirled as he frowned, was that a challenge? A last stand? Who hid behind the shield, the human or White Claw?

"GET DOWN!"

The cry came from Darcy, the Hound had leapt out of her spot and straight towards the Baron. The man hadn't had the time to react, she'd moved so quickly that by the time he'd processed the words, he'd been knocked over and to the ground. Anger might have flared up within him if not for the fire that exploded out of Darcy's back instants afterwards. It came with the sound of shattering pottery.

"White Claw removed her scent! She's attacking from South West!" Mimi's voice squeaked out in a desperate shriek.

She might as well have said nothing at all. The fire had exploded in several places at once, the one targeting the Baron had only been one of four, the splash of damage coated Darcy's shoulder and a considerable percentage of the Centaur's equine back, the equine maiden panicking and running off as fast as she could. Shrieks and panic broke out all around them as everything moved fast.

The noble stumbled to his feet as Nalda pulled him to his feet, equipping her short sword and blocking his view of the battlefield as she stood her ground, the singular protection from what was surely White Claw now that his steed had been scared off so easily. The roar that exploded from somewhere ahead of them made the Baron feel his armor was far too heavy to be able to let him run if the need for it arose.

Instead of running though, he called out his subordinate. "Mimi!"

The Tigermouse did not respond, kneeling as her hands were aimed forward, her body glowing bright lavender as she wielded the mind energy. It was only once he'd been fully on his feet that the Baron got a chance to witness what had happened within the mere span of a handful of seconds.

One Elf lay on the ground, minus the head, the other was rolling, still aflame. Both Doggirls had been struck in some fashion, laying in pools of blood; and the Centaur was nowhere to be seen. Nalda and Darcy were the only remaining effective fighters, the first wielding a short sword and a round shield, the latter a spear and tower shield. And they were currently struggling against the feline that was ducking between their attacks, trying to push towards the Baron but getting cut off every time.

"HIT HER WITH EVERYTHING!" The Baron roared at Mimi, pulling out the elemental gun from its holster, the weight of the weapon making him feel his arm strain.

Matthew checked his surroundings one last time to make sure there were no other potential threats. The nurse was tending to the Elf with a burnt face, her

back turned towards the noble. So long as the healer was alive, the Baron felt reassured of what was about to happen next.

The psychic mouse squeaked, stopping her attack and pooling energy for a larger one. A twinge of nervousness shot through Matthew as he saw White Claw speed up, the restraints that had been holding her back lifted. All too quickly she struck out against Nalda's shield with such force the Orc was sent flying. Immediately she leapt towards Darcy and the Hound was cornered, barely able to defend herself against the Sabertooth, quickly losing ground.

For a moment all the noble could feel towards the feline maiden was awe, the same awe he'd felt the first time he'd seen her, wild, unstoppable, powerful. Even with the burns and bleeding wounds, and the exhaustion, even then she was putting his best fighters to shame. Surely a maiden such as this would qualify for a Royal Knight once properly trained. All his troubles would become a thing of the past.

Which was a shame that he had to gamble all of it away, but there was no other alternative anymore. Raising the gun, using both hands to carefully wield its weight, he aligned the barrel.

There was a whizzing sound, something flying past his head but close enough it had nearly missed. He almost startled and pulled the trigger on instinct, but held back at the last second, glancing at his side and meeting the hateful gaze of that loathsome thief as the offworlder loaded another flechette onto the crossbow. The man was too far away to stop him.

Matthew laughed.

"Watch as I end everything you fought for."

He turned forward once more, his boot kicking the Tigermouse, signaling her it was time. The maiden's glow became all the brighter and all too suddenly vanished right as she collapsed. Matthew felt the dull thud of a flechette hitting his armor, but he knew it would be useless against the enchantments. His focus was on White Claw, and how she suddenly froze, eyes wide in shock as a dull magenta glow wrapped her.

It had slowed her down.

Enough for Darcy to jump out of the way.

Enough for the Baron to have a clear shot.

He pulled the trigger.

And White Claw fell.

Chapter 104 [Rick]

After spending the past half hour in a dead sprint across the forest just to catch up to Monica after the pain from the burns she'd experienced had nearly knocked him out cold, Rick wasn't exactly certain of what he'd be able to contribute to the fight. Thus why the chemistry teacher had been a bit too focused trying to close in on the Baron without being detected.

He'd wanted to sneak in closer, ready to use the Phoenix feather or the black vial on the guy to bring it all to an end if the chance arose. But then he'd seen the guy pull out the gun, and all bets were off. At the provided distance he couldn't throw anything effectively, so instead, he used the crossbow he'd picked up from one of the dead maidens.

The metal arrows bounced off of the armor like they were no better than nerf darts. Leaving Rick as merely a spectator to the firearm wielding Baron taking aim. The gun was practically the size of his arm, the muzzle wide enough it would have made a tight fit for his fist. It was a hand-held canon.

And then the gunshot rung across the forest like a clap of thunder.

Rick had felt more than seen or heard it. A gut-punch that knocked the air right out of his lungs and left his knees feeling like melted butter. His mind whirled, a cry out to Monica almost made it out of his lips but it only came as a choking sound. Fire burned and coiled within his innards like an angry snake, weakness and pain all too suddenly.

Monica's roar of agony rattled his bones, the chemistry teacher pulled at the feeling as best he could, trying to hold it down, pin it in place, remove some of the worst of it from Monica lest it leave her too out of the fight. But there was just so much of it that Rick wasn't even sure he had the strength to do more than struggle to breathe. The pain was a forest fire and he had no more than a glass of water to put it out.

Raising his gaze at the Baron, the man had dropped the gun, the barrel glowed red hot, smoke sizzled out of the muzzle, the canon bent from the heat. The lord's own armor had cracked, the recoil on the firearm being apparently monumental enough to shatter it. The nobleman's face was split by a wide eager smile as he walked forward, not even sparing a glare at Rick. "Hold her in place."

The teacher barely found the strength to rise to his knees, looking towards Monica and feeling his blood run cold.

She was pale, gasping, and weakly struggling against the two maidens pinning down her arms. And in her belly there was a large red hole, big enough Rick could've sworn he could see through it, blood pooling as the feline's eyes moved wildly from side to side. "Rick." She managed to speak with a gasp.

It sent a chill down his spine, the red hot and electric, the localized agony in his gut drawing out every ounce of strength he had.

"Nurse! Make sure she doesn't die, or else all this would have been for naught!" The Baron spoke with a jovial grin, laughing as the maiden with pink hair rushed to kneel in front of Monica.

The nurse's hair hid her face as she didn't look in Rick's direction, hands glowing with a dull gray light, but he knew who she was. Dia. "Brain and heart weren't seriously hurt... I can keep her alive until she reaches the hospital."

"I want her to be stable." The Baron snarled. "Can you?"

"...with all due respect, my Lord, even if we used every potion available, it would be tough."

"Then do that." He dropped a bag next to her, turning around and facing Rick. "Mimi."

"Yes, Lord."

Rick tried to move, to get out of the way. His legs were weak, his mind spun with the dizzying white hot burning sensation, his eyes unable to look away from Monica. She was growing paler, breathing becoming weaker, he could feel her presence slowly slipping from him, like a tree being ripped from the soil by a furious wind.

But he couldn't keep his focus on her any longer, the mousy maiden with a deep tan had him pinned within the next three seconds. In following two, she'd emptied his pockets and tossed the crossbow well outside his reach.

"Rihck..."

Monica's wheeze came with a slight cough, her face an ashen gray.

The Baron laughed, and the human fought against the mouse's grip. She was lighter than him, but her hands had an iron hold on his wrists, her tail keeping his ankles tight together as well.

The sight of the Baron's metal-coated boot forced Rick to look upwards.

"You lost." The noble chuckled, walking back and forth, staring down at the chemistry teacher as he glared hot coals of anger in return. "The only reason you got this far was because you took what was rightfully mine."

The glare was a silent one, Rick's jaw held tightly enough his teeth ached.

"Unlike you, I'm not a barbarian. So rejoice! You're not going to die tonight."
"

The laughter became all the louder as the chemistry teacher's expression faltered, feeling something was deeply wrong with the situation, that what the cold angry eyes looking at him could not truly allow for his survival.

The Baron kept talking. "You're a pure human. Killing you would be a loss to the kingdom. There is much good your genes could bring to this land." The man reached into the pouch hanging from his belt and pulled out a singular round piece of metal the size of his palm. "I will put you to good use."

The coin glimmered under the floating orbs of light that cast the clearing into a yellow gloom. The only defining feature of the item was the '5' etched on its side, and a sense of dread that churned within Rick's stomach when looking at it. Every hair on his body stood on edge at the mere presence of the thing.

"My Lord..." Dia's voice rang out, her healing faltering as she looked at the coin, and then at Rick. Fear was painted across her every feature. "Fiving coins are too powerful for use on humans!"

A slight snarl crept across the Baron's face, his grip on the coin tightening as the metal gave a slight black glow that appeared to suck the light out of its surroundings. "It won't kill him. He'll just never truly recover. Which works just as well. His mind is of no value to me."

Lowering himself, crouching so he could meet Rick's eyes, the Baron's lips curled into an upwards smile.

"Any last words?"

"Monica will never be yours."

The smile grew. "I'm sure she'll cry your name a few more times." He smirked, lowering his voice into a whisper, one gauntlet covered hand grasping Rick's jaw tightly. "But don't worry, the shock of having your mind erased will break the bond... and if it doesn't, I'll just do the same to her. One way or the other, she will be mine and no one else's."

Rick spat at the man, wildly struggling against the iron grip of the tiny maiden that kept him firmly immobile. The noble grimaced, whipping the spit off, the edge of amusement not entirely gone. "As your friend told me: '*I hope you rot in hell*'."

Leaning down, the Baron pressed the coin against Rick's forehead. Its surface cold and hard and electric.

It started with an intense tingling sensation, a ticklish itch that quickly spread all over his skull, turning into lightning and ice. Rick screamed, fighting with

everything he had against the restraints of the maiden atop of him, the sound drowned out by the intense ringing that exploded within his skull. His vision turned white and every muscle on his body seized at the same time right as his sense of touch began to become numb. For a fraction of a second, he almost thought he'd manage to throw off his capturer, but his thoughts didn't get to exist for much longer let alone any sensation from the rest of his body.

A storm of white noise spread within him, his thoughts battered away against a growing sphere of nothingness. There was no chance to fight back, everything that touched the nothingness vanished. His mind scattered, trying to escape, but bound within the confines of his brain, there was nowhere to run. Thinking was pain, feeling was pain, and through the pain, everything in its wake was left in void.

"RICK!"

The voice screamed within the nothingness like the ring of a bell.

He blinked.

The first thing he felt was his own breathing, hard and raspy, struggling against a heart that beat so fast it felt like it was going to explode. The next was the warm wetness on his face and head, and slowly, the whiteness that covered his vision was receding. And what he saw in front of him as his eyes regained focus was slowly pushing thoughts back into existence.

The Baron was kneeling, eyes wide in horror, face pale, hands trembling and reaching upwards. A blade struck out of the noble's throat, blood pouring down the man's chest.

The coin had fallen off of Rick's forehead and somewhere to the forest floor.

Dia was the one holding the dagger, pushing it forward with another spurt, and then... pulling it back. The Baron collapsed.

"My Lord!" Two voices rang out at the same time.

A third voice leaned over Rick and spoke in barely a whisper. "Close your eyes." The force binding his wrists and ankles released.

He managed to look away from the surge of blinding white light that engulfed the space in front of him.

As soon as the dazzling flash ended, the weight that had been keeping Rick pinned in place was off. The human was fighting to be able to focus, his head felt like it had been dunked into molasses. Everything was a painful blur if he tried to summon thoughts. So he didn't think, his eyes locked onto the brown vial along the black glass thimble with a stopper, two items that had been in his pocket merely seconds ago, and he grasped at them both as he found the strength to rise to his feet. Emotion led his actions, fear and anger urging him to move.

The Baron's dying body was knocked over backwards, and Dia was caught by surprise, almost falling as well. The nurse said something, but her words were left as a numb ringing in the chemistry teacher's ears.

He didn't pay attention to her, nor to the canine that was fighting the glowing mouse. Rick's eyes were locked onto the green-skinned maiden that was screaming and covering her eyes in pain from the flash of light. Something inside Rick told him she was his enemy. Nothing else mattered. With stumbling steps, he moved forward, his palm slammed against the right side of the green-skin's face, shattering both vials on impact.

The fire that erupted from the liquid wreathed both his hand and the maiden's left temple. It brought a sudden sharp jolt of pain. The sensation a sharp knife to his brain that pushed his mind to move, to wake up, to drag itself back into action. Pain, the forest, the Baron, Monica. **MONICA!**

Snarling, Rick pushed forward, using his whole weight to ram against the shocked and half-blinded Orc. She fell by his weight alone, dropping her short sword and clawing at her face, the green skin frothing under her fingers. The maiden was too concerned on the searing pain. There was something in the flames, green and bright, the smell they gave off stung Rick's throat. But he didn't have time to think, to feel, the sensation was almost distant in his

mad search for a weapon. He found her sword and grasped it, seeking to give its sharp edge something to sink into.

The Orc's wildly flinging free hand almost knocked the weapon out of his hands, sheer luck letting him keep hold as he swung down at her head. The second attempt struck against her throat, exposed, unburned, and yet it barely scratched her. The Orc barely did more than cough and begin moving more wildly.

Letting out a scream of frustration, the human pulled at every ounce of anger and strength he had.

"HEY BITCH!"

The shout made her stop only long enough to look at him with her unburned eye. And that pause was all he needed. The blade came down towards her burning eye-socket, and her free hand grasped at it before it could strike true.

Her singular eye seared with growing rage, a snarl rumbling out of her chest as her face burnt under the liquid fire. "You!" She screamed, her fingers gripping the blade more tightly, blood oozing out of her grasp. Rick pushed down with both hands, putting his weight into it as best he could. The moment she knocked him off, he was dead.

And with the green flames dying out, she was slowly regaining her strength.

That is, until black veins began to spread from the burn-wounds. They pulsed and spread across her skull, the burns turned into pustulant blisters, skin boiling and melting.

Rick pushed harder, shoving more of his weight down on the blade, unable to look away as the flames that covered half her face were being replaced by frothing flesh, leaving behind blackened skin and bone. His own arm still burned, but everything felt too numb for him to be able to properly feel more than a slight pain from it.

"GO JOIN THAT ASSHOLE!" He roared back at her, reaching down with his burning hand and pressing it against her free eye while his other hand

used his weight to push down, heels digging into the dirt.

The Orc screamed, the arm that had been on her face falling numbly as she held the edge with the remaining one. The blackness was spreading further across her face, Rick's searing fingers pushing into the good eye until it began to sink. Opening her mouth, she roared, a primal scream as she shook and tensed.

Her fingers slipped.

Weight and gravity took its course.

The blade pierced through her eye, a singular solid thunk and the Orc abruptly went limp.

Rick stumbled and fell next to her, his body shaking and mind reeling. Silence spread within his mind. Strength left him with a sudden gasp. His gaze was blurring, and the world was suddenly spinning very fast. His legs gave out, falling to his knees. Only then did he become aware of the nasty purple burns that covered his right arm all the way to his elbow. He could barely make out black tendrils creeping up under his skin, their presence chilling his bones as they moved.

"Rick."

The single word made him raise his head to look at Monica, the feline laying against the tree as she stared at him with those blue-green eyes. A pale smile lingered on her lips, her face almost white as a sheet. Rick figured he didn't look much better.

All around him the world seemed to be getting darker at the edges.

"I'm sorry."

That caught his attention, he turned his head to look over his shoulder barely in time to see the glowing blade strike his arm. In a single burst of pain his mind became lucid again. His heart began to pump wildly once more as he screamed. The noise became muffled as something cold was pressed against

his lips, a liquid pouring into his throat that turned into fire, glowing hands pressing against the bleeding stump. It was too overwhelming, he coughed out, struggling for breath.

"DRINK!" The voice rung, Rick inhaled air and gulped, everything was becoming a whirlwind of confusing sensation.

Everything was blurring again as he collapsed back to the dirt.

"It's the only way to stop the poison."

The voice was distant, poison, the black thing, the black thing he'd smashed with his hand. "Monica." He grit his teeth. "Heal..."

"Sir, if-."

Summoning every ounce of strength he had left, Rick's left hand reached out for the first thing he could see. A piece of leather, armor, a woman with pink hair. He yanked her closer, meeting violet gaze and snarling. "That's an order." He put everything into those words, everything he had left. Only after realizing it was Dia. Her name was Dia. He did not let go until she nodded.

Her face was pale and splattered with blood, her eyes wide with shock and panic. There was little room to doubt she'd follow it.

With that reassurance, he didn't have anything else keeping him focused. Rick collapsed, all strength gone in a poof of smoke, his body taking the opportunity to overwhelm him with every bit of sensation it could throw his way.

A pair of soft hands grasped the sides of his head and slowly cradled it. Rick barely managed to spot the mouse that had pinned him down earlier. Purple light emerged from her touch, and a soothing wave of calmness swept over him. His body felt further and further away, the pain and tiredness something increasingly distant and foreign.

He caught sight of Dia's hands glowing over Monica's injury right as his eyes became too heavy to keep open.

Time slipped from his grasp, and the world spun into darkness.

Chapter 105 [Rick]

Rick couldn't think, or feel, or move, but he could sense the passage of time vaguely. It was a slow eternity before he could sense the hands holding his head, the soothing detachment and sense of distance, the whispers of voices. He tried to wake up, but he couldn't, he was too tired, his everything felt like it would hurt and his everything felt wrong. Like he was feeling several things at the same time.

When he was finally able to open his eyes again, Rick realized the world had shifted. He was somewhere else, somewhere with a rocky stony ceiling over his head that gave him a strange sensation of having been there before.

The pink-haired maiden kneeling next to him was certainly more familiar. It took him a moment to properly recall her name. Dia. "I feel like this has happened before." Rick spoke out, his voice cracking.

Dia startled, eyes opening and instantly reaching out and pressing her hands on his chest, the gray glow pouring into him with warmth before stopping as soon as she realized what she was doing. "Sir." She looked at him, blinking with a forlorn troubled look, there were bags under her eyes, and exhaustion permeating out of her every pore.

"Monica?" He croaked out.

"Unconscious, but stable." She pipped up instantly, tensing as she looked down at him and grimaced. "She... will live."

"Am I in a bad spot?"

"You're stable too, sir." The nurse deflected the question.

Rick closed his eyes and breathed in. "I can't move."

"You will make a full recovery, sir... I hope."

There was a trickle of concern to be had there. "Hope?"

"How..." The maiden paused, her lips curling and brows furrowed. "How much... do you remember?"

She had her hands on his chest, there was a dim glow, and Rick abruptly realized she was a snap-decision away from knocking him out. "I... fought the Baron, no, Monica fought the Baron, we, she... killed... and lost, and..."

"What is your name?"

The question caught him by surprise a little. "Rick Cross."

"And where were you born?"

"I was born in..." The words abruptly died in his throat, his breath hitched. "I was born in..." A deep breath, his brows furrowed. "I... was born in a... in a... it was a city, I..." His breathing was quickening as he felt his heart start to hammer. "It... it was a medium? No, large, no, small? It had... a college. I worked there as a teacher, chemistry." It was right at the tip of his tongue, like a shelf he could barely reach out. A name, right there, it was right there! "My mother's maiden name was Angela Cale, she... came to live in the city from a small town. I've been there, the farm, the chicken, the-."

He stopped as he saw Dia's tears. "I'm sorry." Her fingers tightened, squeezing against his chest as her lips trembled.

Rick couldn't find a response. He didn't need to ask her what she was sorry about, it felt like a mountain had fallen on her shoulders. The words were loaded with meaning, far more than he could process right now.

There was nothing he could say about it, so... he didn't.

"My arm?"

Dia let out a hiccup, wiping off the tear. "Sir?"

"My arm." Rick muttered again, feeling drained, tired, exhausted, and every other synonym to the word in existence. He wanted to sleep and rest and eat.

"We had to amputate to avoid the spread of the poison." Dia's hand moved to touch his shoulder. "Limb regrowth is perfectly possible, your body will make a full recovery in time."

"That's... good." Rick let out a sigh he hadn't known he'd been holding onto. "That's good." A deep breath, trying to not think about the other wound. "The others?"

"They are outside, safe." Dia quickly nodded, her fingers carefully pressing against his bandaged chest, her gaze distant.

Closing his eyes, he tried to find something else. "How... did we win?"

"Sir?"

"After the... coin."

"The... Baron died." The nurse's body tensed as she spoke, her eyes closing tight for a second. "I killed the Baron." She added, there was a slight shake of her voice. "Just... it was wrong, I couldn't let him... I couldn't let him..." Lips pursing, she became quiet.

Rick held his expression neutral. "And then?"

"And then... Mimi helped."

"Mimi."

"The Tigermouse." A slight nod. "The one that had been pinning you down."

"... why?"

"The Baroness commanded it."

There was a long pregnant pause, the chemistry teacher looked up at the rocky ceiling and blinked. "The Baroness." He spoke with a deadpan, not having expected that answer.

"Mimi was never bonded to the Baron." Dia nodded again, her expression a complicated one. "Her Ladyship ordered Mimi to sabotage the fight, and if the Baron died, then to aid in subduing the others."

"If." He blinked. "You said 'if'."

A slow nod. "The Lady's goal was to weaken the Baron, to make her own fight against him more certain of victory." The voice came from somewhere to the right, Rick wanted to turn his head to look, but couldn't, forced instead to keep looking straight upwards. "She is thankful for your help, and has given orders to the Hunters to come pick us up once the second feral wave concludes."

"Rick's awake!?" A voice rang out from outside.

The aforementioned Rick wanted to sigh as he could recognize the voice.

There was a shift in the light, all too suddenly there was a lot less of it. One blond woman was leaning down to look at him with a smirk, Tomas not too far away and a bit more apprehensive. Then there was the woman with scales on her face and Rick felt himself tense up. "Who-!?"

"Rick, meet Lizzy." Kat waved. "She's the one who took some of our chicken, she came back! Anyway, I totally bonded her all bad-ass like, and it was great and-."

"Lizzy tried to kidnap her." Tomas piped up. "Freya almost killed her."

Closing his eyes, the teacher sighed, feeling a slight sense of relief at being able to recognize them. At least that part hadn't been harmed in the incident.

"Please stand back!" Everyone startled at the harsh bite in Dia's voice, the nurse particularly glaring at the aforementioned Lizzy. The loudness nearly made them all jump back, the nurse leveled her intense gaze on the others. "The patient is in a near critical condition, leave now or be made to leave."

Slightly pale, the trio had quickly scampered out of sight, and Dia let out an exasperated sigh. Leaning down, her eyes met Rick's once more. "Sorry

about that, sir," she whispered, carefully caressing his shoulder, fingers readjusting the bandages ever so slightly. "Are you... uncomfortable? Does it hurt anywhere?"

"I can barely move, let alone feel anything." He replied with a deadpan that did a poor job of hiding a slight chuckle. The relief was washing through him in waves. They'd won.

Dia nodded, and another long silence stretched out, only the sound of the wind outside and his own breaths as the teacher did his level best to keep his thoughts in order, to calm down and recover. The nurse's eyes kept trailing over him, her fingers fussing over his chest and arm as if looking for any possible tiny scratch she might have missed to heal it up.

There was that quiet nervousness about her.

"Where's... Monica?"

He finally broke the silence, the question snapping Dia out of the apparently automatic action. She didn't answer, instead reaching out to grab his head and very slowly and carefully turn it to the side opposite to the entrance of the cave.

Monica lay right there, barely half a meter away, her sleep so silent he'd not even noticed.

The feline was still, her stomach wrapped in so many bandages it was impossible to tell the actual state she was in, if not for the slight rise and fall of her chest, Rick would have feared the worst. His own body was too numb for him to feel anything, a familiar thing considering the time he'd woken up in the hospital.

His eyes caught sight of Monica's claw as it lay on his hand, her fingers grasping his own ever so gently.

"Can you...?"

He needn't ask further, Dia leaned forward, glowing fingers tracing a line from his wrist up to his shoulder and neck. Sensation came back to him, only his left arm, only a slight soft tingle.

It was uncomfortable, almost painful.

But it was enough for him to squeeze back.

"Thank you." Rick whispered, letting out a sigh, glancing at Dia as she let out a shy smile.

Something else caught his attention.

"Where's... your collar?"

And Dia looked away, hiding a troubled expression as her cheeks blushed.

Chapter 106 [Barry]

The heaviness in Barry's chest pressed against his heart and lungs as he moved across the forest floor. It cut his breath short and kept his ribcage tight, almost ready to burst. The phantom pain from getting stabbed through the ribcage had been slowly dissipating. At least it was no longer suffocating him to the point he'd crumble in wheezing agony if he pushed too hard.

"Are you at your limit?"

Kajou's words rang out in the same tone of concern that had been used at least half a dozen times since they'd set out. Her hand lingered near his shoulder, and she had a worried expression on her face. The Amazon's eyes kept flickering towards the forest behind them, always looking for some potential threat that just might jump out and attack them.

Wheezing slightly, the young man could do nothing but shake his head. "I can... do... a bit more."

"Pan isn't here." Kajou frowned slightly, giving a little nod of her head. "No need to play tough, you've shown you're strong enough."

A bitter pill coming from a being capable of knocking down your average pine tree in a dozen punches. Barry grimaced, shoulders slumping slightly as he let out a sigh. It was the only answer he could give, and he watched as Kajou shifted her pack so it would hang from her front. The young woman crouched, turning to face away from him, her back inviting him to hop on.

The feelings of embarrassment and self-loathing warred within him as he approached, hopping on to get a piggy-back ride from the maiden that was just about as tall as him and yet at least an order of magnitude stronger, if not more. Her shoulders were narrow and lithe, her skin soft. By all accounts, she shouldn't be able to handle another person's weight this easily. Yet that was exactly what she did.

"Grab on tight," she spoke with amusement somewhere hidden in her voice.

Barry's hands found nothing but skin soft as velvet, with muscles right underneath that were hard as steel. The only discomfort the maiden showed appeared to be balancing herself rather than the actual strain from carrying the weight of the young man on her back. It was an extraordinarily strange feeling, sensing how she adjusted her balance because of the shift in center of gravity.

It took her only a couple of seconds to get comfortable, and then she began to run. Faster than the pace she'd kept when they walked together. "We shouldn't be too far from the court. Hopefully we can get there before we have to start looking into fighting the ferals." Her voice showed no strain from the effort.

"Can't we just... climb a tree and wait things out?" Barry muttered, looking around. The trees here weren't monsters of impossible height as where they'd landed, but they were almost comparable to redwoods either way.

"We'd be exposed to anything and everything that might opt to make a meal out of us," the woman replied without missing a beat. "One hungry or aggressive feral opts to look up and shoot at us, or fly down from the sky, and we'd be tumbling down into the thick of things."

"You've dealt with this kind of thing before?"

"We all have." The woman paused, frowning, slowing down to look over her shoulder at him. "But with you, we might have a chance to fix things."

Barry opened his mouth to reply, but could not find the words. His gaze lowered and turned away, staring into the distance as he tried to keep himself from speaking the rebuttal out loud. What the hell was she expecting out of him? To be some sort of savior? He couldn't even save himself.

Kajou didn't seem to mind his lack of an answer. Focusing ahead on the tricky forest terrain and moving at a speed Barry would have been unable to keep even at his best.

Eventually, the young man found his way through his thoughts and threw out a question. "What's so important about this Court, anyway? Why send you two

from so far away just to get you to talk to them?"

"We need to confirm whether some rumors regarding a different way to form bonds with humans are true." The Amazon kept looking over her shoulder at him, clearly intent on gauging his reactions. "Even if it's just a rumor, establishing some relations could prove helpful to everyone." Despite this statement, she let out a disappointed sigh. "Personally, I'd rather turn around and go back to Coven, now that we've seen that you can bond without a collar."

"I'm not sure it's..."

"Barry, I can feel how hard it is for you to breathe." Kajou frowned slightly, not slowing down. It was odd to see how fast she could run, and yet she wasn't even winded. "You have nightmares of her death, you scream sometimes."

"It could just be PTSD."

"I don't know what that is," she replied. "But you have to trust me on this one. I know what I saw. You bonded her, and you're showing all the signs of a broken bond. And I'm sure something must have happened with that Hound because if a bond hadn't formed, I'm absolutely sure you would have ended up dead."

Barry's grip on her shoulders loosened ever so slightly, but he didn't let go. "Does the pain go away?"

That seemed to brighten the maiden, her lips turning into a slight smile as her pace accelerated. "According to our elder, yes, with time and new bonds."

The young man wasn't too sure what to feel about that proclamation. The tightness within his chest brought his thoughts towards Pan and the glowing, burning sword. It made him grimace and shrink slightly. He could barely stay alive, not even properly run. Was this what would await him every time? The only reason why he'd survived the pit, the ferals, had been Kajou.

It made him feel useless, weak, small.

For the first time in what felt like forever, his thoughts turned to Mark. Was his brother even alive? Was... Veronica? Barry's lips thinned at the memory of the young woman. Shame and anger burned inside him. She'd betrayed them. If Mark found out, Barry was sure he'd likely try to kill her... if they were still alive at all.

Shaking his head, Barry refused to let his thoughts be further dragged down. No, Mark was alive, out there, somewhere. Maybe he'd even found out about what had happened. There was no way his older brother wasn't able to handle the bat-shit insanity this world had to offer. A slight lightness came to Barry's chest at this thought. It was hard to think Mark would be anything other than alive.

His musings came to an end when he spotted a flicker of white overhead. The young man quickly stiffened, gripping Kajou's shoulders. She didn't miss the signal, slowing down and coming to a halt, glancing upwards until they both spotted Pan. The winged maiden was descending from the treetops, spiraling her way to the ground with a stern look on her face.

Barry could not hop off of Kajou fast enough, doing his level best to move away from the Amazon and to the nearest tree and, hopefully, remain away from the blond woman's immediate attention.

"What's the situation?" Kajou spoke out before Pan had even finished landing.

The blond monster's gaze turned to Barry, and her eyes narrowed as her fingers lingered on the pommel of her sword for only a second before looking back at Kajou. "No frenzy yet, but I spotted a second wave."

"Already?"

"It was on the other side of the river," she replied, shaking her head. "I doubt we'll have to worry about that one."

Kajou frowned slightly. "You flew all the way to the river?" Approaching her sister, she reached out, touching the tunic. "You changed your clothes... you were attacked, weren't you?"

"Some ferals trying to get a lucky shot," came the reply, a roll of the eyes. "I had to confirm there weren't Hunters chasing the ferals, and that might come our way."

"They could have spotted you."

"Do you take me for an idiot?" Pan replied. "I was pretending to be feral."

Kajou's eyes widened, her hand shooting out and touching the black collar the woman wore. There was a pause. She touched her own, softly. "You didn't take the collar off." The words were both accusatory and heavy with relief. Her brows furrowed slightly. There was something in that gaze that hesitated, something that went unspoken.

"We need to move. We're almost at the court. I spotted the tree they told us to look for. Adjust the course a bit more to the South." Pan spoke up before Kajou could say anything else. "It should only take us a day, two if you keep pretending the human's actually walking on his own."

Spreading her wings, she jumped into the air, taking several strokes before she'd gained momentum and started gaining height. A lingering silence permeated the two left behind as the woman kept going up and up, and eventually soared off.

"I think she's warming up to you," Kajou commented offhandedly, glancing at Barry with a smirk.

He could only gawk at such a proclamation.

Chapter 107 [Brye]

There were many things Brye had heard about the Wildlings living in the forests south of the kingdom. Of the very many terrible things they did to those they captured. Humans would be castrated and put into underground holes, never to see the light of day ever again. Maidens would be worked to exhaustion and then slowly killed, skinned alive one strip at a time, eventually being cooked into soup.

Of the Dark Elf Courts specifically, the stories only grew wilder still.

She knew many of these things were just folk tales. Brye mostly expected a series of crumbling shacks built atop some old ruins and some group of amateurs without a clue about what they were doing.

Not this.

"I think this is the fanciest place I've ever slept in."

Shery's tone might have held the typical detached cynical bite, but Brye could tell her partner in crime was truly marveling at the polished wooden finish in the walls and roof surrounding them, at the enchanted glow stone that kept a constant dim source of light, the large holes that might as well have been called windows, and the spider-silk clothes they'd been given to wear.

Brye had seen better, but this was still impressive considering how far away they were from actual civilization.

"They're buttering us up," the fox claimed easily enough. Her two tails were stiff, and her ears kept rotating around as she was trying to pinpoint where the real threats lay.

"Think we can make a run for it?" Shery asked. Brye's words had brought the maiden's thoughts back down to reality.

"The room's got spellwork, can't use my powers to sense anything."

Technically true. The enchantments that had been weaved into the wood kept her psychic abilities from reaching past the window's threshold. Like hitting an invisible wall. Though the Nogitsune was still perfectly capable of picking up the breathing of at least two guards on the other side of the door.

With a frown, Brye grabbed up a raisin from the fruit platter and tossed it out through the hole that was the "window". She watched it soar out into the empty void and out at the other end as if there were nothing there. Yet her powers could not follow it past that empty space.

"Can't teleport out either."

She might be able to jump out the normal way, but she suspected there was at least an alarm in place if not an actual barrier that'd block their attempt.

Shery didn't speak the curse out loud, but her thoughts were loud enough to cover for that.

"It is unfortunate, but we can't quite trust you yet."

Brye jumped forward and turned around. Power pooled in her hands, ready to attack. Her golden eyes focused on the spot the voice had come from. The sight of the Warlock made Brye's hackles rise. The fact that she could not sense the old maiden's presence immediately raised alarms. It was as if it were an illusion, but Brye knew her way around such things, and this was flesh and bone.

"At least I hope that will change." The gangling coal-colored woman smiled with rows of perfect white teeth. The gesture would have almost been disarming were it not for the white eyes, unable to focus on anything, distant and cold, blind.

How old was this creature? Brye had seen maidens whose lives were counted in generations, and none had felt this ancient. Like a corpse that had been shambling half-dead, unwilling to die.

The sooner this conversation came to an end, the better. "What do you want from us?"

"Straight to the point? I can certainly appreciate that." Milky eyes turned to focus on Brye, and the Nogitsune felt the pressure of the power held behind that half-blind gaze, pinning her in place. "You were set up to fail, were it not because I am... generous, you would be dead right now."

Neither Brye nor Shery spoke, though the fox could feel the twinge of apprehension in her companion's thoughts.

Uninterrupted, the Warlock continued. "The collars your owner has been selling to us are faulty, by design." A bony finger reached out to point at the collars both maidens wore. "The very ones you wear right now."

A shiver ran down Brye's spine; both her tails stiffened. But she kept quiet, only sharing a concerned look with Shery. Had they fucked themselves over?

"In three months' time, it will start to fail," the old maiden proclaimed, silently walking towards the table that had a platter of fruit on top. "It will start as random small failures. One night you wake up realizing the bond broke. Nothing you can't fix, but give it a week and then it starts happening every other night. Within days it just stops forming the bond at all."

A cold knot of ice formed in Brye's stomach, her lips thinning and her ears laying flat against her head. "You're buying some high grade illegal shit, if you expect it to work like the normal..."

The woman laughed, picking up a pear and looking at it intently before gingerly returning it to the platter. "I accepted that argument, at first. I've since come to realize that was a foolish mistake on my part."

Walking across the room, gliding in her dark silk gown, the woman looked out the window, her fingers reaching out to touch the empty space in the window's threshold. With a flicker of power, the space turned black, almost as dark as the maiden herself. Brye flinched as all sounds from outside were abruptly cut off. The only source of light now was the dim glow of the stone above.

"I have since learned a bit regarding enchantments." The woman turned towards them, frowning ever so slightly.

The fox flinched, grimacing as the Warlock turned towards them, approaching with silent steps, the only sound that of the wood creaking under her weight, and the air rustling in her wake. Yet not a sound came out of the maiden- not that of her heart, or her breathing, or her clothes. Brye would've put doubt on her own hearing if not because Shery's heart was pounding so hard a human could have probably noticed it.

The Warlock reached out, cold bony fingers hooked on Brye's jaw and tugged at her face to meet the milky white chalky eyes. Brye could feel the frailty of the woman's body, old, worn, and brittle. She could outmatch her, just one punch, one scratch. It would be all it'd take to down her.

But the old maiden did not fear Brye. The Warlock knew she felt it. The immeasurable elemental energy swirling around the maiden. The moment Brye so much as tried to attack, this monster would blow her to pieces where she stood.

"Ah, I see. A threshold. That explains it."

Next to the fox, Shery gasped.

Brye's stomach dropped. Anger flared, and she growled. How the HELL had this woman found out!? "None of your business."

"True, I suppose." Brye's jaw was released, the woman stepping back, smiling in amusement. "But aren't you tired of being at the bottom?"

"What. Do. You. Want." Growling, the fox's tails lashed in anger.

"Join me," the woman replied. "There are no maiden slaves here."

"That is a pretty good sales pitch," Brye spoke coldly, giving a derisive shake of her head. "Living in nature, all happy and free. Hell, if I'm lucky, I'll be able to grow into a wrinkly old lady who gets her diapers changed by young studs." Snorting, she rolled her eyes. "Then again, it's likelier the

Kingdom will come crashing down on this place harder than a Quartzal meteor. Then I'll get my corpse thrown into a river, and the last thought I'd ever have would be why I agreed."

"Oh?" Amusement crossed the woman's face. "And what makes you think the Kingdom would be able to destroy us?"

"Besides, how few there are of you? These would also fuck you up." Brye pointed at the collar currently on her neck. "You can't make an army if you don't have enough collars. You'd have to steal them. And the army would come knocking before you had the chance to go anywhere."

The smile that spread across the Warlock's lips almost split her head in two. Those milky eyes shone with wild joy. "You would be right... normally. Things, however, have changed." Her finger caressed the wooden walls as she walked towards the door. "What if I told you I have found a way to awaken the slumbering Elves?"

Brye's eyes widened; she quickly suppressed the shock. "Their curse is too strong to be broken through."

"A week ago, I would have told you the exact same thing." The grin didn't quite vanish, remaining with a tone of smugness. "That the Elves that fall into the deep slumber will never awaken. That no human or magic is powerful enough to overcome their feral state."

"I don't get it." Shery glanced between Brye and the Warlock; her mind was muddled with questions and doubt, too many for her to just stay quiet and observe. "What changed?"

"We discovered someone that can form bonds without needing the help of the collar."

"Bullshit." The response was an instantaneous one. The kingdom would've been in an upheaval if such a person was found.

The Warlock extended her arm, pointing a finger at them. Brye barely had the chance to react as an invisible force grasped her collar and yanked. It was a

hard tug, powerful, accompanied by something sharp caressing her throat. Every instinct in her screamed. "No!"

Too late- the collar had been sliced and yanked out of her grasp.

Next to her, the exact same thing happened to Shery.

A billion thoughts crossed Brye's mind. The bond would break within the next handful of seconds, and she would have three days before she began going feral. Locked in a room, unable to escape. No, she could not let that happen again! Her eyes focused on the Warlock, and the room warped around her. Appearing right above the frail, bony bitch, she prepared her right hand to unleash a wave of darkness at her target.

If this was going to be the end for her, better dead than feral.

The Warlock did not move, not even looking up to see Brye's incoming attack. Had the fox caught her by surprise?

As her nails wracked against an invisible wall, mere millimeters away from the Warlock's bone-white hair, it became clear she had not. Brye flinched, feeling herself slide downwards to the floor in front of the enemy maiden. She prepared to dodge a counterattack.

But none came.

The Warlock merely looked at her with that awful smirk, seemingly too amused to attempt to splatter her into bloody chunks.

"Brye!"

The voice came from behind the fox. She twisted to see Shery, the gray maiden's eyes wide, and her fingers on her throat. Why hadn't she attacked? Brye caught a flicker of thought from her companion. A singular, clear, powerful thought.

"The bond is still there." The realization struck her like a hammer. She didn't have her collar; the enchanted item was still firmly in the old maiden's grasp. Yet she could still feel the presence of the bond, urging her to worry over a

specific and very important human whose comforting presence was currently well out of her reach.

And in an instant, everything clicked.

"Mark."

The Warlock's smirk grew even more. "Exactly."

Chapter 108 [Mark]

After almost a week trapped in that cave with the fox bitch and the gray bitch, Mark had come to expect many things out of his new host. What he didn't thought would happen was a room larger than the whole apartment he grew up in, and a bed that was proportional to a bouncy castle. With less bounce and a lot more silk. And enough pillows he could have hidden under them and likely never come out.

Understandably, the young man was keeping the hell away from the bed and expecting that just about anything was going to jump out of the shadows and drag him towards said silk-covered piece of furniture.

Mark held the small knife they'd left there to be used on the fruit with white knuckles. Little comfort in the face of inhuman monsters, but better than nothing, at least.

His eyes flickered towards the only other living being in the room. The mouse was curled up, knees pressed firmly against her chest, her head resting between her knees, and facing the wall. Noah had not moved from that spot since they'd dropped them there. As far as Mark was concerned, she was just as likely an enemy as whatever else might enter the room, but so far she'd done her best to avoid even giving hints at existing at all.

As soon as the door opened, Mark immediately shifted his concerns.

The woman that had just entered was far FAR worse than everything else he could have faced. With coal black skin that seemed to absorb light, and a presence that made the air around her buzz, the maiden had a soft smile as she stepped through, the door closing behind her.

The human couldn't quite put it into words, but it felt as if the very air around her was threatening his very existence.

"Mark," she greeted, with a slight bow of her head, beady, glassy white eyes piercing into him. She turned towards the only table in the room, approaching

and taking the nearest chair. She gestured for the chair opposite to herself, the piece of furniture moving itself with a slight thud. "Please, join me."

Did he have a choice? With a frown, Mark approached the table, not letting go of the knife in his pocket. Carefully he observed the maiden's features—soft round cheeks and sharp long ears, silky white hair, and those eyes that spoke of her being far, far older than anything else about her might have suggested.

With a slight nod, she raised her hand and snapped her fingers. The door to the room opened again. And in came a woman.

A tall woman, tall enough she had to slightly crouch under the door, almost three meters tall. The only thing she carried was a silver platter with two cups. And that was the sole article on her person, for she wore not a shred of clothing either.

Mark's eyes widened as he looked at the exotic woman. Her skin was a dark gray that had hints of purple delineating her arms and thighs in ways that hinted at the coloration being the equivalent of a tan. Her body was slim but well built, clearly an athlete, judging by the scars on her arms, a warrior. The woman's eyes were a deep green, her statuesque features frozen into a serious expression, a single piercing on her lower pale blue lip.

The human's eyes wandered towards the curves in the figure. There were few to be had, but her breasts were large and her hips powerful. Though the way she moved had little sexuality about it, it was as if she commanded respect by force of will alone, a commander that cared nothing at all for the lack of clothing.

"Let me present my daughter," the old woman spoke with a slight nod.
"Embla, please greet our very important guest."

The woman nodded, gingerly placing the tray on the table before turning towards Mark. His hand gripped the knife more tightly. There was a split second as their eyes met; something flickered in those pale green irises, something he couldn't recognize. And then she lowered herself to a knee, bowing her head. "I greet you, sir," she said, placing both hands on the floor,

and nearly pressing her forehead to the floor. The maiden's white hair tumbled down and pooled around her naked feet, and he realized her neck was adorned by no collar. In its place was a pale band of discoloration that told him its presence having been there only until very recently.

"Please stay like that, Embla," the other spoke, turning to Mark. "You may use her as a foothold, if you wish. You will find none here will attempt to stand above you."

The human hesitated, seeing Embla's powerful shoulders tense, but the tall woman did not move an inch from her half-kneeling position. His throat tightened, taking a moment to look at that pale grey skin, before he turned back to the true threat in the room. "What do you want?"

The question, somehow, amused the old woman. She chuckled lightly, as if having been reminded of some inside joke Mark wasn't aware of. "For you to stay, willingly."

That's it? Mark frowned; something didn't make sense. "Why?"

"Because you are the first pure human to walk these lands in over four hundred years." The woman tilted her head. "And with your help, we can achieve many many things."

A tiny squeak from the back of the room made Mark glance at Noah. The mousy maiden was looking at him with wide eyes, blinking rapidly in surprise.

"I don't care what you want." The human turned back to the old woman, refocusing himself.

"And I don't see why you should." She was nonplussed by his statement. "You get what you want, and we get what we want. Embla could very well be the first thing we give you."

"Your own daughter." Mark's neck tensed, lips thinning, his brows furrowed.

"Such is the importance of our cause," she spoke with smooth control, but with an urgent edge to it. "We do not expect your belief or loyalty, only your aid."

He shifted further away from Embla, the scowl leveled towards the yet to be named woman that sat before him. There was a knot tensing in the back of his neck. She'd sell-out family just like that? Anger started to boil within him. "And what would that imply?"

"You only need to bond some maidens, break their feral state. We would take care of the rest."

Mark's grip on the knife tightened. "And in exchange, you would throw away your own daughter."

The woman with darkness for skin shifted, showing a hint of discomfort, the tingling force she exerted in the room around her faltering ever so slightly. "She does this willingly. There are no slaves here. None are forced to do something they do not wish for."

"She speaks only truth," Embla spoke up, head still lowered. "For the sake of my sister's freedom, I would gladly give my own."

Mark snarled, jaw clenching shut. "I'm not interested in helping."

A deathly silence followed, and the nervousness and apprehension from the dark woman vanished. "... I suggest you reconsider." She stated with a forced calmness.

"I won't change my mind."

"I see." Her own brows lowered slightly, her expression reflecting Mark's own for only a moment. "I would have preferred to do this peacefully. Embla? Be gentle."

The woman stood so fast, Mark barely had the time to pull out the knife. He aimed to cut her hand to get some distance. And the end result was that the knife bounced off of her flesh as if it were hardened leather, her palm

wrapped around both the knife and his palm. Her naked form moved with an unerring slowness, twisting Mark's armed hand behind his back, the other moving to pin his head against the table. The force her hands exerted onto his body was inexorable, unstoppable, and impossible to resist.

"I fucking knew you bitches were too good to be true," Mark snarled, slamming his free hand against the table, a gesture both Embla and the black woman cared little for.

"Such is life, sometimes." The older woman swiped at the table, knocking over the wooden platters occupying it. She reached with her thumb and bit it, drawing crimson blood. "Do you know what are the true requirements to form a bond, Mark?" With the red-stained finger, she began drawing a circle on the wooden surface. "One side must feel a distinct and clear emotion for the other, and the other has to accept it. This does not care for the direction of the emotions." A slight pause. "Your anger for the fox and her acceptance of that hatred are what forms your bond to her. Quite a twisted little thing if I do say so myself." The circle began to glow as the woman continued drawing upon it. "Humans are very easy to influence in that regard. I'm sure Embla will be more than happy to accept your feelings."

With the increasing glow, Mark could feel a tingling that was seeping into his body, a familiar heat that was suffusing into his body like warm oil. He knew where this was going and wasn't about to lie down and take it.

"Fuck you."

He snarled, moving his free hand from attempting to remove the massive woman's grasp on his head towards the glowing blood. The gesture was fast, a simple smear; and, apparently, it had not been expected from either side, because there was a brief moment of panic in the dark woman's eyes.

Then there was a glow from the spot right above the glowing circle, a light that exploded outwards.

And Mark felt his whole body shudder. The heat had turned into an inferno that made everything into an unfocused blur. Dimly, he realized he'd been let go, tumbling backwards and to the floor.

Embla's scream made him shake his head, fighting to clear his thoughts. The woman had whipped around, hand lashing at a gray blur as blood oozed out of a puncture on her bicep.

It took Mark a moment to find the strength in his legs, standing up and leaning against the wall. Between him and a scowling Embla was Noah. The diminutive mouse's lower jaw was stained with blood. In front of both of them, Embla stood, flustered, breathing hard. Her bicep stopped bleeding within the next second, the wound slowly vanishing before their very eyes, the blood drying and flaking off.

Mark expected her to be angry, but there was only barely frustration.

But neither Embla nor Noah were really Mark's concern. The back of his mind screamed for him to run, and it was purely and exclusively due to the singular entity that was still on the floor.

The black-skinned woman had been sprawled, her feeble thin body a tangle of long limbs. She was prone and fighting to stand; the very air around her crackled and twisted as power was accumulating quickly. And everything inside Mark told him he did not want to find out what was about to happen.

It all came to a sudden halt when there was an urgent knock at the door.

Everyone froze, turning to look at the lonely figure that peeked into the room. The intruding maiden grew pale as several sets of eyes glared her way.

"My Ladyship?"

"This is not the time," the dark woman replied, standing up, her hands glowing with power.

"Our scouts have spotted a feral rush coming our way." The woman coughed. "I... we deemed it best to inform you about it since the magical defenses..."

And just like that, the floating swirling energies were gone.

"I will handle it." She looked over her shoulder. "Embla, gather your forces." A pause as she turned to focus on Mark, milky white eyes flickering with

power. "The human can wait until after we've dealt with this... inconvenience."

There were no more words, no more comments or gestures. The tall, athletic woman just turned to leave without a second glance.

The door closed, and Mark felt his legs give out.

"We need to get out of here."

"Yeah," Noah agreed, shoulder slumping as she looked over her shoulder at him and sighed. "Or die trying."

Chapter 109 [Brye]

Brye took a choking breath, air driven out of her lungs as the fingers squeezed around her throat with ever increasing strength.

"A fucking threshold!" Shery's voice roared, tightening her vice-like grip. "I should've known a freak like you would turn against the Boss."

The fox gasped, the whole of her focus centered on pouring as much elemental energy as she could to keep her throat from collapsing under the grip, her hands scratching at Shery's hardened grey skin. A fruitless gesture considering how much more physically stronger Shery was.

Gasping, the Nogitsune felt her focus waver.

The fingers dug further into her throat, her windpipe now a fraction of the size it should be. Brye wheezed, claws faltering; her thoughts were growing muddled as the oxygen deprivation was slowly starting to get to her.

"DIE!" the gray maiden roared, lifting her by the neck and slamming her head first against the floor.

Everything spun, and her focus shattered. The power she was using to protect herself vanished, and Shery's grip squeezed tight without missing a beat. Brye's eyes teared up, barely able to see the world around her spinning and blurring, her lungs burning. There was a thudding noise.

And suddenly, release.

Brye coughed, air rushing in with deep gasps. The maiden lay flat on her chest, trying to recover her bearings through a coughing fit. The world was spinning, but it was quickly coming back to focus.

A soft hand touched her shoulder. "Are you alright?"

Brye's eyes flickered over her shoulder. A soldier, leather vest and helmet, dark skin, pointy ears. From the Dark Elf genus, without a doubt. "Peachy," she croaked. "Shery?"

The soldier turned away from the fox to point at the gray-skinned companion. Her last mistake- the fox had reached out and grasped at the blade on the soldier's hip. Drawing it out, Brye didn't miss a beat and coated the blade with her powers right as she thrust it through the guard's throat. The dark elf didn't have a chance to realize what had happened until it was too late.

The scent of blood filled the air. Brye yanked the short blade out before her victim could even get a chance of fighting back. The Nogitsune rushed towards the door. "Help!" Her half-choked scream came with a swirl of the world around her, the room shifting as her new position placed her right at the side of the door.

The second guard stepped in, blade drawn, ready for combat. Her eyes widened at the sight of her companion bleeding out on the floor. That was as far as her shock went; a single swing from behind her was all Brye needed to sever the woman's head from her shoulders.

"You learn that fancy sword shit in some expensive school?" A grim chuckle broke the moment of silence. Shery lay face down against the floor, looking at Brye with a smirk. "A little help?"

"I like you better when you're on your knees." Rolling her eyes, Brye ignored her companion, peering out the door and checking whether they had to worry about others or not.

"Get your head out of your cunt. Will you help me out or not?"

"Waste of energy. They used a small curse, it should wear off any second now."

Confirming, the guards held the keys to the room. The fox silently closed the door, moving to strip the decapitated guard. "Get the other's armor and put it on, I doubt we have much time." It would be a bit of a tight fit for them both, but better than nothing.

With a grunt, Shery began to move, slowly at first, her strength returning to her bit by bit. Brye could sense the hundreds of little questions the maiden had and wasn't speaking, and it aggravated her. She knew the damn maiden would wait until they were some place safer before she threw the sharpest ones her way.

"Do you think your illusions will help here?"

"No, it's why you should put on that shit and pretend we're part of this whole mess," Brye huffed, turning around and presenting her back at her. "Help me strap this crap."

"Your armor's bloody." Shery hadn't missed a beat, fingers deftly tying the hardened leather.

"If they ask, we killed some ferals."

A pause and a shift in thoughts. "We use the ferals to make it out?"

"Need Mark."

And just like that the silence went from controlled to out of control. Shery growled. "Your bond's speaking, we try to rescue him and we're dead."

Brye snorted, rolling her eyes. "I can read your thoughts. Half of them are pushing you to run out there and start looking for him."

"I'm stronger than my bond." A shove, pinning Brye against the wall. They stared into each other's eyes. "Are you?"

The fact that Shery was asking was insulting. "You heard the Warlock, they plan to use Mark to wake up Elves," Brye replied. "If that works, they'll get a damn army, with no breaks because they don't need the stupid collars."

"Since when do we care about that shit? We're crooks, not heroes."

The image of the Warlock pinning her down made her hackles rise, and anger sloshed through her like magma.

"You don't get it." Brye shoved back, stepping forward and pointing a finger at her. "We fucked up. We lost the cargo, and we left a human worth a thousand times his weight in elemental stones in the hands of a hag looking to start a second civil war. Wanna bet what the Boss would do to us?" Her snarl was clear, threatening. "He'd send us right back here with orders to get Mark out, or kill him."

Shery's thoughts snapped towards the mental image of her hands wrapped around Mark's throat and snapping his neck. The revulsion and fear that came from the bond made the maiden's skin crawl. "Shit." That had been the nudge the strongwoman needed to agree.

Brye nodded. "This is our best chance to get him out of here."

"Shit." A grimace. "Do you have a plan?"

"Pretend we're soldiers, track Mark's scent, hope the Warlock's not with him."

"We're not dark elves."

"I picked up on no less than five different genuses out there." Not missing a beat, she turned to open the door. "Just move fast and they won't have the time to notice. Pretend you're someone who's in deep shit."

"Not going to be hard."

With a shared nod, they exited the room, Brye taking a second to smear the blade's bloody edge against the carpet before sheathing it. They immediately stepped into the empty corridor and began to move. Not running, but a brisk enough pace to pretend they weren't about to stop if someone called out to them.

Brye's nose picked up on a familiar smell right away. "Over here."

The building was not terribly complex, four behemoth trees that had been connected by a singular wooden structure grown out of the massive trunks. The whole thing likely had several floors, and if Brye had to guess by how

polished and well-carpeted it was, this was supposed to be a small palace or fortress in some way. At the very least, it had been at some point in time.

The consideration of Wildlings having built such a thing was worrying to a certain degree. Why would they waste this much effort into such a thing? A part of Brye reminded her of the old Elven courts; the south of the Kingdom had been littered with them. Had these Wildlings taken over the ruins and claimed themselves the new owners?

No, that was not something to focus on right now.

"This way."

Her ears picked up on rushed footsteps, and Brye stopped Shery for the split second necessary to see another dark elf running by. The maiden stank of fear, and judging by the look on her eyes, she had a lot worrying her.

"Ferals?"

"Didn't risk reading her," Brye replied. "But that'd be a good bet." Her head snapped to the side. "Scent's this..." Pausing, Brye's eyes widened, a soft gasp escaping her lips.

"I know that look."

"I smell his blood."

Their feet had started moving before either of them could process the thought, and a sense of urgency and fear lurched out, gripping both of them with such a clear hold that it was impossible for it to be anything other than the bond kicking in very loudly. Brye's fingers brushed against her throat as she ran—no collar, yet the presence of the influence upon her thoughts was clear in her mind.

Even aware that the bond was urging her forward, she couldn't truly fight against it. Mark had been hurt, might be in danger. Every instinct in her body urged her to move faster.

As they ran past one of the many windows, her focus was momentarily distracted when she spotted something in the courtyard that refused to be ignored.

The Warlock stood in the center of a large glowing circle. The air around the old maiden pulsed with magic, the very air wavering as the ground beneath her pulsed with power. Slowly, the lines in the circle were stretching inwards, runes Brye had never seen before forming and interconnecting with one another, the complexity of the patterns growing exponentially.

"What is-"

"Just run."

Brye grit her teeth. A ritual, and a big one at that.

Whatever it was meant to do, they most certainly did not want to be around when it was completed.

Chapter 110 [Mark][

Mark grunted, squeezing his grip tighter. "Stop fucking struggling."

"Fuck you, fuck you fuck-!"

Noah's words came to an abrupt end with a shrill sound, as she bit down on the piece of wood and snapped it in two, her teeth gnawing through it as she wriggled and fruitlessly struggled against the human's grasp.

He was keenly aware that despite her being a pint-sized waif of a woman, the Mousegirl was still stronger than him. He made sure to keep himself very focused on where those hands were clutching at, marginally satisfied that she was grasping the bedsheets with white-knuckled intensity. She'd scratched him up once already.

Panting, Noah collapsed, and he finally let go of her ears.

Pushing back the flush, the human watched his handiwork and nodded. He leaned forward, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Now strip."

Noah didn't appear to have the strength to refuse, a quiet growl turned whimper escaping her petite mouth as her hands moved to remove her clothes, exposing her pale skin. "The... water."

"You sure this will work?" His voice was barely a whisper, handing over the water basin.

"Shut up." Noah growled, face extremely flushed as she plunged her hands into the water, they were still trembling, grimacing as she scowled deeply. Slowly, she rubbed the water across her skin.

Mark felt his feet rooted in place for a fraction of a second, unable to look away. Her body may have lacked curves but made up for it by an almost athletic tightness, a pleasant fragility to her small breasts and round ass. Her hands moved to coat herself in a watery sheen that reflected the light on her

skin, keeping her movements efficient and brief. Noah made sure to be liberal in her work however, adding some extra water onto the sheets below.

The resulting effect was successful, she looked like she'd just finished two consecutive marathons. Noah's roaming drenched hands and flushed face froze as she noticed Mark's eyes on her. She instantly went very still, unmoving, breath hitched. There were faint traces of fear in those eyes.

Mark realized what he'd been doing and turned around with a grunt, ignoring the sigh of relief Noah failed to hide. "Shirt." Noah's voice came as barely a whisper.

The human nodded, taking off his shirt, turning around to look at the Mousegirl as she lay face down on the bed, and then looking away and lying very still on the sheets she'd thrown the water on.

Right, he had his own job to do. The human took the basin, putting it back on the table before wetting his hands and using it to cool down his red hair, face, chest, and then, he stepped towards the door. He didn't trust this would work; it was too insane, but it wasn't like there was much of an alternative here.

Knocking on the door thrice, he waited.

It opened, revealing two guards.

The one at the door wore a leather armor, hand on the pommel of her sword and eyes wary. The one behind her had her sword drawn and looked warier still. Both of them looked just about ready to fight, but Mark could pick out the light blush on their cheeks, the hesitant way they looked at his exposed chest and then back up to his face.

"What do you want?" The one who'd opened the door asked, steeling her voice quickly.

"The rat was a boring lay." Mark grunted and pointed over his shoulder at Noah as she stayed on the bed. "I'm not exactly satisfied, either of you want some?" His cheeks flushed somewhat, and the fact he was already sporting

an erection from what had transpired with Noah wasn't helping with his confidence any.

His mind was screaming out how stupid this was, how impossible it'd be.

"Erm..." They shared a look, hesitating.

He might as well go all in. "I won't tell the Warlock." He remembered Noah's words and put up a smirk. "Unless you've already got someone that scratches your itch?"

Another long look was shared amongst them, and Mark almost held his breath, face frozen as he did not trust himself to falter. Was this actually working? The nearest guard gave a nod; it was mirrored by the other.

She stepped through. "Let's make this quick," she said, closing the door behind her and following as Mark took a hesitant step back.

"Aren't you bonded though?" As soon as the words left his lips, he cursed them- he'd been staring at the black collar around her throat, and the thought had come unbidden.

"Are we here to fuck or to talk?" The maiden only hesitated once her hands had moved towards her belt to remove her sword.

With a sigh, she pulled out her sword and the pouch next to it. She turned around, opened the door, and tossed them at her companion with little fanfare. Mark cursed inwardly at this gesture, but did his best not to show it outwardly, this made a lot more sense than everything else that was going down.

The woman didn't hesitate to reach out his shirt and yank him closer. "I'm going to be on top."

"That'll bruise." Mark replied without missing a beat, ignoring the anger swelling inside of him, his own hands shoving her back. "You don't want mommy Warlock to find out. Right?"

"Bruise can be hidden."

"And I'd rather not risk it, she was pissed last I saw her." He growled in return, leaning in and touching her hip appreciatively.

The tanned woman huffed, but nodded. Her eyes moved towards the massive bed. Without much wait or hesitation, she grabbed his shirt again. "This better be good." She said, pulling him towards the opposite side of where Noah lay. Her fingers worked on her belt and undid them, pulling her pants off with little hesitation, exposing toned legs.

The maiden hadn't hesitated in removing her undergarments as well, and her dark chocolate skin made the tuft of white above her pussy all the more apparent. "Not going to remove your shirt?" Mark prompted.

"You still have your pants on."

The human complied, focusing his thoughts on her shapely ass, feeling himself strain against his trousers as he pulled down his last shreds of clothing. Freed, his erection bobbed in the air, and the dark-skinned maiden whistled appreciatively, propping herself up with her elbows as she lay on the bed, one hand moving down to caress her thighs. "You must want it bad, huh."

Mark didn't so much confirm but stepped closer, making sure not to look in Noah's direction. The mouse had yet to move, what was she waiting for?

"Shirt," he said.

"Sure, sure." The maiden shrugged, flicking her light blue hair backwards, hands moving down to the leather straps to her armor.

Her feet hooked around Mark's hips, tugging him closer as she pulled off her remaining clothes with little fanfare. Her stomach was toned, barely any fat in it, and her breasts were modest but small, with nipples that were black caps to the soft mounds.

Tossing the clothes aside, she smirked, pulling him closer and pressing her crotch against his erection. "Do you want it? You're so fucking hard you want

this tight pussy wrapped up around you and squeezing every drop out of you?"

The human grunted, leaning down, reaching for her breasts and pinching at them. She wriggled, smirking, one hand reaching down to caress her folds, and the others wrapping around his erection. "Such a slut, you can't help yourself, right?"

The image of Brye flashed across his eyes. "Shut up," he growled, thrusting slightly against her grip, feeling her tense and shudder.

"Fine, fine." With a roll of her eyes, she closed her eyes and leaned back into the bed. "Just keep doing that." She pushed her chest into his palms as Mark kept pawing at them, her body wriggling as her own hips started to hump against him, her fingers knuckle deep in her pussy.

A slight pause, a shudder. "I'm ready," she said, using her hands to reorient Mark, to shift him so his erection would point at her entrance.

"Who's the slut now?" He said with a smirk.

"Shut up," she replied in a deadpan, stretching and relaxing, moaning lightly as the human slowly entered her. Mark grunted, shuddering at the sensation of her tight heat all around him, and the sound prompted the Dark Elf to smirk, eyes closed and luxuriating in the sensation. "Someone likes my tight pussy."

The human tensed, clenching his teeth and freezing as he noticed the ever imperceptible shift in the bed. His eyes flickered towards Noah. The mouse was lying on her belly, intensely looking at him with steely gray eyes.

Slowly, the mouse put a finger against her lips, and Mark nodded, pulling back and thrusting into the Dark Elf again. She moaned. "Oh fuck I've missed this."

"Human slaves here not up much for some fun?"

"Fucking... not for grunts, geldings, I-" A choke, and she tightened her jaw shut and shivered. "Stop teasing so much and fuck me already!"

"Not yet."

Noah's whispered voice startled the Dark Elf, doubly so when the mouse leaned forward to kiss the maiden's neck, her fingers moving to stroke the long dark ears.

"Oh shit!" The guard whimpered, her cunt tightening around Mark and driving him to thrust deeper into her, working himself into a fast pace. "That's the spot, that's the..." Grunting, she thrust herself, grinding the hood of her sex against Mark's groin, meeting him thrust for thrust.

The mouse's fingers stroked the maiden's throat, shifting and moving around the collar. Then, one hand moved down to the Dark Elf's nipple right as she leaned forward to kiss the guard's neck again. She moved so fast Mark barely noticed it. A bite, clean through the collar, a yank, pulling it out of the Dark Elf's throat. And her hands went back around the neck immediately after.

"Harder!" It was as if she hadn't even noticed; her whole body shuddered, fingers digging into Mark's shoulders as her legs tightened around his hips. She was pulling him in deeper as their bodies sang together.

The human obliged, roughly grasping at her body, pulling her closer against him as her wet tight folds held him snugly. The human leaned down, breathing hard. "I'm close."

The only response she gave was a quick nod, biting her lower lip, face flushed and breath short, moans escaping her with every other gasp.

With a sensation of roaring fire, the orgasm rippled through Mark, a sensation of heat that ran through his whole body as he emptied himself into her core, unable to pull out even if he'd wanted to. His eyes widened as he realized there was something else in that sensation.

"That was..."

"You're bonded to him now," Noah spoke in a whisper, her words a bucket of ice. The mouse moved her hands to cover the Dark Elf's throat, tightening.

She widened her eyes, freezing; her breath hitched, unable to escape.

"Don't move." The mouse pressed her sharp fingers into the maiden's jugular. "Raise an alarm and your friend will come over and hurt Mark. He could get hurt, maybe even killed. Do you want that?"

A jostle ran through the maiden, her panicked gaze meeting Mark's- hesitation. Her eyes widened in terror as the realization made itself apparent. She gave a deep shuddering breath as she shook her head.

"Nod if you will keep shut."

For half a second the Dark Elf kept looking at the human, then at the mouse; anger, regret, and many other feelings crossed her face. Her eyes bounced between Mark and Noah, a new emotion emerging on her face each time her gaze met Mark's own. Ever so slowly, she nodded.

"Good." Noah pulled her hand away from her target's lower lips.

"This shouldn't be possible," the Dark Elf spoke under her breath.

"It is," the mouse spoke with a look that was a mix between reluctance and mirth. "Boy wonder is pureblood."

With a shake of her head, the Dark Elf glared at the mouse. "I will never betray my people." The guard hissed under her breath, hands clenching tightly.

"I could order you to fight for me," the human growled a threat.

"Don't be stupid," Noah hissed, watching the Dark Elf's eyes narrow and returning her fingers to the maiden's throat. The mouse ignored the maiden, keeping her gaze firmly on Mark. "What part of anything you've been doing to her makes you think she'd obey?"

"The bond?"

"Get it through your thick skull, bond's not an all-purpose tool." She squeezed, and the guard tensed, growing pale as the mouse's nails dug

slightly into her skin. "Besides, take a wild fucking guess what she was feeling when you bonded her."

Despite herself, the Dark Elf blushed, looking away, even as her hips slowly humped against the human.

"Shit." He sighed, slapping her legs off and stepping back. "This'll complicate shit."

"No, it won't," the mouse hissed, letting the pressure subside and letting the Dark Elf breathe in without strain. She looked down at the naked woman and growled. Coming from the pint-sized woman, it would've almost a cute squeak if not for the murderous edge to her eyes. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way," she stated coldly. "Hard way? We rush out, your friend attacks Mark, and you'll be pushed to protect him."

The Dark Elf's lips pursed, hesitating but not denying it, her knuckles white as she seethed, clenching the bedsheets. A snarl played in her lips as she kept her focus on the mouse. "And the easy way?"

Mark and Noah shared a smirk.

Chapter 111 [Mark]

Mark looked at the Dark Elf as she grit her teeth; her eyes burned with loathing, but he ignored it, focusing instead on the door. His hand reached out to knock twice, and the bonded Dark Elf spoke. "Open up."

"Done already?"

The fellow guard chuckled as she pulled the door open. "My turn yet?"

"Sure."

The maiden stepped inside, a wide grin on her lips as she focused on the lump that lay under the bedsheets. "Wait, did you tucker him o-...?"

Mark stepped out of the room, Noah hot on his heels. Both of them saw the sword and keys waiting for their owner. Meanwhile, the armed guard heard them, spinning around with a frown, clearly confused by what was going on. Her lips parted as she attempted to speak, likely to trigger the spell that might paralyze them.

The attempt was thwarted when her companion tackled her from behind, knocking her to the floor. "I'm sorry," the half-naked Dark Elf muttered, her eyes burning red-hot coals on the two escapees.

Before the guard could disentangle herself from her companion, Mark had closed the door, and Noah locked it, snapping the key to make sure it couldn't be pulled out easily.

A heavy thud followed, and human and mouse glanced at the heavy door, waiting.

Mark sighed.

"Alarm's going to be raised," Noah pointed out, grabbing the sword and swinging it. The thing was almost half her height.

"We start running." The human nodded, looking at the petite woman with some wariness. "Think we can trust the bitch's directions on how to get out?"

"I've been here before." She nodded, moving ahead and taking point. Her tail was stiff, her ears perked, and the maiden's hand had a slight shake to it as she held the blade at the ready. "I doubt she'd want you around, probably going to be very happy once her bond snaps." Stopping dead on her tracks, she took a good long sniff, tilting her head down to one of the corridors. "Blood."

"Then not that way."

They turned in the opposite direction, their rush down the wooden corridor coming to an abrupt end when Noah froze on her tracks. Her eyes widened, spinning on her heels and reaching out to grab Mark's hand, yanking him exactly in the opposite direction they'd been running. "What the-"

"RUN!" She spoke with a shrill proclamation of terror.

Mark looked over his shoulder just in time to see a familiar face stepping into view. Broad muscular shoulders, long white hair, three meters tall. Except this time she was fully armored with metal plates and a wicked looking axe that should have been far too large for her to be able to even carry.

The daughter of the Warlock stopped dead in her tracks as her eyes met Mark's right as they took the corner.

"ALARM!"

Her roar bounced off the walls; the human had lost sight of her but he sure as fuck was not going to stick around and find out how long it took her to catch up. The instant they'd taken the turn down the corridor, his eyes locked onto the nearest window.

A part of him wondered how far up they were.

The other saw Noah jumping through the hole devoid of glass and followed through without waiting to confirm. And as soon as he was airborne, he realized the drop was at least four meters' worth.

"DO NOT KILL THE MALE!"

The voice boomed far FAR closer to them than what he thought it should have been. Not that Mark was paying attention, plunging his way down to the ground and doing his level best to roll to disperse some of his inertia.

Both his ankles screamed upon impact, but it had not been enough to cause actual harm... or at least not enough harm his adrenaline-addled brain couldn't ignore. He wobbled a step, finding his hand being yanked by Noah as she rushed him down the inner yard towards the only door that could get them out of there, rushing through the handful of trees that adorned the otherwise empty space.

Both spotted the stunned looks from several maidens that appeared entirely shocked at their presence there.

The wooden door swung open right as Mark's ears prickled at the sound of something heavy hitting the ground. He looked over his shoulder- a mistake, as the tall woman had opted to follow their tracks. Noah didn't wait for the human to process the sight, instead slamming the door shut as soon as she'd pulled him through.

Her eyes were dead ahead, yanking him forward.

One of the doors they'd been about to cross through snapped open, and a pair of grey hands snatched Mark, pulling him in. Noah was dragged along by just how little she weighed. The door did not even close; as soon as they'd been yanked through, a hand moved to cover Mark's mouth, and the air on the frame of the door shimmered.

Two seconds later, the sound of splintering wood followed, and the Warlock's daughter rushed past their room as if there were no open door at all.

"Shhh, little pet." A familiar voice whispered in Mark's ear; he turned to glance at Brye, smiling smugly at him, both tails whipping back and forth in a slow wag. "Don't want the big bad lady finding us, right?"

"Illusions," Noah spat. "At least you're useful for once."

The amusement in the fox's face died as she turned to stare at the mouse coldly.

"If either of you wants to die, you're more than welcome to step outside and fight," Shery hissed, letting go of Mark and letting him breathe normally. "Everyone else is welcome to figure how the fuck we get out of here before they start sniffing us out." She paused for a moment, looking at Mark. "And how did you escape?"

"He fucked the guard." Noah and Brye stated at the same time, glaring as they shared a barbed look with each other.

"I'm surrounded by horny idiots." Shery's brow dropped, unamused.

A crashing sound outside startled them into silence. Someone's voice carried through, a scream that came to a very abrupt end. "What the fuck!?"

"Ferals," the fox declared, leaning towards the door. "Fuck, that must be what the ritual's for."

"What?"

"Warlock's doing something nasty big," the fox said. "It's probably to kick the ferals off before they can cause more damage."

"If it works, they'll be able to focus on us."

"And we'll be fucked." The nods were shared.

"So our only option is to run... through a feral rush." Shery took a long deep breath, rubbing her temples. "Just fantastic. Next you'll say we have to wrestle an Ursine with our hands tied behind our backs. Can we actually even make a run for it?"

"We can."

Noah's words drew the other's attention.

"I'm calling bullshit."

"There's a river not too far from here." The mouse kept glancing out the door. "The rush can't be hitting both sides at the same time. We just need to cross it to get away from them. The Court won't be able to pursue past the river either."

Shery frowned, lips pursing as her brows furrowed. "Are there any bridges?"

Mark glanced at her in confusion.

"Her genus can't swim, they're too dense. They sink like rocks." Brye rolled her eyes, patting Shery's shoulders. "I can make a jump with you, but you'll have to carry me the rest of the way."

The gray-skinned maiden nodded and relaxed her shoulders ever so slightly.

And for the barest instant, Noah's lips had twitched upwards.

Chapter 112 [Barry]

"I smell blood."

Barry spoke as his pseudo-steed, Kajou, kept moving across the forest with seemingly not much complication. It had been for only an instant, a whiff of the scent that had flashed so quickly he'd nearly thought he'd imagined it.

"That's not good." Kajou replied with a scowl, her feet hammering against the dirt as she accelerated a bit further. "Any clue where it's coming from?"

The human could only shake his head. It was one of the things Kajou had told him to look out for, as it could be the signal that the ferals could very well start a frenzy at any moment.

Considering said ferals were currently visible and moving through the forest in the same direction they were, that was a very bad prospect. Barry's shoulders were locked high and tense each time he'd spot a figure running through the trees. For now, all the ferals he'd spotted were more than content enough to keep away from them, however.

"Kajou!" The voice came from above. Barry turned upwards and flinched, seeing Pan flying above with her glowing sword. "Sharp left, Court is three hundred meters ahead! Circle around, they've set up a barricade!"

"That explains the blood," Kajou whispered, tightening her grip on Barry's legs as her body switched directions almost on a dime. The human would've fallen over if not for his death-grip on her shoulders.

As soon as she'd changed directions, they came upon a dozen feral maidens. All sported feline body parts such as fur, tails, and claws. And all of them reacted to Kajou's sudden appearance, scattering before turning towards her. Barry felt goosebumps crawling up his skin as he realized they were about to pounce.

"SCRAM!"

Pan's voice exploded, the maiden diving from above and letting loose an explosion of light that took the larger of the felines square in the chest. It wasn't lethal, but it knocked the feral over. More importantly, it bought Kajou time to rush past before they could opt to target her again.

"I'll clear the way!" Pan proclaimed, beating her wings, speeding up and flying ahead of them.

"She's not even complaining about you." Kajou grinned slightly.

"How can you be so calm!?" Barry replied, eyes darting around as he desperately tried to spot potential new threats.

Kajou's only answer was laughter, her footfalls thudding down and her speed making the wind whip around them while she navigated her way through the trees. The sound of Pan's "work" could be heard, the winged maiden making sure to make loud booming attacks to scare off the ferals that might stumble onto them. It was effective, as it allowed them to move quickly with little interruptions.

That is until they heard Pan shout out. "We're from Coven! We come to help!"

A moment after such proclamation, it became clear to whom she was talking to. It was a group of four maidens, all clothed, wearing leather armor and equipped with swords. Barry's mind instantly tagged them as Dark Elves. It was hard not to consider them as such. Their skin was a deep tan, and their ears were sharp and long.

And just like Pan and Kajou, they wore collars.

The trio took one good look at Kajou, tense with their blades drawn. Their eyes locked on Barry.

"He's our prisoner," Pan stated.

"Then hand him over. We'll put him in a cell," the apparent leader of the trio proclaimed, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Gladly. Kajou?"

The Amazon hesitated. "You mustn't harm him, he's an otherworlder."

"We won't do anything if he behaves." The Dark Elf's eyes widened slightly, focusing on the young man before making a sharp gesture with her head towards somewhere behind her. "Your Valkyrie will stay here to assist in the fight. Follow Ella."

This time it was Pan's turn to hesitate, glancing at the Amazon. "Drop him off and come back."

There was only a nod. The shortest of the three Dark Elves broke off from the trio, gesturing for Kajou to follow further into what Barry assumed was the Court's territory. "How bad is the situation?"

The Dark Elf grimaced. "We're already cutting down the first stragglers."

Kajou tensed as she heard this. "The blood is going to cause the whole rush to frenzy."

"It doesn't matter," the soldier replied, shaking her head. "So long as we can buy enough time for Lady Dagmar to finish her ritual, the rush will be of no concern to us." She paused for a second, glancing at Kajou's frown. "She's a Warlock."

That certainly got a reaction out of the Amazon, eyes wide. "Wasn't the leader of the Court Embla the Dark Lady?"

"Lady Dagmar is Lady Embla's mother."

They had to alter their course as a slanted wall of wood and vines obstructed their way, forcing them to twist slightly further to the right. Barry noticed there was no one near or around the piece of wood that'd been strapped between two trees, but he did notice that there were more of these walls scattered all over the place. Yet each one appeared to be pointed in the same general direction.

He would've thought they were meant to be there to block the ferals' path, but the wooden wall was not continuous, nor were all the walls aligned. It

was as if someone had just tossed a handful of them to be randomly spread around the place while making sure they were all ran along one another. Like a maze that was missing half its walls.

"What's this for?"

"To try to alter the rush's direction," Kajou replied without missing a beat, following their guide zig-zagging through the forest. "There are probably dozens of these all over the place."

"We didn't have much time to prepare," the guard chipped in, her voice slightly strained. "This also was a very bad time for a rush. Many of our soldiers were sent to scour the forest."

"Why?"

The only response was a scowl and a shake of her head, the Dark Elf keeping her hand tightly on the sword she wielded. It looked clear that though the soldier was allowing their presence there, she was not trusting them. Barry could only frown. For a group that was smack in the middle of the woods, he got the distinct impression they looked oddly disciplined.

The maze of parallel walls came to an end rather quickly, followed by thinner trees that were rather scattered. The range of visibility grew, and with it Barry could make out a pillar of thorns. Only ten meters tall, the mass of green was only three meters across. Each thorn was at least half a meter long and pointed in every direction. There were five such odd columns, placed approximately a dozen meters from each other.

Their guard led them through the pillars, making sure to keep a healthy distance from the pillars.

"Who goes there?"

The voice startled Barry. He couldn't see anyone. The source felt scattered from all around.

"An Amazon from the Coven and a human prisoner. Allegedly an otherworlder," the guard piped up, not slowing down. "There's a Valkyrie near the front giving assistance."

"Confirmed. Move quickly, the wave's about to hit."

The human wondered if they had some way to communicate with the others.

"I will be in need of a weapon if I'm to assist," Kajou spoke out. "I can handle myself with my fists, but..."

"Amazon, I know." The guard nodded. "We'll see what orders we get once we have put the human into one of the holding cells."

Barry could only grimace at those words, shuddering. The thought of being put into some room and locked up wasn't exactly appealing, but it was certainly an improvement over having to twitch every time he heard Pan move. His eyes lingered on the back of Kajou's head as he tried to organize his thoughts.

"Stare any harder and you're going to bore a hole through my skull," the Amazon declared with a slight laugh.

"Why am I a prisoner?"

"Because we need to put a wall between Pan and you, and I don't trust you'll just start running the instant you're out of our sight." A slight sigh followed. "We need to sit down and talk, without the threat of violence lingering over your head," she added, slowing down as they approached a wall of vines, frowning slightly. "A real talk."

Her words fell silent as she saw the wall part as if on its own, creating a small tunnel for them to walk through. The moment they stepped out the other side, Kajou's eyes fixed on two new figures, their skin pale and their hair a deep green.

"Elves? There are wild Elves in the Court!?"

"Very few," the guard replied, gesturing at Kajou to put Barry down.

"What's the difference between an Elf and a Dark Elf?" Barry frowned slightly.

That question appeared to bring a scowl out of the two pale figures, their emerald gazes locking onto the human and causing him to shudder.

"Please forgive him, he's an otherworlder and knows not of our ways," Kajou quickly spoke, bowing her head rather low.

That only made the two elves look at him in closer scrutiny. Barry felt pinned on the spot by those deep green eyes. The two green-haired maidens almost seemed to be looking through him.

The moment was interrupted by the sound of a loud horn, an alarm of some sort. One long and three short, they forced every head to snap in the direction straight ahead, through the trees.

"What was that?"

"A prisoner's escaped." One of the Elves frowned.

No sooner had she spoken, a second louder horn blew from the opposite direction, straight from the direction they'd come from. No interruptions, no pause, twenty full seconds of a singular shrill toot.

Barry didn't need an interpreter for that one.

The ferals were here.

Chapter 113 [Barry]

Barry felt himself freeze up at the thought that the alarm for the ferals would sound now. Kajou had mentioned they were barely at the tip of the feral rush and had been keeping ahead of the main body. And yet Barry had still seen at least a hundred ferals scattered about, running in a clear attempt to stray away from danger.

So now that he knew the main part of the rush was coming, he could only feel dread in the pit of his stomach.

"Move!" The proclamation came from Kajou. Her face turned to the Elves.
"Prison. Where?"

No sooner had she spoken than two vines erupted from the ground, wrapping around Kajou's ankles. The Amazon froze, looking at the two elves with a scowl. "We can't leave him here, he'll die."

"You're not vetted, we can't let you move freely."

"Then lead me to the prison cell so I can leave him there!"

"We can't leave the wall unattended."

A shrill scream echoed through the forest.

"I can help!" Kajou's voice said. "But Barry needs to be put someplace safe!"

The taller of the two Elves grit her teeth, turning to the shorter one and sharing a nod. The shorter one quickly pulled out the blade from her sheathe and tossed it at Kajou. The Amazon didn't hesitate, cutting down the vines and letting go of Barry.

"Follow me, quickly," the shorter Elf proclaimed.

With a gesture of her wrist, a vine shot from her tunic, wrapping around Bary's right wrist and tethering him to her belt as she began to walk away from the wall. The human had to run to keep up and avoid getting dragged through the ground.

His eyes locked on Kajou for a moment, but quickly shifted forward. The trees were thickening again. Something about their presence reminded him of the monster-sized trees that were over at where they'd crash-landed. Not quite as massive, but nothing to scoff at. It took Barry a fraction of a second to realize that the trees weren't just larger, but that they were also occupied. Doors, windows, balconies. He barely had the chance to take a look at them before his gaze was drawn towards a singular source that demanded the full of his attention.

She was a frail woman, bony and thin, her skin a pulsating shadow that made her seem as if she were merely a black silhouette contained within a set of baggy purple robes. She was glowing, hovering atop a circle of glowing runes that glowed and wavered, their light drifting upwards as if it was snow rising into the sky. There were no less than a dozen armed maidens standing around the circle and looking fierce as the dark figure's mouth moved in a silent chant.

Barry's skin was tingling just from being this close to the source of the glow, his eyes entirely unable to look away. His red hair rustled against the slight breeze blowing his way.

Which is why he missed the lumbering armored woman as she placed a gloved hand on his shoulder and pinned him in place. "Found you, you little..." The woman spun him around, Barry flinched, raising his hands in fear. "... Who are you?"

Seeing nothing happening to him, Barry hesitated, lowering his arms slightly so he could get a better look at the lady whose arm felt like it weighed half a tonne.

She was tall and statuesque. Those were the first thoughts that ran through Barry's mind. He was forced to move his chin up to meet her gaze, his eyes

barely able to make it over the horizon of metal that covered her chest.
"Wha-?"

"Lady Embla!" The Elf spoke up quickly. "Two messengers from the Coven have appeared. This is a prisoner. They claim he is an otherworlder."

The tall tanned woman paused, head turning in the direction they'd come through and then at Barry. "Return to your post, I'll handle him."

The Elf nodded and ran off. The vine that had been holding Barry's wrist loosened and fell to the ground. The young human could only awkwardly stand there as the tall lady kept looking down at him with a slight frown.

"You..." Barry hesitated, blinking. "You don't have a collar?" It was impossible. She had to be a maiden, what with the sharp ears and being almost three meters tall. Was there something Kajou hadn't told him?

The woman's frown deepened, her sharp angular features tightening as the first hint of a wrinkle came to adorn her brow. The human could only squirm under the maiden's intense gaze, focusing on the piercing on her lower lip to try to distract himself, to look for something to focus on other than those piercing emerald green eyes that were staring into his soul.

The moment broke at the sound of a scream.

Both of them turned towards the source. There was movement near the ritual. One of the guards had dropped, and between the guard and the glowing figure, was a new presence. Two fox tails trailed behind the maiden that was rushing forward, her figure shimmering and wavering as if not entirely there, a glittering blade held in her hand.

"NO!"

Embla exploded forward, lumbering towards the ritual as she drew her sword out of the scabbard on her hip. In a singular fluid movement worthy of an Olympic athlete, the dark-skinned maiden threw the blade forward with every ounce of strength her body could provide.

It flew like a rocket, aimed directly at the fox.

Barry's eyes widened in surprise as he saw the fox react, react all too quickly for what was clearly an attack that should have been impossible to see coming. It had been a simple gesture, a throw, done just in time before Embla's attack punched straight into her shoulder and dragged her away from the Warlock.

The black haired maiden's thrown blade struck true, sinking squarely into the middle of the shadowy woman's back.

There wasn't a muted cry of pain, a quiet gasp surrounded by a dozen panicked faces.

The Warlock fell to her knees, face contorted into a grimace of agony.

The runes began to glow with a blinding light, lightning exploded upwards at the edges of the ritual, a column of brilliance that was hard to even look at. And an intense burning tingling that was washing against Barry's skin like a bad sunburn.

Whatever happened next, Barry couldn't really tell. Almost on instinct, his body hit the floor, and he closed his eyes tightly as he prepared for the worst. Every part of his body screamed in alarm at something big about to happen.

The blast didn't make a sound, but it made the air around him shudder all the same. Barry's eyes opened as soon as the burning light had vanished and he realized that he had to run. It was as much a command as a desire as a need. He had to run. Something was coming, something fierce and dangerous and massive, something that would eat him, tear him apart. He had to run. Barry had to RUN.

His legs were moving before his mind could properly process the thought. The human was moving away from somewhere, something, whatever was going to eat him, he had to run, run fast. Breath short and legs straining, he didn't even care to look around, or at anything, he couldn't stop. If he did, he'd die.

His mind couldn't think as to why or how. Run, he had to run.

Dimly, he realized he wasn't the only one running. There were others, moving faster, but he didn't care, so long as he could get away from the threat, his every step an attempt to put more ground behind him.

The wall came into view. It had been torn to shreds.

Between Barry and the wall was pandemonium. Dozens of maidens fighting, and those armed were outnumbered four to one by those without weapons. Sparks of power danced around like a fireworks display. Bodies littered the ground, the blood thick in the air. The singular moment was enough to knock Barry's thoughts back in order. The human abruptly realized he was short of breath.

He'd been running for his life. From what? It had been pure fear, pushing him to run, and run fast.

Had that been the ritual? Barry's eyes focused on one of the larger holes in the wall. On the other side, he could see ferals scattering or fighting each other. Was this what the ritual had been meant to do? Or was it a misfire?

Standing still on a battlefield was a bad idea, and in this case, Barry learned the lesson the hard way when something knocked him over. Pain exploded from his shoulder and the world whirled out of place for a split second. The next he heard a scream; it was his own voice.

Rather than lay still and confirm what had just happened, his body rolled, urging him to stand and avoid being prone. He'd reacted just in time, too. Whatever had attacked him had pounced onto the spot he'd been occupying not a moment sooner.

His attempt to make a break for it was interrupted by the feral swiping at his feet and knocking him out of balance.

Dimly, Barry realized it was one of the felines he'd spotted on their way to the Court. Her gaze glimmered with unfocused wild eyes, as if she weren't even seeing him but something else entirely.

And as she jumped to tackle him to the ground, something came out of Barry's shadow and knocked the feral out of her intended trajectory.

That something had claws covered in black fur, a long canine tail, and wild unkempt hair.

And a splotch of partially flaked-off white paint on her face.

Chapter 114 [Mark]

Mark ran with all his might, a good reason for it was the fear that gripped his chest, but the other more pressing reason was because he needed to get the fuck away from the Dark Elves and the crazy crone as fast as he could before they reorganized and got the chance to hunt him in earnest.

Escaping the Court had been relatively easy when everyone broke into a wild panic and begun fighting each other or the ferals that had slipped through the defenses. The issue had been mostly the ferals themselves. The spell had made them to scatter in every direction, they were everywhere.

Thus why Noah was leading the way, her ears and nose able to steer them away from the worst of it before they stumbled their way into something they couldn't handle. The mouse had very nearly bolted out of sight the moment the spell had misfired. If not because Shery had kept a tight grip on the diminutive maiden until she'd calmed down, they could have very well lost their guide entirely.

And with her, any hope of avoiding the more dangerous ferals while also finding the river.

"Brye's catching up." Noah declared with a grimace, not even turning around or breaking stride.

"If you can hear her, something must have gone wrong." Shery replied with an angry hiss.

Mark might have spoken, but unlike the other two, he was winded. It was hard to keep up with the maidens, and it was clear they were slowing down enough for him to keep up with them.

"It went fucking fantastic." Brye appeared out of thin air right next to Mark, it nearly made him jump.

"You're bleeding." Shery pointed at the fox's shoulder and limp arm.

"I got poked." Her shoulder had been bleeding profusely, burn marks on her shoulder appeared to be the reason why the injury was closed, but her clothes were drenched in blood. She'd lost a lot.

To a degree, it irked Mark to see her in such a state and yet still instantly able to keep up with him without so much as missing a beat.

"Is the Warlock dead?"

"Didn't get the chance to stick around and see if a sword in the back was enough to kill the bitch." The fox snarled. "How much to the river?"

"We're almost there." Noah replied, slowing down slightly, ears standing straight and abruptly turning to the right. "Ferals."

The others didn't hesitate to change the course, following the mouse as she kept looking left and right, her steps moving a bit more cautiously as she began to make a beeline for them to follow along. All around them they could hear screams and, sometimes, Mark could even smell blood, but not once did they stumble onto anything that wouldn't be scared off by their mere presence.

All too suddenly, Noah reached out to grasp Mark's hand.

"Start running, right now! It's hunting us!"

"What is-."

Brye's ears twitched to point behind them. "We're being chased, feels like a feral." She frowned, turning around and lifting her hand as it was wreathed in an ethereal, dark glow. "I'll catch up in a minute." The air shimmered in front of her.

"Move, move, move!" Noah spoke with a shrill squeak, yanking Mark so hard his shoulder began to hurt.

Not one to argue when the alternative was being closer to something that wanted to potentially make a meal out of them, Mark did his best to keep up, breath short and legs thumping underneath him as his ears picked up on the

sound of running water. It took ten more seconds before he spotted the river, a body of rushing brown water that was down a steep ravine.

Shery began to slow down, taking a look at the river and hesitating. "We need to wait for-."

Faster than Mark could react, Noah had changed course and thrown the whole of her weight towards Shery. The movement was clearly an attempt to trip her up and throw the gray skinned woman down into the murky waters.

And she might have pulled it off if Brye hadn't appeared and yanked Shery out of the way. "Nice try, bitc-."

But Noah still held a death-grip on Mark's hand. Her feet still dug into the dirt, and she'd not stopped. The attack had been a feint.

Mark saw almost in slow motion as he was pulled further towards the ravine. The mouse jumped straight towards the river, and for the briefest of moments, a part of him was half-sure Shery or Brye would catch him.

Either from shock or their awkward position, they didn't get the chance to. Inertia dragged him even as he tried to fight against it, unable to get a proper footing.

Gravity came back from its brief vacation. Mouse and human dropped into the chilly raging waters underneath. In an instant, everything went dark and cold. Mark was battered from every direction, the river dragging them into a funnel of downwards acceleration.

Noah had a death-grip on Mark's wrist, not so much as slipping even in the water.

The human broke through the surface, gasping for air, trying to get his bearings and look for the shore.

"DON'T!" Noah's squeak rung out, her hand pulling him in the opposite direction, towards the center.

A wave struck them, dragging them back under. Up became down, a tumble of shift in directions, the water robbing Mark's breath as he managed to pull himself back up with a gasp. His hand struggled to yank free from the mouse's grip.

"MARK!"

The voice barely made it to his ears, his head catching a glimpse of Brye on one of the shores. She was running faster than Mark thought anyone should have the right to, barely keeping up with them as the distance was increasing ever so slightly. If Shery was anywhere to be seen, Mark did not spot her.

Brye vanished, appearing further ahead, eyes locked on him as she continued running.

"This is the only way!" The words made the human turn towards Noah, the mouse looking very much like a drenched rat, her voice shrill. Her eyes panicked but, but there was something else in them, anger. "This is the only way."

"MARK!"

Brye's call made Mark realize what Noah meant.

This was the only way to escape.

Not just the Court, but Brye and Shery.

"She's going to kill you!"

The call came from the fox, and Mark barely managed to hear it as the stream took a sharp turn, dragging them back under. The human nearly choked on the water, legs screaming as he kicked the water and tried to push himself back out, the cold wet darkness seeping into him from all around.

Just as he'd been about to break back out, something fell onto him, something soft that grasped at his hair and yanked him high enough for his head to make his way out of the water and take a gulp of air before the force of the river

pulled him back under. Mark realized someone was holding onto his other hand.

Yanking both hands down to pull himself back up, another gasp of air, and he saw that it was Brye that had joined them. The fox was currently very much occupied trying to use her injured hand to reach out to the mouse and gouge Noah's eyes out. The mouse, for her part, was using her free hand to push away the hand and leaving bloody strips with her claws all the way down Brye's arm.

"Let go, you fucker." The fox cursed.

Her body seemed to flicker, and for a moment Mark felt as if something were trying to drag him out of existence and somewhere else. But the moment that sensation reached his other hand, it died out. Noah was not letting go, and she was clearly doing something to keep him anchored in the river's wild stream.

"Mark!" Brye used her good arm to yank him up to keep him from being as easily pulled under the surface. "Kick her off or we'll all die!" Her other hand was too weak to be able to stop Noah's rebuttal, and the fox was clearly not going to let him go if her grip on his wrist was anything to go by.

The human hesitated, remembering the words the mouse had spoken. The way out, to escape Brye and Shery, escape the cave, the rope, the smirking goading humiliation. His brow furrowed and his hand tightened as all too suddenly, the fox's eyes widened, locking onto his own with what was unmistakably panic.

Could she read his mind? Or was it his expression that had betrayed his thoughts? Mark didn't care, his boot moved to try and shove the fox off of him.

Time to get rid of her for good.

Noah's maniacal laughter broke the train of thought. Mark saw the end of the river, a drop that could only mean one thing. All considerations vanished as his mind abruptly clicked in place. Escape took the backseat to survival.

Then the world lost its bottom, and he dropped a second time that day.

Mark realized Brye had let go. She was gone.

Noah laughed hysterically all the way down. And for the briefest moment, as the both of them fell, he saw it in her eyes, the anger, the rage, and above all, the glorious pride and satisfaction at their shared doom.

White foam and a deafening roar turned everything into an incongruent mess instantly, a typhoon that twisted him every which way. Only under the extreme speed of the water around them had Noah's hand finally let go. Where she went, he could not see. Everything was a muddy darkness.

Mark felt himself sinking, body too tired, too cold. Everything ached, his limbs tumbling under the twister of currents under the waterfall. It was becoming hard to breathe.

Something grabbed his hand, and the world spun.

And air pushed into his lungs as he dropped to solid ground.

Coughing, Mark heaved, collapsed as he gasped for each breath, too weak to move. His head spun in an attempt to realign itself with the world.

"Reconsidering your life choices?" Brye's voice rung out, her face a deep scowl as she lightly tapped him with her foot.

"Noah..."

"Soon to be dead." The fox stated, ears flickering dismissively. "Good riddance."

"No." Mark clenched his fists tightly, he couldn't breathe, the air was... "... feel her..." everything was dark, spinning, water was choking him. Two visions were superimposing themselves. He was in the shore, breathing, he was underwater, gasping. His mind spun as dizzying darkness was wringing his lungs empty. "Air!"

"The bond. FUCK!" Brye vanished.

It was a struggle to focus on his real self, on the one that was on shore and breathing air, and not on the suffocating darkness.

Then... clarity.

Brye collapsed on her knees, several shades paler, panting hard, dropping the drenched Noah who was coughing madly for breath. The Nogitsune was trembling and looking far worse for wear than a second ago. "Fuck." She gasped under her breath.

"What was...?" Mark shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts, to focus.

"Bond... strong one..." The fox rolled over and lay on her back, taking in deep lungfuls of air. "Death... bad for... partner..." Her hand moved towards her wounded shoulder and she grimaced. "Shit."

Meanwhile, Noah was coughing loudly, shuddering and curling into a ball. The rodent appeared disoriented, her eyes wild as she turned towards the collapsed Brye. Slowly, she reached out, pulling herself towards the fox. Through the fog of disorientation, Noah's eyes shone with single minded intent, slowly clawing her way closer.

"No."

Mark found the strength to reach down, grasping the mousy maiden's tail and pulling.

Noah shrieked, weakly struggling, flailing, her body wriggling and fruitlessly spinning in an attempt to free herself. It was clear she had not yet recovered from nearly suffocating. She couldn't throw him off.

"You fucking whore." Mark straddled Noah's back, pinning her to the ground. His hand reached out for the nearest rock he could find. "You fucking tried to kill me!"

Without a second thought, he slammed the rock down against the back of Noah's head with everything he had to offer.

The mouse shrieked, trying to get him off, building strength.

The next blow made her flinch and collapse back down.

"You wanted to kill me!?" Fire was swelling within his chest, anger that gave him strength. The next blow stopped the mouse's attempts to move again. "Betray ME!?" Another blow, blood stained the rock for the first time. Mark's vision was turning red, he was finding his strength. "ME!"

Pain erupted in the back of his head as he struck once more. He grit his teeth, thrusting the rock back down onto the unmoving maiden. His head burst in fiery agony. He didn't care, another blow, everything began to spin out of control. Mark found the breath to roar, raising both hands and slamming them downwards again.

The blow didn't reach its destination. He'd missed her head entirely, hitting the dirt instead. Mark's arms were shaking, his breathing a deep shudder, vision was blurring as he collapsed to the side.

Through the ringing, he heard laughter.

"The bitch was so happy she triggered a shift. Fuck me." His eyes turned towards the fox, to look at her as she lay on the dirt, wide smirk on her lips as she kicked at the mouse's hand for him to focus on.

The human barely had the presence of mind to notice the pale white skin was darkening. He didn't understand, his head was spinning, his eyes traced further up to meet Brye's face and the mirth as she stared back.

"The Boss is going to love you."

Mark could only heave for air and watch as she knelt in front of him, moving his head and putting it onto her lap. Those deep golden eyes met his own, and the world began to spin, he was too tired to fight back.

"Don't worry." She whispered, stroking his cheek. "I'll take very good care of you."

The world turned dark.

Chapter 115 [Barry](End Volume 2)

Barry couldn't believe his eyes.

The canine maiden stood, her back turned to him, leaning forward, growling, facing off the feline feral as her body flickered with dark energy. For a brief moment, she paused, looking over her shoulder at the human, before turning back to growl at the feline harder still.

Barry's head spun, not wanting to waste his good fortune. His eyes darted around in an attempt to determine the quickest route to safety. His shoulder throbbed. The feline had gouged into it with her claws, blood was dribbling its way down his arm. The adrenaline was likely the only reason why he wasn't incapacitated by the pain by now.

The moment the Hound moved towards the feral, Barry began to slowly inch away, trying to keep a careful eye out for any other familiar faces. Or rather, at the very least, he hoped to spot some way out of this nightmare. The fights happening all around were growing wild as those strange powers were flying all over. The ferals seemed to have stopped their push, but the remaining fights were all equally lethal to him if he got too close.

The Elves fought by summoning plants to their side, attacking the ferals from underneath or from above, arrows piercing through the moment they couldn't escape. The Dark Elves, on the other hand, danced with their blades, seeking to cut the distance and approach their targets. The ferals for their part moved far more wildly. Most sought to attack through claw and fang, moving in from opposite directions and barely using enough coordination between each other. A few would throw elemental powers from a safer distance, lightning and fire being the most frequent. The battle was slowly turning to the advantage of the elves while the Dark Elves were barely managing to hold on.

A bark drew Barry's attention back to the Hound. The noise had been loud and clear, powerful enough it startled everyone else. But especially the feline. The dark-haired maiden's body darkened as she lunged forward, her form blurring as if, for a second, she lost her shape. The feral tried to dodge, jumping out of the way. Except the Hound had not been there, instead emerging out of the feral's shadow and grasping the feline's ankle.

With her free claw, the Hound ripped through the feline's stomach and tossed her out of the way in a spray of blood. Growling, her eyes looked around, pausing as she looked at Barry.

The human didn't hesitate this time, turning to run away before she could get to him.

"Barry!"

Kajou's voice rung out, the Amazon having spotted him through the torn wall and rushing back inside. The Hound was squarely between the Amazon and Barry, the canine instantly spun around and growled, hackles raising and her body flickering with dark power as it suffused the surrounding air.

"I beat you once, mutt, and I was handicapped." Kajou swung the blade downwards, the metal taking deadly glow. Barry recognized the gesture instantly, how could he forget what had haunted his every waking moment since he'd been rescued from the cave? It was exactly how Pan wielded her sword, the only difference being the color of the light being faintly blue rather than yellow.

The Hound didn't take her open invitation for an attack, her body flickering with wisps of darkness. A defensive pose as she waited for the Amazon instead. Kajou took the initiative, lunging forward, her blade sung as it sliced through the air in a direct forward thrust.

And for a fraction of a second, Barry noticed the canine looking over her shoulder over at him. Their eyes met, there was a strong emotion within those eyes, one he couldn't recognize. The Hound vanished in a blur of darkness.

Kajou's attack missed entirely, the canine had moved positions right next to the human, her arms wrapping him into a hug as she pulled him back into the shadows. Barry struggled to no avail, feeling the world stretch and contract as darkness turned to light. They'd emerged some place else, a dozen or so meters further away from the wall, deeper into the Court.

"Let me go!" Barry struggled, only to have his breath taken away as they plunged back into the shadows, emerging yet again further away from Kajou. The Amazon was trying to give chase, but the distance was increasing with each jump.

The Hound's eyes were looking around, taking an awkward step forward while keeping Barry between her arms before lunging straight back into the shadows. But when they emerged from the next jump, something yanked them both sideways. The abrupt gesture tore Barry out of the Hound's arms, his body rolling through the dirt.

A yelp dragged his attention at the Hound, seeing her getting thrown squarely into a nearby tree as if she weighed nothing more than a rag doll.

"Are you alright, little human?"

It was the very tall armored tanned woman. Embla. Her question had been directed at Barry, but her eyes had not left the Hound for an instant.

"I..."

He couldn't quite find the words to speak when he saw the weapon the maiden was wielding on her free hand. It was an axe, but a massive one. Its pommel must have been at least four meters long and thicker than his thigh, the sharp metal head a third of that length. Both metal and wood were scarred, gouges that had chipped away at both its edge and its pommel. As if it had seen countless battles.

"Stay put." The maiden proclaimed, swinging the massive axe left then right.

With just one arm.

Her body leaned in either direction with the shift in weight, but her feet never left the ground as she stepped towards the Hound.

The canine vanished into the shadows.

"Not letting that happen a second time."

The Dark Lady stomped her foot to the ground, a shock-wave of red light glimmering all around her. The Hound had appeared right in front of the tall woman, clearly shocked she'd been forcefully pulled out of the darkness. The axe's pommel came down with a direct thrust that hammered against the canine's chest.

Something cracked as the maiden was sent sprawling back and rolling across the dirt.

With the dirt crumbling under the Dark Lady's feet, her whole body was rocketed towards her prey, axe swinging high and coming down at blinding speed. The Hound had little chance but to dodge, rolling out of the way and barely avoiding the deadly edge. Not that she came out unscathed, the impact against the dirt had caused an explosion of debris.

With a yelp, the Hound hurried to her feet as the Dark Lady yanked her weapon from the ground. Bleeding, the canine's eyes flickered towards Barry, concern plastered across her face.

Growling, she glanced back at the armed opponent, snarling.

"That's a nice look you've got." Smirking, the Dark Lady swung the axe back and forth, the weapon swooshing through the air with ease. "But I can't let a feral get close to our guest." The weapon began to glow with red energy as she raised it over her head.

The Hound didn't hesitate, turning around and making a run for it, ducking behind one of the trees before whatever it was the Dark Lady was preparing could be unleashed. It caught the armored maiden by surprise, she cursed as she lowered her blade, clearly unwilling to unleash her powers in full against the building the Hound had hidden into.

"Tch." The glow died out, she lowered the weapon and allowed its weight to rest on her shoulder. "Not much fun when they run."

"Are you going to... chase her?" Barry's voice cracked as his eyes kept darting around, looking for potential threats.

"One stray feral shows up, and you'd turn into a quick meal." She shook her head, glancing at him with a serious expression. "Besides, I-."

Embla's expression tightened as she whirled around, brows narrowing as she'd clearly sensed something amiss. Her brows furrowed, and she shifted her stance, tightening her grip on her axe. A flicker of shadows to her left was all she needed to react, glowing red energy following as she stomped. "Not gonna w-."

The Hound had emerged, but not in front of the Dark Lady, rather, directly behind. The trajectory the canine had used in the shadows clearly different to what Embla had anticipated. And the canine did not stop, the instant she'd been forced out of the shadows she shifted direction in a straight line towards Barry.

The human met the canine's desperate gaze and something clicked, his eyes widening as he saw Embla dropping the axe and rushing to intercept. His body moved without thought, leaning forward and towards the Hound.

The Hound's arms wrapped around his body, pressing him down, forcing him to the ground as she exposed her back to Embla's incoming attack. Barry winced, feeling the dark-haired maiden press her face against his shoulder while her furry arms tightened around him into a protective hug.

No attack came, only the crunch of dirt as the Dark Lady came to a grinding halt. "What is the meaning of this?" Her voice came with a hesitant strained edge.

Barry's eyes focused on the concerned look the Hound had as she met his gaze. "I think..." His hand reached out to touch the woman's shoulder, seeing the canine relax ever so slightly as she eyed Embla warily. "I think... we're bonded."

The massive woman approached, kneeling next to the two of them and completely ignoring the snarl the Hound gave off as the dark-skinned maiden approached. Embla's eyes were fixed firmly on Barry, her body glowing slightly with a reddish hue.

"You're an otherworlder." The Dark Lady spoke, almost with a gasp.

A wave of relief washed over the young human, he felt himself slump within the Hound's arms and nod. "I just... I just want to go home." His voice shook, almost exhausted, clearly too full of emotion. The canine tightened her arms around him, pressing his body against her own.

Embla hesitated, her eyes glancing at the Hound before she nodded, her right hand moving to press against her left shoulder. "If there is a way to take you home, I do not know of it." She said, her expression a hardened look of determination. "But we can keep you safe."

Barry could only nod.

Chapter 116 [Alice](Volume 2 Bonus)

"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.

Chapter 117 [Dia](Volume 2 Bonus)

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.

Chapter 118 [Major Gabriel Huge] (Volume 2 Bonus)

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.

Chapter 119 [???](Volume 2 Bonus)

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."

Chapter 120 [Freya](Volume 2 Bonus)

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.

Chapter 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?"

Chapter 122 [???] [] (Volume 2 Bonus)

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, her 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.



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