
[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.

[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.

[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!"

[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 jacked 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.

[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.

[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, quirked 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?”

[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.