
[297] [Barry]

Barry squirmed in the chair as he kept his gaze on the floor, wondering how had things come to this? Well, he knew how. There were six knights, one Lala and one Orion, and Embla was somewhere outside Seledo with a retinue of unknown size ready to jump in and save him if things went south. Oh, how desperately he wanted to be saved right now. The only reason he hadn't told Lala to ask for the backup was because he knew how bloody things would get.

He had to escape this problem on his own.

It would likely take a miracle, however, as he was currently trapped in a room with his aunt. One Miss Erica Dodson.

"Your hair is all silly. Why did you dye it like that?" The woman spoke with the derisive tone of voice that was practically a trademark. "You wouldn't happen to have gotten in with some bad crowds, have you, little Barry?"

"No, aunt Erica." He sighed, slumping as he sat on the stool.

"Good heavens, at least you survived. Do you know how much anxiousness you've caused me? I swear, I must have aged a decade!"

"I'm sorry, aunt Erica."

"As you should be. Going off with that troublesome brother of yours like it was some kind of picnic!" She huffed, making a gesture at the nurse. "Bring us some tea, girl, quickly."

"Aunt, I don't think-."

"You clearly don't know how things work. Don't worry, you'll get a chance to learn now that you've come back from whatever horrid place you were in." Her nose wrinkled at his clothes as her hand sent the nurse to run off. "What is it with your clothes? Were you put to work on a farm?"

"No, aunt, I-."

"And the hair. Why did you dye it all out? You look like someone dipped you in tar! I hope it's not something that toxic. It can be scrubbed off, right?"

“Yes, aunt, but-.”

“Good, then that’s going to be the first order of business. Lord Hevron is a minor noble, but he knows generosity and hospitality. We’ll get you cleaned and properly dressed.” She scowled deeply, shaking her head. “And the girl you came in with, she wouldn’t happen to be bonded to you?”

“Lala’s with me, and-.”

“Goodness, no, no, that won’t do at all. Bonded to some farmer girl? Don’t worry, I received some of the Earl’s generosity. I’m sure we can convince him to part ways with one of his knights. Now those are good and proper girls. They know their place and show respect as they should.”

“I’m not parting with-.”

“Well, fine, I guess. Keep the farmhand if you must.” She made a dismissive gesture with her wrinkled hand. “Maybe she can be trained into being a good and proper maid. The pointy eared ones have some ability to grow herbs and that is worth at least the pity.”

“Aunt-.”

“Listen, Barry, you might not know it, but we are very important here. You should start acting like it or you will get people to take advantage of us.” She frowned a little. “Where is that girl? The tea-.” She paused as the door opened, the pink haired nurse entering with a flustered expression. “There we go, see Barry? By the way, where is your insufferable brother?”

Barry’s lips thinned, his face fell as he lowered his eyes. “I thought he might have been here.”

“Heavens, no, that would be such a disaster. That boy never learnt proper manners.” She took the offered cup of tea from the nurse. “This is heavenly, soothing, well done, girl. Barry, you should try it. I’m sure it will help you relax. You always tense up too much.”

“Mark’s dead.”

“Oh.” The woman halted, her brows furrowing. “That... is a shame. I never did like him, but I would’ve never wished for such a thing to happen to him. He has always been a troublemaker though, mixing in with the wrong crowd. It’s a shame no one curbed that boy’s bad habits.”

Barry looked at his aunt as she drank another sip of tea, his eyes widening ever so slightly. "That's... it? Mark's dead and... that's it? That's all you have to say? '*It's a shame*'?"

"Don't get me wrong, Barry. I am saddened by his passing, but I thought both of you had been lost months ago." She replied, shaking her head. "Now at least the good nephew is back, which should be a cause for celebration. Now that I've finished my rejuvenation session, we-."

"No."

Erica Dodson's wrinkled brows rose ever so slightly. "Excuse me?"

"I said **no**." Barry stood up, inhaling sharply as he stood tall. "I'm leaving."

"You will do no such thing." Her lips curled downwards. "Your absentee mother is not around, making me your legal-."

"I'm not a kid anymore, aunt Erica." He turned towards the nurse, his eyes flicking to the nametag on her shirt for a split second. "I came here to buy you."

"Sir,-."

"You can either stay here or come with me."

"Barry!"

The nurse glanced at the old lady's expression as it was starting to redden, and then at Barry. There was a very brief moment of panic before she reached out to grab his hand. "I'd be honored, sir."

"Young man, you will listen to me!"

Barry turned on the spot to look at her, expression stern, anger bubbling in his chest and pushing him forward with the resolve he might not have been able to sustain otherwise.

"No, I won't."

He stepped out of the room, turning to the knight.

"Stop!" the voice shouted out before he could say anything. Miss Dodson stepped through with her wrinkled face contorted into rage to a degree that gave Barry pause. "You are tearing everything apart, acting childish. You might not care one bit about family, but I will do what's best! Knights! Apprehend him!"

No one moved. There was a startled silence, heads turned to look between Barry, Lala, Marianne, and the six armored knights. Hands reached down for the pommel of swords. Stances shifted, and the air tingled.

“I’ve done nothing wrong.” Barry stated, raising his hands, voice faltering. “Are you going to arrest me for disagreeing with my aunt? Would you like me to explain that to the Lord? Or the Earl?”

They flinched, but they did not relax.

“We were sent to protect and serve Elder Dodson.” The one in charge leaned slightly. “Please do not make this more complicated than it has to be.”

“Fuck this.”

Lala stepped in front of Barry, dropping a satchel of leather and stomping on it. There was a sound, an impossible sound, of wood and glass shattering into tiny bits, followed by the sound of the world creaking like an old floorboard. The energy washed over them like a tsunami, and suddenly everything became dark. The floor vanished from under their feet, and they fell?, screaming.

A split second, and Barry blinked back in reality.

One floor below the one they’d been occupying an instant ago.

“Run!”

Lala hissed angrily, grabbing his hand as well as the nurse’s and starting a dead sprint out of the building. From above, he heard screams and shouts of alarm. And when they stepped outside, Barry’s eyes widened. Seeing the windows on the second floor had been blown out as if a bomb had just gone off.

But there was no time to stick around and wait. They ran.

[208] [Embla]

Embla startled the moment she felt the flare go off. “We move.”

She did not wait for her maidens to respond, strapping the helmet in place and moving forward. She was the first to step out of the forest and to the road. Her war-axe swung once, twice, and she began to draw in her power as she didn't bother to hide from the maidens above.

If they killed the fliers, those below would know. And if they didn't, they would know all the same. Better to preserve their energy for the objective. The five maidens behind her were the fastest amongst her fighters.

Her eyes locked on the fortifications. Wood, temporary, hastily put up. The feral rush had hit this place hard. The twelve guards wore the Hunter's uniform. Maidens that were there to fend off ferals, the town had never been approached by the kind of danger Embla represented.

The Dark Lady prepared the first spell, pooling her power on to her helm.

“Ferals! Sound the alarm!”

The roar rang out in an explosion, and immediately the horns rang out, warning the city of a potential incoming feral wave. Still, the guards shouted out for Embla to stop and identify herself. But she didn't even bother to slow down.

“I have orders! Where is the knight captain!?”

Their hesitation was all she needed to cut the remaining distance. One of them shouted for the large wooden door to close. But Embla jumped, heaving her arms backwards and reinforcing her whole body. With a solid *'thump'* against the ground, her feet planted themselves firmly, and she threw the massive war-axe, charging it with as much power as she could pump into the weapon.

More sounds of alarm, shrieks, screams, and the wooden door exploded in a rain of splinters, knocking away the weaker maidens and clearing the way for Embla and her own. A few managed to toss some ability or technique or spell, but they washed off of Embla's armor like rain over stone as she picked up her weapon and continued moving.

With a heave, Embla leapt to the closest rooftop, locking on to Barry's location. She did not bother to slow down for her fighters, instead leaping towards her target without slowing down. Her senses stretched out, looking for threats. She found eight knights, their powers flaring out and dancing in a beat of panic and determination.

But only one was chasing her beloved.

A growl lingered on her throat, the war-axe charged with power, hackles rising as she pushed her aura out in every direction. A threat, a beacon, a call for anyone to dare come after her. A distraction. A very loud distraction. Maidens all over the town ran for cover, while those with power moved to protect their homes. Neither was of concern to Embla as she'd detected the knight chasing Barry had hesitated.

That was good enough. She lifted her great battle-axe and with a roar, threw it in the direction of the Lord's manor.

Her steps slowed as she focused on the projectile she'd thrown, her arm screaming in complaint as the piece of wood and metal soared across the sky in a beautiful arc. It left a trail of sparkling iridescent aberrant energy.

Out of the manor, eight figures emerged. Embla guessed them to be knights, but they were too far away for her to be able to properly sense their power. Though that doubt went away when they collectively cast a spell of some sort, a barrier, thick and humming with power. The axe impacted against the barrier, the sound of glass shattering rung across the town, and the weapon exploded, taking the shield with it and scattering the knights that had made the barrier.

For a brief moment, Embla lamented the loss of her favorite weapon.

She'd get Lala to make her a new one.

The knight that had been chasing Barry had very quickly changed direction towards her, and Embla nodded to herself. This would surely be a very fun fight.

Barry's emotions lashed out, fear, anxiousness, and determination. A desire to leave, to avoid the fight. They made Embla's brows furrow, taking a step back from the glee of a prospective fight and considering the future of the Court.

With a grimace, she turned, heading in the direction opposite to the one Barry and her fighters were taking. They would run out the hole she'd left on the town's defenses, and in the meantime, Embla turned to make a new hole in turn. It didn't take her much time, and she had a considerable head start on the knights.

A part of her roiled at the thought that she'd miss out on the first good fight in a while. But it was her mission.

So she ran. It would take her several days to be able to make sure none could follow her trail back to the Court.

The girl Barry had brought with him was a meek thing, a healer, a proper one. Her pink hair marked her as a rapha, and the girl had been knocked out cold the moment she'd bonded Barry. The young man had complained, but Embla pointed out that if he wanted to give her the option to return to civilization, then she could never know the Court's true location.

Lala and Barry had been quiet while walking through the forest, and from the young man's aura, Embla could read flickers of distress within an otherwise determined facade. Embla pondered on this matter as she carried the healer towards her mother's room, not broaching the subject with her human.

If something troubled his heart, he would share it when he was ready.

The smell of salves was thick in the air, something very close to mint, but with a great deal of things that made the smell wrong. Embla's senses prickled at the sensation of power in the room, the many spells that had been woven in attempts to stimulate the Great Lady's body to at least not worsen. To hold out for longer. For a strong maiden, these spells could save their lives. They'd need only wait long enough and all wounds would heal. But not the Warlock. Her body was too frail, too old, too weak.

The nurse was laid down on the floor next to the cot, and the curse of slumber lifted.

"Let me."

Barry stepped between Embla and the nurse, kneeling next to her and looking at the pretty young thing with those calming eyes. The nurse woke, startled, but it did not take Barry long to calm her down.

"It is simple." Embla made a gesture at the cot. "She dies, you die. She lives. You get to choose if you leave or stay with Barry."

"Who..." The nurse paused, gaze turning from Barry to Embla, and then to the cot. Slowly, she nodded. "I understand, ma'am."

"Good." Embla sat down on the floor. "You may begin."

“I’ll stay here too.” Barry said sheepishly, pulling up a chair and sitting next to Embla. “She’s intense, but she means well. It’s her mother.”

The healer nodded slightly, reaching out to touch the hand of the sleeping of Dagmar. Instantly, her eyes widened in shock and fear, pulling her hand away and glancing from Embla to Barry, and then back to the unconscious matron on the bed.

“She is... what kind of maiden is she?”

“A Warlock.” Embla declared. “They are maidens of great elemental powers, but weak physiology.”

The healer hesitated, shaking her head. “I have read of Warlocks, but she does not feel as one would, not entirely.”

Embla growled, but stayed her hand as Barry gently laid his touch upon her shoulder. “And what is she?” He asked.

“I don’t know.” Reaching back to touch on Dagmar’s hand, she grimaced. “It feels as if she has been changed by something, or someone, fleshcrafting of a high degree.” A long pause, and a grimace. “There is something else within her, something that is also alive, but barely.” Again, she pulled her hand away, realization dawning on her features. “A... plant?”

The word made Embla freeze, eyes widening.

“Oh.” She stood up slowly, turning towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Barry asked.

“I know what is wrong with the Great Lady.” Embla declared. “We were wrong. We’d sought a healer, and what we’d needed was a gardener.”

[209] [Dagmar]

The event played itself within the Warlock Dagmar's mind over and over again. She was trapped within the meditative trance of self-recovery, her senses dulled by drugs and spells as well. She could feel herself like a puppet that was clutching at the last strings. And within her mind, the scene played itself again and again.

The ritual, the spell, the fox, the sword.

The pain that exploded within her as the dagger buried itself into the kernel close to her heart.

The one thing that had kept her alive far longer than any Warlock had the right to live. The last gift of an old friend. With every passing day, the kernel weakened, and with it the thread that had kept her alive frayed just a little more.

Was this meant to be the end? Dagmar roiled at the thought. Her gut churned in anger. They were so close, so close to be able to come back, to rise! The emotions burned in defiance to all else. She would not go without a fight, at least there was enough clarity within her thoughts for her to be certain she'd not yet gone feral. Small miracles in times of storm.

The hours bled in this way, her thoughts scattering and regrouping before becoming diffused once more. The sense of time was dim but constant, days, weeks. A month? More? It wasn't until her body pulsed with a vibrant feeling of... strangeness that she realized something was changing.

The kernel churned, and the life it received pierced into her flesh with renewed vigor. Dagmar wished to scream but her body did not move. The only thing she managed was a sharp gasp and a shudder. Her own flesh trembled with healing magic, but it did not remove the pain, not as the kernel's roots dug ever deeper.

The seed had taken a hundred years to root itself as deeply through her body as it had, and within hours, it was doubling in size. The seed brought power, however, and life, even if the remainder of her existence was drained away more and more. Dagmar's eyes opened and she let out a soul-piercing shriek.

"Hurry!"

Words, actions, power.

Everything turned black.

Dagmar did not know how much time had passed before she stirred awake, feeling drained and frail, but alive. Far more alive than she'd remembered feeling in decades. Slowly, she sat up, looking down at her body. Her obsidian black skin was marred by white scars, spreading across her body like the roots of a tree.

The kernel.

With a soft breath, Dagmar pulled from the powers inside herself. How much had her lifespan been shortened? The kernel had fed its fill, and her magic had been diminished for it. Dagmar could only grimace, there was so little left... the old Lady felt a marginal sense of panic. Months, she only had months, perhaps a year at most. Not enough time, barely a blink of an eye.

“Not enough time.”

She'd have to help her daughter to take the reins of the Court in full, to stamp out those who might outmaneuver her. The Court couldn't be allowed to dissolve into in-fighting, and Embla would have to prove her strength. Would they have to move again? That would be a great strain on their resources, but where else could they go that may be defensible against a feral rush? Against the humans?

With a flick of her wrist, she summoned her clothes. What once had been a simple manner now strained her, she grimaced and nearly fell back to the bed. That fox had done a number on her. It would take time before she regained full control over her powers. Time she did not have. Slowly, she walked to the door, pausing only long enough to pick some fruit from the offered dish left near the entrance. She sensed five guards, and with a simple wave dismissed them.

The corridors of the wooden palace were mostly empty, allowing for Dagmar to comfortably walk without any distraction. She could sense Embla was nearby, and she sought her daughter out. The Dark Lady was, as usual, training. Armored from head to toe, she swung a long piece of wood that was likely five times as heavy as Dagmar was.

The old woman felt pride mixed with a twinge of envy and reminiscence, to the days she'd been strong and agile, the days when she'd need not fear blades or spells. The days when humans knew her name and paid their respects to her. The days when speaking of the thousand armed god did not bring scorn and hate.

“Mother!”

Embla dropped the wood and launched into the Warlock. The strong, powerful physique held Dagmar with a gentle squeeze. The gesture was far too kind for a leader, but one Dagmar would not rebuke as she did her best to return the gesture.

“It is good to have you back.”

“It is good to be back.” Dagmar nodded, inhaling deeply and glancing at her daughter intently. There was a slight frown as she felt a disturbance within her daughter’s aura that had not been there last she’d looked. “Something’s changed.”

“Much has changed. There is much I must tell you.”

“You...” A pause, a frown. This sensation... it could not be. “You captured the human.”

Shame crossed Embla’s face and aura, shaking her head. “No, he escaped. But fortune smiled upon us. There was another.”

“Another... this...” Dagmar’s thoughts stirred, and a sense of danger loomed over her like a shadow. More than one human being able to make powerful bonds? The enormity of the thought felt like the preamble to a storm.

Clouded skies and the roll of thunder in the distance.

She scowled. “You must tell me everything.”

The more Embla spoke, the more Dagmar realized something was wrong, very wrong. Her daughter had bonded a human, and at first, she’d thought this bond was one of dominance, of control. What human could control or force her own daughter to submit? And while the bond was not one of submission, it still had trapped Embla within the clutches of the human’s... weakness.

Dagmar knew of the trappings of such bonds, how they twisted and turned logic and reason against the maiden’s own interests.

But was there anything she could do? No. The bond was powerful. Just looking upon it left Dagmar feeling a slight sense of awe. Never in her life had she seen something that was so entrenched, so strong. The idea of killing this... ‘*Barry*’ was discarded immediately. The blow-back alone could very well cripple Embla, if not drive her into an enraged frenzy or insanity.

If there was something she could do, it would have to wait, however, as there was one more thing that perturbed her. Far more than even her own daughter being compromised by a human's influence.

"There are other humans like him."

"Yes, Barry couldn't ascertain the exact number, but if his guess is correct, there might very well be dozens of them."

The consideration made Dagmar's blood turn cold. "Have you kept an observer on them at least?"

Embla nodded. "Yes, there is an entire knight squadron from the Earl, as well as the local Lord's own forces. After our attack, they holed up in Seledo."

"But they cannot stay there, not forever. If the Earl sent his own forces to protect them, then it means he expects them to reach Balet." Dagmar frowned deeply, feeling her powers waver. "Do you understand the situation, daughter? The threat the humans pose?"

The younger maiden hesitated. "They would be powerful assets to the kingdom."

"It would be more than that, girl, think!" She made a gesture. "Think of the enemies of the kingdom, maiden forces, independent, free. The kingdom never dared go after them, for they had no way to reliably bond them quickly or reliably!" Anger flared, her powers bubbled, and the kernel churned under her skin. "How long before they begin hunting us again? Before they turn our own sisters against us? The draconids, the orcs, the tigress clans, the vampires!"

Embla nodded grimly, bowing her head. "What must be done?"

Dagmar held back from sighing in relief. The human's influence on her daughter was concerning, but at least it appeared he had not won against her daughter's better judgment. That issue would need to be corrected, in time, but for now, there was only one course of action they could take.

"We need to inform the others of the threat. I had a deal with the vampire clans and they will keep their word. But that is secondary, we must mobilize. These humans must be captured or killed, and we must act before they reach Balet. Once within the Earl's castle, it would be near impossible to touch them."

There was a nod and a moment of hesitation.

“Barry may be a human, but he has proven useful. He must not be told of this.” Dagmar continued. “We have a greater need for him. I will take him along with some guards to attempt and rouse the elves from their eternal slumber.”

Embla’s eyes widened, head snapping up to meet her mother’s eyes. “Do you think it is possible?”

“There is hope.” Dagmar nodded.

A hope that the ancient warriors that had once brought the human armies low could be awakened once more.

The question was, of course, if Dagmar had the time to devise a way to break the bond without harming her daughter in the process. If worst came to worst, she would have to find a way to make sure the human her daughter was bonded to would not threaten their plans.

[210] [Alice]

Alice sat on the balcony, her gaze lingering over the town and the village that a singular, extremely powerful maiden had unleashed upon it within the span of a dozen minutes. The attack had been quick, brutal, and efficient. In their wake, they'd left the external defenses crumbled as if two bombs had gone off on either side of the town. Several dozen houses had their rooftops crumble, and the medicen had looked like the upper floor had had a fire.

The psychology teacher carefully remained quiet, her ears straining to the conversation that was going at the entrance of the manor.

"The farmer whore did something to my nephew! They must have kidnapped him!"

"Ma'am, if it was an elf-."

"They were clearly in cahoots with the monster! And you failed to save him! I will have your head for this!"

The voice was shrill, like nails on glass. Ms. Dodson was intentionally making a scene, pressuring the knights to inform the Earl. To inform him that her nephew had been 'kidnapped'. It was a consideration that had concerned Alice as she'd heard of it, as none of the people she'd talked to had ever mentioned there being some independent group of maidens within these parts of the kingdom.

It didn't bode well.

"Miss Smith?"

The voice came from May. The young student who'd lost her cousin that first day they'd landed on this world. The quiet girl who'd stood in the background and gone with the flow. She reminded him of Barry, in a sense, save she looked far more eager to spend time on her own than anything else.

"Something troubling you?"

May nodded absently, taking the seat opposite to Alice's.

"I think I've changed my mind."

"About?"

“About the academy.”

Alice was half of a mind to follow through, merely nodding to prompt the younger woman to continue at her own pace. The thought of the military academy was something heavy on everyone’s mind, since it was the current destination they were set on.

“After the attack, I think I’m not fit to... being in a fight.”

The tone in May’s voice caught Alice’s attention. “You were there?”

“I was near the western gate.” May nodded, her hands laying on her knees. “And I... was paralyzed. I saw her coming, knew she’d be close, and... the knights protecting me asked if they should fight.”

“Oh dear.” Alice stood up, pulling her seat around the table so she’d sit next to May. “You asked them to stay put?” May nodded at the question. “That’s ok, you kept them safe.” She grasped May’s hand, squeezing reassuringly. “So no military academy?”

“I don’t think I’d make a good fit.” The younger woman shook her head. “And... when we were sitting there, just... waiting for the attacker to leave, hoping she wouldn’t notice us, I’d been thinking.”

“About what?”

“Pokeballs.”

There was a pause. Alice blinked, thinking back to the device the Baron had used to contain Monica. She held back the grimace, looking at May and focusing. “What about them?”

“I’d been thinking about the fighting, and the hiding, and... just trying to run, escape from it, you know? Look for someplace safe. Couldn’t pokeballs be used for that? If things are ugly, just... put the ball someplace safe, with the girl in it.”

“I guess that could be one use for them, yeah.” Alice nodded reassuringly, sighing wistfully. “Shame humans can’t go into them. The knights and villagers had been very worried over that, too.”

“Hm? How so?”

“Oh, it’s... you know.” May said, sighing. “During the feral attack, a lot of maidens lost their families and home, and had to travel so they could find someone to bond with. So they’d been feeling the pressure because there weren’t that many humans they could bond to.”

“Yeah, that’s certainly...” Alice’s eyes turned to look away, her brow furrowing. “Huh.”

“Miss Smith?”

“Helga?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

May squeaked in her seat, jumping slightly as the Valkyrie dropped to the balcony’s railing, her wings spread wide for a moment before folding tightly. “You were listening all this time?” May spoke with a tiny voice.

“She’s always within earshot range.” Alice declared. “She’s got a great memory, so she can help me remember details if I forget anything.”

Helga didn’t respond, her cheeks taking a slight blush as she bowed her head. “Would you need anything, ma’am?”

“The situation with the maidens, those who survive feral rushes.” Alice replied.

“It... is an unfortunate truth, yes.” Helga nodded grimly. “Maidens who’ve lost their owners in a rush usually are left with little more than the clothes on their backs. The kingdom requires all families that have lost their homes to travel to the larger cities.”

“To avoid maidens going feral and to have the humans help ensure all maidens have a partner.” Alice replied. “Right?”

“Yes.”

“That’s part of the reason why there’s so many ferals... I think? I remember reading the ferals could reproduce.”

There was a quick nod. “Parthenogenesis. A maiden’s body can self-impregnate under the right conditions. Ferals grow in number because of that.” She slowly shook her head. “But getting back to the matter, I think I was wrong about Natalie and the business idea. I was looking at it all wrong. We might just need to-.”

“DID YOU NOT HEAR ME!?”

Everyone paused, glancing over to the edge of the ongoing argument that had, apparently, escalated while they hadn’t been paying attention. Alice looked over the railing, but the angle was a bad one to spy on what was happening directly, though judging by the number of knights present, she suspected Ms. Dodson wasn’t talking to the knight captain anymore.

“Are you sure there was a charmer?” A male voice spoke, tense. The Lord?

“It’s the only way. Barry wouldn’t have disrespected me so. He was always such an obedient boy.” Ms. Dodson proclaimed with that air of self-assurance she always carried whenever on a tirade. “Something happened to my nephew and I’m certain the bond had something to do with it. She was no elf!”

“Is this true?”

“She wielded aberrant and magical elemental energies.” Another voice spoke out. “This is indeed true that it would be very odd for an elf to use such powers.”

“It would be impossible! It must be a charmer.”

“What’s a charmer?” May wondered, speaking in a low voice.

“They’re... threats. Very dangerous ones.” Helga spoke darkly. “Maidens that were specifically made to twist the hearts, souls, and minds of others. It varies on the breed, some have the ability to break bonds, others can use the bond to control their owner. Overall, they were hunted down long ago, before even the rebellion. There being one this far into the kingdom is a very bad sign.”

“Really?” May looked surprised, to which Helga gave a grave nod.

“Charmers are very dangerous maidens. They have abilities that allow them to directly manipulate emotions of others,” she said.

“That kind of does raise the question of nature versus nurture.” Alice declared with a curious look.

“... ma’am?”

“No, it’s just something academics would blow a fuse over.” The former teacher declared. “Though relevant, I guess. If you’re a maiden breed made to be a farmer, and you work as a farmer, was that your choice? Or were you locked into that path by what you were born as?”

“The circumstances of one’s birth are irrelevant. It is what you do with the gift of life that determines who you are.” May spoke, and immediately shrunk as the others looked at her. “It’s just a neat quote from a very old movie.”

“Sounds familiar.” Alice frowned.

“Yeah, it’s just something from the late 1900s, so I’m sure you would know.”

May giggled, and Alice leveled a glare at her.

“That was a low blow.” The older woman replied with a heavy sigh, glancing at Helga, the Valkyrie having merely stood there and nodding along. “Thanks for the help. By any chance would you know where Natalie is?”

She preened at the praise. “I don’t know, but I’m sure finding her shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Then could you pass on that I want to meet her?” Alice smiled slightly. “She might like the news.”

“News?”

She smiled at May's question, nodding. “I think we might have a way to help. And make a living out of it.”

[211] [Dia]

Dia yawned, stretching as she began taking off her uniform.

“You seem in a rush.” The voice was teasing, but Dia could only really roll her eyes, her fellow nurse was rushing to remove her own uniform just as quickly.

“If I don’t, Rick will start making dinner. What about you? Date?”

“Oof, that’s rough.” The shirt was practically thrown into the wooden locker. “And yes, got my own little date.”

“Is he handsome?”

“SHE is.” There was a waggle of brows.

Dia whistled. “Prestigious little skank. From the academy?”

The fellow nurse preened, shoulders squared and chin raised. “You know it!”

They both shared a quiet look, Dia only raising a brow.

“You know the rules.”

She rolled her eyes, of course it would come to that. “Fiiine, I’ll cover your cleaning rounds tomorrow. Now out with it.”

Her companion lowered her voice to a whisper. “There’s apparently going to be a bunch of women coming to the city. It’s been whispered about here and there, a bunch.”

“Oh, so she’s looking to use you to get into Miss Alice’s good graces?”

There was a pause, brown eyes widened. “What? Who? You know who’s coming?”

“They were in my village, I took care of them.” Now it was Dia’s turn to eyebrow waggle. “And if you want more details, you’re going to have to cover my cleaning duties for two weeks. That includes the green floor.”

The hesitation was apparent, and understandable. Green Floor was where the nastier operations took place, and it was the worst place to be for anyone with a sense of smell. “I-uh, why would I need such a thing?” There was a nervous laughter, but Dia knew she’d caught her.

“Ok then.” There was no immediate response, Dia just grinned. “Think about it, though if you take too long, I might bump the price. See you tomorrow!”

Not waiting for an answer, Dia put on her street clothes and hurried on out of the medicen, waving goodbye to the other girls as she made sure to break into a good jog back home.

Mentally she estimated Rick must have still been finishing up the afternoon class. The thought of him working still made Dia’s stomach churn, she had to reassure herself that eventually they’d earn enough he could just take things as a hobby and not out of a necessity. Dia’s lips thinned at the consideration of Monica, a girl like that could be earning a lot of coin as a knight, even if she definitely did not have the discipline for it, the strength should be more than plenty to compensate for such.

But that was a hope for later, for now she should probably start looking into some of the slum girls. Maybe she’d be able to snag one and put her on Rick’s sights. The purchase cost would be affordable if she was from the slums, all that mattered was the drive and brains.

Fighting back from wanting to sigh again, Dia redoubled her pace instead.

She felt Monica’s aura oppressing the whole damn district shortly after she passed the guard post. That Dia had to smirk at, if there was one good thing about the over-zealous cat was that her very presence cowed the worst dregs of the city into keeping their head down.

Lots less work in the medicen for everyone if there’s less brawls and muggings.

A quick peek at the aura, Monica was moving out of the house and that was a clear sign the class had ended. It meant she was right on time. She slowed down as she reached the door, she combed her fingers through her hair and smoothed her clothes, using her key to unlock the door.

“I’m ho-.” Dia hesitated, looking at the woman standing in the room. “-me?”

It was a beautiful woman, with flawless porcelain skin and sky-blue hair. Her hair had been tightly braided and her neck was shown to be devoid of a collar. Every sense within Dia told her this was a human, she couldn’t detect the faintest flicker of elemental energy.

Yet Rick stood behind the table, tense. Not the tension of someone under a threat but the tension she’d only ever seen him show when alone with an unknown maiden.

“Oh, hey Dia. Welcome home.”

Rick didn't hesitate to walk around the table and past the blue-haired woman, drawing Dia into a tight hug. His finger pinched her shoulder blade, and Dia knew something was wrong. But what?

"This is Kiara, an... acquaintance of Tomas."

Light brown eyes and an impossibly sharp gaze locked onto Dia. The air of superiority oozed out of the lady just like every other human woman. Dia's first reaction was to start a bow, but Rick's hand on her shoulder stopped her.

She could only look at him from the corner of her eye. But when in doubt, follow your owner's lead.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, miss Kiara."

There was a subtle twitch of brows, a hidden sign of annoyance, no doubt at the insult of not being treated as a human woman should be. But it was quickly obscured behind a brilliant smile. "I assure you the pleasure is all mine. I was talking with your owner over some potential deals, would you mind preparing something to drink for us?"

That was certainly typical human woman behavior. Dia almost nodded.

But Rick's hand remained tightly on her shoulder. His heartbeat was fast, blood pressure high.

"And I'd been about to show you the door."

That was about as shocking to Dia as it had been to the blue haired woman. Wide eyes and rapid blinking followed. "Have I done something wrong?"

"You've been trying to use your powers on me."

This time there was a scowl. "I can assure you it was merely the curse. I had hoped we could-."

"Dia, if there's such a thing as a cursed person, would they have control over the energy?"

She startled. "Certainly not."

"Then that means you're a maiden."

Dia looked from Rick to Kiara, and tried to make sense. Was she a maiden? She couldn't feel anything, the energy was feeble and-.

And suddenly it was not. The power suddenly struck out in every direction like a raging fire. Its very presence was hot and heavy, making everything feel like it was sweltering in an inferno.

Dia's hand shot out and shoved Rick behind herself, taking a step back.

"Oh please, if I wanted to fight, you wouldn't be able to slow me down."

The brown eyes shimmered and turned gold. Kiara did not move from her spot but Dia could tell it wasn't a bluff.

"Jesus, thank fuck."

Both maidens hesitated, glancing at Rick as he let out a long sigh of... relief?

"Sir?"

"At least now that the cards are on the table, could you tell me what this whole thing is about? You're not really cursed, right?"

"I..." The blue haired woman faltered, the pressure died out somewhat, her eyes turning from Rick to Dia and back. She appeared to determine the nurse didn't pose enough of a threat, and relaxed her shoulders marginally. "Yes, I'm not cursed. I seek to bond you."

"Why?"

"I've got my reasons." There was a slight shrug, she crossed her arms. "I can't say this is going how I expected it to."

"That's nice, how about we try this again tomorrow?" Rick clapped once. "I don't want a fight to break out, and if you stick around, things will get ugly."

Dia glanced at Rick, then at the maiden pretending to be a human, their gazes met, and Dia squirmed, if this became a fight, her only choice would be to buy him time to get away... however few seconds that would mean. "Sir..."

"Not you. Monica."

It was only then that Dia realized the pressure from Monica's aura was gone. The realization seemed to come to Kiara at the same time. The blue-haired maiden's eyes traversed the room until they fixed onto a specific shadow, one that was darker than the others.

Monica emerged from it, blue eyes and a severe snarl on her lips.

"Monica."

Rick's word didn't stop the feline from growling, but she did move to stand between himself and the blue-haired stranger. Dia immediately felt a wash of relief over her, with her here, she could drag Rick off and make sure he stayed alive.

"It seems I underestimated you, again."

Kiara did not seem put off, she dropped her aura and let out a short laugh.

"I will take you on that offer, Rick, I will be back tomorrow."

The next instant, she was gone.

Dia recognized the teleportation spell for what it was, and quickly moved to remove any possible traces of the lingering energy. She'd heard how practitioners could potentially return to the same spot if the energy wasn't disrupted properly and she definitely did not want that maiden having an easy time coming back.

"Sir, I-."

Her words stopped as Rick grabbed her arm, he gave her a reassuring squeeze. "Let's sit down, think things through."

She bit her lip. Her owner's word was law, that was reassuring, she obeyed, taking the chair and looking at Rick, waiting for his words.

"I think we should hear her out."

Suddenly, she wasn't so sure anymore.