
[122] [Autumn Heat (Various)]

Monica burned from within; every inch of her body was on fire in ways her mind could not process. The hot air within the room caressed her sweat-soaked skin and sent chills through her. The Sabertooth groaned, moaned, and cooed, bucking against empty air as her mind spun with single-minded desire. Claws weakly tugged at heavy chains, scratching at the metal, thrashing, too exhausted to escape, but still entirely unable to stop, to rest. A fever dream that overtook everything. “Riiii~iiiick!” She yowled, squirming in a vain attempt to find release she knew would not come. The room spun out of control, and as another wave of heat rushed through her, Monica’s mind refocused if barely, trapped in the same loop, unable to think, the scent of her own blood mingled with the arousal and sweat, desperation for escape and release urged her onward, making rest impossible.

Kiara stared at the heavy door, drinking water in long gulps. Every inch of her body ached and throbbed painfully. Her flesh was torn, bleeding and bruised, but the physical aspect of her injuries hurt less than the energy saturation. Kiara’s body fought to process the monstrous amount of energy she’d sucked off of the feline.

Even with her aura at full intensity and her using self-healing spells, it was still too much. There just hadn’t been room to do anything but focus every bit of attention to protect herself. Every minute spent in there had been a battle against a creature of lust that possessed no sense of restraint nor any presence of mind.

It was like trying to fill yourself by eating fistfulls of uncooked bread dough.

A part of her loathed that she could not even call upon the healer, as the Rapha would succumb to her aura in moments. “Never seen a heat cycle this intense.” She muttered to herself, staring at the door through half-focused eyes.

Tigresses and those of their genus had a bad habit of losing themselves, but never to the degree where they were borderline feral. Usually they at least had enough sense to know who they were crushing to death in their desperate desire to sate their lust.

“Riiii~iiiick!” The voice called out, pathetic and needy, weak and vulnerable.

Kiara shuddered at it. If they hadn't also partially starved Monica, the feline would've probably still had enough power to escape by her own means. The desperation was extreme, and were Rick anywhere nearby, she would've likely fully broken out and found him.

Seeing the current state of Kiara's body, it was obvious Rick would not survive the encounter.

With a weary sigh, Kiara waited, patching herself up, bit by bit shape-shifting her flesh back into place and then applying healing spells to stitch it close. It was a slow process, as although her body was incredibly tough, it was not easily mended.

“Riiii~iiiick!”

The voice came out with a flare of power, and Kiara grimaced as a wave of darkness rushed out through the door. “I can't keep up.” She whispered with a sinking feeling in her gut.

This was the one thing she should've been in control of. Keeping a maiden sedated and pacified was practically the core of her abilities. Yet staring at the door, she could tell Monica was recovering her energy faster than Kiara could digest it. How many more rounds before the Succubus would collapse? Just moving and breathing was starting to ache.

A soft knocking sound snapped her attention towards the end of the corridor, the door slowly opening. “Just a word of warning.” It was Eva's voice that called out from the opposite side, approaching one tentative step at a time. “This thing won't be able to survive any actual hostile attempt.”

Kiara's brows furrowed, noticing a... bubble.

Yes, it was a bubble. One shielding the Vampire from Kiara's aura. A simple caress of Kiara's energy made it waver, and the Succubus narrowed her eyes further. “You've made a shield to protect yourself against me?”

“It's meant to keep me sane while I help you.”

“I don't-” Kiara stopped herself before she could refuse the blood-sucker, biting her lip.

The only way Eva could've made an effective shield against the Succubus' aura was if she'd managed to figure out the underlying patterns to Kiara's aberrant energy. It was a

bad sign for Kiara, as it signaled proper protections could be made and distributed, ways to detect her, to sense and-

“If you’d rather I leave...”

“No.” Kiara growled, gritting her teeth. “Sucking her blood should help slow down her recovery speed.” She gave the Vampire one long look, scowling further. “Do exactly as I say. She’ll break you in half if she gets a grip on you.”

Urtha lumbered towards the cabin, Rick at her side. Her eyes roamed the forest around them for threats, even though she knew that the greatest danger was ahead of them. A winter’s chill bit into her exposed skin, and though it wasn’t something she’d need to be concerned about, it was still uncomfortable.

The human at her side had been far more liberal in applying layers of clothing, looking more the part of a fluffy pillow than a person. Urtha would’ve probably teased him more about it if not because of the meeting that was about to take place.

At least they were no longer in the deep forest.

There was a wooden cabin ahead, one that had no planks or logs, but that had been stretched out of the bark and wood of the trees surrounding it. Made entirely at the hands of the Elf Queen, no doubt. The construction was simple, a single-story block with few windows and just one door. Yet there were flourishes to it, thick columns that pressed out of the box and into the soil, as if to reinforce it. Similarly, the windows and doors were heavy-set, with wooden bars as thick as Urtha’s forearms locking them into place.

This was supposed to be a neutral ground, far from where the Elf Queen was at her strongest, and yet it felt like they were entering enemy territory all the same.

“Queen Camilla invites you.” The Golden Elf stood next to the door, her body covered in bark, her face hidden behind a mask.

“A powermove.” Rick kept his smile curt. “Haven’t even set foot here and we start off well.” Just as he’d been about to enter though, he turned to Urtha. “Come with me, please.”

C8 stirred at that. “Only one-”

“Each side would have a maiden in the room,” Rick said. “Unless you think I’m dangerous enough on my own.”

Urtha swelled at that to make the point, stepping closer to him.

“You are.” A voice called from within. “But I do not mind having your tribal wife present.”

The inside of the cottage was too pretty for Urtha’s tastes. The wood was smooth and polished, the grain showing sharp contrasts between the lights and the darks. It gave the impression that the singular room was a swirl of milk and coffee. More concerningly, however, was that Urtha could sense the plant-energy all around them, thick and dense enough it was oppressive, not unlike sitting in a hole that was way too deep.

The Elf Queen sat at the far end of the room, a wooden chair with simple and sharp cuts, geometric in its patterns, black in its color. Meanwhile, the seats both of them were presented were prettier, with curvier lines and a larger back-rest. The fact that one of those seats was Urtha-sized meant Camilla had either made it within the last few seconds, or she’d been expecting this. Urtha was pretty sure it was the former, but couldn’t really be sure.

“Urtha, Rick.” Camilla acknowledged them with a bow of her head. “Would you care for food? Water perhaps?”

“If you could get me some sunlight, I’d dance in joy.” Urtha chuckled.

“Certainly.”

The maiden snapped her fingers, and the ceiling of the room began to glow. Not just glow, it was focused on Urtha, a warm light that made her skin tingle and her soreness relent. For the first time in months, the Orc felt as if she were properly sitting under sunlight... except it was all wrong.

“This shouldn’t be possible.” Urtha whispered, mouth agape, staring directly at the light overhead, removing her shirt and twisting her arm this way and that.

“You’re telling me.” The Father spoke with a tired sigh.

“Elf Queen’s possess two affinities, one to plants, and another to magic.” Camilla’s voice was neutral, yet carrying an edge of smug authority to it. “Magic, in its truer sense, is an affinity that can mimic other affinities and elemental energies. Artificial sunlight was one of the first things I learned to create, as it proved invaluable for my saplings.”

“And troops.” Rick added.

“...and troops, yes.” Camilla acknowledged with a slight nod of her head. “It is not quite like the real thing, but I hope it is close enough. It’s been quite a while since I’ve last used this particular spell.”

“I’ll say.” Urtha proceeded to remove her clothes all the way down, entirely uncaring for Rick’s momentary fluster. “Any way to install this into every building in the city?”

“It is very energy-intensive, I’m afraid.” The Elf Queen smiled, unphased, turning her attention to Urtha. “It’s to my understanding you are the lieutenant of the tribe, is that correct?”

“I’m the Spear, Monica’s the Chief, and he’s the Father.” She added a cock of her head towards Rick in that last one. “He’s the one you want to talk with.”

“Yes, but I do have something I’d wish to speak with you as well.” Camilla glanced at Rick. “The tribe are free maidens, correct?”

“Yeah.” He nodded.

“And you do not consider yourself his property.” Camilla glanced back at Urtha.

“Nope.” She flashed her tusks in a smirk.

“Then I have a proposal for you, Urtha. How would you like to stay with us for a season?” Camilla reclined ever so slightly against her chair. “Not right away, mind you, there’s no rush.”

Urtha shared a glance with Rick, and he shrugged. Clearly he didn’t know where this was going, so she asked. “Why?”

“Orcwood.” The Elf Queen answered. “An Orc’s ability to harden wood and make it tougher than any normal metal would be very valuable to us. I’d be quite appreciative of having someone with your skills providing some aid. Not permanently, just enough to help gear myself and my guardians.”

“My skills?”

“C8 had some time to observe the coming and goings in Sinco, and your skills in creating orcwood stood out.”

For a moment, Rick and Urtha shared a worried glance. They’d both heard that the maiden had been sent as a sort of “envoy” to Sinco, but at no point had either of them actually heard of her. Now that they thought about it, only the Chieftess would’ve been

able to detect the Golden-Elf's presence in any meaningful way, and she wouldn't have said anything unless C8 herself did something noteworthy.

The problem was that, to Monica, what counted as "noteworthy" was not the same as what Rick would've wanted to be informed about.

"She would've requested to stay as a guest, but it's to my understanding the situation has been rather rowdy." Camilla's smile held just enough smugness to convey she knew exactly what had been going through their minds.

"Who's her bond-partner?" Rick asked.

"I sincerely do not know." The Elf Queen shrugged. "It would have to be one of the humans in the city, since the ones living near the Grove are too far away." She turned her attention to Rick, the right half of her lips twisting into a grin. "Of course, it would've been someone willing. She would be a poor envoy if she were to break the law."

Rick sat there for a moment, staring back at the Elf Queen, his expression amicably neutral. "I'm a little uncomfortable." He finally declared, breaking the silence and standing up. He turned to Urtha as he gestured at his seat. "Could you lend me a hand?"

Urtha grinned. "Of course, Father." Reaching out, she grabbed the seat and tore the backrest off with a simple squeeze of her meaty fingers. Following his, she removed one of the legs, and pouring her energy into the wood, she began to use her thick hands to compact and change it, slowly but surely grinding down its shape to something smaller and simpler.

After a minute of work, she put down the three legged stool.

"Thank you, much better." Rick kissed her cheek and took his seat, meeting the Elf Queen's sharp gaze. "I'll have to apologize. I'd come here trying to establish some simple relationships moving forward, when it's clear you expected me to approach as Sinco's Lord, and as leader of the tribe." He leaned forward, resting his elbows against his knees. "Let's start over. You were saying you wished for us to lend you our best maker of orcwood?"

Camilla sat on her seat and felt a shiver run down her spine at the look on Rick's eyes. It wasn't murderous, but it held the same sharpness of a singing blade. It was rare to find

a human with such a look, let alone with the force of presence that had accompanied the shift in posture.

It'd taken Camilla a split second to recognize that the human wasn't merely staring at her the same way a maiden Commander would, but his own energy signature, however feeble, was mimicking it. If she closed her eyes and followed only her senses, she would've sworn that the person across from her was not a human and an Orc but two Orcs, one of them greatly restraining themselves.

"That I did." She answered the question, sparing a glance at Urtha. "I take it you wish to negotiate through your husband?"

"My Father." The Orc corrected, smirking that toothy tusk-filled grin of pride.

"Then yes." Camilla turned back to give Rick her attention. "What would you request in return?"

"Just knowledge." The man had not moved an inch, expression stony and cold. "For one, anything you'd deem relevant to teach her to improve her craft and skills."

"That was the original intention." Camilla conceded with a slight nod. Feeling experimental, she reached into the bond and sent a wave of appreciation. She made certain to empower it with some of her energy, bolstering its strength. "Anything else?"

Her attack washed over his shield like it was nothing. Like a vine trying to pierce through solid steel.

Camilla fought back the urge to frown before she sensed the retaliation.

A singular needle-point blow that carried frustration and pent-up arousal in equal measure, hammering against Camilla's magically empowered mental defenses with enough force to make them crack ever so minutely.

Her eyes widened ever so slightly, lips twitching in a restrained smile.

"I'd like more knowledge about bonds." He spoke, looking upon the maiden as if he was of half a mind to pounce.

Whether to strangle her or have his way with her, even Camilla could not be certain. She didn't quite know whether she'd stop him if he tried, either. "It would depend on what, exactly, you wish to know." She conceded with no small amount of amusement.

"I'd like to know whether it's possible to use the bond as a way for her and I to attune somehow." His smile was like a shark's, full of teeth and predatorial.

Camilla laughed. She nearly doubled over as she realized he intended to take her prey right from underneath her nose. He'd intentionally placed her into the position where she could either back down and openly admit she was afraid he might succeed, or be an active participant in his plot.

“Very well. I do not know much, as many of my memories have been claimed by the feral curse, but I will share what I have.”

Let it be seen whether this human could back up his bravado.

One way or the other, it would be amusing to watch.