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## [124] [Drafts]

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After the... incident involving Kiara, something had shifted in the city of Sinco. One would've thought that the only noteworthy thing would be the dozens of maidens having ascended all at the same time. But no, there was something else, something in the air that made the winter chill... smolder. It was like hearing a voice off in the distance, muddled by the howling winds of the blizzard, just barely loud enough to leave him wondering if he'd heard anything at all.

A whisper that trickled down his spine like warm honey.

Every time he'd turn to look, there would be nothing there, just maidens off working. With the blizzard in full swing, the city was equally busy. There were constant patrols moving about the place. The extreme cold might have killed a human within an hour or two, but maidens could withstand the chill for days if need be. Constant patrols moved about the place, some to protect the food supplies from either hungry ferals or citizens wanting to break rationing. More patrols moved between the city and the forest, bringing in lumber to warm the houses that didn't have a fire-maiden to keep them warm. And even more patrols moved through the construction areas that were still in operation.

This made it all around impossible to figure out what was going on. But whatever it was, it seemed he had to stay focused on the very important task of not freezing to death as he walked the ice-covered streets.

With Monica currently vacuum-sealed onto his right arm, it felt like he was stuck between an open freezer and an oven. "How many more trips around the city?" he wondered, glancing at the feline as she somehow managed to walk hunched over, rubbing her cheek against his hair, and still hugging him tightly.

"Two more," she declared after only a moment of consideration.

The inner machinations of her mind were a complete mystery. Was she insisting on this "tour" of the city as some sort of reassertion of "her domain"? After her heat had passed, the feline had refused to leave Rick's side. Not that he'd complain, despite the nature of the event, the whole thing was clearly deeply uncomfortable for all parties involved.

Just thinking about it gave him chills.

He'd promised himself to give Monica as much aftercare as he could.

Though right now, his main concern was over how, despite wearing three layers of protective furs, he still felt like he was halfway into becoming a popsicle. Meanwhile, Monica only wore a very flimsy shirt and pants and wasn't even bothered by the howling icy winds.

"Could we check up on some things along the way?" he asked his feline companion. "Then when we get back we can practice reading some stories together."

Monica beamed at the proposal, giving his cheek a very wet lick of approval.

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Outside the city walls, just a few hundred meters away, were groups of maidens moving to and fro as they worked the trenches to the sound of beating drums. Three Orcs handled some of the drums that had been set out during the end-of-summer festivities, shirtless and unbothered by the chill as they played out a slow and steady beat.

"My Lord," Eva materialized out of the shadows as soon as they had approached, giving Rick a low bow. She wore black leather pants and a vest, with her porcelain arms fully naked save for a pair of short gloves. She had pulled her hair back into a tight ponytail, and her neck lay bare save for a single black choker.

A new set of clothes, no doubt commissioned from Yasir and his wife, Ahina. Rick had a suspicion that the Vampire was growing a friendship with the Spinner but hadn't really heard much. What he did know was that Eva was showing a growing interest in testing fashion in general, specifically trying to ask him about the sort of clothes people wore in his world.

The more amusing part, at least to him, was that she made a very big effort to remain stern and serious in public but was quick to shed that away the moment they were behind closed doors. It was like watching a switch flip, and there was something comforting about how much Eva appreciated professionalism.

"How's progress?" he asked, noting again that warm honey and lingering stares, but keeping his attention on Eva.

"The soil's frozen solid. It would've made progress far slower if not for the Terrielles," she reported.

While a Doggirl or a Mousegirl needed to claw away at the dirt to move it around, a Terrielle could literally will it to yield. The freshly ascended maidens could dig tunnels like it was nobody's business, and though iced dirt slowed them down, they still made earthworks faster than their counterparts.

"They're clearly still fresh to their powers, but they've been learning fast. Their... teacher is doing quick work," Eva continued. Kiara's name was on a list of words not to be mentioned anywhere near the city.

After everything that had gone down, Rick knew it would only be a matter of time before the Succubus was found out again. Eventually, someone would spread the word. Camilla's little "faux death" had bought them time, and right now their goal was to make use of it. Maybe their fake story of the "Lady of the city" having died would be able to stick, but how long until someone like Captain Deneva showed up?

Their goal had changed... or more like it had redoubled. Rick's intentions were to make Sinco so thoroughly impregnable they would no longer need to be concerned with the opinions or politics of the rest of the kingdom.

"How far along are we?" he wondered, catching a pair of eyes peeking over the soil in his direction and quickly dipping right back down as soon as their gazes met. He frowned.

"Slightly ahead of schedule, actually," Eva reported with pride. "At this pace, I'd say we can even extend the project's original parameters. Not entirely certain how viable it might be, however."

"For now, just stick to the original scope and scale," Rick answered. "Most people are still living off of temporary housing made of wood. We're going to need to rebuild with stone as well as into the underground. We can't stall that."

After the attack by the Pinielf and her ferals, a great deal of the city had been demolished and/or burnt down. That had left very little of the original houses standing, and so they had rushed through reconstruction. Having literal Elves and Orcs capable of erecting a house made of wood within the span of a day was a godsend. Unfortunately, though the houses might be sturdy, they were not maiden-proof sturdy. Not to mention that the walls were too thin and allowed for the hearing-enhanced to pry into people's business a bit too well.

For now, the worst that had come out of it was that they needed to cut more wood to keep houses warm, and that gossip spread faster than ever before. But this couldn't be a permanent solution, something would invariably give way sooner or later. The only

reason neither Rick nor the tribe had placed a priority on it was because the Darktons would come once spring rolled around.

“What’s the drumming for?” He frowned a little as he glanced at the Orcs, only now noticing how they’d been spread out thirty meters apart, and how each of them was following a different tune.

“Originally, they helped with giving our tunnelers a sense of direction,” Eva preened as she spoke. “The beats are synchronized if you hear them here, but underground there’s a minute delay depending on which drum is closest to you. Each team is trained to follow a very specific shift in that difference, that way they go in a very specific direction.” She faltered a little. “That said, the Terrielles have an innate sense of positioning; they always know exactly where they stand in relation to anywhere else they’ve been to. Likely to do with that ‘Earth magnetic field’ thing you’ve mentioned a few times.”

“So why keep drumming?”

“There are more tunnels and trenches we’re working on than there are Terrielles,” Eva answered quickly. “We keep the Terrielles on the more crucial aspects, while bringing them in to check the other things during their breaks to point out deviations.”

Rick frowned. “Don’t overwork them.”

“I am insisting they stick to their schedules,” the Vampire stated dryly before her lips curled and fangs peeked over red lips as she ever-so-slightly grinned. “But I’m also not stopping them from coming back after hours to get some extra experience and practice. Having all teams help one another and share insights has allowed things to remain cohesive and very functional.”

His lips twitched. He knew it sounded good, but he also knew how quickly things could turn sour. “I’d rather they have a place outside of work where they can do this. Don’t overwork them, and if you catch them pushing too hard, insist on them taking a break.” Rick wanted to steer clear of creating an environment where the maidens formed a union. “We’re well within schedule, so I’d rather everyone get the chance to properly rest and recover.”

Eva straightened, an earnest smile. “Of course, my Lord. I’ll see what we can do.”

“Great.”

The last thing he could afford was for the maidens to so much as fathom the idea of a general strike. Hell, he’d gone out of his way to incentivize almond-milk production just

so that the Cog-Horde's lust for almond-cheese was well met. Rick would probably need to officially designate the dig-crew as their own group, just so he could more easily piece together what needs they had. Maybe something he could address with his own facility?

Speaking of...

"Keep up the good work."

"Be well, my Lord." She bowed as he turned to leave.

Rick felt the gazes lingering on his back, and Monica's grip on him tightened ever so slightly. Next stop: the factory floor. A certain merchant, Rollo, had asked for a meeting, and it was something he couldn't put aside for any longer.

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"Please, sit. And sorry for the sudden request to move where our meeting would take place." Rick calmly sat down within his home's common room, finally enjoying proper warmth and relaxing into the wooden seat. "Despite my best efforts, there are still chemical smells over at the factory, so Monica can't stand being there."

"Stinky." The feline purred, seated directly in front of the fireplace, her tail wrapped around Rick's ankle.

"Yes, of course, my Lord." Rollo smiled that merchant smile, carrying perhaps a bit too much hope for Rick's tastes as he took the chair opposite him. "I am honored to have been invited to your personal abode, my Lord, and truly wish to convey my gratitude."

Rick inwardly berated himself for what he now clearly realized was being taken as a sign of leniency. Then again, the richest man in Sinco had been playing nice as of late... which was to say that he hadn't attempted to start a rebellion or anything.

"Shortly after you showed interest in radio communication, I sent a small caravan to Aubria, with instructions to find means to acquire radio communication for Sinco." Rollo kept his politically apt smile.

"It didn't go well, correct?" This was the first he was hearing about any such endeavor.

"Indeed. All attempts found failure, as there were both no devices to be found, and the requests for commissions were denied. One of the men I sent even vanished without a trace." The smile didn't show a shred of apprehension, sustained through what Rick

could assume was prospective glee for the good news he was about to share. “Fortunately, the true purpose of the venture was not to acquire a radio device.”

“It wasn’t?” Rick pretended surprise, cocking a brow.

“It wasn’t.” Rollo shook his head emphatically, fat flapping back and forth as he jiggled like a cup of jello. Leaning forward, he presented a small stack of papers.

With a frown, Rick picked it up and began to go through the first few pages, eyes slowly widening.

“The first few pages are objective facts, numbers gathered through direct observations. Maidens imported from other cities, their general capabilities, materials, seeds, draft numbers...” With a fat finger, he pointed at the rest of the papers. “The rest are inferences based on previous experiences as a merchant.”

It was an intelligence report.

Of the exact composition and size of the forces the Darktons were amassing for their attack. With one page laying out exactly the sorts of enchantments and gear they had available, and what were the known capabilities of their Champions. It had a level of detail far exceeding anything Rick and Eva had been able to cobble together from witness accounts and rumors.

If it were anyone other than Rollo, Rick might have even felt tempted to kiss the guy.

“This is... very useful.” He put the papers down, eyeing the merchant whose face had not so much as twitched. “I’d rather we drop pretenses, Mister Rollo. What do you seek?”

“I must say, I really enjoy how you operate, my Lord. It has opened my eyes to many things.”

“Such as?”

“Such as not trusting humans. An insight that seems obvious, but not quite as much when contrasted with trusting maidens.” Rollo interlocked his fingers together. “Until very recently, my perception of maidens had been that their trust was entirely dependent on their bond. If I control the man a maiden is bonded to, then I control the maiden. But your approach to how to operate this city has been... enlightening. I’ve learned that gaining the trust of a maiden, beyond the scope of her bond, is invaluable. Without this lesson, I could not have even considered giving maidens separate orders to those of their owners. It is thanks to them that I managed to gather this report in the first place.”

He leaned forward. "I know of your intentions to legally liberate maidens, my Lord, and I wish to collaborate in this endeavor."

"Why?"

"Because it would make me rich," Rollo's smile broadened. "An enslaved maiden can only spend that which her owner allows her to. A free maiden has no such restrictions. It is clear that by liberating maidens, the market becomes a popularity game, one I am likely to win compared to the current one."

"Good speech," Rick's brows furrowed. "But that doesn't strike me as the real reason you're here."

"I do enjoy your directness, my Lord. It is a very... merchant-like approach, devoid of the presumptions and baggage the nobility often have." The merchant reached into his satchel and brought out a metal tube roughly the size of his forearm. "This is the main proposal that I bring, my Lord."

Rick opened it, finding a blade within. A very strange blade, though; it was small, attached to a thimble, and decorated with golden inlays. "What's this?" It looked as if someone had made a cutting knife, but not one meant to wield normally, but to attach to your thumb instead.

"A few months ago, your companion, Monica, visited me on her own. It was... quite the shock, to say the least," Rollo's smile wavered. "She requested I make a weapon for her, one that could give her claws, now that she felt her arms were greatly weakened. It took many attempts, but it's finished."

Though certain Rick hadn't been told about this meeting, he did remember the day. It had been during the time Monica had been rather moody, and he had wanted to show up to give her a small surprise. She had been within Rollo's estate at the time, which had surprised him. Rick had totally forgotten that, and now that he saw the replica, he could easily guess where Monica had planned to put it on.

Her tail twitched as it remained wrapped around his ankle, after all.

"I've left the package where you requested it, Miss Monica," Rollo said to the feline that had both her ears pointed their way even as she kept facing the fireplace. The merchant turned his attention back to Rick. "As a sign of good faith, this commission was done free of charge."

"Now you're just making it obvious you've had ulterior motives all along," Rick's brows furrowed. "Out with it already."

Rollo remained quiet for a moment, keeping his smile even, sharp eyes locked into place. "I wish to make weapons for you, my Lord," he stated. "I've seen what your technology can do, and I wish to be allowed to supply you with means to improve on its efficacy. To that end, I've prepared other prototypes for this meeting." He pulled a second metal tube, one that rattled from multiple items within. "They're entirely ineffective without your marvelous explosive chemicals, but I believe this technology could be further improved upon... with the Lord's feedback and insight, of course."

Opening the tube, Rick stared at the contents, recognizing several items there before quickly snapping it shut.

Rick closed his eyes and sighed. He'd read enough of the report to know Rollo hadn't been bluffing him, but he knew too damn well what this game was. To know exactly how dangerous the enemy was, how outnumbered they were... and then get told there were ways to improve your own combat effectiveness.

Kicking Rollo out there and then should be what he ought to do.

Out of principle if nothing else.

"Here's how it's going to work, Rollo," Rick stared at the fat merchant with a deep enough scowl it wiped away the smile. "Anything and everything you make that could so much as leave a scratch on someone, you do so exclusively under my name, under my supervision." His brows furrowed as he rose to his feet, staring the merchant down. "And if I ever learn that you, or anyone under your authority, so much as dreamed of sketching out a bad drawing outside of my facilities, then I will personally express my displeasure."

The man had lost all color, swallowing hard as he shrank into his chair.

"The alternative, Rollo, is that you walk back to your home, give me all the designs and prototypes you've made, and never mention this again."

"I..." He coughed a bit, shaking hands drying the sweat of his brow. "I... I agree to further this endeavor, my Lord." The man practically slid off the chair, falling to his knees and bowing his head.

Rick glanced back at Monica, the feline stared back and shrugged.

"Stand up." With a wave of his hand, Rick pulled his chair away from the table as he watched the fat man raise up on shaky legs. "For now, I invited you into my home, sit." Turning around and bringing in a pitcher of juice, Rick served him a mug, and then to himself. "Drink."



Rollo regarded the cup for a moment before grabbing it and taking a long gulp. "A word, if I may, my Lord?" He asked carefully, waiting for Rick to nod before continuing. "Under normal circumstances, a household pledging its service would send either a son or daughter into the service of the Lord. More often than not, they'd send a maiden, daughter to a wife, or a wife if there weren't one available. In this situation, as Arietta is-

"No, just... no." Groaning loudly, he took a very long gulp out of his drink. "We'll draft a contract, put down a brutal fine if you ever breach it. Something like... dunno, sixty thousand gold coins or whatever."

Rollo swallowed, taking a very long sip of his drink.

"Would the Lord be interested in my firstborn instead?"