
[165] [Dia]

“Are you sure you’d want to go around on your own?”

Dia’s lips pursed slightly as she held Rick’s hand. “Sir, I should have done this yesterday.” She had a slight pause, noticing the odd look he gave her. “This is to ensure things are less likely to go wrong. The better aware they are of your needs and...” Her eyes flickered at the feline currently using her tongue to groom herself on the bed. “... Monica’s... the better.”

He hesitated, but nodded. “Alright.”

Stealing a quick kiss before the feralborn cat could do anything about it, Dia smoothed her service dress and headed to the door. Monica had switched tactics and had laid down the furniture as an obstacle course for anyone wanting to enter the room. It took Dia a minute, but she managed to get out of the room just perfectly fine.

With the door clicking shut behind her, she turned towards her first true obstacle. Deneva stood a step down the corridor, wearing the regalia of a royal knight.

Dia lowered herself to one knee, head bowed deeply. “I ask forgiveness for my sister’s behavior.”

With her gaze locked on the beige rug, Dia’s only confirmation that Deneva was even there were the murisium boots on the corner of her vision. The royal knight did not move, not even a twitch, not even a sound. The pressure increased, elemental energy coiling around her and pressing down on her.

Dia lowered the second knee, gritting her teeth, she remained quiet, waiting. It wasn’t the first time a knight would put her under their scrutiny, the Baron’s held a habit of it during their visits to the medicen. But this was different, intense. She could feel the knight’s energy moving just barely within her ability to perceive it. It was like an icy dagger threatening to slice her head clean off before she could blink.

She started to sweat, the knight’s energy stopped dancing and the edge and bore down on her, pressing inwards. Dia’s instincts screamed at her to tighten herself, to raise her defenses and block, but she knew this would only make her look insincere in her apology. So she grit her teeth and waited, exposed, vulnerable.

“Leave.”

The singular word was followed by a release from the pressure.

“I thank you.”

Barely holding back from stuttering, Dia hurried to shaky feet and hastily walked down the corridor. Her back was drenched in sweat and her breathing came irregularly, heart beating at an unhealthy two hundred thirty beats a minute.

At the first corner she found, she dropped to lean against the wall, heaving for air to calm herself.

That had gone far better than expected.

If still terrifying.

Deep breaths, Dia started to force her body back down into as calm a demeanor as she could. Her focus and control wavered as she had to attempt casting the cleansing spell four times before she got it right. It had always been tricky since her energy didn't have a fire or wind attribute. Steam rose from her body as the sweat dried and a fresh breeze blew through her, leaving her still agitated but back to more manageable conditions.

It was only when she raised her head to look around that she realized she hadn't been alone. Three knights stood there, looking at her through their visors but not moving an inch. Protocol was strict, and their captain was clearly a stickler.

“I apologize for the... lack of decorum.”

Even if she was owned by Rick, even with her blue collar, an Earl's knight still outranked her by a hefty margin.

“The captain hasn't been in a good mood.” The closest suit of armor spoke. “For obvious reasons.”

Being assigned maid duty. Dia still grimaced at that. It was clearly a punishment of some sort. “She angered the Earl?”

“Nothing relating to your owner's situation.” The response was a bit too stiff, almost as if startled. The armor blocked casual reading, but the slight shift in tone was impossible to miss.

Dia had to imagine this conversation topic was too delicate to be brought up within the potential hearing range of said knight captain. “I'm looking to familiarize myself with the staff, and my Master sent me to give help where I can.”

“Service corridor is over that way. The entrance is a bit hard to spot. Look for the golden inlay.” The knight pointed her in the right direction. “The head of the maids is likely in the kitchen right now. She’ll point you in the right direction.”

“I thank you.” With a bow, she turned to leave, but halted as she felt a flicker of energy from one of the other knights. “Yes?”

“Is it true?” The maiden didn’t move, her armored body making a perfect impression of a statue. Yet the tone oozed curiosity. “That he captured White Claw in the wilds, on his own?”

Dia kept her smile polite. “It is true. Though the details are improper for polite conversation.” Meaning that she was not going to share the juicy parts for free. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Another bow, and she walked away. Her eyes trailed around in search of the service door. Just as they’d warned, it was discreetly hidden and hard to find for the untrained eye. She approached and applied a bit of elemental energy on the area the pommel should have been. With a soft click, the door opened inward, revealing a corridor too dim for ungifted humans to see comfortably.

The layout and construction of service corridors was always more or less the same. The general purpose was for maidens to be able to move through the building unseen and without obstructing the way of the owners of the place. Dia had visited the Baron’s house enough times to know more or less what to expect. Still, it took her a couple of detours before she found her way down to the first basement of the castle. From there, she let her nose guide the rest of the way to the kitchen.

She tried not to look too shocked at the size of the place.

There were at least twenty maidens actively working on cooking one thing or another. The room was large enough to have at least twelve stoves and just as many ovens, every table and counter-top was occupied and being used. The elemental energy in the room was thick. Just from a quick sweep Dia could spot five maidens dedicated exclusively to keeping the fires burning and the ovens at the exact temperatures. Two were doing the exact opposite, using ice elemental energy to cool down the contents of two stone lockers. And those were just the ones she’d spotted right away. The cacophony alone of shouts and requests and updates was almost overwhelming.

The chance to observe more closely was spirited away as a Hound emerged seemingly out of nowhere. She was clearly nearing her forties and wore a golden collar along an immaculate white dress. The matron had the homeliness to mark her importance, but

the clear sternness on her face of someone who believed in strict discipline. “I know who you are.” She proclaimed, frowning down at Dia. “I am the head maid. You can call me Pristine.”

“I apologize for not being able to come sooner.” Dia bowed her head, making sure to stay away from the veritable mess of people mulling around and hurriedly making sure she wouldn’t bother anyone’s work.

“I’ve heard you come from a small village, so I’ll keep it brief. The lord’s healers all have copper collars and think they’re too good to come down here.” She placed her hands on her hips. “I’m guessing you know how messy things can get when someone sneezes at the wrong time, so you’ll help keep my girls tip-top until things slow down.”

“Sorry!” someone shouted from the other side of the room.

“I will help however I can.” Dia smiled brightly.

“Down here we don’t have sunshine, keep the smiles and rainbows for when there’s someone who cares about attitude over results.”

With a slight shudder, Dia rolled up her sleeves. “I’m ready to help.”

Pristine shot her a savage grin. “That’s more like it.” A firm nod followed. “Before that, my girls are terrified of going into the guest wing. Knight captain is hard to approach, but we know how to handle it. Your sister is more rumors than facts, none too pretty.”

“She is known as White Claw, her-.”

“Stick to the notes. How do my girls work around her.”

Dia took a deep breath. “Don’t make sudden moves, keep your eyes down and don’t show aggression. Don’t push, don’t run away, and don’t try to drug her or you’ll regret it when she wakes up. She will give a single warning if you’re close to crossing a line. Carry some boar jerky to apologize, but leave afterwards rather than risk making a second offense. If you do, and my Master isn’t around to stop her, she will break bones without hesitation.”

“Master?” The tone was amused, and a chuckle crossed the kitchen staff.

Dia’s cheeks lit up, the blush creeping all the way down her neck. “She is territorial over people and specific items, not over an area.” She coughed loudly, trying to get the words to stutter their way through. “Her priority is my owner first, her food second, and being the strongest thing in the room third.”

“Service?”

“My sister will rub herself against anything my owner wears that doesn’t already smell of her. So his clothes can smell nice or look nice, not both. Don’t use scented candles or incense or strong soaps. My owner already has a strong penchant for hygiene and with my sister around him, it’s best to keep scents mild or gone. As for food, he doesn’t like sweets and has a preference for meat.”

“Don’t they all?” Pristine laughed.

Dia felt her hackles rise. “My owner is an otherworlder, the first one this kingdom has seen in generations.” Her voice was firmer, louder, her expression abruptly stern. “He grew up having meat or fish almost every lunch and dinner. A world with so many sweets that diabetes affected a significant amount of humans. And in this world, my owner was a professor.” She squared her shoulders, making sure to stand as tall and proud as she could, even if she couldn’t match Pristine’s height. “Not just any professor, either. His services were highly sought after. Hundreds of human women and men came to learn from him every year. The number of students he has taught numbered in the thousands. I swear this on my bond.”

The kitchen had gone considerably quieter. Pristine’s eyes widened only marginally, the barest show of surprise on her otherwise stern face.

“My owner enjoys reading but has had to busy himself with my sister so much he has had no chance to indulge. He is considerate enough to the Earl that he won’t ask for the library since my sister may break something, so offering to bring books to his room will be a quick way to ingratiation,” she said, “He also desires to teach my sister how to read and write, so children booklets and toys are another option.”

“Enough with the accolades.” Pristine quickly barked, turning to the rest of the kitchen once clear they’d been slowing down to hear more attentively. “And get back to work!”

“Yes ma’am!” Everyone responded.

“I know what you’re trying to do, girl, and even if your owner were the King himself, you keep it out of my kitchen.”

“Sorry ma’am.” Dia’s bravado faltered, a shy smile replacing the stern mask.

“Just give me the “don’t” now that you shouted out the “do”.”

“He doesn’t think of maidens as inferior, but as equals.”

“That doesn’t tell me anything.”

“It’s a comprehensive perspective. Would you whip a human woman for having done her job poorly? My master would not suggest such a punishment, let alone idly stand by when witnessing it.”

Pristine kept her nod tight. “What else?”

“With the rumors circulating about my owner, the Earl might send someone to his bed as a show of hospitality. It is best that he does not do so.”

That got her a quirked brow. “I can’t go against the Lord’s orders.”

“Then he should be informed that anyone he sends will come back in a box. Likely several boxes.”

“Even if your sister is not around to play rude games?”

“The threat wouldn’t be my sister. It would be me.”

Pristine let out a bark of laughter, nodding. “Very well. I’ll try to warn about it, but if the order comes down, I’ll run them through you first.”

Dia’s shoulders loosened, and she sighed with relief. “I’d appreciate that, ma’am.”

[166] [Mark]

Mark and the rest of the group fell into an odd rhythm. The road was long and full of detours. Two out of every three villages they stumbled through would be avoided. Some of the hamlets were far too closely guarded for them to want to risk sneaking through. So they'd have to take a long detour around to avoid drawing attention. The same thing would happen when they spotted caravans or large groups of people traveling the roads.

From time to time, they'd stumble onto a hamlet that had been destroyed by the ferals. The wild maidens themselves popped up often, but never with a force or size that couldn't be easily scared off by the illusionist fox. Brye marked the pace for them. She scouted and determined how unlikely escape would be if things became hairy. It was an open secret that her objective was to ensure they got Mark to the Boss.

And all the while, Noah would mostly remain bound, gagged, and blind. The mouse would eat normal food one out of ten times, the rest being more of the berries. Each time, Mark would be left wondering whether this was a needless risk, whether he was setting himself up for another betrayal. Sooner or later, he'd have to decide on whether he could trust untying her and letting her act on her own.

"Aubria is only a couple of days away."

Brye stepped out of the bushes, seemingly having appeared out of thin air. Which could have very well been the case, considering her teleportation powers. Not that the encroaching darkness around them did any good to discern details, anyway.

"They're currently having some refugee issues."

"Just how far are we from that place?" Mark asked.

"You could get there in just one day. It'd be one good long walk."

"Good luck with the guards." Shery snorted, shaking her head. "We're going to want to get in without getting interrogated along the way."

"What's so important about this village?"

"City."

"Where I come from, a small city has a million or two people at least." Mark replied.

“Tiny city, then.” The fox sat down next to the backpacks. “I’ll need to get inside to see if things are as they should, then arrange to get you all entry.”

“If Lee is still alive, he owes me some big favors.” Shery crossed her arms.

“If Lee’s still in charge, then that dimwit will have bigger things to worry about than a favor or two.” Brye snorted, kicking Noah. The diminutive mouse squeaked and huddled against the tree. “The place must be a mess, and we’ll have to tell the Boss about the deal with the Court getting burnt to the ground.”

“At least they didn’t get to the cache.”

“Fuck.”

“What?”

“We’re going to want to go for the cuddle angle.”

Shery shot Mark a look, then at Brye. “You’re shitting me.”

“Do you want to go back there and check on the cache and empty it if it’s been left untouched?”

“Shit.”

“Told you.”

Mark watched the small exchange with a frown. “I’ll at least be rid of you two.”

“Don’t go throwing us away so quickly.” A quick smirk and the fox appeared on his lap. “We’ll probably end up stuck with each other for a while. Not that I’m complaining.”

“I am.” Shery raised her hand. “I most certainly am.”

“So what happens after you hand me over.” It wasn’t a question so much as a glaring proclamation.

“You’ll get put into the prettiest and comfiest room they have while they try to figure out what to do with you.”

Shery snorted and rolled her eyes.

“The Boss will want to meet you.” Brye’s words came without the taunting smug edge they usually carried, but a hard certainty. There was something in the way she looked at him that felt like a warning. “What he does after that will depend on you.”

“He’ll either want to use me or lock me up, apparently.”

She shifted on his lap, turning to face him in full, straddling him, her arms wrapping around his neck. Golden eyes looked into his with that edge of warning within them. Her fingers pressed into his hair, pulling away as he shook his head. That edge to her gaze wasn't gone, however.

“Take what you want, Mark.”

“What?”

“That's the offer you get.” She leaned forward, pinning his shoulders against the tree.

“You want something, you take it. If you couldn't, then it just means you weren't powerful enough.”

Brye flinched as a pebble hit her on the back of the head. She turned to glare at Shery.

“You don't need a speech. Go fuck already.” The gray skinned maiden rolled her eyes.

“I was trying to get him to be more open about the cuddle angle.”

“You psychics don't make a straightforward plan, even if your lives depended on it.”

Shery sighed, turning to Mark. “Cuddle angle is we suck you off and ask pretty please.”

“Pretty please what?”

With a groan, Brye let go of his shoulders and vanished from his lap. “Yeah, you ruined the mood, bitch.” She appeared at the opposite side of the clearing.

Shery grunted. “Pretty please don't break the bond with us.”

“Why the fuck wouldn't I?”

“Ideally, the question would be asked while you had less blood flowing through your head.” Brye stated. “We're no Doggirls just happily wagging our tails at your every word. But we're a heck of a lot better option than the alternatives.”

Mark leveled a glare at her, scowl deepening.

“She's got a point.” Shery snorted. “Not that our word means anything here.”

“Just imagine it like this.” Brye sat down against her own tree-trunk. “The Boss gives you a maiden. She obeys you, complies with your commands, but she will put you in a plush box the instant you toe out of line.”

“Mhm, and what's the difference between that and this?” He scowled. “If I make a run for it, you'll just drag me back. If I open my mouth, you'll shut it.”

“You never struck me as someone who’s a stickler to any rules that aren’t your own.”
Brye smirked. “I’m a selfish bitch. I don’t care about the rules so long as I end up on top.”

“Or getting pounded from behind.”

“Suck it, flat-ass.”

“Cunt for brains.”

“Would you two shut up!?”

Mark’s voice came out with a growl. “If either of you were half as selfish as you claim to be, you wouldn’t be going through half the shit we’ve been through just to get me to that Boss of yours.”

Their expressions shifted as he said this. They glanced at each other for a moment. There was something dark in those eyes. Shery shook her head intensely, and Brye’s lips thinned. “There’s no alternative.”

“What are the alternatives?”

“We either go back to base and report, try to escape the kingdom, or try to stay in the kingdom and pretend we are just some simple humble traders.” Brye said, counting off of her fingers. “Trying to escape would involve going out through the eastern ridges. Suicide with a different name. And option three is a sword hanging over our heads as we wait to get found out either by knights or by the Boss.”

“Not going to ask whether we join the Court?” Shery sneered.

“Fuck them.” Mark shook his head. “That crone wanted to sell her own daughter, you can’t trust someone like that.”

Brye stiffened, her eyes turning to him with a surprised look. Her attention quickly shifted towards Noah as she started to grunt and wriggle madly on the spot. The mouse started to speak into the gag, albeit her voice only coming out muffled. The wires and blindfold were too well placed, however, and she couldn’t free herself. So Mark leaned over and pulled the gag out of the way.

“Guenes.”

Her voice came with a pant, a slight squeak of a thing.

“Not possible.” Shery shook her head. “We’d have to cross half the kingdom without getting caught. The feral rush was a miracle. We couldn’t have gotten this far otherwise.”

“Mark will be locked up. His blood is pure. He’s worth more as a breeder.”

Brye’s brows furrowed as she teleported in front of the mouse, putting the gag back into place. “If anyone wanted to use you as a breeder, you’d get royalty treatment. No way a human woman would let herself get knocked up by a nobody.”

As she said this, her gaze lowered to the ground, frowning, deep in thought. The same expression Shery was showing. Both maidens shared a look. Something went unspoken, but there was surprise in their eyes.

“Don’t let her get into your head.” Shery said.

Somehow, Mark felt the words were directed at Brye, and not at him.

[167] [Ginny]

The stairs to the second floor creaked as Ginny wandered her way up. The walls felt too narrow, and her tail kept bumping against the walls whenever she wasn't paying attention. The house overall was cramped compared to the ones in Astunes. A more vertical approach, where outside the large city of Balet would have been more horizontal.

Four steps after the stairs, she reached her owner's door. Ginny gathered her resolve and, while balancing the tray with one hand, she knocked twice. "Miss Catherine?"

With the lack of a response, she frowned and focused. There were no sounds from inside the room. The mild panic was pushed down. All rooms in the city had basic sound-proofing enchantments weaved into them. With so many maidens going around, it would be impossible to truly keep any sense of privacy otherwise.

She knocked again.

"Miss Kat?"

Again, no answer. She reached for the handle. It was unlocked. The moment she twisted the handle, the sound finally reached her ears.

"Harder!"

The moan was shrill, loud, passionate. Ginny very quietly closed the door again. Blessed silence replacing the lurid cacophony that had drowned her senses a moment prior. But she could still catch a whiff of sex. Tomas and Miss Kat.

Ginny's face was flush, cheeks burning as she left the tray at the foot of the door and turned to hastily retreat. Her claws battered their way down, and she very nearly jumped half the stairs.

"Someone's in a hurry."

"Miss Hyung!" Ginny had nearly jumped out of her scales. "I am so sorry."

Miss Hyung stared at her with the same cold, detached look she'd been sporting since their arrival. "Is there a ferocious feral up in our guest's room?" The lilac eyes twinkled with a hint of amusement.

Ginny sighed. "It would be easier to handle." She bowed a little. "Sorry for the startle."

"I'm more sorry about the stairs."

Dread ran through the young Draco as she turned to look at the wooden stairs. The rich, dark brown wood had been scratched by her claws. The color started to drain from her face at the consideration of just how careless she'd been. "I will-."

"It was a minor thing." The lady spoke, reaching into the folds of her dress to pull out a small leather bag. "I'd suggest you get yourself some proper household footwear."

Clenching the bag of coins, Ginny nodded, keeping her head bowed. "Thank you for your generosity, ma'am." She said. "I... will head out to the market."

"Perhaps you should look for your sister. I haven't seen her, and she's likely not with your owner considering..." Her gaze flickered upwards. "... things."

"... yes, ma'am."

Ginny held back the grimace and bit her tongue. The lady of the house was a matron, age and power oozed from her, much like her own aunts back at home. She knew better than to disrespect the matron of the house, especially if they were the only wife. Doing so while your owner was a guest would be worse still.

With Kat not interested in having her around, and the lady of the house clearly not finding her presence welcoming, Ginny didn't really have many options left. She moved towards the kitchen and picked up some boar jerky, the kind she knew Lizzy liked. The lexis had probably figured out another way to break out of the house and was sunbathing on the rooftop again.

Ginny approached the door and paused. Claws went to her shoulders, hips, then knees. Confirming her clothes are the ones she should be wearing, she stepped outside. The midday sun was comfortable, welcoming even. A perfect time for training, maybe do some light patrol. The Draco craned her neck upwards to the roof.

No Lizzy.

The trickle of concern was pushed aside. Ginny had taught her owner how to set up the black collar so Lizzy wouldn't be able to get further away than a couple dozen meters. Kat wouldn't have changed that setting... right? Ginny could only hope now, circling around Mister Victor's house while trying to look for the slippery reptile girl. The distressed sound of grunts and whimpers drew her towards one of the alleyways.

Lizzy was curled into a ball, clutching her neck and whimpering.

“Figures.”

Ginny approached her sister, picking her up from the ground and carrying her closer to the house, until the maiden grunted and went limp. In all likelihood, the maiden had been drawn by something and jumped at it. Landing squarely outside the allowed zone. The collar’s paralysis had kicked in along with the punishment.

And her owner hadn’t noticed the tugging in the bond because she was in the middle of having her senses otherwise thoroughly occupied.

“Was it food?”

“Bird.” Lizzy mumbled weakly.

“Of course it was a bird.”

Shoulders slumped, a quick glance towards Mister Victor’s house left her unsure whether to come back inside and drop Lizzy or not. The matron wasn’t exactly welcoming of either her or her sister. Ginny had no doubts the Sorceress saw them as obstructions or dead weight to the potential future her own daughter had in Kat’s service.

“Let’s go shopping.”

Allowing Lizzy to regain her footing, she reached out to her collar and caressed it. Carefully, she chanted the small spell her mother had taught her. She could feel the tether placed on Lizzy shifting to tie around her own blue collar. A little tug and she felt the mental strain that came with it.

Another aspect of the collar. By running Lizzy’s black-collar tether through her own blue-collar tether meant that, so long as they remained close to one another, they could both move up to five hundred meters away from their owner. It restricted Ginny, but she didn’t mind, since she estimated the market was within range.

Hopefully, she’d get to teach Lizzy some manners.

“Food?”

“If you behave.” She pulled the leash out of her satchel and clicked it onto Lizzy’s collar. The feralborn maiden shot her a dirty look, but Ginny ignored it. “I’m not going to choke you unless you run off.”

She got an angry hiss for her efforts. But Lizzy didn’t try to immediately run off... this time.

“I know it’s really hard. I don’t do this because it’s fun.”

Not that what she said was understood by the reptile maiden. Ginny's claws clicked against the cobblestone while walking. The city was sleepy during the midday, but even at its most peaceful the place was comparable to Seledo at its most bustling. The cacophony of smells and sounds was something that Lizzy seemed far less concerned about than Ginny. The feralborn maiden kept sniffing this way and that, needing her sister to rein her in before she got too close to a stall or another maiden.

The crowd gave them a healthy berth. For good reason, one of them wasn't trustworthy. It still brought up bad memories Ginny didn't want to think about.

The market street required her to keep Lizzy closer and for them to move more slowly. Her gaze sought for any store or stall that would sell claw-tip padding. She found what she was looking for. Small leather triangles with a leather strap connecting each to a circlet. The stall owner was more than happy to let Ginny try it on to check the size. It was a rather simple endeavor, merely attach the circlet to her ankle and adjust the straps so that the leather triangles would fit on her claws and stay there.

A simple purchase. Far quicker than she'd thought it would take them.

Lizzy perked up as she saw the trade of coin. "Food?"

"Sure."

As she turned around to look for a food-stand, a hooded figure stumbled against her. Ginny realized she had not heard the figure approach, she'd not sensed anything. Her mind reeled, trying to catch up with the sudden realization something was out of place. Her instincts blared an alarm.

Before she had the chance to act on it, she saw what was under the hood.

Framed between deep blue hair were a pair of golden, shimmering eyes that pierced through her very soul. And the most beautiful face she'd ever seen.

"You look so cute I just might eat you up."

[168] [Rick]

Rick found himself facing a conundrum. He was, by all means, trapped in the castle. And the reason why was not by any direct act from the Earl, but because of Monica. If he wanted to just take a stroll through the streets outside the fortress' walls, the feline would undoubtedly follow, and that, in turn, would cause things to escalate.

It made sense. The feline was like its own tiny nuclear device, and everyone was keenly aware she was the one with the finger hovering over the button. If things went off the rails, Rick could attempt to use the collar to restrain her. But as far as he understood, even if he wanted to use the feature, its power would definitely be not enough to do the job.

Not that Rick would have trusted the approach, even if it did. He could ball her, but that would be a severe breach of trust. So the pokeball the Earl had gifted him remained tucked away and well out of accidental reach of anyone.

So, with his own options of mobility snipped by his own hand, Rick was left with a singular thing he could do to spend time.

"This is a...?"

Sitting cross legged on the massive bed with baby-making themes that had been carved throughout, he held out an item in front of her.

"Shirt."

Monica nodded as he held out the item in front of her. "Good." Rick nodded, pulling out the next item. "This is a...?"

"Shirt."

"Pants."

"Shirt."

"Pants."

"Shirt." Monica grabbed the denim piece, pushing one arm through the pant leg until her furry claw popped at the end. "Shirt."

Rick quirked a brow. "Head?"

She looked down at the pants, then frowned. "Shirt." She declared, extending a claw and moving it toward the zipper, lowering it carefully. "Head, here."

The brow rose further. "Smell?"

She frowned, sniffed, then sighed. "Butt." With a grumble, she pulled her arm out and tossed the thing at him. "Pants."

"Good."

Legs crossed, she gave him a look. Her ears perked and pointed themselves at the door, then at Rick. And she smirked as she slowly licked her lips. The feline began leaning towards him.

"No sex."

The quick proclamation halted her advance. Huffing, she crossed her arms in resignation. "Monica no sex. Rick no teach."

"Come on... Monica."

"Riiiiick." She replied with the same tone, rolling her eyes at him.

"You need to learn more words, you know, so we can talk." Rather than hope the words stuck, he pressed the feeling of what he wanted to convey.

The look on her face flattened, even less amused than before. She shook her head and crawled towards him, one claw toppling him onto his back despite his best struggle.

"Monica teach Rick."

He sighed. "Word?"

"No word." She pressed down on him, knocking the air out of his chest. "Teach." She kept pressing.

Rick frowned, concern growing as he was having a harder time breathing the more weight she put down on him. With a grunt of effort, he grasped her furry wrist with both hands and pushed back. She reacted by putting more weight, and Rick was left straining. Concern trickled through. Heaving in as best he could, he pushed the wrist sideways and off of him.

With her being someone over two meters tall and built like an Amazonian goddess, her weight hadn't really been displaced as much as Ricks. He'd managed to escape but Monica hadn't really worried too much, shifting to pin him back down. "Monica!"

“Rick no hurt. Monica teach.” She declared, steadily increasing the pressure again. There was a catty grin as he struggled to break free again.

This time he didn't hold back, tucking his knees against his chest and pressing his hips upwards. His arms might not be able to lift her, but his legs certainly had at least enough to make it easier.

“Good.” She nodded once he escaped, catching him and pinning him down with her claw once more. “Again.”

“Oh come on!” He raised his knees once more, pushing her off and rolling off the bed onto his feet. “Monica, stop.”

“Teaching now, rest later.” She purred, eyes shining as she crawled from the bed. She kept herself to all fours, claws silently pressing against the rug, stalking him.

Monica's eyes glimmered with amusement but there was determination there as well. Rick felt something fearsome in the air, dangerous, sharp. His breath caught in his throat as he took several steps back. What was she doing? What was she trying to teach him? His eyes darted around the room.

“Bad!”

She pounced, claws pinning him against the wall and hammering the air out of him. The move had been so fast he'd barely registered himself being standing at one moment and slammed against the rocky surface the next. Several somethings inside his chest strained, but hadn't snapped. “Bad bad.” Monica admonished, pulling back enough to let him breath and cough, but not enough to let him leave the wall.

“Rick.”

She poked his forehead, then pointed at herself. “Good.” She poked his forehead, then pointed at the rest of the room. “Bad bad.”

“I'm really not a fan of getting beat up for a lesson.” He pushed her back, the feline relented and let him stand on his own wobbly legs. “Would you prefer it if I taught you that way?”

She might not have understood what he said exactly, but there was enough heat in his voice to make her frown. Her next words came out with a growl that shook the room. “Monica teach Rick.” She declared, flatly. “Monica no hurt Rick. Rick hurt Monica.”

“What!?”

He ducked out of the way right as she pounced. The feline bounced off of the wall, pinning him to the ground. “Bad.” She stated, pressing down on him and driving the air from his lungs. Rick kicked upwards and freed himself, rolling, and yelping in surprise as she backhanded him. There was just enough force behind the gesture to send him rolling, and she pounced again.

There was barely any space to really move or escape, Rick shoved against the bed to avoid getting pinned again, scrambling to his feet and ducking just as Monica flew over him. The feline bounced against the opposite wall like it was nothing. Her next attack came faster than Rick could move, he was pinned against the wall with a definite thud.

She didn’t talk, pressing against him until he kicked her away and stumbled again. The process was a simple game of cat and mouse. Rick being the mouse, trapped in a box with a supernaturally powerful cat. His attempts to make her stop fell on deaf ears, she was serious, and that was starting to bring an edge of concern. Not enough to attempt to force her to stop, but enough he had to wonder where Dia was right about now. His biggest fear was that Monica wouldn’t hold back, that one of these pounces would bring her true strength to bear. Rick had no illusions about the situation, she could crush him like an over-ripe grape.

With each successive escape, she would increase the force just a little, with each dodge she would move just a fraction faster than before. Rick was finding himself quickly being pushed harder and harder, and Monica was getting more serious.

“Rick hurt Monica.” This time she pinned his left arm and chest against the ground, leaning over and looking into his eyes sternly. “Hurt Monica, now.”

“No.” With a growl, he tried to shove her off. This time she didn’t let him, increasing the pressure. “Monica.”

“Hurt Monica.”

“No.”

Her scowl deepened, placing more pressure. “Hurt.”

“No!”

He returned the glare, heaving air as best he could with an increasingly compressed ribcage. His breaths were coming in shallow, and the pain was starting to move past being merely discomfort.

“Rick!” She said, growling. She was growing angry.

The pressure was cutting his breathing short, his lungs were starting to strain, his beating heart was hammering away faster, and it wasn't calming down. Cold sweat began to run down his back, eyes widening. He was drowning.

“ENOUGH!”

His voice came out hard, carried by more than just the air in his lungs.

Monica yanked her claws away as if scalded, anger evaporated instantly and now her gaze was full of confusion and concern. Ears flat, her tail hung limp as Rick collapsed on the floor, heaving air and clenching a fist against his chest.

With his eyes fixated on the floor. “Breathe.” He spoke to himself, inhaling deeply. “Breathe.” It was a struggle, his heart wanted to explode out, his body was tense like a coil. “Breathe.”

“Rick?”

The hand touched his shoulder softly, concern washing through the bond. He didn't shrug her off, but he'd certainly felt tempted. “I'm... I'm ok.” He lied, focusing on the now, on the here, on the cold stone floor and the hard surface against his hand. Irene had warned him it might happen. He just hadn't expected it after over a month without problems. “I'm ok.”

She didn't wait further, pulling him onto her lap and hugging him against her. “Sorry.” She whispered, rubbing her face against his shoulder. “Sorry.”

Undetected by either of them, the room's door closed without a sound.

[169] [Lady Embla]

The royal room was dark, no sign of light from outside. But to Embla this was of little concern, the room was inside the Court's palace, built out of several of the ancient trees and still very much alive. To her eyes, the lack of light was no impediment, the tree's aura was easy to spot and the shape of the room perfectly visible.

Laying in bed, her gaze shifted towards her lover.

Barry's aura was so feeble it was easier to spot him by the outline of his body surrounded by the denser aura of the tree. The man lay with his head pressed softly on her shoulder, his hand squeezing her breast.

For a moment she wondered whether he was seeking to wake her, but it was clear he was still deep in his sleep. He twitched and groaned, muttering under his breath and shaking his head. Embla cast a simple silent spell, the words coursed through her lips as she focused her energy to follow the patterns. She made sure to keep her power light. With a mere caress, he relaxed, sighing and sinking into her embrace. She slowly wrapped him closer into her arms, kissing his forehead gently.

A singular sound broke the silence, a growl.

Embla chuckled in amusement. "Of course."

She let the Hound keep complaining for a while longer as she stroked Barry's hair between her fingers. Alas, she could not ignore the feralborn maiden forever, even if she did feel tempted to.

A second spell was muttered, her whole hand glowing with a faint green as she caressed Barry's chest. Spells that placed someone into an unconscious state were useful, but unconsciousness was not restful. So she made sure hers would be one for deep sleep instead.

Untangling herself from Barry's grasp, Embla threw the bed-sheet over him and walked towards the double-doors of the room, sending the Hound follow. She was uncaring for her nudity. Though the same could not be said about her guards.

"Ma'am!"

Embla needed only to give them a look, and they returned to their posts. She could feel the feralborn Hound trailing within her shadow as she descended the stairs towards the training courtyard. There were a few trainees using it, but she scared them off with a small increase of her aura. With the place left for herself, she waited for the Hound to come out of the shadow. Embla waited, naked and enjoying the light cool breeze of night air.

They both knew the rules of this encounter, it was not their first.

With a savage snarl, the Hound lunged at Embla. Her response was a roundhouse to the chest that sent the maiden flying backwards.

The guards knew better than to come and check.

Embla pressed her advantage, closing the distance in a single step, her fist sinking into the canine's gut. There was enough resistance to show the Hound had at least put some effort in learning since the last time, the canine used the chance to lashing out to rip out the Lady's flesh.

She let her.

Long angry strips of blood and skin were gouged out of her arms. The pain surged through Embla's body like fire, and the next punch found her target's ribs. Embla punched again despite the claws sinking into her arms, the next attack came harder, hammering the feralborn mutt against the wall. Each impact shook the tree with a concussive blow, the pain of the claws sinking into her biceps pushed her to throw herself harder.

It wasn't until she felt the protective layer of elemental energy drop and the Hound's ribs crack that she stopped. Orion was breathing heavily, coughing, blood dripping from her lips. But her claws remained firmly grasping Embla's biceps, claws having dug themselves past her dark skin.

With barely a flinch, she tore those out and stepped back, letting the Hound drop to the ground. "Is that all?" She growled at the canine, pushing her powers to close the wounds, the bleeding had stopped within seconds. She turned towards the courtyard's entrance. "Berry."

The door opened, and two soldiers entered, quickly leaving a small bag with the healing berries. Embla took one out and tossed it at the feralborn that lay on the ground. At least this time the canine hadn't been dumb enough to throw the offer away, quickly consuming the fruit. It wouldn't heal her broken ribs, but it would go a long way towards leaving them less of a crippling injury.

The canine whimpered and grunted, slowly raising herself to her feet again.

The growl came back.

Embla nodded solemnly. "Good."

Lunging forward, her fists came hard and fast. Orion managed to dodge a few, but she lacked the skill and experience to handle someone that could so openly ignore the pain of having her claws rip into them. Admittedly, the difference in experience would have been enough to mark the difference, but even without it, Embla was in a thoroughly advantageous position when it came to a fight with no powers involved. Her breed was faster, stronger, and had not just a powerful ability to self-heal but also to ignore pain.

The primal maidens had made her breed as natural born mage-killers, able to disrupt and deny spells and some of the more complex elemental abilities. Meanwhile, the Hound wasn't a fighter, she was a hunter. Made to track prey for months and wear them out before delivering death, she had a healing power, but it paled to Embla's.

But the biggest and true drawback besides inexperience was that a Hound was half-way down her genus, its powers not yet realized in full, she still had another shift left in her... once she became strong enough.

Meanwhile, Embla was at the peak. And had been for nearly half a decade.

The spar took four hours before the Hound could not get back up even with the aid of the berries. She had learned the hard way to dodge rather than block, to move out of the way with the least amount of effort. It was a lesson she'd yet to truly hammer down, but there was a talent in the canine, a clear goal somewhere in the maiden's mind she was pushing herself to.

By the time the Hound could stand up no more, most bones had broken under the unrelenting fists. No guard stood around watching for long, many of them were familiar with what training a feralborn maiden meant, and none were keen on spectating after the first ten minutes.

Embla gazed down at Orion, proceeding to pour every bit of her power over the creature to show this had been little more than a warm-up to her.

The Hound grunted, growling weakly but not moving.

Embla rolled her eyes and scooped the canine into her arms, walking her towards the apothecary. The resident healer grunted in annoyance, lifting her gaze from the book she'd been reading. "Again?"

“Again.”

Placing the Hound gingerly on the table, the old maiden made an annoyed sound.

“You’re trailing blood all over the place.”

“Someone will clean it.”

“You should have cleaned yourself.”

“Your tone should clean itself too.”

With glowing hands the old maiden leaned over the Hound. There was a sound of annoyance, and then rest. The healer glanced at Embla. “You should show more respect to the one who changed your diapers.”

The only response was a cocky smirk as she put her hands on her naked hips. “Going to finish any time soon, hag?”

“For failing to get a feral to bow to you, you’re in a good mood.”

“Perhaps.”

“You fought naked.”

Embla shrugged her shoulders slightly. “Maybe I’ve grown a taste for insolence. Makes it more interesting.”

The healer quirked a brow. “Or maybe you’re proud your male bonded a high-spirited thing.”

The barest hint of color reached Embla’s face. “Maybe.” She rolled her shoulders to remove the tension.

“Don’t think you can fool me, girl, you’ve been parading that bare neck of yours all over.”

“A symbol of freedom.”

“At the hands of a human.” The woman spoke with an edge of steel.

That caused the woman’s eyes to narrow. “What are you trying to insinuate?”

“Nothing, my Lady. I only feel concern about whether you’ve forgotten our cause.”

Embla growled now. “Never.”

“Good.” A slight nod, the old woman leaned away from the unconscious Hound. “Your mother does not have long, and action must be taken.”

“Barry’s not ready.”

“Your mother’s health does not depend on his readiness.” The old woman spoke, meeting Embla’s steel gaze.

“I am aware.”

“If a rush comes through while she is incapacitated like this, we may lose too many to survive.”

“I am aware.”

A harsh nod followed. “Then act like it.”

Embla leveled a glare at the woman, but said nothing. She reached to take Orion from the table and with the feral in her arms, she proceeded to walk over to the nearest shower. She placed the unconscious feral on the floor and allowed the cold water to drench them both. Thoughts of her mother came heavily as she began scrubbing her body clean of the blood, her own wounds closed.

She cared not to dry herself as she headed back to her room.

The guards dared not speak or comment on their Lady carrying a naked drenched Hound back into her chambers. And after laying Orion on the nearest chair, she moved towards the bed, stopping herself at the edge. She looked at the human that slept soundly, hands stretched out in search of someone who was not there. Quietly, in the dark, Embla stared at the pasty pale redhead. The young man whose eyes would still twinkle with wonder and innocence. His warmth called to her with a promise of rest, of peace. A breath of fresh air she had not known she’d needed so desperately.

Had she lost sight of their goals? Had she deluded herself to believe this could continue forever? Fingers reaching for her throat, she caressed where the collar had once been. She could still see the item, its enchantments broken and gone, no more than a piece of leather.

Closing her eyes, Embla steeled her resolve.

She turned towards the dresser, she activated the mage-light to look at her reflection. Her fingers brought the collar up, clicking it around her neck. The sound loud in the silence of the room, her fingers shook for a moment, as if expecting something terrible to happen, of old memories to resurface. But there was nothing, inside or outside, only quiet.

Embla opened her eyes to stare at her reflection once more.

She looked as if a weight had fallen on her shoulders, she knew it to be one that had never left. Her eyes shone with sharpened steel, the soft contours of the hint of the smile she'd worn now gone.

A wave and the light was out.

She turned towards the door, knowing she could not turn to Barry or she'd waver.

The guards froze as she stepped outside, feeling her power as she projected it in full.

She gave but a single command.

“Bring me my armor.”

They ran.

[170] [Mr. Gabriel]

“Elder Gabriel, we should be heading back.”

He leveled a stern gaze at Rose. The Centaur squirmed slightly and nodded sheepishly, clopping her hooves and turning to look at the alleyway they’d walked into while remaining silent. There was nothing there save darkness, some trash, and mud, but Mr. Gabriel didn’t mind it, walking past and making his way forward. Tess the Mousegirl was stuck to his side, albeit far more loosely than she’d been on the main streets of the city.

She felt safer away from the crowds, and Rose was practically the opposite.

Keeping a steady march, his eyes continued to turn upwards to the rooftops.

The castle town had a feel to it that made it appear haphazardly put together, a certain chaos to the streets and their layout. But he’d seen more subtle traps during his time. The layout was clearly meant to make it hard for attackers to navigate the city effectively. Trying to go on straight lines would lead to dead ends, taking a wrong turn could have you clashing face-first into whatever incoming force was trying to rally their way to the fortress. The philosophy was quite thorough, like trying to use a river’s strength against itself.

Old habits died hard, and in this case, Gabriel had spent the better part of the past few days walking around the city. His legs weren’t as strong as they used to, but he wasn’t about to let that slow him down. “There we go.”

There was a mild sense of accomplishment once he confirmed the street they came out to was the one he’d been aiming for. And that meant the conman’s house was...

“There.”

Just slightly further up the street and-.

“Ginny!”

The centaur sprung to action faster than Gabriel had the chance to notice what was going on. He spotted the two lizard girls standing in front of the house with a third one talking to them.

“Don’t worry Rose, we’re alright.” Ginny spoke with a wide smile and a flushed face, her hand gestured at the woman next to her. “We met on the market.”

“And who is this?”

Gabriel’s voice startled Ginny, she turned to him with a moment of nervousness that was followed by a quick bow. “Greetings, elder, I was merely introducing a maiden I met at the market.”

His eyes turned towards the woman in question. She wore a long dark cloak which hid just about everything about her save her head. Her hair was a shimmering blue that made it appear as if made out of gems, her eyes a brilliant gold, high rosy cheekbones and a picture perfect demure smile framed in ruby red lips. Her eyes locked on him, and for a moment Gabriel felt like he was a teenager all over again.

The moment was fleeting, however, leaving him with only a slight smile of days long past.

“I met a woman like you, once. Most exotic girl in Ho Chi Minh.”

Her face flushed slightly, she bowed her head. “You are too kind, sir.”

“That, and she gave half the platoon more crabs than a crustacean buffet.”

“Excuse me?”

He laughed, ignoring the shocked and confused expression the maiden shot his way. He waved them off.

“Don’t pay me any mind, I’m just some old bones rattling.” His focus moved to the blue-lizard girl. “My hell-spawn still jumping on the bed with the Tomas boy?”

Instantly the woman squirmed. “I, erm-“

“So yes.” His gaze rose towards the window on the second floor, eyes narrowing slightly.

“Ginny?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Go tell her she has exactly ten minutes before I go up to get her down myself.”

“I, um-.”

“I am going to count the time, whether you tell her or not.”

Jumping from her spot, the maiden turned towards the house, rushing inside.

“It appears you are quite strict.” The voice came out smooth, the stranger stepping closer to him.

“Owner of the house is too scared to put his foot down. Someone’s got to hammer some manners into that girl.”

“Children do need some tough love from time to time.”

“You have any of your own?” He turned to look at her, noticing her hand gently patting Lizzy’s head. The reptilian maiden nuzzling into the touch. “That girl was a very squiggly line.”

“You’re surely not insinuating I am old enough to have children, sir?”

“I met one of you lot that looked as young as my granddaughter and was closer to my age. I’m not taking chances with assumptions.”

The smile remained sweet and soft as her golden eyes shone. “A very wise view. Is there a Miss Elder by any chance?”

“Long gone, I’m afraid.”

“Ferals?”

“Illness.”

“I am sorry to hear that. She must have been very happy with such a man at her side.”

“The lucky one was me.” A deep sigh, he glanced at Rose, the Centaur had gone quiet, moving to his side and watching the conversation unfold. On the opposite side, Tess was gripping his hand tight enough to hurt.

The door opened. “I have informed her, sir.”

“Good, good. The ten minutes were almost up, anyway.” He glanced at the blue-haired woman. “I think you should be going now.”

“Indeed, my owner must be getting worried.”

Gabriel snorted. “Owner, sure.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“A pretty woman like you? Men would be lining up to get wrapped around your finger like a ring.”

She laughed, the sound a soft chime that sent chills through places Gabriel hadn’t felt move in decades. “This was a very pleasant meeting, Elder.” She bowed low. “I hope to meet you again.”

“I’d invite you in, but it’s not my home.” He shrugged, giving a dismissive wave of goodbye. “Maybe when I’m under my own roof.”

“I will be waiting, then.” She bowed again. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Liz, Ginny, and Rose.”

“Have a nice day!” She Draco waved her hand enthusiastically and watching her go.

Gabriel merely stepped into the house with Tess, stroking her hair with his free hand until she loosened her death-grip on his fingers. The mouse slowly eased and relaxed until she leaned into his hip, wrapping her arms around his chest in a hug.

He waited until Ginny brought in Lizzy and closed the door before talking.

“You should be careful around that woman.”

“I... she is a stranger’s maiden, of course, sir. We must be careful.” She nodded emphatically but it was obvious her response came from an instruction manual.

“The only time Tess gets this terrified is when Monica’s looking directly at her.” His expression grew stern.

“I will keep that in mind, elder. I thank you for your wisdom.” Another quick nod before crouching, taking out some leather straps from her pocket and putting on what looked like little leather boots on her claws. “Miss Rose should be waiting for me at the back, I’ll let her. Hopefully we can help to prepare dinner.”

“You do that.”

With a weary sigh, he turned to walk his way up the stairs. He didn’t need a cane, Tess was more than eager to help him every step. The young woman was no more than four and a half feet tall and she showed far more strength than any he could muster. Likely more than he ever could have.

Reaching his granddaughters’ room, he knocked twice.

The door swung open. “Wha... Hello gramps.”

“Well, at least I can be sure you got that from my side of the tree.” She yelped when he reached out to pinch the back of her hand. “Keep your hormones in check, girl, this isn’t your house.”

“Hey!” She rubbed at the back of her hand. “I can do whatever I want.”

“And so can I. Your mother taught you better than to be this disrespectful.”

“What do you want me to do? This city blows, the closest to a party they don’t even have parties unless it’s some big event or whatever.”

“Well, Victor did say he had a daughter that...”

“Shut up!” Gabriel and Kat spoke in unison, the shirtless Tomas flinched.

“You can help with the meals.”

Kat’s eyes widened. “Are you joking? That’s what the maidens are for.”

“You can speak up when you get a better idea.” He leaned over to glance at Tomas.

“Same goes to you.”

“... yes sir.” He sighed.

“What!?” Kat whirled on him.

He just shrugged. “I don’t have a better idea.”

The two began to throw half-hearted grumbles at one another, and Gabriel could only sigh. He couldn’t wait until he found some place to settle down his weary bones and stop worrying so much about the petty things.

It was just so tiresome.

[171] [Pan]

The sound of loud banging startled Pan out of her bed. Her sword was in her hand within instants. The room was dark, the light shinning through the cracks in the wooden panel that covered the window telling her it was still late at night.

“Pan, wake up!”

Kajou’s voice eased her concerns, she sheathed the sword. “I’m coming.”

“Dress up.”

That gave her pause. If she was to dress, then this was more than just Kajou visiting at the late hours. Pan nodded and quickly donned her full gear, the movements a welcome comfort, the protective clothes were always more comfortable than the alternatives. She was out of the small room within the span of two minutes, finding Kajou and two Court guards flanking her.

“The Lady’s called for an emergency meeting.”

Pan’s brows rose, was it finally time? “Do you think...?”

“I think nothing. I’ve not been told what this meeting is about.”

The tone stung, but Pan kept it from showing. It was clear Kajou was still very much irritated. Perhaps from their last argument, or the one prior. At this point it was becoming hard to keep track of what had been the last issue to cause sparks between them.

They marched into the palace, its massive size hidden in the darkness as the trees stretched up towards the night sky. Four towers that had been built by the elves long before the current Court came to be. Pan couldn’t help but wonder whether the dark elves had sought this place or merely stumbled upon it, her wings itched with the sense of awe for the elves of old, now long locked in slumber or enslaved to the humans.

The moment they stepped into the palace it was clear something was off. The guards were tense, they were trained, their emotions hidden behind discipline. But it was a clear sense of something larger looming over everyone.

Kajou had clearly noticed as well, her hand remaining idly on her sword.

They were taken towards the conference room.

The table was gone, the chairs were gone, in their stead was Embla, seated on a stool as if it were a throne. She had the same fearsome black armor they had seen her wearing during the feral rush, using her right hand to hold the giant war-axe standing in place as it rested beside her. The implications prickled at the back of Pan's mind. She shared a look with her sister, they knew they'd just stepped into a Dragoness' den. They could feel the gaze of the maiden from within her helmet. One wrong step and they would burn.

"We greet you, Lady Embla." They spoke in unison, bowing low in a show of cordiality and deference.

There was the barest of nods. "I greet you in turn." Embla's voice carried perfectly even through the armor's helmet. Silence stretched out, and the sisters glanced at each other once more. "I have reached a conclusion to our negotiations. But you will first wait."

Wait for what? Another worried quiet look, they dared not speak and nodded.

It didn't take more than a minute for someone to knock at the door.

"Come in."

As soon as Pan noticed who was opening the door, she felt her hackles rise. Her hand twitched and froze when Kajou's own hand gripped it tightly, the two maidens shared a cross look as Pan's jaw clenched shut tightly and waited in silence as Barry stepped into the room.

The human was clearly not to meet them either.

"Do you... need me?"

"Yes, come."

Even with Barry's presence, both sisters could feel the Lady had not moved her focus away from them even an inch. Once he was standing in front of her, she waited several more seconds before moving her attention to the human.

"You have lived with us for several months. You have seen our ways, met our people, and have dined with us." Embla's voice boomed outwards, carrying every bit of power she wielded. "It is time to decide. Will you join us?"

He shuddered under the pressure, nearly falling to his knees but holding out. "I... thought I had."

“No, you had not.” She stood, dwarfing him. “Joining the Court means you will fall under my command. It means you are ready to obey that command. And it means you are ready to lay down your life for our cause. Do you understand what this means?”

“I mean, I-.”

Squirming, he did not step back as she stepped closer. His eyes looked into the helmet and he paled.

“This is your only chance to make a decision. If you stay, you become one of ours, we will protect you as one of ours, but we will also command you like one of ours.” A heartbeat of silence. “If you leave, you can do so on your own, or with them.”

Seeing the look of panic Barry had when looking their way, it suddenly became clear why they’d been called. Pan’s eyes widened and fury boiled in her blood, her mind was half made up to stake a step forward before she felt Kajou’s grip tightening around her hand painfully. Only then did she realize Lady Embla had not let go of the gigantic war-axe, holding the weapon exactly where it needed to be to block them if they tried anything. And trying anything would get them summarily executed, no doubt.

“I... I want to join. I want to fight with you.”

Barry’s voice carried as much resolve as it could under the pressure Lady Embla was putting out. He was shaking, pale, and likely would faint soon, so it had come out as barely a whisper.

“Very well.” She released the pressure, he stumbled forward, falling into her embrace. With one arm wrapped around his shoulders and pulling him against the armor, Embla’s attention turned towards Pan and her sister. “How this proceeds will depend on you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Barry was liberated from your abuse upon his reaching our Court. Under our law, he is due vengeance.”

A chill ran down Pan’s back.

“Even by Coven standards, you have been barbaric.”

Pan took a step forward, and Kajou yanked her back. The Valkyrie glared at her sister. “Don’t do this.” Kajou mouthed under her breath, pale and shaken. If a fight broke out, they knew exactly how it would develop.

She yanked her hand out of Kajou’s grasp, turning towards Lady Embla with a glare.

“You took us in and yanked us around like we’re some-.”

The words were cut short, the war-axe swung and Pan barely had the time to unsheathe her blade to block it. Her whole body rung like a bell, instinct moving faster than thought, wings spreading wide to slow down right before smashing into the wall. The most surprising thing wasn’t how hard she hit the wall, but why Lady Embla had not followed through and split her body in two.

“STOP!”

Barry stood between the Lady and Pan, arms wide. He was three shades paler, skin closer to snow than flesh.

“I don’t want revenge.”

“That had not been for what you are owed.” Embla had not moved, war-axe held on her right hand like it weighed nothing. “You have two choices, ambassadors.” Her voice was smooth, cold. “You can either both die, or the Valkyrie willingly surrenders and the other leaves.”

Pan’s eyes widened.

“If you surrender, the Amazoness walks away with everything we know about the collars we were supplied.”

“That’s a death sentence all the same!” The winged maiden shrieked. “She’d be feral by the time she reached the mountains.”

“Not if she bonds Bary.”

Whatever was said next, Pan did not hear it. She roared, bursting away from the wall with fury and coating herself with radiant flames. There was just enough sense to know she would stand no chance against the Lady, so she turned her focus towards the human. Putting every bit of power she could pour into her blade, she met the scared look on his face as she swung.

Just as her blade began to arch downwards, something washed over her, and the world around her became empty of energy, of her own power. The searing white fire surrounding her blade sputtered and died, the energy coating her body for protection vanished.

It knocked the air out of her, everything slowed, the very acceleration she’d been trusting on dying as well. She didn’t see the metal boot coming her way, but she felt it as it

landed squarely against her chest right as her powers flickered back into existence. It barely avoided her ribs cracking under the impact.

The consideration as to how to retaliate died when the war-axe came down upon her. Again, instinct kicked in and she raised her blade, gathering every bit of power she could in an attempt to deflect the incoming attack. The two blades sent sparks flying, Pan kept a close eye on the Lady's energy, trying to get a read whether the next attack would be elemental in nature or physical.

She didn't expect another burst of void to hit her. It was followed by a singular punch to the chest that came before her powers came back. She choked and stumbled, the war-axe was coming back, its edge bit into her leg with searing hot pain. Pan did not hesitate, lunging forward with her wings right as her powers flickered back in place, blade dancing towards the visor.

Her adversary turned enough for the metal to miss and scrape against the enchanted murisium. The movement flowed into a thrusting movement with the butt of the axe, smashing against Pan's wing. The blow was too heavy, Pan stumbled back, nearly falling over from her wounded leg.

With glowing hands she sealed the wound before it could bleed her dry. There were voices shouting, but she heard none, leaping right forward. Her blade thrusting at her enemy as she carefully tried to read when the next flicker of void would hit her. Not that she could keep her focus away from the war-axe more than a split second, the Lady swung it close to her body with such precision and speed it was impossible anyone else would have been able to accomplish such a feat, even less within the tight quarters of the room.

Lady Embla danced with her axe, a deadly sharpened edge stuck to a gigantic pole of wood and steel that barely avoid scraping against her own body. The armor and weapon ought to weight several humans on their own, even maidens would have a problem putting that much inertia and shift the direction, but Lady Embla made it look easy, weightless, a leaf in the wind.

Pan had no room to attack, barely room to defend. She gathered her power onto her blade, ready to strike at her opponent's elbow, seeing the gap in the armor.

Pan did not expect Lady Embla to take the attack, to allow it to pierce into her flesh.

In her surprise, she could not react to the burst of void.

Nor the war-axe coming down to her head with a definitive blow.

Except something shoved her out of the way.

The cry that followed made Pan's world shatter.

Kajou stumbled, her right arm gone, a spray of blood painting Pan's side.

There was only one thing she could do.

"I yield!"

She threw herself in front of the Lady, kneeling and looking up at the uncaring cold eyes within the helmet. "I... yield." Her hands spread wide, her head hung low. "Please, not... not her."

"Pan..." Kajou grimaced.

A clatter of steel and stone, Pan's sword yanked out of the wound and tossed across the room to a corner. Lady Embla wasn't even breathing hard, she merely reached down and, with a gesture, yanked Pan's collar.

"You won't be needing this. I heard of what you'd done to Barry and his companion during your trip. And so the same will be done to you." She tossed the piece of enchanted leather at Kajou and ignored the younger maiden as she turned to Barry. "They will go feral in one week. Whoever you have not bonded with, I will execute."

The guards took them both away.