
[052] [Still waters (Urtha)]

The Chieftess had been crippled, awaiting the slow treatment to eat away at the parasite much as it was trying to eat out of her.

The Succubus was unconscious, unresponsive to any form of stimuli.

Urtha knew that all the Father had left was her.

All the tribe had left was Urtha.

Urtha, who everyone knew was not genuinely joined with the Father. Urtha, the one warrior who had been Chieftess herself, the position taken from her, twice.

By all accounts, she had the perfect opportunity to reclaim it and set things right once more. None of this "divorce" nonsense; maidens protected their humans, and that was what made them deserving of such.

To have a human rely solely on a weakling would get both killed, dooming any other prospective maiden to the feral curse. The world was unforgiving to weakness. And the weakness that now surrounded the Father should have been the perfect chance for her to strike.

The Orc sat on the pier, gazing at the water, suppressing the deep shudder of watching the blackness underneath.

Her thoughts lingered on the first time she'd seen Rick, the human who'd struck another human to make a run for it. At the time, she'd thought him nothing more than a pesky male with too little sense.

He'd learn in time.

Or so she'd thought, until he was made a sacrifice for the Vampire's cruelty. She remembered the fury, the wrongness of it all; only a coward would see any sense in killing a human.

And then he'd done the impossible and won. Bloodied and half-dead, but he'd stood like a warrior after having felled a thousand foes, a gaze as hot as a fire that had sent the weaker blood-sucker fleeing in terror.

The sight of him had stirred something deep inside her, a curiosity she kept to herself as the new Chieftess proved her ferocity and strength, driving the Vampires away, and taking over the tribe.

The Sabertooth had shown herself to care little for the position, but her strength was undeniable, Urtha had challenged her twice, and twice she'd been beaten soundly. The fact that such a formidable maiden would only sing praise of the strange curious human only stocked interest within the Orc.

Then he'd gone and "lightly poisoned" half the tribe's humans just to humiliate her in front of everyone, stealing what control she still held over the tribe from right under her nose.

Even now, she wasn't certain HOW he'd done it; she just knew he was the reason.

And then he proposed, in that very instant he could've had the Chieftess crush her. The male even followed the rites, marrying her under sacred rites when she was of half a mind to go against everything she stood for and kill him while she still could.

Afterward, he'd helped her see her tribe prosper for the first time in living memory, bonding her and making her heart beat like the drums he'd taught them to make.

And... and... and...

Everything about the Father felt as though she was trapped in an earthquake. One moment he would act with the bravery of a hundred warriors, and the next propose that the men should be left to fend for themselves.

She wasn't even sure if he'd saved himself within that fortress or not. The others insisted it was likely another of his "miracles", that he'd somehow beaten back and frightened off whatever had crippled both the Succubus AND their Chieftess.

Urtha's gut told her that was impossible, but she didn't know what to believe anymore, much less prove it.

A winter ago, she would've refused everything, marched straight up to the foul-smelling place and claimed him for her own. Broken bones be damned, she'd make it clear who was in charge, and they would reshape the city into a proper tribe.

With the strong maidens being able to pick what partners they wished to protect, to risk their lives for, and the weaker maidens to help.

Yet she knew that the Urtha of a winter ago would not have been able to take the city with only losing a handful of sisters; no, if it'd been her making the choices, many more of her tribe would be dead.

It was a feat she wouldn't be able to accomplish even as she was now.

Her fingers caressed the "mohawk braid" he'd gifted her during the marriage ceremony, the wind gently brushing against her face.

"Mind if I take a seat?"

She greeted Rick with a slight stiffness, yet nodding. "You reek."

His white clothes looked out of place, like he'd put on something lifeless. There was little of him that could be seen, only his eyes, and the hint of the scars peeking up his neck from underneath the cloth covering his face.

"I guess I do," he admitted, slowly removing the pieces covering his head. The man took a deep breath out of the sea breeze, wiping away sweat. "It's suffocating in there."

She only made an affirming sound, eyes on the water. The silence yawned between them, only the sound of the waves crashing against the pier persisted.

"Before coming to this world, I'd been in a relationship with a woman, human of course." The Father didn't meet her gaze when she glanced his way, his eyes lingered on the horizon as he spoke. "We were together for almost a decade. We both saw marriage as mostly unnecessary, we'd get to it if or when it became relevant." He sighed. "And when I thought the time had come, I asked the big question and... she left. Just... gone. No messages, no explanations, nothing. Gone."

Urtha considered his words for a moment. "She sounds like a coward."

"I thought she'd died." His reply came with a strain in his voice, a tension in his brows. "It took me a month of trying to contact her family to figure out she hadn't. Maybe it wouldn't hurt as much if she'd just told me why." He turned to look at her. "I owe you an explanation."

The Orc felt as if she'd prefer the wood underneath her to give way and for the bottomless blackness of the sea to swallow her up. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because it's how adult relationships should work," he stated, as if it was a fact everyone was told. "People don't work the same, don't think the same, don't feel the same. If there's no communication... the problems only grow." Rick leaned forward slightly, gripping his knees. "I never saw our relationship as a marriage, not the way I define it at

least. As far as I was concerned, we were just partners in convenience. I thought it's what you wanted too."

It was. It had been. Now she wasn't sure anymore. "Is that why you were scared?" She blurted out the question and grimaced.

"What scared me was that you spoke the truth... about cowards."

"What?"

His grip tightened on his knees. "I killed Thorley because I was terrified."

"That... doesn't make sense." She frowned.

"Doesn't it? The man had maidens who were willing to die for him at the drop of a hat and without a bond forcing them to act." He huffed. "He'd played the whole city like a fiddle, keeping them nicely wrapped around his finger and under his heel even as he squeezed them like an old rag." Another sour chuckle accompanied his words. "The instant he figured us out... he would've taken everything."

Urtha stared at him for a long moment.

Then she laughed.

"What's so funny?" He asked with indignation.

"You are," she answered. "The little man's head would have exploded after a day of trying to make sense of you." She'd know, her own felt like it should've burst like ripe fruit weeks ago.

"Haha. Funny." He rolled his eyes, combing his hair with his fingers, then fell silent and stared into the distance again.

Another silence followed.

"I speak of honor and protecting our partners, and not once have I kept you from harm. I very nearly attacked you." She stared at the dark water beneath her, the sound of waves gently lapping against the pier. "You are right in ending this union."

"I didn't say I wanted to break things off." The Orc's breath hitched, and she dared not move, listening intently. His hand touched her shoulder. "I'm doing this because I want us to give a real relationship a shot."

Urtha wanted to smile, to feel some relief of his admission of wishing to be with her. But she couldn't. The Orc pinched one of the planks of wood on the pier and ripped it off.

Then she took the block of wood and squeezed it until all that was left was a ball of splinters she dropped into the water. "Every man I lay with, I break."

"You're going to need to be more specific."

Her brows furrowed. "There is no mystery, when it comes to men I..."

"Can't hold back?"

Urtha's shame burned within her. For a moment, she thought he'd misheard her, but his touch remained, warm against her shoulder. Looking over her shoulder, she found his gaze. "Do you know of a way?"

"Not exactly, no instant miracles under my sleeve. But we could start by helping you relieve some pressure."

Her jaw clenched slightly. "I will hurt you."

"Only if you touch me." Rick's lips twisted into a grin, one that only grew at her confusion. "I think that's something we can work with while you learn how to relax."

This time, she growled. "I know how to relax."

"Give me your hand, palm up."

The maiden didn't hesitate, extending her arm away from herself. "You can stand on it if you'd like." She declared with a self-assured smirk, one that vanished when he pulled out an empty glass vial from his pocket. "What's this?"

"Our unfortunate test subject." He placed it on her palm. "Now hold still." With his left hand, he caressed the base of her neck, while the other did the same for the inside of her wrist. "Tell me what you were thinking of that day, before the argument."

"I... like your scars." She spoke breathlessly, shuddering.

CRACK

Both of them turned back to her hand, now closed, glass shards trailing over the edge into the water. Shame coursed through Urtha like a fire, burning her cheeks and throat, her lips twisted as she threw what was left of the vial with a growl. The maiden moved to stand, but the Father's touch left enough pressure to stop her.

"So, my scars?" He didn't wait a second, carrying on as if nothing had happened, leaning away, reaching up and untying the white cloth, followed by taking off his shirt. "Can't say I mind them much, but everyone else gets uncomfortable when they stare."

Her annoyance dissipated in a single sharp inhale, she couldn't look away, her eyes trailed the contours of his chest. Rick had gained a light tan, making the crisscrossing pale lines stand out all the more. Urtha found herself swallowing with a dry mouth.

She'd seen men naked, dozens of them, yet now she felt like she was a green-sprout again. Never had she seen a man with quite this chest, this confidence in his form. All others burned with shame or weakness from scars gained from another's cruelty.

Not Rick.

"Battle scars are..." She stated the truth for what it was.

"Exotic?" He wondered, genuine curiosity as he sat right there, within her reach.

"Because Orcs can't scar easily?"

She didn't want to think; she wanted to touch him, but his warning lingered in her mind, her hands hovering but not touching. "Maybe."

Rick teased her with a cocky smile, following her gaze and trailing a finger up to caress the pale mound all the way from his shoulder to his ribs, an injury that, had it been any deeper, would've likely rendered his heart into pieces. "An Orc like you, you can grow whole limbs back without a scratch... A scar could only be from a fierce battle, not from fighting just any old weakling."

The only thing she could do was nod, breath shortening.

"Do you find scars on maidens hot too?"

It was a question that made the burning in her face intensify, spreading down to her chest. Urtha's tusks itched at the thought, gaze breaking off, though the spell lingered. His words had conjured an image into her mind, and she could not get rid of it.

Monica, the Chieftess, with a body tempered by a thousand battles to the death, a peerless warrior that stood proudly and shamelessly in her imagination.

There was a mischievous twinkle in Rick's eyes, and in that moment, she felt he'd become a Succubus, the man leaning closer, hot breath washing against her tusk and cheek.

"Scoot a bit away from the edge."

Urtha quickly obliged, and Rick walked around her so he'd be standing in front of her, his exposed chest close enough to her face she'd nearly go cross-eyed, so close she

caught a hint of sweat in his scent, making her mouth water, wanting nothing to lean forward and taste his skin.

"Remember, no touching." The man straddled her right thigh, ignoring the nearly pleading look. He stared up at her from his new seat. "But you can touch yourself."

"I..."

"If you want me to stop, just say the word." He stated simply, reaching over, his hands moving over her forearm, continuing up to her shoulder. The touch was so soft it tickled, yet it left fire in its wake as he squeezed her with shameless hunger.

Sucking in a shuddering breath, she closed her eyes and shook her head, face feeling like that time she'd fallen face-first into a campfire. "Don't..."

"Don't?" His fingers paused on her collarbone, fluttering.

"Don't stop."

Rick chuckled and obliged, his hands moving further down. Urtha used her free hand to rip her shirt off before it could get in the way, thrusting her large chest out fully, proud and naked, starved for contact. Her shoulders trembled slightly, her body had not received such soft caresses in... a long time. She found herself craving his attention.

"So firm," he praised, drinking her in and continuing his way down, teasing paths around her breasts but leaving them aching untouched. The caress tickled at her ribs before proceeding to her belly button, circling around it.

She croaked, breathing in sharp lungfuls, her body burning.

"You like maidens, powerful strong maidens," his voice had gained a husky undertone to it, sending shivers through her bones. "You'd enjoy it if I were as strong as one."

Urtha nodded, biting her lip. "You... you wouldn't break." Her voice shuddered, her body trembling under the unrelenting teasing of his fingers.

"I think it's more than that; look at how worked up you are from just this much." One hand moved up, back to her aching breasts, the other teasing at the hem of her pants.

"What do you do when you get this riled up, Urtha?"

"I fight. I train." The confession was rewarded with his warm hand grasping at the underside of her breast, hefting it, squeezing. Her eyelids fluttered, fingers tightening their grip on the planks, drawing creaking complaints from the wood.

"So you keep looking for a strong and capable warrior to test yourself against," he whispered with that sweet voice. "And you work yourself up more, seeing that sweat, those muscles, the scars, that unrelenting force of will..."

Her imagination ran wild, a thousand images piling one atop the other and releasing an earth-shattering force through her. The stream crashed through her as abruptly as it was intense.

Urtha's eyes shot open as his fingers dipped lower, electricity coursing through her, hips thrusting into the air, her entire body bursting in fiery bliss.

"Fuck!"

The cracking of wood turned into an explosion, and suddenly there was nothing underneath her but air. Elation turned to panic as she plunged into the water, cold wetness attacking her from every direction, the sloshing water and foam turning her deaf and blind as she struggled to catch up with everything around her.

Her first instinct was to lash out at anything in an attempt to avoid sinking, but the faintest hint of a thought reminded her that Rick should have been right there with her, and any sudden move she made could break him in half.

The half-second of hesitation cleared her vision; she saw one of the pillars the pier was held on and reached out, using it to pull herself to the surface. "Father!" She shouted the moment she took in a lungful of air, her gaze whipping wildly in search of her human.

"I'm fine!" His arm waved at her, the man several meters further away from the pier.

Her sudden bucking had catapulted the human into the sea.

Urtha was thankful for the cold water, as it helped keep her from igniting in shame. Had she been so worked up a simple touch had pushed her over the edge? If the tribe knew, they'd never let her live it down.

She didn't move from her spot, holding onto the wooden column and watching as he made his way back.

"I should've..."

"Don't sweat it, just help me get back on," he replied without a pause.

"Yes, Father." Feeling like a chided sprout, she pulled herself out of the water, finding relief in the relative firmness of the pier, helping her human get out as well.

Urtha stared at the part of the pier that had been torn under her moment of passion and scowled.

"I'll fix this." At least in this she could find determination.

"Better it than me, wouldn't you say?" Making a show of his arms and chest, he winked at her, lips parting into a dazzling smile. "Do you feel better?"

The question brought a fresh wave of embarrassment through her, but she couldn't deny that she did in fact enjoy it. It was as if a bit of weight had been lifted from her soul.

"Maybe next time..."

He gave her forearm a friendly slap. "Next time we'll figure something else out. Slow and steady." With a shrug, he began to use his hands to dry off the excess water from his skin, drops falling back into the ocean. "And maybe I can start working out with you."

"Working... out?" She hesitated.

"Yeah, do some human-appropriate sparring, lift some weights, that kind of thing."

His words summoned an image that branded itself into her mind: the Father wearing nothing but a sheen of oil, muscles taut and strained, grunting as his scarred body heaved and pushed against her, the waves crashing softly in the background.

"That... would be nice."

[053] [Life Lessons (Eva)]

Eva stood as still as she could within the dimly lit, relatively small room, staring down at the creature that had haunted her nightmares as she slept soundly.

The bone-white striped fur that covered Monica's claws was marred by the presence of rich green vines and leaves. The skin was pierced by the vegetation much as a tree's roots pierced into the soil, the very tips showing as odd bulges that reached nearly up to her shoulder, exactly to the metal bands that had been clamped in.

The Sabertooth did not move, breathing slowly and steadily, deeply asleep. Her heart beat so slowly that the pulse was almost imperceptible to Eva's senses. By contrast, Dia's beat was wild, the nervousness leaving a scent in the air that made the Fledgling's mouth water. If she focused, she could make out the pulse of the veins and arteries on the Rapha's throat through the metal cover.

"Preparations are complete," Dia spoke under her breath, the black thorns of her armor glinting under the flickering firelight. "Hold the patient."

The three Orcs leaned forward, their meaty hands clasped in their own elemental power, turning their skin from merely stone-like to something tougher than metal, holding both limbs firmly. Eva swallowed as Monica's left arm was maneuvered away from her body, claw facing upwards, exposing the arteries flowing near the armpit.

"Commence."

The Fledgling hesitated, licking her lips, and finally gave a slow nod. This was not the first time, the past few days had been a constant reiteration of this exact procedure.

"Commencing," she acknowledged, leaning closer, her fangs piercing flesh. The blood had a sweetness to it, pungently strong in much the way a potent spirit would be, but there was an acrid undertone that left the distinct impression in the Fledgling's mind that she was licking grass.

"Stop."

She jolted away instantly, watching the vines on both arms twitching slowly, and Monica's expression tightening into a slight scowl of discomfort. The sound of waves from the nearby pier subtly filled the silence that followed.

"Thirty seconds," Dia declared, the Polita behind her swiftly jotting down the information. "It's been slowing." The armored healer stepped closer to the arm, metal-covered fingers hovering just above the skin. "The plant has shrunk slightly as well."

"Might be seeking to conserve some energy now that we're depriving it of nutrients," Eva said, glancing at the waves gently lapping against the pier. "Do you think there might be something else to it?"

"Nothing but guesses at this point. I just keep wondering how they keep the infected ferals from attacking one another," the healer muttered, examining Monica inch by inch. "The hyper-aggression makes sense given the mixture of hormones the plant's pumping into the bloodstream, but a feral in such a state would've torn anything to shreds, including other ferals. Working as a horde should be impossible."

"Can't be a spell or ranged ability; at such a scale, it would've been detectable by anyone who bothered to look," the Fledgling considered, nodding thoughtfully. "Do you need me for anything else?"

"Check the clamps, and could you stay a moment after?"

Eva hovered over the metal, scrutinizing the carvings carefully.

The pieces of metal were instruments designed to aid when a maiden sought to train their physiology. Some breeds had an innate capability to infuse their bodies with their power, and to develop physical capabilities, it was faster to temporarily deprive their muscles of that energy while they exerted themselves.

These clamps weren't meant for continuous use, especially not for a maiden with the monstrous strength that Monica possessed. "The enchantment is running out; it'll need to be replaced by tomorrow or the day after."

Dia made a dissatisfied noise. "That's it for now, everyone else back to your jobs."

The others moved to leave the hut as the Rapha did some last checks on Monica. The fresh air outside cleared the scent of blood, and the sound of waves crashing in the distance added a rhythm that soothed Eva's nerves. The Fledgling took some water to wash away the taste of wood from her mouth.

A minute later, Dia joined her, the maiden carefully removing her armor.

"What did you want to talk about?"

"I know that you lied to Rick about why you're tearing the fortress inside out." The maiden didn't slow down nor look Eva's way as she systematically removed the

protective equipment. "I let it be since I was curious where it might lead, but you've pushed it far enough."

Eva sputtered. "But the monster-."

"I was trained in Balet, I'm not some country bumpkin. I might not have the skill or power to cast those fancy teleportation spells, but even I know it's vastly easier to pull something to you than to push it somewhere else." She emphasized her words with a twirl of her wrist, summoning her enchanted scalpel. "If the monster could've jumped into the city, they would've done so rather than use a tunnel to sneak through. I'm sure Rick would've picked up on at least that much if he hadn't been so distraught over Monica and Kiara."

"The person who saved us got through the defenses on the fortress like they weren't even there." The Fledgling paused, glaring. "I know it has to be the same person who made the Lightning-vault; such skill can't be allowed to just roam around."

"And then what?" Dia tilted her head slightly, shrugging off the intensity of the gaze. "What happens after you find them?"

Eva paused, her jaw tightening. "It's none of your business."

Expression softening, the healer took a long quiet moment as she stared at her. "Humans, I swear." With a sigh, she wrapped the spiky greaves in cloth and put them into the bag. "You need 'The Talk'."

"The what?"

"It's the talk maidens have with girls who've gone through the threshold."

She bristled. "I'm not some girl."

"I know, you're a woman and a battle-tested maiden."

"I-!" Halting her words, she glared.

Dia smirked. "I didn't pull you aside back then because you were more of a, well, bitch."

The glare intensified.

"Also because Rick had intended to drop you once you found someone else to pester... how things change." She sighed dismissively, ignoring the Fledgling's indignation. "I've heard that former nobles in particular need a harsher version of '**The Talk**', I suppose it was my fault for not doing this sooner." She walked over to the shorter maiden, looking

into her eyes intently. "This is the secret every maiden is told at some point or another in their lives, so listen closely."

Reaching out, she grasped Eva's shoulders and squeezed emphatically. The shorter maiden swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Suck it up."

They kept their gazes locked, the Fledgling blinking as Dia tightened her grip.

"It doesn't matter if you hold some knowledge on how to forge legendary blades, or if you were the crowned queen. If the human that picked you is a cobbler, then you suck it up and help them become the best cobbler in the world." Her smile remained warm, despite the bite of her words. "You suck it up and thank them, because that human is risking their life and livelihood by picking you, someone who's likelier to lose control when compared to a maiden who's had since birth to hone their powers."

Eva's feet were frozen in place, eyes wide, the fingers digging into her shoulders sending jolts through her body.

"And the most important thing you must understand is that the kindness your human gives you, the forgiveness they shower you with, is not something that your sisters will necessarily share." Dia's gaze became colder, the smile gone. "Because every time you fall behind, every time you fail, your sisters have to pick up the slack for you." She leaned closer, meeting with the Fledgling, purple eyes unwavering. "And when you end up hurting your human, it's your sister who's left clutching at straws just to keep him alive, all while the distant sound of waves crashes against the pier."

Her breath hitched, throat tight, the maiden tried to swallow, nodding frantically. "I... what... do I do?"

The pressure relented, the smile returned, coldness gone in an instant as she released the Fledgling. "You start by not being rude to your sister." Dia smiled warmly, this time in earnest. "Let's try this again: Why do you think it's so important to find whoever saved us?"

"I... know how to design enchantments. It's what I did for a living, it's what I know best," Eva muttered, lowering her gaze to the ground. "I can't just hope we can train a maiden, it'd take years." She kicked a little at the ground. "And I can't teach myself either, blood and shadow are not viable mediums, out of all the things I could've ended up as, I..." She growled. "I need someone with enchanting skills to put that to use, to help build..."

Dia let out a long sigh, the sound alone causing the smaller maiden to stiffen and go silent. "Eva, two nobles have died so far because they sought to take Monica from Rick. Do you really think he would take someone else's maiden?"

"As the Lord of the city he..."

"That's the problem right there!" Dia threw her hands into the air. "Urtha, Kiara, and now you. You keep trying to push the ideas of what Rick would have to do to be the sort of ruler you would be if it was you in that position." She poked Eva's ribs, making her wince and take half a step back. "Have you bothered to pay attention to what Rick is actually trying to do? On what he's trying to accomplish? Or do you just fixate on how much you want a bite?"

The maiden kept her gaze on the ground, hands tight as she couldn't bring herself to refute the Rapha's words. "I don't know what to do," she whispered under her breath.

"Fortunately for you, there's something you definitely should be doing," Dia smiled slightly, nodding. "You need to learn to control your powers, all aspects of them. Not just how to hide in Rick's shadow and trail after him like a love-struck Doggirl." The maiden crossed her arms. "Now, do you have any plans on how to go about that?"

Eva flushed with indignation, but any attempt to verbally lash out was kept locked tightly, the fear still fresh. "I'll... I'll try to learn how to cast spells."

"Good. Do you want specific exercises to start off with or do you know where to start?" She noticed the look on the Fledgling's face and rolled her eyes. "Don't look at me like that, I won't let you slack off."

Eva chewed on the word, reluctantly nodding as the healer finished bundling up her armor and snatched the shorter maiden's elbow. Without another word, she marched off towards the city, dragging the Fledgling along, the sound of waves crashing against the pier in the distance.

"Let's go give the report on Monica's prog-"

BOOM

A plume of smoke rose from the southern edge of the city, Eva's breath caught. "We-!"

"He's ok," Dia interrupted, frowning and fixing her eyes on the rising black column.

"He's... annoyed, but not in danger." The maiden nodded, maintaining a pace just shy of turning into a jog. "Also, you should avoid staying inside the shadows at every opportunity. It's ok if you're protecting Rick, but outside of that, others find it rude and unnerving. You don't hide as well as you think you do."

"Al...right," Eva replied hesitantly, glancing at the taller maiden and trying to make sense of the tone she was using.

It was friendly, in a forceful way.

"There's a Hound named Eli, you've probably seen her. She's Rick's because just about every other maiden here is... I should've been more careful when I wished he formed bonds with more normal girls for a change." The maiden's tone resembled someone dictating notes to a student, but with an inflection of pride mixed with exasperation. "Eli's one of Kiara's... whatever you want to call them. Whores, I suppose. She's been trying to get closer to him."

"I don't..."

"She's a former Hunter, and currently, she's been gaining some renown in the new militia. Have her teach you," Dia commanded sharply. "It shouldn't be hard, Rick spends more time with you than anyone else. Sure, you're mostly hiding even from him, but everyone thinks the reason he hasn't executed the cute doll-like Fledgling is because she's his bed-warmer."

"What!?"

"Do you really find it a weird rumor? You chase him around, and as far as anyone can tell, you don't do much else."

"I protect him."

"The same way a Mousegirl would jump to his rescue if she stuck to his shadow all day," Dia huffed, the sound of waves crashing in the distance. "Monica and Urtha are the protection. You're mostly seen as a trophy, the blood-sucker he keeps around to show he's beaten the Vampires once already."

Eva's face burned with embarrassment, the maiden sputtering as she tried to find the words to refute her.

The Rapha waved her off, snorting loudly. "Whatever the case, you're seen as being around him all the time. Anyone looking to get on his good side would see you as someone who could put in a good word. They just never get the chance since you avoid everyone."

"But-"

"There's also the classes Rick forced Mister Rollo to open once a week. It hasn't caught on just yet, but I've seen those Mousegirls of yours attending there almost religiously,"

she said. "The merchant's maidens stick around to answer questions and teach things, but they're just cagey about anything that goes beyond the basics. Take the chance."

"Their work is subpar," she said with a snort.

Dia slowed down, staring at her. "Oh, so if Rick asked for an alternative to buying another clamp for Monica from Rollo, you'd be able to offer something?"

Eva's mouth snapped shut.

"That's what I thought."

They continued their march, and the Fledgling couldn't help but stare at the pink-haired maiden. She'd known that her attack on Rick had earned her the righteous hatred from both the Sabertooth and the healer. Indeed, things had been strained yet professional ever since their defeat of the vampires controlling the Orc tribe.

"Why are you doing this?"

Blurted the question, she felt like she'd said something that should've gone unspoken. The pink-haired maiden's gaze hardened, though she didn't turn to the Fledgling as they walked.

"If I can't get the sisters I would've wished for, then I'll have to make do with the troublesome ones my human keeps picking up," she answered, not sounding thrilled at the prospect. "I too have to suck it up."

She let out a heavy sigh, and the gentle sound of waves crashing nearby added to the atmosphere.

"Now let's find out what's causing that awful smell."