
[128] [Open Ended (Tomas Hew)]

“Oh, it’s you.”

Tomas froze in recognition of the voice that’d called out to him, spotting Kat as she leaned against the door of the orphanage. The two humans locked gazes, and a chill fell onto the air around them, colder than the winter chill that blew unperturbed.

“It’s... good seeing you again.” Tomas held back from showing any of the bitterness he felt. He’d thought that three months without seeing his fellow otherworlder would have made the sting of the breakup duller.

She rolled her eyes, gaze flickering over at the High Elf at Tomas’ side, lips thinning.

Freya lowered her gaze, but her emotions spoke loudly through the bond. Anger, betrayal, indignity, and concern. Tomas reached out to grasp her slender fingers tightly, trying to reassure her there was nothing to worry over. The gesture didn’t go unnoticed by Kat, who let out a snort, crossing her arms.

“How’s mister Gab-”

Kat tensed, snapping to look away. “He’s doing fine.”

The way her shoulders bunched up spoke of many possibilities, and Tomas had to assume she’d gotten into another big fight with her grandfather. The Vietnam veteran had quickly settled, taking a mute Mousegirl for his wife. It was the very same feral maiden they’d found in Monica’s cave back when they’d entered this world. Kat had been happy for them, and it’d clearly made mister Gabriel happier. But after that things had started to sour.

Tomas didn’t know the exact details, but at some point in time their relationship had started to dip, and they’d broken off soon after.

“I wouldn’t have asked you to show up if... it wasn’t important.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“It’s about Rick.”

She jolted, eyes lighting up. “No shit?”

The naked enthusiasm in her voice stung a little. “Miss Alice apparently got a letter, asked me to call for everyone.” His shoulders slumped. “Unfortunately most of the others didn’t want to come.”

“Most?” Kat glanced behind Tomas.

“Ok, no one,” he said. “Look, I tried. If you want to go to the Earl’s academy to talk some people over, I’m sure Alice can wait.”

“Nah, fuck that. Those prissy assholes are doped up on that whole ‘*human superiority*’ ego trip to Mars and back. Surprised you haven’t had a few holes poked into your brain too.”

It was a harsh comment, but Tomas wasn’t about to deny it held a kernel of truth.

After May’s kidnapping, the Earl had put his foot down and, through a decree from the king, made it so every otherworlder younger than thirty would be given a battle-capable maiden if they weren’t bonded to one already, and made to join the academy. It wasn’t like getting drafted, but it was probably as close to it one could get. To summarize the current situation, every young otherworlder was expected to learn, and the environment they were throttled into made it extremely easy to align oneself with one noble house or another.

Meanwhile, the older otherworlders were treated a bit differently.

They were invited to join the academy, but it wasn’t a mandate. From Tomas’ observations and studies, the older otherworlders were seen as fully fledged nobles in their own right. Ones that just happened to not own either gold or land, yet were immensely valuable to the kingdom due to their ancestry.

Their pure human ancestry.

The reactions to this situation had been... broad. Mostly.

Amongst the former students, there were those that rebelled and did their damndest to only fulfill the technical minimal requirements while avoiding everything else, Kat being the prime example. The opposite side of the spectrum was Tomas, who focused entirely on learning rather than building any connections to the noble houses. Most, however, fell somewhere in the middle, treating the academy as a bare-bones means to adapt, but focusing entirely on making friends.

The politics of it all flew well above Tomas’ head, but he knew a couple things for sure.

One, this whole situation was a massive boon to Earl Vittchat. He'd openly sent invitations to every court in the kingdom to send representatives to Balet. It was an offer only an idiot would turn down, because it was here in Balet where almost every pureblooded human currently resided.

Two, the invitation (and many details about the otherworlders) had actually been delayed from being sent under the pretense of an ongoing emergency. Tomas suspected the reason for this had mostly been to ensure they would all have stronger bonds with the Earl's court *first*. Any outsiders showing up would have a harder time in making allegiances and friendships.

It felt like a political master stroke, as the Earl was a strong proponent for peace amongst the noble houses. Though honestly it mostly flew over Tomas' head, as he'd been far more fascinated with this world's approach to warfare.

Maybe it was because court intrigue felt no different to the sort he'd read on from his own world.

While all of this had been going down, the parents and teachers that had arrived were taking a stronger standoffish approach. There were a few that openly and happily joined the Earl's court or any one of the noble families. But most had sought their own means, not really meshing with the new lifestyle that was being practically imposed on them.

For example, Miss Alice had opened an orphanage for young maidens without a family, which, of late, there'd been many. The Earl had promised an open wallet for anyone seeking help, and it was something the others had used to try and to start their own way of life. Though the Earl's help came with the caveat that no one could turn down visits from nobles, and the various families were using that to their full advantage.

"Sir." Freya squeezed his hand, making a discreet gesture with her head towards the corner of the orphanage.

There were two armored maidens standing there, so still one might have mistaken them for statues. The colors on their armor and slight blue sheen meant these weren't just any knights though.

"Someone important came over." Tomas said, combing his fingers through his hair. "I hoped someone else might show up, but let's just go knock."

"Yes!"

The doors were unlocked, two knights standing inside. They stepped through unimpeded, being given a quick look-over before the three got ushered further inside.

Two more knights were mulling around in the corridor, and then two more near the door at the end. The number of knights was a bit alarming, but Tomas figured Alice had called over someone that was closer to the Earl.

The moment they entered the common-room, he froze.

“May!?” Kat was the first to speak, excitedly stepping closer but stopping once she noticed the others.

Near the center of the room sat Alice, being right next to the fireplace. Opposite to her was May, the young student seated on a wheelchair, pale and with bags under her eyes. Her state reminded Tomas of pictures he’d seen of terminal cancer patients that’d barely dodged the bullet. There was an exhaustion in her eyes, with slightly sunken cheeks and thin arms.

Between the two stood Knight Captain Deneva, the maiden holding her helmet under an arm, looking as unamused as ever. Yet as soon as she spotted Freya, she raised her hand to stop her cold. “You wait outside.” Her tone brokered no room for negotiations.

“Sir.” The High Elf was quick to bow out.

Tomas wanted to argue the point, but knew it would be futile. Deneva was the Earl’s right hand maiden. “Is this that important?” He asked anyway.

“Yes.” Alice answered, gesturing with her head towards May.

The young woman had gone pale and shrunk into her wheelchair, lowering her head.

“Kat, I’d ask you to stay away from her too, and not make any sudden movements. I know you’re concerned, but what she’s gone through... has been rough.” Alice continued.

“Wait, seriously?” Kat glared. “Why-”

“Kat.” Alice hardened her voice, and grimaced as soon as she saw May flinch. She lowered her voice to a soothing tone. “Trust me.”

Hesitating again, she nodded. “I-alright, fine.”

“I will be talking in Miss May’s stead, but also as a representative of the Earl.” Deneva spoke openly. “The events Miss May went through are not the topic of discussion of this meeting, and if you press on the matter, I will be obligated to kick you out.”

“As May’s psychologist, this is a process to work through the trauma.” Alice added softly. “The reason why she is here is because she insisted on it, and I believe it is a healthy step for her to participate.”

“Shit.” Kat whispered under her voice, finally realizing the severity of what Alice was implying.

Something truly fucked up must have happened to May.

Tomas had been living in the Earl’s castle, so he’d been there to note how everyone had gone into a frenzy when Deneva had returned from her expedition. But he hadn’t really heard much else until now.

“So... Rick?” Tomas spoke up.

“There are three pieces of information regarding Rick. First, Captain Deneva met with him in person, and I believe her part of this is necessary to properly understand the second part.” Alice turned to the Captain. “If you would.”

“Yes.”

Deneva stepped forward and proceeded to narrate what could only be explained as a heavily redacted narration. She’d been tasked to rescue Barry and May, based on information extracted from a Wildling prisoner, corroborated by a few other sources. It turned out the kingdom had had a Dark Elf problem and not known about it due to how discreet they’d been about it... until recently.

She skipped the parts mentioning May’s capture, as well as many details regarding what happened once Deneva’s forces reached the wildling camp. Apparently, the Dark Elves had made their homes in the ruins of a very old Elf city.

Tomas immediately perked at that part, but though he asked for details, he was rebuffed. Seeing how May had grown pale as soon as the word ‘Elf’ was spoken, he didn’t press further. But he had a feeling that part of the reason why they were being told this with May present was exactly so they wouldn’t push for answers. Tomas definitely wouldn’t have put that past the Earl. This whole conversation already felt like it was pushing into high-secret details he wouldn’t want spreading around the place.

Deneva didn’t even mention what happened there, only focusing on her meeting with Rick.

“He was leading a tribe of Orcs, and claimed he was the current de-facto ruler of Sinco by lack of a better candidate or any living nobility.”

“No shit!?” Kat laughed. “And here we are stuck with dusty old-”

“Kat.” Alice cut her off. Again. “The second piece of information is that Rick is likely to get into a war.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny any information in this regard.” Captain Deneva hastily declared.

Alice sighed at that. “As she said. This is hush-hush, and I’m mostly putting this together off of what I’ve heard.” She rubbed the bridge of her nose. “The nobles like to talk too much, and everyone’s talking about Darktons amassing resources for an attack. God, I hate gossip.” She groaned. “Anyway. Rick mentioned a potential fight. He didn’t share any details, but seeing as how Sinco was supposedly ruled by Thorley Darkton, and Rick himself told Deneva he’s the one in charge...”

Kat’s eyes illuminated as she jumped. “He stole a city!”

“Don’t... don’t say it that way, because it can cause a lot of problems for everyone involved.” Alice muttered. “This is a very delicate situation.”

“I’ll bet.” Tomas nodded.

“If this is a serious fight, I’m mostly sure the assholes will die one way or the other.” Kat nodded sagely. “All Rick would have to do is send Monica to chop them up or something.”

“I am concerned with your apparent enthusiasm for targeting nobility.” Deneva stated.

“Why would anyone want to fight a bunch of soldiers you have no beef with?” Kat countered with a frown. “Just punch the guy that wants your stuff and end it.”

“The reason why I am concerned is the letter he sent,” Alice said, her tone dark. “Among other things, he mentions *‘If things get dicey, I’ll let people C4 themselves why I shouldn’t be messed with’*.”

Kat audibly groaned, pawing her face. “God dammit, using puns...”

May giggled, but quickly shrunk back down.

“This... means... oh.” Tomas muttered, eyes widening. “The Darktons might be biting more than they can chew.”

“Elaborate.” Deneva stated flatly.

“C4 is a non-magical explosive material, like gunpowder, but way more stable and malleable.” Tomas quickly explained. “A fistful of the stuff would kill everyone in this room. Well, every human. A person’s worth of it could probably bring down the whole building. If Rick has access to that...” He visibly grimaced. “There are just too many ways to make that useful in warfare. It doesn’t contain elemental energy so it can’t be detected through the usual means, nor can it be dispelled. You need to be physically protected from it, always. If he’s managed to make the stuff... yeah, that’s going to mess things up a lot.”

“Satisfied?” Alice’s question was aimed at the Captain.

Kat and Tomas shared a confused glance.

“The Earl intercepted the mail and asked me about it.” Alice spoke in annoyance. “When I told them that the Darktons were making a huge mistake, he insisted someone else verify.” She took a deep breath. “Try this one for size: *‘I also got some nice thermal lakes nearby. They’d be great for making mustard, but I don’t think anyone’s going to appreciate the smell.’*”

“Oh no.”

“Shit.”

Tomas’ eyes widened in dawning realization. “Fuck.”

“I only caught a handful of the references. Heck, I’m half-sure *‘sarin’* is something really bad, though I’m not-”

“It’s a nerve agent.” Tomas hastily explained. “Liquid, colorless, and odorless, a very dangerous poison, the sort you touch and you die.”

Deneva’s complexion darkened. “Do you realistically believe he was able to make this?”

“I don’t know, maybe?” He shook his head quickly. “He was our chemistry teacher, but I don’t have a clue how knowledgeable he might be in the processes involved, nor how reliably it could be replicated.”

“It’s a warning.” Alice stated. “I think the main reason why he mentions all these things is because he wants to emphasize he’s serious. Rick isn’t the sort that would even consider massacring a city.”

“Not unless he’s influenced to do so.” She muttered under her breath.

“What’s that?” Kat pipped up.

“How well do you know him?” Deneva didn’t answer, turning to look at Alice.

The question clearly unbalanced the former psychology teacher. “Uh... we’ve been somewhere between acquaintances and friends for almost a decade?”

“Is there anyone else in the group of otherworlders that might know him better?”

“Where is this coming from, Captain?”

A slight pause followed as she glanced at Tomas, then Kat, and back to Alice. “I have to confess that I’ve been carrying a communication enchantment on my person, allowing the Earl to witness this conversation directly.” She gave a slight bow of her head. “He summons you to the castle and wishes to meet with you personally. The situation involving the Darktons is far more delicate than originally believed, and you might be necessary to help in achieving a peaceful resolution.”

Alice’s temper flared, she stood up. “I will not abandon the orphanage. These children are under my care.”

Deneva gave a slight nod. “The Earl promises he will spare no expense to guarantee their wellbeing.”

Kat whispered under her breath. “What the fuck’s going on?” She glanced at Tomas.

“If he can spare no expense, then he won’t mind preparing a caravan so they can be moved to Sinco.” Alice pointed at a piece of paper on her hand. “The current Lord seems to be looking to expand education and social programs, and is asking for help. I am rather strongly inclined to give him that help.”

“The Earl requests clarification of where, exactly, he mentions this.”

Bringing up the piece of paper, Alice cleared her throat. “*“Uncle Tom’s Cabin over here is a nuisance, going to need to make a Sesame Street, so I’m sort of looking for the whole cast.”*” She folded the paper. “Sesame Street being a program meant, specifically, to educate as many children as it possibly could.”

“God dammit, Rick.” Kat groaned loudly.

Tomas noticed the meaningful look he got from Alice, and he nodded. “Sesame Street” might have been a reference towards children’s education, but “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” was a reference for slavery. Fortunately, Kat either hadn’t caught that one or had also chosen not to mention anything about it.

Slavery was a rather taboo subject to question or bring up. The kingdom had gone through a slave revolt that had turned into a civil war sixty or so years ago. Those in favor of freedom had lost since those against it had received backing from the Northern Empire.

The echoes could still be felt even today.

Most of the otherworlders had learned not to make a fuss about it, and while some had embraced it, the deniers had tried to distance themselves from the nobility as much as was reasonably possible.

“How early would we have to leave?” Alice interrupted the momentary silence.

“The Earl says that taking the orphanage would delay things needlessly.” Deneva spoke firmly. “There is only room for negotiation so long as the southern parts of the kingdom remain wrapped in inclement weather.”

“I doubt taking forty eight children would be that much of an expense since a full caravan would be needed regardless.” The former teacher dusted herself off. “I will make preparations on my own end. I might be able to convince a few others to come and convince Rick to...not take extreme measures.”

‘Looking for the whole cast’

Tomas’ thoughts turned back to that statement, trying to imagine the implications. He’d been fairly certain that there were applications for chemistry in this world, but hadn’t really looked into it too much since he’d never learnt about stuff like industrial chemistry or specific processes. Or more like what little he had learnt he barely remembered.

But a question lingered over his head. There’d been other teachers, not just Rick and Alice. If knowledge from the modern world could be put to use... all the while seeking to abolish slavery... Was he trying to prop up a free-city?

It was the sort of talk he was fairly sure the Earl would not be happy to hear about.

Better to just keep that to himself for now.