
[057]

"So, if I were an up and up seller of pokegirls, where would I put my place of business in such a rinky dink village?" Kat put her hands on her hips as she looked around.

"We should probably ask the receptionist." Tomas glanced back at the pokecenter.

"Where's your spirit of adventure? I'm sure we'll find the place quickly enough. Not like we're in a hurry." The young woman chuckled, pulling out her dex. "Oh, Rick sent the list." With a pause, she frowned, looking down at her device. "I feel like I'm back in class again, man those are a lot of comments. Did I fail my homework again?"

"It's useful." Tomas glanced at the copy he'd received. "Though I doubt we'll find most of the ones he put down as high-priority within the price-range."

"I don't care what breed the girl is, if I'm going to make my first purchase, she better be hot, or cute, or both."

"I don't see any such thing on the list."

"Well, that just goes to show that guys don't know their priorities." Rolling her eyes, she pocketed the device. "Would it have killed him to at least mention the things he likes the most?"

"Is it really that important?"

"You tell me." Kat turned to face him with an arched brow. "You're going to be spending a lot of time with the girl, the least she should be is easy on the eyes." She noticed the look on his face. "Don't give me that. We both know it's true."

"I don't... looks shouldn't be that important. If they were, he'd have mentioned it."

"Look at it like this. Would you rather we get someone who's strong? Or strong AND pretty?"

"At the price he mentioned, I don't think we'll get either unless it's one of the more common breeds." Tomas sighed, scratching the back of his head. "The more I look at this list the more uncomfortable I get."

"Hey, what's a little slave trade for the moral compass?" Kat shrugged. "Think about it like this, it's Rick. Whoever we pick's going to end up better off than if some local had bought them. We're doing them a favour."

The young man let out a long sigh. "You're always so... would it kill you to take things seriously for a change?"

"Don't know about you, Tom, but my team is grown locally. You bought Freya online like she was an inflatable sex-doll." She giggled as she watched him squirm. "Speaking of, figure we should tell Rick to start looking? This place is fucking empty."

"He said local is cheaper, so we got to try at least."

"That shit's hilarious."

"What is?"

"I have to wonder how much would the cost need to be before people start grimacing at the price-tag. Would it be free-shipping if I also purchase a bottle of lube and some chains?" Her smile paused as she looked at Tomas. "Wow, ok, it seems you're taking this way more seriously than I thought. What's eating at you?"

"It's just the whole thing, it still rubs me the wrong way." Shaking his head, he raised his hand. "And before you ask Freya, I... didn't really know what was going on back then. It was just the click of a button, a useful breed name, the league starter coupon thing, an estimated time of arrival. But it's people."

"So like a mail order bride."

"What? No it's not."

"I mean, it kinda is." She replied. "But whatever, you're just going to run circles over this like usual. Tell me when you reach the conclusion that we're not doing something bad because we're ensuring the girl's going to someone we trust."

"And you're just going to pretend there's no problems, like usual."

"I don't ignore problems, I just don't sweat the small stuff."

The look of scepticism he shot her was thick. "Since you want to stay in this world, what do you plan to do with your girls after you stop being a tamer?" A smirk followed. "And 'I'll get there when I get there' isn't an answer."

"Oh shut up." She punched his arm lightly before reaching at his belt and tugging at his hip, bumping it with hers. "I'm sure you've got planned the names of the first ten babies you'll have and the exact year they'll be born." Her gaze turned to the ground, not letting go of him. "Do you... still want to leave this place?"

"Why... do you ask?" His question tightened in his throat, reaching out to pull her hip closer to his.

She'd let go before he could grasp her. "Feels like a waste of time, no one knows how. Besides, I've seen how you look at your girls, I know you'd be crushed if you had to bring them back."

"I..." The young man scratched the back of his head. "I've been looking around, asking some people in forums, sending some mails... I haven't given up on it, I just don't think it'd be the best to move ahead assuming I will find it."

Kat's step hesitated, and her face remained still, making an effort not to look at him, and turning away instead. "And what's the plan?"

"I don't really know. I've heard some good things about prospects for tamers who've got a degree."

"Pfff, yeah right, not in this econom-" The young woman stopped herself, letting out a chuckle. "Right, other world. You going back to studying? Even in a world full of sex-babes you're such a nerd."

"It's just an idea." He quickly waved off. "A very expensive one apparently, but an idea."

"I'm sure you'll tell me all about it when you're surer about it. Ah, here we are. 'RANCH'." She pointed at the sign atop the building. "Which is on 'ROAD' street, inside 'TOWN' village. Let's look at that boring list again..."

The air inside was hot, and the girl sitting behind the desk looked just as uncomfortable as they were upon feeling the humidity slap them in the face. Through a tight smile, and some prompting, the girl brought out the list of available girls and began explaining the many things their ranch specialized in.

"Sewing, cooking, basic survival-"

"So they're trained," Kat interrupted.

"Of course they are." The woman nodded with a customer-service smile. "Quite thoroughly as well, league standards."

"I think that's very valuable." Tomas nodded knowingly. "Having knowledge and experience is crucial."

"Yeah, but we can barely afford the cheapest on the list." Kat glanced at the screen in front of her. "Shouldn't these be cheaper? We're tamers."

"Only starter ranch-purchases have a discount, ma'am."

"I like the Harpy." Tomas pointed out. "Just slightly out of budget, but we can cover that. I'm sure she'd be good aerial support."

"She's a stick with feathers. The bitch would wrap her around her finger by the end of the first round." Kat snorted. "None of the girls here would be able to pose a threat to Rick's girls."

"I don't think that's what we should be looking for."

"I mean, think about it." She glanced at Tomas. "He wants something that could help cover the hole in his team. Their team is weak against that. And even then these girls wouldn't be able to really threaten the team."

"I... um..."

"Look at the harpy's entry."

"I know what you mean, I'm just considering what she can evolve into." He tapped at the dex screen. "If she's well trained, it shouldn't be too hard to get there."

"...I guess that's fair." Kat reached for his arm, pulling him closer. "So how about we look at the alternatives and see what catches our fancy?"

"Alternatives?"

"Ma'am?" She turned to the receptionist. "Any other place one could buy a girl?"

"There's the sell corner just down the street, can't miss it. It's where most tamers sell their girls."

"Tamers selling their girls? Great, let's go check it out!"

Kat didn't wait a single second, snatching Tomas' arm and pulling him out of the building. The sun shone down on them. Fortunately the day was fresh- though it wasn't very hard to imagine how warm it could get during summer. With one look at one side and then the other, Kat picked the left, the cobblestones ringing under her feet as she hurried along with the young man that was barely keeping up.

"What got into you?"

"Me? Nooothing at all." She impishly grinned.

"I know that look."

"No you don't."

Tomas only looked at her and she turned the other way, ignoring the unspoken prompt. With quick steps, she saw the first signs of what she was looking for when she noticed two pokegirls standing naked at the edge of the road holding up pieces of cardboard with a number. Behind them, there was a man sitting on a chair leisurely reading from a book. The two women next to him looked equally bored, shoulders slumped and shifting from one foot to the other as they eyed the crowd.

Kat didn't miss a beat, scanned them, and moved on without taking a second glance. The young man hesitated, but wasn't given the chance to do so for long as she yanked his hand and moved onwards.

As they progressed down the street, the number of people was increasing. Some left behind signs with a breed list, prices, and a contact number. Others just left behind their girls to sell themselves, with another one overlooking them. But what stood out was the wooden podium that'd been built at the very edge of the village. It stood in front of a large cloth tent, and the pokegirls there made Tomas' skin crawl.

Physically there was nothing wrong about them. They were naked, clean, and spanned a broad range of proportions and breeds. The tantalizing display of flesh was offset by their eyes. One and all stared blankly into the void, eyes lacking focus and pupils shrunk into pinpricks. There was an odd relaxed ease to their postures, with their shoulders slumped yet backs straight, and their mouths tightly closed yet their head almost slumped.

"I don't really think Rick would want one of these." The young man looked around, feeling goosebumps as one of the pokegirls moved to stand in front of him.

"Let's check it out first. Besides, this is only temporary."

"You can't be serious, you aren't considering this."

"Look, all I'm saying is that it costs nothing to check it out," she said, rolling her eyes. "If there's some interesting breed, it might be worth it."

Tomas hesitated, glancing at the tent and the empty podium. His face tightened into a grimace, but a nod followed as he steeled his resolve. Kat led the way into the tent. The air was cool inside, fresh and soothing. The space was the size of a general store. It had wooden racks lining the walls, pokeballs occupying every inch of free space. Each pokeball had a label underneath it detailing the breed name and a price. The sight made them both boggle and halt. There were hundreds of them. Were each of them fived?

The tent was occupied by at least a dozen prospective clients, walking and reading the tags, a few checking their pokedexes as they went. There were four imposing looking pokegirls, one at each corner and keeping a very sharp eye on each of the human clients. The center of the tent was dominated by a wooden counter. There were two pokegirls at either side, and a bored-looking man at the center. The human in charge looked old. His face was a labyrinth of wrinkles, old and weathered leather. His expression sour as he glanced at the two newcomers.

"Oh wow."

One of the pokegirls at the corner approached, flicking a lock of black hair over her shoulder. "If you're here only for the sights, I'd suggest stepping out."

"Um, er, we're here to buy," Kat spoke up quickly.

"Great, all pokegirls are fived. Do not touch the pokeballs until you've confirmed a purchase with the owner."

"Can't we ask to view the contents?"

The woman shrugged. "Talk to the owner."

Nodding at the instructions, Kat pointed at the nearest rack of pokeballs. "We'll be checking things out, then."

Tomas' eyes turned to his companion as soon as the pokegirl had stepped away. "You go the other way? I don't want to be here longer than necessary."

With a slight nod being the only response he got, the young man turned to the right while she went to the left. As soon as he looked at the first rack of pokeballs he realized there was one more reason for wanting to get out of there as soon as possible: it was disorganized. There was no rhyme or reason to it. Each rack could have ten pokegirls of the same breed but they would be scattered around. It was

like trying to dig through the second-hand game stash in a store. A long sigh escaped him. This would take a while.

The first thing he noticed as he checked through them was that the prices were exceedingly cheap. The handful of Pidgy's he saw had been listed at less than half the price of what was being sold at the ranch. Was experience really such a big part of the price tag? It made his gut twist into a knot. Maybe the best course of action would be to inform Rick of their findings and wait for a response.

His eyes flickered towards Kat. The young woman was tapping her chin as she was studiously glancing over the names. Tomas had a sinking suspicion she'd try to get them to pick one of the girls here and go with that instead.

"Oh, excuse me."

He'd nearly stumbled onto someone, having moved without paying attention where. They both stopped, as they had a chance to look each other over. The first thing he noticed about her was her honeyed eyes, tender and deep. There was a sparkle of understanding hidden within them, and a twinkle of something else, something... ancient. They took a more appreciative edge as she smiled- a mysterious smile that hid many things. The woman flicked a lock of red hair behind her ear as she offered a delicate, pale hand.

"Sorry about that, my name is Aphys."

"Tomas." He awkwardly took it. Her grip was warm and soft.

"A pleasure." Her touch lingered, not letting go for a long moment. "Your aura is bright."

"Excuse me?"

"A bad habit of mine. I couldn't help myself." Her lips turned further upwards.

"You can see... auras?"

"Sometimes." She gave a little nod and a laugh. Her voice was melodious. "If it's not too forward of me, why would someone like you be in a place like this one?"

"Just looking around." The answer came about hastily.

"What a terrible coincidence, so am I!" She moved in, hooking her arm into his own. He froze as she turned to the racks of pokeballs. "Looking for anything in particular?"

Tomas felt a shudder run down his spine. He glanced over his shoulder, noticing Kat as she quickly turned towards her side of the store. His jaw tightened a little. "I'm helping a friend look for something, and we're in a bit of a hurry."

"Ah, you're taken I see." She pulled her arms from his own. "Shame that, I was going to ask for some coffee."

"No, yes, I mean, it's... complicated." The young man did his best to hide the grimace.

"Don't mind me, then." With a wink, she made a gesture towards the racks at the far end. "I'd recommend checking the ones over there, they've got a couple gems."

"Gems?"

Rather than answer, she winked, turning around. "Good luck, Tomas. I'm sure we'll meet again."

Numbly, he nodded, watching her walk towards the counter. His eyes lingered on her for a moment longer, turning towards the racks once more and frowning and trying to focus. There was a gnawing at the back of his mind, but he ignored it in favour of trying to make sure this tedious task could be ended as soon as possible.

The more he looked the more convinced he was they wouldn't find anything that might merit the effort. Titmice, Catgirls, Doggirls, Bunnygirls, Pidgy, and a Kitsune here and there. All of them amongst the most common kinds of ferals one could find in the wilds. Just toss a stone and one could encounter any of them hiding at a nearby bush. It didn't help that they were most certainly fived, empty husks. The thought made Tomas grimace.

Frustrated, he moved on to the second rack, certain there was nothing there for them. Glancing at Kat, the young woman had moved on and was currently not looking his way. She was looking at the pokeballs at the rack that the woman had pointed at. It made Tomas sigh a little, his own wall of pokeballs little more than the same as the previous one. It made him wonder. Did tamers sell their captures here? It did make sense there might not be anything worth paying close attention to. The feral rush had been a while ago, the good things could have already been bought out.

"I found our candidate." Kat's voice made Tomas startle a little. He looked over his shoulder; her face had a no-nonsense tone to it, and her expression looked marginally annoyed.

His only response was to raise a brow, wondering what she might have stumbled onto. "What is it?"

"This."

She flicked open her dex, showing a dex entry. Vampyr.

"This wasn't on Rick's list." He frowned. "And she can't fly. Actually, she can't do a lot of things Rick's looking for."

"Yeah, whatever, look at what she evolves into when you throw a ghost evolution stone her way." She pushed the link, leading to the next entry. Vampire.

His eyes widened as she clicked past the yellow blinking warning lights. "No."

"Why not? Can fly, and I'd honestly shit my pants if we ever encountered one coming at us."

"Are you insane!?" He reached out, grasping her arm and hissing. "She needs to drink blood to survive, and she can turn humans into Vampyr. There's a damn warning that getting one puts you under league surveillance. Rick would definitely not want this dumped on his lap."

She rolled her eyes, shrugging her arm out of his grasp. "Look, the way I see it, Rick wants something that can compensate for fucking-murder-machine-Monica's weakness. Besides, he wanted to get rid of that evolution stone, no? Let's ask the owner over there."

"Kat, I don't-"

Too late. The young woman had turned towards the man behind the counter. Her steps had been purposeful and she'd made sure not to glance at Tomas as he hurried to catch up. When he did, she'd already waved for the old man's attention. "Vampyr, over there. Third shelf from the top. I want to take a look at her."

"Sure. Peg!"

The girl at the edge of the counter flicked her wrist, causing one of the balls to float out of the air and into her palm. With a flick of the wrist and a bit of pressure, the ball released. The occupant appeared in front of her, standing still, shoulders slumped, and a blank stare in her red eyes, framed by her locks of black hair.



She stood still, eyes vacant and distant, pupils dilated, and her shoulders stiff.

"Cute, I think this can be worked with." Kat turned back to Tomas. There was something in her eyes- a glare? "We're taking her."

"Kat, don't, we need to ask Rick."

"What for? If he doesn't like it-"

"No refunds." The man pointed at the sign that was stapled to the counter. "You don't like it, you sell her and we buy her."

"We need to ask first, Kat, it's not our money."

"If you're going to waste my time, the exit is right there." The old man crossed his arms, scowling. "Either pay for this one or get some other girl, or leave."

"There, Rick says ok."

"What?"

Kat turned her dex, showing the screen at him. She'd opened the mail function and sent a pic to Rick and the purchase details. He'd responded with an "Ok". Tomas

blinked. When had she typed that? He pulled the dex closer. "You're omitting things."

"What things? Vampyr, cheap, fived. And a pic." She waved him off, turning to the owner. "We'll take her."

"All yours."

The man pulled out a dex on a blue case and slapped it against Kat's. A beep confirmed the transaction. The girl was recalled, and the ball was tossed at Kat. Just like that, Tomas was left speechless as the young woman moved to leave the tent. He managed to catch himself and follow, hurrying out and moving to intercept. "What's wrong with you?"

"What do you mean what's wrong? I found a girl, sent confirmation, and bought her," she scoffed. "Job done. Poor unfortunate girl gets a new dick to keep her happy, the dick finds a new cunt to pound. Everyone's happy. Happy happy happy."

Tomas grabbed her wrist, slowing her down. They met eye to eye. "Talk to me, Kat, something's wrong."

She averted her gaze quickly, yanking her wrist from his grasp. "No, it's not."

His mind whirled. "Is it about the woman? I didn't-"

"No, you didn't do anything. I know, what do you take me for? An idiot?" The young woman shook her head, locks of dark gold and light brown mingling under the sunlight. "If you'd wanted to try something, you would've just bumbled your way into accidentally removing her pants. Not that it matters, we're not a thing."

"I don't-" He hesitated, blinking and going quiet. "What did I do wrong?"

"I'm not..." Kat's face twisted, lip curling. "Fine, FINE! You're not going to drop this shit, right? Because you just HAVE to bring everything out all the damn time even if it's something I don't want to." Her hand pointed at him. "Because you still think we're together."

"I, I mean, us-" He hesitated. "I didn't say..."

"No, you didn't **say** it, not **exactly**." She gestured at him. "But you're acting like me being bothered about something is somehow your responsibility to fix. Again. And you turned down some girl because you're obviously guilty."

"But, I mean, I thought-" His own scowl returned. "We're friends."

"And what the fuck do you think that means? Last I checked me having a friend didn't mean I'd cock-block you by my sheer presence."

"That's not what I mean." The young man's face coloured. "I thought that it'd be bad to try something so... soon, while you're..."

She rolled her eyes, huffing. "You have three girls slobbering over your cock every night. And every morning you give your Elf the long puppy eyes of someone who just lost his virginity. Do you honestly think I give a shit?"

"It's different." He stepped closer, frowning as he looked down at his hands. "I know it's different for you, you-"

"It doesn't matter. I know it's no different for **you**. The only reason you haven't put a ring on your girl's fingers is because you don't know their sizes yet." The young man's face turned tomato red, and his head lowered further as his anger was swept aside. "Like I said, I don't care. If you want to be friends, I don't mind. If you want something else, you're shit out of luck." Her gaze levelled with his. "I fucking thought we'd had this conversation. I sure as hell don't plan to have it again. You want a 'thing', I don't. I don't hate you, it happens. But we're either friends or nothing at all. The door is closed Tom."

He shrunk, and for a moment he seemed a third his size. Squirming, he sighed, only deflating further. "I erm... yeah."

"You get why I didn't want to bring it out?"

A deeper sigh. He nodded. "Yes, I'm just... I'm sorry, I'm still getting used to... things."

"Awesome." Turning around, she shook her head. "I'm going to drop this and go do stuff. Feel free to do your own stuff."

The young man could only look at her as she walked away.