
[130] [Rick]

“Seledo’s certainly seen better days.”

Rick glanced at Dia, the nurse grimacing as she looked at the large village below. It was certainly larger than Astunes, maybe a little over two or three times the size. Its current state reminded Rick of some towns that had been hit by an earthquake or some similar natural disaster. About a fifth of the buildings had fallen down, a handful of those reduced to smoldering coals.

“You’ve been here before?” He asked, glancing her way.

“Yes. I was born and raised near Balet, so when there was a nurse position available in Astunes, I volunteered.”

“You can volunteer?” Kat looked surprised, pointing at her own throat. “Aren’t you like...?”

“Green collars are public domain.” Freya stated matter-of-factly. “It isn’t odd to transfer to other areas or to the ownership of another Lord. You do need permission first, and there must be some agreement between the Lords beforehand.”

“So you can choose who owns you, so long as your previous owner acknowledges it.”

“And they’re paid their dues. Either by the new Lord or the maiden herself.”

“Speaking of money.” Rick patted the coin purse on his hip. “I think we ought to look for some income options.”

“The Baroness’ bounty reward as well as the Earl’s invitation should be more than enough to cover for travel expenses, sir.” Ginny looked at him in confusion.

“And when I run out, I’d rather not end up having to rely on money that comes with strings attached.”

“Speak for yourself, I’d rather get all the free food I can get.” Mr. Gabriel laughed heartily from the centaur.

“I guess I take that from gramps.” Kat joined in with a chuckle. Next to her, the green scaled Lizzy next to her smiling in turn.

“If... sir wants to earn some coin, the easiest way would be in assisting with the rebuilding and repairs.” Ginny glanced at the humans with a slight nervous laugh, scratching the back of her head with her blue scaly claws. “It’s not like we’d have anything better to do while we wait to leave.”

“It would be best if we had things to sell.” Dia commented, shaking her head dejectedly. “Manual labor only usually is enough to cover for meals, maybe a place to stay.”

“It’s a start.” Rick nodded along. “Might give us a chance to find out more about the Earl.”

At his mention of the Earl, the other former-Hunter maidens squirmed. He’d tried prying some information out of them, but the sum total of things they knew of the man was mostly in relations to his job as a mediator and judge for the area. Meaning that most of what they had to share was over the man’s preference for people with more human-sided ancestry.

“Food. Up.” Monica spoke, her head tilting towards the clear blue sky.

And as she did, everyone noticed the three flying figures that were approaching them from the village. Rick blinked a moment when he noticed a flicker of light shining in their direction.

“Hunters.” Freya commented, pulling out a small piece of metal from her pocket and holding it over her head, making some rhythmic twitches with it. “They’re requesting we stay put.”

“That wasn’t Morse code.” Tomas muttered. “What do the lights mean?”

“Doing a constant quick rhythm is a basic ‘look at me’, and once they get a flicker response, they send the message. In this case, four slow beams mean they’re Hunters. And the constant quick rhythmic beat afterwards is a request to meet up. If it’s used from the ground, it’s a call for aid, and if it’s used from the air, it means they’re approaching and to not move from our location.” The Elf listed off in a boorish tone. Her hand was firmly on her hip, glancing up at the sky as she watched the trio approaching rather quickly.

They looked like a triplet of identical twin sisters. Dark brown hair, and wings for arms, they were circling downwards and keeping a distance.

“Monica, no kill.” Rick whispered under his breath as he looked up at them, sensing the feline was preparing to attack. She pouted at him in response, but obliged, relaxing her shoulders and sighing.

“Identify yourselves!” The voice shouted downwards. “And the white-haired maiden that’s with you.”

“I think they mean you, Rick,” Kat whispered under her breath.

The chemistry teacher glared at her for a moment before turning upwards. “I’m Rick Cross. We come from Astunes with an invitation from the Earl. The white haired maiden is mine, her name is Monica.”

A moment of pause. “Is she White Claw?”

Would he have to do this every time? “She is.” He responded.

After another pause, the trio seemed to be talking amongst one another. “Is she... safe?”

Rick glanced at the group. Freya kept her voice low as she spoke up. “By Hunter standards, Monica would most certainly not be considered safe to keep within the village. But whether sir wishes to claim she is... is up to sir.”

Rolling his eyes, he wanted to sigh. His gaze turned upwards. “She’s still fresh and learning. Could we have accommodations that are close to the edge?” A slight pause. “We also have a copy of the content from four black-boxes.” With a sigh, he glanced at the others. “And a human woman.”

He could almost see them startle at that last part. “Under the Earl’s law, we will secure safe accommodations for the woman and the elder. Please keep White Claw outside Seledo’s human zone. We will ensure there’s an area for you and your maidens to rest.”

Two of the three split off, heading back to the village, while the third kept circling over them, albeit gaining height.

“Is this normal?” Rick glanced at Freya, the Elf merely shrugging.

“If they are playing things safely like this, it must mean important people aren’t present.” Ginny spoke under her breath. “The Lords might have fled during the attack.”

“Monica is very dangerous, and were she to go on a rampage, it would require a serious effort to stop her.” Freya shifted the topic, talking without much commitment. “If they are warned ahead of time that Monica is dangerous and not entirely domesticated, then they’ll know to make sure there’s nothing that may startle or tempt her.”

“And to keep fragile things out of her reach.” Kat chuckled slightly. “Or she might knock them off the shelf.”

Ginny giggled, the Draco's laughter a nervous one, almost forced. Rick caught her eyes quickly darting between Lizzy and Freya. The silent plea for help within them told the young chemistry teacher everything he needed to know. "Our world had cats, as in, the actual animal. Like a boar, but feline. They were famous for knocking stuff off shelves." He muttered under his breath. Both Freya and Ginny perked up at this, sharing a glance between them and a slight nod.

It must be taxing, being the underling of someone whose sense of humor you didn't share but felt obligated to partake in. He'd been there, and done that.

"So how far out is the 'safe-zone' they spoke of?"

"It's that space between the farm-steads and the first homes, sir." Ginny stepped ahead, moving close and pointing in the distance at the space of mostly barren soil that separated the farmland and the village.

She recoiled away the moment Monica let out a growl, the feline clenching Rick's hand and pulling him closer to her.

"Hey!" the teacher barked. "No!"

His tone made the Sabertooth flinch, turning at him with another deep pout.

"Don't worry, sir, we've dealt with many ferals and we know how clingy they can get with their first bond-partner." Ginny spoke urgently, taking another step away from him and Monica.

"I don't want her showing aggression like that, less so to a companion." Rick replied quickly, glaring at the feline as she turned the other way to avoid his gaze. He pulled his hand from her grasp, crossing his arms and watching her hesitate.

"Riii~iiick."

"No."

The pout turned sullen. She sighed and kept walking.

"Um... sir?" Dia whispered as she stepped closer from the opposite side, offering a hand for him to take. Her cheeks glowed ever so red.

The teacher blinked, an idea forming at the edge of his mind. "First, give Ginny a hug. Friendly hug."

"What?"

“Just... trust me.” He hurriedly told her, glancing at Monica from the corner of his eye.

“Um... yes sir.”

Dia looked at him as if in confirmation, slowing down and approaching the blue-scaled Draco. The two shared a confused look before halting. The nurse reached out and gave a brief and awkward hug, letting go once Rick nodded.

As she moved back to him, Rick took Dia’s hand, though that didn’t make her any less confused. Her confusion was greater as he made a show to Monica that he was holding Dia’s hand.

Monica looked, holding hands, then at Ginny, then at Dia, and then at Rick. The Sabertooth grumbled but moved with purpose. She quickly approached the Draco, not giving even a chance to take a battle-stance as she enveloped the Draconian maiden in her arms right as Ginny let out a panicked squeak.

Nearly shoving the scaly maiden off instantly after, Monica returned to Rick’s side opposite to Dia’s. “Rick.” She proclaimed, offering her paw at him.

“I think you’re going to be helping me to teach Monica how to behave.” The teacher whispered, grabbing Monica’s paw and then shrieking as she yanked him out of Dia’s grasp, pulling him into a full bodied hug.

There was a long road ahead.

[131] [Rick]

“Riiii~iiiick.”

Rick glanced at Monica as she dropped down the four very heavy tree-trunks she'd been carrying, grunting slightly as the wood bounced off of the ground slightly on impact. She stepped out of the slight indentations her paws made on the soft soil from her having walked with the massive weight.

He still couldn't quite believe that she'd been able to carry all that, nor that she didn't just sink all the way to her knees into the dirt. There must be something up regarding elemental energies because physics had walked out the door a kilometer ago which was where she'd picked the lumps of wood.

“Rick!” Monica spoke more insistently now, glaring at him as she poked his chest.

“I'm on it, I'm on it.” He nodded along, reaching into the pouch and pulling out a piece of boar jerky. She glared at him, and he pulled out two more.

Snatching it out of his hands, Monica grumbled, following him along as he turned around to walk back towards the logging area. Judging by the number of pieces of jerky left in his bag, he had for one more trip before she stopped wanting to collaborate. The feline made sure to grab his hand, her scowl was a deep one, mumbling and muttering and grumbling with every handful of steps.

“There there.” Rick patted her shoulder. “We're doing this for food.”

Monica's gaze narrowed, her paw pressing against the pouch. “Food.”

“More food.”

Her lips pursed. “Monica kill food.” Letting go of his hand, she dejectedly crossed her arms, following along with an even deeper pout.

The teacher could only sigh a little, watching her have a tantrum over the whole thing. Like some petulant child who insisted there were better ways to go about things, and... he couldn't really deny that, from her perspective, it might seem far more entertaining to go about things differently.

“Hey.”

Tugging her hand, he caused her to stop. His other arm reached out, tugging at the baggy shirt she wore and pulling her closer. She obliged, leaning down. With a quick peck on her lips, Monica's ears perked up. "Sex?"

"Kiss." He chided, watching her pout again. But she didn't lean away.

Leaning back, she wrapped him with her large furry paws in a warm snuggle of an embrace. Monica was hungry for his lips, nibbling and biting them lightly as her tongue quickly pushed to invade his mouth. Rick could feel her breasts squishing against his chest, an elastic pressure that was joining the desire he could sense from her. He had to fight to break it off before it would escalate into more.

Monica purred, tail lashing, back and forth, ears perked and... so were her nipples, visible through the discolored shirt. "Riiiiick." She whispered, taking his hand and guiding it down to her thighs.

He pulled away. "No sex. Work." He insisted quickly, looking around and only now noticing the hollers and wolf-whistles coming from the construction crew. His face flushed, and he took her paw in his hand, quickly continuing his march up the hill.

"Sex later?" The feline pressured, putting his hand on her naked hip as she grasped his.

Gaining hold of himself. "Maybe." He declared. If she was going to pressure for sex, he was going to at least take advantage of it and get her to earn it. She'd been pouts and grumbles ever since starting this, and it'd been getting harder and harder to convince her to help.

"Maybe." The pout was back, but she couldn't really stop her tail from keeping the happy swish, so that was that for now.

The next round-trip he managed to convince her to take as many tree-trunks as she physically could... in exchange of his hand staying firmly on her ass every step of the way. The feline wasn't exactly happy with it, but she compensated by wringing a make-out session the instant she'd dropped the batch near the construction area.

"So THAT is how you tamed the legendary White Claw."

Someone nearby shouted out, and the hollers came. Rick's face flushed, and Monica didn't care much at all. The feline kept her arms tightly around him, possessive even as he turned around. Like a giant spooning session, she lay her chin against the top of his head and kept her arms wrapped around his chest as the young man tried to compose himself. "Is there any more timber to move?"

“That’s about it for the day. Help’s much appreciated.” The foreman spoke with a hearty laugh, patting his generous belly as the sound shook him from head to toe. “Can’t say the show was any less impressive.”

“She’s... she can be a bit needy sometimes.”

“You gotta have some impressive War-Hound in your pants to get White Claw to act like a blushing Ingenue.” The man laughed louder as Rick squirmed a little. “Let me invite you to some ale.”

“I don’t quite think she’s going to let me go anytime soon.” Rick glanced upwards at his catty-captor.

“No need to worry over that, sir.” Dia’s voice pipped up from the sideline. It almost made Rick jump in surprise. He glanced over at the nurse as she emerged from one of the houses. “There’s a potion-brewer in town. I’m sure we could request some catnip essence to keep Monica entertained while you get a chance to relax.”

“That girl of yours’ impressive.” The foreman declared, stroking his stubby beard. “Saved us a lot of time, didn’t need to take anyone to the medicen today.”

“Very smart too.” Rick nodded, watching the pink-haired maiden smile brightened. “If you think you can handle Monica for an afternoon... I’d appreciate it.”

“Certainly, sir. I’ll go right away.”

The moment Dia was gone, Monica’s arms loosened slightly around Rick, and the young teacher could only sigh in response.

“Jealous type, eh? Been there myself.” The foreman nodded sagely. Rick noticed the man was talking at Rick from slightly to the side rather than directly ahead, and never quite looking his way directly. The man was clearly mindful of Monica’s potential response to him. “Had a puppy girl, adopted, would stay glued to my side all day long. Wife nearly tore her a bloody strip.”

“How did you solve it?”

“Becca showed her who’s who in the house.” A slight shrug. “It was tough watching, but after she got patched back up she mellowed out.”

“I don’t think that’s viable for me.” Rick chuckled nervously.

“I’ll say, with how she carried those logs, your gal’s probably a match even against a Royal Knight!” A hearty laughter followed. The man turned to leave. “I’ll have a girl come on over to lead the way. Sundown sound good?”

“Hopefully.” Rick shrugged, watching him leave.

Monica proceeded to turn her attention to the other maidens that were looking their way and growl. Many sets of heads quickly turned away, and the feline kissed Rick’s head. She refused to let go, though, so walking out of the area was a bit of a hassle until she finally let go and just took him by the hand.

They walked through the “empty” stretch of land that separated the village and the farms, and straight into the large shack the Hunters had provided as a place for Monica to stay at. Their intention had been for only Monica to stay there, but once it was clear, it would have to include Rick and Dia. They’d made sure to upgrade the place with several sets of mantles and straw to use as bedding underneath.

Not the most comfortable accommodation in the world, but it certainly beat having to rough things out without a roof overhead. Also, they brought food every morning, a bonus as it was a trade in conveniences. Monica’s presence scared the shit out of any feral that approached the area, and the Hunters had one less place to need to patrol over.

Monica was quite insistent on returning to the shack. Her shirt flew off the moment she’d stepped inside, and so did Rick’s. The Sabertooth cared little for much else, dragging him to the pile of bedding and, despite his protests, stripping him along the way.

With a loud exaggerated sigh, she curled up around him, laying her head against his shoulder as she hugged him closely. “Sex... later. Sleep now.” She mumbled, closing her eyes. Rick shrugged in return, not really having much alternative for the time being. She was calling the shots, and she wanted to nap. No sense in not joining in.

Pulling one of the mantles over them, he closed his eyes and joined her.

[132] [Rick]

The tavern, or bar, or whatever the place opted to call itself, had several things about it that caught Rick's attention almost right away. For one, the only females in sight were the four bouncers near either exit, and the maiden tending the bar itself. The second thing to catch him by surprise was the fact that the alcohol was far stronger than he expected it to be. The beer tasted like it'd had rum mixed into it, and there was a sweetness to the flavor that masked the punch a lot more than he expected. If he wasn't careful, he'd likely get drunk way faster.

The third thing to grab his attention was the absence of music or background... anything.

Most bars he'd gone to had at least a television or a radio or something. Part of him was expecting sound to burst out through hidden speakers at any moment and the bar to explode into celebration at the fixing of the technical issue.

"You look like you're about to get jumped."

The voice snapped him out of the thoughts that kept dancing around the room. Rick forced a smile and took a long swing of his drink. "Spent a little too long in the forest."

"You saw some shit, huh." The foreman, Carl, nodded somberly. "Must be pretty damn horrifying. Whole Knight Squad getting slaughtered..."

"... yup." Another nod. Rick held his tongue, making sure to keep from sharing his actual thoughts. As far as everyone here was concerned, he was just a traveler, not an offworlder. "Say, I never did learn much about the Earl. He a good man?"

"As good as any of those nobles go." A large shrug. "Far as we care, he's kept the taxes fair and the roads safe. Honestly, gramps keeps telling the kids to appreciate the peace while it lasts."

"He lived through war?"

"The Rebellion, though he was a wee lad back then." Carl shook his head. "Keeps quiet about it, but you hear the stories of how it went. Maiden killing humans, maidens fighting maidens, ferals burning defenseless cities to the ground... that sort of thing." A loud snort as the man took a swing. "So, what were you doing before joining the militia? Usually folk get a run earlier in life."

“I just recently became a citizen of the kingdom. Family’s place didn’t have much space for me, so I just went around looking for a new lot in life.” Rick just parroted off the first excuse that came to mind.

“Huh, so a noble’s son?” As Carl asked this, and the teacher choked, eyes wide and looking around right until the man slapped his back. “Don’t think us simple folk too dull. You stink of rich.”

The teacher chuckled nervously, trying to calm down. “I... how?”

“Skin’s pale, clothes are nice and new, you talk all pretty-like, and you drink like a babe. White Claw being yours? Traveling with a human girl? Stinks of old money all over.” The man laughed. “Don’t worry too much over it, we don’t much care where you come from.”

“Yeah... yeah, I’d just rather not...” He coughed, cogs spinning wildly. “You know, I’d rather avoid trouble.”

Carl rolled his eyes, patting his belly and keeping his tone light as he waved Rick off like it was nothing. “Got some tips if ya like, though not for free.” A wink. “Just wanna know what the lass’ story is. First human lady I’ve seen that didn’t come with a military escort.”

“Kat?” A slight pause. “She’s... traveling with her grandfather, don’t know much about her. Tomas fancies her, and there might be something mutual, but... that’s about it.” He shrugged slightly.

“Bah, fine, keep your secrets.” He grumbled, another long swing from his mug, leaving it back on the counter and gesturing at the bartender to refill it. “If I were in your briefs and wanted to avoid trouble, I’d either stop trying to pretend I’m someone from the dirt and just say something about being some noble lady’s thigh-warmer.” A chuckle followed. “Seeing how White Claw looks at you, no one would doubt that.”

“Duly noted.”

“So...” Rick paused, glancing at Carl as he sipped from his drink, the bearded fellow looking at him with a wide smirk. “So...” He repeated.

“So... what?”

“How is she?” The man chuckled. “Wild?”

“Oh! You mean... in bed.” The chemistry teacher coughed, taking another swing from his drink. “She... uh, she’s intense.”

“Come now, you can’t leave things like that!” A new face showed up, a man nearing his fifties, weathered face and bright smile. “Name’s Victor, sorry, but I couldn’t stop but overhear. You’re the man who caught White Claw. Right?”

“Victor... huh, I know a Victor.” Rick gave a slight nod.

“Hopefully a good fella.” The man offered a hand to shake. His grip was firm. “Would a drink in exchange for more details be the right price?”

“I’m not one that tends to share those kinds of details.” He shrugged nonchalantly. “She was feralborn, kept me alive for some reason, and things sort of rolled from there.”

“Mhm, everyone’s seen how she handles things.” The new Victor laughed. “Has a lot of things to learn. Must be quite the handful.” An emphatic nod followed. “How would you say she’s at fighting? Can she distinguish between friend and foe yet?”

Rick frowned. “I feel like that particular question came out of the blue.”

Victor frowned in turn, as if trying to decipher what he’d just said, but quickly recovered. “Don’t be very surprised. I’m looking for some security heading to Balet, and if I could convince the owner of White Claw to keep me safe...”

If he were a dog, his ears would have perked up. “So you want a bodyguard?”

“From ferals.” New-Victor pipped up with a slight grin. “Lost my guards during the rush and I’ve been stuck around these parts since the rush got everyone’s hands tied up. Would you be interested?”

“Somewhat, depends on how much.” A little pause. “And you’d have to consider that I’m not traveling alone.”

“Sure, sure.” Another quick nod. “Food expenses for yourself, White Claw, and the nurse. And ten gold coins?”

Carl choked on his drink, eyes darting between Rick and Victor. The teacher had to take a moment to ponder whether this was some sort of act as a way to get scammed or if it was something else. The sense of money was not one he’d gotten a solid hold on. He’d have to ask the others to get a better sense of how fair the offer might be.

“Sounds decent enough, but I’ll need to talk it over with my friends first.” His response was cordial enough, taking a long swing from his drink. “Wouldn’t want to commit to anything and then find out they’d rather avoid such dealings entirely.”

“Of course, of course.” Victor nodded. “I’ll make sure to pay you a visit, say... tomorrow noon?”

“Sounds... good?”

“Great! Great!” A pat on the back. “I’ll be there, then. Got lots to prepare. Be seeing you.”

Turning around, he left, waving off as he marched straight out the door. Rick was left blinking and slightly confused, glancing at his drinking partner as Carl merely shrugged. “City-folk, that one. Business burned down in the rush.” A long swing. “Personally don’t like him much, but he’s always paid well.”

“What about him don’t you like?”

The response was a simple shrug. “Just too... rushed, I guess.”

“Hm...” Rick shook his head. No sense in hurrying things on that end. He’d get time to talk things over with the others. “So, about the Earl, you don’t got anything?”

“Like I said, peaceful times make for boring stories, thing’s been quiet with him in charge. But many folks appreciate that.”

He could understand the feeling. The chemistry teacher merely nodded along and spent the rest of his drink. The hours oozed by slowly, doubly so when there was nothing to really keep his sense of time. By the end of his second glass, he was already starting to feel slightly light-headed and a bit loose-lipped. Carl was fun in a down-to-earth kind of way, but Rick was not feeling like he could really loosen up.

So, not wanting to risk talking too much or saying something he shouldn’t, Rick called it a night and headed back through the village in the general direction of the shack he was sharing with Dia and Monica.

Tipsy and a little disoriented, the local Hunter girls (green uniform, green collar) were more than happy to help. A few offered to accompany him the whole way, but something in the back of his head kept telling Rick he shouldn’t, so he didn’t. There was an odd sensation of being watched that followed him as he walked his way back.

He stopped as he found the shack having its door blocked by a heavy trunk.

“Um...”

He knocked and heard movement. “Rick?” The voice called out. It was Dia. “Rick, Monica locked me in!”

“What?”

“Rick.”

This time the young human shouted, jumping and turning around as he saw Monica was standing right behind him. She was angry, snarling as she stepped closer, pinning him against the tree-trunk. Reaching forward, she yanked the trunk out of the way, nearly tossing it out of the way. The door burst open and Dia stepped through. The nurse was shoved aside as Rick was shoved inside.

Whatever complaint Dia had was ignored, Monica lumbered into the house, pushed Rick onto the hay and straddled his hips. “Sex.” She stated, pushing him down. “Now.”

[133] [Rick]

Rick could feel the dampness of her crotch against his pants, her paw keeping him pinned against the bedding. Monica's blue-green eyes shone in the darkness of the shack, the only source of light what little filtered through the open door. Her paws were warm, her touch surprisingly soft despite the aggressive use of force from moments earlier.

"Sir, sh-."

Dia's words were cut off by the feline's head snapping towards the door and growling with such intensity, Rick could feel the vibrations all around him.

"Just... don't piss her off." He replied, leaning upwards, and immediately getting shoved back down.

"Sex. Now. Dia. No." Monica proclaimed with a solid, bone-chilling glare.

"I'll... wait outside."

"You do MFFFF."

Monica sealed his lips with a kiss, then immediately pulled back, scoffing and spitting. "RICK!" She whined in complaint, grabbing a fistful of cloth and shoving it into his mouth. Her anger turned into betrayal and annoyance, her claws moving across his body in an attempt to get his shirt off in one go.

The human laughed, pulling out the piece of cloth and helping her along, ignoring the half-hearted glare she sent his way as he reached up to help her remove her own shirt. It was hard to see what with how dark everything was, but even in the darkness, he could feel the weight and softness of her breasts as they escaped from the cloth that confined them. Monica shuddered as his cool fingers squeezed her warm tits, their flesh overflowing through his fingers. There was just too much of her for each hand.

"Riiiiick." She moaned now, her nipples poking at his palms, the weight she bore down on him relenting now that he was reciprocating. The thrust of her hips against his pants gained an edge of growing impatience and intensity.

"Shhhh." He whispered, releasing one of her tits and moving his right hand down between her thighs. It was easy to find the source of her need. She was wet, practically drenched. The scent of her arousal was thick, her folds warm to the touch.

Another low moan, a slow thrust of her hips. Monica grabbed hold of his shoulders and shoved her breast on his face. He obliged, leaning into her, teasing her with his touch, driving the feline to move quickly against him. She needed no warm-up, but he enjoyed it all the same.

Her weight bore down on him, but Rick wriggled his fingers, nudging her hips to rise. Slowly, he wriggled out from under her, teeth bearing down on her nipples with as severe a bite as he could make it right as he thrust his fingers into her hard. Her response was immediate, a rumbling roar, her arms pulling him against her chest. The maiden leaned back, and Rick took the advantage to push.

Monica presented no resistance, falling back and dragging him along the way, suffocating him with her breast, wriggling madly as the orgasm wrapped through her. Rick took the chance to lower his pants, already hard and ready, he didn't waste any time to guide himself into her eager cunt.

With her legs instantly locked around him, she let him breathe and release her eraser-thick nipple. Still high from the small orgasm, she pulled him into a kiss. Instantly she yowled, he couldn't see her face in the dark, but the sound was greatly annoyed. The feline shoved him back down into her breast and he obliged, tongue and lips laying claim of her flesh as he thrust hard into her.

The Sabertooth maiden tightened, sex slick and silky, one claw grasped his ass to help him thrust harder, the other kept his face against her left tit. Rick used his hands to grip her hip and push. Every thrust rocked them both on the bedding, wild and fast, there was little room for patience, alcohol and pure sensation driving them forward as she met him thrust for thrust.

Wordless, Monica cried out again, pulling him deeper into her embrace. He could feel her holding back, letting the sensations wash over her yet keeping a tight seed of concern within herself, all too aware...

"Turn around." He growled, struggling with her legs, jaw tightening as he felt himself all too close to the edge.

She didn't understand up and until he reached for her tail and yanked at it hard enough she yowled. Taking a long breath, she moved fast, opening her legs and turning around. A mutual gasp as he pulled out of her as she repositioned, his own grasp on her tail the tether that led him to her taut ass.

They fumbled, Monica lowering herself to her knees and then having to adjust further for him, her thighs quivering as he found her needy sex and thrust back into her. With one

hand grasping her tail, the other slapped her hips. Monica growled, pushing back against him hard enough it almost sent him stumbling over. A warning as much as a request. And he obliged, guiding himself back into her waiting sex and pushing.

It was wild and out of control. Rick barely able to hold on as he clutched at her body for dear life while she threw herself back at him, finally able to stop holding back as the new angle could barely let her exert any of it on him.

Rick couldn't hold out much longer, feeling himself reaching the edge as she roared once more. The human leaned over, hugging her hips as his hand reached down to her cunt, reaching for that sweet spot right over where their flesh met, fingers pressing down on her clit. It drove her wild, Monica roared again, this time her whole body shaking and pressing hard against Rick, causing his knees to drag across the floor as the cloth they were fucking on made a loud ripping sound.

He collapsed on her taut ass while she fell face first into the hay. Both of them enjoying the ripples of the afterglow, the feline shuddering with every stroke of his fingers over her clit.

And yet, she growled, breathless, tired, but a growl.

"Shhh." Dia whispered in the dark, her hands pressing against Rick's naked lower back.

"What are yo-?"

Monica stirred, beginning to gather the strength to move, but failing as soon as Dia's hand reached down under and between Rick's thighs and stroking his sack. A surge ran through him, his cock throbbing hard enough both feline and human moaned in unison.

"Dia?"

"Let me help." She spoke smoothly, fingers stroking over Monica's pussy and trailing her way down to the base of his shaft. "Master."

The word was a hushed little thing, followed by a stroke that sent tingles up and down his spine. Rick glanced in Dia's direction but only saw darkness, still, her free hand reached out to him, pulling him into a kiss. Her lips were hungry, her other hand stroking Monica and the human. The nurse took the hand he wasn't using to grip the feline's tail, placing it squarely between her thighs, pressing his fingers into her sex.

Moaning into the kiss, the strange rhythm overtook them. Sabertooth moaned and humped, Rick kissed and thrust, Dia stroked and kissed. The pink-haired maiden hungrily took the whole of his head, his chest, his balls. Monica squeezed his cock and

thrust against his hips with gusto. A second wind was upon the two lovers, and the third was all too eager to participate.

With the human's exploratory digits, Dia finally let go of his head, grasping his arm and forcing her whole naked body against it. She cried out, legs giving out as she shrieked, pulling him with her.

The trio collapsed, Rick stumbling and pinning Dia to the ground, the maiden wrapping her arms around him protectively as she took the brunt of the impact. There was a long collective sigh, then a second sigh, with Dia breaking into giggles, rolling slightly back and forth as she squeezed Rick's head against her chest in a tight hug. "That was hot, Maaa~aaster."

The moment ended quickly as Monica yanked them apart.

"Rick. Monica. No Dia!" She growled, holding him in the air by the chest with her large paw.

"Dia hurt no hurt Monica." The cat growled, keeping the human firmly pressed against the wall and the nurse to the floor. "Dia hurt no hurt Monica!"

"Dia?"

"She..." A cough and a wheeze. "She caught on to the catnip... sir, only took a bit to get randy and playful, but not enough."

"Ugh." Rick groaned, feeling it hard to breathe. "Monica, calm down. No hurt." His hands reached for the paw holding him in place, slowly stroking it. "No hurt."

"No Dia, bad Dia."

"Sir, I should apologize to her."

"We both should. Not sure how to convey it to her though."

"Maybe... I have an idea?"

In the darkness, Rick couldn't really tell what was happening, but Monica's pressure against him relented as the feline suddenly let out a surprised gasp. A moment later there was a slight moan. "Monica?" He asked, trying to free himself from her grasp but she was quite adamant to keep him pinned against the wall.

She moaned louder, and finally her strength relented, allowing Rick to fall on his feet and stumble in the dark a bit.

“Dia bad?”

“Hm...” Monica’s blue-green eyes shone in the dark, the feline moving towards Rick and enveloping in a tight hug, knocking him down onto the mantles. “Dia bad. Dia no bad bad.”

“What did you...?”

“I tested something... maiden’s secret.”

Feeling too tired and woozy, he relented the point, sighing and trying to adjust himself to sleep instead. He’d... deal with it when he was more clearheaded.

[134] [Rick]

Rick glanced at Monica, then at Dia, then back at Monica, and back once more. The two maidens were looking at each other and trying not to make it obvious. The feline had a clearly confused expression, the nurse a somewhat smug one. The larger of the two currently had the human stranded on her lap, fuzzy warm furry paws wrapped around his chest protectively and only ever shooting a glare when the nurse got too close.

“So about last night...” He coughed. “Why did you... call me ‘master’?”

“Isn’t it true? You own me, sir.” Dia’s eyes twinkled with mischief, the nurse giggling slightly. “I also thought it would be sexy.”

“I feel like the term has some connotations I’m not aware of.”

“Perhaps. Does Master wish to give me an order?”

“Let’s...” Rick shook his head. “If it’s something you’re into, I’m not going to stop it. Just don’t use it in public.”

“Certainly, sir, it wouldn’t do to make others believe you spend long sleepless nights making your maidens moan and breathlessly call out to you.” With a fit of giggling, Dia pulled her shirt on, adjusting it. “I think Monica does that well enough, her roars certainly weren’t quiet or humble. I expect ferals thirty kilometers away were quite thoroughly spooked.”

“Oh God.” Rick shrunk slightly. “Could you at least tell me what you did to get Monica so confused?”

The nurse giggled louder, pulling up her skirt and adjusting it. “I just apologized with actions, sir.”

“Have you... are you... ?” He frowned slightly. “Do you find girls attractive?”

“Hm? I wouldn’t bed one if given the choice.” She shrugged, leaning down to tighten her shoes. “But I heard from a Harpy that the men from your world seemed to have a particular penchant for... maiden on maiden action. So to speak.”

“There’s a lot to parse through in that sentence. You don’t have to do this.”

“I still choose to.” A little shrug, fingers brushing over her hair, palms glowing. Her pink hair smoothed and primed perfectly with just her touch. As if she’d spent the past hour

brushing it. "If sir believes I am not property, then it's my choice how I act. And if sir does consider me property, then I am doing my duties to the best of my ability."

"I feel like you talked with Alice."

"Do not underestimate a maiden's courage, sir!" Dia winked, moving the glowing hands over her face, leaving her skin fresh and clean. "I will be going to gather some supplies."

"Wait, before you go." A deep sigh. "Last night I talked to a merchant, don't remember the name, he offered some money to travel with us, thinking about having Monica as protection against ferals."

"That's great news, sir!" She nodded along. "I'll make sure to share this with the others if I see them."

The teacher took a second too long to get his words in order before she was out the door, humming some tune. It left him inside the shack, trapped by Monica's hug as she refused to get out of the bed. A bed that had been reduced to tatters thanks to last night's activities having involved her clawing them into ribbons.

Had Rick known she'd do that, he would've insisted keeping her on her back instead. Or on the normal ground. Resigned to try to spend another hour or so getting some extra sleep and shuteye before the day's activities caught up with them, he snuggled into Monica's arms and stroked her hip, urging her to relax in turn. It didn't take much for her to follow along, and the human felt like he wanted to sigh more deeply than ever.

It was becoming clearer that his job was, primarily, handling Monica. Monica and her mood. Everything else was secondary to some degree or another. And a lot of it had to do with the limitations in her vocabulary. He'd have to focus harder on that, though he wasn't too sure how many chunks of boar-jerky it'd cost them to get there.

The nap was short if pleasant, it was impossible to feel cold when Monica was basically one large heater with fur-covered attachments for arms and legs.

"Let's move."

"Noooooo." The feline complained, squeezing him back into the sheets.

"Monica." He pinched her ear, getting her to grumble in response.

With a loud growl, she let go. But she took all the mantles to wrap herself up into a warmer ball rather than leave the bedding. This left Rick with the chance to use a washcloth Dia had left prepared on himself.

Trying to use the washcloth on Monica proved fruitless... again, so he just focused on getting clothes and checking his things before stepping outside. The feline grumbled and groaned and complained, but once he was out, she soon followed, ducking under the door's frame and standing next to him. It seemed her unwillingness to leave him alone greater than her love for a warm bed.

Fresh morning air, the sun was about an hour over the horizon, and the sky was clear.

Taking the chance to stretch his legs, he glanced at Monica stretching. His eyes trailed over her naked figure, enjoying the well fit tall woman and her generous assets, a part of him felt like leaning to touch her body. But that would get her started up and asking for more sex, and he definitely wasn't with the energy for that right now.

After a night with drinking...

Wait.

"Last night you sneakily followed me while Dia was trapped in the shed." He talked to the feline as she cocked her head at him. Obviously she didn't understand most if not all he'd said, not that it was the purpose, he was venting. "And... Dia took my hangover away?" He definitely shouldn't drink while having to keep an eye on the two. Monica was more dangerous than heavy machinery, he'd have to stay sharp around her.

Doing some stretches, he turned to leave towards where the foreman had pointed out was likeliest he'd find supply run requests. The chemistry teacher didn't really need to consider whether Monica was following, even if he couldn't hear her, he could practically feel her breathing down his neck.

Wait.

Whirling around, he faced Monica again. "God damn it." Reaching for the backpack, he pulled out another of the large shirts he'd been given. "Monica, put this on."

She looked down at the shirt, ears laying flat against her face. "No." She crossed her arms and snorting loudly. "Food."

"This is an extortion..." He put the shirt. "Kiss?"

"Bad kiss Rick, no."

"If kissing's not his strong-suit, wonder what he used to make the kitty roar?"

The voice came from slightly above them, he glanced at the rooftop of the nearby house, spotting one of the maidens with wings-for-arms. She was giggling as she looked down at them, ignoring the half-hearted glare Monica was sending her way.

“Morning to you too.” The human called out. “Got anything for this big pout to lug around?”

“Nothing today, she’s already dragged half a forest down here.” They spoke with no shortage of humor.

“Riiii~iiick.” Monica’s paw turned him around to look at her. “Yes food. Food. Food.” She snatched the shirt from his hands, and immediately began scowling at it as she tried to figure out how to put it on without tearing it.

“Come here, you.” Taking the clothes back, Rick ignored the giggling from up above and held the piece of clothing. She had to put the tips of her claws together to avoid puncturing the cloth, and even then it was a bit of an effort to squeeze those large paws through the holes.

She yowled and complained, but got through, head popping out and shaking her wild unkept white hair before looking down at herself and sighing deeply. “Food.” She now turned to him, poking his hip, the bag he’d hold for precisely her favorite meal.

“Hug?”

Monica arched a brow. “Food.”

“Hug and kiss?”

She stuck her tongue out and grimaced, and with one swoop of her arm, the bag was out of his belt.

“Hey!” With a complaint, Rick tried to take it back, but Monica used her other paw to stop him from being able to reach.

“Monica food.” Sticking her tongue out at him, she smirked and chuckled.

The Harpy watching things unfold howled with laughter, and Monica smirked all the wider.

It was going to be a long day ahead.

[135] [Alice]

Alice sat down on the chair Helga had brought over from... somewhere. The Valkyrie stuck to her side like glue, so Alice wasn't sure how it'd been possible to begin with. Still, the teacher was currently overlooking the same field where the Doggirls had been tied down and pinned not a full week ago. Now, each of the men was holding a bag of boar-jerky and, with varying degrees of success and failure, were trying to get the maidens they were assigned to stay put.

Some had the maiden stock still at their side. Others... not so much. A few of them were just running around while the human 'handler' was trying to draw their attention or get them to behave. Others would have to remind the maiden to stay in place every handful of seconds.

"Ma'am."

Huge's voice drew Alice's wary attention, the man moving to stand next to her as if, somehow, she were in charge of the operation. The psychology teacher could only look up at him half in disbelief and half in exhaustion.

Long nights reading history in the Baroness' library were not kind to the eyes.

"Yeah?"

"I'd just thought... erm, excuse me. Just reporting in, things are going smoothly."

Alice looked at the half-cocked mayhem in front of her, and then back at him. "I have no sense of reference over what's normal in these things."

"They're three weeks ahead of schedule, more or less... ma'am." He smiled slightly. "At this pace, I'd expect they'd be able to start spending more time together in a week or two."

"What do you mean with 'more time together'?"

"Sleep together, eat together, those sorts of things." The man shrugged. "My main concern is getting them through fragility training."

"The what now?"

"The gals are currently under constant watch whenever their partners show up, so if anything goes wrong, it's going to be hard for it to go wrong in a lethal kind of way." He

replied, shaking his head. “But once out there, on their own, they need to be able to understand that humans are more fragile.”

The psychology teacher felt herself grow tense. “And how would you normally... teach this?”

“Through example is the quickest way.” He grimaced. “Thought I’d give you a heads up, ma’am, so you don’t feel startled over what’s going to come next.”

Not giving much chance to ask what’s going on, Huge stepped forward, clapping loudly to draw everyone’s attention. As he did this, one girl hurried to walk up next to him, a Hunter girl, green uniform and green collar, but she was a Doggirl like the other ones.

“Time for a lesson.” The man called out, gesturing at his assistant of the day to step forward. The girl moved towards the recently feral Doggirls.

It was a slow thing to do, approaching each, letting them smell her hand, the young maiden letting out a small bark, and then moving onto the next. Many of the Doggirls that were behaving quickly broke from the rank and file, a gathering occurred, the maidens quickly devolving into barking and yipping.

Five more seconds and all the black-collared former ferals were in the group of maidens sniffing at one another and greeting.

Alice could only frown in confusion, not quite sure what was going to happen that the Major might feel necessary to warn her about. She almost missed how there were a dozen other maidens that jumped in, each approaching the humans.

“Now, I want you to cry for help.” Huge spoke softly, a tone that was so friendly one might have mistaken it for a joke.

There was only a moment of shared confusion right as the maidens that had approached each human reached out and grasped their forearms. It was so synchronous it might as well have been choreographed. Some of the humans called out in alarm, others a half-hearted attempt.

And then the maidens squeezed.

Shrieks and complaints began to emerge all over, the pack of Doggirls rapidly broke into chaos, each maiden appearing to lunge at their own partner. The Hunters that had grasped the humans had pulled away, letting go the instant a canine approached.

“That should form a bruise.” Huge spoke loudly. “Make very sure to show that it hurts whenever touching it, exaggerate if you must. Above all, you need to show that you are fragile and weak compared to a maiden.”

The psychology teacher could only wince at the proclamation, not everyone was likely to take that in a good light considering the current circumstances. Even with everything they’d gone through, she could tell most present weren’t happy with the Major’s request. But the man appeared entirely uncaring, glaring them down.

Sighing, Alice stood up. “Do I really have to be present in all of these?”

“The Baroness did insist.” Helga reminded her.

And the psychology teacher was left with an odd sense of wrongness about that. Shaking her head, she tried to take a moment to reconsider. “Maybe we should get the other women to participate... or at least observe.”

The women had mostly been studying books the noble-lady had suggested. From history to... genealogy, it was something that would supposedly help them at least not stand out like sore thumbs. Personally, Alice was quite fed up with reading about what noble killed what “rebel-leader” during the civil war they’d had almost a century ago.

Something that did catch Alice’s attention was the severe lack of territory-based war compared to every bit of history she’d known of back from her world. There were kingdoms and there were contrived legal disputes over some territories, but not an iota of actual war.

The ferals likely were a strong part of that reason.

“Where to, ma’am?” Helga interrupted Alice’s thoughts with a chirpy little smile.

“Just somewhere to sit back and think... alone?” She replied, glancing at the winged woman as she nodded along.

“Plenty spots like those!” The wings spread wide, and with a slight running start, she grabbed Alice into a bear hug and leapt into the air.

Barking noises broke out as they took into the air, the psychology teacher let out a choked scream, holding back and clutching at Helga as the maiden easily adjusted her grip so she’d be carrying Alice by the armpits.

“Don’t worry ma’am, I’ve got you!” A laugh followed, the maiden beat her large wings with gusto, gaining height. Within moments the village below was nothing more than little squares.

“It’s cold!” Alice warned, and Helga flinched in turn.

The flying maiden lowered her altitude somewhat, though her trajectory was clearly not intended to be somewhere within the village. Her wings kept flapping, and they kept gaining speed, descending the hill and towards the farms.

It took little more than a handful of minutes, Helga angled them towards one of the farms that looked to have fallen into disuse. The fields weren’t uniform, small trees dotted the green pastures, the building itself had a collapsed-in roof. The place looked empty from above, and the Valkyrie slowly circled down near the entrance.

Setting down in front of the fence, they touched ground, and Alice was quite thankful for it.

“This place’s been empty for almost a decade.” Helga spoke, standing on one of the broken beams that stuck out of the building’s ruins. “Road’s that way.” She pointed to the left. “You’ll get to a farm before that though. The Crambers are nice folk, they’ve got a killer bean soup.”

“Why did you take me here?”

Alice looked around. Weeds and grass all around, little of note beside the remains from the building.

“It’s a nice quiet place, safe too.” Helga replied with an eager smile. “This is the best place to think stuff without others around. It’s inside the land-perimeter and the patrols, but the sky-patrols move a bit further than that, so very few people actually know about it.”

“I... um, thanks.” A nod. “I think I’ll... use it?” Looking around, the psychology teacher awkwardly scratched the back of her head. “Do you know what happened here?”

“It’s where I grew up!”

“Oh, sorry! I didn’t think you’d take me somewhere personal to you.”

“It’s ok, after the incident, the Major took me into the Hunters and gave me a good job.” Helga nodded. “So the Hunters are like a family, even if they sometimes get a bit too overbearing. Do you have a family?”

“I... did, do, it’s complicated. Family’s something I never really had much contact other than the rare call.” The woman sighed slightly. “I had a partner, boyfriend, been trying not to think about it too much.”

“Just because you close your eyes, it doesn’t mean the sun is gone.” Helga chided. “How was he?” There was a dreamy quality to her smile.

Alice arched a brow at her. “You know, the idea was that I’d have some time to think for myself.”

“Oh, right! Sorry ma’am!” Helga spread her wings wide. “If you need anything, I’ll be overhead. Just a shout or a really vigorous wave and I’m here. Whatever you need ma’am.”

It took her a single jump to take to the air, and the psychology teacher finally let out the sigh she’d been holding onto. The thoughts just rushed back in, the doubt and the... everything. Was she really supposed to somehow lead the group that, for all intents and purposes, wasn’t united to begin with? What the hell was she supposed to do here? Just... give up everything she’d had until now?

Leaning against the ruined house, the teacher looked at the stone that lay next to the door.

She wanted to laugh at herself.

Somehow, fighting the spider had felt easier than this.

[136] [Barry]

Barry walked the forest feeling a strange ease and calmness as he did. His shadow was thick, meaning Orion was there. The Hound barely if ever came out, only to eat and a few other occasions. She was hard to read, but Barry found her quietness something he'd grown to appreciate from time to time.

Looking around, the young man realized he'd walked a bit into the outer perimeter of the safe area for the Court. It was easy to tell, the lowest branches in the trees had scratch-marks. Not really visible unless one looked for them. Heading further out would mean a larger risk.

"You can come out." He tapped his foot to the ground, his shadow wavering slightly. Barry was fairly sure Orion was a bit nervous, so he reached into the pouch he'd been given and pulled out some fruit. "I've got something tasty for you, if you'd like."

Crouching, he put the fruit on top of the shadow, watching it be absorbed into it. The second piece he held it a bit over the shadow, this time a clawed hand emerged, trying to reach for it. But Barry pulled it further away, and the claw followed, until Orion was mostly out of the shadow and had managed to snatch the fruit out of his hands.

The young man smiled at her, and she met his expression with the usual blank stare. "See? We're alone."

The canine maiden glanced around, ears perked and rotating this way and that, her nose sniffing for a bit. It was only then that she fully stepped out of the shadow, looking at him, and throwing the piece of fruit into her mouth.

"Orion." He spoke her name, and her ears instantly perked up. "How have you been doing today?" A nervous laugh followed as she just blankly looked at him. "Mine's been good too."

Orion just looked at him, her eyes calm and barely blinking, her gaze meeting his own and not looking away. Barry tried to focus on her eyes, but couldn't really keep it going for too long. Turning around to begin his walk, he offered a hand for her to take, but the maiden looked at his hand, and then at him.

"Here, like this." He grasped her paw and began pulling slightly, walking forward.

Three steps later, she was gone, vanished and back into his shadow.

“Guess you just prefer it there, huh.”

Barry nodded a little, dropping down more fruit, and watching it vanish into the darkness. Calmly, he set himself to walk, dropping a little food from time to time, checking whether it'd vanish or not and continuing onwards. The forest was calm, peaceful, and a lot less threatening. The human relished on that calmness, on that sense of... safety.

His thoughts turned to Mark, his aunt, his family.

Embla had said she'd sent scouts but had found no other humans in the forest, and he couldn't really bring himself to believe they were all... gone. It didn't make sense, there should at least be signs but it's not like the Court could spare resources to send a whole squad that far East.

Not when their strongest fighter and wisest leader was incapacitated.

“I don't really think I'll be able to help them.” Barry's words were muted, a half-whisper. “I mean, I know I need to, they're desperate for good healers, but...” Scratching his chin, he thought of trying to force someone to just do what he told them to do. “I know Mark would do it, blink of an eye, snap, just like that.” A slight sigh. “Then again, I guess he'd be just as likely to run off as soon as someone asked him to do anything.”

Deflated, the young red-head ruffled his hair, trying to find an answer.

“Just be confident.”

His shoulders squared and then dropped.

“Just be confident.”

Shaking his head, he turned back towards the Court, meandering through the trees and trying his luck at figuring out the layout. The Court itself wasn't really large, barely a tiny village's worth of houses. But the houses were spread out and many were well hidden, with the sole exception of the palace. So Barry still hadn't really seen the whole thing just yet.

Or any humans, for that manner.

Walking about, he noticed the number of “faux walls” had drastically increased during the time he'd spent with them. It was straight up impossible not to find the court if one stumbled onto the nearby area, the Elves had clearly been put to hard work.

There was a lingering question over how much of that work would actually help if the next rush came from the wrong place.

Orion rumbled in his shadow, a slight shift of her shadow making Barry's feet feel slightly colder.

"Is someone there?" He spoke out to the surrounding forest, glancing at the trees, unsure as to what to expect.

"Only guards, sir." A voice spoke out from above. He didn't recognize her, but judging by the tone, she definitely did.

"Good girl." Barry whispered under his breath, dropping some extra food into his shade, feeling it waver as Orion took the offering without much hesitation. He added what little dried meat he'd been carrying too.

Continuing towards the center of the Court, meandering through the defenses that had been put in place. Eventually, he managed to get fairly close to the Court, but had stumbled upon a large willow. Its trunk was large enough Barry could recognize it as another of the "houses", but the rest of the tree was abnormally... aggressive.

The large hanging branches were covered in bright red bloody thorns, the tips embedded to the ground and the branches tense, as if ready to spring at the slightest touch. Barry felt a sense of foreboding danger in their presence, it was easy to imagine that a disturbed branch would lash out as it sprung, ripping flesh and muscle along the way.

Frowning, his gaze turned towards the tree, there were windows, but they were small and round, barely large enough for someone to look through. The inside of the tree itself was impossible to discern this far out, but the sheer size of it felt like it could fit at least four or five floors.

Two maidens, dressed in thick green leather, moved up to him from within the thorny cage. They wielded whips, their expression somber. "Sir, the prison doesn't allow guests."

"This..." Barry looked at the place, feeling the shadow under his feet shifting, his soles practically frozen cold. Orion did not like this place one bit. "What sort of prisoners do you have here?"

"Human prisoners." The guards both scowled, lips thin and eyes cold. "The Lady forbids execution of humans, so our only option is to keep them locked."

"What sort of crimes did they do?"

“Enslavement of maidens, those are the ones treated most leniently.” The guard closest to Barry shook her head. “But we have others that have done far worse than that. Ones we happened to catch by chance, and that the world is better off without.”

“Torturers, breakers, traders. Humans who’ve abused maidens their whole lives.” The other guard spoke with a cold edge. She pointed to her arm, showing white lines, scars, littering her right forearm and shoulder. “My old owner among them.”

“It’s... that doesn’t sound good at all.”

“It’s not.” The taller one replied, giving a curt nod. “Sir, we have our orders. Please return to the safety of the Court. This place has too much filth for one such as you.”

He nodded, feeling a chill as he turned to leave and head back towards the parts of the Court he knew better.

As he walked, he felt eyes were on him. He looked over his shoulder, not seeing anyone looking his way, but unable to look from the black holes that littered the willow-tree’s walls. He was being watched, by someone within.

He hurried his steps all the more.