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## [114] [Dreams]

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Rick opened his eyes to a beautiful world of green rolling hills under a bright, sunny, and clear sky. The grass was high enough to reach his hips, waving under a cool summer breeze, turning the scenery around him into a sea of vegetation that seemed to shimmer and bend under the whims of invisible currents.

For a moment, he felt as if he'd lost his train of thought for a very long while and only just now paid attention to his surroundings. The first thought had been to ask what he'd been doing a moment ago, and why there was no trail in the grass to mark the path he'd taken so that he could walk it back.

It was only a fleeting moment, one immediately followed by the realization that his last memory was of being in the Elven Grove.

“What is this place?”

No sooner had he spoken than something snapped around his ankles, yanking with enough force to knock him down, dragging him through the field of tall grass. Rick let out a startled shout, desperately trying to gain some purchase or semblance of balance, but his hands would rip the grass out, his palms stinging with cuts.

Then, the vine pulled up and away from the ground, Rick rose feet first into the air, completely disoriented and trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

The hills were gone, and he was now within a rather lovely light forest, with plenty of light streaming through low canopies. Not that he felt like he could enjoy it, hanging upside down by his ankles from a coiled vine.

“So they sent a third.”

Rick was spun around, left face-to-face with a pair of intensely dangerous green eyes.

The green eyes belonged to a maiden that he could only bring himself to describe as “regal”. Her features were sharp and angular like an artist’s geometric representation of what a perfect face ought to look like. A sharp chin led to thin pink lips, followed by an aristocratic small nose, high cheeks, sculpted brows, and a golden tiara upon her brow. Her skin was snowy pale, yet carried a greenish edge that almost made her look like she just might dissolve into the nearest tree. Her hair, a deep black that seemed to be made

from shadows, was long and free, reaching all the way to the grassy forest floor. And her eyes, brilliant green gemstones, shone with the fierce chill of domination and contempt.

Despite the many things that made her look human, how the sharpness of her angles carried curved edges that hinted at an almost motherly beauty, the creature before Rick was anything but human.

There was an accumulation of oddities all over her, from the way she was taller than him in a way that made her look stretched vertically, with eyes that were zoomed-in on her face, a mouth that was slightly stretched, a face that was too unblemished, and a figure that left the impression of being photoshopped. No individual part of her felt uncanny, but the accumulation of them gave the maiden wearing the simple long white gown a definite air of otherness, of something that wasn't quite real.

"I think I'm going to get a headache if I stay like this for much longer," he commented, keeping himself limp as he hung from his ankles.

"You are far calmer than the previous two."

"I happen to want to be here," he said with a shrug.

"And why would that be?" She arched a statuesque eyebrow.

Rick shrugged again. "I made a deal with the guardians of the grove; so long as I'm here, they won't try to kill the ones I'm bonded to." It took him half a second to realize the words that had just come out of his mouth. His eyes widened in panic; that had not been what he'd been about to say!

The maiden grinned in amusement. "This is a world of souls and minds; lies do not exist here."

"I'd like to be able to keep my mouth shut." Whatever was going on, at least he hadn't shared that his goal wasn't really to bond with her but to stall for time. The longer, the better chances an attack would come and succeed. Even if this maiden was awakened, as long as Monica got to Rick and Kiara, they'd be able to do something about it.

"I expect you would have, human, but I am the one in control."

He growled, now glaring at the vines holding his ankles firmly midair, trying to figure out some way to break their hold. "And is this alleged control because you've got me hanging like a prize fish?"

She didn't answer, the maiden slowly walking around him, sizing him up. "What does the world know of me?"

“I’d need to know who you are first; all we ever got was a title.” He was too far up and too far away from anything to be able to reach for something to grab onto. “Not that ‘Green Empress’ rings any bells.”

“That is a shame, an error that will be corrected in due time.” Her steps were silent, staring through him.

He paused, blinking. “Hey, don’t mind my rudeness or anything, but you said this was some sort of mind-soul place, right? What happens if I die here?”

“It is impossible to die here. A soul, even a human’s, is far too durable to be snuffed out through raw force.”

“Wait, really? Great!”

And then he punched her perfectly symmetrical face.

With a startled yelp, she stumbled back, and the vine holding Rick suddenly let go, dropping him like an undignified sack of potatoes. Out of all potential outcomes, this had certainly been the best one, not that he wouldn’t have cared for the alternatives. This place didn’t seem to operate on normal rules, and the last thing he wanted was to give her the chance to just up and interrogate him when he couldn’t even refuse to answer.

Twisting around and getting back to his feet, he hurried to put a couple of good long strides between them before facing her again.

Straightening out, he gave her a toothy grin. “Name’s Rick.”

The maiden had just stood there, eyes wide, fingers pressed against her nose. “You... you punched me.” She spoke with utter disbelief, pulling her fingers away and revealing a tiny stain of blood there. She stared down at it with just as much shock as Rick was feeling currently. “You punched me!” She repeated, this time her voice took a harder edge.

“Let’s just call it even after you dragged me through the hills like that.” Though he was trying to keep his words calm, his mind was spinning out of control. Not once, not ONCE, had he thought it was possible for a human to hit a maiden hard enough to make them bleed. At least not without a sledgehammer and catching them completely by surprise.

What WAS this place?

Rick didn’t have time to think more on the subject, sensing a sudden overwhelming urge to get the hell out of there, he obliged, stumbling back and just in time to avoid the vines

that lashed down from overhead. They chased, with new vines emerging directly opposite to him, blocking the way out. He took to a full sprint to try and buy some time, only to smack face-first into a tree he could've sworn had been further away.

“Ow, what the-”

Another wave of concern and danger, his body moved faster than he could follow, ducking under the swipe of a vine and rolling out of the way. His legs kicked out from under him, and for a split second, he could've sworn he felt his toes digging into the dirt as he misjudged the distance and smacked against another tree.

Looking down at himself, he was wearing jeans and sneakers, plain normal clothes. The momentary confusion cost him, though; one of the vines wrapped around his wrist, and just before he could start struggling, a dozen others joined in. Before he could even try to break free, he was held midair, each limb taut from the vines pulling him in all four directions at the same time.

“That will be enough of that.” The maiden’s stare was full of reproach and anger, moving closer albeit this time not within striking range. Not that he could punch her again, the vines were tight. “We shall make this simple for you, human, submit and form the bond. Do so, and whoever is partnered with you will be spared.”

“But not me?” He asked with a mock tone of innocence.

“Judging by your... immature attitude, I can only assume you’ve not received proper education from your betters. This is no more your fault than a child is at fault for having a tantrum.” Her brow arched. “But so long as you submit, then they will be forgiven for this slip-up in discipline.”

Rick stared at her, blinking rapidly and trying to make sense of what she’d just told him. “My... betters?” was all he managed to get out, barely holding back from actually asking whether this was some sort of joke or not.

“Yes, you appear well-groomed, and your clothes are... passable in quality. I am to assume you are bonded to at least a high-standing maiden with agelessness, no?”

“I am bonded to two ageless maidens,” he answered, unable to hold back the words. Kiara and Eva were the ones, though he wouldn’t call either “high-standing,” no matter how much either of their egos might bruise at the claim.

“Two?” Her brows furrowed. “Has the world decayed, or is this merely some odd circumstance? Tell me, how many humans are there for every maiden? Ageless or otherwise.”

“Humans per maiden?” Rick laughed, this time quite happy to answer and keep the conversation rolling. Anything so long as it bought him time. Time for the fight outside... and time to figure out what was going on in this strange place. “Oh no, it’s the other way around. There have to be something like eight maidens for every human, and that’s without counting the ones that are feral. There’s got to be at least ten times as many feral maidens as there are bonded ones.”

Her eyes widened more than even when he’d punched her; she took a step back, somehow becoming paler than she’d already been. “We failed,” she whispered under her breath.

Rick caught a scent in the air, something that he couldn’t quite pin down. His nose told him that there was a scent, that it was detecting a scent, but it couldn’t provide any further details other than there was something there. Yet something in the back of his mind lunged at it, screamed a singular thing.

The maiden before him was terrified, and this was a moment of weakness.

Not doubting this instinct, he yanked at the vines, startled at how they ripped apart as if made of gummy-worms. Rick landed on his feet, descending to a full crouch as the vines swiped overhead, missing him by a hair. He twisted, launching himself sideways and using his tail to rotate so that he could spin and land back on his feet.

He jolted, looking over his shoulder and expecting an extra appendage but not finding anything there. Nothing felt right. His senses, body, and mind seemed to be increasingly disconnected.

“Enough!”

Though his senses screamed danger, they provided no direction for safety. A moment later, a wave of power blasted him off his feet and directly into a tree. Rick’s back exploded in pain, and he groaned, trying to get back up but finding himself sinking into the bark. It was like trying to fight out of quicksand; every movement of his flailing arms seemed to bury him deeper into the trunk, until everything waist-down was completely contained.

The tree hardened, and he was left stuck, legs trapped along with his lower torso and his left arm. The right one was quickly grappled by the vines and tied against the tree trunk, leaving him very uncomfortable and with no options for mobility or escape.

Anger and power wafted off her like the stench of sulfur off an active volcano. All around him, the trees were growing, stretching in every direction. Suddenly, the quaint, unassuming forest was darkening, rocketing out so high that the very sunlight was being

blotted out. Rick felt his back drench with cold sweat, memories of titanic trees and dead students mixing with the visceral panic Monica had felt when trying to keep him alive from the Golden Elves.

“Do not test my patience, human. Twice I’ve been too soft and allowed my chance to awaken to slip between my fingers. Twice too many.” She was levitating, her body glowing with a deep green power that pulsed throughout the world around her. Every tree, every branch, every leaf trembled and responded to her will. “Submit like you’ve done for your betters and let us return to the real world.”

“I submit to no one.”

The words came out of his lips hot and heavy, coerced out of him by whatever laws this place had, yet equally from his own will.

The Green Empress froze, the maiden floating there, staring daggers at him, scrutinizing him as if for the first time. “Then am I to assume you rule over maidens? That none stands above you, save yourself?”

The words came as much a threat as they did a question.

“Yes.” He met her glare in full.

A sudden threatening coldness clamped down on the blatant display of power, one hiding a terrible anger. “Then it is clear you were not due any kindness.” Her words made the forest tremble, creak, and groan, a chorus that rose into a fervent crescendo, tendrils of blinding hot neon green light lashed out from her like a living storm. “Today you will learn your place.”

This time, the danger was all-encompassing, the wood Rick was trapped in tightening, squeezing him. He shut his eyes and screamed, pulling at anything and everything he could, desperately clinging to that singular moment of strangeness that had somehow let him move in impossible ways.

The tightness was suddenly gone, Rick opened his eyes, finding himself a scant few meters away from the hole that collapsed into itself. His gaze and the Empress’ met, and for a split second, he sensed a flicker of panic within her.

All around him, the forest roared, springing into action towards him.

No room for panic, no room for hesitation.

He gripped that oddness within him and lunged at the Empress with everything he had. The distance between them shrank in the blink of an eye, he tried to connect with her face, but she'd ducked, using her shoulder to block it.

She was sent flying, smashing against the tree so hard the cracks spread like spiderwebs all the way up.

And Rick knew, at that moment, this was Monica's strength, Monica's powers.

He raised his fists in a boxer's pose and readied himself.

For once, he didn't feel like this was a suicidal gamble.

He was going to win.