
[036] [Adjustment Period]

Rick woke to an unfamiliar ceiling not for the first time in recent memory.

“It’s been an hour,” Dia kept his head on the pillow with a firm touch. “You were in shock and crashed from the adrenaline.”

He closed his eyes, letting the warmth of her palm pass over and through him. He recognized the soothing spell for what it was, inviting the balm against his frayed nerves and exhausted body. “Are you going to ask me why I did it?”

“You need to rest.” This close to her, he could feel the well of emotions within the healer through the bond. She’d spoken every syllable with a mix of anxiousness and certainty, a mix of fear and unwavering trust that made him feel like she was looking at someone other than him.

“But?” He offered, feeling the unspoken words linger in her lips.

“Lord Thorley was a noble.” Her tone was soft. “They...”

Rick let out a small sound of disapproval, squeezing her fingers. “You know I’m always open to hear your thoughts.”

Dia nodded. “The Darkton family... there’s not a healer in the kingdom who doesn’t desire some of the enchanted tools they create.” She caressed his forehead. “With that much influence... it would be very easy for them to claim you also killed the Baron of Astunes.”

“And it’s the truth.”

The image had been burned into Rick’s memory. His body on the ground, brain burning from the enchantment that ate away at his mind, and Dia, slashing the Baron’s throat, plunging the dagger into the noble’s flesh to save him.

Dia’s touch stiffened. “Is this punishment?” She whispered. “Has everything that followed us because of...?”

“No.” Rick breathed in, there was a lingering scent of mold and salt, but above it, he could catch a hint of the herbs the healer usually carried with her. It had the scent of mint and honey. “I couldn’t give anyone up then, and I couldn’t now. That’s all.”

She gently stroked his hair. “May fools reach for the Draiga and burn.”

That was not something he’d heard before. “What does that mean?”

“It’s an old wive’s curse.” She muttered. “A Draiga is a maiden, of the same genus as the Dragoness. Their scales burn hotter than any fire when they are enraged.” With a whisper, she pulled herself up to kiss his forehead. “We use it as a warning upon those who seek what they don’t deserve.”

“The world is filled with idiots.” He couldn’t help but chuckle, reaching up to her and caressing her cheek.

She leaned into his touch. “Then it will burn.” She kissed him, drying a tear when she pulled away. “I greet my Lord.” She spoke the words with reverence, and something else. Pride.

It stung.

“I’m no Lord.” He laughed dryly. “They’re desperate, they’d have taken a deal from the Vampires if it meant another meal. They’ll throw me out the instant someone else is at the gates.”

She glared, covering his eyes. “You should rest. And if you don’t agree to it, I will make you rest.” She spoke with a mock growl. “Everything is being taken care of. Yasir and Sir Whitney are coaxing the people out of their homes to assess who is in most dire need of help. Urtha has the safety situation handled. Kiara insisted on making a celebration out of feeding the citizens, and Eva’s resting... somewhere.”

“Monica here.” The feline patted his leg. “Rick safe.”

“What she said.”

What was there left to do? It wasn’t as if he felt like he could do much more than just lay there. “Fine, you can go help too. Just... don’t put yourself at risk.”

“You’re one to talk.” She leaned over him, laying a soft peck on his lips. “Lord of cheese.”

He swatted at her, the maiden giggling as she escaped his reach, softly closing the door as she left.

And just like that, the world went silent. The walls and windows thick enough no sound could reach inside. It made him keenly aware of his own breathing and how the sheets shifted with every exhale.

His heart thumped, entirely unwilling to calm down.

The weight of Monica's paw against his chest startled him, the feline not having made a sound, but his hands reached up to stroke the soft fur. In the darkness, her blue eyes weren't on him, but the door. She was guarding him, and that brought a sense of invulnerability that the darkness had nearly robbed him of. Rick's fingers slowly drew circles into the fur, feeling her knuckles, her phalanges, her claws, the pads on the very tip of her fingers.

It was a relaxing presence, but one that didn't keep his mind from churning.

Just like that, the responsibility for the city and its people had fallen on his shoulders.

Was this how it felt? To conquer?

Rick found he didn't enjoy it much.

The chuckle he let out was bitter.

A year ago, his list of concerns was so... so... insignificant. Tests to grade, rent, and whether the woman he thought he'd spend the rest of his life with would answer the big question. And now here he was, laying in a stiff bed with scratchy sheets, in a room devoid of a heating or cooling system. If he wanted to warm the room, he'd need to start... something, whatever.

The life before this world felt like a dream.

His body rested, the exhaustion too deep to allow for anything else. The hours melted away, unnoticed, but slow. Rick could only turn towards reviewing the day, breaking it down piece by piece.

Rick wasn't sure how long he stayed there, protected yet trapped. Four people had died to pay for his mistakes. Who would pay for the next? There was so much he could've done, so much he could've avoided. If only he'd known more, if only he'd been smarter, if only he'd been better...

He stirred to the sound of music, waking up without having realized he'd fallen asleep. There was a window open, Monica was at his side, her paw still on his chest, light as a feather. "Rick need food."

She proclaimed with a purr, vanishing into the darkness as if she'd been nothing more than a figment of his imagination.

When he'd first met her, he'd found such absolute silence to be terrifying from a creature nearly twice his height. Now it was reassuring, there was no one she could not sneak up on, none that could see her coming.

Slowly, he sat up and meandered to the window to see what was going on below.

They had illuminated the plaza with torches. By the looks of it, the celebrations were at full swing. The tribe had pulled out just about every scrap of food it had to spare, and the Lord's hoard had been added to the pile.

The drums were playing, a beat that rattled the tower like it was made of cards. The maidens of the tribe danced, they cheered, and they made merry. The Orcs were the rowdiest, singing praise to the Great Conquering Father, and calling out the names of the fallen with clear pride and awe.

Meanwhile, the former slaves and now tribe-sisters were no less enthusiastic, albeit in a much more coordinated way. Over and over, they would sing the same hymn.

The old lord, his greed had caused such woe

But now he's been overthrown, don't you know

The new lord takes the throne

And frees slaves, it's now shown

That the tyrant's end, has finally been sown.

It was from this group alone that Rick spotted more than one pair of eyes turning up to his window. They would point, they would raise their ration, and they would sing all the louder. There was a sense of... bittersweet gratitude. His bond to them was nowhere near that of Monica or Dia or even Eva, yet with them gathered like that, it made it easier to sense the shadows lifting from within.

As if he'd vanquished a great evil.

His gaze turned towards the third group. The ones that didn't celebrate, the citizens. The ones whose faces were thin and eyes sunk in with either long sleepless nights or hunger, or both. They remained at the edges of the light, approaching with the utmost wariness, some with fear, others with anticipation. They formed a line, one with Dia,

Kiara, and Sir Whitneye would greet, along a dozen other maidens from the tribe, and the knights.

Rick saw the stunt for what it was: an attempt to show unity.

They would greet the people, give them healing, or food, or both. They would be invited to celebrate with the rest, and the people would only ever approach the food, take whatever they could, and leave. The only humans that approached were those that showed clear signs of some illness or another. The rest remained back, with the children, looking with blank faces or even contempt.

Rick didn't blame them. He'd just shown up out of nowhere and within the span of a handful of hours removed the man who ruled them.

"Monica bring food."

The maiden emerged from the shadows, holding three boar legs and noisily biting down.

Rick snatched pieces, not exactly having much of an appetite. "How do the people of the city smell?"

The feline pondered this for a second. "Hungry, angry, weak."

"Yeah, that sounds about right."

The Lord might have been a cunt, but it didn't seem like he'd been enough of one to alienate most of the city. Rick didn't blame them, the kingdom held beliefs in the sanctity of blood, nobility were special, protectors, beacons for the community. A symbol.

A celebration and some pretty sounds and lights would not convince the city the situation had changed. To them, he might as well just be the new tyrant. Just one that happens to be giving them food.

Worse, he was an unknown. An outsider.

Someone that clearly didn't align with their beliefs or traditions.

Rick lounged there, enjoying the breeze, and mulling over the great many things that needed to be done. The previous tenant hadn't been kind to the place and there were things that needed to be fixed, improvements to be made, and responsibilities to throw at whoever might fulfill them.

Looking at everything from above, he couldn't help but feel surrounded. This fort-like tower was at the very center of the city, a place with nowhere to run.

His thoughts were interrupted when Monica wrapped him into a hug from behind. She said nothing, mewling softly into his ear and rubbing her cheek against his head. The bond glowed with the comfort and safety.

"Rest."

It was half a question, half an order, and half something else. Whatever the case, he couldn't find the energy to refuse. "Not here." He declared.

Monica obliged, taking him through the shadows, emerging away from the party, taking him to an isolated building not too far off. Far enough that it might be easily protected. "Monica tell others." She promised, taking him inside, and leading the way to the main bedroom. It was stuffy, and small, but far more reassuring than the darkness of the room in the fortress.

She left him there for only a minute, and it didn't take long before Dia was there as well. The Rapha didn't ask questions, merely helped him undress and soothed him into the bed, the two maidens lulling him to sleep, never letting go, as if trying to will themselves to enter his dreams.

He woke the next day, late, on an empty bed, and the sound of knocking at the door.

"I brought food." Kiara declared, raising the small wicker basket, plucking a grape from the wooden plate and popping it into her mouth.

"Welcome in." Rick frowned, stepping side and closing the door behind her as they made their way to the only table inside the abandoned house. "Can you even eat normal food? I never saw you eat anything solid while we traveled."

"Though I can survive without it, I enjoy a bite from time to time," she spoke leisurely. "I'm mostly testing for poisons." Her lips curled up at his startled look. "Killing the new Lord before they set roots is the standard of the game. Can't be too careful."

"I'm not a Lord."

"You will find most of the city agrees with you." She replied with a smile. "It's why I'll be sticking around you if neither of the two brutes are available."

He made a face. "Fine." He sat down. "Monica?"

“Your cat caught a feral near the area, and has been hunting for others that might have snuck through.”

“Fucking how?” He threw his hands up in annoyance. “The wall has a massive fuck-off reverse porcupine at the top.”

Kiara shrugged. “The farm was also attacked, but nothing the muscle couldn’t handle. Current priority is to expand it as fast as possible and pluck some of that political sway the fishmongers might hold.”

“Seems you’ve got it all hashed out.” He leaned back into his chair. “Am I even needed here?”

The Succubus tossed one grape, smacking his forehead, making him wince. “Do not think of yourself as useless, little human. Yours is the task that carries a burden no Orc can lift.”

He rubbed at it, picking up the fruit. “Go figure.” He muttered. “As soon as the obvious decision of moving forward isn’t as clear...”

“Exactly.” She dug her nail into the table, carving out a circle on the wood.

Rick paid no mind to the vandalization of the piece of slightly rotten furniture, quietly chewing on the dried fruit. “You’ve done this before, haven’t you?”

Kiara’s hands clenched shut, leaving deep gouges in the wood. “Something like that.” She had replaced the leisure tone with wary apprehension, masked behind a neutral expression. She inspected his expression, loosening up after a second, and returning to destroy the table with her nails with the same ease anyone else would if they were wielding knives. “This was part of our original deal, did you forget? Or are you reconsidering?”

“No, not reconsidering. Just... curious.” He muttered. “It just feels like all of this is more than just wanting to be bonded to me.”

“Only a fool would have believed it was merely for the bond.” She conceded after a second. “But it’s not like what I seek is something physical. It can’t be made or taken. Only found and nourished.” Her golden eyes glimmered, lips curled with that edge of... greed.

“The only other time I’ve ever seen that look was when my ex was looking at jewelry.”

“A jewel fit for a crown.” With a soft laugh, she tapped the table twice, boring holes into the wood each time. “Now, it is time to think, little lord. What is the greatest weakness to your goal?”

Rick leaned back against his chair. “Are you going to give me a lecture if I fail the test?” She just smiled, so he continued. “The greatest weakness is that I want to be left the fuck alone, and that I want everything else to just go smoothly. That means that the greatest weakness is everyone outside the city who wants a piece of me.”

“Mhm.” Kiara didn’t seem to answer, claw dragging along the wooden surface, chipping away. “And what about me?”

“What about you?”

“I’m not an outsider, yet here I am... destroying your table.” She smirked, sinking her sharp nails further into the wood. And with a snap, it broke, shattering, spilling the fruit all over. “Whoops.”

Rick sighed. “You’re saying that a house is only as strong as its foundations.”

“I was just commenting on the sturdiness of the table.” She innocently batted her eyelashes at him, the smugness oozing out of her.

With a flat look, he picked up the fruit and stood. “So what’s eating at this city’s ‘table’?”

“Order. Or the lack of it. Murder, theft, robberies, and the tiny little Lords that think they are owed parts of the city’s gold. It’s not a situation that could be solved with the... bluntness the tribe offers.” She made a gesture to the window as if to make a point. Rick glanced and found one of the ‘guards’ playing some dice with another. “A disciplined bunch they are not.”

“I don’t think there would be an easy way to get them to behave, either.” Rick admitted. “What do you propose?”

“There are some knights left in the city, all supporters of the old man. They might prove useful to prepare a proper militia and policing force. And we can look for new Hunters once this rush relents.” She twirled her fingers. “That said... under the kingdom’s law, they would be your-”

“No.” He cut her off with a snap.

Kiara paused. “That will weaken your position.”

“Then we’ll have to compensate.” He replied. “If I have to shove a bond down a maiden’s throat so they don’t kill me, I might as well just jump out the window and save them the time to plot something.”

With a wide smirk, Kiara plucked up an apple, slicing it with her nails, handing him one half while she bit down on the other. “Exactly so.” She licked her succulent red lips, golden eyes flashing slightly. “I might have an idea or two, to get you something more subtle than the Orcs, but we need something to increase your legitimacy in the people’s eyes.”

Which would make it easier to lock him into the position, Rick hid the grimace, looking out the window and trying to decide whether this was another hole he wanted to dig himself into. “Got any ideas?”

“The Lord had a third cousin working for him as a judge’s scribe. He was married to a maiden called Arietta. The lad is dead, but I’ve heard the maiden is alive. Currently owned by the man who runs the mines.”

That sounded like a giant headache. “It can wait, then.” He declared, standing up and heading for the door.

The sun was shining; the day was fresh, and the eastern breeze only had a minor hint of sulfur. Rick greeted the Orc guards, took ten steps, and stopped. He looked around, then frowned.

“You’re lost, aren’t you?” Kiara grinned.

The Orc guards chuckled.

“I’m going to go to the fortress, someone send a message to Whitneye and Eva to come over.”

Kiara quirked an eyebrow. “What do you plan to do?”

“I want to know how that place generates electricity.” He gestured at the surrounding houses. “Especially when there are no lightbulbs anywhere except inside the fort. And...”

“And?”

“I don’t know, it’s just something that struck me as odd when I was thinking about it.” It was slightly unnerving, looking at the fang that was the fortress. “Out of all the places he could’ve holed in, he did so in the one spot where he didn’t have an easy way out.”

“Warriors don’t run away.”

“And smart warriors don’t let themselves be easily surrounded.” Rick replied at the Orc.

Time to dig into the former Lord’s secrets.

[037] [Steel and Stone]

It was odd to find a metal screw in the middle of the cobblestone plaza.

The tiny metal item just lay there, innocuous, almost invisible. To the Rick of half a year ago, the object would've been ignored, just a bit of trash. Yet he recognized it for the oddity that it was. Wood and stone dominated construction, metal could be found, but rarely due to how expensive it was to make it. The glint caught Rick's attention like a magnet, drawing him to pick it up and look around for the likely source.

There were tiny shards of glass around the area. Looking up, he found the shattered windows of the second uppermost floors in the ivory fortress.

"Ah."

With the tiny mystery solved, he pocketed the screw, and approached the white tower, Kiara quietly following behind, her eyes never leaving the back of his head.

The first thing that caught his attention was the blood. There was a dried pool of it next to the entrance, with a trail leading inside to mark the gruesome fight. Why had no one cleaned the blood? There were maidens that could summon water among the tribe, it shouldn't have been much of a hassle.

But maybe that had been the point.

Its presence marked the end of the Lord and those that supported him.

Rick followed it inside, finding the little spots here and there were splatters would paint the walls. He hadn't had time to take the place the day before, but it was hard to miss the cracked stone and drag marks that were all over. Continuing his way up, he found broken doors, unhinged ones, and rooms that had been thrashed beyond recognition.

He stopped after the second set of stairs, looking at the wall where four deep lines were gouged into the stone wall. The lines trailed up, arching like a rainbow, and then moving down, ending right above a pool of blood. Rick thumbed the claw-mark, each deep enough to fit his thumb.

Monica.

Had this been before or after the roar? “It was a clean kill.” He muttered.

“How are you sure?” Kiara asked, curious.

There wasn't any way he could word it, it was a feeling. Rick mimicked the gesture, tracing the mark, and stopping in the pool of blood. It took him a moment to recognize that the only disruption to the stain was when the corpse had been dragged off. It finally clicked. “They didn't move after they fell.”

The Succubus let out a noncommittal sound, and they continued up the stairs to the workshop.

The room appeared exactly like someone had fought a massive battle within it. Glass, wood, and metal was strewn all over the place, with more blood splattered all over. Rick frowned a little. “Did any of the Mousegirls die?”

“No.” Kiara confirmed. “Mice are good at hiding when there's danger afoot.”

He wanted to say something about that, but just shrugged off the comment, feeling a breeze and finding himself no longer detecting blood or mold, but the salty sea and beached algae.

Looking at the room, Rick expected to feel... something.

He'd nearly died here less than a day ago. All his brain could supply him with was annoyance. The grand mess had ruined a workshop, and it would need to be cleaned up eventually. His eyes gravitated to the window he'd jumped through. Shattered like all the others.

“I doubt whoever saved you yesterday will do it again if you jump now.” Kiara whispered into his ear, making him squirm and step away from the window.

“Well, that would make her a spoilsport.”

Her brown eyes turned gold as she grinned. Ignoring her for a moment, Rick made his way around the room, trying to identify the purpose the workshop had. Some pieces had the telltale curvature of a lightbulb. He met her gaze again.

“Why are you watching me so closely?”

“Someone needs to keep an eye out for your emotions, make sure you stay healthy up here.” She poked the center of his chest. “It wouldn't do to have a Lord that seeks tits and drink to drown their woes.”

“Coming from you, that sounds like a threat.” He scoffed at the Succubus. “Are you going to preach abstinence next?”

She rolled her eyes. “The mice and the leech are here.” She pointed at the door with her thumb.

Not ten seconds later, Eva stepped through the door, walking briskly up to him and looking him over once as if to confirm he was in one piece, then bowed with the stiffness of a soldier saluting their commanding officer. “You called for me, my Lord?”

The Succubus’ snicker left Rick groaning. “Keep the title in your pants. There’s no sense wasting time on it.”

The Fledgling sputtered, her face aimed at the floor. Whatever she was about to say was interrupted by a chorus that erupted from the workshop’s entrance. “My Lord!” Cried out the Mousegirls, hurrying to step through and bowing low to the point their floppy ears nearly touched the floor.

It was becoming increasingly obvious this title was going to get old and fast. “Raise your heads, all of you.” He took a moment, breathed in, and out. “Now, this workshop, what were you doing in it?”

One of the Mousegirls stepped forward. While the Mousegirls had gunmetal blue hair, this one had a distinct metallic gray. “We made lightbulbs, my Lord.” She declared with a voice that was just an octave away from squeaking.

Rick looked down at the debris, then up at her. “Could you walk me through the process?” He pointed at the ruined space. “Imagine everything was working order. The spot I’m standing on, what would you do here?”

She hesitated, glancing left, then right, and back at him. “That... would be where we’d draw the filaments, my Lord. It is the part that glows.”

He nodded. “That’s where you burn some fibers and pass them through a small hole, right? You’d then add graphite and clay?”

The maiden hesitated. “No, my Lord, the bulbs use a very thin murisium coating.”

Murisium? That was the special metal used for the knight’s armor. “Where do you get it?”

The maiden hesitated a little. “I... do, my Lord. I am a Metalmouse.”

Rick was just about to ask her for a demonstration, when he remembered the Polita and their... method, for making the concoctions. He looked her over for a moment and chose against it. Maybe some other time. "Where would you remove the air from the bulb? Or would you fill it with something other than air?"

Eva gave him a funny look, one mimicked by the confused expressions from the maidens. "Remove... the air? My Lord?"

"It slows down the reaction process by making it harder to burn, prolongs its lifespan... how long do the lightbulbs last before needing replacement?"

"A month, my Lord."

That was far more than he expected. Without a vacuum, an incandescent bulb would typically last minutes, not days. He rubbed his chin in thought. "What was the shop's output? How many bulbs would you make in a week?"

"Usually five, my Lord. The components are very brittle and break more often than not."

Rick nodded again, walking over the room as he kept his eyes on the ground, looking over the debris. "And the glass?"

"We would call for the blower once a month, my Lord, though... not after the ferals."

"Is she alive?" Kiara asked.

"Yes, my Lady, it's just that her owner closed his doors and refused further work." The Metalmouse quickly declared.

Another nod, and a pause when he reached a pile of broken furniture that seemed conspicuously bunched up compared to everything else in the room, there were oil stains on the floor, and pieces of ceramic. "And what did you do in this area?"

"That... was where we-."

"There is a truth spell in place." Rick bluffed, his smile thinning.

The maiden swallowed audibly. "The capacitors, my Lord."

"Ah." Another interesting little tidbit. "I guess ceramic would work for that too. You'll have to excuse me, my specialty is in chemistry. But I know a thing or two about engineering." He glanced at the pile for a second. "What is the purpose of the fortress?"

"My Lord?"

“You generate electricity here.” He said, pointing at the shattered incandescent lightbulbs above. “Is it consumed anywhere else?”

The Mousegirl bowed quickly, staring at the floor hard. “We worked following the designs, my Lord, not told what for.”

The deflection didn’t go unnoticed, but Rick let it slide for now. “Eva?”

“I’m only familiar with a handful of ways they could generate this.” She shrugged. “I would need to look at the generator.”

“Shall we?” Kiara offered, latching herself to Rick’s arm and leading the way to the spiral stairs.

There was no blood to mark the way up, yet it felt as if the air was becoming considerably heavier the closer they got. The metal door at the top was also far heavier than any of the door until now. Kiara even pretended to struggle to open it, shooting a mock glare at Rick when he refused to “lend a hand” much to the confusion of the mice.

Stepping through the threshold of the door sent a shiver down his spine.

The room was a labyrinth of metal and gears; the walls adorned with intricate carvings that pulsed with a thundering energy that tingled against Rick’s skin. The ceiling was a vault of copper and brass, the spokes of several room-wide sized gears visible.

The scent of ozone was thick despite the breeze blowing from one of the large open windows.

The floor was a mosaic of iron and steel plates, worn smooth from use. Arcs of electricity danced across the surfaces, crackling and snapping like the sparks of a blacksmith’s forge. In the center of the room stood a monstrosity of a machine, a hulking beast of cogs and levers, its surface alive with two glowing stones.

There was a slot for a third one, empty.

It was a laboratory straight out of a madman’s imagination, fit for being used in a movie-set where the scientist would run its experiments.

Rick whistled appreciatively, carefully following the crackling sounds. There were multiple machines at the sides of the room, giant hamster wheels devoid of their respective hamsters yet still spinning at a leisurely pace.

And it all converged at the center, on the terminal holding the stones.

“This...” Eva spoke with wide eyes, mouth wide. She looked like a child who’d just entered a candy-store and was standing in awe of the marvels just within reach.

But it was Kiara’s reaction that caught Rick’s attention. The maiden had stiffened, her eyes turning into a hard glare as she took a cautious step away from the machine. Something within the bond seethed at the room like an angry snake, ready to lash out in self-defense.

It didn’t go unnoticed that the Mousegirls nervously huddled together and trying to keep their distance from everything.

“Any guesses, ladies?”

“The elemental stones were overcharged recently, and part of the mechanism discharges them safely rather than have the excess explode out.” The Fledgling quickly declared. “This gathered energy and condense it, but for what purpose...”

“There are some maidens that to get to the ultimate step of their genus, they need to gain a great deal of power, far above what they’d normally be able to wield.” Kiara whispered darkly, hands clenching tightly. “Usually, one can only do so through extraordinary events, needing a great deal of training and experience, others attempt to cheat it. No matter how painful.”

It was only when she said this that Rick noticed a feature of the machine that he’d overlooked. A circle right in front of it, cleared of any clutter or objects. And in it, there were foot-thick monstrous manacles.

“The missing rock?” He asked, frowning.

“Most likely what the Lord used in the plaza.” Eva quickly declared. “Breaking any of these would unleash everything it stored in one go.”

Another slow nod, he turned to the mice, to the gray-haired one. “What do you think of this place?”

She shivered, lowering her gaze to the floor. “It is evil, my Lord.” Her proclamation made the others nod quickly.

Rick considered it for a moment, his hand brushed against the bump in his pocket, and he remembered the screw. With an amused sound, he pulled it out to show it to the Metalmouse. “Do you recognize it?”

Her eyes widened, and slowly, she nodded.

“You saved my life yesterday. Would you trade that favor for the destruction of this room?”

“RICK!” Eva said. “You-”

“Yes.” The Mousegirl declared, resolute.

He handed her the little metal trinket. “Then it’s decided.” He turned to Eva. “I want you to dismantle this room as safely as possible. Determine what can be melted down for reuse, and how much help you’ll need.”

“This is insanity,” she said. “This room is a marvel of engineering, and fully usable! We just-”

“You just need to find a maiden to strap there and put through the process.” Rick stepped closer, looking down at her, all color drained from her face, which to her already pale complexion made her look like she was about to become transparent. “What if the one meant to be strapped down was you?”

It was only then that horror dawned upon her, the understanding. The maiden looked around at the room with an expression full of conflicting emotions. “I... it will be done, my Lord.”

With a nod, he pointed at the two stones. “And make sure those get put somewhere safe.”

“What about the... one meant to get strapped down?” Kiara’s question was blurted out, she looked surprised by the act, as if her own lips had betrayed her. The maiden appeared entirely ignorant of her own clenched fists.

“What about her?” Rick shrugged. “For all we know, it was one of the knights and she’s dead now. It doesn’t matter either way.”

The relief was physical, Kiara nodded, unclenching her hands and turning on the spot to leave.

“Eva, you’re in charge of... What’s your name?” He glanced at the Mousegirls.

“Rafaella, my Lord.”

“You’re in charge of Rafaella and her crew. If you need help, ask for it. Look for anyone with metal-working experience since we’re going to reuse the metal for... I guess farming tools and weapons.”

The proclamation made her choke on a sob, looking at the room with the expression of someone who'd been asked to kill a puppy.

“And I want a report of anything you think might be worth saving out of this... this.” A pause, he pondered for a moment. “Oh, and safety is the first rule. I won't be happy with any preventable injuries.” His smile was all teeth and no warmth. “Are we clear?”

Eva stiffened, putting her hand against her shoulder in the kingdom's standard salute. She was all stiffness and discipline, shoving her emotions to the side with practiced ease. The gesture was instantly mimicked by every Mousegirl present.

“Good.”

He followed down the stairs, trailing after the Succubus, and finding her back at the workshop. The maiden was near one window, breathing heavily, staring at the blue sky above. She didn't acknowledge his presence, and just breathed, mind clearly somewhere else entirely.

“Tell me something I don't know.”

“What?”

“Anything,” she said. “Anything at all. Something I don't know.”

Rick pondered, looking up. “The sky is an illusion, and it's possible to reach the moon.”

She closed her eyes. “An illusion?”

“A trick of the light so to speak. Like a rainbow, the reason you can't find the foot of one is because it's a trick of the light. The sky is the same.” He nodded up, pointing at the clouds above. “Some of the sunlight hits the air, and it scatters, turning blue. If you could go up and up and up, eventually the blue would vanish. And it would be no different from night time. Just with the sun hanging above.”

Kiara took a second, closing her eyes. “I knew of the day turning into night. Not it being because of the air. So if you rise high enough...”

“You would suffocate.” He chuckled. “That's why to get to the moon you need special suits that let you breathe. They're these big ugly white sacks that keep the air trapped inside.”

“Like the ones some humans use to dive underwater.” She nodded a bit more empathically, her shoulders eased. “Yes, that... helped.” There was a slow sigh, and a rustling under her dress that could’ve only been made by her wings and tail. “Better.”

“Bad memory?”

Kiara shrugged, looking away. “A drop in the sea.”

“Well, now it’s your turn.” He replied.

“My turn?”

“To tell me something I don’t know. And it needs to be as impressive as the one I gave you.”

“You want to be impressed...” She looked out the window, slowly, turned down at the shadows the sun cast within the room, and used those to orient herself, pointing out in a somewhat eastward direction. “If you could fly, and you headed in that exact direction, you would reach the Golden Sands.”

“I knew that much.” He rolled his eyes. “Yasir comes from there, won’t shut up about it sometimes.”

“And if you do not sway, if you do not change course, and you follow exactly this direction, you will reach the ruins of the City of Glass. It is the only place in the world that has constructions from the age before the maidens. All else has been destroyed, replaced, or built upon.”

“How are you sure?”

Her eyes twinkled, and in that moment he saw it, her, Kiara, for who she was.

What she was.

Not a Succubus, or a maiden, but an ancient being. A creature hundreds of years old that had traveled the land. That had scoured every corner and searched under every rock. A woman that had been gathering inertia for decades, hunting for something.

Suddenly, he felt like the question he should’ve been asking was not of her certainty, but of her cause.

“A jewel for a crown.”

He frowned as that ancient gleam in her eyes became sharp, hungry, predatory, just as dangerous and cunning as Monica's. But one that came with ageless experience, knowledge, eyes that had seen a great deal of things, both wonderful and terrible.

Her lips curled into a smile of perfect pearly teeth, full red lips, and one full of pride, it was almost warm.

Almost.

Then, she caught the look on his face. "Do not give me that look." She scoffed. "Even if it turns out you might fall short of my goal, my next best hope would be whatever offspring you sire."

"That is very creepy." He crossed his arms, shaking his head. "I'd suspected you were a cradle robber, but not by this much."

This time she shot him a hard look. "Be grateful I haven't put you to work as a breeding stallion."

"Too jealous?"

Kiara's hand snapped out, snatching his shirt and pulling him close until they were face to face, noses barely touching. "Jealous of what? A mortal barely-HEY!"

Rick had licked her face, getting shoved away as the Succubus palmed at her own face. Now glaring as he broke into laughter. "Serves you right." He stuck his tongue out. "I have one more question, if you'll humor it."

There was a gentle shrug.

"When the feral Angels showed up, you ran to get help. I thought it was because-."

Kiara just sighed. "There are maidens that possess the power to twist the energy of others. And there are maidens with the power to untwist, to bolster and purify."

Rick frowned, nodding. "Maybe I should find such a maiden to help Dia."

"Know that if you ever do, I will kill them." She spoke the words with the casualness one would comment on the weather, turning to leave. "Now come on, my Lord, we need good old Sir Whitneye to work out this whole militia and guard thing."