
[078] [Rick]

If there was one thing Rick had learned to loathe throughout his years as a teacher, it was the red tape. He would have figured that it being a dinky little village in the middle of what was probably the farthest point from any bureaucracy that the country could offer would mean there would be little need for such a thing.

Apparently, humanity and paperwork were synonyms.

Rick's eyes bore holes into the pile of paper that lay in front of him. A contract. Thirty pages thick, the paper itself was thicker and rougher than what he was used to. It made the whole thing look closer to a book, especially with the flat pieces of wood at either side, using string to bind the pages together.

The fact that it tingled to his touch told him there was also more to it than met the eye. Which made him all the warier to sign without understanding every line of text within.

Thus why he was currently seated in the common room, the only area with electric lighting in the building, a dim orange that did not flicker or wane even as the storm raged outside. It was currently, thankfully, mostly empty of people.

Rick drummed his fingers against the table, glaring at the ink-filled pages. Next to him there was a blank piece of paper he was scribbling notes onto. There were no such things as pens in this tiny village, apparently, so he had to use a cloth-wrapped piece of coal that was making a mess of his hands.

"Don't you find it weird?" Tomas interrupted Rick's inner musings, taking the seat opposite to the teacher's.

"I find many things weird." Rick replied, muttering and writing a few other words. The legalese that was in the contract had more than a few terms he wasn't too clear on.

"I mean, you've seen it, right? It's in English."

"Mhm."

"We're in another world. There're monsters and magic, and they're speaking English and the Baron had a pokeball."

“Pokeball?” A frown followed. His eyes hadn’t left the paper. “Ah, the thing Kat mentioned the Baron is using to keep Monica trapped.” A growl left his lips as his jaw clenched, his brows furrowed. “Yeah, weird shit.”

“But don’t you think that-.”

Rick’s eyes snapped away from the paper, glaring at the young man. “Tomas.” His singular word came out with a growl. “I am currently trying to get Monica back. I do not have the time or mental capacity to start playing guessing games. Do you have anything that could help me process this bullshit faster?”

“You could just sign it. I did.” The young man muttered, dejected. “It’s not like there’s an alternative.”

“Never sign something without reading and understanding it.” Came the harsh reply. “For all I know, this thing says I forfeit any claim to Monica in some convoluted way.”

“Do you really think this will help?”

Rick’s neck tensed, his hand clenched around the piece of coal. “Do we have any other way to do this? I can’t just break into the Baron’s house, find Monica, and fight my way out.”

“You could have your nurse girlfriend lend a hand. Maybe she-.” Tomas rolled his eyes, crossing his arms. The look in his eyes faltered as Rick leveled a glare back at him. “I’m guessing she’s busy then... Ok, I’ll help. What do you need?”

Rick didn’t hesitate to hand him the piece of paper he’d been scribbling on. “I need the definitions for these.”

The young man nodded, looking down at the paper, taking a pause. “Do you know where they keep a dictionary?”

A harsh bark of laughter left the young teacher’s lips. “Apparently, there’s only two in the village. The Baron has one, and the Hunters the other. Neither allow people to take the book, only to show up to look at it, so if I want to use them, I’d have to go on over to where they are at.” A growl. “You know, while we’re in lock-down, trapped in a building because apparently there’s a horde of monsters out there just itching to eat us.”

“Then how should I...?”

“Asking around would be the first option.” Rick shook his head, pausing as he saw Tomas’ look of confusion. “Green uniforms, blue collars.”

“What?”

“Green uniform, blue collars. The Hunters.” An impatient drumming of his fingers against the table. “The only ones that have been able to answer my questions. Black collars don’t know how to read. Green and red are a tossup. Blue collars.”

“Oh, ok.”

“And Tomas?” Rick looked at the young man as he’d been just about ready to rush through the door. “Thanks.”

A firm nod. “Don’t mention it.”

A weary sigh as the no-longer-bespectacled former student hurried off.

“I take it you don’t have a minute to talk?”

The voice startled Rick slightly. His eyes rose from the paper he’d been about to get back to scribbling on. Standing where Tomas had been a minute ago was Victor. The fellow teacher looked ragged, bags under his eyes, hair unkept, his complexion slightly pale. There was a weariness in that gaze that made Rick feel like calling for a nurse rather than start conversation.

Victor had never been a conversationalist, not with Rick, at least. The chemistry teacher scowled, but kept quiet, a little nod that signaled for his companion to take a seat opposite to him. He waited for a heartbeat. “Is it about Alice?”

The older man paused, blinking, then nodded slowly. “Yes.”

Leaning back, the chemistry teacher crossed his arms. “You should probably apologize.”

The man frowned. “You’re saying I’m to blame?”

“I heard the story from her and confirmed with some of the other students. Personally? I don’t really put you on the list of people to blame for what transpired.” Rick quirked a cold brow. He leaned forward, lips thinning. “But it’s clearly eating at you, so either do something, or sit back and do nothing. Again.”

Victor shot to his feet, chair clattering behind him. The man’s eyes blazed as he leaned over the table. A snarl played on his lips. “Do you think this is some sort of joke? You pull the hero and now you’re better than the rest of us!?” His hand swung to throw the book and papers off the table. A clattering sound that very abruptly drew everyone else’s attention.

A quiet spread across the room. The only sound that made it through was the drumming rain outside.

Rick remained seated, not moving an inch as his eyes moved from the tossed book up to Victor's glare. Both teachers kept the glare, one side with a clenched jaw, the other with a cold, unwavering wall of ice.

When Rick moved, Victor jolted backwards, raising his arms, ready to stop any potential attack.

None came, however.

Quietly, the chemistry teacher was the first to break eye contact, moving towards the items that'd been shoved off the table. Without a word, he picked it up, carefully organizing it into a pile and then returning to the table. With purposeful slowness, each item was returned to their original spot. Rick proceeded to flip the contract open back to the page he had been at before his interruption.

No longer paying attention to the glaring man, Rick grasped the piece of coal and placed his focus on the contract. It took Victor several seconds to react to the quiet dismissal. His eyes turned around to stare at the people present.

A heartbeat later, he turned to leave.

The door slammed shut.

Rick waited until the low-tone whispers died down before putting the full of his attention back on the headache at hand. Thoughts of Victor were summarily dismissed.

Quietly, the chemistry teacher thanked that the whole thing had been printed. The letters weren't exactly small, but they were certainly uniform. The issue was the font made his eyes hurt. The letters were sharpened like knives, given needless squiggles, and some not having gotten all the ink it would've needed to get a proper imprint. Or too much.

So, sometimes, it was a tossup on what exact word was being used, which did not combine well with the existence of, apparently, legal terms he had never heard of before. Even the ones not using words that, to him, looked made up.

What the hell did "statutory disconnection" even mean!? Sure, he could infer some meaning through context, but the document appeared to have been made intentionally convoluted.

And that made him even warier of outright signing it.

Rick paid little attention to the sound of the common-room opening again, nor did he really notice how all conversations had quickly come to an abrupt end. He did, however, notice when two figures had put themselves in front of his table, partially blocking out the light.

Holding back from sighing, he raised his eyes towards the third distraction within the past hour.

Whatever he'd been planning to say flew out the window. It was Dia, and she'd brought someone with her.

She was a maiden, if the green uniform and green collar didn't make it clear, the light gray wings on her back sealed the deal. Her uniform looked crisp, far better kept than the others he'd seen. The green had some golden inlays near the cuffs and skirt, a touch of luxury that had been absent in the others Rick had met so far. His brows furrowed ever so slightly as he met her gaze, blue eyes and blond, her skin pale save a touch of redness in her cheeks.

The connection jumped out at him. She'd been the winged one that had fought Monica.

"Sir, this is Lieutenant Helga." The nurse's tone was formal, crisp. "She was in charge of the rescue operation."

It was only really then that Rick noticed that both Helga and Dia had a slightly serious look on their faces, the sort of forced neutrality one would find on a soldier during a formal event.

Helga leaned forward, giving a slight bow. "I never had the opportunity to thank you properly, sir. Your actions during the fight helped avoid needless deaths that day."

"I'm not..." Rick's thoughts were not quite up to speed, looking between the two. So he defaulted towards cordiality. "What do I owe the pleasure to?"

"I told Helga about your current circumstances, and she agreed to aid in expediting the process." Dia's stony expression betrayed only the slightest of cheeky grins twitching at the corner of her lips.

"Yes. I witnessed the events that day and, if needed, I can testify that the feral behaved more like a recently bonded maiden protecting her partner." Helga affirmed, with a far more serious nod. "More importantly, the citizenship process requires testimony under truth-spells, and a psychic evaluation. I am qualified for the testimony part."

“Oh.” With a slight nod, his mind attempting to process the statement, Rick’s gaze lowered to the documentation currently in his hands. “Do you happen to be fluent in legal?”

Not too far away, still looking for help, Tomas sneezed.

[079] [Rick]

Rick sat in the chair, looking over to Helga and trying to figure out whether he should be complaining about the odd feeling that had saturated the room since the start of the... inquiry. The feeling wasn't comfortable, it was a similar sensation to when his limbs fell asleep, a tingling that spread and worsened the more it moved. Except it was happening on every follicle of his body, as if, somehow, the very hairs had been the ones to lose blood-flow. A million tiny car batteries plugged into each tiny hair and giving tiny little jolts that tickled more than hurt, but were not appreciated all the same.

"Is that all?" He wondered, drinking from a cup of water after having recounted the events since showing up in this world.

"Almost, all you would need to do is answer a handful of statements." The maiden nodded. Her blue eyes kept moving from his down to his lips, and sometimes further down still. The seriousness of her expression never faltered, though. He couldn't read what she was thinking. Maybe trying to read his expressions and body-language? "Have you ever, directly or indirectly, either through action or inaction, caused the death of a human?"

Rick hesitated, an image crossed his mind, and grimaced. His hands clenched as a cold dread ran down his back. "Yes."

Helga's brows furrowed. "How many?"

"One." The teacher breathed in, feeling a sudden tightness in his chest. "Charlie."

"The student." She nodded solemnly, leaning forward ever so slightly. "You did your best under the given circumstances, sir."

"Next question? Please?" He asked dryly, feeling the tightness inside his chest not quite going away.

"Have you ever stolen or destroyed anything that would have been considered of high economical or emotional value?"

"No to economic, yes to emotional." Came the response.

"What kind of item?"

"Can I skip the question?" He frowned slightly, turning away.

Helga grimaced a little. "I'm... sorry sir, I can't."

Closing his eyes, he sighed. "It was a... loop of copper." His lips pursed slightly, but he didn't feel anything off. His mind flashed to the little black box that had been left on his night stand.

In a world he'd been told he would never see again.

Yet she was looking at him. There was a hint of concern on her brows. "What was the emotional value?"

"It was symbolic, of a relationship." He squirmed a little in his seat. "Next question?" He pressed harder to move on. The subject still felt sore, certainly not one he wanted to bring up.

Helga nodded. "Have you ever engaged in the destruction, or vandalism, of property that did not belong to you?"

Rick's shoulders relaxed, a slight smile coming to his lips. "Worst I can think of is the time I took my mother's car for a ride and crashed it against a fence post. Way back when I was barely a young teen."

A little nod. The angel relaxed a bit as well. "Have you ever engaged in sexual intercourse with an unwilling human?"

Human. The word left a bitter edge to the sound coming from the lips of someone who was not considered human.

Rick shook his head emphatically. "No, never."

The proclamation caused her lips to tweak upwards a little, a shadow of a smile. "Last question, sir, have you ever been in a relationship with a human female? And if so, do you have children?"

"Yes, I have been in relationships. No kids."

"Plural." Helga blinked.

"Excuse me?"

"Erm..." She shook her head. "Sorry, I was just a little surprised. You said relationshipS, plural. As in having been with multiple human women."

"Not at the same time, but yes, that is correct."

"Huh."

There was something in the way she was looking at him that had a new edge. Her eyes moved up and down his body and Rick quite suddenly felt as if he'd just been stripped naked. Squirming in his seat, he coughed loudly, the sound making her jolt a little. Her cheeks reddened slightly.

“Sorry, that was... unprofessional of me.” Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a little glass cube no larger than Rick's thumb. It had been glowing a pale white. The color shifted to dark blue, and then it became opaque. “There, this will be attached to your documentation. Now the only thing missing for full citizenship would be the psychic evaluation.”

Standing up from the wooden stool, she moved her right hand into her left shoulder, a salute.

“Sure, thanks for the help.” He replied.

“It's the least I could do after your bravery, sir. Besides, the Major would have had my head had his little girl died during her first rescue operation.”

Off in the distance, there was the sound of a pin dropping, louder than the pouring rain from outside.

“Excuse me?”

“I might not have been meant to say that.” Helga let out a weak chuckle, quickly looking her shoulder towards the closed door. “Would you mind keeping that a secret?”

He had several questions, but left it at that, nodding. “That psychic evaluation...?”

“I will make sure it starts promptly, sir.” She nodded rapidly, taking a step back and towards the door. “Have a good day.”

Her wings slightly fluttered behind her as she hurried out of the room.

With her departure, the soft, glowing white light that hung on the ceiling flickered and vanished.

Quite suddenly, Rick found himself in the dark, blinking at the dim orange light that illuminated the corridor and feeling like he wanted to deflate like a popped balloon. This had been exhausting. Whatever the ‘truth detection spell’ was, it had kept him tense the whole way through.

Rick's eyes turned towards the only window in the room. Outside was the middle of the day, but everything was cast in a dull grey light due to the ongoing thunderstorm. There

was just barely enough illumination for Rick to make out the furniture as he stood, trying to get his thoughts in order.

The rain had not stopped, the streets were wet, reflecting the pale light back up, the houses had a calmness about them. Very few windows revealed activity inside. If there was, it was in the darkness of the house interiors. The town felt... empty.

He could see most all chimneys had smoke. He could catch the flicker of movement from people rushing back or forth from a home, but everything was so still. The image of Monica flickered to his mind and his lips pursed. There were a lot of emotions attached to that he wasn't even sure he wanted to process right now.

"You look handsome when you're troubled." The voice was soft. It came with a hand carefully touching his shoulder. Dia's violet eyes caught the light and pooled them inside. "Are you alright, sir? Helga left in a hurry."

"The angel brought up some uncomfortable memories."

"Valkyrie." The nurse spoke the words and immediately flustered. "Angels have a halo and their wings glow."

"You're kidding."

"Nope." Dia giggled. "They're a different genus entirely. An angel can't shift into a Valkyrie. Not that I haven't seen some try." Her hand rubbed against his shoulder softly. "It's going to be ok, sir. I'm sure the Baron will see reason."

"Yeah..." Sighing, he closed his eyes, not wanting to voice his doubts out loud.

He startled when he felt something soft press against his lips. Dia was blushing slightly, holding a finger up to her lips. A little wink and a smile. "You know..." she whispered, her voice hushed, a hand reaching out to caress his arm. "We could continue where we left things off last time. Help take your mind off of things..."

Her eyes darted towards the closed door. When had she done that? Rick felt a slight stir of surprise at not having noticed her when she came inside.

Rick felt his heart a beat as her touch lingered on his wrist. She was warm. Opening his mouth to speak, he felt the world spin.

"What the-!?"

His balance was knocked right from under him, his body slumped backwards. The world spun thrice more.

“|-.”

Dia’s eyes widened in fear and surprise. She reached out with glowing hands, holding him as his body was eased onto the bed. The world spun two more times and things were becoming blurry at the edges. Rick’s eyelids felt so heavy...

“This is...? Irene!” Dia called out, looking over her shoulder, staring around.

Rick was fighting with his eyelids. It was so hard to keep them up. His whole body was becoming so impossibly heavy. The sheets were so comfortable, so warm. Dia’s voice was ringing as she moved, but even that was moving away, Rick could only barely register that he’d been laid on the bed, that he had to fight against the drowsiness...

His eyes couldn’t hold out any longer, they slowly.

The world plunged itself out of existence.

Yet Rick’s consciousness had not gone with it.

“Now,” a voice spoke out from the surrounding darkness. “Let’s start the psychic evaluation.”

[080] [Rick]

Rick stood in the void. There was no darkness. He could see his own body just fine, but that was as far as his senses would allow him to perceive. There was a flat hard surface under his feet, smooth and cool, nothing about it making it any easier to figure out where he was.

And then there was light.

An infinite flat world, devoid of anything save the white floor and white ceiling. Featureless and indistinguishable from one another. Rick looked around, spotting several other people within this white, featureless space. They were too far to identify, though, and before he could move, the white space rippled. Black walls rose from the floor, separating them, forming a box around Rick no less than ten meters across.

A box with no ceiling, walls that were as high as the sky itself. The only trace of an end to the obsidian walls a speck of white off in the infinite above.

“Rick Cross.”

The name came from behind him, forcing the chemistry teacher to turn around and face the woman that was now standing where there had once been empty space. Her face was obscured by a featureless mask, long bright red hair fell around her, pooling on the floor around her ankles. The faceless woman wore a business suit, black with thin white lines running vertically from her heels all the way through her dress pants and blazer. The way the lines shifted made it seem almost as if the suit was not really there and was more a hole to gaze into a dimension of black and white stripes.

“I am here to carry out your psychic evaluation.”

“This feels like a dream.” He wanted to say ‘nightmare’, but held his tongue, feeling his words echo around the room and all the way up.

“It is. I rendered you unconscious and connected to your psyche. It makes this process easier.” The body that was before him was unnatural. It didn’t twitch, it didn’t move. It was so utterly perfectly still it might as well have been a statue.

“What’s the purpose of the evaluation?”

“To determine whether you pose a threat to the kingdom.” The woman replied. “And whether you are apt to own maidens.”

That perked Rick’s attention. He focused on the featureless mask and frowned. “And how do we go about this?”

“It’s not really very hard. You only have to answer one question.”

The world blurred. The figure remained standing as the constant. White and black shifted. The featureless box he’d been standing in turned into a prism of color before it bled through, shapes forming, becoming more defined. Rick’s eyes widened slightly as he saw the trees sprout into focus, the wooden behemoths that were too wide, too tall, mutated, and twisted.

Next came the rain. Falling down on and around him, the light dimming, drowned out through countless droplets. The sky turned gray and opaque, casting shadows that made the trees blur, the shadows under their branches a perfect black, impossible to see through.

“The forest?”

The figure did not answer, nor did it move. It remained firmly in place, silent.

More details poured in, more shapes. A large rectangle of steel and glass knocked on its side. The block gained definition, its shape smoothing out, curves, cracks, bumps. Slowly it morphed, and Rick recognized the wheels, everything else clicking into place as the blob turned into the totaled bus.

His heart skipped a beat, something reaching down to tighten its grip on his chest.

A form emerged from the ground. A featureless brown lump as tall as Rick. The rain washed away the dirt, revealing that someone was standing there. Black hair, blank eyes, pale skin. A trickle of blood ran down his mouth, the expressionless stare turning to stare straight into Rick.

Straight through him.

“Charlie,” he almost choked the word out.

Upon the mention of his name, the thing that had taken the young student’s form let its jaw hang loose, falling open in a cavernous silence. It drew in a breath, a raspy coughing sound that made the bulge at the side of his neck apparent.

A broken spine, Rick felt cold ice punch through his chest, his lungs unable to fill up properly, cold sweat running down his back.

“Why?”

The question came as a whisper, almost inaudible through the pouring rain. The rumble of thunder shook the ground and Rick’s legs felt like they were suddenly about to give out underneath him.

He stumbled a step back.

And the corpse stepped forward.

“Why?”

A howl in the wind, the trees bent, the rain whipping around them and sinking Rick’s feet into the mud.

“I-.” His voice faltered.

“Why?” The corpse took another step, tears falling down his cheeks. “Why did you kill me?”

“I-.”

“You killed my brother.”

Rick whipped his head to the side. There stood a featureless lump, mud washing away to reveal the features of the young woman. It took him a second to recognize her. “May.” He felt the tightness within his chest, air running short.

Stumbling, he pressed his hand against his chest, gasping for breath.

The water was rising, mud sucked at his feet, the next step he took he sank further in.

“Why?” Charlie’s corpse whispered louder, reaching out for Rick.

The only thing he could do was attempt to run. The next step sank him to his knees into the mud. The forest closed in around him, the rain splashing down and drowning out his voice. Short gasping breaths, a tight stabbing pain. His heart hammered against his throat, blocking air.

“Why?”

The corpse leaned down. Rick tried to fight him off, but he was too strong. Cold slimy fingers wrapped around his throat. The man choked for air, body knocked over

backwards into the mud. Rick's fingers clawed against the unyielding grip, head submerging under the mud.

He was sinking. He couldn't breathe.

Thunder streaked across the sky. Rick broke through the surface, gasping for air. His head whipped around, a current dragging him down the river. A whirlpool plunged him under, blackness all around him.

Two more faces appeared from the darkness, their skin pale, their eyes blank. Rick kicked against the water, pushing himself to swim upwards. The surface was so far away.

"Why?" Tomas and Kat's voice spoke in unison, whispers drowned under the current. "Why?"

Rick clenched his eyes shut. No, no, Kat and Tomas were alive. They hadn't died, they hadn't died. His hands grasped at the sides of his head. The currents dragging him further down. His lungs burned, the sound of his heartbeat hammered and deafened everything around him.

THUNK

Gasping for breath, Rick felt his body fall and slam into cold hard ground. Instantly, his eyes moved around. He was in a cave. No, he recognized this cave. A cold shudder ran down his spine. He turned around. The wrinkled face of Mr. Gabriel met him. Unlike the others, his eyes were not empty.

No, there was a boundless fury within them.

The old man stood, taller than Rick, looking down on him with the gaze of a man who had seen the world. "No, they didn't die."

He spoke with a howl that made the wind around them swirl. "But it was thanks to you that they almost did." His step made the ground shake. Rick stumbled backwards. "Your choice almost killed me as well."

"I don't-."

The avatar of wrath that stood before him swung his fist. Pain exploded within Rick's chest. The world blurred as the man felt himself being no more than a rag doll that had been tossed to the other side of the room.

He hit something with his back, the impact breaking his fall. Even then, pain exploded all around him.

“Rick.” Laying on the ground, barely able to move, he opened his eyes and saw a new face. White hair, feline ears, battered and bruised. “Rick?” Monica weakly reached out to him, tears streaking down her cheeks. She stretched her claw towards him, trying to drag her broken body closer. “Rick.” She whispered, even as he could not find the breath to so much as make a sound.

A ghostly hand reached down to the cat. Rick’s eyes widened.

“Monica!” He shouted, watching, helpless, as a heavy iron collar was put around the feline’s neck.

She choked, reaching for the collar, fighting to tear it off. More ghostly hands assaulted her. The feline wailed, weakly kicking and screaming.

“You ruined everything, Rick.” The colossus of wrath loomed over the scenery, blazing eyes boring into Rick’s soul. Its face had turned into a featureless white mask, only two holes to let the searing gaze to focus onto him.

He couldn’t look away from Monica, watching as more pieces of iron were strapped onto her body, her wrists, her ankles. They grew taut, binding her and forcing her to curl into a ball. She couldn’t break free, she couldn’t escape.

“She begged you not to go,” the faceless being spoke.

“Monica!” Rick shouted, watching the ground melt, pulling the feline down into it.

Her eyes met his own, tears running down her cheeks.

“Monica!”

“She could have lived happily without you.”

She uttered a single word before she vanished.

“Why?”

Finding himself able to move again, Rick lunged towards the spot the maiden had occupied a second prior. Fingers helplessly scratched against the stone.

He screamed.

[081] [Rick]

Rick felt himself trapped in a nightmare.

Before him stood the faceless monster of wrath.

At either side of the creature, Monica, Kat, Tomas, Charlie, Mr. Gabriel, and May.

Everything else was dark. Only the eight of them existed within this nightmare.

“You killed me,” Charlie spoke, pale blue lips curled into an emotionless mask. May, next to him, nodded.

“You would’ve gotten us killed too.” Kat, Tomas, and Mr. Gabriel proclaimed.

“You abandoned me,” Monica spoke, iron collar weighing her down, chaining her body into the ground.

The monster of wrath waved its hand, and the figures on either side went silent. Head bowed, he did not speak. His eyes were not focused on those before him but the nightmare that flashed across his thoughts. Lips trembling, he tried to form the words, but his chest tightened. Only a half choke made its way out.

“Do you really think you’re qualified to own Monica?”

The question snapped his attention forward. To look at the source, he found nothing there. He was alone. The world swirled, the void turned into something else. A room with a checkerboard floor. A chandelier hung from overhead, white light shining brilliantly, illuminating the stairs of gold and silver that led elsewhere into the building. But Rick wasn’t paying attention to the architecture. His focus was on the figure near the center.

It would’ve been easy to recognize her, the white hair and cat ears were easy to see. But everything else about her was... different.

Monica stood tall, her body as imposing and powerful as ever. And she was wearing clothes. A light gray uniform, a vest with long sleeves that reached all the way to her elbows where the fur of her claws grew. She wore a long skirt that went all the way to her knees, revealing the powerful fur covered calves and paws she had for feet. The most striking change was in her face, her long hair had been pulled back into a ponytail, her blue-green eyes shining brilliantly.

And on her throat, a green collar.

The young woman paced back and forth, her long white tail lashed back and forth nervously, ears flat against her skull. She eyed the door, twitching as it opened. Her eyes lit up and a half smile formed, but her shoulders slumped when the one to enter was another woman, another maiden. The face of the newcomer was blurred, the scene was focused on Monica.

“You look nervous.” The ghostly presence spoke with a chuckle.

“Of course I am.”

Rick heard himself gasp as he heard her speak, clearly, fluently. His eyes locked on Monica as she wriggled, pacing again, biting her lower lip and eying the main entrance every other second.

“Keep walking in circles and you’ll make a whole.”

The feline bristled. “Shut up.”

A soft click signaled the door opening, and a figure stepped through. It was a man this time. Tall and slim, his features were sharp. The figure carried poise, dominance, control. No sooner had he stepped into the room that both maidens had reacted, moving their right hand to their left shoulder in a salute.

Rick saw as Monica’s tail began to lash in excitement, her ears fully standing at attention and focused on the man that was approaching. Her lips contained a grin. “My Lord.” She spoke, puffing her chest out.

“Monica.” The man nodded in acknowledgment.

The man reached out and caressed the feline’s cheek.

“This is how her life will be.” A voice whispered into Rick’s ear.

He couldn’t look away, seeing Monica lean into the man’s touch. The man smiled.

And Rick’s heart felt as if he’d been stabbed.

“Follow me.” The Lord spoke, turning to go up the stairs.

The feline turned to follow, the lash of her tail accompanied by a bounce in her step. She eyed over to the fellow maiden and they shared a quiet giggle, moving through featureless corridors as the tall thin man remained ahead of both, not looking over her shoulder.

“Isn’t she happy?” The voice softly spoke at Rick’s ear.

The Lord entered a room, a small room, there was something off about it. The room tingled with power, it prickled against Rick’s skin. The space small enough that it felt personal, almost intimate.

There were only two things in the room.

A window with a purple curtain, casting the room in a low purple glow. And a small wooden step near the center, a cushion laying on top. The walls were adorned with depictions of various women kneeling, presenting their naked throats to tall imposing noble figures. In each one, the nobles held in their hands a collar, its coloration varied from one scene to the next, just as the shape of each woman in each scene was different.

“Elise, you first.”

The declaration almost seemed to hit Monica, she winced and pouted, but kept quiet.

“Watch.” The formless voice told Rick, and he felt like he couldn’t look away.

The faceless woman moved to kneel on the step, raising her head and showing the green collar to the noble.

“A green collar means that they have no specific Master or Mistress, practically public property.” The voice told Rick, a hand slowly falling on his shoulder, gripping him, pinning him in place so he could not look away. “Blue means they have found an owner.”

The noble cleared his throat, reaching down to caress the green collar. There was a quiet tension as his fingers tightened around the collar. “I will break your collar.” The noble spoke. “And in doing so, your bond will break.” His eyes bore down onto the kneeling woman. “Are you willing to trust me with your sanity? With your heart, mind, and soul?”

“I do.”

A snap, the collar breaking as if it posed no more resistance than paper. The woman gasped, face tightening and her hands clenching. Closing her eyes, she raised her chin, ready for the next step.

“This is your final chance.” The man spoke. “From this day forward, you will be mine. Do you surrender?”

“I do.”

Behind the kneeling woman, Monica stood, rapt attention and unable to look away. Her face twisted in a mix of a smile and concern, her eyes flickering between the lord and the maiden.

“This...” Rick felt himself falter. “This is an illusion.”

“True. But does it matter?” The voice spoke. “This image of her feels real to you.”

The Lord spoke. “Now and forever.” His hands clasped a blue collar around the maiden’s neck. She shuddered, closing her eyes and smiling. “From hence forth, your name shall be Guinevere.”

“I accept this name.” The woman spoke, trembling. “Master.”

“See how happy she is?” The invisible hand moved Rick’s head to stare at Monica, watching as she stepped forward. Her smile was brilliant enough to flood the room with its light. “Monica will be better off here.”

“No.” His voice shook.

“Yes.” The formless voice replied. “All the fighting and hunting she could wish for. All the education and help she could need.”

“Kneel.” The Lord spoke softly, the feline not needing to so much as wait to comply.

“She’ll be happy here.” The voice caressed Rick’s chest, his heart beat wildly underneath.

The Lord reached out for the green collar around Monica’s neck, she bared it eagerly, thrusting her chest forward.

“No.” His fist clenched.

“What’s the alternative? You? You who sent one of your students to his death?” The voice hissed, Rick felt his strength falter. “You who sent her into a hole to suffer all because she accidentally bonded you?”

“No, I...”

“I will break your collar.” The noble spoke.

“Do you really think you’re someone who should ever be in charge of someone else? Let alone someone who trusted you blindly because of a bond?”

“And in doing so, your bond will break.”

THUMP THUMP THUMP

Rick's fist clenched.

"No, Rick, you're not able to handle this."

"Are you willing to trust me with your sanity? With your heart, mind, and soul?"

The beating turned into a loud ringing.

Monica parted her lips to speak.

"MONICA!"

Rick roared.

The feline's right ear twitched.

"MONICA!"

He screamed again, moving a step ahead but feeling the hands of the formless voice holding him fast, rooting him on the spot.

She blinked.

Confusion appeared on her face, frowning as she looked away from the Lord.

Their eyes met. Her eyes widened, a soft gasp.

"Rick?"

"What the fuck?" The voice gasped.

With the feeling of a rubber band snapping into place, the scene vanished, everything became white, and the hands let go of Rick. The man stumbled forward, almost falling down to the floor. But he had not let go of the hand grasping his shoulder, a vicious snarl on his lips as he swung around, clenched fist. The faceless woman had been standing right there.

And for an instant, her mask held the barest hint of an emotion. Shock.

His fist connected against her jaw, her body crumpled, falling down, the mask shattering into a hundred pieces. A pale red face with orange eyes revealed behind.

"Monica's mine." He snarled, stepping closer to her prone form.

She wiped the blood from her lips. "Make sure to remember that feeling." The strange woman smiled. "You'll need that attitude if you plan to get her back."

With just a blink, he was back in his room.

“You should hurry.” The red woman’s voice whispered in his ear, the tingling sensation vanishing from his mind.

Rick quickly looked around, snapping his head left and right. His body felt like it was waking from a very long nap. Everything was lethargic, slow, barely clicking into place. Was he really back? He sighed in relief.

“Sir?” The voice snapped his attention, Dia had been seated there. The young woman smiled, but frowned right after. “Are you alright?”

“Yes.” He nodded, moving to stand up and almost falling over. He fell ass first back onto the bed. “Ok, maybe in a minute.”

Dia approached, leaning to touch his forehead. Her hand glowed softly and right away the odd mismatching sensations and dizziness vanished. “Please breathe. Psychic intrusion can sometimes leave one disoriented.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Rick replied. “I need to go get Monica, tonight.”

“Oh.” Thunder crackled outside, thunder making the windows rumble. “That... will be complicated, sir.”

“A little storm isn’t going to stop me.”

A loud siren broke through the silence, a long wail that reminded him of the bomb warnings from the war.

“The ferals might pose a bit of a problem, though.” She grimaced.

[082] [Alice]

Alice sat in a small wooden room, it was well illuminated. And really, that was about the most positive thing she could say about it. A light loosely hung from the ceiling, dangling from a piece of what she guessed to be string. The source of the light's power was a mystery to the psychology teacher, but it certainly could not be electricity.

It certainly let her focus on it rather than on to the overcrowded shelves at either side of her, stuffed with papers haphazardly and just about ready to explode in a rain of confetti made out of every scrap of paper that had been shoehorned into its wooden perimeter.

The space available would have been snug had the designed of the room left it devoid of furniture. With the bookshelves and desk, the available free space was quite certainly not enough to hold one person comfortably let alone two.

"You can keep focusing on the lamp, but it's not really stopping the other thoughts."

Alice flinched. "I'm sorry, I'm sure this space is..."

"Cramped? Confined? Constricted? Compacted? Inadequately small?" The black brow was arched in a way that almost appeared permanent upon the maiden's face.

A maiden whose skin was a fire-hydrant red. Not pale white or pink or dark chocolate. Red. It was like watching a walking-talking button just about ready to be poked at from every which direction. Everything about her demanded attention, not just the skin color but also the lack of clothes, naked save for the copper colored collar on her throat.

"Do not worry, I like it like this." The woman spoke with a droll, the two antennae poking out of her forehead twitched. "It makes people uncomfortable, that way they spend less time here." A tilt of her head followed, her pale orange irises turning slightly left of Alice's head, staring into the emptiness behind her. "But the Baroness made a call, so here you are."

"Am I disturbing you?"

"Yes." Irene answered flatly. "I am currently conducting five psychic evaluations to your fellow offworlders, and if I didn't have to talk to you, I would be doing six." She raised her hand. "And before you offer leaving, the Baroness will catch wind and I would get into trouble."

“Then what would.... How could I help?”

“Just ask whatever you came here to ask.”

“I erm...” Keeping her gaze away from the maiden’s naked skin, she managed to focus on the little stubble of black hair that coated Irene’s head. “Why did you shave your head?”

“Because it draws attention to something I can control about my appearance.” The maiden replied, arching an eyebrow. “I can hear no less than eight questions I would rather answer than that one.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because preemptively answering questions freaks humans out.” A smirk. “And yes, I am also naked because it’s something I have control of. That and it makes people nervous. But the reason why has nothing to do with nakedness but what it represents.”

“Why would...?”

“Ferals are naked, almost always anyway. Me being publicly naked makes people think about ferals.” She replied. “Are you ready to ask the other questions yet? I can almost hear the arguments inside that head of yours.”

“How does that work? The telepathy?”

“You are asking me to describe color to a blind person.” She sighed. “It’s like trying to read a book where I can only see some pages and the rest are hidden behind fog. I can guess at what’s in the other pages based on the ones in front of me, but I won’t really know for sure until I turn the page.” A slight shrug. “And people can often sense when I turn the page. Some minds are barely a pamphlet, others a whole encyclopedia.”

Alice’s lip twitched, noticing the dismissive gesture of that seemingly permanently raised brow on Irene’s face.

“And is a person’s capacity for thought split into two systems that operate differently?” She tilted her head. “Where system one is fast and instinctive while system two deliberate but slow?”

And just like that the brow lowered. Irene’s attention focused on Alice in a more abrupt sense. The human had the eerie feeling those orange eyes were staring into parts of her mind she didn’t want seen.

“A professor, I see.” Had she-? “Yes, I turned a page. It’s... strange, I’ve never found so little resistance before, you didn’t even notice it.” Closing her eyes, her antennae twitched, the woman crossing her arms. “The two system hypothesis is very proximate to my personal observations, for humans at least.”

Alice’s back straightened. “And maidens?”

“We are not human.” The response was simple, direct. “We look human, we have certain human features, but we are monster maidens first and foremost. The way we think, the way we feel, it is not human.” A wave of her hand. “The more obvious example would be the feral state. Which works through what I figure you would call a third system. The Curse.”

Alice took a moment to consider that, rubbing her chin. She became quiet, staring at the red-skinned maiden as it was this time Alice’s turn to arch a brow. The question clear even if unspoken.

Huffing, Irene rolled her eyes. “Origin of maidens, myth of creation. It goes that this being, called The Maker, popped in one day. An other-worlder, like you lot. He showed up, saw humans were fucking things up and created the first maidens, six in total. He really juiced them up, made them powerful enough they could level cities. He put them to work helping humanity and went to sleep. At first things were good, they stopped famine and war and sickness. But apparently they weren’t made incorruptible, and they grew hungry for power. So they figured out how to steal the Maker’s ability to make more maidens and got to work”

There was an insipid roll of the eyes that followed, as if she’d heard the story more times than she cared to count.

“Each made their own army, intent on conquering humans. But the Maker woke and saw this. The Curse was unleashed onto maidens for their hubris, rendering them unable to live without humans. If they tried, they’d just go insane, feral.” With a sigh, she made a dismissive gesture with her hand. “There’s more... platitudes and preaching to the original tale, but that’s about the gist of it.”

“And what really happened?”

“As far as the history books and ruins show? There was a war. Big enough no city from the old world was left standing. And there’s little proof of maidens existing before said war.” Irene replied. “Not that there are much details from the time before the war. Mostly because a plague followed after.”

“What does the myths say about the plague?”

“Not much. They call it Red Death and blame an other-worlorder for it.” She shrugged. “It’s what’s baked into the medicine books at least. None of it goes into detail about what exactly the thing did other than kill almost every human. Guess record keeping was tough when nine out of ten people kicked the bucket overnight.” Her hand slapped down on the table. “Anyway, this got a bit derailed. The fact is that the third system exists in the mind of every maiden. Regardless of whether it was put there or there from the beginning.” A snap of the fingers. “Without the bond a maiden’s left just a knot of instincts and fuzzy memories, and if you get a bond, your full cognitive abilities kick in.”

“I take it you called it a third system because it works different from the other two.”

“It is a system tied to a singular person, that is not the maiden herself.”

“The one you bonded?”

“There you go.”

“But...” Alice frowned. “If the third system is what filters cognition...” She tilted her head.

“It means that a maiden’s perception of the world will twist around their bond and the emotion imprinted from it.” Irene had an amused smirk on her lips, her finger tapping at the copper collar on her throat. “But that’s just how it is for us, maidens. We live and die for those we’ve bonded, we’re taught since young how to-.”

Irene’s lips twisted in a grimace, her antenna twitched and curled into themselves. The woman doubled over, eyes shutting tightly and groaned, her whole body shuddering. Alice leaned forward with concern, watching a trickle of blood run out of the maiden’s left nostril.

“Are you...?”

“Just...” Irene raised her hand, keeping the other grasping the side of her head. She tried to stand, toppling over right back onto her chair. “I had not expected someone’s bond to intrude. It caught me off guard.”

“Are you alright?” The teacher hesitated.

“It’s nothing.” Irene leaned back against the chair, sighing heavily, using both hands to cover her face, annoyance flashing through her features. “Just need to-.” She snapped at attention, back eyes widening as her focus shifted towards the back of the room.

“Shit.”

The door flung open with a bang.

“Miss Smith?” Huge peered into the room, eyes barely registering on Irene and focusing on the psychology teacher. He didn’t hesitate, stepping inside, a hand reaching out to her. “We need to go. Right now.”

[083] [Mark]

Mark sat on the ground, his back against one of the dozen or so crates that littered the cave. His eyes lingered on the woman that sat opposite to him. Noah. The once male human was now a mousy maiden, in quite the literal sense.

She was asleep, slumped forward, wrists tied behind her back with metal wire. Her body was devoid of any clothing, left naked by the other two that had beaten her black and blue day in and day out. Now the only trace of the treatment she'd been given being the purple lines that adorned her body.

Mark's focus lingered in the black collar that had been strapped around her neck.

His eyes turned to the side, to the two wardens that kept him trapped and were also his only choice to make it out alive. They were playing a game of cards, hunched over a small box, tossing the cards and throwing insults at one another whenever someone appeared to be taking the lead.

Brye's ear was firmly aimed his way, the vulpine appendage almost rooted in place. And Shery would turn to glance his way from the corner of her eye every other minute or so. They weren't attempting to hide that they were keeping a close eye on him.

Growling, the young man turned his back in their direction, focusing on the mouse instead.

He shuffled forward, the sound making the mouse's ears twitch. She opened her eyes and looked at him, twitching and jumping backwards, her head hit the metal pole that kept her rooted in place. She froze, breathing hard, chest heaving air and wide green eyes. A twitch of her ear, her attention snapped towards the two maidens playing games, then at Mark.

It was like watching someone trying to swim through mud. Slowly, ever so slowly, the focus came to her eyes. "Fuck... you..." She squeaked the words, very slowly making out the sounds with her lips, the snarl faltered.

Sighing, Mark clapped.

The sound made her jump, back of the head banging against the tube again, wincing.

“Hey.” He said, keeping himself just close enough he could reach her, but not enough she could kick him if she started fighting against her restraints again. “Do you want to die?”

The mention of the word caused her body to seize up.

“I’m guessing you don’t want to die.” Mark nodded slightly, frowning. “But you can’t escape. You’re trapped.”

“Fuck... You...” Her eyes shot towards the metal door, closed, locked in place. She turned back to Mark, heaving air quickly, short fast breaths, hyperventilating.

“You’re trapped.” Mark replied. “And you’re losing your mind, you can barely speak. I’ve been out in those woods, with the ferals, and you’re starting to act like one.”

A sharp gasp, the scowl returned. “Fuck....”

“Fuck me, yes, I know.” He nodded. “What’s your name?”

Her eyes widened. The short breaths became gasps, her focus turned to the side, then the other. The maiden began to struggle against the wire, she screeched, squeaking and gasping, ramming her hands against the wire and pulling, legs kicking every which way. It became louder. “You!” She screamed. “You! You! You! Fuck You!”

Unfocused deranged eyes flung side to side, never fixating on any one thing. Gasping for breath, her head slumped to the side, face growing pale as she tried to heave, pulling as much air she could into her lungs.

With a flutter of her eyelids, her eyes shut, head slumping forward.

A sound behind him made Mark turn to see the card game had come to an end. Shery had shot to her feet, appearing to have almost jumped in his direction. Brye had stopped her, grasping the grey woman’s wrist and keeping her there.

The fox did not turn to acknowledge him, but there was a smirk there, playing on her lips.

Grunting, Mark focused back on the mouse, taking the leather water-skin and pouring some water atop the mouse girl’s head. Her short brown hair draped over her face as she jolted awake again.

“Hey.” He said, moving back to sitting in front of her, watching as she looked around. “Do you want to die?”

Her scattered focus returned to him like a laser, eyes wide.

“You’re going feral.” Mark spoke calmly. “You’re losing your mind.” His voice was calm, his attention severe. “You don’t even remember your name. It’s Noah.”

The eyes widened further, a sharp breath, followed by several quick ones. She looked down at herself, eyes widening further. With a grimace, she looked back at Mark, a pained grimace. “F-f-fuck...” She drew a trembling breath. “Y-y-y-you...”

“You’re not going to go anywhere, you can’t do anything.” Mark reached out, patting her foot and watching her recoil, drawing her legs against her chest, curling into a ball as best she could despite her hands tied behind her. “Let’s end this.”

Confusion crossed her face. The confusion came to an end as she saw the thin metal disk that was on his hand. The disk with a ‘5’ inscribed onto its surface. Noah’s expression turned to dread. Her legs kicked against the dirt, kicking and trying to get as much distance as she could, but unable to move so much as an inch.

Hyperventilating, she locked her eyes on the coin the young human was wielding, it didn’t take her long to slump again. Sighing, Mark waited for a minute, quietly looking over the naked woman as she sat there, unconscious once more. He waited, moving to splash her again.

A sharp breath, she woke once more.

“Hey Noah.” He looked into her green panicked eyes. “You’re going feral.” He sat down calmly, meeting her gaze squarely. “We’ve had this talk a couple dozen times already.”

“Fuck-“

“You’re exhausted.” The young man frowned. “You can barely breath, you’ve been struggling against that post for hours. You’re bleeding.” His eyes focused on the mouse. “No one deserves to go like that, losing their sanity.”

He raised the coin, showing it to her.

“Let’s end this, Noah. You won, the bitch didn’t get what she wanted out of you.” He calmly nodded, watching her mirror his gesture. “Would you rather watch yourself go insane? You’re at your limit.”

The words made her lower lip tremble, she nodded. The scowl was clearly an effort for her to maintain, her breath coming in and out in tiny squeaks.

“Do you want to die?”

A sharp breath, the mouse closed her eyes, nodding.

Mark's shoulders slumped, he sighed and nodded in return. "Alright." His grip tightened on the coin, watching it for several long seconds. Was this really what he should do? His gaze turned towards the other two, watching the anger and panic playing in Shery's face while a scowl remained on Brye's.

The fox had her hand clenching her companion's wrist with a white knuckled grip. Both ears had flattened against her skull and she was watching him with a singular burning eye.

He turned back towards the mouse, moving to stand and watching her twitch. "I'm going to approach now." He spoke calmly. "You can keep your eyes closed if you want to. Just don't attack me."

The nod was a quick panicked thing, lips curled tightly and eyes shut.

The young man nodded in turn, taking a step, watching carefully in case she lashed out. She only twitched and tightened further. "This will only take a second, it will all be over soon."

Leaning down, he caressed her cheek, her eyes snapped open, looking up at him with wide eyes.

"Do you trust me?"

Gulping, she took in a sharp breath, and nodded.

A tingle ran through the palm, up his arm, and traversed his body. Mark's grip on the coin faltered as he blinked in surprise. Slowly, his arm pulled back, placing the coin into his pocket.

A hand brushed against his back, a soft breath blowing into his ear. "Give her a name." Brye spoke. "Before the bond finishes settling."

"I don't give a shit." He shrugged his shoulders, prying himself away from her touch. With a grunt, he looked down at the wide-eyed mouse that had not so much as blinked. "Noah." He said, frowning as he looked down at her.

She nodded slowly, the tingling in his arm dying down and focus returning to her eyes.

Slowly, the mouse looked at Mark, then at Brye. Her brows furrowed.

"Fuck."

[084] [Mark]

Getting out of the cave would have felt more like a victory if it weren't at night and if there weren't a metal wire tying him to the mouse named Noah by their hips. The air was damp, mostly due to the light rain. The only light that let him see where he was going a flickering blue flame Brye had summoned, she kept it floating in front of Mark the whole way.

"Boo."

The sound made Mark twitch, but Noah jumped. The diminutive woman leapt a full foot off the ground and latched onto Mark's arm. A moment after, she squeaked, letting go and stepping away, her face turned towards Brye, a seething rage burning within those pale eyes.

"Aw, don't be like that, I'm sure Mark liked you squeezing him like that."

The comment made Noah turn to looked at Mark, anger in full swing.

And just as their eyes met, it sputtered. The flame vanished, her brows smoothed. Noah's shoulders slumped, and she turned away. "Let's just get this over with." The mouse breathed out, defeated.

"You heard that, pet? Give the order."

Mark felt his jaw tighten, catching Noah's hackles rising from the corner of his eye, her whip-like tail lashing once. The mouse was seething in her glare towards Brye. "Let's just get this over with."

Noah glanced over her shoulder in his direction. Gritting her teeth, she nodded, stepping ahead and pointing forward. The wire keeping her tied to Mark grew taut after barely five steps, its tension caused her to slow down enough for him to catch up.

"It's still hard to believe she's the same Noah." Behind the group, Shery walked. She was carrying a wooden crate larger and several times heavier than any one of those present. Yet she was bored, only needing one arm to keep it aloft as if it were no more than an empty cardboard box. It seemed that the hardest part about the task was its size more than anything else. "How much further, mouse?"

The mouse glowered at her, ears twitching. "The clearing, should be close."

“You forget what the good human kept telling us?” Brye laughed. “She’s not Noah, she’s a mousegirl that has Noah’s memories.”

“You’d know about that, wouldn’t you?” the mouse whispered under her breath.

And just like that, Brye appeared in front of the mouse, her hand moved forward, grasping her by the throat. Noah snarled, hands clawing at the arm holding her in place, sharp nails digging into the fox’s flesh. Not that Brye cared, she raised her free hand, black fire enveloping her digits. “Seems you lost your burnt ugly mug, maybe I should fix that.”

“Stop.”

Mark’s singular bark made Noah freeze, her whole body went rigid.

But the word had not been aimed at her, his eyes were on Brye.

“Tch.” Her ear flicked in annoyance, her hand letting go of Noah, the mouse dropping to the ground and coughing.

Green eyes peered at Mark, he frowned, ignoring the gaze and just trying to keep moving. His mind kept running in circles, trying to focus. He was tied to Noah, but that was mostly just to ensure Noah couldn’t run, she was most definitely faster than him. And by the looks of it, she had no trouble seeing in this intense darkness that surrounded them in every direction.

Mark’s eyes kept flickering towards Brye, she was walking ahead. Shery behind.

“We’re here.”

At Noah’s words, the group turned in the direction her finger was pointing. Just a dozen meters to the side or so was a clearing. Just like the mouse had promised. They approached cautiously, eyes peeled for potential threats, but finding nothing at all. They didn’t move to the center of the clearing, since the drizzle would’ve drenched them right away.

Without warming, Noah moved her fingers to her lips. She let out a loud whistling sound. Three short ones, and one long. It had been a sharp retort that pierced through the surrounding forest.

“Now, we wait.” Noah slumped to the ground, sitting on the damp soil without apparent discomfort. She leaned against the tree, closing her eyes.

“Mice and their naps.” Brye chuckled, her hand pushing Mark against the same tree albeit on the opposite side. “Sit, I want a nice comfy chair.”

He remained unmoving, leveling a glare and not moving.

“We’re on the job, no playing.” Shery commented, putting down the crate and using it as a seat.

“It’s just a little playing. Who knows how much longer we’ll get the chance? Mark might make a run for it the instant we stop looking.” The fox’s leg moved swiftly, hand pressing Mark against the tree trunk as she kicked out his feet from underneath him.

He fell ass first, groaning from the pain, and then grunting when the fox straddled his lap. Gold eyes flashed in amusement, her hands draped around his shoulders. Her body pressed against his own, hot, warm, there was something in her scent that tickled at the back of his mind.

“See? Much better.” She cooed, hand patting his head.

Mark didn’t try to shove her off, not only was it impossible for him to struggle against her strength, it would encourage her to do more. He turned to look away, trying his best to ignore as she leaned down to blow a cool teasing breath into his ear and neck. It made him grimace, but he still fought to keep a straight face.

And that appeared to encourage her too, her fluffy black tail lashed back and forth. Her lips moved to kiss his shoulder, hands moving to his chest and gripping his shirt before her touch moved downwards, teasing at the edge of his pants.

“Brye, seriously.” Shery grunted from her box, eyes darting into the surrounding shadows. “Keep your head out of your cunt.”

“Why?” She asked, chuckling. “Our clients like the show after all.” Her head pulled away from Mark, eyes gazing into the darkness. “A product demonstration, if you will.”

The human nearly jumped when several figures emerged from the shadows.

First two, then five, then a dozen.

Maidens, one and all. Monsters that were so approximate to human that for a fraction of a second it had fooled him. But no, his eyes locked on the collars, on the weirdly sharp ears, the weirdly colored hair. Most looked like an elf that had spent too much time under the sun. Tall, thin, lithe and graceful. Each of them a warrior wielding a sword, a bow, or a shield. But there were a handful that were of paler complexion. But such a rule did not apply to the one that walked in front of the group.

It was a woman of coal black skin that felt as if it absorbed the very shadows around her. Her features were fair, beautiful even, there was a thin fragility to her lithe figure. She was almost as thin as Noah, but taller. Unnaturally taller. Her limbs slightly longer than they should have been, her fingers like bones that wrapped around her walking staff with a deathly grip. Clothed in long flowing purple robes, she was the only one from the group that looked one strong breeze away from collapsing like a house of cards.

Her eyes, milky and unfocused, half blind, were still somehow able to lock onto Mark with laser precision.

That gaze bore into him and made every part of his mind scream to shove Brye off and start running. To run fast and as hard as he could. Any thought and consideration to use this client to get rid of his two captors was thrown out the window without a second consideration.

This woman was dangerous, far more dangerous than everything else Mark had ever encountered.

His whole body went rigid, cold sweat running down his skin as she approached.

Brye growled, leaning over him, her body almost a shield. "We have the product, there are more boxes where that came-."

The words died, Brye's body became rigid. Her eyes widened. Her lips moved but not a sound came out. The tall bony figure approached, fingers reaching out to caress the collar on the fox's throat.

She had not stopped looking at Mark, not an instant, not a blink, had she even breathed? "I see."

Those two words chilled Mark's bones.

Slowly, the finger on Brye's throat released its deathly touch, the woman raised the hand above her head. "Take them."

"That..." The fox looked surprised she could speak again. "That isn't how this works."

"Our deal was with the human named Noah. The only human here is clearly not him." The woman's ebony lips parted to show rows of pearly white teeth. "Worry not, you will be our... guests... while we hash out a new deal."

Mark certainly did not like the sound of that.