
[088] [Intentions]

The moment Rick got far enough from Embla's hut, he let out a long and exhausted sigh. He ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head to clear out his thoughts and center himself. Had he seriously thrown the 'date' idea like some conversational smoke bomb?

Everything that had transpired within that "cell" had reeked of Kiara throwing herself on top of a bomb before it caught him in the blast. Trying to figure out where he'd messed up only led him to dead ends. Perhaps it was something the Succubus had picked up through her empathy, or maybe it was some cultural thing, or maybe she'd caught wind of how he'd been attacked last time around.

At this point, he was mostly glad to have removed himself from the situation. The more people called him "Lord" this or "Father" that, the more his mind turned to his world's history. Embla as a whole presented some questions that he'd rather not get pushed into answering. Because he knew it would not be pretty.

"Kiara being allowed control of these negotiations is a risk, my Lord," his shadow spoke up. "She clearly came with some plan in mind."

"Of course she has some goals of her own," he said. "Our concern is getting the Pinielf put down before some other infected feral rush comes our way. If Kiara gets something for herself out of it, then good for her."

Eva emerged from the darkness. She wore a black dress with a knee-length skirt, sporting white and purple highlights. The Vampire looked like she had been plucked from a fantasy role-playing magazine cover. The clothes were clearly meant to be daring compared to the locals, yet highly conservative at the same time. Prominent in her ensemble was the purple necktie, the golden sigil in immaculate display as if everything had been built to highlight that single item.

Sensing his gaze, her red eyes twinkled with approval even though her face remained stony and expressionless. Eva's self-confidence appeared to have bled into a more stoic appearance when in public.

"That should be concerning as well," Dia spoke up next to him; there was intensity in her purple eyes. "Kiara gaining more influence... it would undermine you eventually if it hasn't already."

He didn't dismiss her words outright, trying to take a moment to consider them.

"I don't mind her being a major player in the city." Since they were in public, he also needed to be wary of the wording in his response. No one could ever be sure who was listening in from three streets over. "Just as I don't mind you being in charge of the only organized group of healers here."

Dia had the decency to look bashful, glancing away and scratching her cheek awkwardly. It looked cute.

"What would you have us do, my Lord?" Eva asked, smoothly keeping pace.

Though they were moving as a group, there was something about how Eva moved that just begged all attention to gravitate to her. Rick had a hard time identifying it; in a sense, he felt like she was putting on a performance, stalking her way down the cobblestone like a dancing wolf. It made everyone else look like they were penguins waddling all over.

If not for Dia pinching his arm, he wouldn't have noticed that he was staring. "You're leaking again," the healer pointedly glared at Eva.

This time it was her turn to look bashful. "Oh." The maiden's cheeks took on a hint of red even though her face remained perfectly stoic. She slowed her steps and turned her focus to her hands, twitching her fingers.

"What are you doing?" Rick asked, watching as Eva curled her fingers in short spasms.

"Focus exercise. I'm moving my blood into and out of my digits," her answer came strained, the air about her slowly losing some of that intangible feeling she'd been exuding a moment prior.

"It's not an aura effect," he cocked his head. "I can usually sense those."

"Probably due to your body's extremely low tolerance for elemental energy," Dia provided. "What Eva was doing is different, though I'm not entirely sure in what way." She rolled her eyes. "Monica does it all the time."

"It's intent," the Vampire's face cracked to show the slightest hint of a smile. "Rick's more talented at it than I am."

He didn't take much stock in her words until Dia nodded along. "What?"

"It's that thing you do when you get that air of authority and danger about you," the healer pointed out. Her gaze turned to Eva for a moment. "What's the method?"

"I'm not completely certain yet. It's instinctive in some fashion, but I've yet to fully comprehend it," Eva kept her gaze on her fingers as they continued to twitch erratically. "What's surprising is that Rick's picking up on it."

"Yeah..." Dia nodded along. "Humans are less sensitive to these things. Rick especially."

He was looking between either of them, now frowning. "I feel like I should be offended."

Eva let out a short laugh, turning her attention away from her hand to focus on him.

"Don't be. Your ability to just walk up to the maiden pouring out the most aggression and engage them like nothing's going on is astonishing."

"It's nerve-wracking," Dia quickly corrected, reaching out to grasp his arm.

Rick's face fell a little. "I didn't think there was a specific term for it. Just body language."

The response was a shrug from the other two. "It is exactly that."

"Then the difference is...?"

"The difference is that it's not just our body that reacts to emotions, but also our power," Eva made a gesture at herself. "Little bits of it always leak out; minute flares or changes can betray someone's mood or intentions." She gave him the barest hint of a rueful smile. "What I suspect is happening is that you flare what little energy you have in such a way that it mimics what would've seeped out of someone like Monica, who's really good at controlling her power. To a maiden's instincts, it's as if we're hearing ruffling leaves and thinking 'predator'; it makes our alarm bells go off."

"But it's all just a harmless Lord of Cheese," Dia giggled.

He playfully shoved her off. Not missing a beat, she twirled right back into place before he'd even taken a full step. Rick tried to nudge her off a second time, but she held fast now, leaning against his shoulder. Though her grip was loose, he could feel the iron behind it. Escape would no longer be an option for him.

Resigned, he took a turn toward the city gates. "In the end, Monica didn't show up."

"I haven't seen her since the hunting trip," Eva mused, keeping herself a step behind Rick and slightly to the left. "I think she's testing me, though. I keep sensing her here and there."

He thought back to their conversation. “I think she wants you to try to find her. Otherwise, I doubt you’d sense her at all.”

Her face tightened slightly; her only response was a slight nod of acknowledgment.

Rick couldn’t be sure of her intentions, but he was certain that Monica wouldn’t turn down the opportunity to ‘play hunt’ with someone who could actually make an attempt. If nothing else, it might help them get closer. So far, Monica had only acknowledged Dia as a potential friendship? Rick wouldn’t call it that; it felt more important in some ways. Regardless, it would do her good to have someone else to relate to and befriend.

Speaking of... “I should’ve written a letter to Alice and the others,” he muttered. “Shame whatever gets sent out will get intercepted and read by others if not straight up sabotaged.”

It’s what he’d do, and he doubted anyone capable and willing to block Thorley from putting up a radio tower wouldn’t mess around with his mail if they had the chance.

Eva was the first to answer, adjusting her neckerchief and smoothing it out. “I would recommend contacting the Earl first. You did mention your relationship with him was a positive one?”

In a sense.

“I was his guest for a few weeks.” But back then, things had been different. For one, he’d only been bonded to Monica and Dia. “He was friendly, even went out of his way to try and work around Monica. Unfortunately, that didn’t quite work out.”

“Yes, it resulted in Rick jumping into the middle of the fight to stop her fight with the knight captain. A fight between two Champions,” Dia delivered the blow with a carefully neutral tone.

He could feel both of their silent stares of disappointment bore into the back of his skull.

“Fortunately, things ended on friendly terms.” It was the only real answer he could provide. At the time, it was exactly the right move, and looking back, he’d been somewhat influenced by Monica’s emotions.

The healer scowled at his claim. “Yes. That was after you turned down his offers and chose to move into the city’s feralborn district, and after we were attacked by a Vampire and a Sabertooth.”

The proclamation drew a gasp out of Eva. “I knew you were attacked, but what I hadn’t known was that you’d openly refused hospitality.” Her breath caught; lips drawing thin.

“Not just refuse, but go so far as to follow it with moving into the slum of the very city he rules.” Her tone carried a mix of awe, offense, and reprimand.

“I couldn’t just hit the road, and Monica couldn’t stand living under the same roof as a maiden she saw as an active threat to her position of dominance.” Rick rubbed at his temples. “It was a delicate time. She was still acclimating to civilization, and I’d pushed too hard.”

Dia’s grip on his arm loosened a little, becoming a gentle touch. She didn’t say anything, but the look in her eyes was apologetic. It was easy to see why she’d want to throw an apology into the mix, but he’d rebuffed her before, and she knew he’d do it again. The mistake had been his own; at the time, he’d been the only one who could understand something was wrong.

He’d just lacked the knowledge on how to help Monica. He still wasn’t sure he’d done the right thing back then.

“If your goal is to contact your friends, doing so through the Earl might be the best way,” Eva hurried to move the subject back on track. “Earl Vittchat is well known for having mediated between families to avoid bloodshed. I’m not certain of his relationship with the Thorleys, but they should be under his authority to some degree.”

“Yeah... I guess I’ll start sending letters his way,” Rick nodded. “If the Thorleys intercept and block them, though...”

“It would be seen as an insult to the Earl,” Dia assured.

“But if they win the fight, the consequences would only amount to some loss of face,” Eva warned. “It’s not the sort of thing a noble family would fear. Especially if it’s after a fight they won. The king himself would need to step in at that point, and he wouldn’t make such a move without good reason.”

It was probably because a lot of the nobility alive right now had been born around the rebellion or shortly after it. If anything, it was odd the kingdom had managed to retain peace for this long afterward. With how many battle-hardened nobles and combatants there were all over the place, it felt like it would’ve taken considerable effort to keep them reined in until their graying years.

“Great,” Rick rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Having Aubria as the middle-point toward Balet is a pain. But whatever, we’ll send something that might not warrant tampering, just to get a line set up. Maybe Rollo has some method to sneak stuff through.”

The man was shrewd. The merchant's lack of open shenanigans only made Rick concerned that he might be up to something, though Yasir had insisted he was keeping an eye on the man. He'd check up on the man once the terror of having Monica drop by for a surprise visit wore off.

As they moved past the city gates, Rick turned toward the farms, though his true goal was past them. His approach wasn't exactly inconspicuous, and the Mousegirls tending the fields spotted him and hastily stopped what they were doing. A dozen or so in total, the maidens moved to stand in a row.

One of them stepped forward, marking herself off as the 'voice' of the group.

"Anything to report?" He kept his tone casual, noting the way the maidens chattered with each other in that odd, indecipherable language of theirs.

"The fertilizer the Lord has provided is very effective. Experimental output has increased by half, though the Elf in charge claimed the plants had a weird feeling to them."

"Weird how?"

The girl shook her head, her floppy round ears waving around. "She couldn't explain it."

"Try to get a full report down on paper and send it to the..." The sigh was inward. "And send it to the experimentation Cog."

With a quick nod, they got back to work. Rick's journey continued past the farms, his mind bouncing between the different possible formulas. The nitrate that could be used to blow up a building was also usable in a farm, and his goal was to be thorough in his approach.

"It's weird how you guys farm," Rick muttered to his two companions. "It's hard to imagine having a full harvest every other week. Even if it's a plant that's not meant for this weather."

It explained why "off-season" fruits were available year-round, and how the local cuisine was mostly vegetarian but with a vast array of selections to pick from. Fish was a supplement, while meat was far rarer to obtain than Rick had thought. Having Monica around meant there was always something dead waiting to be cooked, though he suspected the same would have been the case due to his rank.

"What is the goal of using fertilizer?" Eva asked. "I'd imagine greater food production would be valuable. But it's not like we're wanting for it right now. Our stockpiles are filling out nicely."

“It’ll be useful in a pinch. If things go south, it’s better to have half-time over the production. That would let us make better use out of the same space,” he scratched his chin. “Hopefully, it can reveal something else though. I’m curious about how it reacts with that whole ‘tree-death’ thing.”

“Tree... death?”

“You know, that thing where if an Elf grows a tree in a span of a month, the tree and its wood will be rotten by the end of the year,” he waved it off.

“That’s elemental poisoning,” Dia stated. “It’s why poorly grown crops can be hazardous to humans. Elves need to be able to ensure the edible parts have a low concentration.”

“My hope is that fertilizers might help lower the energy needed to grow the plant while keeping the speed. Maybe it’ll allow Elf-grown wood to not rot away so quickly,” Rick nodded. “It’s in the testing phase. As is testing out what happens if you infuse the nitrate with different elemental energies.”

Eva visibly perked up. “Anything of note?”

He chuckled. “Fire energy makes it explode. The question would be whether it’s because the energy itself reacted with it, or if it’s just the heat it creates.”

“Heatless flames are very hard to create without a spell’s structure to assist in the process,” Eva mused out loud. “Even with a spell, it’s not easy. You’d need to... hm...”

Apparently submerged in the conceptual challenge, Rick left her to her own devices as he turned his attention toward the construction efforts past the farms. The massive stretch of land was strewn with labyrinthine trenchworks. It was amazing to consider just how quickly the network was growing. Orcs weren’t considered expert diggers, but they were several times stronger than any human athlete and couldn’t grow tired without massive amounts of work.

A singular Orc could dig a three-meter-deep and eight-meter-long trench in a day. Twice that if it was sunny. The main issue was getting them to do so in the first place. Rick had only managed to convince a handful of Orcs into it. Everyone else lending a hand was from the Cog-Horde and the militia.

Dia’s attention followed his gaze. “Is it meant to disrupt a charge?”

Rick came to a stop near the edge of the nearest trench. It was like standing at the edge of a web dug out of the earth, the area it currently covered being large enough to cover at least a dozen city blocks. “Urtha was explaining to me the other day about how frustrating it is to fight against someone smart.” He glanced at the exposed dirt, knowing

it would eventually have its walls covered in planks of wood. "And something sort of caught my attention, about how smart fighters always try to set things up so that you are put into a dilemma. One where neither option would be good for you, just different kinds of bad." He scratched at his chin. "It got me thinking about warfare in this world. You guys just don't do sieges."

"It hasn't occurred much over the past three centuries, at least as far as I remember reading," Eva acknowledged. "Sieging a modern city is useless if you cannot properly destroy their food production. And ferals only make the endeavor more taxing as they will invariably harass you from the other side. It is simply easier to focus down a weak point to create a breach."

Rick laughed.

"Yeah, Urtha said the same thing." Shaking his head, he glanced at Sinco's walls. "It's just so... weird. Back in my world, castle defenses were so effective that many times it was just easier to starve a city out even if it took months. Here, if the enemy has some earth-controlling Champion, the whole thing would be barely an obstacle."

"It would be if the city didn't enchant its walls against it," Eva's eyes followed his gesture and back to the city. "And Aubria has the most powerful enchanters in the kingdom. Attacking them would be complicated without finding a way around their protections."

That was a startling thought.

"Why in the world would I want to attack them?" He blinked at her in surprise. "Just shattering whatever they send our way should be enough to make the message clear."

Both of his companions shared a look.

Eva cleared her throat, stepping closer, keeping her tone polite if gentle. "You would be in a stronger position to cease aggressions," she pointed out. "Taking over Aubria would give you ample room to negotiate since you could hand it back with stipulations. It would also allow you to take desperately needed resources for Sinco." She gestured at the city. "There is exactly one maiden under your control who knows enchanting, and she is busy building some project she refuses to divulge. If there are any others, they are under Sir Rollo."

"You wouldn't need to force anyone into the work either," Dia stepped up before Rick could make a comment. "Unless the intent is to eradicate the Thorleys entirely, then having them concede enchanters shouldn't be unreasonable. I myself came into possession of Seledo's medicine for a time from negotiations between them and Balet. I

volunteered to be sent to Astunes in the convoy transporting the pieces for their radio tower when the possibility presented itself."

"Trading people like it's some card collection. Awesome," he grumbled, acid dripping from his words as he gave the trenches one last look-over.

Much to his surprise, Eva reached out to grab his arm firmly. "The Lord protects their land and the people therein. It is through this contract that we, the people and the land, belong to our Lord," her gaze was stone cold. "In this way, it is the Lord who defines how the land might better be served, by whom, and in what way. One important method is to have friendly relationships with neighboring nobility." Her grip tightened. "To send a maiden so that she may form part of another noble's seraglio is not trading of goods. It is the most direct way to ensure a representative of your interests occupies a position near a noble's ear, one that allows the maiden, and by extension you, to be heard. These are the foundations of the relationships between nobility; the only tighter bonds would be those of blood and marriage."

"I don't know about nobles, but I do know Kiara being your wife means she's not going anywhere," Dia's words held a calm sternness to them. She clearly wanted to say much more about the subject, but it wasn't something that could be talked about in the open.

What was mildly surprising was that the emotions she was projecting had a touch of sympathy to them. She was avoiding his gaze as she spoke, focused more on her boot pressing down some dirt clump.

The reaction from Eva was distinctly more aggressive, a flare of anger and irritation, but one that she didn't express in any visible way. The only reason why Rick had picked it up at all was thanks to the bond being there.

Seeing the two side by side was a rather peculiar contrast.

"Well, whatever the case, I'm not sending anyone off," he broke the silence, glancing off down to the slope leading into the trenches. Every now and then he'd spot a Mousegirl running down the ramp carrying empty boxes roughly large enough to double as a coffin. "If the time comes to it, then I'll look for volunteers and go from there."

"I might be the most useful asset you have if you desire to gain support from the Bavtha household," Eva declared with a steely gaze that hid well a wavering emotion within. "Their imperial role in manufacturing the bond collars gives them great influence beyond this kingdom's borders."

"Imperial? From the Northern Empire?"

“Just so,” she nodded solemnly.

“Why would the Empire send an entire noble household to this place?”

“There are thirty sworn families that hold the secrets to the bond collars. Due to how dangerous travel is, the Northern Empire deemed it a better option to have production spread out across its member and allied nations,” she grimaced. “It is hard to believe some individuals of these households haven’t been subverted by now. But if it has been the case, it’s been kept secret.”

Since the Vampire standing before him was a member of one such household, Rick guessed this wasn’t the first time either. It probably also meant the empire had measures in place, but he had no plans to find out about them.

“I imagine it’s a very powerful tool to keep members in check. If they get too rowdy, threaten to cut off their supply of bond collars,” he guessed. “Well, whatever the case, it’s none of our concern. I don’t want to get on bad terms with the big players.”

Eva looked away. “And the Bavthas?”

“If the time ever comes when they learn of you and ask of you, then I’ll just tell them no,” he waved off her concerns.

“It’s not like anyone would be insane enough to keep a Vampire near them anyway,” Dia added with a smirk. “If some noble house took you in, you’d be a glorified prisoner, not a representative.”

Rick shot a mock glare at the healer; she stuck her tongue out at him. The tone eased Eva a little, and she nodded ever so slightly, shoulders relaxing as she stepped closer to the ramp and turned to Rick.

“Why did you bring us here?”

His response was to gesture at the trenches. “I’ve tried leading this project, but it’s been chewing into my time a lot more than I thought. There’s too much I don’t know to be able to effectively implement what I want without a blind spot popping up somewhere. I need someone who has a better grasp on what to expect if Aubria ever comes knocking,” his eyes locked on to her. “I was hoping that person would be you.”

Eva hesitated, glancing at the trenches for a moment, then back at him. “Wouldn’t Sir Whitney be best for this? Or Urtha?”

“Whitney’s up to his fantastical mustache with the militia. Urtha’s similarly busy with the tribe. Even if they were free, the Cog Horde listens to you,” he answered without missing a beat. “If you think you can’t do it, then I’ll see what I can find.”

The maiden kept looking at the Mousegirls as they marched into the trenches with the empty boxes. “I’d need to understand what your plans are, my Lord. I don’t think I’d be able to be effective otherwise.”

With a nod, he reached out to grab her hand. “Sure. I think we can squeeze that in while Kiara does her own thing. Let’s take the tour,” he led the trio of them down the ramp. “Now, to understand where this idea is coming from, I’ll have to go over what little I know about warfare in my world...”

[089] [Risks (Kiara)]

Kiara stepped out of the bath, allowing the dampness to cling to her skin as she floated her way into her room. All around the house, the pets were hurrying about with a citric anxiousness about them, a mix of concern and enthusiasm as they prepared for the Lord's visit. They dressed conservatively under their Lady's instruction, foregoing the typical nakedness. Kiara made a mental note to recruit someone who might help elevate her pets' sense of style.

Eli was waiting for her in her room; a quiet command got the Hound to begin helping Kiara fit into her dress. No words were shared; the young maiden moved with purpose, suppressing fruity curiosity.

"I don't believe Rick will come here tonight," Kiara answered the unspoken question. "But do keep an ear out all the same."

"Of course, my Lady." Eli bowed, hiding a twinge of disappointment as she bowed.

Kiara would've addressed those concerns, but her thoughts were focused on the 'date.'

The prospect of it would've been alluring under different circumstances. Getting the human wrapped around her finger would've been ideal... but the bond granted him a measure of empathic sensitivity, and that made things tricky. With her most moody bouts since her recovery, avoiding the man had been the best way to prevent souring the relationship.

But now he'd called for her.

As Eli tightened the lace of her dress, Kiara turned her powers inwards. The energy coursing through her body whined in complaint like a poked bruise. Carefully, so as not to deteriorate her recovery, she pushed herself to feel flushed and warm. She let out a soft sigh, leaning closer into her pet's touch.

"My Lady?"

"Pay it no mind," she said right after, slipping into the uncomfortable slippers and turning to leave. She could sense the human had come, and the preparations were the best she could hope for given the current circumstances.

Rick was waiting for her at the abode's entrance. He was surrounded by the hungry looks of the pets. There was an unspoken invitation lingering in the air, but the human appeared too nervous to appreciate the flavor.

He wore simple black clothes. They were carefully tailored to his form, fitting him in a stylish, if simple, way. The lack of decorations or flourish, save a single golden symbol on his left breast, reminded Kiara of the styles worn in the Azure seas.

"You look presentable," she greeted, approaching without touching the ground. There would be plenty of walking outside. "Is it a special occasion?"

"I'd say you look better." He politely avoided the question, stepping closer and offering a hand.

She took a moment too long to take it, the gesture a conscious display rather than an immediate response. She kept the smile and turned to the door, feet back on the ground, leading the way out.

The cool breeze greeted them.

"I've sent out a scouting team to verify some of the information from the prisoner. They should be back by tomorrow at the latest," Kiara took the lead. "According to her, the Pinielf can either be with the little band of misfits or in the grove. Hopefully, she's not in the latter."

His response was an affirmative sound, moving fast to keep up with her pace.

"The misfits are mostly Dark Elves; there's some sob story about the kingdom deeming them undesirables because of their participation in the rebellion. It's no wonder they haven't gotten too far; the breed specializes in disruption," she continued. "The real threat is in the grove, though. There are feral Golden Elves guarding the place; we'd be at a severe disadvantage if we were to attack head-on."

The Pinielf was in the grove; the arrows that had been meant to deliver that message had been imbued with a mix of ephemeral and plant energies. It was hard to believe Dark Elves could have been the source of that. But they could hope it wasn't the case.

"We're preparing to head out once we've confirmed where to hit them," she pushed forward. "I'll be bringing along some humans to—"

"If we're going to kill that bitch, it's best we head out with overwhelming force and hit hard," he cut her off, digging his heels in enough to slow them down. "I'm guessing the prisoner would be coming along, yeah?"

“She wants to seek out her human and extract him from harm; little else. She’s lost her cause.” A rebel without a rebellion was also prime material. But Rick being there would cut down her possible avenues of approach, doubly so if he brought along the other meddlesome brats. “You’d make for an easy target. There’s no point in your presence that far away from the safety Sinco presents.”

She squared her shoulders, thoughts focused on her bond’s desire for her human’s safety, projecting that emotion out without trying to be obvious about it.

“Seeing how the more powerful maidens in the city might be going, I don’t see the safety of staying here.”

Was he just being intentionally obtuse or hard-headed? Kiara’s scowl deepened. “You would send Monica?”

“You’d go, right?”

His rhetorical question caught her off guard. Kiara answered it all the same. “I can keep myself safe just fine.” They were still in the city, she quickly added. “I trust my guards.”

“You’re weakened, accompanied by a maiden that’s not on our team; she’s a champion in her own right, going into enemy territory,” he shrugged. “Either we all go, or we send someone else. I’m not blatantly putting you at risk.”

That wouldn’t do. Having him around would be a wedge in her plan. He’d be at risk, that was true, and his presence would undoubtedly put everyone on edge. “Sinco would not look kindly on you leaving alongside most of its military assets. Someone needs to stay behind.”

“That could be you, you know,” Rick raised a skeptical eyebrow, gripping her arm and tugging her in a different direction than the one she’d been taking. “As my beloved wife, staying in the city would be beneficial, and it could be seen as a surefire sign that I’m not leaving for good.”

She stumbled a step, her glare deepening. “You’re changing goals. You said you’d leave if I did.”

With a chuckle, he shrugged nonchalantly. The pulling became more insistent. “Let’s drop the subject for now; we won’t know for sure until the scouts get back, right? If we prepare for a large expedition but it turns out we only need a small one, then we just don’t send everyone.”

“A trip’s preparations aren’t so simple to undo!” Her complaint went unheard as Rick kept guiding both of them somewhere.

Kiara didn't fight him on that; shelving the topic for the time being suited her just fine. The discussion would more easily go her way if she recruited the healer's voice into this; there was no way she wouldn't loudly push for Rick to stay in Sinco. The cat would probably interfere; Kiara was mostly certain she was busy with something and didn't want interruptions. Similarly, the leech lacked enough control over her powers to be able to handle herself against a serious threat.

It just didn't make sense that he'd now push for this.

While she churned through these thoughts, Rick had successfully led them to the beach. To be precise, right next to the large, ugly wooden building he called a laboratory. The usual pungent scent that lingered over the place like some shroud wasn't there, leaving behind only the scent of the sea.

"Why are we here?"

"Just a sec, and I'll show you." He hurried to unlock the main doors; there was a small wooden box waiting for him lying on the floor. Carrying it under his arm, he locked the door back and proceeded further to the beach. "I asked the area to be cleared out."

"Hm?"

Following along, Kiara turned her senses outward. There was nothing nearby she could pick out, though that didn't mean much. The cat was good enough at hiding her presence; she could be right in Rick's shadow and Kiara wouldn't be able to tell. And although the leech hadn't mastered her abilities yet, vampires were equally capable of naturally hiding themselves.

"You even made the mice leave?"

"One day off for every three of work," he answered with frustration.

"That's a considerable amount of time off." Kiara had met more hard-working nobles. It was hard to think Rick would push for this.

"They need to spend at least half a day for every rest day taking Rollo's 'free classes'." Rick was bemused. "Whether that time is spent as work hours or free time is up to them. So far, most of them do it during their free time. I think they're just not used to it."

She pondered this for a moment. "Is this amount of free time usual in your world?"

"More or less," he nodded.

She watched him come to a halt at the edge of the pier and put down the box. "And what of everyday necessities? Do they not consume much of your time?"

"In what way?"

"If your shirt tears, who mends it?" she asked. "If you need a new shirt, who weaves it?"

"Shirts are dirt cheap. We can get one for less than it costs to have a decent lunch. And if things break, then there are people who work on fixing them."

Kiara's frown deepened. "I keep forgetting how many people live in your world." She considered this for a moment, trying to imagine the scale. "Indeed, if there are enough of you in one place, then someone could make a living solely out of mending the clothes of others."

"Not just clothes, but also tools, even parts of your home."

Kiara couldn't quite fathom why anyone wouldn't learn how to mend their own clothes or their own home. "It's a very strong degree of reliance on one another." More so than she'd expected, seeing how fierce Rick tended to be towards authority.

"It's the effectiveness of scale," he said. "I remember one of my fellow teachers bringing up how humans from a couple thousand years ago were no less smart than we are now. It's just that society as a whole had not built up as much of a foundation."

"It is hard to fathom the life of another from before maidens existed." Her gaze turned to the sea. The waves tinkled under the flickers of moonlight that filtered through the clouds. "I never bothered to look into it much, but there's no shortage of mythology. Many a human-led kingdom makes promises of cities of gold with towers that could touch the sky, of machines that could do the work of a thousand maidens in half the time, and of magics powerful enough to control the weather."

"Any of it true?"

Kiara chuckled, shaking her head. "Very little remains of that past. What little is known for certain is that there were plenty more humans than there are now, and that their cities had a large amount of metals."

"Doesn't sound too different from the place I come from," he muttered.

"It's a vague enough description that just about all otherworlders think that," she corrected. "If you were to search for answers and details, you'd eventually find the discrepancies. Otherworlders are rare, but not so rare that there aren't records. Many of them have sought the secrets of the past, hoping to find a way back."

“And?”

“And if they’ve found such a thing, it was never revealed,” she shook her head, looking over his shoulder as he appeared to be fiddling around with the contents of the box. “Those that failed did leave notes behind, woes and cries of failure, long and winded texts despairing at the injustice that their assumptions were not reality.” Kiara grinned with some amusement. “One went so far as to put a curse on the bloodline of their assistant, thinking them responsible for their delusions. It is said that they and all their descendants were born deaf and blind.”

Rick visibly shuddered. “That seems harsh.”

“It’s also just a story, meant to scare the gullible.”

Kiara sat down at the edge of the pier, looking over at his work. There were some vials and sticks. The wind was blowing the wrong way for her to catch the scent, but seeing how Rick had positioned himself slightly downwind from her, she guessed it was intentional.

“Why did you ask me on this little outing?” she wondered. “I’ve been looking into your emotions; I fail to find anything that would explain this effort you’re putting up.”

Rick stopped for a moment to meet her gaze. “I know you see this as some sort of business arrangement.”

“With benefits,” Kiara added with a hint of amusement. “Not that you’ve taken to it the way I anticipated.” At his look of confusion, she huffed. “I am a succubus. Never have I found someone who’d agree to bond with me and not take liberties.” She made a gesture at her body. “My form should be just about the most enticing thing you could ever desire; a succubus’s body changes to meet the tastes of those they bond with.”

“You didn’t seem that eager about it,” he spoke carefully.

“I am a succubus,” was her response. Seeing his blank expression, she pushed on. “I feed on sex, lust, and energy. In my natural state, I am irresistible. Strangers have run to me just so they could sate themselves against my body, and even at my lowest point, I would’ve found it enjoyable to some degree.”

Rick’s emotions drew inward, a flash of caution hiding itself behind steely black eyes. He kept looking at her carefully. “Are you trying to say—”

Kiara’s jaw set. “You cannot rape a succubus, Rick; we are never unwilling. Ever. Sex is when we are at our most powerful. It is when we are the most in control.”

He averted his gaze, looking down at the box even though his hands weren't moving. "I guess it's another one of those maiden things, huh." There was a bitterness lingering in his words, but one that was quickly swept away. "To me, it just felt like most of the time you were just barely tolerating us. That you were putting up with everything just to see it through."

She didn't curse, but the words nearly escaped her lips. Of course, he'd been aware of what she'd felt, apparently from the very start. This time she looked back at the sea, trying to focus her emotions on something true, but that might distract from the full truth. "I am old, Rick. Have you not felt like the younger bratty children are something you need to tolerate sometimes? Even when you cannot feel the connection you might form with a fellow of your own age?"

"So I'm a brat."

Kiara nodded along with some amusement. "A very interesting brat, but yes." She lifted her eyes to the cloudy sky. "To you, the stars in the sky might feel like something novel and new. But I have seen them enough to know them like the back of my hand." She let out a long-winded sigh. "From the jade-laden palace and its succulent gardens to the boats of ever-ice, I have been to many places and seen many things. There are very few wonders in this world that I've yet to experience."

Turning to give him a rueful grin, she leaned back a little.

"It is a miracle that I found someone as novel as you in such a remote place."

An honest compliment, one that got the desired effect. Rick flustered slightly, chuckling and scratching his chin as he turned back down to his box. "I was hoping I'd have something new for you here."

"Hm... that is yet to be seen." She made a point to caress the purple neckerchief she'd put on whenever going out in public. "This dye, as marvelous as it is, already existed in this world."

"Har har, rub it in, why don't you. I bet you never dressed entirely in purple before."

Kiara didn't answer; he was right, of course, but she preferred his frustration right now.

Rather than retort, he handed her the box. In it were a few vials and a piece of paper that had instructions.

"I bet you've never seen this before either."

Rick puffed up a little at that.

“It is certainly the first time I’ve seen this box. Though not the first box I’ve ever seen,” she teased back, pretending to be bored about the whole matter, resisting the urge to check the content of the paper. “What is it, little human, that has you this eager?”

“It’s as close an approximation to epoxy as I can currently manage.”

The simplicity of his response and the lack of further explanation were his attempt to jab back at her. Kiara didn’t mind, pretending to be offended and putting up a glare that had no teeth.

“If you follow the instructions and mix the contents of the vials in the right order, it will create a clear, thick liquid that will eventually harden.”

“That... is an odd gift,” she raised an amused brow. “Whatever would you give it to me for?”

Rick hesitated, scratching his cheek. “It’s useful for preserving things. It’s effectively a protective coating that can be as thick as you want it to be. I won’t claim it’ll last forever, but the stuff is close to preserving something in amber.”

Kiara’s breath caught in her throat. She found herself now looking at the box again, this time reading through the instructions. There were details on how to create more of it herself if she ever had the need for it. The process wasn’t simple, not by any measure, but it was easy to spot that Rick had put it together in such a way that it shouldn’t be impossible so long as she recruited a few maidens to assist her.

Her eyes turned back to him, looking into his, trying to find something, though not entirely sure what she wanted to see there.

“Why would you give this to me?” Her voice felt smaller than a moment ago.

He smirked. “I thought a granny like you might appreciate it.”

Kiara couldn’t find the words to properly answer that.

Rather than allow the moment to linger and the awkward silence to stretch out, she closed her eyes and softly closed the box. Her fingers brushed over the rough surface. “There are enchantments that help preserve things. But even the best enchanter cannot create something that will last more than a handful of years without proper maintenance.” But they were enchantments that cost fortunes, maintenance efforts that became a vortex sucking up immeasurable amounts of gold. She opened her eyes to give him a plastered, amused grin. “I’m afraid this is not as new as you thought it might be.”

He wasn't offended, shrugging off her little jab, the smirk still in place. "Well, if this wasn't special enough, I guess we can still just walk around, and pretend to be saying interesting empty things. Some laughing, some teasing, and I somehow end up getting ambushed by your 'pets' again."

She chuckled, shaking her head. "That might have been my original intention, but I think I'm not in the mood for it."

Rick arched a skeptical brow at her.

Kiara pushed down the waver within herself as she couldn't find herself able to meet his eyes. She focused on pretending that she was looking out to sea instead. Something had changed, and the thought of what it might be put a knot in her stomach.

"Woe is me, forsaken by my wife." He laughed, his voice carrying a lilt in the air.

For the longest moment she remained quiet, enough so that Rick's amusement turned into concern.

The knot in her stomach tightened. "The message on the arrows was meant for me." She spoke, eyes fixed into the infinite, anywhere but him. "If it proves to be true... then it's an offer I can't refuse."

His silence became a mountain on her shoulders. The crashing waves might as well have not existed at all, Kiara's ears pricked at how suddenly aware and focused she was on Rick's every breath. Her hands tightened into fists, waiting for him to explode, to realize she'd intended to carry through even if it potentially meant selling him off.

To end this and chase her away.

"I see." It was a neutral answer, infuriatingly devoid of inflection, or had she picked a hint of concern from him? "I was the one that ascended Eva. We used the bond to pull it off."

Kiara's head snapped to him, eyes wide.

"You're..." Her voice wavered, she took in a breath to calm it down. "You're trying to coerce me into turning the Pinielf down."

"I am, I want her dead." His gaze held an edge of coldness to it. "And I think neither of us want to be put into a position where we need to decide between our goals and each other."

She bit the inside of her cheek, thoughts blitzing through. She needn't concern herself with whether he was telling the truth or not. Rick's resolution had enough steel to it,

she'd ask again when she set up a truth detection spell, and it was clear he'd answer. Her concerns were the Pinielf.

"I don't care if she lives, only what she knows." She finally conceded.

"So long as it's not a trade meant to be in exchange for her survival." His tone held no room for rebuttals.

Kiara nodded. "I can work with that."

With a sigh, Rick relaxed again, combing his hair through his fingers. "Great, then we'll prepare to head out together."

Another quick nod, though she chewed the inside of her cheek. "That would let you keep an eye on me. It's reasonable." This was the time for concessions.

"No." He shook his head. "I'm doing it for myself."

Whatever he was thinking about, he didn't elaborate.

Seeing the resolution in his gaze, Kiara dared not ask.