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## [086] [Matchmaker]

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Rick sat on his wooden stool, the “Lord slaying” stool. The room was large, but he felt stuffy and just about ready to get some fresh air. More than anything, he was wondering what he was missing from the picture. Before him there was an Orc, a human, and a Mousegirl. Behind him stood Kiara and Urtha. At his left and at a respectful distance away was Arietta; mirroring her position was Sheel to his right.

He was, effectively, in the eye of the storm. Everyone in the room was trying to direct their arguments his way, but kept throwing words against each other. It was clear the people here had already taken sides on the matter.

“As a proven warrior, she has every right to pick amongst the unmarried,” Sheel spoke calmly, arms crossed.

“No human can be forced into marriage, not legally,” Arietta replied, a chilly icicle of a maiden, her posture exactly the same. “Didn’t the tribe pass laws permitting divorce?”

“Laws that permit a marriage to be reviewed,” Urtha muttered. “There have been no rulings on the formation of a marriage bond.”

That had been a nightmare. The tribe was set up as a sort of military institution. The leader might be able to dictate what to do, but customs and traditions were something else entirely. Typically the Orcs would be the only voices that would be heard, but Rick had dissolved some of that by allowing the humans to unionize. This was what had allowed the concept of divorce to be even brought up.

The current iteration was that two Orcs and two humans, both randomly chosen, would get to vote on whether someone’s marriage was acceptable. It would’ve been impossible if Urtha hadn’t volunteered to be a permanent fifth member and tie-breaker of the “jury.”

“Not yet,” Kiara happily reminded the room, earning glares from the two Orcs and the Hobgoblin.

“Even if they married and it were reviewed, his sole companion is incapable of battle.” Sheel’s gaze moved to the Mousegirl, the maiden shrinking as she kept her spot in front of the human. “And Veris has committed no faults.”

“She dragged me out of my home!” The young man spoke up.

Rick rubbed at the bridge of his nose, trying to bring himself to bother to remember the guy's name and failing.

"It was proof you're poorly defended," Urtha snorted.

"Perhaps you should stay in your family's home until this is resolved?" Arietta offered.

The man growled. "I am all that is left." His hand waved at the Mousegirl. "She is my aunt, the only thing that was left. I don't have enough to get another!" His voice rose, eyes flicking to Rick, the heat in his tone vanished as their gazes met. The man wavered, lowering his eyes to the stool he sat on, and then to the floor. "Not like there are options left," he petulantly added.

Right, because Rick had effectively bought every "available" maiden and refused to put them up for sale. The maidens themselves didn't seem put off by this since being bonded to the Lord was seen as a boon. The rest of the city on the other hand... It was something they were still working on, trying to figure out how to get the ball rolling.

"Have you considered that bonding to the little warrior might change your fortune?" Kiara threw in the metaphorical rope, leaning closer.

The young man's lips thinned, shooting a glare at the Orc. "If I took her in, I'd lose my home as well."

Rick leaned forward, propping his elbows against his knees. The move immediately silenced the room; everyone's gaze turned to him. "Could you elaborate on that?"

"I can barely keep us fed," He gestured at the Mousegirls. "I have no coin to give."

Cocking his head slightly, Rick arched a brow. "And if you did? It shouldn't be hard. Sinco's coffers weren't infinite or extensive, but they weren't meager either. Thorley had been hoarding for a while now... most likely a war-fund."

The man tensed. It was the Mousegirl that stepped forward. "My Lord," she said in a squeak, lowering to her knees.

A moment of silence followed. Rick felt a nudge on his back, from Kiara most likely. He nearly sighed, having forgotten that protocol. "Yes? Speak." Property could not speak to a noble without permission. He'd tried to get people to move past that, but that was as much culture as it had once been law.

"I am of the Cog-Horde," she spoke hastily. "The master owns a mill, but not enough maidens to make it work. I do what I can, but it is not enough. I would need four other sisters at least."

There was no real mystery as to why they could afford having four Mousegirls but couldn't sustain having one Orc. The problem was ownership. The tribal maiden was "free," thus any work she carried out for someone was work she'd seek compensation for. Even the tribe's work as the city's military force was being properly paid. Not enough in Rick's view, but more than the tribe thought fair. For the Orcs, to be a warrior was just natural. They'd get whatever food they might need from the tribe, and would put their life at risk without a second thought. The only place where money played a role was when they needed to barter with others not of the tribe.

When the local economy was built around slavery, mom-and-pop businesses couldn't sustain an employee. That was something only Rollo's deep pockets could afford.

"My Lord, if I may?" Kiara leaned closer, pulling out a medallion and pretending to fiddle with it for a moment. Rick couldn't spot the motions for the spell, but felt the tingling of its effects as her voice became private to only him. "Neither he nor his girl want the Orc in their life," she whispered. "The only reason why coin is brought up is because they fear refusing her outright. In their eyes, she would kill them outright," she spoke with a boorish tone. "It is why the mouse brings up the name of her group."

Rick looked over his shoulder at the Succubus' flat expression. She was bothered by something but had gotten far better at hiding it behind apathy. Now wasn't the time for that, however.

The spell ended, and Urtha was glaring at Kiara.

"Just an explanation about context," Rick waved off.

His mind was on the Mousegirl's words. If the horde had been mentioned, then it put him in somewhat of a bind. Much how the Orcs had a near monopoly on the military power of the city, the Mousegirls held a lot of sway within the city's functions. A simple example was how quickly crime began to drop after Rafaella bonded him. Overnight, the number of reports on who had done what had shot up, all of them involving an eerie amount of details.

Rick wasn't sure what they would make of this case when it reached their ears, but his impression of them had been that their in-group mentality was tighter than even the tribe's. At the same time, he couldn't just ignore the woman's attempt to push him into a decision. Rick agreed that the guy should've been perfectly able to say "no." That didn't mean he would let people just name-drop factions to get him on their side.

"Am I right in assuming this matter would be dropped if his refusal was accompanied by proof that his aunt can keep him safe?"

His question might as well have been a claim that he was about to sprout wings and fly. Everyone in the room just looked at him with wide eyes.

Urtha was the first to recover enough to speak. "It... would be acceptable grounds for refusal, Father."

With a nod, he turned his attention to the young Orc. "Do you accept that the requirements to keep a human safe are not the same as being a warrior?"

Her only response was a quick nod. "Yes, Father. That much is clear." She glanced at the Mousegirl for a moment, lips thinning as she turned back to him. "And... I know of your ways. I would only ask if this is one of the changes you have promised, or a trick."

Rick blinked a little, ignoring the swell in pride from Urtha next to him. His Orcish partner kept from smugly looking his way even though she very much felt like she wanted to. She was pushing the feeling through the bond, in fact.

"It is no trick, only fact." He took a deep breath, pointing at Urtha with his thumb. "Do you remember the weapons she wielded during the fight? The explosive capabilities it had?"

"It is hard to forget, Father." The maiden stood straighter. "She used it to defeat the Champion."

"I've been producing enough explosives that about a third of the city could have one such single-use explosive spear." Rick kept his expression neutral, even if he wanted to shoot Urtha a smug grin of his own. "Would you say she holds the potential to defend her human if she were to wield such a weapon?"

The pregnant pause that followed had all three tribe members sharing looks amongst one another. He was only bonded to Urtha though, but the nervousness was palpable in the air.

"Are you saying you would share the weapon, Father?" Sheel's tone was cautious, not as nervous as Urtha looked though.

"The day may come where the people in the city might be able to make their own." Hopefully not if he had any say on it. The last thing the city needed was that the average lethality was pushed upwards. A small fire or accident would turn not just a house but entire sections of the city to rubble. "Some of the concepts the tribe ran on cannot work. The balance was held because Orcs were the only thing standing between the ferals and their humans. Here we have walls and bombs."

His eyes moved back to the subjects. The young Orc appeared like she'd swallowed a bitter pill. The human looked like he wanted to cheer. The Mousegirl was the only one

that appeared ready to bolt. Most likely because she understood she might be asked to make a demonstration.

“I... acknowledge the truth in your words, Father.” The warrior straightened out, lifting her chin. “I am ready for your judgment.”

“As am I,” The man quickly added, lowering to his knee.

With a nod, he glanced at the young Orc. “You two are to temporarily bond, and you will lend a hand in the mill a minimum of eight hours every week. This is to last a month. Anything after that point would be under the condition that all parties agree to the extension.”

There were no complaints. All three of them grimaced at the proclamation, none looking pleased about it. Rick didn't bother to pretend he expected them to be ecstatic about it, though. With a gesture, the trio were dismissed.

The moment they were across the door, he turned to Urtha.

“This is a test,” she said to him, not a question.

Another shrug. “I've done what I could to give her the chance; it's up to her to succeed. Best case scenario, they find out they work great together.”

“Now that's done and over, I'll be off.”

Kiara didn't wait a moment to walk off, taking one of the side-entrances.

As soon as she did, Arietta approached with a piece of parchment. “A transcript of the trial, my Lord.”

Rick gave it a quick look over, suppressing the urge to ask how she'd pulled it off. It hadn't been in person; she'd been standing stock still the whole time. Now that he thought about it, her breed was called a Puppeteer... maybe there was some sort of doll somewhere she could use to write?

“Thanks.” He noted she was hovering nearby, looking at him expectantly. “That'll be all; you've been a great help today as well.”

With a bow, she turned to leave.

That left him with Sheel and Urtha.

“I’ll tell the girl about the nature of this test,” The Hobgoblin muttered, scratching her chin. “This thought about those weapons in everyone’s hands... it pushes things, Father, I hope you know that.”

“The way I see it, we have two options moving forward,” He sighed. “These young warriors don’t know how to get a partner that isn’t through the old ways. Option one is we help them learn new ways.”

Urtha growled. “And option two?”

“People start getting hurt,” He shrugged. “The militia will start training on how to wield the explosives sooner than later. I can only imagine that it’ll be a matter of time before someone smuggles the stuff to anyone willing to pay.” His smile turned sanguine. “Like some disgruntled Mousegirl looking to replace their competition’s pillow with a bomb.”

Sheel’s eyes widened. “You think they...?”

“I know it’s what I would do if pushed into a corner.” He looked at Urtha. “It’s the sort of worst-case scenario I’d rather avoid. I’m working on proper, strict inventory management guidelines. But that just covers one side of things. I think you should be a teacher to those girls, show them some of the options to move ahead.”

She was startled. “What? Why me?”

“Because you and him started off on all the bad footing.” Sheel didn’t look too pleased, combing her fiery hair through her fingers, sparks dancing against her touch. “We’ll need Spikes.”

“Dia?” Rick cocked his head.

“She’s the only tribe member that knows how city-folk think. At least the only one of us the others respect.” She made a point to shoot him a cold stare. “This change can’t be just the tribe. We can adapt, but it cannot be a one-sided effort.”

Nodding slightly, he could see her point. He didn’t like it either, but it wasn’t as if he could just snap his fingers and make the slave aspects of the culture vanish. And getting those parts off the table was crucial. He needed a well-educated workforce if he wanted to push the technology forward.

It would’ve been so much easier to just throw around some laws and rules and use the militia to coerce them into place. But that would just make it likelier the tribe would react just as strongly. There was a metaphorical line in the sand, and he couldn’t just march right over it.

“Sure, I’ll-”

The room’s doors opened. A haggard-looking maiden panted her way inside. “My Lord!” She fell to her knees the instant she was through the door. “We received a message.”

“Message? From Aubria?”

The Doggirl shook her head wildly. “From the forest.”

She reached from her flank, laying a short spear in front of her. The stick was oddly shaped, nearly twice the thickness of his thumb, and about as long as he was tall. Urtha was the one to snatch it, inspecting it thrice over before turning to show it to Rick for inspection.

There were words carved onto the shaft.

“*I know of the dark ascension?*” Rick read out loud as he took a closer look at the weapon. On closer inspection, the thing looked like a disproportionately massive arrow. The wood tingled to the touch; clearly, there was elemental energy still lingering within.

“There were dozens of them, littering the area between the forest and Sinco.” The Doggirl reported. “We’re still looking for the culprit, but it seems they left.”

“It seems they wanted to make sure the message reached its target.” Sheel’s expression tightened. “But who?”

Rick shook his head. “Whatever the case, this means our prisoner doesn’t get any more time to think things through.” He grumbled. “Time to get Embla to betray her friends.”

That was not a conversation he was looking forward to.

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Sheel: A Hobgoblin, eldest maiden of the tribe. She is one of Urtha’s closest friends and advisors. Her powers lean into creating fire, but her specialty is in enchanting wood so that it gains explosive properties.

Arietta: One of Mister Rollo’s most trusted maidens, she was once owned and married to a man meant to become a judge in Sinco. Her partner passed during the feral rush. As a Puppeteer, she has mild mind-reading capabilities, but specializes in using dolls to communicate information around the city.

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## [087] [Musings (Kiara)]

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Leaving the sham trial, Kiara walked across the city slowly. Today she was focusing on garnering some softer support for the cause, visiting little shops and splurging just enough to look generous. She engaged in pleasant conversation, asked about friends, family, neighbors, and gossip if there was any to be had.

Her human spent most of his time locked away from the broader population, working on this or that. Most of his effort went into working on his projects, some of it on the maidens closest to him. The times he'd face the public were rare, so it fell onto Kiara's shoulders to present him as a man working himself to the bone to help rebuild the city.

It was she who sought out the milder negative voices and soothed their woes.

"Of course the Lord wouldn't rebel against the kingdom," she whispered, softly grasping the wrinkled human's hand gingerly. "His concerns lie with how the Darktons abused this wonderful city. They were squeezing the very life out of it, just to get more coin."

The man's face flushed lightly as he nodded, and Kiara soon moved on to the next source of mild dissidence.

"The slave wars were terrible. Our Lord might be an otherworlder, but he knows of its cruelty," she smiled softly, pulling up her sleeve just enough to reveal the hint of a fake scar. "I was fortunate he found me. A wildling nearly took my life at the time."

And on she went, pleasantries shared. Kiara threw in a small show of generosity by buying some crudely made shoes before navigating in search of the next target.

"I can see your daughter wearing the imperial purple. It is a gift; it is a show of my husband's commitment." A soft touch here, a gentle hum there, the maiden's jealousy relaxed, and her husband's affection turned more closely to appreciation. "But I will not lie, if you wished to leave, the Lord wouldn't stop you. No doubt those pieces of fabric will be more than enough to buy you a new start elsewhere."

Few, if any, would follow through on that. There were no available maidens that could offer the muscle to keep a family protected. The day would come when outsiders would change that, and at that time Rick's purple cloth would allow rumors to spread far and wide. It was necessary work, but a tedious one. This would be so much easier if Rick allowed her to use her powers. His concerns of potential rebellion would be gone



forever. This small city would be easy pickings; any attempt to coalesce opposition would only have their leadership subverted by Kiara in quick order.

Instead, she had to pretend she cared about the mortal's petty concerns. It was easy to navigate these waters; they were the same shallow ponds that one could find anywhere, no matter the time or culture.

Not everything was as smooth as she would've wanted, however. There was one particular problem that needled Kiara no matter how much she tried to distract herself.

She was used to failure, having lived as long as she had made failure an inevitability. Everything would fail given enough time. Most times, the failure would occur within the span of a mortal's life; a few times, it would take longer. But it had been a long time since failure had appeared in this form, this quickly.

Or this loudly.

The bloodsucker was fighting to keep control over her power. It blared out like a horn that was out of tune, loud and grating against Kiara's neck and tail. The little leech was locked inside the ugly rock the city called a fortress, trying to pretend she was discreet in her experiments and bumbling training.

But the proclamation was deafening: After denying Kiara, she'd found a way to ascend into a Vampire on her own. The situation wasn't unsalvageable; it would be decades before the leech posed a serious threat to her. Things would be smoothed over by then, and unless there was some catastrophe, Kiara's power base would be too solid.

The problem was that the ascension shouldn't have happened.

Kiara had checked; the hold her power had lingering in the damnable blood-fetishist should not have been enough to spark the ascension. It was something she'd kept an eye on precisely because the cat was a potential rich source of elemental shadows.

The fact that the bloodsucker appeared to have deeper energy reserves than usual was the crowning jewel to the annoyance. It made the blaring horn of her failure ring for most of the day and night. If only she still had the Wolf-Spider silk mantles with her, she would've been able to block herself from sensing this from nearly across the city.

The constant reminders left her mind stewing on the question of how such a thing had been possible to begin with. Kiara could easily imagine Monica had been involved; there was no other source of elemental shadow in the city short of draining every Hound dry. But anything past that point was guesswork. Kiara's leading idea was that the previous

Lord had kept a Vampire captive somewhere, and the leech had found them. But it was a theory full of holes.

If there was one assurance, it was that Rick had been involved... somehow.

“Maybe I’m rusty.”

Taking a break from the house visits, Kiara made a rather un-Lady-like gesture and sat near the plaza, watching the people mill about. Those that noticed her presence would make a quick curtsy and mumble “my Lady” before moving on. The Succubus kept her thoughts elsewhere. The more she thought about it, the clearer it was these problems were emerging out of the limitations Rick had imposed in their initial deal.

It wasn’t like she couldn’t break the deal, but the point was to earn the mortal’s trust.

Leaning back to look at the cloudy sky, Kiara couldn’t help but draw a line from her internally wounded state to her sullenness. Every time she was hurt, it took longer to come back to her full strength; these moods just left her thoughts leading to her goal: ascension. After all, this was the closest she’d ever been to achieving it. Maybe it’d take a generation or three, but it was so close she could almost taste it.

Once she became a Dark Queen...

Kiara shook the thought off before she ruminated any longer. Something had stirred the city; it hadn’t been large enough to warrant her attention, but she’d been sinking too deep into her thoughts and needed an outlet. She pulled out a whistle from her dress, giving it a soft blow, then followed it with two others. To her ears, it barely registered, but there were a few Mousegirls nearby that flinched.

After a few minutes, Eli emerged out of the shadows around the corner.

“What is the news?”

“The wildlings shot some arrows with a message written in it, my Lady,” Eli reported, bowing her head in deference. Her energy had a mild bored taste to it. “The Lord appears to be preparing to visit the prisoner. Guarded, this time.”

“Did he not call for me?”

“He has not.”

Kiara’s brows creased ever so slightly. Was there a reason for his continued refusal to let her interact with the prisoner? His insistence on her not using her powers was

concerning. At first, she thought it to be some cultural morality, maybe religious, but it was becoming clearer he might have intended it to keep her in check.

“Lead the way.”

The command was clear, and Eli’s momentary hesitation turned into a servile nod. The Hound took point and moved through the city with Kiara in tow.

“There’s no rush,” Eli said in an attempt to break the silence. “He is still waiting for Monica.”

“Of course he is.” Kiara ignored the lemony taste of concern from the Hound. Her pets were loyal, but they needn’t worry over her own emotional state. Having them distracted with irrelevant things wouldn’t help anyone. “What did the wildings send, by the way?”

“I know of the dark ascension.” She didn’t look particularly invested in the statement.

Kiara’s steps slowed. “Anything off about the arrows?”

“They were as tall as I am, and there was some residual energy on them.”

Eyes widening ever so slightly, she came to a complete stop. “Bring me one. Preferably one that hasn’t come into contact with someone else’s powers or enchantments.”

Catching the urgency in Kiara’s tone, Eli bowed quickly. “Of course, my Lady.” And vanished into the shadows.

Kiara headed straight towards the tiny hut where they kept the Malumari. Her steps were hurried, every footfall bringing certainty to her destination. There would be a very short amount of time before Rick got here, and she wasn’t about to waste it.

There were a couple of Orcs and mice keeping guard over the wooden hut, the quaint little structure plastered in that gap between the city and the wall. The guards saw her coming, and moved to put themselves in the way. Kiara didn’t bother to slow down, pooling her power into her hands.

“You either let me through or you’ll wake up in each other’s arms in a day or two,” Kiara spoke loudly before they got close enough to start the fight.

The Orcs tensed, unsure whether they were allowed to escalate.

The mice bolted, probably to warn Rick about this.

“Last warning,” she growled. “The Father will not fault you for stepping aside. He knows what I am capable of.”

The greenskins hesitated, then stepped aside. Kiara dispersed the energy and moved past them, opening the door to the room where the Malumari resided. Without wasting any time, Kiara closed the door and began to cast a silence spell to wrap the room.

The dark-skinned maiden was hiding her flavor, an expert control over her power that put her comfortably into the position of being a Champion in every right. Just a glance left Kiara rather certain that fighting her would leave her at a disadvantage, at least not without figuring out a way around those defenses.

“You’re the Succubus.” The maiden sat at the edge of the poor excuse for a bed. “I was wondering when he’d send you.”

“He’s been trying to keep me away. I respected that.”

“Something’s changed.”

“The Pinielf.” Kiara checked one more time to ensure the ‘prisoner’ wasn’t using her power to poke holes through the privacy spell. “Was she a High Elf?”

Pale brows knit together. “Does it matter?”

“A High Elf loses their agelessness if they ascend into a Pinielf,” was the answer. “I thought her some runaway sage from the Pirate Queen’s domain, but if she was a formerly sleeping High Elf... it changes things.”

A part of her hoped the answer would be a denial, that this was no maiden woken from her infinite slumber. But it was impossible to miss the way the maiden before her tensed. She might be talented in hiding her energy and tucking it away, but her expression was an open book.

“You managed to awaken her with one of the otherworlders that came with Rick.”

More silence. The Malumari kept studying Kiara’s expression, trying to peer straight into her skull. “How old are you?”

The question caught Kiara off guard; she frowned. “I’m older than this blotch of a kingdom that’s been tucked away in a forgotten corner of the world.”

“Is it true, then? That the Northern Empire is at war?” Embla gripped her knees. “That their hold wanes? Barry came to us under odd circumstances. Messengers from Conclave had found him on their way to us. They sought to establish trade for collars. They brought news of these things.”

“Conclave.” She rolled her eyes at the name. “They’re an isolated bunch. They live in the wildlands, the ferals and mountains their only real protection against conquest. It is true the Northern Empire is showing cracks, but it is not the sort of weakness that would bear fruit within your lifespan.” She shrugged. “Perhaps in a century or so it will finally splinter. It will depend on how the Emperor dies and who inherits what.”

The maiden caught on to that. “But it will fall.”

“Eventually, yes. And whatever comes next will fall too. As will what comes after that.” Kiara cocked her head. “The Endless Greens, first of its kind, led by ageless maidens, once covered most of the known world, and it too fell.”

Something changed in the maiden’s demeanor. She lowered her face to stare at the floorboards of the hut. “That is who we sought to awaken.” The words were heavy with remorse, the posture tense in every way. “That is who sleeps in the grove deep within the forest. The Empress of Green.”

Kiara knew well of that particular figure even if it had been well before she'd been born.

If one were to believe the tales and myths, the Empress of Green was one of the original maidens, born out of the Creator's own hand. A maiden that had once ruled all that the sun touched, whose forests and jungles bowed to her every whim, whose presence could be felt from the other side of the world.

It was a tale chock-full of exaggerations and mysticism. Nothing too unexpected when the current Northern Empire had gone to such lengths to erase her existence from history alongside every other maiden of importance. Kiara was also certain the Empress of Green was the reason why every two-bit maiden slapped the title onto themselves when given the opportunity.

“You don't say?”

As far as she was concerned, it was impossible that this was the literal Empress of old. The records were scarce, but she'd stumbled onto her fair share claiming the Elf Queen in question had been assassinated. The ensuing infighting only hastened its eventual collapse.

None of the texts had made mention of Succubi or their ilk among those holding power, so her interest in this portion of history had remained brief.

“She can't be allowed to awaken.” The Malumari spoke with fervor. “I'd kill her, but that would be impossible. The grove is too well protected.”

Protected? Kiara cocked her head at this proclamation. Perhaps this particular grove had some former figure of importance. If the message in the arrow was to be trusted, then there could be information there she would want.

Something in her periphery twinged, and she knew their time was almost up.

“Whatever deal you plan to strike with Rick, insist that I must come alongside you.” She gave the young Champion a pleasant smile.

“And what if I do?”

“Then I will tell you of the wider world, of the places where maidens walk as people and not as property.” It was a simple enough thing, not like she was asking the girl to do much.

“You will teach me some aberration manipulation as well. I can sense your technique is not one I am familiar with.” This maiden was desperate for something to cling to, and tall tales of faraway truths always were a good source of inspiration. Indeed, the girl was tempted by the offer, nodding along as she considered it. “And the Pinielf dies, no matter the cost.”

Kiara reached out to take her hand. “Reasonable.” So long as it was the Malumari’s life and not her own, she wasn’t about to put a stop to a martyr looking for a pyre to jump into.

The door opened, and Kiara tightened her grip to prolong the shake. She basked in the looks she got from Urtha and Rick, in how the Orc oozed spicy confrontation and how the human was all fizzy and bubbly shock. She took the time to enjoy the taste before letting go. “It is a deal, then.”

She turned around to meet her human’s gaze firmly, wondering how he’d react. Suspicion? Anger? Fear? Maybe disappointment?

His shock turned to confusion as he glanced from Embla to Kiara, expression impossible to read, but emotions glowing with deep concentration. “You got her to agree to help, then?”

Kiara’s right brow twitched; was he pretending this was according to some pre-established plan? Fine, she’d play along. “She’ll lead the way. Only the details need hashing out.” She ignored the mild tomato anger out of the prisoner, turning her focus to her human. There was none of the expected emotions out of him; in fact, she detected some... relief?

“I appreciate you doing this.”

The declaration was simple, direct, and Kiara did not sense a shred of dishonesty.

She kept from showing any surprise. "Of course. We're partners, right?" At her rhetorical question, there was the barest flicker of shame from him, and its mere existence baffled her. "You owe me one." She quickly blurted out.

Shooting her a grin, he nodded. "It's a date. Tonight?"

The green giant had kept looking between the two, trying to pick up on what she'd missed. For once, Kiara felt sympathy for the brute; she wasn't too sure what was going on either. This whole interaction had not gone as it should have.

"... sure..." she agreed, if only to keep the silence from stretching indefinitely. Kiara watched Rick turn and leave without another moment of hesitation.

All three maidens remained in place, watching the empty doorway where the human had stood a moment prior.

"I thought it was just me." The prisoner spoke with some form of vindication and amusement. "That man seems to make the world lose its balance."

Kiara begrudgingly agreed.

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Embla: A Malumari, daughter of the Warlock Dagmar. She was the unofficial strong-arm of the rebel group, and its most powerful asset on the field. Her specialty lies in her physical capabilities combined with her power to disrupt an enemy's elemental energy.