
[117] [Tentative Handshake]

Waking up took a hot minute.

The sensation was familiar, that of feeling like shit.

He could almost taste the elemental overdose, but the warmth and relief slowly spreading through his body to replace the aches was a welcome change. It was the other familiar sensation he'd grown accustomed to: Dia's healing.

"Hey," he muttered as the Rapha's stern face was the first thing he saw upon opening his eyes. "Please tell me we won." He gripped her hand, and her features softened.

"We did... mostly," she whispered. "The monster is dead."

"Oh thank fuck," Rick laughed, it came out as a wet cough. It was like a ball of anger within him had been released, a driving force that had been pushing at him from the back of his mind ever since the attack on Sinco.

Right.

"Are we back or...?"

"Not quite," Dia grimaced, her expression slightly apologetic as she leaned away to look at someone else.

A maiden armored in pale-blue murisium, with every inch of the gear etched in the telltale signs of enchantments. Normally, recognizing who it was would've been impossible, with the helmet being exactly the same as every other knight of the kingdom. But there was just something about Captain Deneva that always felt more dangerous than anyone else.

"Captain." he moved to sit up, but Dia's hands firmly kept him lying down as she quietly kept working on him. "I get the distinct impression you're not happy to see me."

Even through the closed helmet, he could feel her lips curl.

"You are bonded to a Charmer."

“And that’s a very bad thing to be accused of,” Rick played it off calmly. He might be in the presence of someone using truth detection, but he’d be damned if he wasn’t going to spin this a thousand ways around.

“Do you know the threat they pose?” Deneva asked calmly. “Kingdoms torn from the inside at the hands of Charmers who beguiled nobles into ruin. Armies turning on one another at the behest of a Charmer’s lies. Cities burnt to the ground from their plots.” Her tone was even; she didn’t so much as twitch or move, yet there was a heaviness to her voice. “It matters not if you think she has spared you or works for you. Ageless Charmers like a Succubus wait decades before springing their traps.”

Rick squirmed internally. Of course Deneva would push on this, she’d seen Kiara back in Balet. As far as Rick knew, it’d been a brief encounter, but one the Captain was unlikely to forget. If she was bringing this up now, then she must have caught a whiff of the Succubus.

Still, the way she spoke, it felt like she was keeping her tone purely informative, as if trying to give him the opportunity to speak up. She spoke emphatically, not poised to attack him or his own. The presence she gave off held not a hint of hostility, even with the sheer power it held. Maybe it was out of concern that even the act of reaching for her blade could set off a bloodbath, one her knights would lose. Although, maybe it was something else.

No, it was definitely something else, but he couldn’t fathom what it might be.

“Captain, do you possess the necessary skills to detect a Charmer’s work?” Eva asked, emerging from the shadows next to Monica and slightly behind her, clearly not wanting to place herself somewhere easy to reach as she stared at the armored knight evenly. “Have you been trained to look for the signs?”

The armored maiden tensed slightly. “I have.”

“Would you be open to inspecting the forces Lord Rick brought for any proof of Charmer influence?” Dia had caught on quickly. “I would also extend this to searching for signs of Vampire influence. We’ve kept Eva in a strict line and she’s not allowed any to drink of her blood, but it would do well for you to verify and lay any possible suspicions to rest.”

“I would be obliged to do so,” the gritting of teeth was almost audible, even as she did not move from her spot.

Rick looked around; he wasn’t in the heart of the grove anymore, he’d been moved out and currently sat on one of the massive branches leading up to it. He was surrounded by

the tribe, the knights, and... Dark Elves? That felt like a question for later, especially when Embla was nowhere to be seen.

Kiara was back at the grove. He could sense her through the bond, too far to hear the conversation, and, more importantly, too far to be within easy reach of the captain.

And yet, he had the very distinct impression that the spot captain Deneva was occupying currently was strategically crucial. Rick had no knowledge of maiden combat, not enough to really make the call, but if he were betting, then it would be that the Swordmistress was exactly where she had the highest chances of success at launching an attack on the Succubus' current location. And that likely also accounted for the angry archers in the way.

If this assumption was right... then Deneva was going off a hunch; she'd probably caught a hint of the Succubus during the heat of the battle. But there hadn't been enough evidence to take action.

"If an inspection is all it takes to lay this problem to rest, then I won't stop you," Rick provided with a show of open arms.

He was now certain that Deneva had actually already tried and failed. After all, the only maiden that might have lingering traces of Kiara's power would be Eli, and the crippled Hound was back at camp with the knights.

Better to stick to technical truths anyway. "You will find that Eva has drunk from many of her tribe sisters, but past that? I am absolutely certain not a single person here is under the sway of a Charmer... unless that charmer happens to be me."

The tribe chuckled, a rumbling sound with more tusks and bared teeth than actual amusement. It made the knights shift and pull ranks ever so subtly. None reached for their weapons, but the tension was palpable.

Deneva was the sole knight that had not moved. "Say it."

"Say what, Captain?" He asked.

"Swear that you are not bonded to a Succubus." Her hand landed against the pommel of her sword, the air grew a degree colder, and Monica twitched. "By oath of omission, either claim no knowledge of conspiring with a Charmer, or be found guilty."

Eva raised her voice. "You do not have the authority to do this."

"I wouldn't if Rick possessed a title of nobility." Deneva answered coldly. "You and I know that this is the only way to protect him."

He frowned, glancing at the Vampire. "What's she on about?"

"Anyone working with or for a Charmer is considered a conspirator against the crown. Such people can be killed on sight." She spoke through gritted teeth. "If you or one of your maidens admit to the Charmer's influence before definite proof is discovered, then you are given leniency."

It was a twisted strategy, one clearly meant to use a maiden's bond, their terror at the potential death of their human, against the Charmer. Because whoever ran to the authorities first would have their human spared. The kingdom would probably make sure to enforce this law very strictly. At the very least as a way to guarantee that the next Charmer to show up would be found that much more quickly.

Carefully, he met the gazes of the others. Monica looked just about ready to fight, as did Urtha. Dia and Eva had shifted positions to guarantee that if a fight did break out, they'd get the chance to pull him out.

"He is an otherworlder, the sole person above him is the King," Dia countered.

"As an otherworlder citizen, he is allowed the right to roam freely within the King's lands. He is also allowed levity in terms of owning battle-capable maidens," There was the briefest of nods. "This does not, however, protect him from questioning under a truth-detection amulet. This is to mean that silence will be presumed an admission of guilt." Her helmet lowered, just enough to emphasize that she was looking directly at him. "I will not allow poison to spread within my Master's domain; the laws regarding Charmers are far stricter than those for corrupters for a reason. They cannot be trusted, each and every one must be killed on sight." Her voice growled within the helmet. "Say that the Succubus you met in the city of Balet is either dead or that you've not seen or heard of her again."

She wasn't looking to kill him, all of this was fanfare to get the strongest fighters around to be defensive around him. Deneva's sole target was Kiara. His jaw set. "Are you truly willing to put everyone's life at risk over this?"

Deneva had the barest moment of hesitation.

Because his question was a threat: if Deneva went after Kiara, he would make sure not one of them got out of here alive.

The Swordmistress shifted her helmet to face him fully. "We are knights; it is our duty to protect this kingdom," She reached down, fingers wrapping around the hilt of her blade. "To our last breath."

Both sides tightened their postures. None made overt moves, but both knights and tribe were eyeing one another, measuring each other up. Everyone was waiting for the other side to make the first move, to see who would blink first.

“Do-”

His words were cut off abruptly, searing hot pain stabbed through Rick’s heart. He clutched at it, suddenly out of breath. His vision swam and spun as the bond within him flared out with a jolt of agony that came as quickly as it left. Rick could barely breathe as he struggled against the shock that had run through his whole body.

“Stop!” Deneva barked out right as his vision began to return. The maiden had taken half a step back, blade still not drawn.

Dia was on him, hands glowing a bright green. “Uninjured.” She declared flatly, not for his sake but that of everyone else.

The confusion as to what had just happened was clear on everyone’s faces, including his own. It took him half a second to realize the pain had come from Kiara.

The bond had gone silent, and Rick scrambled to his feet to get a better view, staring wide-eyed as the Empress dropped the limp Succubus, pulling out a glowing blade that dispersed into the air as if made of petals taken away by an invisible wind. Behind him, Monica growled, and Rick’s hand lashed out to grab her wrist before she did anything. Everything teetered at the edge of a bloodbath, they couldn’t afford for a brawl to break out. They needed to move carefully.

Even though he didn’t know what powers the Empress could use, he was absolutely certain that here, in this very tree, she was at her strongest. Even if they won, it would be a massacre.

All around the Elf Queen, masked archers emerged, arrows at the ready, staring down at both the knights and the tribe as the Empress approached. Every step she took made the tree shudder with a pulse of power, causing even Deneva to hesitate, tightly gripping her weapon.

“The Succubus is dead,” The Empress proclaimed, standing at the edge, right behind the line of archers. “You leave now.”

“Not without the body.” Deneva declared. “Not with a wildling-”

“The body will nourish my tree.” The Empress waved off. “He is the sole human I will acknowledge.” She pointed at Rick. “I bonded with him, I will deign that to threaten him

is to threaten me. Tell your masters of this, and of the four thousand Elfin kind that sleep here... for now.”

The group of knights stirred at that.

“Is that a threat?” Deneva’s voice had lowered a degree.

Empress shrugged. “Be a good dog and tell your owners that I am open to negotiate only through the current Lord of Sinco.” This time her voice shifted from aloof and commanding to threatening. “But if you do not leave, I will consider your presence here a threat to that human, and by extension, myself.”

The archers drew their bows, the massive arrows pointed not at Deneva but at the knights. Only the maiden directly at the Empress’ side pointed her own arrow at the Captain.

Despite the obvious threat, Deneva remained rooted in place.

Rick’s fingers sank into Monica’s fur as her growl intensified, their gazes locked on the ageless Empress. He could still feel the bond; it was tenuous, more so than if Kiara had been asleep or unconscious, but it was still there. There was time to save her.

“Embla isn’t here,” Eva broke the silence, her own expression calm, even as her hands were clenched tightly. “She’s gone for Barry, and even if you leave now, you won’t make it in time to stop her.”

That seemed to do the trick. Deneva did not speak out, there were no outward signs of a command, yet the knights reacted as one, gathering to formation and turning to leave through where they’d come. The Swordmistress remained, however, her helmet pointed directly towards where Kiara lay, seconds stretching out until, without another sign, she too turned to leave.

Rick could feel her gaze on him for a bit before she jumped off of the tree altogether.

At their departure, the archers relaxed their stances, but they did not leave.

Because Monica and the tribe had been far less willing to hide their aggression towards the Empress’ actions. Seconds ticked by, neither of the three remaining factions made a move. It would be suicidal to openly charge in, and Rick glared, a glare that the Empress was more than willing to meet, her lips slightly quirked in amusement.

Maybe they wouldn’t be able to hurt her, but it shouldn’t be impossible to get to Kiara’s body. The only option that came to mind was to order Monica to snatch the Succubus and get her to Dia before whatever remained of her life was—

“SHIT!”

Kiara gasped, lurching up and clutching her chest in a panic.

“That was shorter than expected,” the Empress spared a glance at the Succubus, now glancing back at Rick with the amusement having become a full blown smirk. “I like the intensity in your eyes, it is the look of a maiden ready to kill.”

With a snap of her fingers, the archers fully lowered their weapons, all of them save the ones retreating into their hiding spots behind branches or on other perches. Despite this, the tribe and the others did not relax, because they knew that the only thing that had changed was that the Golden Elves were just not blatantly threatening them.

They could still attack at a moment’s notice.

The Succubus was not taking any of it. “You stabbed me!”

The Empress chuckled. “I would assume you, out of everyone here, would be the most familiar with the little death.”

“Not this kind!”

“It solved the problem, and you live,” she said, waving the Succubus’ complaints away as she kept herself focused on Rick. “Bloodshed was prevented, and you might even still have the chance to strengthen ties with those slave-owners, however foolish that move might be. I would say that puts you in my debt, does it not?”

He was not amused, his eyes narrowed. “What do you want?”

“A bond would be a good way to establish a proper start,” she answered. “I can feel my domain, and it is no empire, barely even a province... one in ruins. Empress is no longer a name befitting me, so I will do you the honor of allowing you to suggest one.” She crossed her arms, staring at him and ignoring the glares of everyone else present. “And I would request an exchange of envoys. I need to rebuild, and establishing a baseline for friendly relations seems beneficial to both our factions.”

“Rebuilding your empire?” Rick asked carefully.

The Empress took a moment, closing her eyes as her certainty wavered. “It has been too long without a home,” she spoke softly, shaking her head. “My subjects are owed at least that much.” Her emerald gaze met his own. “I would’ve thought you and I were of the same mind in that regard.”

Despite his desire to growl, he couldn't help but agree. His gaze fell on Kiara; the bond had fully reopened and he could feel her emotions. The maiden wasn't even mindful of what she was projecting through—the frustration, exhaustion, and unease. There was much on her mind. It was the same for all of them.

But she was alive, something that wouldn't have been possible without the Empress' aid.

Even if the method had been a very unpleasant one.

“Could you give us some privacy?” he asked.

“Not unless you leave the grove entirely,” she appeared greatly amused as she spoke.

“This tree is an extension of me; all that is said in the presence of this tree, I hear as well.”

“Swell,” Rick glanced at the other maidens, taking a moment to frown at the Dark Elves who seemed to be trying to pretend they weren't there. Though he could vaguely fathom why they were, he wasn't going to take gambles.

Before he could say anything, Monica had broken from the group, walking directly towards Kiara. The feline glared daggers at the Empress as she reached Kiara, wrapped her in her arms, and marched right back towards Rick. The Succubus squirmed and struggled for a bit, but her words grew silent as she got closer.

“You can stay over there.” Rick pointed to the side, and Monica obliged, plopping down on the bark while keeping Kiara firmly in place. He turned to Eva, Dia, and Urtha.

“Are we doing this?” Eva popped the question that was clearly on everyone's mind, glancing at the Empress for a moment and then back at Rick. “She's...”

“Not someone I want to fight,” he said, shaking his head. “And I suspect the feeling is mutual, which would make her the first neighbor with actual prospects.”

“But do you see her as a potential alliance?” Dia asked.

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he groaned. “We'll talk more once we get back, but for now I'll say a tentative yes.”

Nodding, the healer bit her lip and stepped towards the Empress, though not breaking away from the group. “I have a question.” The only response she got was a silently quirked brow from the Elf Queen. “Do you know the method for a Rapha to become a Nightingale?”

“I do,” the amused brow rose further.

“Then I would trade it for healing. I’ve studied Elf hibernation; you undoubtedly have lesions, and though your power is impressive, your body will take time to recover and function properly again. Time I can help shorten.”

For a moment they held each other's gazes, yet the older maiden let out a sigh. “You speak the truth that my body will take time to acclimate to the waking world once more. But I refuse your offer,” the Empress shook her head. “I will not give power to a maiden whose aspirations are to remain a slave.”

“She’s not a slave,” Rick frowned.

“Not in your eyes, perhaps,” the rebuttal came without missing a beat.

Rick didn’t back down. “You can’t judge on-”

“Let her answer, then,” the Empress waved offhandedly. “Are you that man’s property?”

“I am,” Dia’s face burned as she tightened her jaw, raising her chin and squaring her shoulders proudly. “I am his, in every way. I would die for Rick.”

“Then this matter is closed,” she shrugged, making a small gesture to indicate the conversation had come to an end.

Dia bristled. “You’re a maiden! You said you would bond with him.”

“And it is your false presumption that a maiden’s bond is one made for servitude,” the Empress moved closer, ignoring Dia as she approached. Though her focus was mostly on Rick, she did spare a glance to Monica and Urtha. “Unless it is your goal to see me subjugated.” Her voice came in a low whisper that thundered like a storm hanging overhead. A promise for terrible things.

Meeting her emerald glare, Rick focused on the memory of when the bond had formed while they were within that strange dream-like place. On the notion of not wanting to be anyone’s slave even if seeking respite.

“Of course not.” With those three words, the bond snapped into place as if it had been there all along. Far more easily than he’d expected, yet still slightly surprised at how it’d formed almost as if an afterthought.

A surprise the Empress felt as well, the maiden recoiled and blinked rapidly, eyes widening. For a fraction of a second he sensed shock, amusement, amazement, and concern. The next moment she’d clamped down on it, cutting off any further emotional feedback.

She furrowed her brows. “You-”

“It’s been... I’ll call it an uncomfortably productive encounter, Camilla,” he cut her off with a curt nod. “I believe the envoys can wait for a bit, as we’d left our home in the middle of something, and I’d rather get back promptly.” His arm reached out to pull Dia closer, even as the healer bristled and glared at the Elf Queen.

“Camilla.” She tasted the name, annoyance washed away and leaving behind only amusement as she tapped her chin. “Yes, it is close enough to the camellia, a medicinal plant, but distinct on its own. I believe I will adopt it, then.”

Rick kept to himself that the name also meant ‘bed’ or ‘stretcher’ in Spanish as he maintained his polite smile. He still felt the urge to punch the ancient maiden, particularly after how she’d dismissed Dia, but this would have to do for the time being.

Dia was sure to get a kick out of it once he shared that tidbit with her.

“I think that will be all, then,” he glanced over at Kiara. The Succubus had given up on trying to escape Monica’s protective embrace a while ago. “Are you going to stay or come with us?”

The question startled her a little. The maiden glanced down at her hands for a moment, her skin shifting from dark back to her usual healthy pink. “I...” Glancing at the freshly-named Camilla, a nervous shiver coursed through her. “I’ll go back.”

“Though you might not appreciate this offer, I would recommend allowing C8 to escort Kiara through an alternate path,” Camilla said evenly. “The Swordmistress’ intuition is sharp; she left scouts and lookouts in her wake, both maidens as well as enchanted tools. No doubt to verify whether your return to your village would include a certain Succubus amongst your numbers.”

The first instinct was to call out that Sinco wasn’t a village, but Rick really didn’t have much of a leg to stand on. By his own world’s standards, it probably wouldn’t count as a city. It lacked the size, and it definitely lacked the population density for it. It just left him wondering how much more exhausting everything would be if he’d actually put himself in charge of a city.

“Ah, and I would recommend sending your healer with her as well.” Camilla broke out after a moment. “Kiara might be putting up a good front, but her condition is rather fragile.”

“Bullshit, I-”

One look from Rick killed Kiara's words before she could say anything else. Unlike Camilla, the Succubus wasn't clamping down on the bond, he could feel the hurt. He could also feel the chastisement and apprehension that was oozing out of her, which was new for her.

Rick wasn't about to press though, this was neither the time nor place.

"I think I will go." Dia spoke up, looking thoughtful. "Kiara's not the only one who needs my help." The look she shot him was to please not ask questions while they lacked privacy, so he didn't.

"Eva will go with her as well, and some of the tribe." He ordered. "Urtha, I want the rest split up into squadrons. To give Deneva the impression that we're scouting things on the way back. That way it should be harder to tell whether there's someone actually missing."

"Doable." Urtha nodded.

Rick ignored how Camilla opened the bond just enough to send a tiny sliver of approval his way. The Elf Queen looked ready to say something, but frowned as someone from the group of Dark Elves stepped forward. "Yes, whoever among you wishes to stay may do so," she added without missing a beat. The Elf Queen had overheard whatever internal mutterings the group had going on in the background.

"If you want to join the tribe, just follow us, and we can talk later," Urtha hastily added, taking the spot at Rick's side and squeezing him closer.

Monica had yet to let go of Kiara, shooting him a long serious look.

"You can go with them, but I need you to be running all over the place. Pretend you're chasing off ferals. Deneva needs to believe there's a reason why you're not at my side the whole way."

She nodded seriously, squeezing the unresisting Succubus.

"I bid you farewell, though with the implication you won't allow this bond to break." Camilla gave him a slight wave. "Expect my envoy within the month."

"Yeah, let's go home."

Embla's lungs burned as she ran, holding Barry firmly but gently against her as she bolted across the forest. All her gear and weapons had been thrown away the instant she'd succeeded in her surprise assault, all for the sake of speed.

Now that the assault was over, the knights would take Barry away from her forever. The sole stroke of fortune had been that she'd reached the camp before anyone else. She didn't even need to kill the knights, merely bull through and away.

The original plan had been full of wishful thinking, desiring to just grab her human and run away, escape the kingdom entirely. Barry was ill; the elemental overdose and the damage it caused to his body had not been fully treated by the healer. Embla knew that the Rapha, Dia, had restrained her work precisely to ensure the Malumari would not attempt to stab them in the back while they attacked the grove.

The true threat, however, was Captain Deneva, the bigger reason why Dia had held back. There had been no other way for the knights to trust Embla's presence there. The knight Captain was undoubtedly giving chase by now, even if Embla couldn't sense her yet. How many minutes of a headstart did she have? How far would the Swordmistress chase when Embla had left the human girl behind? The fight had drained so much out of the Malumari, but she couldn't stop, not with Barry being a few days away from going back to a fully critical condition.

Her options were, truly, just two.

The first was the more obvious one and a trap. To head back to Sinco was too predictable; it would make it easy to find her and her human again. It would also make it easier to track her down. That only really left her with one option: to fool her pursuers into thinking she'd taken for one of the many random villages surrounding the great forest, but in truth circling back to-

"Left."

Monica's voice nearly made Embla jump, yet she reacted calmly as the feline led the way. A wave of relief washed over her, and she could only hope she was not being led to another trap. But so long as Rick and Kiara remained allied, then there was no way Monica would be helping out the knights.

"Right."

The minutes continued, and the Sabertooth guided her through the forest, seemingly taking random turns, and even doubling back a few times. Until they finally reached a small clearing, not much different to any other save the three figures that stood there.

“The prodigy returns.” Kiara was pale, looking exhausted and weak, but managing a smirk.

“Shut up.” Dia shoved the ageless maiden aside and stepped forward, looking up at Embla with stern eyes. “Patient, now.”

She complied without hesitation. “I’m being-”

“The guardians are muddling your tracks, Monica’s-”

“Here.”

The feline appeared, dropping a frazzled looking Eli on the ground. The Hound quickly scrambled to her feet, standing at attention.

“-helping.” Kiara shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. I prepared for this; a Succubus can never be too careful when there are zealots afoot. There’s a safe place I had my girls build, we’ll be sharing it until the troubles die down.”

Embla knew the true meaning of those words.

Safe so long as they remained aligned with the Succubus’ goals.

Brye heaved free air for what felt like the first time in months. The Nogitsune shuddered, not from the chill of the night, but from exhaustion, her insides burning up and fraying. Teleportation was no easy feat, and doing so while using every ounce of available power did not make it any easier.

But the bond had demanded nothing less.

It was the only way to save Mark Dodson; time was running out.

Ever since that encounter with the man whose mind was insanity, Brye had been captive to her sisters in crime. Mark had betrayed the Boss, declared himself free of his grasp, and taken to the wilderness in an attempt to make themselves harder to find.

Noah, the former human, now a Tigermouse, was instrumental to the secrecy.

The maiden had been useful in infiltrating both Sinco and Aubria to gather intelligence as Mark’s group remained constantly on the move, going back and forth through the

forest to muddle tracks. The recent feral rush had made this endeavor safer than it ever could have been, though it also meant that if and when pursuit came, they would not be concerned about ferals either.

Brye had picked up bits and pieces as she bided her time, always trapped under some heavy object or another that Shery had dropped on her.

Both cities were gearing up for battle, with the Darkton Lords having a head start, clearly intending to strike once the upcoming winter came to a close. Any sooner would see their troops trapped in the infamous blizzards that swept over the region, with this year looking potentially more brutal than all before it.

Meanwhile, Sinco had also been preparing, though in a manner Brye had yet to properly grasp.

Noah's reports had mentioned strange weaponry and stranger earthworks, both apparently familiar to Mark, but even he hesitated at some of the descriptions. His confidence in the Lord of Insanity's victory against the Aubrian assault was clear, though that clarity faltered whenever Brye mentioned the Boss.

Because at the end of the day, the simple matter remained that the Boss would win.

Be it a month, a year, or a decade from now, Mark would wake up with a dagger between his ribs. Such was the fate of anyone who betrayed the Boss, and Brye knew in the bottom of her heart that Mark had no way to escape such a destiny. If she didn't get him back to the Boss, he would die.

And thus, her bond screamed at her, day in and day out; it screamed for her to escape, seek out the agents of the Boss and tell them where to find Mark. Because their only hope was that he'd be seen as too valuable to assassinate. He'd be locked up, used as a breeding stud for the rest of his life, but he'd get to live.

So it was that she waited.

The opportunity came when they encountered an abandoned secret house a day's walk north of Sinco. It was freshly built and would've remained hidden if not because Noah had been part of the team of mice that had brought supplies to the place. Someone important in the city had ordered the house built and to be stocked up.

Clearly, one of the fat cats in Sinco wanted somewhere to hide when Aubria's forces came marching in. Mark had made the call to make it their base of operations during the winter. Particularly, his decision had been made because the place came with a cell.

It was an alcove with enchantments meant to allow for someone to be held prisoner if necessary. Enchantments that neither Noah nor Shery had known weren't powerful enough to keep Brye locked.

And now Brye ran through the forest, keeping her mind sharply focused on her bond with Mark, counting the minutes until they found out she was gone. It would only be a matter of time, and once that time ran out, he'd find her through the bond.

So long as there was enough distance between them, she'd be able to get to Aubria before he caught up to her.

So long as she told the Boss, Mark would be safe.

It was the only way.

It was-

"Prrrr?"

A looming figure of white death turned its head to look at Brye with icy blue eyes. The Sabertooth cocked her head as the Nogitsune opposite her froze in place.

"What's this?" A figure walked out from behind the Sabertooth, a woman of blue hair and impossibly pristine beauty, with golden eyes full of amusement. "A psychic, do be careful of possible tricks." As she spoke, a power lashed out towards Brye, and her attempt to reach for their minds abruptly failed.

"You." Another maiden came out, one with dark skin and snowy hair, her voice full of contempt and anger the moment she locked on to Brye. "I know you."

They'd met before.

It had not been a pleasant meeting.

"You know her?" The golden-eyed maiden spoke.

"In a way." The Malumari growled, glaring daggers but not moving, as if waiting for permission from the other. "We'd captured a human called Mark, and she'd helped him escape. This was before we found Barry."

"Mark?" A fourth voice piped up. A young man with familiar fiery red hair stepped forward, staring at Brye with a squint that spoke of his poor eyesight. "You know where my brother is?"

The blue-haired maiden chuckled, stepping past the redhead. “Look at that poor thing’s condition. She’s far too scared to answer anything properly.” She stepped towards Brye, golden eyes blazing with intent, looming over Brye as the Nogitsune felt herself suddenly flush.

Heat spread through her flesh like a wildfire, Brye stammered, recognizing that something was being done to her, but entirely unable to stop it. Her body felt hot in ways that were fueled by her exhaustion, coaxing her to melt into the stranger’s touch. She recognized the Charmer for what she was, the danger she posed, yet all ability to fight back left her the moment the Succubus sealed her fate with a burning kiss.

“There we go, nice and soft,” she said with a purr.

“Kiara.” A new voice spoke up in warning.

But Brye could not see, it was as if the world had been reduced to the woman and nothing else, a pink fog descending upon her exhausted mind. Her bond screamed, but it too became silent after a minute under the tingling caress of the most beautiful creature in the world.

“I’m not... I can’t sit back and do nothing.” Kiara growled, a voice that sent delicious shivers through Brye’s body.

“She played you, is that why you’re like this?”

Delicious fingers wrapped around Brye’s throat, lifting her up to her feet, she whimpered and cooed as all thoughts melted like snow under a summer sun. The Nogitsune’s legs kicked as all air was cut off, a delicious intoxicating suffocation, concern and fear washed away in a blissful pink fog.

“Kiara?”

With a gasp, Brye dropped, a smile plastered across her face as she gasped for air. Every concern left her body, her two tails wagged with a lifetime’s worth of compressed happiness and heat.

“I nearly got him killed, Dia.” The pink voice spoke, barely a whisper. “I was supposed to be the one in control.”

A long infinite silence stretched out, only punctuated by the purrs of Brye caressing her own body, enjoying every moment of the suffused warmth that had penetrated down to her very core. There were no concerns for helplessness, no fear, no anger. The joy within her burned, hot enough she could even vaguely make out the impression that Mark was enjoying it too.

Not too far away, a mouse was sure to be getting all the attention she could hope for.

“This is how I do things, this is how I help. This...” A foot stepped against Brye’s stomach, she moaned and squirmed. “This is me being in control.” The foot tightened, squeezing harder, the Nogitsune groaned out and flushed. “Now, little fox, you know where Mark is, don’t you?”

The Nogitsune nodded eagerly, drunk on a pleasure that seeped all the way to her bones.

“Take us to him.” The foot lifted.

Feeling light as a feather and any thought of resistance burnt away under the mounting satisfaction, Brye led the way.