
[137] [Rick]

Rick walked down the road. The day was beautiful, sunny sky, a fresh cool breeze to counter the hot sun, shoes didn't have any holes in them, and the dirt under his feet had a crisp crunch about it.

It was a shame that Monica had opted to kidnap him. She wrapped him in her arms and walked, the taller and stronger woman basically dragging him as her eyes kept flicking towards Dia with a certain degree of nervousness about them. The nurse, for her part, was holding his hand and not letting go, but otherwise ignoring Monica.

"Wouldn't your quiet compliance be a form of pampering her?"

"She's mostly behaved well all morning." Rick glanced at Tomas as best he could, making an exasperated gesture with his hands. "If you've got some different way to promote her doing that, that doesn't involve jerky, I'm all ears."

"I just thought this feels like you're promoting her clinginess." The younger man commented.

"Believe me, I know." It wasn't like there was much of an option. Monica wasn't exactly some sort of child. As far as Rick was concerned, she still had ways to go to get acclimatized to this whole 'society' thing. "I hope this isn't bothersome, Victor."

"Please, don't mind me." The man spoke with a nervous chuckle, walking from nearly ten meters away and showing all smiles. Next to him walked two twin purple-haired maidens. "I am paying for safety, after all. I wouldn't dare comment on the methods so long as there are acceptable results."

"Rick becoming a merc is the second wildest thing after the confirmed threesome that included the hot-nurse and amazon-kitty." Kat chuckled, arms wrapped around Lizzy's neck as the Salalexis was giving her a piggyback ride. Next to them, Ginny looked slightly nervous, her gaze bouncing between Kat and Rick as she walked. The Draco appeared just one wrong twitch away from jumping out and pulling either of them some place safer.

The teacher grumbled. "Could we please not touch on that?"

“Oh please, you woke up the whole village. There were alarms raised, the Hunters went on high alert. Every patrol available went to the street ready for a fight.” She laughed now. “Your sex-life is a matter of public safety.”

“God.” He was thankful for Monica’s arms holding his head. It hid the slight coloration on his face. Not feeling particularly inclined to continue in the current conundrum, he began struggling against Monica’s grip.

The feline loosened it just enough for him to finally return to his feet, but not without firmly grabbing his hand in the process. Now the human was left with the maidens on either side, each clinging to a limb. “Nope.” He declared, pulling them both closer and wriggling his fingers out of both of their hands.

He didn’t so much escape. They let go, and the human crossed his arms, trying to use the chance to relax his shoulders. Monica pouted more severely, and Dia mostly nodded along. There was still a sense of troubled jealousy he could sense from them both, and so he just stepped away. “That’s enough Rick for now.”

He ignored the giggling that broke out behind him.

Now free, he kept walking, noting Monica’s constant looks towards Dia. No doubt she’d cling to Rick the instant the nurse opted to so much as twitch the wrong way.

“You have family, Victor?” He shifted his attention to the merchant and the two maidens walking on either side of him.

The man’s face lit-up. “Of course, sure, yes I do!” The two maidens at his side sighed while the man moved with an extra spring in his step. “I’ve got a one beautiful wife and three daughters. Maidens, of course. And quite the healthy boy. I hope he will get the business one day. I was always told that I should marry at least four maidens, but who has the energy to have so many children? I just prefer having the maidens help and work and that’s that. None of my business if they get someone to love. What’s the sense of pushing it? Far better to just focus down on whomever you fancy and just go for it. None of that whole multiple-wives thing some of the lower folk love to have. Such a hassle, really. I’m sure you can tell maidens are just so competitive sometimes, right?”

“... I see.” Rick nodded slightly. Had the man been saving up all the words he hadn’t used since that morning?

“Wait, your daughters are maidens, right?” Kat glanced at merchant-Victor, a strain in her voice. “Are they property?”

The man's face twitched before his smile brightened with practiced ease. "They are part of the family, though many people have said I pamper them too much. I've made sure they get a good education. Hopefully, they will find a nice man and snatch their heart. Though Ema keeps turning down the gentlemen, she's met thus far. Still, they're my darlings, I tell you, and I will definitely not have them sent to some ranch or sold to the highest bidder. Does that make me too lenient? Maybe, but family's family. Or so I keep saying." There was a slight pause as his gaze focused on Kat. "Would you be interested in meeting them? I suspect Ivy might be quite eager to enter your service."

That caught the young woman by surprise. "I mean, I'm not quite sure what you mean?"

"You're a lady, and certainly, you might have customs that are not shared with those born in this fine and right kingdom of Edogia, but I'm sure even you would be in need of someone to support you in matters of coin and business? I can guarantee Ivy is quite privy and skilled in these regards, she has studied both law and business, and being a Witch, she has had much experience with the more traditional spellwork, of the divination sort, as is her mother's specialty."

"Wait, a Witch? An actual Witch? With the wand and stuff?" Kat perked up.

Victor's smile brightened. "Oh yes, she has a focus, built it herself out of a murisium core and flakes from radiant elemental stones. Her mother had had many long a dispute over this choice, but Ivy's skill in forecasting the weather with her spells has saved me many a nice suit, though it's still not quite as useful as her mother's ability to tell when a tax collector might be coming by, I do feel that she has learnt much." A vigorous nod. "Yes, yes, frankly, she is a very bright young maiden, with a great future ahead. Her usefulness to you would definitely be quite the contribution to whatever business endeavor you'd wish to start." His gaze flickered to Lizzy and then Ginny. "Maybe a surveillance and safety enterprise?"

"A what now?" Kat blinked.

"Victor." Mr. Gabriel spoke with a slight frown, the look in his eyes causing the merchant to hesitate. "Back off."

"I, yes sir, I meant no offense." Victor didn't even twitch, bowing his head. "I understand if you might have higher standards than what I can humbly offer."

"There's nothing humble about you." The old man spoke. "Your business is with Rick, not us."

“Yes, yes, I will make sure to keep that in mind, good sir.” The man’s shoulders deflated slightly, and the maidens next to him squirmed, but kept quiet as they lowered their heads.

“Hey, I decide what I do.” Kat turned to glare at the old man sitting on the centaur.

“He is a salesman. Any offer he makes will come with strings attached.”

“I would not be so facetious, sir.” Victor bowed slightly. “Though I understand the concern, I must insist this is my daughter, and not some merchandise. I would never allow for a final transaction to occur without her approval for it.”

“You’re barking up the wrong tree, buster, we’re dirt poor.” The older man snorted, crossing his arms with a glare. “Got nothing for you to take.”

“Maybe we should drop the topic for now?” Tomas muttered, scratching the back of his head. “This whole arranged relationships thing is... not normal to us?” He chuckled slightly. “I mean, the normal for us is more like Kat and I? Just meet and-.”

“Wait, what do you mean ‘relationship’?” The young woman frowned slightly. “Like, sure, we are kinda having fun, but-.”

“I think we should have a lunch break in an hour or so.” Rick raised his voice, gaze meeting Kat, Tomas, and then Mr. Gabriel. “And if there’s any talking you want to do, perhaps consider doing so more privately.”

That appeared to snap the trio, shared nods, and worried ones as well. The teacher’s focus shifted to the maidens. They’d been quiet, but he could tell there was more than one with a troubled look, Freya and Ginny among them.

Shaking his head, Rick tried to put his thoughts in order. He might need to have a private chat with Victor.

[138] [Rick]

“I’d like to know what your intentions are with Kat.”

Rick directed the words at the merchant, but his gaze was firmly planted in the surrounding forest and not on the man himself. He knew Monica was only a handful of meters away, and by the looks of it, so did Victor. But the anxiousness of something else possibly being there was very much present.

“I was just making an-.”

“No.” The young teacher frowned. “Let’s not pretend you are doing this out of the goodness of your heart. I want to know what benefits you had in mind.”

Victor paused, eyes sharp even if there was hesitation in his voice. “You’re not from around these parts, right?”

“I’m an offworlder, not been around these parts for long.” Rick stated flatly. The man’s eyes widened. “And unless you start talking, I’m dropping you off at the next village.”

“Yes, yes, certainly, that... would be bad, though I am fortunate you find yourself to be so kind as to not just leave me here for this slight that I have incurred. I really should watch what I say, sometimes I-”

“Let’s just keep things to the point?” He gestured back in the general direction he knew Monica was at. “I’ve got things to do and they’re impatient, as you’ve seen.”

Victor paled slightly, nodding vigorously. “Certainly. Well, for someone who’s not been too long in the kingdom, human women tend to very quickly gain the favor of many people, important people. I just considered that having my daughter under a prospective future noble could have been a great boon for her.”

He wanted to sigh. Of course it would be like that. “Keep the offers of slavery off the table and we’re good.”

“Slavery? Sir, my daughter would be a servant, and a highly esteemed one. She’s no feralborn slave.” The man scowled deeply. There were hints of anger in those words that caught Rick by surprise.

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he sighed. “Servant, whatever. To me, it’s the same. She’s put under someone else’s control.”

This appeared to baffle Victor for a second. “Sir, the kingdom’s laws protect servants and give them higher rights than those of a slave. They are under the protection of a human, yes, but there are consequences to be had if any are treated poorly.”

“And slaves can earn their way into becoming a servant, and if they give birth to a human they are considered matrons. Practically human.” Rick tried to keep the acid from his tone. “Look, where I come from, slavery is illegal. Having someone whose life you can just control in such a way is severely frowned upon.” A vague gesture of his hand. “I’m adjusting and all that, sorry if I caused insult with the choice of words, it’s just that, to me, they’re all the same.”

“You could not force a servant to marry, any more than you could threaten a matron with punishment save extreme circumstances.” Victor nodded slowly. “But... yes, yes, I can imagine why it would seem all the same if you come from a place without slaves. I take it there are no ferals either?”

“No maidens, only humans.”

The man perked up immediately. “Fascinating, really interesting. And how does this world handle supply and transportation?”

“Boats, planes... wait, no. Victor, I want to make it clear, don’t offer slaves, or servants, to us.”

“Sure, sure, boats and planes. And money? Do they use gold? Paper notes?”

“I feel that you’re not listening.”

Victor laughed. “On the contrary, I am very much paying attention. Your sensibilities and apparently those of the rest of your group are not quite those of this kingdom. Understandable, you’re much closer to a Wildling I’d say, dangerous stuff to speak out loud in front of the wrong person, but really not that strange. I do share some of that kindness as well. Maidens are just as capable as humans, but the whole feral business, ugly stuff. Can’t really treat a maiden and a human the same way because of it.”

“Wait, what?”

“Maidens have bonds, need them to avoid going feral. Have this whole thing because of it. If you treated them the same as humans it would be pandemonium. No, different needs are had, maidens need a partner, or leader, or protector. To keep them safe from themselves. They can’t exist alone, no sirree, always someone else in the caravan.” A loud clap and a smile. “We were talking money. You were explaining how that worked in your world?”

“I wasn’t.”

“Come now, Rick, Richard? I’m sure we can reach an understanding? I have heard many great things about offworlders.” A vigorous nod. “I also heard you wanted to know about the good Earl Vitchatt? The man of strict traditions and cautious steps?”

Rick’s brows furrowed. “We use digital money, for the most part, the rest is in paper.”

“Paper that represents a portion of gold, I take it?”

“No, it doesn’t represent anything, it has value in of itself.” The chemistry teacher rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “It’s complicated, but basically we once had the paper money represent gold, called it the gold standard, but it’s no longer the case. Now about the Earl, I was invited, and-.”

“Yes, yes, invitation due to the subjugation of the renowned White Claw, slayer of the Baron of Astunes. The news travels fast and the rumors faster. There was talk that you bonded her in a single night of intense passion, and the radio messages have had some talk of your power to summon fire that brought her to her knees in single combat.” Slow nods that became quick ones. “Now, this money that represents itself, how exactly does it have value? Why would anyone use it if it doesn’t use anything? And digital money? Is that like information through the radio or in the small computers? How do they stop people from just lying? Do they have some shared ledger?”

“Something like that. And it has value because people agree it has value.” Rick shook his head slightly. “Look, about the Earl, I want to know if I should expect trouble from him or not.”

“The Earl? Nonsense, he is a very calm and fair man.” A quick nod. “His rule does have a penchant for nobles, but it can never be said he has been cruel or unfair. His father? That man was quite stricter. Back during the years after the war, whole lot of the kingdom was practically ready to explode. It was thanks to him that everything came to order.” The merchant shook his head. “So, about the value of this money with an agreement, how does the agreement work? How do they set the value if it is not tied to anything?”

“It’s... ok, one sec.” The teacher shook his head slightly. “It’s like the value of bread or some other commodity. It fluctuates depending on supply and demand. I’m not exactly knowledgeable in these details, strength has always been in chemistry.”

“Money as its own product!?” The man was blinking in rapid succession now, nodding slowly as he rubbed his chin. “Yes, yes, yes, hm... but... no, hm...” Humming, he paced back and forth, nodding as he went, clearly not thinking entirely on the conversation but

on something else. “Then the more people believe in it and want it, the stronger its value...” Abruptly turning to Rick, he smiled. “Yes, this feels like really useful information. Need to think on it, really interesting I have to say, a value that is volatile only so long as the belief and need for it isn’t stable, and... yes. With that out of the way, how long do you intend to stay with the Earl? I could very well invite you to spend some time with my family, it would be quite the honor.”

“How... long?” Rick frowned slightly. “I’d intended to meet the man and move on?” As he said this, he noticed Victor’s brows rising. “But I take it that would be bad.”

“Oh, OH! Offworlder, yes, that... that makes sense. No, invitations of hospitality are typically at the very least for two weeks, perhaps a month. Though it’s not unheard of for guests having trouble with their finances to stick around for longer.” He tilted his head a little. “In your world, this is not the case?”

“If we invite someone over, it’s usually to spend a night tops.” The teacher felt a twinge of nervousness. “Any longer and it’s usually because it’s a very special event or vacation or something.”

“Vacation. Vacate? As in leaving a place?”

“We travel for fun during holidays, sometimes. Go faraway place for a week or a month, then come back and carry on working.”

“... that must be nice.” Victor’s smile faltered for a moment, scratching his cheek and frowning. “Really nice.” A slight nod. “My son had asked to come with me, and had to say no, too dangerous.”

Traveling here was a chore, a risk, and likely expensive if one wanted to do so safely. “I guess it would be.” He glanced at the man as he nodded along, apparently deep in thought. “Well, I guess we should get back to the road soon.”

With a slight nod, Victor walked back towards the others, holding his chin and not quite seeming to focus on anything in particular.

The instant he was gone, Monica popped out from behind one of the nearby trees. “Rick safe.” She proclaimed with a serious nod, moving closer and grinning as she leaned back, shooting him a coy smile as his eyes bounced down to her breasts.

The human sighed, looking away. “Shirt?”

“No.” she purred, grinning from ear to ear.

Rick sighed louder.

[139] [Barry]

Barry grunted as he felt his knees weaken from the blow. His hands trembled as they let go of the stick he'd been holding. Palms stung and shoulders ached. It'd felt like he'd just tried to lift a car for the past half hour.

"No, not like that, never like that." Embla spoke with a stern voice, stepping closer, grabbing his arms and raising them over her head. "Never attempt to block, maidens and humans both would crush you."

"I know I'm weak, but humans too?"

"The humans of this world have had maidens in their families. Many are stronger for it. Against any opponent you face, you must never rely on your strength or speed, read them, follow their movements, apply as little force as possible."

"Flow like water." Barry mumbled, almost wanting to roll his eyes. "And when do I start hitting back?"

"You don't. This is a defensive style, meant to help you survive. Hopefully long enough that help will arrive. Remember the gesture, engrave it if you must." She spoke sternly, slowly bending his arms so that the stick he held would inch to the side, the imaginary blade he was parrying allegedly slipping downwards. "And now you roll."

"Wait wha-!" The young red-head screeched as he was tossed sideways, thumping against the dirt with a solid grunt. "There was no roll before."

"There is now." Embla proclaimed. "For someone with the speed and strength of a maiden, the deflection would follow with an attempt at a counter, but if you are not going to counter, you are left open for a second attack. The angle would make it tricky for your opponent, but not impossible. The roll would be to avoid that follow up."

Reaching down, she picked him up by the shoulders, pulling him back to his feet as if he weighed nothing.

"Since you don't know how to roll with the impact, we will just focus on the deflection and we will work on rolling for the next session."

"How... what if they go for a stab instead?"

"You will get your chance to train for that."

That would sound much more like a threat if not for how her strong hands moved down his shoulders and to his hips, her gaze boring into his own with an intensity that held something else within. Something soft.

“I... hope I am not interrupting anything, my Lady?”

Embla’s hands remained firmly on Barry’s hips as she turned to meet the newcomer. “Nonsense, Lala, you may enter.” Only once the dark skinned artificer had fully entered the training grounds did the Lady’s hands leave Barry’s body, though not without giving an appreciative squeeze to his rump.

Lala did not miss that, her face flushed slightly though she kept a straight face. “You call for me, my Lady?”

“Yes, I’ve heard that you’ve been slacking in your training. It is time to correct that.” The taller woman gestured at the two swords that lay side by side at the edge of the training ring.

Lala paled. “My Lady, I am very honored to spar with you, but I would not desire to take up your very important time. There is certainly better things to do than waste energy trying to train a weakling like me.”

“And yet here I stand, ordering you to ready yourself.” Embla didn’t blink, picking up the short-sword and giving it a couple of practice swings. The weapon looked too short for her size, almost as if it were a better fit to be used as cutlery instead. “You can opt to run, but that only means I will go for my favorite weapon instead.”

All eyes moved to the seven foot long axe that lay outside the training ring, and Lala visibly shuddered. “I-I will do my best, my Lady.”

Grabbing hold of the other short-sword, Lala gulped, eyes glancing around and landing on Barry for a moment before quickly turning away. “Should we... spar seriously?”

Embla’s back straightened slightly. “I had forgotten, yes.” She moved her hands down her figure, pulling up her shirt and exposing her naked large dark breasts, her six-pack abs, and her thin yet well toned arms. “Let us keep blows only to the upper torso.”

“... certainly, my Lady.”

Lala had been wearing a short green dress, and with its removal, she was left down to a pair of loose light green briefs. Next to Embla, Lala was far shorter, even Barry was slightly taller than her. The maiden’s skin was fairer, the coloration not quite as dark, a deep tan that left her body looking like a supermodel that had spent a long time on the beach.

Barry felt his throat go dry. Lala looked a fair bit less athletic or powerful than Embla, broader hips and a lack of muscle definition gave her a more homely visage.

“I believe our audience is enjoying himself.”

Embla’s words caused Barry’s back to straighten and his face to flush. Lala had similarly tensed, face turning slightly redder, but she’d not looked away from the taller maiden for an instant, holding her blade firmly.

“Watch very carefully, Barry, I wish to hear your opinion of this spar later.”

No sooner had she spoken, than the taller maiden stepped forward. Lala reacted instantly, with a vicious forward stab that was aimed squarely at Embla’s gut. The sound of ringing steel deafened everything else. Embla had deflected the attack with a simple gesture of her arm, her blade flowing in an abrupt downward slash that Lala had to deflect.

She rolled right as Embla’s attack had turned sideways. Lala tried to prepare to block the next attack but saw the force with which the Lady was swinging the blade and quickly rolled a second time. It was just enough to regain her footing, barely enough to meet Embla’s thrust with her blade and spin, pushing the attack to the side just enough to stop herself from getting skewered.

And again, Embla turned the attack into a sideways swipe with such ease that the blade might as well have weighed as much as a toothpick to her. Lala rolled, raising the blade and swinging to force the attack to go over her head. The shorter maiden saw Embla’s exposed side and tried to go in for a stab.

The attack turned into a swing when she spotted the incoming back-swing. The two blades threw sparks as metal ground against metal. Again, Embla had been left wide open, and Lala lunged for an attack. But she couldn’t cover even half the distance between them before Embla’s arm came back swinging with a powerful blow. Confusion was growing on Lala’s face with each time she had to turn her attack into a forced deflection, and even Barry was starting to notice that the larger woman was leaving herself open for a counter, but denying the opportunity before it could come to fruition.

She was just that much faster and stronger.

And then the shorter one slipped.

It had been a misstep, a miss-calculation. She’d attempted to attack, and hadn’t had the time to parry the incoming sideway attack. So she blocked it.

A horrible screeching sound was immediately followed by a shriek. Embla's attack pierced through the blocking sword, and right as she'd been about to cut Lala in half, twisted the sword so it would impact with its flat edge instead. The technician's ribs audibly cracked as she was sent flying out of the spar-ring.

Barry ran after her instantly. "Don't move." He quickly knelt next to her, hands reaching out to touch her shoulder. "You probably broke something."

"Get up."

Embla stood behind Barry, holding her blade and bearing down on Lala's prone figure.

"Just... one moment, my Lady." The woman grunted, wincing as she tried to get up but failed, groaning in pain as her hand pressed against her bruised ribs.

"Your ribs are broken." Barry's voice rose as his fingers touched the soft skin. "You need to get healed." He looked over his shoulder at Embla. "She needs some healing."

"Broken bones are of no concern during a spar. We are not that fragile." The woman spoke, scowl deepening. "Do you think a feral will care to give you a moment's respite just because you are injured? Or a Knight or Hunter, for that matter?"

"But this isn't a serious fight, it's a spar!"

"D-don't worry, Barry, this is nothing, really." Despite her words, Lala's face was contorted and tight as she brushed his hand off, standing back up, albeit on shaky feet. "Besides, the L-Lady's been generous enough to be holding back today, she must be in a good mood."

Embla's lips curled upwards in a smirk. She raised her chin, making her naked throat all the more apparent. There was something shared in that look as Lala proceeded to lunge with her broken sword, the metal glowing with some sort of purple energy that made Barry's skin crawl from just looking at it.

The Lady merely dropped her sword, stepping forward and grasping Lala's wrist before the swing could be made. And with her other hand, she punched into Lala's good side. It was followed by the crunching sound of ribs. Lala fell to her knees, coughing blood.

"Enough!" Barry barked.

"No." Embla made a gesture with her hand, and the human abruptly felt his feet stuck in place right before he could enter the ring. The taller woman turned to her subject. "If you had to protect the Court, would this much stop you?"

“No... my Lady.” Lala wheezed the words out, slowly struggling as she returned to her feet.

“That’s how it should be.” A solid nod and a grin. “If you stay on your feet after the next one, I’ll let you take your collar off.”

Lala’s eyes widened, her breathing already short and uneven fastened slightly. She raised her fists, arms shaking slightly as she glanced Barry’s way for a second, then tightened her jaw. “I’m ready.”

Embla stepped into the shorter woman, her fist swinging upwards. Lala tightened as best she could, changing her position so the attack would at least be blocked by her arms. The impact was a solid thud that felt like a grenade going off. Lala’s whole body rose from the ground a whole two feet before being dropped.

She vomited blood as she stumbled, pain clear on her face as she held her knees in place, her whole body shaking almost violently.

“Good enough.”

Embla reached for the maiden’s throat and yanked, the collar snapping loudly. The taller woman ignored Lala as she collapsed, approaching the still paralyzed Barry. With her arm stretched out, she dropped the torn collar onto the ground before him.

“Your kindness is a strength, but anything in excess can be a poison.”

“Heal first?” The woman groaned, falling to the ground and laying on her side. “My Lady?”

Embla tilted her head slightly, turning from Lala to Barry, and nodding. “Not until you and Barry have bonded.”

Barry didn’t regain his ability to move or form words until Embla had left.

[140] [Barry]

“How... bad is it?” Barry sat next to Lala as she lay on her back, the ground beneath her stained with her sweat.

“Been... worse.” She replied, naked chest heaving with her breaths. “Not going to die from this.”

“But in pain.”

“Been worse.” Lala didn’t deny his words, looking at the hand he was holding. “You’re soft.”

“I’m not used to seeing people in pain.”

“No, no... your hands, they’re soft.” Closing her eyes, her fingers brushed against his palm. “They’re really pretty hands.”

Barry’s cheeks lit up. “I’ve never had anyone say that to me before.”

“I bet it’d feel great if you touched me with them.” Lala’s lips parted into a weak smirk, shifting slightly to thrust her chest upwards a bit.

“You’re in pain!” He complained, pushing through the embarrassment. “Broken ribs, spitting blood, you need to get healed.”

“Lady ordered it.” She muttered, closing her eyes. “Bond first.”

“Then I...” He hesitated. “Do you really want to make a bond... like that?”

“Do you prefer bigger chests, like the Lady’s?” A slight wiggle of her hips followed, and a little smugness appeared on her face.

His finger poked at her side and she winced. “You. Are. In. Pain.”

“And I just need a strong emotion and for you to accept it, right?” She replied, her fingers stroking the palm of his hand. “I don’t want it to be pity.”

“Why would I feel pity for you?” He remained seated next to her, fingers grasping her palm lightly.

“Cuz I’m a maiden that lost against someone who wasn’t even trying? Because I’m a stick of a girl barely able to swing a sword?” A grumble and a light cough followed. “That’s harsh.”

“Pretty sure no one can beat Embla,” Barry said, nodding slightly along before blinking, his back straightening up a little. “Close your eyes.”

“If you’re going to have the Hound fondle me, I’d rather keep my eyes open and give pointers.”

His face reddened. “It’s not that.” He waited until she’d complied before he allowed himself to take a deep breath and relax. Fighting the temptation to look her over, he leaned closer.

“Just a heads up, but if you’re going to fuck me, I need some preparation first.”

“Would y-you stop!?” Barry grumbled, freezing as he’d felt the embarrassment burning through him. “Just... just stop, ok?”

“Bond-less girl looking for a good time, just saying I’m fun, not desperate.” She smiled smugly. Barry poked her ribs, and she winced. “Alright, alright! I’ll shut up.”

“Good.” He muttered, sighing loudly. “Just... relax, I’m not going to hurt you.”

A deep breath followed by a long slow exhale, Lala lay on the ground flat, arms stretched at the sides, legs slightly apart. The only piece of clothing upon her form the light green briefs. Barry took her body in and leaned forward, placing one hand next to her head for balance while he moved the other to her neck.

Slowly, he stroked it. Up and down, his fingers brushed over the patch of discoloration that marked where the collar had once been. Lala froze as he did so, inhaling sharply and shuddering. “Breathe.” He reminded her, ignoring his own flustered face and moving his fingers over her exposed throat.

“That’s... ticklish.”

“And what else?” Barry asked. “What else do you feel?”

“I-.” Another shudder and a slow trembling exhale, her face reddened right as her eyes snapped open. They were shimmering surfaces of ochre, but this close, Barry could see flecks of gold, her pupils widened slightly and her hand reached up to press against his chest.

Parting her lips, she whispered a word, too low for him to hear. Barry leaned closer. "What did you-?"

She rushed upwards the short distance, her lips meeting his in a brief chaste kiss. Her hand pressed against his chest and tugged at his shirt, keeping him from escaping as she mashed her lips against his. Barry could taste iron.

With a gasp, she slumped back down. "That... worked? I'm bonded?" Lala laughed before breaking into a coughing fit and groaning. "Oh wow, it... it was never this easy, this smooth, this..."

"What did you feel?" He asked, scratching the back of his head. "Lady Embla seemed to like it when I touched her neck like that, and... well, I thought you'd like it too?"

"Oh you naughty naughty man." The maiden moved to sit up, and failed, falling flat and back down to the ground. "Ouch."

"You're hurt." He reminded her.

Lala grumbled at the proclamation, head smacking against the dirt underneath. "I know you're an otherworlder and all that, but you were giving me fuck-me eyes, right?" She said, eying him with a half-cocked grin. "I gotta know if I should pretty up for tonight or not."

"I don't... I don't have 'fuck-me eyes'." Barry leaned away defensively. "I don't even know what that is!"

"That didn't sound like a 'no' to me."

Crossing his arms, he glared down at her, or tried more like, brows not quite managing to lower all the way. "I won't answer that. If you want to come meet me, then you'll have to talk to Lady Embla."

There was a long moment of silence. "W-what?"

"She and I... sleep together." He stood up in full, turning away. "I'll look for a healer so they can patch you up."

"WHAT!?"

Ignoring her words, Barry hurried out of the training area, doing his best to keep his flushed face under control and failing. He'd thought Embla was shameless, but by the looks of it, Lala was going to be ten times worse. Was this normal? A part of him felt like

his face was just about ready to burst in flames as he tried to push away the thoughts of either of the maidens coming onto him.

“And what about you?” He glared at his dark shadow.

Orion for her part, did not respond. Though she did take the little piece of fruit he dropped for her to snack on. So at least she was still there, even if she appeared quite content on not popping out at all. Which was sometimes turning out to be quite frustrating.

Quickly moving towards the apothecary’s place, Barry tried to keep his pace brisk as he wanted to get Lala’s broken ribs treated as soon as possible. So heading straight towards the wooden palace, the young human worked over how he’d request the nice old lady to send someone to heal the hurt maiden. The last time he’d felt like there’d been some implied faux pass and it would probably do him some good to be more aware of how he said things.

As a strategy began to form, all thoughts came to a grinding halt as he spotted Kajou limping her way in the same direction. Alarms rung within Barry’s mind and he approached, looking around quickly as he tried to determine if Pan was anywhere to be seen. “Kajou?”

Getting closer, he called out to her, and watching her flinch.

“Barry.” She greeted, bowing her head slightly. Her arms were bruised, and there were cuts on her thighs.

“What happened?” He asked.

“I had a small altercation, nothing of concern.” She glanced downwards before turning to continue limping her way in the same direction he was taking.

A moment of hesitation, Barry looked around quickly once more. “Let me help you.”

Kajou looked like she was about to complain, but nodded as he took one of her arms over his shoulder.

Their steps led into the wooden palace and into the largest room nearest to the entrance. The walls were lined with pots, vases, and flasks. Dry herbs hung from the ceiling, and there was a moldy kind of scent lingering that mixed with the herbs.

The young man could only inwardly scowl as he glanced at her once more, not quite sure how to deal with this. It had been weeks since he’d last seen her, and yet it felt like the nightmare in the forest had been barely a dream.

“After this...” Kajou hesitated. “Could we talk? Privately?”

Barry could only grimace.

If it were Pan, he’d refuse in a heartbeat.

But Kajou had fought tooth and nail to protect him from the crazy Valkyrie, even put her life on the line to fight for his safety during the feral rush.

This... he owed her at least that much, right?

“... sure.”

[141] [Alice]

“I’d like to know more about how psychics work.”

“Could you... not? Ma’am?”

Alice frowned at Irene, and the red-skinned woman frowned back. They were inside the tight little room the psychic maiden called an ‘office’, and this time the psychology teacher was pushing herself to ignore the discomfort from both the small space and the woman’s nudity.

“You run the psychic evaluations. Let’s start with that.”

“Please?” Irene glanced at the book she was holding, the look on her face looked equal measure irritated and exasperated. “I really don’t have interest.”

“You have plenty of time, this village has nothing going on of importance, and I’ve got it on a good source that you can effectively hold twelve conversations at once.” Alice replied, crossing her arms.

“So I am to aid in amusing you, I take it?”

“I heard from Rick that the evaluation you gave him was basically torture. Yet the others were not.”

Irene sighed, placing the book on the table. “Miss Alice, I hate the Barons, both. But they hold the cards and, more importantly, can make life very dangerous for the people I care about. So when they gave the order to ensure Rick had an unpleasant experience, I complied.”

“I already suspected that much. I want to know what the psychic evaluation is, and why it was different for him.”

“Because the normal process involves placing the human’s mind into a highly strenuous situation, likely traumatizing, and gauge their reactions. With a use of amnesia afterwards to avoid lingering consequences.”

“You can delete memories.”

“I can delete dreams.” Irene responded with a ‘tut’. “Though relaying telepathic information is my duty, dreams are my specialty. I go into dreams, I make dreams, I let

the person experience dreams, and I can make it so they don't remember them if I so wish." A slight shrug. "To be more specific, I make them so they don't 'stick', so the memory doesn't form."

"Like when someone drinks too much alcohol." Alice nodded slightly.

That startled Irene a little, the woman shifted in her seat, brows burrowing. "Exactly." There was a slight pause, and a tilt of her head. "You're wearing protection today."

The teacher touched the silver bangle on her wrist. "When I told the Baroness I was going to talk to you, she gave me this, said it would make it impossible to have my mind read without my knowledge."

"... I could attempt to push through, but it would warn your guard outside." Irene didn't look away from Alice's eyes. "Is this all you needed? Or were you looking for something else from this conversation?"

"Why do you want to get rid of me?"

"I prefer the company of my books." The psychic replied flatly, rolling her eyes. "It is not my fault you are bored, nor should I be the source of your amusement."

"I know, it's just... gah!" Alice's fingers brushed through her hair. "There's nothing to do, and so many people I'd rather meet in small measured doses."

Irene's brow wrinkled ever so slightly. "Someone you don't like is occupying the Baroness' library."

"Pretty much. Really not looking forward to having to see that old wrinkly wind-bag's face." The psychology teacher deflated. "I could make it worth your time to tolerate my presence here."

"Hardly. But I am curious as to what you might think I might be interested in."

"Books, maybe?"

"Yet you carry none." She made a show to look Alice up and down.

"I meant right here." Alice tapped her forehead. "I've literally read thousands of books over the years, books that have never and likely will never exist in this world. Can't a psychic hop in and help re-experience them?"

"Thousands." Her lips curled. "A tall tale. Lesser nobles have troubles gathering that many let alone reading them."

“Only really one way to find out, isn’t there?”

There was a long pause, Irene closing her eyes and carefully pressing her fingers against her brows. She shook her head after a few seconds. “Why do you really wish to have a look at your own memories? Do you long for reliving your home, perhaps?” Her eyes opened again, red irises boring into the teacher’s skull. “You could always just order me to do these things, you do realize this, correct?”

Alice froze and grimaced. “Do you feel uncomfortable being treated like a person?”

“I have two daughters, a loving husband, a wife-sister, and no shortage of maidens that treat me ‘like a person’. I assure you I am not bereft of affection or respect.” Irene’s shoulders slumped slightly. “What I do find... amusingly vexing is that you treat me like a fellow human. There are no undertones to your words, and you behave as if ignorant of the dangers of being alone with a maiden, a psychic no less.” A slight sign of mirth came to her lips. “It is as if a child pulling on a Hound’s tail and calling it ‘fluffy’.”

Now it was Alice’s turn to frown. “I choose to believe your capacity for violence or harm is not one you decide to wield during civilized conversation.”

“A belief that you held in regard to the Baron’s actions as well.”

This time she flinched. “I... had hopes you’d be better than that.” Rubbing her shoulders, the woman lowered her head a little. “Look, I’ll be out of your...” She hesitated and sighed. “I’ll see myself out.”

“No need to rush.” Irene made a flicker of her hand, the window closing behind her with a soft click. “I was feeling rather curious over the... alcohol.” She tilted her head slightly. “I was wondering how a world without psychics found out that the brain loses the ability to form memories because of it.”

Perking up, the psychology teacher nodded. “It’s chemistry and biology. The brain’s capacity to form long-term memories gets affected if the alcohol content in the bloodstream spikes rapidly enough.”

“And how was this discovered, is my point of interest.”

“Well, depends on the study.” Alice replied. “One had people strapped to an MRI and... wait, ok, this is trickier.” She rubbed her chin. “So we created this machine that lets us see the parts of the brain that light up as they become active or inactive. So one study had people get drunk slowly, and another group to get drunk quickly, and observed the differences in how their brains behaved.” A little smile followed. “Add in questions and skill tests to them and a control group, and you’ve got yourself one of many studies into

the subject. With a large enough pool of volunteers, the statistical commonalities begin to emerge.”

A slight nod in response, Irene drummed her fingers on the table as she appeared to consider something. Alice felt a little hint of nervousness, scratching her chin for a moment.

“Have you bonded Helga yet?”

“I mean, I hadn’t even...” Alice frowned slightly. “Are you reading her mind right now?”

“She keeps sending reports to me because she’s technically not ‘fully under your service yet’.” The psychic maiden put up a lofty smirk. “Why not take her?”

“It’s...” A sigh. “If there is an unfair system, and I participate in it, then am I not promoting its perpetuation? That would make me a hypocrite.”

“If you think it’s an unfair society, why not leave? Become a Wildling, go live amongst the trees and ferals.” Irene used her hand to lean against the table. “Or maybe what scares you is that accepting Helga would be a self-confirmation that you aren’t in your world anymore?”

“Are you... are you trying to psychoanalyze me?”

“Aren’t you doing the same thing to me?”

“It’s more of an unwanted habit.”

“And mine as well.” She replied simply. “But out of the two of us, you’re the one who is in an emotionally precocious situation due to perceived instability and lack of control in your life.”

“The same situation any maiden is pushed into whenever they bond someone new.”

“You could always swear your fealty and service to the Baroness. Get rid of having to decide on the bigger picture of your existence, fall into the comfort of a habit dictated by another.” Tilting her head, the maiden stood up, dusting her lap and gesturing at the door. “I think we’ve both had enough of each other for the day. Do feel free to ask Helga on the proper procedure to bond a maiden when she’s entering your service.”

With a nod, Alice stood up in turn and smiling awkwardly. “Next time should I bring sweets?”

“She doesn’t like sweets because they make her look more like a milkmaid!” Helga pipped up from outside the room, giggling.

Irene's lips tightened slightly, though she kept a slight smile. "Boar jerky will suffice."

"See you in two days?"

"Three."

Nodding along, Alice stepped out of the room, hearing the door close behind her and feeling slightly refreshed. She glanced at Helga as the winged maiden stood at attention, fighting against a slight smile and bouncing on her feet. "You've been spying on my conversation?"

"My duties are to protect you, ma'am, not being able to hear you would be a dereliction of that."

"Mhm." Rolling her eyes, the teacher sighed slightly. "I'll think over what Irene told me, but... I think I'd need to make clear some things first."

Helga nodded, smiling brilliantly. "Of course, ma'am, the best way for a servant to do her job is to understand the needs of their protector."

"And... that's exactly what we'll have to talk about."

[142] [Barry]

Barry sat down in the small chair in the small room. There was only one bed, and a sack at the corner with what he guessed were clothes. It was only large enough for the bed, a small round table, and a little extra space, with a window filtering the light inside. "This... feels cramped."

"I'd asked for a small room, it is hard for me to sleep in large ones." Kajou spoke softly as she sat opposite of him. "If this is too small for your tastes, we could always go someplace you'd prefer."

"No, it's... alright. Why do you not like large rooms?"

"It's just something that makes me uncomfortable." The Amazon shook her head. "How... how have you been taking? To... Lady Embla? The Court?"

"It's nice... I've... she's helped me, a lot." He nodded. "What about you? You... not in good terms with Pan anymore?"

The Amazon grimaced. "It's complicated."

"Maybe?" Barry shrugged a little. "Sometimes it's easier than it looks."

"I'd..." Kajou's shoulders slumped, dark hair pooling downwards, covering half her face. She softly touched her throat, fingers brushing against the choker. "Coven is in need of help."

"Could you explain it a bit?"

"Coven is..." A sigh. "East of the kingdom of Edogia, this kingdom, there is a large stretch of land that is ruled by no one. Coven is what we call the conglomeration of villages, tribes, and small towns that live there. We have survived for hundreds of years."

Nodding slightly, Barry remembered the map he'd seen of the kingdom. "I'm guessing it's rough out there."

"It is, but it has been a way of life for us." A sigh. "There are barely any humans within Coven, it is a place where they are a very rare sight. Most maidens are ones that have escaped slavery from Edogia... Pan included."

"But..." The young man frowned. "What about the ferals? Can't they be turned?"

“We don’t have enough collars.” Her words were sombre, her gaze distant as she spoke. “During the Great War, the Creators made collars for maidens to bond to other maidens. Humans...” She shook her head. “According to our Elders, humans had the ability to make bonds without them. Captured maidens were turned to humanity’s side rather quickly, and eventually, they won.”

That seemed strange, Barry couldn’t help but frown. “I thought the maidens had been cursed with the feral state for trying to fight humans.”

Kajou shook her head. “That is the story that is told in the kingdoms of men. Some of our elders speak of a different truth, that the feral state was used ensure maidens stayed loyal to their superiors, that the curse was that they were made able to bond humans without the collars. A trick done by the Saintess to avoid humanity from being exterminated.” Her fingers crossed together, tightening. “Not many believe the purpose of the bonds was to save humans, and most elders tend to be... displeased, with those that do.”

“But... what does this have to do with the collars right now?”

“The collars we have are five hundred years old, made with spells and enchantments we could not figure out how to replicate.” Her fingers touched her throat once more, the leather under her fingers didn’t look old or worn to Barry, but then again, he didn’t have his glasses, so it wasn’t like he could see the finer details. “The enchantments are starting to break down, and Coven is looking for alternatives to avoid... war.”

The young man became still, brows furrowing. “Without collars, you would need to fight to steal more collars.”

Kajou nodded emphatically. “Coven has tried negotiating with the various kingdoms over the centuries. At first we had amicable relations, that is why some of our population has humans, but after the rebellion...” Her shoulders slumped. “Things have not gone well, and many people of Coven have had to hide further into the wilderness where the kingdoms cannot reach.”

Nodding slowly, the young man couldn’t help but sigh. “It seems like it’s not a good place to be.”

“The ferals there are far more dangerous, and it is... tough, when one of our own joins them.” With a quiet calmness, the young woman met Barry’s gaze. “It’s why I want to bring you there. I... There is hope that we will be able to learn about the strong bonds, and hopefully how they work. At best we might be even able to make new collars, or at

the least be able to ensure those whose collars have stopped working avoid going feral while we seek for a better solution.”

“I...” The young man didn’t like what was happening, and to a point, he could understand why she’d be asking this of him. “I’ll... try to think on it. I can’t promise more.”

The Amazoness nodded, smiling slightly. “Thank you, Barry, really.” The relief the maiden expressed with those words were heavier than he expected them to be. She bowed her head, pressing it against the table. “Thank you.”

A pang of guilt made its way through him, and Barry could only look away. “So... what do you want with the Court, anyway?”

“Yes, apologies.” Kajou muttered, taking a deep breath to recompose herself. “Coven had taken in some maidens that had been in the Court, and they’d mentioned about a new kind of collar, one that allowed maidens to form bonds of ownership over humans.” She shook her head. “Many of the elders were intrigued by this, and we were sent here to try to discern whether the Court found out how to make new collars, or if at the very least they had some insight into the enchantments.”

Though Barry could only nod, the realization struck him. “But the... Embla’s mother is unconscious.”

“And she is the only one with insight into the collars, or at least that is as much as Lady Embla has claimed.” Kajou nodded. “Pan and I had some... disagreements, over what to do now.”

“I don’t want to pry any more than I already have,” he said, shaking his head and trying to think of something else to bring up and talk about. Scratching his chin, he couldn’t really find anything in particular. “I... I’ve been spending time with Orion, the... Hound.”

Kajou perked up a little and nodded. “The one you bonded in the forest. I can sense her in your shadow somewhat.” There was a slight moment of pause. “Have you... does she come out of your shadow often?”

He hesitated. “Not really, no.”

“We... have seen escaped slaves doing that, sometimes. Hounds in particular tend to be rather territorial.” Kajou said with a slight edge of concern. “Usually it is a sign that they don’t find themselves comfortable with things, the environment.”

“That... oh, I’m not... how would you handle it?” Barry adjusted himself in his seat. “I’ve been trying to coax her out of my shadow, but she usually doesn’t do that unless there’s some apparent emergency.”

The maiden took a moment to stand up, nudging her chair backwards and kneeling down under the table. Barry hesitated, pulling himself away a little and watching as the Amazon reached down to the dark shadow. She stopped cold the instant said shadow began to growl, the maiden calmly moving out from under the table.

“I think she needs a friend, someone to get along with.” A grimace followed. “It might be hard to find a feralborn maiden in the Court all things considered, but I’ve seen a few Doggirls, they might understand Orion better.”

“Erm... thank you.” He replied, awkwardly smiling at her as he scratched the back of his head. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“It’s the least I can do.”

Her hand reached out to linger on his shoulder, their eyes met, and for a heartbeat, Barry felt as if the air within the room had suddenly changed into something else. But before he could even attempt to make sense of it, the growling returned, the shadow under his feet rumbling impatiently.

“I... I’ll be going now.”

“Yes.”

“Let’s... meet again?”

Kajou paused, nodding with hesitation. “I would like that.”

[143] [Mark]

Mark's feet and back hurt, his head felt like it was going to throb its way into an implosion, his legs were sore, and his stomach kept growling for food and water. Everything felt just about horrible right about now, and his patience was running thin.

The quiet mouse lay on the ground nearby. Blindfolded, gagged, and drenched in more of the purple berry juice. It was something that was happening more and more often now, whenever Brye and Shery went off to check things or try to spot a potential new victim, it would always end up like this.

This time there had been no luck in any of the ventures.

"There's a small town, and they're wary." Brye's ear twitched in annoyance, her claws traced up and down Noah's rope-like tail, the mouse wriggling and groaning. "It's going to be a pain to go around."

"Why the hell don't we go in and have an actual rest?" Mark spoke, crossing his arms and glaring at the two-tailed dark fox.

"You?" Shery looked slightly surprised as she answered.

"We can't exactly walk in with rope tied around your wrists." Brye pointed out.

"And I'm fed up." He replied flatly. "The pace we're keeping is going to get me killed before you get to whatever the place's name is."

Brye stepped closer, leaving the squirming mouse shuddering and gasping through her nose. The fox approached the human, leaning down and not looking away from his gaze for even a second.

"Promise it."

Mark hesitated. "Promise what?"

"Promise that you'll be in your best behavior." She replied. "We go into the village, you act like you're our owner, get yourself a nice soft bed if they have a tavern, maybe even a warm bath and hot food. But you keep your mouth shut and let us do the talking." A pause. "Just this village, just this once. Promise it."

Shery hesitated, stepping forward. "Brye, don't be crazy, he could-."

The fox raised her hand to stop the gray-skinned maiden, not looking away from Mark. The silence stretched out, man and maiden meeting gazes, quietly gauging one another. The human's mind whirled through the possibilities, he could lie to her, he could trick her...

And then what? Get put under the control of whoever was calling the shots here like they did back at the Court?

"Deal." He spat on his palm, reaching out to her.

She glanced at the palm for a moment, then nodded. "Deal." She grasped it tightly, shaking once before she yanked.

Mark gasped as she reached out with her other hand, pulling his neck closer as she kissed him. The fox let go immediately after, stepping away before he could even properly react to the surprise.

"Deal."

"You can't be serious." Shery complained.

"I am." The fox replied with a shrug, grabbing Noah by the wrapped-up wrists and tossing her at Shery. "If this is a fuck-up, I'll fix it."

"You better."

Mark nodded somewhat, glancing at them. "So what now?"

"Now we walk, and if we're questioned, you let me be the one to talk." Brye said with a simple shrug.

With Noah being carried by the same person that was also carrying most of the luggage, the group set out towards the nearby road. Mark noticed one of Brye's tails vanished, and so did Noah's tan. He had to blink twice and then twice more before he felt like his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. This was an illusion, wasn't it?

They walked quietly, the dirt road under their feet crunching with every step.

"Oh, by the way." Brye's singular tail lashed back and forth as she looked over her shoulder at Mark. "Maidens like a Doggirl can hear a conversation a whole building over. Not as good as mine, but good enough that you shouldn't consider there's really anywhere private in the village."

"Whatever."

He rolled his eyes, the sooner they got some actual food and rest, the sooner he could consider the prospect of what the hell to do next. Now that they were approaching actual civilization, he'd take the chance to learn more about what sort of crazy place this was. He was fine with not trying to run away at the first chance he had, but he really couldn't afford going at things blind anymore.

It took them an hour before the village came into view. A small thing, maybe thirty buildings tops. Most of the space was occupied by the farmland, which had clearly seen better days.

"Dregs from the feral rush came through here." Shery muttered, her focus on the fields that were battered and torn as if someone had passed a giant rake over it in random directions.

"Doesn't seem like they were hit too hard. And we're on the road of gems, so they might have a tavern."

"The what?"

"There's an elemental stone mine south of the kingdom, the road they take the rocks goes through here." Brye shook her head. "If there's no tavern, we'd have to look for someone offering hospitality, in which case we're better off just moving to the next place."

As they approached the village, Mark noticed there were people working out in the edges of the fields. Some wore loose rags for clothes, but there were a few that had green uniforms. One such uniformed maiden spotted them and hurried over from her work.

"Greetings." The brunette spoke, glancing at Mark, Brye, and stopping at Noah. "What business do you have in our village?"

"Just passing through, will spend the night, maybe two, ma'am." Brye bowed her head low, hands furling against her lap, her voice a demure soft silky plea. "Our Master is very tired, and would appreciate a soft bed for us to warm. Would you happen to know if there's a tavern available?"

The human almost did a double-take at the fox's soft-spoken words and almost submissive behavior. Though the uniformed maiden brightened slightly, apparently not catching Mark's shock.

"We've had very few visitors as of late, so there's surely room to spare at the tavern. Do you plan to sell that feral?"

“No, my Master was looking to break her in. He wanted to give her as a gift to his younger cousin.” Brye bowed her head with a slight bending of her knees. “He’d been intending to buy a collar for her in Aubria.”

“That’s nice.” The uniformed maiden waved and stepped aside. “Best of luck out there, and be careful, there’s been word of some banditry on the roads, some of the displaced have grown desperate.”

“Much appreciated, we will keep a watchful ear and a sharp nose.”

Another bow, and they continued towards the village. Mark couldn’t stop looking at the back of Brye’s head, unable to believe she could behave so... demurely.

“Dear Master, if you are going to stare so much, perhaps I could provide a better focus?”

The fox looked over her shoulder at him, smirking as she raised her tail, making her rump more prominent to his gaze. Mark rolled his eyes and Shery snorted in amusement, but little else was said, even as Noah’s struggling had regained some vigor, though by now the maiden had long since pushed herself past the point of exhaustion.

They walked through the town, Mark trying to see if he could spot anyone that wasn’t a maiden.

And failing.

Every single person that crossed their path was a collared female. There was the usual sense of normalcy going about them, very few giving them more than a glance. But Mark could feel every alarm in the back of his head sounding off at maximum volume. Especially from those that would focus on Mark for a bit longer than the rest.

Every single person they crossed paths with could crush him in an instant, his eyes kept paying very close attention to their hands, their shoulders, the way they tilted their heads. His jaw was tight as he pushed down the feeling of creeping danger. He could tell there was no hostility, a part of him did at least, he had to fight back against himself.

Where were the humans? He could only wonder at that.

“At this time of day, most are having an early dinner.” Brye pipped up.

And Mark realized she’d been looking at his thoughts. Again.

The fox only grinned. “Here we are.” She stepped into the building that had a barrel and a bed atop the entrance.

The smell of rancid alcohol hit Mark like a ton of bricks, he covered his nose and had to look around to find the room had at least six men and four times that in maidens. They were eating for the most part, very loudly at that. Mark could vaguely make out that it was some sort of celebration, but Brye and Shery hurried them along to the counter.

The fox slapped down some coins.

“The biggest bed and the most soundproof door.” She stated with a wide smirk. “My tail is in need of some yanking. Also need some hot bath for my partner.”

The bartender rolled her eyes, snatching the coins and dropping a key. “Last one to the left. Bath-water in three hours.” And without missing a beat, she turned to hand over some wooden mugs at the waitress.

Mark barely had time to finish taking in the sight of the crowded place before Brye was tugging him along and up the stairs. The door slammed shut behind them and instantly after Noah hit the floor as she was dropped like a sack of potatoes. It was a modest room all things considered. Single window, large bed with light brown sheets, and a smaller bed next to it. Apparently meant for ‘the help’, if Mark’s guess was correct at least.

No sooner had he taken in the view that Brye was taking off her clothes while Shery was moving towards the smaller bed. “Don’t be noisy.” The gray-skinned woman proclaimed, slowly easing herself onto the wooden piece of furniture.

Said furniture complaining greatly under the weight.

“Hm? Why would we be noisy?” Brye shot Mark a coy smirk, naked as she swayed her way onto the big bed and laying on top of it.

The human hesitated, not sure how to react. The first expectation that had come to mind had been that the fox would forcefully strip him and have her way with him. Again. Instead, he was left standing next to the door and focusing on the golden mirthful eyes that were looking back at him.

“Well?”

“Well what?” He scowled.

“Are you just going to stand there and watch?” She arched her brow, fingers tracing their way up her milky thighs.

He growled, taking off his shirt and tossing it at the bed before moving to lay on the bed, his back turned towards her. “Do whatever.”

“Sure.”

There was ruffling, and then... nothing.

The human looked over his shoulder. Brye was lying on her side, her naked back aimed his way, her two tails draped over his hip. With a frown, he flicked them off and returned to try to relax himself, take the edge off of his weary body, get the chance to recover some energy.

By the time the tails returned to drape over his hip, he was too close to falling asleep to try to flick them off again.