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## [007] [Fires]

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The heat of the scorching sun might have been tolerable before, but with a raging bushfire in their wake, the sensation was closer to standing in front of an open oven that had gone out of control.

It was under these conditions that they marched, adding new starting points for the fire while Kiara would take to the air to confirm if the bandits were chasing after them or not.

As the former Neigix captive had promised, the wind kept blowing towards the east for several hours, creating a curtain of smoke. The bushfire, as far as Rick was concerned, was doing its job at obstructing line of sight and giving them ample chance to escape. So long as they managed to get the hell out of there, it should be enough for them to get away.

Thus, their march continued. Constantly looking over their shoulder.

“What are we going to do when we encounter the next group? Or if this one follows?” Dia popped the question like it was little more than a small comment, but she kept looking at Rick with concern.

“Why are they even here?” Eva asked. “It’s as if the bandits just popped out of nowhere.”

“They’re recruiting.” Kiara commented idly, tapping her chin. “Looks like the usual sort of maiden rebellion you see pop out in the human kingdoms.”

Rick sensed the Succubus’ eyes focusing on the back of his head. Not really wanting to lose his focus, he kept the steady pace, paying closer attention to his breathing. Pushing so hard was not fun, it would sting tomorrow, no doubt. But the worst part was watching the others keeping pace and barely being winded.

Maybe he should get himself a palanquin or something.

“Your point being?” Dia shot the question.

“These things usually only occur when they have someone offering protection.” Kiara shrugged. “They take what they can, and when trouble comes, they leave.”

“We’re close to the edge of the kingdom. Everything south of that is just sea.” Dia declared. “The east has forests and the snow-peaks, and to the west marshes and deadlands. There are wildlings there, but none that could survive the kingdom bringing its might to bear.”

Kiara laughed. “That’s all? This really is a little shitty patch of dirt on the map.” She shook her head. “Still, how sure are you that the seas are devoid of underwater queendoms? They could even be getting support from the Coral Empress.”

“Who?” Rick quickly asked before Dia retorted. He noticed a thoughtful look on Eva’s face, though she hid it under the lip of her hood.

“Just someone who terrorizes many a country. Her flotilla is said to number in the hundreds of thousands.” Kiara spoke idly. “That said, this kingdom is very far from the waters she usually roams. Besides, if it were her, we’d have storms all over the place.” Her finger pointed up at the sky. “Bone-dry weather’s not her thing. Then again, ferals of the Goblin tree always liked to fight a bunch.”

“Where are you from?” Dia’s comment came with a slightly wide-eyed look.

Kiara just shrugged. “Very... very far.”

There was something in the way she said it, the tone, or maybe the distant look. There was a tiredness to it. Rick couldn’t quite put words to it, but he certainly felt something from the bond. Something that he recognized came from Kiara, a feeling of... longing.

But it was short lived, the emotion was gone as soon as it had come. Her golden eyes moved to Rick. “Though not as far as a certain someone.”

She spread her wings and took to the sky again.

On and off, their hurried traversal of the plains continued. And as the pursuit didn’t appear to occur, the group eventually had to stop to allow Rick to rest and catch his breath. The pace was grueling for the human, but at least it hadn’t been a mad run through the wilderness as they were chased down.

It seemed they’d managed to pre-empt pursuit.

“You sure they’re not chasing?”

“If they are, they went in the wrong direction.” Kiara confirmed for the tenth time. “I did spot the white-bitch taking off. Must’ve broken out of her bonds.”

“But she didn’t chase us.” Dia pointed.

The Succubus shook her head.

“We should lie low and wait for Monica to come back.” Rick muttered, pulling out the map. He glared at the thing fiercely.

“You sure you want to keep going towards that little city you keep talking about?”

“As far as it seems, we don’t have much of a choice. Turning back will take us to the heart of the kingdom, which will get us eventually killed when they realize what you and Eva are.” He muttered. “East goes into the forest, and then the mountains, and a lot of nothing but ferals along the way. West we might stumble onto some villages, but we’ll end up at the sea. And since I don’t want to waste months of travel just to try to get out of the kingdom wholesale, Sinco remains our-.”

He stopped. Something had changed.

It was a scream in the back of his skull. Something that jolted him and gnawed at his thoughts insistently.

“I swear, even without the cat around, it’s like they share a brain.” Kiara said, looking at him with a disapproving shake of her head.

Rick ignored her snark. Slowly he began looking around, trying to identify what it was that was bothering him. His heart began beating faster, eyes widening, the world around him sharpening as if he just put on glasses for the first time. The crackle of fire was distant, the sky was clear, there was no movement save a small breeze, and as he sniffed...

“Smoke.” He proclaimed. The scent had become stronger, far stronger. He shot up and checked the wind again. “The wind’s changed direction.”

“We should’ve killed the winged bitch.” Kiara shook her head. “It doesn’t matter though, even a man like you can outpace the fire.” She rolled her eyes as she spoke. “Let’s just...”

Kiara went quiet.

Her eyes widened, all color draining from her face.

Rick frowned, following her gaze and using his hand to shield himself from the sun. He squinted as he stared at the sky, trying to spot anything that the Succubus might have seen.

“Are those spots... glittering?” Dia asked.

It took a couple of seconds before he saw what she was talking about. A dozen or so dots flying through the smoke. The forms appeared to refract and reflect light as if they were made of glass. But they were just too far off for him to see any more details.

“That’s... really not good.” With a flap of her wings, she took to the air, beating them in desperation. “RUN!”

“Wha... what are they?” Rick asked.

“The worst kind of ferals!”

She hadn’t even bothered to look back. The maiden pushed relentlessly to gain as much momentum as she could manage. Rick didn’t even bother to wait. He slugged on the small backpack and followed suit. If it was something that made Kiara panic like this, he wasn’t about to stick around and find out what the hell it was.

Though he felt they soon would, anyway.

But he underestimated Kiara’s endurance. It was clear she was made of something entirely different. Even with Dia pulling him to gain some more speed, by the time he’d been heaving, the Succubus was still going at top speed and leaving them behind by a quickly growing margin.

“Kiara!” Rick called out.

She slowed, looking over her shoulder at them, and then at the sky above. “Whatever you do, don’t stop running!”

Seeing her turn and push herself to fly faster was like watching someone drop a rock into his gut. “Hey!” He called out. But she either didn’t hear or didn’t react. She just kept flying further and further away, beating her wings with everything she had.

If anything, it looked like she was putting in even more effort. Within just a handful of minutes, she was gone.

Just... gone.

“She can’t... have left you to die.” Dia muttered, helping him by lifting part of his weight and moving at a trot that to him was a half-sprint. “She’s bonded to you... right?”

“She’s a charmer.” Eva spoke darkly. “She might be a maiden, but she’s a traitor first. They can’t be trusted.”

“If those ferals can hit from a long enough distance...” Rick muttered. “We need to keep going and hope they’re not chasing us. Whatever those are.”

Even if the figures were still too distant to make out any details, the distance had been decreasing, and he could see the shape of wings and the way seemed to glitter around them.

The minutes moved forward, and the pursuers got closer and closer. But it did not look like they were directly chasing them... at least not at first. They would often change course, circling in some apparent random direction. Sometimes, plumes of smoke would arise before they veered in a different direction.

Yet the longer it went on, the clearer it was becoming the figures were making a beeline towards them.

And then Eva laughed, stopping.

“They’re Angels.” She declared, gesturing at the sky, pale lips cracked into a broad smirk. “This is what the Succubus was scared of? They’re practically harmless!”

Rick squinted, looking at the glittering figures. They indeed looked the part. Women with golden hair and glittering pearly wings. The lack of clothes made it clearer still that they were feral, but he focused more on their numbers. A little over a dozen were nothing to scoff at.

“I’ve never heard of feral Angels before.” Dia commented. “Most Angels are tame, so it’s very rare.”

“How dangerous are they?” Rick had not slowed down for even a second, and the Rapha was obliging.

“I once saw a Hound easily defeat an Angel in th-.” Eva jolted half-way through the sentence. “... in a fight.” She quickly added, practically tripping over her words. “I doubt they could do much more than give us a sunburn.”

Rick frowned, but turned to look around. Kiara was not easily spooked. Perhaps it was the fact that there were at least a dozen of them? He did not feel any safer, nor confident that this was as safe as Eva was making it out to be.

“The breed mostly work as healers and to help in sentry duty at night. They’re among the more inoffensive breeds.” Eva continued, nodding at herself. “They’re so rare as ferals because they’re easy to capture and bond. Ferals are well known to be attracted to shiny things. The fire must have drawn their attention. I’ve read that you can catch one by luring them to the ground with glass shards or by flicking pieces of metal.”

Rick glanced at the flock of ferals, and then at the new plume of smoke that emerged from right under them. “Don’t stop running.” Dia looked at him and then followed his gaze towards the smoke.

Her eyes widened ever so slightly.

The flock had shifted direction again, back towards them. And the distance began to shorten quickly.

“Ferals only dazzle and blind their-.” Eva stopped as a white circle of light appeared at her feet. As if someone had shone a powerful spotlight towards the exact area. “See?” She stopped stomping on the spotlight. “It’s just-.”

Five other circles joined in.

The sound of giggling and laughter fell upon them from above. Several of the flock began to circle from so far overhead Rick could barely distinguish their silhouettes against the blinding blue sky. The glittering wings were shining ever so slightly brighter.

Six other circles of light converged under Eva’s feet. Her whole body appeared to be standing right under its own personal ray of sunlight.

A puff of smoke emerged from the ground.

The Fledgling shrieked and jumped away as the grass spontaneously burst into flames. The laughter grew louder, a melodious ringing of bells. The concentrated circle of light chased after Eva as she ran. In its wake, a trail of fire.

And the circle was quick to catch up.

Rick’s eyes shot around. Grassy plains and bushes all around, very few trees. “Under the tree!” He declared, already sprinting towards the nearest source of cover, Dia close behind.

Despite running as fast as she could, the beam still caught up to Eva. The Fledgling screamed as the light crawled its way up her legs, igniting her pants. Underneath, her skin blistered and reddened.

Eva barely managed to dive under the tree before the burn spread.

The treetop over her head burst into flames within seconds. From above, the laughter grew louder, the ferals lazily circling overhead. Several of the beams of light would split off from the concentrated beam and dance around the area, the spots where it converged with the other beams igniting the grass.

“Eva!” Rick called out, wary of how the fire was quickly starting to surround them. “Use the shadow-jump!”

“I can’t!” She cried out, clutching her head. “I can’t! It’s too-.”

She flinched as several flaming branches fell to the ground. The tree wasn’t going to last much longer.

“It’s dark inside your cape!”

That startled her into action. Eva quickly nodded, pulling the hood over her head and crouching low so that the cloth would cover her entirely. She left only a hole for her to be able to see in their direction. There was a flicker of darkness, and the cape slumped to the ground, empty, right as the tree broke down in a ball of fire.

With a gasp, the Fledgling emerged from the shadow right next to Rick, clawing at the air as if she were coming out of a pool she’d been drowning in. The Fledgling was shaking like a leaf. “We-.”

Dia covered her mouth before she could speak further.

The giggling continued, circling around the destroyed tree and moving on to a different tree and igniting it. The three of them remained deathly quiet, watching, hiding behind the tree trunk and trying to remain as out of sight as they could manage.

They were unable to do anything but stare as, one by one, the trees were being set ablaze all around them.

“Are they...?” Dia spoke, realization dawning on her.

“... they’re cutting off our escape.” Rick muttered with dismay, seeing as the circle of fire was starting to close in from every side. “Guess feral Angels prefer their meat well done.”

There were only a handful of options for them to run to, and they were dwindling further. Rick moved to take the lead, but Dia shoved him back hard. “Split! I will draw them off!” She declared, stepping out into the open in a full sprint.

The beams of light instantly moved to follow the Rapha.

Rick grit his teeth as he ran towards a different tree. A hand locked around his own, Eva following close behind, still shaking as her eyes remained glued to the sky above. His breath came in short and hot. The ground crunched under his boots as they jumped over a small fire, and he pushed his screaming legs as hard as he could.

The sound of Dia’s shriek snapped his eyes to the Rapha. The beam had been focused on her legs, the skin blistering under the concentrated heat. The sting of exhaustion in Rick’s legs turned into fiery agony. The reaction was automatic. There was only one thing he could do, and it was to reach through the bond, grasp at the red-hot emotion, and wrench as much of that pain out of Dia and into himself.

It worked. It gave her the room to focus, to move, to push herself towards the temporary safety of the tree. But the excruciating sensation caused his legs to buckle under him and his head to swim. He stumbled, vaguely thinking of the harder fights Monica had had.

This was the one thing he could do to help them, and he felt powerless.

Eva had reacted quickly, dragging him towards a lone looming boulder. The woman was barely tall enough, her head reached his shoulder, and she was dragging him like he was an oversized garbage bag.

“Are you alright!?” she declared with wide eyes, hovering over him as she tried to find what was wrong.

The grass ignited all around them.

“We’re not going to have much time.” Rick coughed, lowering his head to avoid the smoke, glancing at the rock above them with a grimace. “If they heat it up enough, it’s going to either crack or explode or both.”



Hysterical howls rung from high above, the dazzling sparkling wings shining like miniature suns and concentrating the firepower of a dozen maidens upon them. The air went from hot to infernal.

There was a groaning, cracking sound from the rock.

“I don’t want to die.” Eva whispered, shivering as she hugged herself tightly.

As weak as the bond with her was, Rick could still feel the fear, the panic, a distant echo from the pain and anxiety within Dia. He glanced at the tree she was under, aflame, but not under the focus of the Angels. She was healing her legs and looking at them with a horrified expression.

With a grimace, Rick reached into his bag, pulling out the cape and draping it over Eva’s shoulders. This one was several sizes too large. “Catch your breath... and jump with me.”

“What? I don’t have the energy!”

Fledglings fed on blood and energy drawn through fear. This fact rang inside his head as he shoved her against the boulder. Eva weighed barely anything at all, making the task easy. The rocky surface was uncomfortably hot under his touch even in the shade. Their eyes met.

“Look at me, Eva, breathe in, breathe out. And bite me.”

She didn’t move, barely a twitch, eyes wild and body shaking more intensely. “I-I-I-.”

A slap may or may not have worked. She was a maiden, tougher than a human. Chances were, he’d hurt his hand more than it would actually sting her.

“Fuck it.”

Rick leaned down, his lips brushed against her shoulder. Eva’s skin was smooth and cool. The maiden shivered. He bit down harshly, devoid of any gentleness. It was hard enough it would’ve seriously hurt a human. But on the porcelain skin of the Fledgling, it did nothing more than draw a gasp out of her.

The young woman reacted, leaning into him. Her lips brushed against his neck. There was a pinprick of pain as she pressed her cool body against him in a tight embrace.

The cape closed all around them, darkness in every direction and a growing bottomless pit within Rick’s chest.

The world turned into a tornado of shadows. Rick couldn't breathe. Air knocked right out of his lungs. Images of drowning in a river rushed through him, of a flood and of that first time Monica had saved his life. Cold chills ran through him, everything around him threatening to freeze solid.

And just as it came, it was gone. They were back in the heat, gasping, heaving. They were next to a tree, one that wasn't on fire. Dia? The ferals? He didn't know, the cackling and giggles were so far away...

Eva collapsed, falling like a rock, writhing and heaving, shaking and grasping his hand desperately. She screamed, a shrill sound of breaking glass, eyes wide, pupils dilated to the point her irises were little more than minute specks of red around the bottomless black pits. Her breaths were deep gulps, her grip iron.

Rick tried to take a step away but stumbled, feeling a warm trickle running down his chest. The dizziness overtook him by storm. Everything spun out of focus. He collapsed, head hitting the ground. Trying to fight to get back up was useless, his arms too weak to move.

Was it that she'd sucked too much or that the teleportation had put too much pressure in his body?

It felt like eternity, maybe it had been. The minutes passed and all Rick could do was breathe, to try to get the world to stop spinning, to get his body to move.

And what was that thundering sound? Shadows flickered past him, moving all around. He recognized it now... hooves.

"Kill the birds." The words were thick, heavy. "This... it?"

"Yes." The second voice spoke smoothly. There was a calmness to it despite the bated short breath. "We can leave the others, just take their collars. They'll go feral and won't be our problem anymore."

Soft, warm hands cupped Rick's face. The world was too blurred for him to see the details, only the sapphire blue hair that flowed in the wind.

"No. We take pale one. The Lady will want her."

Energy poured through him, and he gasped, able to breathe again, the deathly cold inside his chest receding. "Kiara?" He managed to speak between breaths. "What...?"

"This was the only way."

He felt the metal collar locking around his neck like a choker. A foreign power washed over him soon after. Rick barely had the time to recognize the sleep spell before it took hold and everything began to go dark again.

“Welcome to the warband, little male.” The gruff voice declared.

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## [008] [Bad Day (Dia)]

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Dia jolted awake with a scream that died before it escaped her lips. Her head snapped to look around, finding herself entirely alone in the wilderness.

It was dark; the sun had set. The surrounding ground was damp, patches of grass burnt and the tree little more than charcoal. There was no one, nothing, no movement, no sounds other than the breeze, no scents other than the lingering smell of old fires, no light other than the stars and moon above.

Rick was gone.

It took her a heartbeat to realize something worse. Her hand reached up to her throat, the collar gone.

“Oh, no.”

She was going to go feral.

Her breath came out in a strangled gasp. Dia felt the panic, and the air suddenly thinned.

Had Rick left her?

But her training wouldn't let her panic, not now. The Rapha recognized the emotion for what it was and the danger it posed. She was better than this. With a deep breath, she allowed her aura to settle and seep into herself, like soaking in a hot bath. The terror had no chance, it sputtered out. Within moments she was nothing more than mildly nervous and deeply concerned.

Her fingers touched her throat again. The space was still very much devoid of her enchanted blue collar.

And yet... she couldn't sense the feral curse. Her thoughts were unconstrained. Maybe it was too soon? No, every maiden was taught to spot the signs within themselves. Dia breathed out slowly.

She was not going feral. She was still bonded.

She looked around more carefully now. The spot she'd been sleeping in was muddied, the grass untouched by the flames. There were traces of water all around, but too focused on a single spot for it to have been raining.

A maiden had done this.

But why was Rick not there?

*"They'll go feral and won't be our problem anymore."*

The memory came to her unbidden.

*Kiara, holding Rick, surrounded by dozens of bandits and a gigantic Orc. The Succubus yanking the collar out of Dia's neck and laughing as she used her powers on the Rapha and leaving her for dead.*

"That traitorous cunt-munching whore!"

Dia kicked at the charcoaled tree, then screamed as it broke and she lost balance. Trying to stand back up, she screamed again when she spotted the wide-eyed face looking up at her.

Jumping away and holding both hands up, she prepared for a fight, even if unsure she'd win it. She was a Rapha. Her confidence when it came to fights reached as far as the very stupid or very weak ferals went, that was about it.

But the face hadn't moved. It was clear they weren't blinking either. Dia quickly pooled her energy and, after carefully shaping it into the proper form, carefully cast a small illumination spell.

The corpse came into view. One of the feral angels.

Dia grimaced, then stepped closer. The feral had been taken down by having something large pierce through the center of the chest. Likely a spear. It had been a clean kill, precise. The corpse had some oddly shaped discolorations around the chest area, but nothing worth paying attention to. Yet it was when Dia had been about to turn away that a splotch of green caught her eye.

Something in the wing that her mind registered was being completely out of place.

A leaf.

“What’s this?” She leaned closer and tugged the leaf. The whole wing immediately twitched. She leapt away, breath caught in a half-formed scream.

But nothing happened. The corpse remained dead.

She relaxed, sighing. “I’m wasting my time here.”

Dia began looking around for... anything. It didn’t take long to find two of the bags they’d been carrying. One had been hers, the other was Rick’s, containing the solid wooden box that rattled with the sound of dozens of tiny glass flasks.

The thought gripped at her heart and clenched so tightly she whimpered.

She had failed him.

But she couldn’t cry, she couldn’t show weakness. She was a maiden, she couldn’t... she couldn’t....

Dia dried a tear from her eyes. She was a maiden. She was supposed to be the unflinching support, the strong one. Crying wasn’t any of those things, but she couldn’t stop the sob that turned into a wail.

They’d taken Rick, and there was nothing she could do.

“Dia loud.”

She shrieked, jumping away and swinging the first thing she’d caught a grasp of.

The half-burnt stick turned to tiny pieces against a bloodied white furred arm with black stripes. Dia recognized it instantly. Monica.

“Rick good?” The Sabertooth hadn’t even flinched at the attack. The stick might as well have been a feather.

Dia gawked as the taller maiden that was a foot shy of being twice her own height bit into a boar leg, loudly chewing through the bone, blood dripping down her chin and all over the half-torn shirt. It took the Rapha a stupefied second to catch herself, to look to the murderous maiden that owed her life and sanity to Rick and yet stood there doing... nothing!

“You!” Dia shot to her feet, pointing at Monica. “You left us! You didn’t come back!”

“Rick say three days. Monica hunt three days.” Monica scowled, batting away Dia’s hand and nearly throwing her to the ground in the process. “Rick need food. Monica hunt food.

Monica do good.” To prove her point, she dropped the three boars she’d been carrying, each easily twice Dia’s weight. “Rick good?”

“They took Rick!” She punched the blood-stained chest, feeling the maiden not even react. “They took Rick!” She punched harder. “Kiara took Rick.” This time she managed to get Monica to wobble ever so slightly.

Monica spoke with a slow growl that made the ground shake under Dia’s feet. “Kiara take Rick. Your fault. Weak. Not stop Kiara.” Each letter was a dagger that sent the pink-haired healer reeling.

“No.” She spoke the word, but hesitated.

“Kiara not share Rick. Bad Kiara.” Monica spoke dismissively, sniffing around the area and no longer paying attention to Dia. “Monica share Rick. Share with Dia, share with Kiara. Eva? Eva... not want Rick.” She sniffed again, then glared at some spot near one of the trees that had not been burnt. “Or do want?”

“What are you talking about?” Dia demanded, managing to find a trickle of determination now that she was not the focus of the stronger maiden.

“Smells.” Monica shook her head. “Eva hurt Rick, blood. But Rick alive. Eva scared and happy? Very happy? Rick calm, weak.” She pointed at the ground. “Kiara, Eva, Rick, others.” She held her hands out, counting with her fingers. “Eight, nine, ten, many, many five, many... eight? Bit strong, not strong. One big strong? Two?”

“Nineteen. The word is ‘nineteen’.”

“Nineteen eight?”

“No, just...” She shook her head, trying to get her thoughts in order. “We need to find Rick.”

“Dia stay, Monica find Rick.” Monica quickly declared, shaking her head. “No sharing, mistake. Monica and Rick alone, best.”

The Rapha found that shred of determination instantly. “No.” She spoke now, frowning. “I will come with you. We will save Rick.”

Monica snorted, pointing a claw at her and rolling her eyes exaggeratedly. “Weak.” She poked Dia’s chest. “Slow.” She continued. “Dumb.” Another poke. “Monica not share. Rick not want Dia.”

And just like that, she exploded. “LIAR!”

Dia leapt, uncaring from the fact that she was outmatched. She swung at Monica with a clenched, glowing fist.

Monica’s tail lashed out and swept her feet from under her. Dia stumbled, not managing to connect with anything other than the ground. The Sabertooth took another bite of her boar-leg while she held the trio of boars on her shoulder with the other arm. She hadn’t even moved.

“You’re a liar.” Dia stated, quickly standing back up.

“Dia weak. Lose Rick to Kiara.” Monica threw a slight kick at Dia as she’d tried to get close, sending her to the ground again. “Monica tell Rick. Weak Dia danger. Bad for pack. Dia slow Rick down.”

“I kept him alive!” She stood back up, only for her legs to get kicked out from under her again. Her face smacked against the blackened mud. “I saved him! I saved him because you put him in danger! You nearly got him killed!”

“Weak Rick.” Monica shrugged. “Monica protect Rick, but Rick mistake, Monica mistake. Rick get hurt, Rick learn, Monica learn. Rick grow strong. Stronger. Dia not learn. Dia weak. Always weak.”

She seethed, shuffling to get back to her feet, but every attempt got her arms and legs knocked right from under her. Monica barely needed to move. A kick or a simple flick of her tail was enough to keep Dia down. It wasn’t even as if she was being shoved or weighed down.

Their difference in power and experience fighting was just that great.

“Rick will never be strong!” She cried out, clenching her fists. “He is human! Don’t you get it!? No matter what he-.”

“RICK STRONG!” Monica snapped.

The ground shook, and Dia tripped in a sudden attempt to backpedal away from the monster as fast as she could. This time the Sabertooth was not holding back. Her body shimmered with dark power, and the surrounding shadows reacted, the blackness of the night turning into sharp knives.

Blue eyes shone with unrelenting, unstoppable power. “Rick grow. Here.” Monica slapped the center of her chest. “Rick smartest, teach Monica. Rick toughest, take



Monica pain, take anger.” She kicked Dia, sending her back to the ground. “Rick leave good-food place for Monica! Rick strong!”

The Sabertooth was breathing hard, her face contorted into a grimace of pain, her whole frame shaking from the raw emotion.

“I...” Dia swallowed, looking up at the feralborn maiden from the ground. “I never thought... you...” She bit her lip. “He said it was because he... wanted to get away from the politics of the nobles...”

“Always complicated.” The tall woman snorted the word bitterly, rolling her eyes. “But Monica smart, learn.” Her massive claw pinned Dia to the ground, the Sabertooth licked her lips. Slowly, she got close to Dia, leaning down until they were face to face, her voice little more than a whisper. “Dia tell Rick where. Now.”

The feline’s presence flaring out like a thrown knife. Dia found herself suddenly very aware there was nothing in this world that could stop Monica from killing her there and then. It brought back the awareness of what the maiden had been not that long ago.

Monica might be tame now, but Dia remembered what she’d once been. White Claw, the terror of the tiny little border village she’d spent the better part of her life in. The singular feral that would decimate the local guard forces every time they tried to capture or kill the thing.

This was the maiden responsible for the death of dozens of trained knights back when she was under the influence of the feral curse. The one whose name would be whispered in hushed tones full of hate and fear.

She’d only grown more dangerous since. And now her claws were inches from Dia’s flesh. She might as well have been human for all the protection her powers could grant her against the Sabertooth.

“Why do you ask me!?”

“Dia not know? Dia hate Rick?”

Desperation gripped her. “I don’t know! I just can’t hunt or see in the dark or track like you! I am a he-.”

“NO!” Monica’s claw poked Dia’s chest, just barely off center, perfectly above her heart, drawing a singular drop of blood. “Here. Feel. Where. Rick?”

Dia hesitated, swallowing. It didn’t make sense, it wasn’t as if she could just magically...

Her legs.

Blinking, she stopped her struggle. She tried to calm her heart, to think, to...

“No think! Feel!” The feline poked harder, piercing deeper and pulling a sharp cry from Dia. “Rick. Where?”

She remembered the strange feeling as she'd been running from the angels. The sensation of the pain upon her legs suddenly diminished. A sensation so abrupt she'd almost feared she'd lost them. But they'd been there, something else...

There was the barest tug, a twitch, something inside her that... tinkled, like a tiny bell.

“That way.” She wasn't sure why this was, or how far, just... that it was that way. Exactly that way.

Monica pulled her claw off of her chest, and Dia gasped. “Dia learn, good. But still dumb.” She proclaimed, shaking her head. “Monica take Dia, hunt Rick, save Rick.”

Just like that. No fanfare or further declarations were necessary. She picked up the boars and began to walk as if the exchange had been nothing more than a brief moment for rest.

Dia hurried to pick everything and catch up. “We should hurry.”

Monica rolled her eyes, ripping a boar leg and tossing it over at the nurse. “Rick far. Monica tired if rush. Many strong, big fight, need strength.”

“If we don't hurry, he might get hurt. We might not make it in time.”

“Rick strong. Trust Rick.”

Jealousy washed down Dia's throat like a bitter pill. She'd known the bond with Rick was not normal. She'd known it was far more than it seemed. With a grimace, the Rapha remembered every time Rick had felt... different. How he'd moved differently, intensely predatory. It had been unnerving, as if he were almost someone else entirely.

As if some part of Monica had rubbed off on him on a fundamental level.

Every day he'd felt more alien.

“Does he...” She swallowed, lowering her gaze, tightening her fists and trying to look at Monica but suddenly not finding the strength. “Does he hate me? Is that how he really feels?”

The Sabertooth paused, slowing down and turned to look at her, their gazes meeting for only a moment. The feline's eyes were a piercing deep blue, predatory and intense. Unflinching. Dia's were a pale magenta, soft, hesitant, uncertain.

Monica rolled her eyes and continued walking through the grassy field, her steps not making a sound. "Monica lie." She proclaimed. There was an edge of amusement in her words.

"Rick taught you that?"

"No, Monica watch Dia. Learn."

The Rapha blanched. "I do not lie."

The large feline snorted, shaking her head. "You always says you happy. Always. Says thing that not feels. Lie. Lots."

Dia's mouth snapped shut. Flushing, she looked the other way, rubbing the back of her neck. "I'm-." With her fingers brushing against her skin, she stopped and blinked. Her eyes widened.

"We need help to save him, and you're going to help me get it."

Monica looked at her humourlessly.

"Please? There... uh... you'll get to fight a bunch?"

The feline didn't move. Dia fidgeted.

"And... I'll be stronger. I won't slow you down."

She began to turn.

"And it will help Rick!"

Monica raised an eyebrow. "Dia explain."

"It's... uh... compl-." She stopped herself before she could finish the sentence. With a nod, she pulled her hair back slightly. "I'll explain. Everything."