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## [031] [The Big]

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Rick had expected that taking an entire tribe to Sinco would be slow. Who wouldn't? It was a whole tiny village after all, one nearing a handful hundred.

But the Orcs, and by extension all the other maidens, had more than one surprise in store.

When the tribe had set off, they'd done so with a grand demolition. The moment everything of value had been picked up and packaged, the village was then torn to shreds by anyone willing to take part in the little destruction-derby.

Following this, the tribe would split up into hut-family units.

Every "family" would be made of one human and multiple maidens. The maiden with the highest standing within the family unit (almost always an Orc) would be in charge of carrying and protecting the human on their back. And the rest would handle the luggage and supplies that "family" unit would take with them.

And from there, they would break into a jogging pace that, to a human, would have been a dead sprint.

Rick had the distinct "honor" of being carried by Urtha since Monica's job as the chief meant it was her job to be at the tip of the metaphorical spear. Meanwhile, Rick was left seated on a sort-of-backpack the tall Orc carried.

Kiara flew overhead with the handful of other flying maidens that'd been woken up from the boxes. Leaving Eva and Dia to carry their belongings. It left an unpleasant aftertaste in Rick's gut.

The smirk Dia kept shooting his way as he petulantly crossed his arms and resigned himself to being glorified luggage. "I could at least be playing the drums to mark the pace or something. It's not like we're being subtle or quiet."

"Humans have no place drawing attention where danger lurks," Urtha said, the only one present that wasn't even winded. "Less so the Father."

"Some feral might think you are a cheesy snack." Dia, huffing as she pushed herself, still giggled.

“The tribe is tense enough already.” The Orc shook her head. “We rarely bring this many weaklings with us.”

“One of many changes to come.” Rick held the sigh, mostly because he was holding on to the chair to keep from falling over. He didn’t want to think about it, but once they reached Sinco, things would get complicated.

They were effectively marching out, seeking to conquer a city. Whether it be through actual warfare or maneuvering, they weren’t sure just yet. They just knew that they were prepared for the former if the latter didn’t work out. The reports had come in: Sinco was not in a good place. The constant presence of highly aggressive ferals had been chipping away at their defenses.

The only hope the city held was that they would receive reinforcements from Aubria.

Rick would get there faster.

It was in these thoughts that he pondered throughout the day. The tribe traveled and rested too often to the Orc’s liking. There was much friction to be had, and the humans were guarded like the treasures the tribe considered them to be.

When night came, a singular large hut was made for the humans, and the maidens would sleep in rotations. There would be small songs and minor stories that were shared, small moments of comfort. But they were all held under the looming watchfulness of the tribe.

Because they were at their most vulnerable. One missed feral deciding to make a stand could mean a human getting hurt. Rick had to begrudgingly respect them for that. As much as he loathed being treated like some kind of porcelain doll, there was no room to question that the maidens were going the extra mile for everyone’s safety and survival.

Though they would sometimes go a bit overboard against the maidens that “slowed down the tribe”. His role mediating such disputes had become his main role throughout the following days.

One morning, as they were preparing to set out, he heard it.

It started with a scream, then a yelp, and then a rush.

By the time Rick realized what was going on, Monica was upon him. Drenched from head to toe and stinking of salt and seaweed. The massive maiden was looking at him with a smile that threatened to split her head in two.

“Rick!” She hovered over him, dripping water all over. “Come! Come!”

“Is everything alright?” He asked from the discomfort of the portable chair he was currently occupying.

“COME!” she insisted, hopping on her feet and skittishly looking back, aiming her ear in the direction she’d come from. “Quick!”

“The tribe is not heading that way.” Urtha pointed out.

Rick considered it for a second. “Are there any problems shifting course to travel nearer to the sea?”

“It is a bad idea. For many reasons.”

Her words brought nods from Eva and Dia, to which Rick could only respond with a shrug. “Ok, then we could call for a break for the day, give everyone a chance to properly unwind, and I’ll go with Monica.” He pointed over at the feline that was bouncing on her heels, just barely holding back from reaching out and yanking him into her wet embrace. “Seems like the chief is very excited about something.”

“I bet its food,” Eva said.

“Urtha?” Rick waited.

The Orc glanced over at the crowd. “We will set camp for the day. We cannot afford to lose any of the weaklings.”

That was as good as he could’ve hoped. Rick nodded and was immediately snatched by Monica’s fuzzy paw. The maiden picked him up, putting him over her shoulder and trotting through the shrubbery and trees with little regard for who might be following.

Rick got himself a face full of leaves, flinching and batting them away. “Hey, wait, the branches-”

The Sabretooth yanked him into her arms and broke into a full sprint. Dirt and rocks burst forth from where she stood as air whipped about them. Her fang-filled smile only grew. Monica’s eyes were only focused forward. Rick, meanwhile, was trying to avoid swallowing bugs. The insects that kept flying about appeared to prefer smacking against his face.

There was a moment of clarity, light, and blue.

And with a splash, he was underwater.

Rick made the mistake of gasping, swallowing sea-water, wildly flinging his arms to get himself to the surface. Monica yanked him out of the water, leaving him feeling like a half-drowned cat as he coughed and spat.

“LOOK!” she proclaimed, dropping him on the sandy beach as she hurried towards the crashing waves, kicking at them and sending sprays of foam high into the air. “Rick! BIG!” She waved wildly, rushing her way into the water, then back out.

“That’s the sea.”

“Monica see!” With wide arms, she tried to point at all of it at once.

“No, it’s a new word. Sounds similar.” He combed his hair out of his face with his hands, removing his shirt. “Sea. S-E-A. Big, wet, and salty.”

“BIG WET!” Monica was cheering and splashing, kicking her way up and down the shore, jumping into the waves and coming out a dozen meters away and then making her way back to the shore.

“It’s the sea.” He couldn’t help but smile, watching as she slapped the water with her huge paws, creating a billowing tower of water and foam to rise at least a dozen meters into the air.

He put the low-end terrifying notion of how much force was packed into that strike and kept an easy-going smile.

“It’s the ocean.” The voice called from above, Kiara leisurely drifting down and sitting next to him. “Too far away from anything or anyone. Few ships go through here.”

“So chock-full of dangerous ferals?”

“Just like everywhere else.” Her eyes weren’t on Monica. The Succubus’ gaze appeared more focused on trailing the waves as they crashed into the shore. “Likely they’ve been scared off, though. The rush must have eaten everything available near the shore.”

Rick looked at the waves, then at her. “How can you tell?”

“There’s nothing in the waves.” She pointed. “Usually there’s at least the odd Sprite.”

“Maybe Monica scared them off.”

“Doubtful.” Kiara shook her head, turning to eye him with a slight smirk. “You’re drenched. Maybe you’d want to take your clothes off?” Her gaze trailed over him in a distinctly predatory way.

“You’re hungry, huh?”

She leaned closer, hand reaching over to caress his shoulder. “Maybe a little more than that...” Gold eyes locked to his, her hand gently pushing his back into the sand, the Succubus moving in closer so that she could pin him down.

Rick grinned. “Careful with the splash.”

The momentary confusion turned to shock and horror as she was yanked away and flung into the sea. Monica stared with ample amount of self-satisfaction as the Succubus swore and sank into the waves. “No horny time.” The feline declared, looking at Rick with a dangerous glint in her eyes.

“I understand.” He raised his hands, playing the role of innocent bystander.

“Play time.”

His eyes widened with concern. Uh oh.

She reached down, pulling him up by the shirt. “Rick train swim.”

“I know how to swim.” He quickly proclaimed, grabbing hold of her claws as her arm tensed. “BUT!”

Monica hesitated, looking at the water, then at him with narrowed eyes. “But?”

“Don’t throw me like you did Kiara or I will break,” he said, quickly relaxing a little as he pointed up into the air. “Throw me a little up. Gently, into the water.”

She eyed him for a moment, and with a flick of her tail, caught a stone. “Like this?” She grasped the rock and gently tossed it into a high arch that fell into the sea with a little plop.

“Yeah, just like-AAAAHHHH!!!”

He was flying, body spinning in the air as gravity quickly lay claim. Rick did the only thing he could think of, curling into a ball, drawing breath, and plunge. He was underwater in the next instant, bubbles and light, with the sandy bottom still within sight.

It was down there that he spotted Kiara looking up at him with a smirk, a bubble wrapping her head. The conspicuously naked Succubus used her wings to swim up at him, catching him in her grasp and pulling him down.

Rick clutched his mouth, trying to keep his breath.

Kiara's amusement was apparent as she held him by the shirt, looking at him with a mischievous twinkle. The iron grip remained, and he could see what her plan was, so he leaned into her, breaking the surface of the bubble with his face.

The breath was cut short with the kiss.

Then she shoved him away, waving off and winking as she swam further away from the shore. The speed she was moving with clearly was one not meant for him to follow, so Rick didn't, going up to the surface.

Monica was waiting for him, excitedly grinning from ear to ear.

"Again!" he declared the moment he stepped on the sand. "But this time not from the shirt or it might rip."

By the time others were reaching the beach, the duo had figured out a way to make the launch procedure safer... ish. Mostly in that the victim of choice would stand on Monica's palm and curl into a cannonball, so that she could then throw.

And the maiden had quite the throwing arm.

The couple of Goblins that showed up excitedly joined in. Then came the Orcs, Mousegirls, and Doggirls, and by the time Urtha had shown her face, the various tribe members had a line of eager volunteers to be thrown into the sea. While the Orcs were competing with one another to see who could get their cargo the furthest from the shore.

Dia caught sight of the glare before Rick could even speak up. "I've set up a rotation of guards with the ones keeping watch over the tribe," the healer proclaimed. "And the water maidens are working as lookouts."

"Do you think that would placate me?"

"Do you want to play in the launch games?" Rick asked, giving Dia a warning look. "I bet you'd give Monica a run for her money."

"She is stronger." Urtha spoke after just a moment of observation, shaking her head. "I would need to wait for her to tire."

He looked at the Orc as she remained near them, but didn't sit. He could almost taste the tension within her, that knot of uncertainty. "Would you like to build a sand castle, then?"

"A castle of sand?"

"Exactly that." Rick sat up. "Just wet sand and more sand, and make a castle with it."

Urtha's thick brows furrowed. "That... sounds childish."

He shrugged. "Sand is fragile and crumbles easily if mishandled. Consider it a test of skill." A sly smile followed. "Or are you scared a little human will be better at it than you?"

With a scoff, she stomped her foot once. "Show me."

"I'll join in!" Dia said. "It's been a while since I've played mud-walls."

"The what now?"

"It's a game we healers played when little helped give us finer control over our power." She crouched down, grabbing a handful of wet sand and proceeding to carefully lay it down in the shape of a very thin tube. A tube no thicker than a straw, and tall enough to reach her knee. "The trick is in pushing the water away at the right time."

Rick and Urtha shared a worried glance.

Two hours later, things had escalated... a little.

It turned out that the Orc's ability to make wood nearly as tough as steel could be applied to sand to just enough of a degree that Urtha had made a box tower about two meters on the side and five tall. Rick, working with a knife, carved out details on the tower.

Mostly windows and bricks.

Dia, on the other hand, had built a miniature replica of the fortified city of Balet. Devoid of any details, the city was a configuration of boxes roughly knee height.

It was when some maidens that had tired of the Monica-Launcher™ had gathered to watch that things escalated. With Mousegirls quickly getting recruited by Dia so that they could turn the sand boxes into detailed houses, and Urtha recruiting other Orcs so that they could put together a second tower.

Somewhere along the way, Sheel had shown up to set up an impromptu grill service.

Rick got his fill as he watched the competition unfold, recovering his energy and feeling exhausted in a good way. He caught sight of Kiara emerging from the sea, sans clothes. The Succubus took one look at the gathering, and eventually locked on to him.

The alluring blue-haired Succubus shifted her walk, tucking away tiredness and presenting only assuredness and grace. Her ample hips swayed with a mesmerizing rhythm, tail punctuating every step with a flick. The maiden made a show of pushing her sky-blue hair over her shoulder, presenting her bare chest for him to drink in.

There was a twinkle of enjoyment in her golden eyes when his gaze locked on to her body. A sly smile played on her lips, seductive and coy.

As she reached him, the succubus knelt down and whispered in his ear, her voice soft and alluring. "Is this spot taken?"

Rick felt his throat dry, and he coughed a little. "Sure."

Kiara grinned wider, taking his lap, tail reaching under his shirt to caress his chest. "It is very comfortable." She punctuated her words by grinding against herself against his crotch a little. "You seem thrilled to see me."

He wrapped his hands around her midriff, pulling her against his chest, ignoring the slight discomfort of her wings. "Be warned that Monica is looking our way," he whispered. "Engage and you will get launched. She's gotten great at it."

The tail twitched. "Noted." Her tone was begrudging. "I meant to ask, are you familiar with... this? The sea? The ocean? The depths?"

"I've been on my fair share of boats, and went diving in a reef once." He admitted freely. "And I've flown over the clouds in one of the most boring technological marvel my world built." A little chuckle followed. "But I think you were meaning to lead this somewhere else?"

Kiara shifted, staring over her shoulder for a moment. "I'd like to hear more about your world sometime." Her voice held an edge of hesitation to it, and Rick had the distinct impression she was trying to hold something back. "But yes, I was meaning to lead the conversation to this."

The tone was gone; the look was gone, replaced by smug satisfaction as she held up a blue gemstone. The object was the size of a pearl and a deep, glimmering blue.

"An impure elemental stone." The Succubus declared. "Take it."

Rick obliged, lifting it to get a better look. Light wavered and refracted within the sphere, adding a shimmer that made it look as if there was a tiny sea contained within. Twisting and shifting the stone did not make the illusion of change, making the little sphere appear like a looking-glass of some sort.

The refracted light swayed and shifted against his palm like an aurora.

"It's... this is really impressive." He declared after a moment, glancing back at her.



“I stumbled onto this while looking for something else. It has some minor value, but is mostly useless since it has a very low purity.” She shrugged her lithe shoulders, trailing his jaw with her sharp nail. “Consider it compensation.”

He frowned a little. “Compensation for what?”

She shrugged, beating her wings once and hopping on to her feet. “I will go get myself a change of clothes and a snack.” She turned to leave. “You’re more than welcome to join.”

Rick could only chuckle. “I appreciate the offer, but I’m exhausted right now.”

“Have it your way.” The maiden vanished into the thicket, sauntering off to the tribe. “If you’ve got nothing better to do, pay some attention to the little leech. Wouldn’t want her to feel neglected, now would we?”

Where had that come from? Rick watched her go, taking a moment to stand up and check that the little get-together was going nowhere. From there, he turned his focus inwards and sought the bond to Eva. It was tougher than he’d expected, especially with the noise from all the other bonds trying to drown out everything.

He found her sitting on a rock, at the very edge of the sandy shore, staring off at the setting sun. The maiden had her knees tucked against her chest, body covered under her black cape, only her red eyes and pale face exposed to the sunlight.

She noticed his approach, but didn’t react.

Rick took a spot next to her, not quite within arm’s reach. “You’ve avoided talking with me. Anything I should worry about?” His question caused the intended result. Eva looked at him with wide eyes. “Don’t look at me like that. I know you don’t like small-talk, and this is just about the most important subject I could think of.”

The Fledgling turned away. “True.” She acknowledged. “I cannot answer your question, sir.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Can’t.” She hugged her knees, turning away and towards the horizon.

Was she hesitating to take a stance, or was she unsure of what stance to take to begin with? Rick nodded a little. “If it’s any consolation, it’s weird for me, too.” He lay back on the stone, looking at the orange clouds above. “Especially with how stiff you’re acting.”

“The Wildling-King calls me his property, and then complains he is treated with the due formalities?” Eva glared.

“Point taken.” Rick sighed. “I just expected that you’d learn from the others.”

“I cannot compare myself to the monster that is Monica or Kiara, nor consider myself to hold a fraction of the trust you give Dia,” she summarized. “I am a Fledgling. Anywhere within the kingdom, a slip of the tongue, a mistake, or a perceived fault would earn me severe punishment.” The maiden glowered, then sighed. “I myself have given such for less.”

“So you don’t know what to expect from me, but will avoid talking with me about those expectations.”

The glare intensified. “I would trust you of all would understand the matter is not that simple.”

“You’re not calling me sir.” He replied with an arched brow, watching her flinch. “I don’t want to insult your intelligence, but it seems like you’re intentionally running on a groundless hypothesis. So my question would be, why have you kept at it?”

She deflated with a sigh. “I don’t know.”

Rick reached out, ruffling her hair. “Well, while you think about it, how about spending some actual time together with the others? Brooding didn’t get you the answer you were looking for, so how about trying to change the pace a little?”

The glare intensified. “I was not brooding. What do you take me for? I am older than you! I was the head of a noble house of great prestige!” She shot to her feet, glaring, lips curling into a snarl.

Rick stepped closer, directly into her personal space. “Evangeline.” He declared, his tone holding only the barest edge to it.

The Fledgling flinched, looking away, hands hiding under her cape. “You are right.” She spoke, deflating. “I... am Evangeline now.”

She moved to kneel, to lower herself, but his hand on her chin held her in place. He raised her gaze so that they would meet eyes. “The only line you stepped over was baring your fangs at me. Nothing else.”

He wanted to step away, to turn around and go to the beach with the others. But something else held him in place as he looked down to those ruby red eyes, the way she

trembled against his palm, how she inhaled deeply and her eyelids fluttered. The maiden leaned into his touch, taking a hesitant step closer.

“Th-this...” Eva stammered, swallowing.

Rick leaned closer. “This is your chance to step away.”

She didn’t.

The Fledgling followed the gentle tug of his palm, raising herself to her tiptoes, leaning into the kiss. She froze, opening her mouth a little and scratching his lips with her fangs in hunger. They pierced, only enough to draw a drop of blood, only enough to make him flinch.

Eva recoiled, eyes wild, face beet red. “I, no, I-... This isn’t...”

The maiden vanished into the shadows before he could say anything. He could sense her quickly making an escape through the darkness. The human was left mostly amused at the reaction, chuckling as he took the long way back to the others.

He could understand why Kiara found entertainment out of teasing the Fledgling. Idly, he wondered if they could exchange some notes.