
[129] [Fire]

Monica was happirritated.

Rick stared at the feline as she walked, chest puffed out, shoulders straight, head held high, chin raised at an upward angle. She walked with a smug grin, her tail held up, showing off the piece of metal that had been added to the tip. It was a blade, roughly a foot in length and with a wicked curve, the design simple but deadly. And with every maiden that stopped to stare at the thing, Monica swelled a little larger.

It almost hid the little twitch of her ears and lip every time her tail moved a little too fast.

There had been three ways to install the weapon on the maiden's tail. The first relied on shaving the tip of the tail so the proper enchantments could squeeze it into place.

Monica, of course, would sooner rip Rollo's head off than have her beautiful tail shaved.

The second option was to wrap the whole tail in armor plates... which was also shot down since it would restrict its movement too much.

The third option had been, in effect, to "fix" the weapon in place through four rods piercing through her tail. The procedure had been performed by Dia, and she had assured there was no irritation or risk for infection, but that Monica needed to keep the weapon in place for a week. Otherwise, her body could start to "patch the holes" the moment she took it off, requiring going through the whole process over again.

As far as Rick could tell, the presence of the weapon didn't hurt her, but it was incredibly annoying. Monica hated having someone pull on her tail, and this was exactly that. But the swagger and preening from showing it off to the whole city was, currently, compensating for that well enough.

Also, she had promised she would get used to it.

"Remember that you'll have to spar with Embla and Urtha once you get used to that." He didn't exactly like that he sounded like a coach, and that Monica's pout was adorable. But he had also promised to help her however he could, and that meant insisting she start participating in the mock battles with the tribe for once.

Neither of them enjoyed the thought of Monica being part of a fight. She wanted to focus on making that nest, and Rick just... didn't like having anyone fight for him. Even if he understood the necessity, it didn't mean he liked it.

For a moment I fantasized about making an army of Rollos. Something I could truly throw at a dangerous problem and not be too concerned about how many make it out... then again, an army of Rollos was probably worse than anything the Darktons could send this way. Also probably useless in an actual fight.

“Why angry?” Monica had slowed down, and stopped herself from reaching out to him with her tail, instead gently placing her paw on his shoulder.

“No, just... annoyed.” He shook his head. “We need to go to the stinky place, there are some things I need to check on.”

Taking advantage of a break in the blizzard that had been assaulting them these past few months, they had cleared out the area to start a new installation, this one meant to be closer to a factory than the chemical plant Rick had propped up. In fact, it would have been more accurate to call it a weapon’s manufacturing facility. Some of Rollo’s prototypes had been approved, and alongside the original “bomb-spear” and “bomb-shield”, the facility made for a safer place to put everything together.

Rick had wanted to add a third building but exclusively for Raphaella’s plane project, but the Cog Horde refused to use anything other than their subterranean maze.

“Fine.” Monica declared flatly, nose scrunching up as she turned them both towards the coast. “But short visit, not enough Rick time.”

“Story of my life.” He chuckled wryly.

Dia sat quietly, one hand using a charcoal stick to quickly scribble notes while the other moved from the two bleeding arms that had been placed in front of her. One was from Embla, and the other from Haal. The Malumari and the Orc had both been made volunteers for a bit of medical experimentation. Dia had made two exact incisions, parallel lines, three inches long, and spaced half an inch apart. It had been tough, but not impossible with her medical tools. She had long since gotten used to the Orc’s durability and in finding ways to get through.

“Are you just going to keep cutting us up over and over?” Haal asked, the pregnant Orc gingerly caressing her belly with her other hand.

"Just a few more times," Dia replied, not raising her gaze from the paper. "This round, Embla, could you slow the process further?"

"I don't think I can slow it any more," she replied. "And I still think you shouldn't walk this path."

Dia's scribbling slowed down, and she raised her gaze at the maiden, raising a brow.

"Trying to become a better healer?"

"Trying to learn fleshcrafting."

"Right." Dia carefully moved her hand from either maiden, casting another analysis spell to contrast the two. Returning to her note-taking, she used tiny amounts of elemental power to empower the spell so she could stare more carefully, more deeply.

Embla was there mostly to try and talk Dia out of this. Haal, on the other hand, was getting a little stir-crazy from not being allowed to fight with the tribe. She had been more than happy at the prospect of potentially getting injured, if only to relieve the boredom.

"Leave Spikes alone," Haal snorted loudly. "She wants to be stronger, nothing bad about that."

"What she said," the Rapha said, preparing to observe the healing process over again.

"Now hush, got to focus on this."

Upon injury, the body would produce hormones to signal that the healing process was to begin, hemostasis and inflammation would follow. Platelets in the blood would clump and clot, stymying the bleeding and protecting from infection.

All her life, Dia had been taught that there were two ways a body could heal itself after this process had taken place.

The first kind, the most common, would follow stages of healing. Fibroblasts would migrate into the injury, collagen would be used to create granulation tissue, then epithelial cells would proliferate to pull on the wound, and on and on... effectively, in the end, the process would cause a scar. The body would take anywhere from weeks to years to fully reorganize and repair the tissue, undoing the scar most of the time.

The second was the kind maidens capable of regeneration would take, such as Orcs or Vampires. Unlike with humans, the body would be flooded with stem cells, guided by the maiden's own elemental energy. The whole process would be far faster, creating the materials necessary while skipping the middle steps a normal wound would need. Despite this, the body could still undergo healing the "usual" way, but that would be if there weren't enough stem cells to work with. It was the reason why Orcs were so

unlikely to scar; the injury had to be brutal enough that the original process would kick into gear.

And then there was Embla's method of healing.

If she didn't do anything, then her body would follow the normal maiden variation, the usual slow process. But if she did... It was baffling. Because every time it happened, it could be in a different way. Most times, the platelets would just remake themselves into skin cells. Other times the blood would form bits of skin cells and graft them into the injury. And once, her body just pulled the injury closed and coerced the skin cells to multiply until the tissue was reconnected.

It was as if she could force any part of herself to become a stem cell, and then alter it to become any other cell she wanted. At will.

The process had its clear drawbacks. After her fight with Urtha and getting herself torn up on the inside, Embla had nearly killed herself by not configuring her insides as they should have been. It was also slower than an Orc's regeneration. Its main advantage was that Embla could choose not to heal something back. If she lost her hand, she could keep the stump. Not exactly an obvious plus, but an Orc's dietary needs would be far greater if she wished to regrow a limb, something that might not be available all the time.

In Dia's eyes, even if the process was an entirely new thing, it felt like a middle step between normal healing and regenerators. A step that opened options she hadn't even thought of before. What if Embla pushed her body to form thicker bones? Or stronger muscles? What if she could use this technique to...

She quickly shook her head before the idea could take root. Dia was a healer; her work was to help her patients. She would never allow herself to walk the path of that monster.

Yet this path was the possible way she knew how to make up for her mistakes, to help Monica recover her hands... and to help Rick's scars to finally mend.

Pulling out her scalpel, she gazed at both maidens. "Another?"

Rick stood at a slight hunch as he stared down at the "Cog Wings v2," snugly kept within the underground confines of "Cog Base #1." This cavern had a ramp leading to the

outside that could double as a take-off ramp, and was otherwise accessed through tunnels too small for Rick to walk comfortably.

The Cog Wings v2 looked very much like its predecessor (that is, a cannon that had been given wings), but there were several distinctions. The first of which was that this time around, there was a second seat for a copilot. The second distinction was that the copilot's cabin had an exhaust pipe coming out through it, one that was as wide as a fist and had a mechanism to swivel it around.

"Please don't tell me that's an actual cannon," Rick muttered as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. It didn't go unnoticed that the copilot's cabin had the walls completely covered in cloth-covered spheres.

"It is a force exhaust port," Raphaella proclaimed. "If necessary, it can be used to shoot. But it can also be used for sudden aerial maneuvers."

"I still don't know how this thing can even fly." With a groan, Rick sat down on the ground so he could look at the plane's underbelly. "At least this time you've got landing gear."

"We are still working out how to use the exhaust port for proper deceleration," the Metalmouse said. "Theoretically it is possible, but there are complications as the force is not aligned with the central axis."

"Why not just put the exhaust port at the nose and align it?"

"Because then it wouldn't allow for sudden aerial maneuvers."

Rick tried to imagine what it'd be like if this were an actual jet plane. What would happen if the main engine was turned off and the thrust was sent out through this "port" that could be swiveled? He imagined the plane would immediately tumble around like a ragdoll caught in a tornado. Worse, the force of the twisting could be enough to shatter the wings. "Does the math even check out?" He pointed at the wings. "Won't they break?"

The Horde answered in a chitter of excitement.

"We did stress tests." "Urtha jumped up and down on the wings." "Heavy." "Bent old wings, had to replace." "Stronger now." "Only bends." "Bends little." "Cheese?"

"And Barry approved this?"

"He gave the idea of a mounted weapon," Raphaella nodded.

Rick frowned. "But did he approve this?"

"We do not trust Barry, he is not of the Horde," the Metalmouse answered. "Not yet."

Behind her, the Horde nodded along. "Good, but not tested." "Bad with secrets." "Too trusting." "Tricked easily." "Doesn't think." "Cheese?"

He glanced at the group of maidens; their little chattering had grown on him, he even found it cute to a degree. But there was something missing. "Where are the others?" he asked, tapping his temple. "The psychics?"

"You prefer talking to the Horde when they aren't around."

Rick flinched a little at that. Had it been that obvious? Whenever a Tigermouse was in the room, the Horde would talk less like a synchronized stampede and more like a singular entity sequentially speaking through multiple mouths.

"You shouldn't worry about that." With a slight sigh, he scooted closer to the plane, still frowning at the controls. "You really should get Barry to take a look at the control layout; there's a lot here I'm fairly sure is too unintuitive."

Raphaella hesitated, glancing away. "We will... consider."

"The whole city saw the plane when you took off, and a lot of the tribe saw the insides of the pieces," Rick pointed out.

"Not the same," the mechanical genius hurried to speak, lowering her head a little and squirming uncomfortably.

"Lewd," called the Horde. "Peeper." "Secrets!" "Thief." "Cheese?"

"Ok, ok, take your time." Standing back up as best he could, he loomed over the plane, frowning at the 'exhaust'. "Please tell me that the way to load a cannonball into that thing isn't by stuffing your hand into the muzzle."

Raphaella's eyes widened a little. "Safety first." She nodded, hastily approaching the plane and with a single twist, yanking out the whole tube contraption. "Make it safe!" She commanded, throwing it at the Horde.

The Mousegirls snatched it midair. "Safe." "Lever!" "Door!" "Loading chamber!" "Cheese!" They proceeded to run off deeper into the tunnels.

"I... did not know you could remove that thing so easily." Rick glanced inside, seeing the hole that went straight between the copilot's legs. "What are the chances there's some sort of fault and it explodes inside the cabin?"

Raphaella hesitated.

“Another thing you hadn’t considered?”

“It... is it safe...?” she said, hesitant, leaning over the other side to look at the same hole. She began to speak under her breath. “Explosive force, reinforcement enchantment, murisium bolts...”

“What if the cannon has an obstruction?”

“Oh.” Biting her lower lip, she hastily shook her head, ears flapping wildly. “Not safe.”

“My hope in bringing Barry in was so that he could potentially have spotted this before you built it.” He patted her head. “He wants to help, you know. I’m sure he’d appreciate if you—”

“Different.” She closed her eyes tightly. “He is human. Thinks too differently. We don’t know him. Can’t trust. Not yet.”

“I’m human too.”

“You proved!” Raphaella squeaked. “You think like the Horde, you care, you are mouse too. Inside. You have honor.”

“Now you’re just making me blush.” He patted her head, ruffling her hair a little, amused at the little squeak she gave off. “I trust him with this. And I think he can help make this safer, and better. You don’t need to implement any of his suggestions if you don’t want to, but I think you should at least listen.”

With a shudder, she nodded, her round ears flopping back and forth. “I... understand. We will try.”

“That’s all I’m asking—”

Rick’s words were cut off as he jolted upward so fast his head smacked against the ceiling. Wincing and letting out a swear, he followed the sense of urgency without a second thought, rushing out towards the mouth of the cave and out to look up at the sky.

Gray and white clouds covered everything, a stale white shine giving the rough location of the sun. Among those clouds up above appeared a streak of red light. A line that flew in from the north, slow at first, but faster, and faster, and faster... until it pierced through the clouds.

A spear of fire descended from the sky, plunging until it impacted somewhere beyond the horizon, north of the city.

A handful of seconds later came the sound, the shrill angry scream followed by bone-chilling silence.

Through the bond, a singular stream of emotions made their way through: concern and fear, and a deeply rooted understanding that a maiden had done that. It had been someone powerful enough they'd all sensed and not merely seen and heard.

The red trail of fire lingered, the hole it had punched through the sky slowly widening. It took minutes, but the clouds overhead were dispersing, revealing a brilliantly blue sky.

It took him a moment to realize what that meant.

They had been planning to finish their preparations two weeks from now, and to use all the extra time to increase production of everything that might be useful for the battle.

Now they only had, possibly, barely a handful of days.

The Darktons were coming.