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## [135] [Stripes of every color]

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The plane had crashed.

Rick didn't know where or how; he only knew that Raphaella had screamed out "uncheesy" thoughts at him before a sudden and abrupt silence. He could feel the bond's presence, still there, still alive, but no longer sending anything, unconscious.

It wasn't the only thing on his mind, however. The militia and the Horde were dying a scant few dozen meters away—tiny little sparks of intense fear, agony, sadness, or anger. Emotions that threatened to overwhelm the bond, smashing directly into his mind like a ram against castle gates.

In the darkness of the tunnel, he could only lean against the walls for support. On either side of him were two Tigermice, hands gripping his shoulders, minds reaching through and soothing the tsunami, numbing the pain. There were few deaths, blessedly few, but they were so close that each one was like a bomb inside his head.

Drenched in sweat, his focus still felt scattered in a dozen directions all at once.

Monica, Eva, and the handful of combat-experienced Hounds in the militia were fighting the enemy army within their "hunting ground," singling out and eradicating knights wherever possible, and attacking the enemy militia where not. They were up against a force that outnumbered them a hundred to one; killing them was impossible. No, their job was not to win but to stall them out and eradicate anyone with a semblance of authority.

The tribe was corralling the enemy forces, cutting off avenues of escape or movement, pummeling away. The Horde and the militia were right behind the green wall, using spears to attack the Centaurs from range, grenades to punish any attempts to close ranks.

The latest invention from Rollo's laboratory was not as deadly as the Orczookas, not against a maiden, but that did not make them ineffective. The loud noise punished anyone with sharp enough senses, and the fragmentation was still likely to injure or maim anyone caught off guard.

Inch by bloody inch.

And that was where Dia came in, with her walking platoon of heal-bugs just a bit further down the tunnel. Her own battle was to keep everyone alive. Anyone with a serious injury would be sent her way; no one was to be left to die. Some would be patched up and sent back into the fight within minutes, others would be made to aid in the earthworks currently being constructed around their shrinking battlefield. With the Dark Elves on standby for anti-spellcraft protection.

The original plan had been to make obstacles, not lay down a proper defensive location, but the mice had been feeling a strangeness in the air all day. Individually none of them had noticed it, but Rick had sensed the shift within the Horde; they moved and twitched at any sound and all too frequently stopped to look around for no apparent reason.

It had been an undercurrent of paranoia and concern that had left Rick with the feeling of being watched at every turn. Now here he was, crammed in a dirt/rock room underground, sweltering from the feelings of a hundred bonds reaching out, fighting for a hundred and one reasons. He'd take the feelings of those feeling courage, strength, valor, control, and send them to the rest, smoothing out fears and steeling resolve.

In a way, he was like Dia, his support invisible but crucial. The militia weren't experienced in warfare; most didn't even have experience in combat outside of drills. The only ones with proper experience were those who'd been Hunters at some point or another, dealing with ferals, killing.

Having them succumb to panic and falter was not an option.

Then, there was a shift.

A horn that sang five times.

And a slowness to the fighting, mixed with confusion, hope, and a growing wave of elation that spread out in every direction.

"VICTORY!" The shout was heard a handful of seconds later, a maiden running into the tunnel, screaming at the top of her lungs. "Victory!" she kept announcing as she moved deeper and deeper into the tunnels.

Rick rose to his feet. "Order the engineering teams to continue their work and gather the wounded," he barked out sternly. "The humans are to be captured, separated from the maidens, restrained, and stripped of anything and everything enchanted. As for the maidens, disarm them, remove their collars, and restrain them. Break bones if anyone tries to fight; kill them if there's no alternative. Allow only those who've agreed to be pacified to tend to their wounded."

The smiles of those around him vanished instantly. “Yes, my Lord!” they chanted in unison, bolting out to spread the orders.

He tempered his excitement, imposed discipline where he could, and turned his attention to the Horde. The Mousegirls were excited, happy, cheesy, yet the underlying sense of caution had not vanished.

So Rick waited, managing the reports as they rolled in. The flying knights had landed in the no-man’s-land between this spot and the trenches. They had yet to make any moves but had clearly obeyed the command to surrender.

Meanwhile, Monica and Eva were still embroiled in their fight. The larger army had yet to realize what was going on, and Rick had no intention of allowing them to come out unscathed. The last thing he needed was the Aubrian nobility or any of their knights getting ideas.

When the goal was to keep the leadership alive for ransom, a decapitating strike could only remain effective as long as the captives couldn’t find a way to escape.

Minutes churned away.

Eventually, Dia came over to confirm there were no more critical cases left, gluing herself to his side, spiky armor and all.

“You should rest,” he told her, not needing to see under the helmet to know she was exhausted beyond words.

“Not until you do,” she replied, sitting on the chair, following one of her breathing exercises to recover quicker. “My Lord,” Dia added with a lilt of amusement as she reached out to grab his hand and squeeze, pouring a feeling of pride in him through the bond. “It was thanks to you that we could have so few casualties.”

Squaring his jaw, Rick kept silent, trying not to fluster at the same time he tried not to bring up that there had still been needless deaths.

“My Lord,” a Doggirl appeared, covered in dirt, grime, and blood. “The situation is now under control. The enemy demands your presence.”

“Guess that’s my cue,” Rick combed his fingers through his hair. “Once we’re done here, we sneak them back into the city and lock them tight. No way in hell do they get a chance to give orders to their people.”

“Of course,” Dia nodded, rising with him. “What do we do with the maidens?”

“I have no clue. I think we’ll need to hash things out with everyone.” There was still so much to do... They’d tackle things one at a time.

Putting on the rest of his armor, he marched down one of the dozen branching tunnels, surrounded by a growing number of maidens as he stepped back out into the open air. The freshness of the outside air was spoiled by the stench of blood, gore, and shit.

All around him the Horde and the militia stilled, turning to look at him, stopping in their task of turning the area into a fortification. The tribe was far less quiet, hollering and shouting, Orcs and Hobgoblins showing one another their wounds, talking over whether it’d scar or not.

The enemy had been separated between humans, maidens, and knights. The knights were being kept under close watch by the Orcs, stripped of armor and weapons, made to kneel with heavy chains nailing them to the ground. The maidens were being treated far more leniently, tied up by the Horde and militia, also kneeling but without added restraints. And the enemy commanders...

Thirteen humans, all of them dressed in nothing but their breeches and undershirts. Their wrists and ankles had been tied together with hemp, made to sit on stools, the maidens keeping watch over them jeering. He immediately recognized the Viscount, the older man had a lush beard and a lean body unbefitting someone his age. Compared to the other humans who had decent pudginess, Viscount Gabriel and the young man next to him looked like they took their training seriously.

“You are a coward without a shred of honor or decency,” one of the men at the back called out, half of his face freshly scarred. “How dare—”

Rick remained silent, watching the man as he continued to go on and on. The words twisted from self-righteous calls to insults, and even as the other nobles began to grow pale, staring between Rick and the babbler, he kept going, devolving deeper and deeper. Some of the militia had even made a move to silence him, but Rick stopped them.

Ten minutes in, the lord in question was panting, red-faced, and heaving.

“Would you die happily if those were your last words?”

Not that he would, not with the tribe present. They saw humans as too valuable to just kill off, particularly if all they were doing was running their mouths. If he was going to kill any of them, then he’d make sure he had a damn good reason.

Rick had taken in the feeling of Monica, drawing on the sensation of a predator and pushing it outward. To the guy's credit, despite realizing something was off, he straightened up. "If I am to die today, then I will do so knowing I did not shame the Norwar household."

"I see." He turned toward the normal captive maidens, moving closer, watching them twitch with every step he took. The fear and panic had only grown, their gazes hastily lowering to the ground. "Who among you would die for that man?"

Silence.

"You were fighting for that man, were you not?" he asked, approaching one of them. "You." He signaled at an elf that shivered. "When your lord called for you to come and kill my people, did you answer?"

"I-I-I..." The maiden shrank under his gaze, shivering like a leaf. "My human is a farmer, my Lord; he was ordered to send me."

"You didn't have a choice?" Rick cocked his head.

"N-No, my Lord."

Rick turned his gaze to the others. "What about the rest of you? Did any of you come to kill and die of your own volition?"

Silence.

Another nod, this time slowly turning toward the knights, all eyes on him. There were glares there, but also confusion. Many of the maidens twitched with every step he took, and Rick focused to redouble the feeling of predatory threat from Monica. He could almost see exactly where he'd need to cut to kill each one, a thought he banished, aware he lacked the means to win such a fight.

Slowly removing his helmet, he met the gazes of those more intent on loathing.

"Were you ordered to come, or did you do so of your own volition?" He stared them down, daring any of the knights to speak.

Silence.

Rick raised his voice to a roar. "WHO HERE FOUGHT OF THEIR OWN FREE WILL!?"

The tribe was the first to shout out, followed by the horde and the militia, a cacophony of voices rising up. It was an assault of shouts, swelled in pride, conviction, and trust, a mix so powerful it hit Rick almost like a physical force.

Their captives all shrank.

He turned back to the nobles, watching fury and panic in equal measure. “You treat your soldiers like expendable tools. That’s the real reason you lost.”

There was one exception, however. Gabriel Darkton had been the only one to remain stoically staring at Rick, his face impassive and unchanging. The wizened man betrayed no reactions or emotions, standing so still he might as well have been a stern statue.

“For you lot, the deal is simple. All of you but one will become captives. Since I don’t much like scar-face over there, he gets to go back to Aubria to deliver the news.”

Though Rick had pretended not to know who he was, Rollo had been very helpful and made a list of profiles for the lords that had shown up. Claude Norwar was the Lord of a minor house that was, currently, struggling in Aubria. Out of all the options, Norwar was the least likely to be able to make use out of being the sole “survivor”, he had some pull, but not enough to be able to prevent the Aubrian court from agreeing to pay the ransoms. Meanwhile, sending back the Viscount would just be opening the gates to having the noble turtle down and potentially call for backup.

In the end, getting attacked again was a risk no matter what he did, but the longer he could stall that, the more he could refill and expand his arsenal.

By the time they showed up again, he’d have enough explosives to wipe the whole of Aubria off the map.

Turning to the maidens, he stared them down. “You lot, and every other maiden out there, have two choices.” Nervousness immediately spread at his words. “Option one, you swear to surrender and willingly accept being put under a three-year slave contract, at the end of which you’ll be given freedom.” He raised his hand, holding out two fingers. “Option two, you swear to never come back to Sinco and fuck off.” His lips curled into a menacing grin. “You’ll be made to swear under truth detection. Liars will be executed on the spot.”

Kiara had insisted that anyone recruited would be put under her watchful eye, and though everyone else had proposed just killing the losers who refused to join, Rick didn’t want that. He wanted news to spread of what had happened, of not just his willingness to grant mercy but also what awaited any army wanting to march on his territory. The truth-detection oath also made it easier to excuse killing anyone trying to leave whom he didn’t want the Darktons to keep. The “champions” being at the top of that list, they were a threat he would not permit to return to Darkton hands.

Based on the way the Viscount was looking at him, Rick had to guess the guy already suspected what was going to happen.

“Well, now let’s-”

The Horde shuddered.

A tiny little tweak, a collective increase of stress as they all abruptly stopped.

Rick had shoved Dia away right as the claw passed over the spot her head had occupied.

The dark shadow didn’t miss a beat; the back-swing hammered the Rapha, sending her careening across the dirt. The other paw snapped forward, grabbing Rick’s chest plate and raising him off the ground as if he weighed nothing.

“This is the second time you’ve reacted when you shouldn’t have been able to,” the orange feline spoke with a dark chuckle.

He only knew of one other Sabertooth besides Monica. “Throag.”

“Rick,” she greeted in turn, baring her fangs.

“Unfortunately, Monica’s not here to play with you,” Rick reached towards his belt, grasping at the vials held there. “Though if you wanted me dead, you’re doing a shitty job,” he added, trying to fish for information.

What was she doing here? And more importantly, was she alone? The last time they’d met had not been under the friendliest of circumstances; he still had the scars. But this time things would not go the same way. The Tigermice were already telepathically relaying his orders throughout the gathered forces.

“She’ll be playing with the blood-suckers, but if I keep you around, I’m certain she’ll show up sooner or later.”

“So the Vampires sent you to deal with me.”

Fuck.

“No,” Throag’s amusement grew. “The clan is on a hunt. The suckers are just a good distraction.”

*Clan.*

“What have you done?” He asked in a slow whisper, slowly scowling.

“You have a nice city,” she smiled, lips curling into a very wide smirk. “Nice, big, unprotected city.”

Rick’s veins froze, eyes going wide with horror. His gaze shifted, staring in the direction he knew Sinco to be at.

And a rising column of black smoke.

“Now, be a-”

He threw the vial before she could finish. The feline batting it away, shattering it. The white phosphorus immediately reacted, exploding in violent fire as it spread over her arm.

With a roar, she flung him aside as she batted at the toxic flames.

“GET THE PRISONERS OUT OF HERE!” Rick roared as the tribe lunged all at once.

Throag was faster.

She’d jumped straight towards Rick, reaching out to grasp his armor, shadows flickering around them. There was no impact, just the ever-consuming suffocating darkness from every direction.

When Rick could see again, they were no longer in the camp but a few hundred meters outside. The Sabertooth let go of him, recoiling away as a rapier blade embedded itself into her paw.

“You will not touch him again,” Dia declared, standing up. She’d managed to grab hold of Rick right as the shadow-jump had taken place, getting dragged along for the ride.

With a glare, Throag focused on her still flaming arm, wrapping it in shadows until the flames were entirely put out. “You and what army?”

Rick’s gaze flickered to the camp; the tribe was already scrambling to catch up.

They needed minutes.

And he knew Dia could not buy them on her own.

“She doesn’t need an army.” He moved to stand behind the Rapha, meeting Throag’s glare. “Just me.”

If there was anyone who knew how Monica thought, how she fought, it was him.

He’d just need to get Dia in on that and pray it would be enough.



