
[082] [Hunter]

Though his goal was to go and greet Monica back from her hunt, Rick's first destination were a series of small cots that'd been set up between the lab and the shore. A dozen in total, each of the wooden huts was roughly the size of a large room. It was yet another temporary construction that'd been erected as a stopgap while they made plans for the more permanent arrangements.

Despite Dia and Kiara's complaints, Rick refused to have the stone-work construction efforts focus on his lab. There were too many families that were living within what they felt to be a tent. Wood just didn't provide much protection when it came to maidens, and no one liked living in a house that could be accidentally leveled.

Besides, the longer they took in turning their attention to the lab, the more time to improve the design. Rick wanted to make sure they had ample room to grow into, and that required planning.

Every hut in the grid was labeled with a number going from 01 to 11, with Rick's being the only one that had his symbol burnt onto the door. With the day having turned into night, the inside was pitch black. Rick just lit up the magestone near the door and used the wooden bar to block it.

There were four lockers in the room, the only metal present within the space. And unlike most every door out there, this one actually had a lock. A heavy-set lock that screeched as it turned. Rick grumbled inwardly as he winced at the sound. The whole box wasn't meant to be hard to open, even a Mousegirl could just straight up chew through the thing. Rafaella had told him the box's mechanism was meant to make a lot of noise if anyone attempted to open it without the key. The point was to draw the guards' attention, nothing more.

As far as he'd understood, actual safes meant to make it hard to open relied more on ensuring a forced attempt would destroy the contents. Things meant to stump maidens from getting through relied on enchantments, and the heavy-duty stuff would cost a large city their yearly budget. Everything else were just degrees of annoyance.

Rick dumped his clothes into the locker and turned his attention to the large four barrels. Each of them was large enough Urtha could've sat inside, meaning he had some space, but not much of it.

The first barrel was filled with cool fresh-water and had a layer of wood-ash at the bottom. Rick scooped up the ash to scrub himself all over. The concoction was the first of the steps, and was meant to act as a base and also help remove grease. He paid close attention to his hair, face, and hands. Stepping out and feeling like he'd rolled on sand, he dunked a couple buckets' worth to cleanse before jumping to the next back. This one was just water, but there was a bottle with apple vinegar he poured in. The slightly acidic nature of the mix should help remove other smells. Another scrub, another rinse, and the next bath was with sea water and activated charcoal (Sheel was still perfecting the process since activated charcoal would be necessary in the lab too).

The fourth and final bath was just fresh water and some mildly scented oils. 'Mildly' for a Doggirl's nose, Rick couldn't pick up anything from it, so it was mostly a trust exercise at this point.

Some part of him begrudged the whole process. It made him feel like a blind person that was worrying about color-matching his clothes. He knew the feeling would pass once he got used to it. It also helped that this wasn't something he was doing for the sake of some stranger, Monica hadn't been shy to share her opinion about the chemical scents from the lab.

"And now Eva's got an improved nose too," he mused as he dried off.

Closing the locker that had his dirty set of clothes, he unlocked the one that had the set he'd prepared for tonight. A simple set of travel pants and a brown shirt. Both of them sported a not-ignorable amount of loose white fur. Rick had made a point to rub both pieces against Monica's favorite clothes to get some of her hair on it. The Sabertooth liked him walking around with her "mark", and he wasn't about to refuse what might be one of the strongest feral-repellent scents in the city.

Stepping back out, he flipped the sign on the handle so as to signal the water and clothes ought to be refreshed.

"Maybe I could make a sauna part of the process..." He made a note to test that out and see whether there was some practical way to apply it. Running hot water would be ideal, but that was a bit too luxurious for the currently available resources.

Breathing in the night air, he spied his Orc escort mulling about around the cabin.

"Let's go."

"Where to, Father?" The nearest one spoke up.

“Good question.” He focused on the bond, trying to pinpoint Monica’s location. “The Chieftess’ at... the eastern side of the city. So that’s where we’re going.”

They set out, with the Orcs going at a leisure pace while Rick practically powerwalked. It was good exercise, and at this point he was more used to it than anything else. He ignored the irritation of having to be escorted around. He understood the need for their presence, and logically accepted that they had to be there, but it still felt like he was some mafioso walking about with his goons.

Then again, Urtha wearing a fedora and a tie was amusing, and the whole thing about uniforms hadn’t been hammered out, so maybe... He waved off the fanciful thoughts. It wouldn’t work, Orcs had that whole “eat sunlight” thing, so anything with long sleeves or long pant legs was doomed to be torn off at the first opportunity.

The closer he got to Monica’s general location the more acutely he could determine her exact location. It seemed she was... at Rollo’s place? What was that about? There was no reason he could think of that would result in Monica willingly visiting the man. Had she found something during her hunt? The only certainty he had was that the Sabertooth was currently annoyed about something.

Just as he was two hundred meters or so away from her, Monica’s annoyance flared out. The emotion was forced Rick’s way, wordless but clear. *‘I don’t want you here’* it declared with the same undertone as someone not wanting to be disturbed while they worked.

Rick stood there, blinking rapidly and quickly taking several steps away.

But the feeling didn’t go away until his guards had reacted and moved back as well.

“Something wrong?” They asked, sharing some chuckles. “If something scared you, we can handle it.”

“Monica’s angry.”

The four choked for a moment, tensing and looking around. “Anything... we should know?”

“I think she doesn’t want to be disturbed right now.”

A nervous nod was shared amongst them. “The Chieftess’ pretty good at avoiding us when she wants to hide. Guess she’s pretty good at sensing us.” The Orc glanced at Rick askance. “It’s pretty freaky you can sense her though. You’re like that puppet-girl.”

“Arietta?”

“Yeah, her.” They shared nods. “She’s one of them weird ones, always knows who’s where.”

Rick nodded absently. Arietta was a maiden in his relative orbit by the nature of the work she’d volunteered to take. In a way she was like the constable, Whitneye, in that she kept a very respectful distance from him and avoided interactions where she could. Most of his opinion about her boiled down to someone he needed to work with out of reasons neither of them could change. At least not until she trained someone to replace her as “legal aid” to any queries regarding the kingdom’s laws.

“Hm...” Focusing on the problem ahead, he crossed his arms. “I think I’ll change the approach...” He scratched his chin in thought, he could think of a few ways to cheer her up. “I’m just trying to think of how to go about this.”

For a moment he glanced away, and paid closer attention to Monica’s emotions as he led the way further away from Rollo’s place. As he moved further away, the flicker of attention going his way began to diffuse until Rick was mostly sure she wasn’t paying him any mind.

“Here, I think.” He pointed his thumb in Monica’s rough direction. “I want to give her a bit of a surprise, but you’re too loud. Think you could march about for a bit? Just don’t get much closer than this to Rollo’s place.”

They shared glances with one another. “Urtha will break our legs and bury us head first if she finds out we left you alone.”

There was something equal parts gruesome and fascinating about Orc threats. It had taken Rick a while to get used to the fact that though Urtha meant every word of that promise, for a fellow Orc this was the equivalent of getting a black eye.

“Monica knows I’m here. If she asks, you can say she took over guard duty.” He paused as he looked them over. “I could ask the Chieftess to spar with you for an afternoon or two. Maybe you’ll get to be the first in line for the new thing I planned to teach the tribe.”

The four of them perked up. “We’ll want details.”

“Sure,” he declared with more confidence than he felt... the usual.

Maybe he’d figure out what that new thing would be by the time they asked for details.

Waving them off, Rick waited for a good five minutes, removing his shoes and stuffing them into his bag. The stone was chilly, but not cold. He couldn’t be entirely sure how far Monica’s sense of hearing went, but he figured that walking around barefoot would make it harder for him to draw her attention.

Though it was night-time, there was still plenty of activity going around. The night-time maidens were moving about, though this part of the city had far less nudity than the average. This was the “high brow” area after all. The houses here were more spaced out, built with heavy fences and heavier walls. Stone all the way through. These were the only structures in Sinco that had been here before the walls had been erected.

The whole style of the place reminded him of an European village that’d been beefed up. The houses were miniature fortresses, and protected accordingly. Maybe once Sinco’s growth reached a threshold the buildings would start moving skyward, but that time was very far away. Maybe it would never come. Rick was pretty sure that building upwards wasn’t much of an option, not when some random maiden could punch a hole through a load-bearing wall. It was the reason why the master bedroom was underground, working more like a bunker.

Maybe that would be the way to go? Underground?

A slight twinge from the bond warned him Monica’s attention was shifting. It was the equivalent of her ears twitching, she was giving a slight show of annoyance. But her focus was firmly on whatever else she was doing. Rick figured she’d quickly realize he wasn’t with the Orcs the moment she focused on the bond, so he tried to shut down on it.

It wasn’t something he was sure would work. He wasn’t even sure he was doing it properly. Rick just tried to focus on the idea of pulling his emotions into himself and blocking the bond. Sure enough he stopped sensing Monica, but would that work the other way too?

Well, he was too invested into this, and Monica often judged intent first in these kinds of things. So he might as well go all in. If he were trying to sneak up to Monica, what else should he do? The question felt out of place, so he rephrased it. If Monica were in his shoes, what would she do?

It was like his mind put on a different set of clothes. The feeling was a familiar one, but he was sure he hadn’t tried intentionally focusing on doing it.

As soon as he thought about it, his attention turned away from Rollo’s mansion. Trying to sneak inside was impossible for him. Even if the staff there were in on it, even if Monica couldn’t sense anything from the bond, she was very sensitive to other maidens. She’d know he was in the area as soon as she detected them moving in some abnormal way.

There was also the issue about his walking.

Rick couldn't place the origin of that particular thought until he'd focused on it properly. Of course Monica was familiar with the way he walked, she'd be able to pick him out of a crowd in a heartbeat. Was he close enough she'd notice? Better to change the rhythm of his steps.

"Huh," he muttered to himself as he continued down the street. The maidens were putting some more distance between themselves and him than a moment prior. But he didn't feel like he was doing anything in particular. It wasn't like what he did with Eva, he wasn't focusing on trying to project his presence and intent.

Maybe it was something else.

Whatever the case, he kept himself to the task at hand: trying to find if he'd be able to shock her. Again, his thoughts churned out a simple conclusion: it was impossible. Even without the bond, Monica would be able to pick up on his heartbeat once she got close enough. The only real option would be the huntress being distracted by something else.

It was like someone else put a lightbulb into his head and flicked it on.

His steps turned him away from Rollo's estate and down a different street. Again, Rick wasn't sure why. It felt like the thing Monica would do if she were in his shoes. So he followed on that certainty.

After a minute or so, he realized he was moving upwind from Rollo's estate. It meant Monica would be able to catch his scent the moment she stepped outside... and that was the way to go about it? The more he tried to think about it, the more jarred he felt. Like he was trying to do gymnastics when he was wearing a tightly tailored tux.

So... he stopped thinking about the why's.

Stepping forward again, he focused on trying to think like Monica would. The direction was the right one, he just needed to find... something. Rick wasn't sure what exactly, but he knew he'd know what when he saw it.

It took a while, but eventually he reached a spot on the road that felt "right".

Rick was left looking around the place. It was empty compared to the other streets, barely any movement. But that wasn't why this spot was a good one, there were other streets just as empty as this one. Again he felt restrained, this time he tried to figure out what came next.

"Put my shoes on the road?"

Cocking his head, he glanced around. He was sure there had to be something about the place... his mind pushed his attention towards a tiny whirlwind of leaves. There seemed to be a constant current going around the place. The bend on the road pushed the breeze into a slightly chaotic twister.

“It can’t be sound... smell?”

The breeze here moved weirdly, all over the place, his scent would be hard to pin down. That felt like the proper line of thought, and it made his thoughts become calmer. Right, this was the reason, or at least part of it.

Trying to think like Monica for this long was giving him a bit of a headache. Taking out the shoes from his backpack, he put them near the leaves and looked around for someplace to hide. But before he did, he nicked his thumb and let a drop of blood fall to the street. The ‘Monica’ in him protested at that, but he just ignored it. A drop of blood should be enough to warrant the feline’s attention once she finished whatever she was doing.

Satisfied, he picked a bush to sit his ass into.

It was silly, it was dumb, and he was mostly sure Monica would laugh her ass off at his attempt.

But that was entirely the point of it.

There wasn’t much else to do but wait.

Rather than lose himself in thought, he just allowed himself to drift off. The only guide was that question he’d fixed into his head. “What would Monica do?”, it must’ve been something about the literal bond they shared, or something else. Whatever the case, it was an interesting experience to have something resembling the answer bubbling inside.

It made it easier to slow his breath, to adjust his posture, to take in the world around him with sharper edges. The darkness of the night wasn’t oppressive, his naked feet against the moist dirt felt right at home, his heartbeat crawled into a slow thump. Rick’s posture adjusted itself in a dozen tiny ways, fingers splayed out to caress the dirt, head tilted slightly lower, feet firmly planted...

And then he saw her.

Monica was openly walking down the street like she owned it. Three meters of muscle and scars made it impossible to mistake her for anything but dangerous. The white furred claws, sharp fangs, and feline gait only accentuated that fact. If the city were a

jungle, she would be its queen. Rick drank her form, how she leisurely put one foot in front of the other like she was following a trail. Nothing about how she moved had any waste to it, there was an efficient confidence to it all that spoke of lethality.

Added to her natural presence there was something else in the air. Her eyes were fixed on the shoes with an intensity that would've made them combust. Rick's instincts cheered at the sign of a distracted prey, but he kept his excitement, waiting for Monica to get closer.

And closer.

He pounced right as she was about to cross in front of the bush, aiming himself at her flank.

It was as if the world slowed. Monica's ear twitched, her head turned just enough to spot him from the corner of her eye. Her tail twitched as if to slap him out of the way, but stilled. She took half a step away and tripped right as he'd made contact. Suddenly they were both falling to the ground, Monica's toned body serving as the best cushion he could've hoped for.

"AGH!" She cried out a second too late, throwing her hands up and letting them drop to the ground.

Time returned to its normal flow, Rick blinked down at Monica as she lay still. The maiden's head was turned to the side, a very long tongue flopped out and hanging limply, lips curled into a barely contained grin.

"I know I suck, but you don't need to exaggerate it." He gave her shoulder a slap, grinning.

"Rick second greatest hunter, Monica not exaggerating," she replied with a dopey grin, ruffling his hair with her large fuzzy claw. She pulled him closer before he could escape, her face leaned in to sniff at his neck. "Hm..."

"Something wrong?"

She didn't answer, picking him up in both her furry hands so she could sniff his shirt, then pulling him further up to sniff at his pants, and then back at his head. "Close," she huffed. "Good enough."

Rick didn't sigh, though he felt like he ought to. "Good enough not to get tossed into the sea again?"

“No sea. Smell almost good.” She rubbed her cheek against his shirt, letting out one of her standard earth-rumbling purrs.

“Why were you at Rollo’s anyw-”

Monica’s tail snatched him into the air before he had the chance to finish the question.

“Hey!” he complained.

“Monica solve Monica problems,” she declared firmly. The three meter tall mass of muscle and wild power stood up, keeping her tail wrapped around his hip and raising him up so that they were eye to eye. “If Monica need help, Monica ask Rick.”

The seriousness of her tone caught him a little off guard. Usually she’d let him help her with this sort of thing. “Are you ok?”

“No.” She shook her head. “But Monica solve Monica problem.”

“Is this about your-”

He wanted to ask about her scars, about how her arms had a faint shake to them as she held them close to her chest. Was that why she’d lifted him with the tail instead? To hide it?

“Monica problem.” Her answer was petulant but firm.

“But Dia’s-”

“Monica problem. Not Dia.” This time she growled the words out, staring him down, almost daring him to tell her otherwise.

Rather than answer, he reached out for her tail and stroked it softly. There were several things he’d rather tell her, but it seemed clear now wasn’t the time. Her blue eyes softened at the gesture, lowering him back down so he’d lay against her body.

Her expression tightened. “Does Rick want Monica to fight?”

“No.” The answer was immediate, there was no real need to think it through. “I hate it when you get hurt.”

Monica held his gaze for several seconds, looking for something. Whatever it was that she wanted to find, it wasn’t there. She let out a dispassionate sigh and moved to stand up, lifting him up to his feet along the way.

“Rick strong.” She shook her head. “But not know strength.”

“Is...” Hesitating for a moment, he took her paw into his hand. “Is this a new word you’re looking for?”

Monica shook her head again. “Monica asked Urtha, asked Sheel. It is strength, but not strength. It...” she grimaced. “Monica strong, and Monica know strength. Monica see weak and strong, and know weak and strong. Rick see weak and strong, but not know weak and strong.”

This was important to her. Rick wasn’t sure how much, or in what way. He didn’t need the bond to feel the frustration radiating out of her like a flare as she kept her gaze firmly locked on his own.

“Can you... show me? Teach me? Maybe we could use the bond to...”

Again her eyes lingered on him, for a minute she stared, until she closed her eyes and leaned closer to him. Her forehead pressed gently against his own. He focused on her end of the bond as she threw an emotion at him.

For a moment Rick wobbled on his feet, trying to understand what was rushing through him. The world felt like it was made of paper and glass, the very road he stood on no different than a brittle surface. And along this sensation of fragility, there was this opposite emotion of something being out there that could see him as nothing but glass and paper, that this singular or multiple things could crush him even without intending to.

The impression was gone as quickly as it came.

They both leaned away, looking at one another, Rick’s eyes wide and bewildered.

“See?” Monica asked, there was a hopeful undertone even though most of it was heavy. “Rick strength and Monica strength different.” Another grimace followed, then her shoulders slumped. “Complicated.” The word was bitter in her lips.

Rick stared at her for a long moment, then turned away. “I might not understand the strength you’re talking about,” he muttered. “But this is important to you. So it’s important to me too.”

With a heavy nod, she pulled him closer, wrapping him into her furry arms. Monica let out a soft sound, a mewl, thick with something he’d not expected from her: sadness. “Monica need to fight.” Her voice trembled. “Or Monica lose kit again.”

His breath caught in his throat. “*Again?*”

She didn’t answer. The silence tortured Rick’s thoughts, whipping them into a frenzy of questions and doubts. He wanted to voice them, or lacking that, to read her mind and

figure out what she meant. But Monica didn't move, didn't say anything, she kept her arms against his own, hugging him.

When he heard the shudder in her breath, Rick squeezed tighter. He wasn't sure what to hope for, just that he didn't like the sound of her being shaken like that.

"Come." She finally broke the silence, releasing the hug, taking his arm with her tail.

"Monica talk. And Rick listen."

And they walked.

[083] [Darkness]

Despite Monica's promise to talk, the walk was quiet. The streets were dark and empty, and here and there he could sense her throwing her intent outwards. His partner was projecting an aggressive lack of patience towards the world, and every maiden within the city knew better than to test that.

Rick didn't ask her to speak up, he could sense there was a purpose to their destination, but remaining patient was proving to be far harder than he thought. His mind just kept going back to those words, over and over again.

Or Monica might lose it again.

He didn't want to assume what that meant, what it could mean, but there were very few ways he could take such a statement.

The only thing he could do was wait and focus on the path they were taking.

Rick was unfamiliar with this place. It was one of the parts of the city he had rarely visited mostly because it was nearly entirely abandoned. The buildings here were larger, but closer together. The road had seen better days, cobblestone worn and uneven, the intricate windows of the houses were now just wooden boards. The buildings themselves were wood, but the burnt marks and soot were a sign this had been the case before the attack on Sinco, and not after.

There was a distinct feeling to the place that made it appear as if it could just fall down on its own any day now. Doors either left open or wedged shut, smashed window boards, and an oppressive silence that spread in every direction. Rick could barely pick up on the sound of the sea, and he was pretty sure the shore was right around the corner.

Monica came to a halt in front of a house that didn't look any different to the others. She reached out, grabbing him by the shoulder, her power surging out, pulling them both into the shadows.

Eva's shadow-jumps were an intense but brief affair. One moment you were out, the next there was chilling oppressive suffocation, and then back out. Monica's were different, it was like falling into a pool of warm water. Rick couldn't breathe just the same,

but he got a clearer sense of movement. If he focused, he was sure he could even spot something in the void.

Their exit was into a place almost as blindingly dark as the void Monica could move through. But something in the air was different, warmer, without the scent of mold or sea or charred wood.

“Where are we?”

“Nest.”

Her large fuzzy paw tugged him forward, and Rick stumbled, falling face first into... cloth? It was a mound of cloth, pillows, and blankets. He couldn't see, but he was pretty sure the thing was large enough he could get buried in it. A moment later a heavy 'woomph' sound followed as Monica took her spot on the pile. Without a comment, she scooped him up by the shirt and dumped him into her lap.

She'd removed her clothes at some point between pushing him and joining into the pile.

“Pretty cozy spot.” He tried to lighten the mood a little.

“Important place. Almost ready.”

She pulled his back against her chest. Monica wasn't hunched over, she was stretched over the pile, which meant her massive breasts were currently resting on his shoulders. Rick could feel a trepidation from her, a mix of nervousness and seriousness that was clashing with expectation. She didn't bother to hide her feelings, yet he couldn't quite make out what she was thinking right now.

“Being feral is hard for thoughts.”

Her switch in mannerism jostled him a little. Rick tensed, but her hands kept him pinned by the hips.

“Monica can't remember well. It is...” He couldn't see the grimace, but it was apparent in the shift of her toned body. “It is telling memory, but not living memory. Complicated.”

He had his fair chance to look into things. From how Eva and Dia explained it, the feral curse didn't just cut away your mental capacity, but it also ate away at your memories like rot on wood. A year under its effects could chew away a few weeks, maybe a month or so. Even if they'd been born and raised in the wilderness, a maiden wasn't susceptible to the feral curse until they were old enough to need a bond.

It was why Hunters focused on catching younger feral maidens when given the chance. Maidens who remembered their youth needed less training to learn how to navigate the wilderness. They were the ideal recruits to swell the Hunter's ranks.

"Many details missing?"

"Many many." She agreed. "But sometimes Monica remembers smell, or place, or thing. Memory that isn't memory, but that it is true." With a deep breath, her hold on him tightened. "Was teaching Eva to hunt, and remembered." Her voice tightened. "Kit... daughter."

A heavy sigh followed, Monica released her grip on him, her tail draping itself over both of them. A protective warm fuzzy blanket.

Rick adjusted himself as best he could. "How much did you recall?"

"Always knew. Not much, but always there. Pain and want." Her cryptic answer hung in the air, her hands moved to wrap his chest into a hug. "Monica strong, claim mountain, defend mountain. Then... change, here." She picked him up, putting him at her side, taking his hand, and pressing it against her lower abdomen. "Monica confused, but determined. Survive and fight, like always. But thought maybe not alone, then."

Parthenogenesis. Another anomaly these beings possessed compared to humans. After their first puberty, a maiden could spontaneously become pregnant, the baby being a practical clone of the mother. It was the only way for them to get pregnant at that point of their life. It would not be until they hit their second puberty that they'd become a matron... and be able to have children the more human way.

"It grow, and Monica fat. Monica knew what was. Had seen many like this, knew had to prepare nest." With her hand over his own, she squeezed. "Strong kicks." There was a hitch on her voice. "Monica ready. Monica get good meat, good water. Warm nest." She took a shaking breath. "And then pain."

Rick didn't want to think about it. The question he'd asked Dia the day she'd explained about parthenogenesis, about how the process was responsible for the ferals being as numerous as they were. The question about why the wilderness wasn't just oversaturated with maidens like Monica, so powerful there was nothing that could realistically threaten them.

"Pain get worse." Monica let out a shaking breath. "Bad. Very bad pain. Try to hold, try to survive."

The more powerful the maiden was, the more powerful the parthenogenesis baby would be. Strong enough they could pose a threat to the mother's life. Strong enough it could kill them both. And in those cases...

"Then it stop." She sobbed.

"Oh God." He immediately reached out to her, clambering up so that he could hug her neck. He blinked away tears, squeezing her tightly as she cried against his chest.

Rick thought she should wail or scream, but Monica's tears were silent ones. The only proof of their passing was the dampness in his shirt and the way her whole body shook. He cried with her, unable to fathom the grief she must have felt at the time. It was impossible to miss how even this much was barely an echo.

It was impossible to tell how long it took before they'd calmed down.

Even after they'd calmed down, the silence stretched out, neither of them letting go of the other.

"Monica need strength." She was the first to break the silence, loosening her grip on him, hands shaking. "Monica need fights." There was steel in her words, a hard determination that wouldn't let itself be swayed.

"Have..." He paused. "Have you spoken with Dia?"

"She say not Monica fault." Her tone was bitter, angry.

Rick's chest tightened. He wanted to tell her that it wasn't her fault. But it was clear some part of her believed that she'd been responsible, that in her desire to survive, to stop the pain, she'd lashed out.

His fingers caressed the scars of her neck, and he choked on his breath. He could see it now, the scars that covered her body practically from head to toe.

"When the time comes, I'll take the pain away."

Monica nodded.

Her hands shook as she squeezed, her fingers pulled away enough that she could ball her hands into fists until the tremors stopped. She didn't make a sound, but the frustration boiled through the bond. This time she tried to hide it, to tuck it away in shame to keep him from seeing it.

Rick did his best to pretend he hadn't noticed.

With gentle touches, he combed his fingers through her hair, idly brushing the knots away until their breathing slowed and they fell into a rhythm. It took a while for her arms to relax, going limp albeit twitching every so often.

“I’ve been afraid of putting things into words for a while,” Rick whispered, scratching the base of her ear until it twitched in annoyance. “Saying things out loud has this... it feels like it makes things real, and real things can break.”

Monica shifted a little, pressing her chin against his chest so that she could look up at him. The darkness made it impossible for him to read her expression though.

“Recently I’ve been trying to change that. And... this will sound dumb, I know. It’s this thing that hangs over my head that everyone assumes, but no one really mentions because it seems obvious.” He took a heavy breath, scratching his chin. “What I’m trying to get at is... I like us being a family.”

For the longest moment, Monica didn’t answer, her breath tickling his chest. “Family,” she finally said, as if tasting the word. “Dia too?”

“Yeah.” He nodded a little. “And the others.”

“Kiara?”

Rick grimaced. “Yeah, though I feel she wouldn’t like the idea.”

Another long pause followed. “Sheel and Haal?”

He hesitated at the names. Both were tribe-members, Sheel was the Hobgoblin and the oldest in the tribe. The maiden was almost a matron. Her position and friendship to Urtha made her one of the default go-to’s whenever he wanted to know what the tribe was thinking behind closed doors. She also came with some convenient wisdom nuggets from time to time, and apparently had gotten along well with Dia.

Haal was the pregnant Orc. Like Sheel, she was Urtha’s sister in the broad sense of the word. Rick had barely shared a couple dozen words with her.

“I guess they could be considered a distant part of the family, or maybe friends to the family,” he conceded with a grimace.

“Yasir?”

“Same.”

“Rollo?”

“No.” He quickly answered.

There was a slight pause, Monica made a thoughtful sound. “Complicated.” She proclaimed with a huff, as if tossing the whole conversation out of the window. With impossible ease she brought him further down the pile until they were face to face. “Not bad complicated.”

Leaning closer they kissed.

“But only Dia allowed in nest.” Monica added as she reached over to his shirt to take it off.

He pretended to be offended, helping her strip him. “And me?”

“If not stink.” The soft pads of her hand caressed his chest. Her touch lingered on his scars. “Need smaller fights too.” She muttered as if making a promise. Whether it was for herself or him, he wasn’t sure.

“I promised Dia I won’t be throwing myself at feral maidens.”

“Boar is not maiden.”

Rick balked. “That’s worse in a lot ways.”

Monica didn’t answer, removing his pants and leaving him just as naked as she was. “Nest need more good-Rick scent.” She blatantly ignored his complaint, putting him next to her. “Cuddles?”

“Yeah.” He answered with a soft smile. “You get all the cuddles you could want.”

They embraced quietly, long into the night.