
[027] [Humanity]

The meet-tent was packed with humans, men one and all, but not equal. At the front of the gathering were men wearing the same leafy robes that some of the tribe maidens paraded around. Their hair was well groomed, washed, and clean, each of them at least a decade older than Rick, and looking far more comfortable here than anyone else in the room. Those were the humans that had willingly been a part of the tribe the longest.

Immediately behind them were younger males that were equally clean and groomed, but their clothes weren't as well taken care of. They were the begrudging, those who were a part of the tribe but didn't share their beliefs. They made up the bulk of the gathering.

Last were the slaves, the humans that had tried to run or escape when given the chance.

Rick only really needed to focus on the front row. They represented the part of the tribe that actually had a voice that would be heard. The men at the back might oppose anything he proposed, but so long as the front row was in line, the others would have no choice but to follow.

"I will keep this simple." Rick stood on the podium, accompanied only by Yasir. "I will bond every enslaved maiden in the tribe."

There was a wave of chuckles that began at the front of the gathering and moved its way to the back. Rick didn't miss the hint of nervousness that became more apparent the further it moved through the audience.

"Are you serious?" One of the older men stepped forward.

"I am," he replied. "And you will all help wake up the ferals from their curse. I will provide the collars for the task." Rick turned his focus to the dozen men at the front. "I am also creating a position within the tribe, exclusive to humans. It will be called a representative for the time being."

The term he'd originally thought of was 'tamer', but the word already had certain implications.

"The tribe has its normal meetings where the maidens voice their opinions. Up to five representatives will join these meetings. They will be the voice of the humans of the

tribe, as well as the maidens bonded to them.” He took another step. “We will choose the representatives through human vote. As Father of the tribe, I am not a candidate, nor can I vote.”

Twelve humans with power, and only five positions. Rick held back the smile as he saw them sharing glances. As far as they were concerned, this was an incredible opportunity. The tribe had suppressed their voices, and this was as good a chance as any to speak up. But who would be the one to gain that power?

“There is a catch.” He raised his voice. “Your power as a voter will vary depending on how many maidens you have bonded.”

It was a simple equation. With Rick taking away every non-tribe maiden, the easiest way for them to gain voting power was through bonding the ferals.

“Just a word of warning.” Rick gestured at the bearded merchant at his side. “Yasir will mediate any conflicts or issues pertaining to this process. He too will abstain from being a candidate, but he can vote.”

One man in the front row stepped forward. “How will the vote happen?”

“You will each get a marked stone for every maiden bonded to you. There will be boxes representing each candidate, and you will distribute your stones into each box however you wish.” He raised his hand. “It is important to note that it will be private. Your vote will be secret.”

Rick would’ve preferred the ranked choice system, but many people here were illiterate. It would have to do for the time being. The important factor was anonymity. It granted a layer of safety to those further in the back. It represented a destabilizing factor. The power dynamics would shift ever so slightly away from the Orcs.

Hopefully that would make the tribe’s transition to civilization smoother.

“Oh, and anyone can be a candidate. You just need to talk to Yasir.” With a smile, he waved the room away. “The focus is to wake up as many ferals as possible. We need the headcount.”

Leaving Yasir to answer further questions and to organize everyone into the feral-awakening thing, he walked out the back of the tent. Dia and Urtha were waiting for him. The taller of the two held her iron club loftily, pretending to be paying attention to anything other than Dia.

Dia for her part was grinning.

“Where’s Monica?”

“Playing with the stalks,” Urtha snorted, nodding off to the side.

Rick ignored the gesture, focusing on the Orc instead. “You haven’t changed your hairstyle.” He commented idly, the Mohawk-like braid not having moved an inch from where he’d left it. “Are you sure you don’t want to try forming the bond?”

“It can wait.” She brusquely turned away with a growl, holding the weapon with a loose swing that matched her steps.

Rick suspected she had another day or two before the effects would be truly severe. Not bonding her would strain things with the rest of the tribe, undermining what little legitimacy he had. At least Monica could defend her position by squashing whoever reared their head and thought themselves a better fighter than her.

Near the center of the tribe, where the farm had once been, where Rick had nearly died days ago, was now a gathering of maidens. They wore rags, rope and chains and were kept tied and huddled. Doggirls and Mousegirls made up the bulk of the gathered maidens. Elves were the third largest demographic, and the rest were a mixed bag of at least a dozen different breeds. He even spotted a couple of Centaurs.

As far as Rick was concerned, this was a crowd with very sharp noses and sharper ears.

The important thing was that they were all traitors to the Kingdom. The maidens that had run away from slavery and ended up in just an unpleasant situation as they’d been before, if not worse.

“Listen up.” He stepped on the box that would make for his soap-box, his position next to Urtha drawing the crowd’s attention. “As of this moment, you will no longer be slaves.”

The massive Orc whirled to look at him, a scowl so deep there were canyons on her brow.

“You should’ve been there yesterday.” He told her offhandedly, keeping his focus on the crowd. “The tribe plans to head to Sinco. We will become a part of the city, whether or not they want us to. Some of you are familiar with the small mining city, and should understand what it would mean to have the tribe be a part of that.” His smile was devoid of warmth, drinking in the nods that were being shared. “You have two options. You can either leave this tribe, or you can become a part of it.”

He waited for a moment, watching them stir.

“Leaving is a death sentence. I will not pretend it is not. I do not care for those who leave.” He looked at the crowd. “Stay, and you will be expected to pull your own weight, and you will be protected from...”

Rick paused for a moment, looking at Urtha again, at her scowl and the way she glared at the crowd. He then glanced at Dia, the stoic pride of her stance, the way she squared off against the crowd, as if challenging them to do something about it.

“Fuck it.”

Hopping off of his improvised podium, he stepped towards the crowd. Rather than approach the closest maiden there, he sought the one that looked the most flippant. It was an Elf, with glimmering blue eyes and extremely short white hair, a maiden that he was certain was way older than the early twenties appeared to be.

“What’s your name?”

“Begonia.” She declared. “Sir.” She added, spitting at the ground.

“Well, Begonia, I want you to bond me. Is that acceptable?”

Her gaze was icy, her wrists held in front of her by hemp ropes. “Do what you wish.”

A good enough answer, Rick reached out and unclasped the black leather band around her throat. The maiden sucked in a sharp breath, glaring but unmoving. He knew the look in her eyes. He’d seen it before in his students after all, it was a look they’d give him when he asked to trust him. The look of someone who did not trust the system, and who saw Rick as a representative of that very same institution.

He wouldn’t try to dissuade them with words.

Rather than tie the collar back around her throat, he put a piece of brown leather.

Murmurs spread all around them.

“Begonia.” He called her name, gesturing for her to kneel. “We will follow the way to form bonds we are most familiar with.”

There was one advantage the maidens of the Kingdom presented, and it was that they’d been taught since young how to form a bond quickly. A training that unfortunately didn’t carry over if they ever went feral.

“My name is Richard, and I am the Father of the tribe.” He reached out, touched the crown of her head as she knelt, following the same ritual he’d done with Dia. “Do you submit?”

The Elf's shoulders tensed. She drew in a sharp breath, and then slowly let it out. "I do." She whispered in dejection, and in that he could sense the surrender, a surrender he accepted without hesitation.

There was a jolt that ran through them both.

Just like that.

Rick waited for her to stand up. "Don't move, please." He reached for her throat and removed the brown collar. "Now follow me."

She looked at him in confusion, caressing her naked throat.

"Did I stutter?"

The maiden jolted, scuffling forward, drawing the attention of the crowd. The other maidens were sharing confused looks, muttering but not speaking out loud. Rick ignored them, taking Begonia to a wide eyed Urtha.

"Remove her bindings."

Not giving a chance for the Orc to complain, Rick hopped back on to the podium so that he could address the crowd once more.

"Those of you who wish to leave, you can walk away. The tribe will remove your bindings and will give you food and water for your collars. No one will stop you on the way out." He gestured at the spot in front of his podium, a spot currently occupied by a wide eyed Elf that kept touching her throat. "Those of you who wish to become a part of the tribe, step forward, and I will set you free."

There was a stir in the crowd.

The first to step forward was a Mousegirl, and once she'd squealed and declared she was still bonded, others followed. One by one, until Dia had to step in to make sure they moved in a line. While also arranging for the collars to be sent to the feral pens to quicken that part of the process.

Though focused on forming the bond with each one of them, Rick was more focused on the tribe. It didn't take long for him to draw a crowd. Orcs mostly kept showing up to peek at the whole thing. Some were making bets on how many he'd bond before he hit the limit, others just stood and stared. But there was one group of green-skins that were there to look at Urtha.

The massive maiden that had held a severe glare had only grown more intense the longer the ceremony continued. It didn't take long for the disbelief to become anger, and soon after she was stomping her way out of the gathering.

After two hours, he'd bonded most of the former slaves. There had been only three that had walked out.

Feeling like his head was about to explode through his cranium, Rick had the crowd dispersed while Dia used her literally magical fingers to ease the migraine away. "You've pushed yourself again."

There was nothing chiding about her tone.

"Are you proud?" He asked, somewhat surprised.

"Why wouldn't I be? Only a noble could ever hope to bond this many maidens," she whispered. "And being bonded to this many maidens will keep you better protected."

Numbly, he nodded. "It's... a weird sensation."

The bonds were weak, and from his experience with Kiara and Eva, that meant he shouldn't be able to feel much, even if he really focused on it. But there was this sensation of hope that was washing over him he knew wasn't entirely his own. As if the collective emotions of so many maidens were making up for the weakness of the individual bonds themselves.

It was a concerning realization, but one he wasn't even sure it was a problem he'd have to tackle. For him, the biggest issue was that the secret about bonding without collars was out, but that too was something future-Rick would have to tackle if a need for it ever arose.

"Question." He leaned down, putting his head against her shoulder. "Is there some context I've missed in the interactions today?" He sighed. "Eva, mind pipping in?"

The Fledgling emerged from his shadow, the hidden bodyguard when none other was available. "The number of bonds alone would make you royalty in their eyes. Making a show of being able to bond without a collar places you a step above that."

She spoke quickly, sternly. The tone had that forced cadence of military discipline that grated against Rick's nerves, but that he wasn't about to ask about since he had other things on his plate.

"You bonding them makes them stand above any station they could have dreamed of achieving."

“A bubble that’ll pop eventually, I guess.” He sighed. “That leaves Urtha.”

Dia shook her head. “You humiliated her. It made it clear to the tribe that if there was any problem in forming the bond, it was her.”

“Eva, thoughts?”

“She is no longer our problem.”

Rick hesitated, then blinked. “What?”

“The tribe now knows of your importance. And that Urtha has not bonded you of her own accord.” The Fledgling fidgeted for a moment. “It is her turn to decide. She can either bond with you willingly, or cause a problem.”

Pondering on that statement, Rick agreed with the sentiment.

“And we can deal with her if she becomes a problem... I just hope it doesn’t come to that.” He nodded slightly, relaxing his shoulders and standing up. “Whatever the case, we get ready for the mess and wait for her move. For now, let’s focus on the ferals and the preparations for the celebration thing.”

[028] [Heartbeat]

It took a minute for Rick to realize that what he was looking at was a drum and not some kind of mini-hut. Standing at nearly two meters across and almost as tall as he was, the beast of an instrument was the largest drum he had ever laid eyes on. His brows narrowed as he caressed the polished wood shell, working his way up to the soft head. The cloth was made of silk and was held in place by a series of industrial strength metal rods.

“How did you make this so fast?”

He glanced at Yasir and his wife, Ahina. The Spinner smiled, preening at his question. “We recruited the best crafters in the village. It is the largest piece of the set.”

A set.

They’d made a set.

“The Orc-wood is very useful for making drums.” Yasir took a mercantile tone as he spoke. “Its production was hastened because of necessity, but my wife is meticulous. This instrument should last at least until we reach Sinco.”

Rick grabbed one drum-stick, a wooden club the thickness of his arm, and struck the surface of the drum. The instrument let out a singular beat, powerful enough to rattle his ribs. His arm bounced back and nearly made him stumble. His gaze remained on the drum for several long seconds. “This is meant to be played by a maiden.”

“Of course. We made this one keeping the Orcs in mind.”

Tall, muscular, strong, and enduring as hell. Rick marveled at the craftsmanship and felt a quiver of excitement at the thought of maidens playing instruments. How far could music be pushed when the abilities and senses of both performers and crowd were vastly greater? He struck the drum again, expecting the bounce. The sound was deep, rattling his bones, the ground, the very air.

It was like an explosion on demand.

“You like it.”

Yasir wasn’t asking, reading the grin on Rick’s face easily.

“I think I will, yeah. We’d just need to find some players.” Rubbing at his chin in thought, he glanced at Dia. “Is alcohol still out of the question?”

“Will there be humans present?” She asked pointedly.

“Nothing to inebriate the maidens.”

“The music is already pushing it.” The maiden whispered, barely loud enough for him to hear.

Ahina’s smile tightened ever so slightly, though she remained quiet. Yasir didn’t. “It is natural for maidens and humans to enjoy music and song.”

Now it was Dia’s turn to tighten her expression. “And accidents happen when things get rowdy, do they not?”

“True. But they are the exception, not the rule.” Yasir kept the tone polite. “Maidens unable to keep basic awareness are not allowed to such events. They are, after all, expected to be responsible for themselves and their actions.”

“Not at the potential expense of humans.”

“I think we can save this philosophical debate for another time.” Rick interjected, sensing Dia’s mood turning icy. “The point of this whole thing is to raise morale. We’ll make sure to keep the humans away from the rowdier crowds.”

“It’s a tribe of wildlings.” Dia hissed. “They are all rowdy.”

Rick smacked the drum. “And we’re part of that now. So we’ll work around it. If things get out of hand, we stop or shift things. This whole thing is going to be a long list of firsts for many people.”

Rather than flinch, she perked up at the declaration. Dia glanced at the drum once more, and then at Rick, giving a quick nod. “I will make it work, sir.” And marched off in an uncharacteristic rush in her step.

Ahina giggled, the sound mixed with Yasir’s amused chuckle.

“Let’s... see the other things...” He frowned, watching the healer rushing off in what was clearly a maiden on a mission. What had gotten over her?

The married couple took the lead, showing off the preparations that had been underway throughout the past handful of days. The amount of work done grated against Rick’s sense of time and effort. If the drums hadn’t been enough, the mountain of meat, drinks,

food, and other preparations were irrefutable proof of just how industrious maidens could be when they put their mind at it.

All in all, it felt like he was looking at the culmination of a month of toiling to prepare for some grand event. Yet this hadn't even been an entire week. It made sense, and he'd have to further familiarize himself with such capabilities.

With the tour over, Yasir returned to his work, keeping an oversight of the humans as they awoke the ferals. The healers were in on the whole thing. Being locked up in the wooden box had not been a healthy environment for the maidens, and Polita puke-juice had been the order of the day. Much to everyone's chagrin.

The atmosphere in the tribe had shifted considerably.

The number of Orcs had increased now that many of the scouting parties had returned, and overall the green-skins appeared chirper, but overall slightly tense. Particularly around the former slaves. Those maidens were far more skittish, avoiding the public spaces whenever they could, and moving hastily whenever they needed to do something.

There was one thing they all shared. And it was that they kept a healthy distance from Rick. Their eyes would linger, their voices would whisper. Many would bow and smile, or just stare and walk out of the way. It was clear the whole bonding thing had made bigger waves than either Dia or Eva had mentioned.

The edge in the way they moved wasn't exactly comfortable, but he figured things would loosen up in time.

"Where's Urtha?" He asked.

The Orc standing in front of his tent jolted. "I... haven't seen her." She declared. "Father." She hastily added.

Rick glanced at his hut for a moment. "Why are you standing guard here?"

"Monica insisted."

"Monica?" He frowned, peeking into the hut and finding it empty. Was there anything in there worth stealing? What few things of value there were, would be easy to find and identify... "Did she walk in here carrying a bunch of meat?"

"I did not see what she had on her person, Father." The answer was hasty and tense, the Orc's gaze turning away in quick order.

Rick quirked a brow, but changed the subject back. “Where do you think I could find Urtha?”

“When she is stressed, she usually goes chopping.”

“Chopping?”

‘Chopping’ was a spectacle to behold when being done at the hands of a three meter tall Orc. The maiden held an ax that was as long as Rick was tall, swinging it with monstrous force, slicing through meter-wide tree-trunks in one hit.

Urtha had leveled the equivalent of a football playing field within two hours maximum. The maiden hadn’t even broken a sweat, grunting as she’d swing the weapon like a baseball bat, cleaving wood like it wasn’t even there.

Rick remained there, watching her work. Was there a purpose for it, or was it merely to vent? He could guess at many things they could need these trees for, but doubted all of it was for the sake of utility. There was a tension to the way she moved, an anger to her every move.

He wondered whether he should do something, to leave the ball on her side of the court and wait for her to bounce it back. Did he trust she would take the step and avoid things heading into a collision course?

In the end, he left her to her trees. If Urtha wasn’t able to handle something like this, then it was clear he could only trust her with matters of the battlefield if that.

He meandered some more around the village, spotting Monica as she grappled and played with four Orcs. The green-skins were clearly trying to pin her down, and the feline just teased, laughed, and threw them off with ease. It forced the others to coordinate and fight together, with other green-skins joining in the rough-housing as others dropped out.

Kiara was supervising the feral thing, pretending to fly about the place with boredom, but constantly drifting back to the feral pens. From time to time, she would drift down for a minute or four before taking back to the air.

Yasir was there as well, often accompanied by Ahina, though the Spinner would mostly only show up whenever the Succubus came down from her skyward perch.

Dia was nowhere to be seen.

Rick's steps somehow led him back to the Drum. Its smaller siblings had emerged, a dozen in total. Each of them had a different size, though all of them kept a similar wood

and metal aesthetic. Ignoring the maidens that were walking about the place, Rick sat next to the drum that closest matched the sizes he was familiar with.

Once upon a time, he joined a marching band. The worst and best kind of band.

The time he'd spent there had been brief. Music had piqued his interest, but it had never really kept it. Yet Yasir had thought his idle drumming and humming was a sign of something else. Rick was left to tap away at the surface of the instrument, testing out the rhythms, trying to remember what he'd learnt all those years ago.

Nothing quite clicked. There were a few rhythms and beats that were interesting, but his lack of practice and experience was obvious.

"Maybe I should invent a guitar and play Wonderwall." He muttered to himself, tap-tap-tapping at the surface and rummaging through his memories.

Was there any music he'd be able to play? What even was the easiest thing he could play?

Bum-Bum-Tap

"Oh."

Rick grinned, returning to his meandering light playing of the drum, mind churning. Maybe he hadn't been looking at this the right way. If writing and science were things that could be taught, then why not music?

This was a world where the concept of interconnection didn't exist. There just was no effective way to communicate with someone on the other side of the planet. Or if there was, it was so expensive only a handful of people could afford it.

How many thousands of songs had he heard over the years?

Bum-Bum-Tap

He'd send a message to the others who'd been stranded in this world alongside him. Maybe they'd have some stuff they could send over. But that was something for later.

"We will, we will rock you." He hummed away in preparation for the festivities to come.