
[118] [Home sweet Home]

Their return to Sinco had been a muted thing that slowly revved up as the tribe began to call for celebrations for their victory. The city had been asleep, lulled into passivity by the preparations for the upcoming winter, and the return of the tribe's warriors was like a spark to kindling. Promising alcohol and beer was fuel to the fire, and before the sun had even set, the city plaza was alive again.

Rick was put front and center, made to stand in front of the crowd as he tried to push away the exhaustion.

"I'm not a man for speeches, so I will keep it brief," he called out, trying to recognize whom among the crowd were the families of those who had not returned. "Many good warriors died to avenge Sinco. Some of you might call them wildlings, but I have the honor to call them tribe-sisters. They were under no obligation to fight or to give their lives; they chose to fight for this city, and they chose to show Sinco's enemies what happens when you threaten us."

Most of the words had been hastily cobbled together with Kiara's insistence. Rick could feel some faint echoes within the script of words his old uncle had once spoken. He waited for the roar of the crowd to die out.

"In their honor, I will establish a stipend program. Every family of every warrior that has died will continue receiving that warrior's salary for five years."

Neither the tribe nor the locals had much to do when a fighting-maiden died. For the locals, if she had died while fighting, then she would be given a symbolic burial if there was no body. A piece of wood with a name and a circle drawn on it, to represent that the maiden's life had fulfilled her duty. For the tribe, the family would mourn, and potentially be taken in by a different fighter if the ties were close.

This "death benefits" business was entirely new to them. And he had plans to throw in one other thing into the pile. "Also henceforth, any maiden that passes the tribe's combat rites will have the choice to join the tribe as a warrior. A warrior who will stand alongside her sisters in battle!" He raised his fist, and the crowd cheered again.

Just like that, he'd thrown in another option for a maiden to seek freedom. The rest was just fanfare and minimum courtesy to the families of the fallen. Rick threw in some

buzzwords about 'standing together', trying to sell off the idea of the tribe and the city being one and the same.

He'd get a chance to see how effective this whole thing was later.

Which was why, with the collective agreement from Urtha, Monica, and Dia, they went to sleep while Sinco was still in the throes of drums and dancing.

Rick woke to the familiar warmth and darkness that surrounded him from every direction. His body was squished between two bodies that were both hard and soft, Urtha and Monica, the giants of the team, each nearly twice his height. The two maidens snored softly, arms of steel draped over one another and trapping Rick exactly at the squishy center between their two chests.

It was like being trapped between four torso-sized marshmallows and surrounded by rebar.

The scent of sweat and morning breath mingled in the room, and though either maiden could've worked as a space-heater by themselves, Rick only found mild discomfort in the pressure. One or both of the components in the meat sandwich were squeezing ever so slightly. Enough that his ribs were starting to groan in complaint.

Carefully, he turned towards Monica, and deployed a gentle tickling in her ribs, caressing the scars as his touch remained light as a feather. It didn't seem to work at first, but after a minute of this, she twitched and relaxed just enough to give him some wiggle room. From there he repeated the process with Urtha, the Orc was tougher though, and he ended up needing to press very hard with his knuckles for her to react to the tickling.

Then... freedom.

The cold chill made him immediately regret his choice of leaving the pillow-and-iron prison. Blind and in the dark, he began looking around for pants and a shirt.

A hand reached out, grasping his wrist, tugging him towards a lump of cloth. His pants. Rick blinked, then frowned as he had to activate enough of his brain to sift through the bonds to recognize who was in front of him. "Eli?"

“Yes, my Lord?” The Hound answered, tone formal. “Mistress Kiara sent me to help you; she figured you needed it.”

Another long second trying to shuffle through those intangible things that were the bonds until he found Kiara’s. The Succubus was upstairs, impatient, worried, and serious. Dia was there too. There was a distinct sense that Dia was watching him through the bond, and he could only guess that it was how she’d known he’d awakened. He sent a small wave of amusement, which only got him a jumbled shocked mess that was quickly locked down.

Dressing up with Eli playing spotter for his clothes, Rick pondered on the bonds, on how every passing day they felt more... solid. It was something he hadn’t really noticed day to day, yet looking back to months ago, the bonds had once felt almost alien to him, weird little pokes and nudges in the back of his mind. At first, it had been like a magnifying lens, making the maidens around him seem easier to read, to understand.

Had he looked at Eli a few months ago, he would’ve picked up on a few things. That little twitch, that tiny sway, the suppressed wag of the tail, the way her attention roamed him freely whenever she thought he wasn’t watching... Each was a sign that showed tempered eagerness. A woman who knew what she wanted but had the patience and discipline not to show it too openly.

Yet now there was more to it, as if he could see past merely the body language and unspoken cues. Standing in front of the Hound, unable to see a single thing in the pitch blackness, Rick could still sense her presence as if she were perfectly visible. She occupied a solid spot, much as how he knew the spot his own hand occupied. Leaning forward, he caressed her cheek, and this brought with it new emotions.

Surprise, yearning, warmth, eagerness, hesitation...

Ever since Eva’s ascension, that feeling had grown stronger. But it hadn’t been until now that it had truly become this defined. Caressing the Hound’s cheek, he could feel her innermost desires pushing past the discipline, whispering at him to pin her to the wall, bend her over, and tear her clothes off. They were effervescent feelings that carried with them the taste of Kiara; he couldn’t explain how he knew this, but in his mind, the image of the Succubus’ smirk became prevalent.

The events with the Elf Queen had left an impact on him. What that meant, or how it worked, he wasn’t sure.

A twinge of annoyance and a light growl broke the moment.

“Monica’s awake, by the way,” he commented as he leaned away, closing the connection before her unspoken disappointment took root. Turning to leave, Eli followed closely behind; they both quietly ascended the stairs to the common room.

Rick glanced at the two maidens currently waiting for him and felt too many things jumbling together. Kiara, despite looking all too calm, was a nervewreck, enough so that Rick opted to dampen all information coming from the bonds.

“I suspect the only reason our resident huntress let me step out is because...” He smiled, trying to lighten the mood. “She’s hungry and doesn’t want to get out of bed.”

“Meat!” a voice harshly whispered from downstairs.

“She can wait, this is important.” Dia and Kiara sat opposite each other at the lone table; the healer held her hot cup like a lifeline, while the succubus sat with the straightness of someone bearing bad news.

The two watched him intently, a platter of hot food waiting for him.

Fish and potatoes.

“Which of the important things are we talking about?” Rick asked as he sat, still trying to keep the tone light, hoping it would help at least Kiara relax a little. “Mark, Barry, food supplies, the Darkton assholes, the tribe, the city, the celebrations, or...?”

“The Elf Queen,” Kiara didn’t growl the words, but she wasn’t hiding an iota of her aggression. She was pissed, concerned, and terrified, all in equal measure. There was also a hint of regret there. Meeting his gaze, she seemed to realize what he was doing, and, gritting her teeth, kept her defenses lowered.

She was trying to intentionally keep herself easy to read.

“Right.” With a sigh, he began to eat. He wasn’t going to manage to defuse things, it seemed. “I’m listening.”

“Rick, to put this bluntly...” The succubus stared at him evenly. “... What kind of future do you want for your children?”

He choked on the mouthful of potato, hastily taking the offered cup of water to wash it down. “You bitch,” he hacked out between coughs. “You want to kill me?” There was a flicker of amusement from her, but her expression remained a hard one. “Care to elaborate where this is coming from?”

“If I say the word ‘baby’, there’ll be two maidens who suppress the impulse to gush, and a third who’d jump if it were you who said it,” Kiara didn’t smile, and Dia made a point to avoid looking at either of them. Rick could almost taste the embarrassment and self-consciousness in his meal. “At this point, it’s a question of ‘when’, not ‘if’.”

“And? It’s not like this should play into anything.” As soon as he said it, he frowned. “Actually, no, let me rephrase that. I am not going to consider the prospect of children with some sort of utilitarian goal.”

“Rick, I understand you do not wish to look at your prospective children as tools, but that does not mean those around you won’t do just that,” Kiara gestured at Eli, the hound stiffening. “Amongst those closest to you, that dog is the first to show signs of second puberty. She will become a matron, and at that point, she will be able to have human children. In this way, I planned for her to be the mother of your first human child.”

The reaction was immediate, a flare of red-hot anger that washed over him like a storm. His hands slammed against the table as the chair clattered behind him, leaning forward as he felt every muscle in his body tense.

It was instantly followed by a touch of fear and apprehension. Rick recoiled, blinking from the emotional whiplash. “What?” His head spun, and he realized the second surge of emotion had come from Kiara, Eli, and Dia at the same time.

“The bond works both ways,” Kiara took a calming breath, closing her eyes. “Before you start pointing fingers.” The Succubus let out a small sigh. “Eli is very much willing in this, and at no point did I plan for it to be unwilling from your side. Over time, I would orchestrate both of you to get opportunities to share time, to grow closer. If you meshed, then things would progress naturally towards the desired conclusion. If you didn’t, then I would use someone else.”

He was feeling a little dizzy, having some trouble clearing his thoughts as he hastily began clamping down on the bonds more harshly. All of them. Pulling away for the sake of clarity. “But—”

“To ensure the mother of your firstborn human was loyal to me was a plan with several goals in mind. First, it would’ve given me political power. Second, it would guarantee a lineage I could reliably influence. Third, it made my own ascension likelier... or so I’d thought.” She drummed her fingers against the wood. “A hundred years from now you will be dust, and I will be there, watching as your great-grandchildren run around.”

“Not enjoying the existential dread, Kiara.” Rubbing at his temples, the headache was at least fast subsiding.

"Fine, then how about this? My goal with Eva was to help her become a Vampire, and then to be her teacher over the next thirty-odd years." Her brows furrowed slightly, but she kept her tone even. "By securing a firm foothold in the relationship early on, it made her a likely investment down the line. In a hundred years or two she'd be powerful enough it would be worth my time to call in favors from her."

"Why are you...?" He groaned as realization bubbled forward. "You want to show me the kind of thinking process Camilla has."

"The Green Empress ruled over half the world for at least a century, and that's not accounting for how long she spent conquering all that," Kiara pressed the palms of her hands against the table. "The very first thing she did when she woke up was to take steps to put you in her debt... both of us, in fact."

"So she's... wait. You?"

The Succubus grit her teeth and lowered her gaze to the table, wringing her fingers as her gaze took a very distant troubled look. Much to Rick's surprise, Dia reached out across the table, giving Kiara a reassuring squeeze, who recoiled slightly and immediately grimaced before forcing herself to relax again.

"I... the reason why I joined you was to ascend. Succubi have another step in their genus, the Dark Queen. The method to walk this path is an unknown one, but I've been hunting for it my whole life." Her hands shifted in pigmentation, darkening before turning pale again. She glanced at him. "My best lead pointed me at you. A human immune to my abilities, one with the cadences of a king. I figured the crown wasn't a literal requirement, that there was something in the combination of immunity and pride that would resonate with my genus to push me to the pinnacle. Even if you didn't turn out to be the key, odds were that your children could have been."

There was that anger again, but also apprehension. Kiara was coming clean, she was forcefully keeping the bond open, shoving her emotions at him in a way that was terrifying. No, not terrifying for him, but for her. The Succubus had been closed, secretive, aloof. This side of her was one he had not seen; there were barely any hints of it through those eyes that seemed to have seen the world thrice over.

The eyes of someone who'd been running all her life.

"She told me how I could heal from my injuries, and proved it. She could be the key for my ascension to the pinnacle of my genus." Her expression hardened. "Maybe the only key."

The tone she held gave him pause, she was begging. Begging for what? Permission? All of this felt so uncharacteristically like her... Actually, why was she here at all? When he'd asked her whether to come with them back to Sinco or not, she could've just stayed. But she hadn't, she was clutching at straws.

"Except... you don't want her to be."

At his words, Kiara very slowly shook her head.

Rick swallowed as the realization hit him of the things she wasn't saying despite being open about everything else. Actually, looking over the conversation, Kiara had all but spelled it out for him. The reason she'd sought to ascend Eva had been to accrue a debt, a big one she could cash in down the road.

Now, the Succubus was playing her cards the only way she could: she was showing her hand for the sake of an alliance. But she was doing it in a way she was familiar with. Kiara was having two conversations with Rick, one with her words, the other with her emotions. It was hard not to feel overwhelmed and cornered; it was the exact underlying feeling she currently had.

How aware was she of what she was projecting?

Or was the point to present herself in this utterly honest, vulnerable state?

She didn't want to find out.

"Shit." He closed his eyes, closing the bond further if only to clear his thoughts for a minute. Specifically, trying to look at the situation through the lens that the Green Empress would've used.

Rick was a pureblooded human, and that had allowed her to bond even while in that weird dream-like state. She'd mentioned there were thousands of Elves in her grove; of course, the ageless maiden would be looking to the long term. Maybe he wouldn't be willing or able to awaken everyone, but what about three generations down the line? How many "pure enough" human descendants could there likely be by then? And Kiara had shown herself capable of assisting in the process of forming that bond; of course, the Succubus was a powerful ally to have at her side.

Even if Camilla didn't want war, Rick was a golden ticket, and Kiara a nice cherry on top. The calculations shifted only slightly once he accounted for Barry and Mark in the mix; they were younger, easier to manipulate, to twist, and-

Rick shook his head, dismissing the thoughts, realizing he'd been going down a line of thought that wasn't entirely his own. A part of him was sick at even thinking of the

situation in such a way. Assets. Tools. Things with or without value, and in what ways they could prove fruitful. But it wasn't like he could just ignore that others were making plans while looking at him in that way.

That would be a headache for some other time.

"You said you used the bond to ascend Eva," Kiara whispered. "You told me that to guarantee-

"I remember," Rick nodded. "I insisted on it because I wanted that bitch to be dead." And also because he didn't want to lose Kiara. "I am as uncertain of whether it would work as you are. The only thing I know is that the bond between us is a fraction of what it was with Eva then." He suddenly laughed, realizing that this whole exchange, these twists and turns, the double-layered meaning. All of it. It had been done with the express purpose of leading to this one question she'd just asked. "Is that why you're being so open all of a sudden?"

There was no response, but the look in her eyes was answer enough. Kiara withdrew herself slightly, raising defenses, closing the bond, bruised pride, hesitant. "Do I have your word that you'll try at least?"

There was some mild amusement to be had in this question. Rick had told her he was responsible for Eva's ascension, but he hadn't told her the exact method. "Yes." Though he hid the grin, Kiara clearly picked up on his emotions.

The Succubus pulled away, evidently exhausted from what must have been a deeply uncomfortable conversation. "Then I think we can continue this later. I have some tasks to attend to." Letting out a heavy breath, she pushed away from the table and stood up. Only now did she acknowledge Dia, giving her a serious nod. "As agreed, I'll leave him to you."

Rick perked up, confused. "As agreed?"

"My Lord," Eli bowed, following Kiara out of the door as none of the three maidens addressed his question.

Dia shifted to stand next to him, picking up his empty wooden plate, and quietly walking towards the wash-basin. Dropping everything off, she then turned right around and marched back to Rick, making him sit back down before he could rise to his feet.

Gingerly, she took his lap, placing both of her hands on his chest and giving him a hard look. For a moment, she paused, shooting a glance at the door, then back at him.

“I know how you ascended Eva.” A single finger moved up to seal his lips before he could speak up. “Don’t look so surprised; she’s shy and reclusive, but I got her to share all the details... or so I’d thought.” Her look turned accusatory. “It didn’t quite click that THAT was the reason for her ascension until Kiara approached me this morning, asking for help of all things.”

“Uh-”

“Before I say anything else, I’d like to know what your thoughts are on her request.”

Rick chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment. “I want to help her out.”

At his answer, she arched a brow, poking his cheek. “And?”

“Remember after the attack? When we sat on the pier, soaked to the bone, and then came back here to warm up and dry up? Remember how we all gathered around the fire?” He waited until she nodded. “Back then, I felt there was an empty chair in need of a Succubus.”

“So you will help her.”

“Yes.” Rick made a face. “I also had the distinct impression that if I didn’t, she would’ve found an excuse to burn the city to the ground.”

With a nod, Dia leaned closer, putting a peck on his cheek. “Then, as your medic, I believe we need to do this properly. Safely.”

“What... wait, what are you suggesting?”

“I’m not sure yet, I need to hash the details with Eva.” She shot him a rueful smile. “What I do know is that we will need to do some safer practice runs.”

“Really now,” he growled, leaning closer and kissing her neck. “And what did you have in mind?”

“Down, my Lord, these next four days are exclusively for Monica and Urtha. They’re the stars of your campaign, and are due all the attention they rightly deserve.” She nudged him back with a finger. “Then you get two days, one for handling city business, and another with Eva, in whichever order you might need, my Lord. I will still be whipping the nurses back up to proper standards. But after that?” She reached over, giving his rump a tight squeeze that nearly made him jump off of the chair. “Then I’m **yours**.”

“Just one thing,” he chuckled. “Does Kiara know about the details, or...?”

“Oh, oh no no no. This is a secret.” Dia grinned. “Of course I didn’t disclose anything. This is war, Rick. Kiara’s so desperate for this I could’ve strung her up, danced her around, made her do a hundred tiny menial annoying tasks. But I didn’t, I was a good sister and brought her straight to you.” She cooed. “And do you know why, my Lord?”

“I feel like this will be a question I regret asking, but I’ll bite. Why?”

“Because we, Eva and I, will be putting a lot of effort not just in guaranteeing your safety, but also in making sure our dear sister Kiara gets **exactly** what she asked for.” Dia cackled darkly. “And you’re going to help us with that, my Lord.”

Raw vindication and dark glee sparkled in her eyes.

What other answer could he give?

Rick swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Yes, ma’am.”