
[106] [Tribal (Monica)]

Monica was always interested in many things. Every day she found something new, something complicated, or something strange. She would often spend time trying to understand these things on her own, but sometimes there was clearly more to the discovery, and she would have to bring it to someone else to ask about it.

Once, during one of her little games of sneaking up on Eva, she found a box that clicked. It was an annoying box because it didn't stop clicking, even when Monica lifted it up and looked at it more closely. The insides were all metal, and each piece moved on its own, spinning at different speeds but never stopping... well, until Monica killed it by accident.

Bringing it to Rick, he told her she'd broken a "clock," something meant to measure time.

Like always, Rick managed to make something simple too complicated. He talked about how time wasn't the same everywhere, that sometimes it could move faster or slower depending on many things. Her mate was very smart in many things, but this was not one of them; he kept insisting that the only way to make time change was to go faster or be near very big things.

Monica clearly knew more about this because, unlike Rick, she'd seen time go slower and faster. When she was around her human, everything moved so quickly Monica would sometimes wish she could pull on it all to enjoy it more.

And sometimes, time would just stop.

Looking at the empty spot where Rick had been, this was one of those times.

Nothing moved, nothing but Monica's thoughts. She couldn't twitch or blink; her own heart squeezed tightly, lungs empty. She couldn't even move her eyes away from the empty spot, minute bits of dirt suspended mid-air.

It was unpleasant.

Four of the Silent Deaths were pinning her arm with knives; even this close, Monica could not smell them, could not sense their energy, and she knew that even if time came back to normal, she would not be able to hear their heartbeats nor their breathing. They

were nothing; they killed without existing, always sudden, right when you let out a sigh and relaxed.

Monica should've known better. Monica shouldn't have relaxed.

Now Rick was gone.

Rick was gone.

Monica glared harder, willing time to return to her.

Specks of dirt rained down from the shields the tribe held above them. Her teeth clenched tightly, pain from the multiple stabs burning their way up her shoulder, free claw inching forward. While her eyes shifted toward her target, the Silent Death in question was also moving, releasing the dagger and pulling away.

A second dagger rose from her prey's belt, slowly rising toward the approaching claw. Monica didn't flinch even as the metal cut deep and down her arm right as she found her grip on the head.

A grip that failed; fingers abruptly no longer able to squeeze, tendons torn and muscles failing. Monica didn't slow, leaning forward, mouth opening as she inhaled, willing the prey closer. Her fangs met flesh and she bit down, warm blood spraying around her as she tore the maiden's throat out.

The world was returning to normal speed.

Left claw flung wildly at anything within reach as knives yanked and tore through her. Her tail trailed behind her and, like a rope with a rock at the end, whipped around the head of another. At the same time, Monica took a step forward, twisting her whole body, adding momentum and yanking on her tail. With a crack, the second Silent Death's head spun until it was facing backward.

Another of the Silent Deaths vanished. Monica could feel the power in another of them, so she roared, throwing darkness to keep them grounded.

More knives, something cold sank into her gut, becoming hot. Monica spun to smash her face against the mask, shattering it and revealing a face wrapped in bandages. She tried to close in to finish her off, but a punch threw Monica's head back. With the half-step, she kicked at her, making sure to dig in her claws as she ripped downward, tearing at her chest.

Then she was gone, leaving Monica's foot against empty air.

Everything was speeding up, fire crawling up both her arms and spreading from her gut. Monica felt danger and dropped flat against the ground as a hand had nearly managed to grasp her head. With a thrust of her tail and legs, she leapt up face-first at the attacker, biting down and ripping the arm off, knocking her back against Urtha and shoving darkness at them before they could escape too.

The Orc gripped the maiden's head and began to pummel her with her fists, completely ignoring the free arm that kept stabbing at her. And right at the same time, another of the Silent Deaths vanished.

Another twinge of danger and Monica kicked backward without thought, thrusting with the whole of her weight. She hit only air, but several cold slashes followed her movement, ripping at her ankle and trailing up to her thigh, looking for where it would bleed the most. Monica didn't hesitate to leap back with her good leg; her tail thumped against the ground to give her the balance her injured limb no longer provided as she swung her elbow. The Silent Death didn't block; instead, they punched the incoming attack directly, thinking they had enough strength to stop it.

They were wrong.

Their fist shattered against Monica's bone, and she pulled her arm back just enough to throw the attack again. Too quick to be stopped, this time she smashed against their skull, a severe crack following suit right as Monica lunged after the stunned enemy. They collapsed to the ground, and the Silent Death struggled with their free arm, kicking and kneeing Monica at the same time.

Monica just kept hammering at their head with her elbows, darkness welling around her as she kept her prey from escaping, her claws otherwise limp and useless. Over and over until she felt the skull cave in and all struggling stop.

No, not just the struggling, everything stopped. The hammering rain of not-spears had stopped. The movements of the Silent Deaths had stopped. Monica was left straddling her victim, breathing hard, and bleeding profusely, her fur dyed red.

She tried to stand but found all but her left leg and tail failed her.

Looking down, everything was bleeding. Usually, she didn't bleed for this long; injuries tended to... ah, it was the fire, the fire thing that burned inside. It was a familiar feeling, from the prey with many legs.

Rick was gone.

Gritting her teeth, she used her tail for support as she rose to stand as best she could. With heavy breaths, Monica glanced up in the direction she could sense Rick.

"Monica first, the blades were poisoned," someone said. Monica's head wasn't doing too well. Everything was too hot, burning.

Rick was gone.

Dia's soothing touch reached her leg, and wounds began to close. The heat began to die down, but it was slow. Dia was fighting the fire inside Monica, and Monica just stayed there, letting her, trying to think.

"We'll get him back," Dia said. "Just like last time."

Rick was gone.

Monica knew where they were taking him, but she knew she wouldn't be able to get to him in time, not like this. The place none could leave, the place where death took you before you realized. The one place Monica could not reach.

The land of Silent Death.

Everything was spinning slightly; Monica's legs didn't have the strength to stay standing, so she fell back to her knees, eyes fixed on the direction Rick was being taken. Maybe... maybe she could catch up. If Dia kept healing her, then maybe she'd make it in time. It would be a day of pushing herself hard, maybe two, but if she made it before... before...

A thump turned her attention to the side, Dia had collapsed, breathing hard, pale and shaking.

"Shit, Spikes!" Urtha rushed to her side, quickly picking her up and glancing at Monica. At the still bleeding Monica. "Did she-"

"Something in the wounds makes them harder to heal. Not a poison, but my energy just doesn't..." She groaned, rubbing her head. "It took ten times more energy than it should have just to get her stable."

"Tarantella poison? Or perhaps their webbing in a dust form?" Eva was concerned, looking at Monica with a deep frown. "It naturally disperses elemental energy, making it hard to control energy, much less cast spells."

"If she's stable, we should focus on..."

Monica stopped paying attention, eyes fixed on the ground, fighting against the burning inside. Breathing was hard, moving was hard; she knew the feeling, even if she didn't

remember it properly. Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply, holding it in, following her instinct.

The wrongness was all within her, burning whatever it touched. It wouldn't kill her, there wasn't enough, but it made even moving painful. Focusing on her insides, Monica tried to remember.

It was fuzzy; memories from before Rick were hard to piece together. They often came to her through dreams or in little pieces. It made it easy for her to understand the big things, the longer things, but not the small ones. She knew she'd lived in a cave, that she hunted prey, but every time she tried to focus on any specific prey she'd hunted, things would be muddy.

This too was muddy, a feeling of fighting things that hid under the ground, that made holes and traps... Monica was fighting dirt. That was why it burned, because dirt in open wounds hurt. Maybe? She wasn't sure Rick or Eva would agree she was thinking the right way, but it made sense to her, and that was what mattered. The burning was trying to make it harder to do things with her strength and her shadows.

Shadows weren't too good at breaking dirt, but strength was.

With a slow nod, Monica stopped trying to push out the burning using her darkness, and instead focused on making herself stronger. At first her body cramped, blood pumping harder, heart racing; Monica fought against moving, channeling that strength into her heart.

Bit by bit, the burning sensation was dying down. Her own body began to take over the healing process.

"She's purging the poison," Urtha's voice called out.

"And exhausting herself. We'll keep an eye on the Chieftess; doubt she'll be in any condition to fight once she's done," Sheel said. "Go help Spikes."

By the time the burning had died out, Monica was drenched in sweat, most of her injuries closed, and the feeling within herself was mostly one of exhaustion. Sheel helped her up to her feet and led her over to the large tree. Exhausted physically and mentally, she could only ask to sit down near the tree and slump against the wall. Every limb was as heavy as that time Rick had asked her to help move heavy stuff in his stink-den, if not more so.

What else could she do? Even with the tribe, they weren't strong enough.

“I hope you’re not giving up on the Father,” Sheel looked down at her, hands on her hips and staring intently.

“Not giving up,” Monica said under her breath, sighing. “But... not strong enough.”

The fire-maiden was amused. “I’d say the exact same thing about the Father. He’s fragile like a twig, but he took over the tribe anyway.”

Though she agreed, Monica didn’t know how to think like Rick. She was smart, and smart at fighting, but Rick was smart at not-fighting. And right now they needed to fight, but no matter how hard she thought, there just wasn’t anything they could do to get to him.

“What do you think makes him strong?”

The question was an obvious one. Monica sighed as she looked at Sheel again. “Rick is strong of gut, of heart, and of head. But not of arms or claws.”

It was a different strength from Monica’s, and one he didn’t understand, not truly. A big heart couldn’t make death stop, a strong gut couldn’t make it kneel, and a full head might be useful, but not without claws. Rick wasn’t strong here where words didn’t matter, much like how Monica wasn’t strong underwater.

Sheel shook her head. “You can get stronger on your own, but the Father cannot, not in a meaningful way. His source of strength is external: the maidens that follow him, the tools he makes, the land he rules.”

Monica flinched, lowering her gaze. There were things she didn’t agree with, but she couldn’t completely deny the other maiden either. It was... frustrating. Very frustrating.

“If the tribe becomes stronger, then the Father becomes stronger.” She made a gesture at the open door. “That’s what Spear, Little Spear, and Spikes are doing right now. If we’re not strong enough to rescue the Father, then we just need to find more power.”

There wasn’t much else Monica could say to that, only frown.

Captain Deneva: Swordmistress and the right-hand maiden of Earl Vittchat. She is known for her strict discipline and open contempt towards cruelty. As a Swordmistress, she can learn techniques from a blade if the weapon was wielded by other maidens before her. Her second ability allows her to summon or dismiss weapons on demand.

Earl Vittchat: Direct ruler of Balet, and overseer of the South. He played host to Rick, Monica, and Dia. Currently he is the one overseeing the bulk of the Otherworlders, as they're attempting to fully adapt to life in this world while staying in Balet.

Royal Knight Captain: The highest rank a maiden can achieve within the kingdom, there are only four such maidens, each in service of an earl save the fourth who serves the king directly.

Sheel: A Hobgoblin, eldest maiden of the tribe. She is one of Urtha's closest friends and advisors. Her powers lean into creating fire, but her specialty is in enchanting wood so that it gains explosive properties.

The Prisoner (Embla): A Malumari, daughter of the Warlock Dagmar. She was the unofficial strong-arm of the rebel group, and its most powerful asset on the field. Her specialty lies in her physical capabilities combined with her power to disrupt an enemy's elemental energy.

[107] [Against Time (Eva)]

Eva had never held any particular interest in managing knights, yet as a noble, Evans Bavtha had no option but to go through extensive education on the matter. Knights weren't just expected to be the best of the best the kingdom had to offer, but standard protocols ensured they firmly followed codes of conduct. This was mostly in the form of regular interrogations under the watchful eye of a psychic, as well as under the watchful eye of truth detection.

There were ways around such things, of course. Less-than-stellar nobles could place their most trusted agents in legal limbo, holding all the power of a knight but neither the position nor prestige. Others would tweak the questions in a way to guarantee technicalities. A few would just use and discard knights on a regular basis, all for the sake of ensuring their records would not be stained. In the most extreme cases, nobles would use psychics to erase memories and seek to bribe the inspectors to ignore any signs of mental tampering.

By contrast, the Earl of Vittchat was a noble of impeccable conduct. He had gained many enemies over the years, and one of his most powerful shields was complete openness in regards to his knights. Where other nobles might conduct the interrogations behind closed doors, he would make it a closed-door ceremony involving representatives of any who wished to send their own.

One of the core rules of knighthood was that, without direct orders from a noble, the eradication of any accursed was a priority. The exceptions to these rules had been what allowed Eva to remain alive the first time around. She was a prisoner, one willingly submitting to a human as well as to the knights themselves. She had escaped, though, at least on a technicality, and that could very well mean that the instant she met Deneva she'd be executed on the spot.

It was for this reason that Eva's priority was to avoid the knights and focus on getting to Barry before Embla did.

Dia, Urtha, and the rest of the tribe were tasked with minimizing the loss of life. Every maiden lost could potentially mean one fewer pair of hands that could assist in assaulting the grove.

Which, at first glance, appeared closer to disaster relief than to combat.

Upon first entering the "wooden palace," Eva had originally assumed the inner structure would be akin to an actual palace. A large entrance leading to separate "wings" where guests and servants would be housed, with amenities and special rooms sprinkled throughout. Something large enough to potentially house a few thousand people, maybe up to thirty if things were pushed to the limit.

Once they made it past the initial entranceway, it quickly became clear it would be more fitting to assume the place could house at least ten times Eva's initial assessment.

The entryway led directly into a town plaza at the heart of the tree itself, with light shining down from above; part of the tree had been hollowed out. Dozens of staircases led away in different directions, balconies overlooking the garden. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of windows leading up and up. Intense overgrowth spread throughout the entire structure, not just in the presence of emerald mosses and random branches sprouting where they shouldn't, but also in how the wood was irregularly bulbous and swollen.

Sporadically one could spot signs of maintenance—sharper edges and smoother bark—but they were specks compared to the tree that had been slowly reclaiming the hollow space within itself over hundreds of years.

The strange, almost ethereal image was a stark difference to the massacre they'd encountered. Corpses that were halfway between plant and maiden littered the spaces; blood was thick and pungent in the air, death in every direction and down every passageway. Dia had just needed one look at them to know they'd not even died by the hand of the knights but by one another, brutality unleashed with anything and everything they could get their hands on.

The sound of combat echoed throughout the place, coming out of windows and corridors in practically every direction.

"This just makes my job easier," Urtha said, turning to the orcs that had followed her into the colossal building. "Girls, groups of four. Help the knights only so long as you get the chance to capture. Keeping them alive is preferable, but not over your own lives."

"I'll begin setting up a healer's area," Dia said, turning to two of the orcs and five Pollitas, singling them out and recruiting them to her effort. "Potia, make sure to tell the knight's healers to come here once they're done tending to the wounded outside." One of the five Pollitas instantly set off, clearly relieved at being given the chance to get away from the bodies.

"And... I'll hunt for Barry," Eva grimaced, looking at every possible avenue before her.

She couldn't just run around blindly; the place was too massive and complex, so she did the next best thing. Closing her eyes, she slowly inhaled through her nose. The smell of blood bombarded her with information: anger, panic, fear, desperation, determination, and death. At first, it came as an avalanche of disparaging bits and pieces, each trying to tell the whole story of every individual maiden that had perished within the past hour. The knowledge mostly related to their health—how they'd been at the beginning stages of malnourishment and severely stressed. But as Eva began to focus, she could also pick out which scents belonged to stronger maidens, their power thickening the aroma and making it almost mouth-watering.

The Vampire tried to determine if there was any human blood in the air, but nothing came to her. However, she did notice that the nearer "fresher" sources of blood wafting out of the windows had a rancid undertone to them. Whatever this oddness was, it coincided with the areas where knights were fighting, so Eva could only assume it came from them.

No matter; that made it easier to avoid them.

Eva glanced up at the walls of the plaza and focused on the shadows a few levels above, on a window that didn't appear to have any action happening nearby. A quick jump through the darkness, and she emerged into an empty hallway. The sound of fighting was now both above and beneath her, so she focused on a spot opposite the plaza, but also a level or two above. A quick jump, and another hasty assessment of the scents before taking another leap.

Focusing only on the places that had no activity going on, she used her shadow-jump to make her way up to the highest set of windows. Here and there were signs of fighting that were still going on, with knights split up into small squadrons of five wielding heavy shields and long spears.

Meanwhile, the wildlings had little to nothing other than whatever was at hand. Those directly infected by the plants would fight in a frenzy, copiously wasting their energy and ruthlessly attacking anything that wasn't each other. Those that weren't had the presence of mind to lock themselves into rooms or to raise improvised barricades in some attempt to fight back. But there was a third category: maidens that had no visible signs of infection yet acted with ferocity, a wildness in their eyes as they set up ambushes or coordinated attacks. If it was any indication, they were likely those bonded to Barry, being assisted by some of the wildlings unwilling to go down without a fight.

Eva didn't stop to take part in any of these battles, but as she made her way further out of the plaza she did slow down to take advantage of them. Wherever she found the

wildlings preparing an ambush for approaching knights, she'd wait and only move through the area once the fighting broke out and everyone was focused on one another.

The design of the inside of the tree was... odd. There were no clear, singular paths anywhere, and most rooms she encountered were usable as alternatives whenever she had something to avoid. The only exceptions to these happened to be those that were placed around either the innermost area right next to the plaza, or nearer to the outermost edges of the tree. Here and there she'd encounter small gardens, miniaturized variants of the central plaza, some leading all the way to the bottom floor while others barely allowing access only to those at the top.

Even with the corridors and rooms that had overgrown to the point of making it impossible to traverse through them, it was impossible to miss just how empty it all felt. There were undoubtedly hundreds of knights and at least that many wildlings, if not more. Yet even with both of them combined, the vast majority of the "palace" had not even a semblance of activity.

As if they were no more than two large gangs fighting within the ruins of a city.

It made Eva's work moving around easier, but it also made it harder to find where she needed to go. No matter where she went, the same scenes were repeating themselves. Some were better prepared, while others were more desperate, but whatever the case, in none of these locations were there signs of guards trying to protect a location.

There couldn't be many options that would make sense in these circumstances. Barry couldn't be in a constant state of being moved around; it was too massive a risk, and Eva had not picked up on any hints of such. Similarly, keeping him locked in some room and ignored felt like too big of a gamble on the wildlings' part... If anything, it felt as if she was on the wrong si—

THUD

The impact came from beneath, not just a few floors underneath but rather all the way. A concussive force powerful enough to travel the whole tree, accompanied by an overwhelming feeling of energy surging from underneath... way underneath.

Underneath the tree.

Eva turned around instantly, rushing her way out and toward the center of the tree and into the open space that was the plaza. For half a second, she hesitated, looking at the drop with apprehension. The climb up had been tedious, but seeing the three-hundred-meter fall that waited for her, a trickle of apprehension made its way through her.

It was illogical fear; she was a maiden, a Vampire. She knew it was perfectly possible to survive such a drop so long as she used her powers properly. So with a deep breath, she...

Teleported to the furthest lower floor she could reach.

Right into a corridor surrounded by knights who were in the middle of fighting frenzied Dark Elves.

For a fraction of a second, Eva tried to pull upon the shadows once more, but felt a pulse of disruption course through her body. Without hesitation, she turned to the window, throwing herself toward the void, and not a moment too soon, as she felt several swords pierce through the armor and nick her flesh.

The emptiness took her, gravity taking hold and pulling her into a flurry of wind.

Eva tightened the cape around her body, pulling on it to create shadows to draw from. With the cloth tightly secured, she focused on the world below, the garden that rushed up to meet her. Cursing every second, Eva flared out her power, tying her existence back to the darkness, pulling into the strange, distorted world of shadows.

And then she was out, launched at a strange angle, if slowed down somewhat, slamming against a wall. A burst of pain and several creaking sounds left the world spinning and out of control. Eva's senses flared out, seeking the nearest source of nourishment.

"Eva!?" Dia's voice rang out in alarm, rushing from what looked like cloth tents.

"Down. Need to go down," she groaned, slumping to the nearest corpse and taking a long drink to recover from what were likely several broken bones. The feeling of her own flesh stitching itself back together was not a pleasant one, but it was better than the alternative.

THUD

Another shudder, this time far more intense, sent dust and leaves falling down the chimney that was the central plaza.

"This way, Little Spear," one of the Orcs called out, not bothering to wait for Eva to get up and dragging her along through one of the corridors, this one leading downward. "We saw the Swordmistress down there, told us to fuck off, Urtha said that was a good idea."

"What... was she doing?"

The Orc shrugged. “Fighting this big-ass wall of branches that kept trying to grab at her.” With a toothy grin, they followed a spiral staircase, bark surrounding them in every direction, still leaving Eva to wonder how deep the trunk of the tree went.

“If she’s still there, I need you to interact with her on my behalf.”

The Orc threw her a weird look. “What does that even mean?”

“Just walk ahead and tell me if you see her, alright?”

Another shrug. “Sure, whatever.”

Their trek down the stairs didn't take much longer, opening to a long corridor that had every available surface covered in cuts and deep gashes. Neither commented on it, but Eva could only shudder at the thought that Deneva had been the one to unleash this.

As they moved further down the tunnel, the air became thick with elemental energy. Eva’s mouth watered at the taste as the tremors of a fight further ahead rushed through the air.

THUD

This close to the source, the air vibrated, numbing Eva’s skull and earning a savage grin from the Orc. “They’re at it, huh.”

Eva didn’t quite understand what she meant until the tunnel widened into a large chamber where she saw Embla and Deneva in the middle of what could only be a battle to the death.

This wasn’t good.

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