
[111] [Wood (Urtha)]

“Just what in the world has Rick gotten us into?” Eva whispered in a mix of horror and awe, staring at the mother of all trees.

This thing was to the titan-trees what the titan-trees were to regular ones. It was a plant that Urtha couldn't believe existed. From their vantage point, it was straight-up impossible to even see half of the trunk. There were smaller trees growing on top of its branches and roots as well; it was so big it was supporting its own forest.

“A fight,” Urtha answered with a smirk to hide the turmoil inside of her.

The three groups had pushed themselves into a hard march towards their goal: to rescue the tribe's Father and eradicate the Pinielf. They'd foregone the bonds wherever they could spare them, and anyone not bonded to a pureblooded human was kept from bonding Barry. Everyone else had removed their collars a full day ago, leaving behind the men under the care of the healers and barely a skeleton crew of knights.

The human redhead was kept unconscious by Dia's order, the reason being mainly health concerns. It was something the tribe had fully backed, and the knights had agreed with. The wildlings had wanted to complain, but Embla hadn't fought the decision, so that kept them quiet. He, like the other humans and most of the healers, was left behind over a day ago.

Each and every maiden not bonded to either Rick or Barry was currently a day into the feral curse. Either this fight would finish within the next day or two, or they'd be forced to go back to their humans to refresh the bond.

“We are seen,” Embla stood in front of the group, staring at the green sky of branches and leaves overhead.

Monica nodded, jaw clenched tightly, a constant growl punctuating her place in the conversation.

“Lookouts,” the knight captain agreed. “They've pulled their forces back, likely set up kill-zones where they expect us to push through.”

Urtha hadn't sensed a thing.

No matter how hard she strained herself, the forest around her just felt like a forest. There was plant energy floating about the place, but it was no different here than it'd been at the palace or anywhere else.

Standing next to the three champions in their own right, Urtha felt as if there was a massive gap between her and them. She'd fought Embla and won, not thanks to her own strength but because it had never been a fight to begin with. The Malumari's spirit had been broken since the start; it'd been a desperate half-battle, and one where Urtha herself had nearly died if not for the help of Eva.

Urtha knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that any one of the three could beat her black and blue if they were to fight seriously.

She'd thought herself to be close to entering that mythical realm, to be a champion, a force on the battlefield none could ignore. But the more she'd stood next to true champions, the more she'd realized the gap she needed to overcome was immense.

Yesterday's fight with the Golden Elves had been the final crack. Urtha had barely been able to keep up with the maidens, and that was while she was expending a lot of power to sustain some sort of crazy collective ritual. And yet, in that same amount of time, Monica had slaughtered them.

They were both roughly the same age; they'd both grown up fighting all their lives. So why was the gap so large? Their species alone couldn't excuse things, not when Urtha knew she held the advantage against Monica in raw physical endurance, durability, and regeneration.

Urtha's thoughts were interrupted when she sensed an attack.

In an instant, Deneva had taken a step forward, the swing of her blade so fast Urtha barely even saw the flicker of light. The next instant there were two explosions of dust at either side of her as the halves of the arrow embedded themselves into the dirt.

The captain relaxed her posture but did not sheathe her blade.

"I can't see where it came from," Eva admitted.

Neither had Urtha, the best she had was a rough guess. "It was an invitation," she said instead. "They don't want to wait."

A pulse of energy washed over them. It was faint, but it felt as if it had emanated from all around them at the same time. Suddenly, the forest felt alive in a way that made Urtha's hairs stand on edge. The pulse vanished, but in that brief instant, it had felt as if every plant and tree was hostile.

“We cannot stall either,” Deneva stepped forward, glancing at Embla and Monica. “Shall we begin?”

The growl intensified; the Chieftess half-crouched, darkness wreathed her form, air trembling with energy. Sinking her claws into the dirt, Monica’s anger became an almost physical thing, to the point where Urtha could sense it digging into her spine and screaming at her to fight. But what truly frightened her was how abruptly it vanished without a trace, pulling into itself with such tightness it became less than a whisper in the wind as she submerged into the shadows, pulling Embla along with her.

Monica’s hunt had begun.

“Can’t let the Chieftess have all the fun!” Urtha roared. “Ladies, get your packages ready!”

Each Orc took a Dark Elf, who strapped themselves to each Orc's back. Urtha did the same, having Dia and Eva along for the ride as well, all the while hefting the large metal shield. The combined weight was cumbersome because of the shift in the center of mass. To sustain her jog comfortably, she needed to focus on grounding every footfall with a bit of her energy so that it would properly “stick.”

The knights closed in the rear, keeping a loose enough formation each could react to a possible attack without getting in the way of another.

At the head of their group was Deneva, sprinting to put as much distance between herself and the tribe as possible. She was to be the tip of the spear and the forward scout. There were several ways up the miniature mountain of branches and bark, but Urtha knew better than to trust their opponents would be easily accessible through any of them. If anything, those were exactly the places where she’d have surrounded in—

“INCOMING!”

Deneva’s warning was all Urtha got to pour her ground-energy into her shield and raise it, hardening it barely in time. The metal rang like a bell, a sound that echoed all around her. The first strike nearly managed to stop her in her tracks, the downward angle of the impact carrying far more of a punch than she’d anticipated. She adjusted the shield so the arrows would deflect a little, hammering the ground around them instead.

“Charge!” Urtha commanded; she didn’t slow down but turned her jog into a sprint, every other maiden behind her doing exactly the same, pushing straight into the rain of wood.

Ahead of them, the Swordmistress appeared unfazed by the attacks. Deneva appeared to dance between the arrows, only casually deflecting or cutting one or two every

handful of seconds. And yet, despite how her path had turned into a zig-zag, she was still gaining ground, getting further and further ahead from the tribe.

“Aren’t Monica and Embla supposed to be hammering them!?” Eva held on tightly, flinching every time the shield shook from an impact, daring a peek over Urtha’s shoulder.

Urtha gritted her teeth. “They are.”

Every time she peeked under her shield towards the tree ahead, there would be some area of the tree that seemed to spontaneously explode. Every single time it was as if an area would be attacked by dozens of arrows from every possible angle all at the same time. It was a barrage that could’ve easily tripled the intensity of the attacks the tribe was currently running through.

The Golden Elves were clearly dedicating more of their effort to stopping Monica and Embla than to the tribe and the knights.

Urtha couldn’t spot any of their attackers, but the Golden Elves had clearly spread out all over the tree. This allowed them to attack anyone that got too close to one of their own, overlapping their lines of attack to ensure none of their positions would be safe from the others. It was clearly also meant to turn any push into the tree into a death-trap, as they would become further surrounded the deeper they went.

“ON ME!” Deneva’s command was immediately followed by her taking a sharp turn to the right, heading straight towards one of the titan-trees that rose from between the branches of the behemoth.

“Spread!” Urtha added.

The Orcs slowed and changed direction, forming a semi-consistent line between the knights and the Golden Elves, shields raised to be the bulwark and take the brunt of the ongoing attack. The blows didn’t slow, nor did they intensify, even as they placed the titan-tree between themselves and everything else; the arrows kept coming, sprouting out of the bark as if the tree itself wasn’t even there to begin with.

They pressed against the base of the trunk, shields kept at an angle as each member of the tribe took a knee.

“Ladies, get your passengers and tie your ropes! We leave none behind!”

She glanced at the knights, some of whom were winded, others had taken injuries from the arrows. They were in no condition to make the climb on their own, at least not if the goal was to get up to the highest branches in any reasonable amount of time.

Meanwhile, the other Orcs were still fresh, and Urtha felt a great deal of pride that not one of them had gotten anything that wouldn't mend itself on the way up.

"You, with us! Eva, switch rides." Dia hastily pointed her finger at one of the knights that had a painful-looking gash in her armor and was still bleeding profusely.

The armored maiden nodded and took Eva's position, only sparing a half-hearted glare at the Dark Elf. Eva, in the meantime, squeezed in as a third passenger on one of Urtha's sisters.

With everyone accounted for and Dia focusing her attention on the injured knight, Urtha gave the command. "Time to go up! Darkies, you fail us and we'll kill you all on the way down!" She laughed, grim smirks and determined nods were shared amongst the rest of the tribe as they swung their shields onto their backs, trapping their "passengers" in place. As they did this, each of them tied a rope in a harness around their torsos, connecting each of them from the first to the last in the six groups they'd decided upon already.

Urtha's Dark Elf passenger flared out her power, and all of a sudden, the next wave of arrows didn't come.

"Remain close to one another, overlap your 'Darkies' areas of effect," Deneva switched her blade for two short knives, burying them into the bark of the tree. "Don't fall."

"Not going to do your fancy air-walking trick?" Urtha taunted, punching her fist into the bark and pulling herself up.

"I need to preserve energy," the captain spared the comment, eyes staring directly upward. "Monica and the Malumari can only buy so much time before they need to pull back and catch their breaths."

With a slight nod, Urtha pulled herself further up, punching in again, using her feet to kick holes to step into. A different Dark Elf let out a pulse of power, and no attacks came. "Let's move it, ladies! Last one gets spear sharpening duty!"

There were barely six of them marking the way up, punching and kicking holes for the others to use. Their formation was far tighter than before, the pace a rhythm of thuds in-between pulses of power from the Dark Elves.

Urtha stared at Deneva. The Swordmistress had managed to climb twice over their own distance, and was increasing the distance the more time went on.

Her fists thrust through the outer layers of the bark, her feet kicking into the holes. Two holes to pull every second, a race up the tree, the disruptive pulses of their passengers

increasing in frequency the further up they were getting. Urtha couldn't sense the incoming attacks or how effective the Dark Elves were being, but the heavy grunts her own passenger let out every ten or so seconds...

"They... they stopped?" The maiden suddenly called out, breathing heavily.

"MOVE!" Urtha immediately called out. If the Golden Elves had stopped their assault, then it meant they were preparing something worse. "PUSH!" She commanded, screaming out as she began smashing her way up. The Orc no longer bothered to make holes and instead focused on grabbing fistfuls of bark, infusing just enough ground-energy into it so it'd hold out just enough so that she could yank herself higher. Each pull gave her a few meters, the tribe clambered up the wall behind her as if they were jogging their way to the top. Yet Urtha could feel it deep in her gut that something was coming.

A whistling sound overhead drew their attention. Dozens of arrows had been shot from the opposite side of the tree and away from the tribe. However each line was connected to the same string, which grew taut and forced the arrows to swerve towards the trunk. Each arrow drew a horizontal arch around the trunk, the moment the arrow reached the opposite side, the rope would grow taut and fix in place.

Then a second barrage of shots followed, descending from that first attack and creating a second set of white lines upon the dark bark.

"DON'T TOUCH THE SILK!" Deneva roared the command, abruptly shoving herself downwards towards the tribe. The maiden abruptly spun midair, lashing out with her blades, destroying a dozen arrows and getting grazed by a few that she missed and had to twist around.

The Golden Elves had changed positions, some of them had moved to the opposite side of the titan-tree and now had a clear line of sight on the tribe.

"REINFORCE SHIELDS AND DON'T STOP!" Urtha commanded.

Ignore the Golden Elves, Deneva would have to handle them, push energy into the shields on their backs, push energy into their fists, and pull up. If they failed, the Father would die.

Keep climbing.

Urtha felt attack after attack hammer against the shield on her back, shoving her chest-first into the tree. She used the shove for impulse to hit harder, push faster. A scream underneath was suddenly accompanied by a yank.

The bark she'd been holding onto broke, unable to hold the weight. Urtha punched into the tree before she dropped, hard enough to get herself up to her elbow. Looking down, two of her sisters immediately down the line had lost their hold. One of them from a now-missing arm, the second quickly recovering.

“Focus on defense!” Urtha commanded, turning to look up and punch the next hole... no, that would be too slow, so she poured more power into the bark as she held onto it and pulled. Her insides twisted in queasiness at the increased output. How much more could she get out? “And use your good arm, dammit!”

The two Orcs had recovered, but the one missing the arm was not going to be able to keep the pace. Urtha yanked harder to compensate.

Behind them, the armored Deneva was like a bird, bouncing mid-air as she protected the tribe as best she could. The Swordmistress was knocking arrows out of the air by the dozen, and still the Golden Elves kept shooting.

There was no time to waste.

She had to keep climbing.

The moment they reached the first white line, Urtha immediately sensed how the energy around it flickered and dispersed as if afraid of the silk. She recognized the effect from the description Eva had given: this was the same stuff they'd put into the Chieftess. If she touched it, then the energy she'd gathered on her shield and in her hands would disperse.

With one hand buried into the tree, she reached out to her back. “Knife!” She shouted, and a sword was put into her hand without a moment's hesitation.

The rope was tough, and trying to cut through it proved a hard task even with all the strength she put into it. Urtha felt more blows rain down on her shield as she ground at the line, sawing it with the sword until it finally gave way.

Except it didn't fall off.

Parts of the rope were sticky enough that, even with it cut in half, most of it remained in place. The part that had dropped was barely enough for one of the other five groups to pass; the other four would have to either wait for them and follow along, or they'd need to cut their own line.

Urtha grit her teeth.

Keep climbing.

So long as she was fast enough, she'd be able to create the space the others needed. If she pushed hard enough, then the others would get more breathing room. So she pushed, thrusting herself towards the next rope and once more working her way to cut through. Every second another attack landed either on or near her shield.

When she reached the third line, the weight pulling her down increased with a yank.

Behind her, she could hear the battle Deneva was unleashing, and her instincts told her things were not going well. The number of attacks was increasing, the Golden Elves were dedicating more resources to stop them.

"Fuck it."

She punched into the tree, looked up, grit her teeth, and jumped over the line. Her hands grasped the wood, just enough time to punch a new handhold into the bark. Every bit of energy was now focused on the shield on her back; there was none to spare for her grip. So every time she pulled up, she would poke another hole into the tree with her fist and feet.

Keep climbing.

The weight on the line increased again; there were shouts.

Keep climbing.

Another line, another leap. For a moment she could feel the weight lightening, someone finding their footing. But it only lasted barely long enough for her to reach the next line, yanking and punching her way past it.

And the next, and the next.

Keep climbing.

Her ears were ringing, her arms bled from too many scratches to count, her bones groaned, and her muscles screamed. Urtha's back was being pummeled with attack after attack. But she clenched her jaw shut and thrust the next fist into the wood, her foot kicking into bark with explosive force, her leaps dragging along however many of her sisters she needed.

She would carry the whole damn tribe herself if she had to.

"I am Urtha Cross!" She roared, explosive blows disintegrating bark under her bloody knuckles. "I am the Spear of my tribe!" She tore at the wood, wildly pulling upwards,

gravity barely an afterthought compared to the strain of her body. “AND YOU WILL NOT STOP ME!”

Keep climbing.

Punch, pull, kick, thrust.

Keep climbing.

Punch, pull, kick, thrust.

Keep climbing.

Punch, pull, kick, thrust.

And then... solid footing, a flat platform, a branch thick enough to put a house on top.

For a fraction of a second, she nearly forgot the weight on the line. For a moment she nearly toppled over the edge.

“PULL!” Dia screamed into her ear at the top of her lungs, slapping her hands against the Orc’s skull with a wave of healing and clarity that kicked her into gear.

Urtha dug her heels into the tree, stomping herself holes for support, and gripping at the rope with her hands and pulling at everyone underneath. One by one she pulled her sisters up to the branch, she was dimly aware of how some of them weren’t moving. The only thing that mattered was that not one of their passengers had died or been dropped.

Every able maiden that reached the top helped pull the others up.

Until there were no others on Urtha’s line.

“Set defensive perimeter.” Breathlessly, she sucked in cold air, filling her aching lungs. “Prepare for the next group.”

“Urtha, what are you...?” Eva hesitated.

“We’re not done.” Urtha looked down at the others that were still making their way up, fighting to pull on those that had been injured or worse.

She began her descent.

Not a single one of her sisters had failed.

She could not fail the tribe.