
[115] [Confrontation]

With his arms firmly tucked against his body, guard raised, and body as compact as he could make it, Rick ducked and wove his way around the attacks. Thorn-covered branches and vines lashed out at him, each attack seeking to impale his body in a wooden embrace. Parts of his mind screamed out, warning him to leap out, to use claws and tail to give him better balance and stronger offensive capabilities.

Yet he didn't fully embrace those instincts. Now that he understood what was going on, Rick could better control his own capabilities. He could push himself harder, attack more fiercely, and follow Monica's instincts in how to savagely assault the Empress, but he restrained himself as much as he could get away with.

His objective was to buy time.

The instant this attempt at bonding succeeded or failed, he would be thrust back into the real world, and he would be no more than a liability. But if he stalled things, then it meant the Golden Elves would not be able to operate at their full strength against Monica, Urtha, and the rest.

He had to trust they could win, that his efforts would ensure that no matter the outcome in here, they could handle it.

Even if the Empress woke up, she was just one maiden.

So his blows landed with closed fists, aimed at the gut or face, simple, direct, and brutally fast. They were effective in disorienting the Empress; each punch would knock her off her feet and send her sprawling, and if Rick really put his back into it, he could send her flying off... not that he wanted to give her that much room to maneuver. Though there was something about having the ability to just throw someone like they were a baseball that was intensely satisfying.

Though he was dominating the fight, ensuring it followed his pacing, he had a growing sense that he was not truly in control. Despite every blow cracking bone and bruising flesh, the Empress would barely flinch, standing right back up entirely unharmed as if she'd never been touched. Though she'd shown a moment of panic at first, now her emerald eyes were nothing but cold, serious, and determined.

The momentum changed the instant she stepped into his punch, gracefully angling her body to avoid the attack as her arm came up in an upward slash. The blow was sudden, cutting deep into his chest and sending him tumbling back, a spray of blood spurting out of his chest. Confusion led to surprise when he saw the green glowing saber she hadn't been holding an instant ago. Trying to draw in breath, he found himself unable to, lungs burning as he sputtered and choked.

"You cannot win against me."

Her words were cold and hard; she lunged with her blade, a sudden rush of light erupting out of her body, trailing her arm, and focusing at the very tip of her sword. Everything inside Rick screamed out, and he dodged, barely avoiding the beam that sliced through the tree behind him.

"You lack experience." She stabbed, another beam of light surging outwards directly at his chest. Rick could only duck as a hole was punched into the toppling titan of wood and bark. "You lack power." Another slash, and the slowly falling tree got cut from a different angle. "You lack skill."

Three quick thrusts, Rick only managed to avoid two, the third punching clean through his knee and sending him to the ground. The Empress stood in front of him, blade pressed against his throat as the tree crashed behind him, a thundering noise that shook the very ground and made the forest tremble.

"The power you wield is a fake one, stolen from a maiden, not even your own. You are only human." She pressed the tip against his throat, a prickle drawing a drop of blood. "Surrender."

Rick bristled, kicking away at her with his good leg while slapping the saber away, ducking under the beam that would've severed his head clean off. Her footwork was impeccable, avoiding getting tripped as she immediately followed through by stabbing at his chest.

His tail lashed out, wrapping around her sword-wielding wrist and jerking the attack so it would bury into the soil instead. Rick followed through by grasping her surprisingly sturdy dress with his left hand and pulling her close so that his right fist met her face.

The Empress tucked her chin in, meeting his knuckles with her tiara.

"You fight like an animal," she clutched his throat with her free hand, trying to pull the saber out of the ground but failing as his newest appendage kept her arm gripped firmly.

Rather than attempting to break her hold, and with the feeling of his vision starting to blur either from air loss or blood loss, he punched her face with everything he had. But it was as if he wasn't even tickling her; the maiden's head barely twitched from the blow, appearing as though he was just punching a statue.

Something had happened while he'd been pummeling her.

Just as he felt his thoughts drifting toward panic, Rick let his instincts take the reins, and with a slash of his hand, cut at the Empress' throat. The spurt of blood caught her by surprise, the hand on his throat relenting just enough for him to lunge. Fangs buried into pristine porcelain flesh, his mouth erupted with a taste of power and nature that washed over him like a warm blanket.

The moment of confusion and relief was followed by all air getting driven out of his lungs as she kicked him away.

Rick groaned, rising to his feet, frowning when he realized the agonizing pain was gone from his chest and leg. The bleeding had stopped, the injuries were gone. Across from him, the Empress clutched at her throat, wiping away the blood only to reveal unblemished skin.

"A Vampire as well, then," she straightened, standing tall with blood splattered all over her dress. The maiden's expression returned to one of being perfectly calm and collected. "It will not change the outcome of this."

"You're awfully repetitive," he wasn't injured anymore, not a scratch or a bruise.

Why? His brows furrowed.

A part of him was certain this was some sort of regeneration, the same sort Urtha and Eva had. Yet that couldn't be it, this had been practically instantaneous. He tapped deeper into his instincts, not just Monica's or Eva's, but as deeply as he could go. There was something else going on here, and unless he figured it out, then she could very well bring this whole thing to a sudden and abrupt end.

Rick lunged into the shadows, emerging right behind the Empress. The maiden spun around with two sabers, light exploding out in searing heat as she cut off his right arm. The exact same right arm that grew back and pierced through her chest with its claw. The Empress swung at his head and he ducked, throwing her to the side as he reached out to grasp a tree.

His muscles bulged and tensed, pulling out a massive chunk of wood with which he dropped upon the maiden. She sought to cut through it, but Urtha's hardening powers had laid claim over the improvised club.

With a thundering crash, the Empress was buried. Yet Rick's instincts screamed at him to dodge, just in time to avoid a slash that came right out of the nearby tree.

The fight turned into mayhem.

While the Empress used exclusively her sabers and that odd form of teleportation, Rick was rifling through everything and anything that came to mind. Every single attack he sent out was no longer with the intention of holding back but with the exclusive goal to hurt and maim.

Monica's claws slashed, Eva's fangs pierced, Urtha's club crushed. But nothing stuck, every injury, if it happened at all, would be healed and gone within the blink of an eye. It didn't matter if he aimed at her head, her heart, her guts, or her limbs. The Empress would put some effort into dodging, but not really enough to avoid everything.

It was as if... as if nothing could truly hurt her.

Then his next slashing attack didn't even dig into her skin. Rick jolted, freezing for a moment too long, unable to react as her next attack came swiftly. The world spun as he felt his neck being pierced in one clean thrust, pinning him to the tree. The second saber pierced him straight through his forehead, and everything began to lose focus. Thoughts crawled to a complete halt, and pain overtook all else. Any attempt to fight back was destroyed; all thoughts were gone.

"You can't win."

Her voice was firm, in control. There wasn't even anger within her tone, only an overwhelming force of will. The voice of a ruler, of someone who knew what to do. And wasn't that just it? Why fight? It was impossible to... Impossible to...

"FIGHT!"

The voice screamed from inside of him, a voice made of dozens, hundreds of others. Sudden and violent clarity came to Rick as fire exploded from his body. He stumbled, finding himself free of the sabers that had been embedded into his throat and skull. Touching his skin, he found himself devoid of injury.

The same could not be said for the Empress. She'd let out a shriek and stumbled back, hands singed and burnt, fury clear on her face. Rick stared down at himself, at the circle of purple flames that hungrily lapped at the forest around him, the very tree he'd been

impaled into having caught on fire. His eyes trailed at the burning wood, reaching out to grasp the charred bark, barely registering the flames as nothing more than lukewarm.

“None of the maidens I’m bonded to can wield fire,” he muttered. “A place of mind and soul... The limitations aren’t just the stuff maidens can normally pull off, now are they? Just whether or not we believe it.” He frowned. “If I’m convinced I’ll lose, then I’ll lose, and if I think it’s possible, then...”

He squeezed tightly, the charred wood exploding in his grip. Gritting his teeth, he squeezed harder, feeling the intensity of the flames around him. When he opened his palm, there was a small diamond within his grasp.

“It does not make you any likelier to succeed,” she said. “I am no more able to bend the knee than the mountain is to fly. And the longer this goes on, the stronger I become. Every moment you struggle is another moment where I recall more of my past, more battles.”

A bow materialized in her grasp. It was a beautiful tool, made of cherry blossoms and twisting light brown wood. Behind her, one of the titan-trees lit up like the sun, shrinking down and compressing at great speed, until it had become the size of an arrow. The Empress grasped it, earth cracking beneath her feet at the weight of the object she now held, and with a singular graceful gesture, she nocked it.

“More victories against humans like you.”

She let loose the arrow, and Rick dodged. There was a thunderous crashing sound, explosion after explosion and sheer devastation, as several rows of trees practically disintegrated upon impact.

“Yeah, I have it the other way around,” Rick pressed his palm against the dirt, focusing on the elements found within. “Every time I’m up against a maiden, my options are to bluff my way out or die, or worse.” It was as if his mind had reached into every direction, spread out like a blanket, tugging at the aluminum and iron oxide found within the soil under their feet. “And you know what really pisses me off?” he roared. “You all play by your own rules. You don’t even bother to learn how the world around you works because you can just impose your own bullshit! Well, guess what!?” He pulled his hands down, causing two pillars to emerge, one a dull gray and the other a rusty red. “Now it’s my turn!”

The two pillars crashed against one another, and down at the Empress, the purple flames leapt up to the descending dust, turning it all into one gigantic thermite flare. Over two thousand degrees Celsius and blindingly bright, the intense heat instantly ignited

every tree within a hundred meters and turned the soil beneath them into molten slag. Smoke billowed up into a darkening sky, and Rick pressed onward, turning his focus to the burning trees.

Nitrogen, Carbon, Oxygen, and Hydrogen. He pulled at them from the burning trees and the soil, structuring it all into a cube-like shape down at the molecular level. The rush that coursed through him was like an adrenaline high times a thousand, watching the soft, fine white powder synthesize and coalesce into existence as his will became reality.

A sense of danger passed over him, and the flames of the thermite split as a brilliant arrow tore through the air. The Empress stood atop the ruined forest, her body covered in welts and burns, her hair fraying and catching fire. Eyes burning with fury, she drew her bow to prepare the next shot.

"Catch!" Rick roared, directing the stream of several tonnes worth of octogen explosive powder directly towards her.

The forest roared as the blast opened the canopy like a crater, knocking the trees away and pushing the still-burning thermite in all directions. The Empress had been sent rocketing through several of the Titan-trees as if she were little more than a cartoon character, and Rick could only feel elation as everything had caught fire by now.

Neither the smoke nor the heat bothered him, and Rick was all up for it, focusing on the next concoction.

What followed was pandemonium.

Rick created and deployed the most dangerous substances he could think of. Everything that got too close would burn to a crisp; acids and bases would rain upon the forest and chew it up; noxious and volatile fumes spread in every direction; explosions rocked every inch of land.

Meanwhile, the Empress, though battered and thrown around like a rag doll, used her own ever-growing powers. The arrows that could blast trees became infused with such mass and speed they became capable of destroying mountains. Trees would sprout out of the tiniest saplings and become towering titans of wood that were ever more resistant to fire. Plants would gain movement and suckle up the toxins, turning them into weapons they would then hurl back at him. Vines and roots would lash out with ever more durable bark.

The landscape was reshaped, remade, destroyed, and regrown within instants. Neither side backed down, and even when unable to significantly dent Rick's attacks, the Empress kept fueling new growth out of the annihilation. Each iteration she made would

adapt to whatever new thing he summoned; it never fully neutralized it on the first try, but the following generations would clean up and show considerable resistance.

The escalation was inevitable and unstoppable. Injuries were meaningless; anything and everything that made it past their defenses would be healed with but a thought.

Once Rick reached the thermonuclear level, he began to pull upon concepts that were increasingly more esoteric. Fluor-based hyper-oxidizers led down the path towards anti-matter bombs, and from there physics was taking the wheel as he summoned the very power of the supernova.

Just like him, the Empress was grasping for things ever increasingly hard to comprehend. The same instant he could blast away the world, she could remake it in a shower of green light. She summoned horrible twisted things that were neither plant nor flesh, beings that kept adapting and multiplying at exponential rates.

Over and over, the titanic clash of god-like powers continued, rotating around each other, pulling at each other, refusing to let go, refusing to stop, refusing to run away, and refusing to surrender.

At some point, he wasn't even sure if he was trying to buy time anymore; he just wanted to WIN. Any sense of logic or plausible utility had been thrown out of the window, anything and everything that could be summoned by their imagination and empowered by their will was brought to the battlefield.

Resolving himself to bring this to an end, Rick summoned a blade made out of the densest substance imaginable, a weapon that was a singular two-dimensional line of pure, infinitely dense matter. Light itself bent and twisted around the weapon, as it could not escape its gravitational pull.

Detecting the shift in him, the Empress did the same, creating a saber of howling life energy in its purest form. Its mere presence made the very soil beneath her violently shake with a will of its own.

They swung at the same time, screaming bloody murder. The weapons met with a reality-ending clash.

Yet, there was no explosion; there was a blast of wind that swirled around them, and the next instant, both blades vanished, consuming one another into nothingness. Rick stumbled at the same time she did, the half-panic and half-confusion mirrored as they tried to dodge at the same time, only to collapse to the ground.

The moment they regained their footing, they swung at each other, clenched fists meeting bare flesh. Rick was smaller, with a shorter reach, and got pushed back. The Empress moved to straddle his chest, raining down blows as he tried to cover his face as best he could.

“Why. Won’t. You. Give. Up!?” She screamed, her face twisted in fury.

“Because I can’t let them down!” He roared back, finding the leverage to knock her off, pressing her down into the mud as they traded places, hammering away at her.

“Because at every turn, I need to be in control, I need to solve the problem, I need to protect them!” Clenched fists bruised against her arms.

The Empress yanked him off, pinning him again. “You’re human!” She landed three good punches on his face before he could put his guard up. “You’re weak, you can’t fight, you’re a weakness!”

“I know!” He pulled his legs against his chest and kicked her off, hastily scrambling to stand, raising his fists, and... hesitating. “I know.” His breathing was ragged, his body ached, lungs burned. “I know, and it’s fucking exhausting.”

Rick lowered his fists.

“What are you doing?” The Empress asked, still holding her hands up, fists clenched.

“Aren’t you tired... of this?” He gestured around himself, at the still smoldering devastation, the pockets of magma, the wasteland of radiation and monstrosities. Not one thing remained that wasn’t either dying or trying to kill something else. It was an infinite wasteland.

“I...” She stiffened. “I have a duty to my people.”

“Our people are probably killing one another right now,” he said. “I’m not sure what’ll be left by the time one of them wins. I know mine won’t give up, and they still live, but if yours are even half as stubborn as you...”

The Empress bit her lip, taking a shuddering breath. “Is it true, then, that everything is gone?”

“The only thing you have left are those currently in the grove with you.”

The maiden closed her eyes, clenching her hands tightly, pressing them against her chest. It was the singular show of pain that hadn’t come out of being surprised. A lone tear traveled down her cheek, and she dried it with a single flick of her finger.

When she looked into his eyes again, the burning anger was gone.

“I... I am exhausted too.”

A sudden jolt ran through them both, and a string of green light reached out from her hand, connecting to his wrist.

The bond had formed.

They looked at one another, frowning. “This... doesn’t feel like a victory.” The Empress muttered, meeting his gaze.

“We both lost.” He replied with what could only be an apologetic shrug.

The Empress didn’t answer, staring out into the desolation, the world around them was starting to lose focus, crumbling away at the edges.

“What’s your name?” Rick prompted, earning an odd look from her.

“Unit 31, harvest division beta.” She closed her eyes. “Then I was Unit 31, green platoon alpha. Then Commander Unit 31, green platoon gamma. Then General Green.” Her shoulders tightened slightly, and for a moment she looked different, younger, more... human, dressed in camouflage fatigues and wearing a silver emblem on her shoulder. But it vanished, replaced by the simple white dress and a golden tiara. “And then I became the Green Empress.”

“There’s a custom, in the new world, where a maiden takes on a new name when they form a new bond.” Rick commented. “Not sure if you’d be interested in that.”

The Empress chuckled, a soft lilting sound not much unlike that of chiming bells. “It was a custom in my empire as well, albeit only amongst those that had short lives. To the ageless, new names were only taken when our rank changed.” She gazed back to the infinite. “I suppose I am not an empress anymore.”

For a moment she didn’t move, mind lost elsewhere, her form shimmering as the world around them continued to cave in on itself. She glanced at Rick, and he felt a new wave of determination surging from her, emerald gaze taking back that steely indomitable resolve.

He didn’t get to ask what conclusion she’d reached, as the universe around them had vanished.

It was time to wake up.