

Chapter 467 Shadow

Rowan was pleased with the reaction. Their number advantage showed, most of the night spend either resting or building siege weapons. Riverwatch hadn't understood what was happening but even if they had, the Lord was reasonably certain they wouldn't have broken through.

Now that the suns had risen, the true power of his army was revealed. Not all pieces but enough to show what they were up against.

The walls and important buildings were bombarded with spells, flung stones and heavy arrows. Many of the projectiles were flung at the closest lines of houses but his orders were mostly obeyed. Rowan had a few trusted rangers and mages keep close track of those who went overboard or exclusively attacked civilians.

A third of the Vowed aided by warrior slaves willing to participate for a chance at freedom and citizenship had pushed forward. The show of force aided by ranged artillery and arrows had let them advance to the walls. A few of the gates had even been broken but it wasn't the time yet to push into the city with everything they had.

It may be possible to take Riverwatch now but the losses were uncertain, both parties not yet having revealed all of their cards.

Lord Harken was patient, many years of battle and rule had shaped him. This battle should already be a victory. It was only a matter of time. Uncertain aspects like the Shadow's Hand and potential high level individuals in the city would have to be dealt with but their numbers were overwhelming.

If he didn't make major mistakes, this battle was theirs.

Retaking and rebuilding his home lands would be the challenging part of this war but Rowan didn't let his thoughts drift quite yet. Overconfidence had been a cruel teacher and he wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

"We have identified most of the officers," a ranger reported, the man suddenly appearing close by.

"Good. Inform me how they fare against the lower leveled Vowed," he said and used his looking glass to observe the walls.

Well disciplined guards. Fires aren't spreading, which is good for both sides.

"Focus on taking out their healers," he said when another ranger appeared.

"Sir, Vowed were spotted fighting on the enemy side," he reported.

Rowan ground his teeth. "Those sent with Luis?"

The man nodded, fear showing on his face.

So the reports were true. Who are we dealing with here? A powerful enchanter?

The implants were excessively expensive but they did their job. If someone destroyed the ring, they would detonate after a while. If someone removed them, they would detonate.

None of the Vowed were allowed classes that could survive or regenerate a missing jaw and those with higher Blast Resistance would receive stronger implants.

“Reduce the bombardment in half an hour, half the mages should rest,” he said to a waiting officer.

“Yes, sir,” the man replied and vanished in a red smoke.

Harken checked on the troops positioned north and south of his position, finding their aggression to be similarly effective.

Alistair Gallian was a reasonable man, if the records could be believed. He will give up the city if the pressure becomes too much, too many guards dead. Rowan hoped for both of their sake that the man made the right choice and in a reasonable time. He hated camping in the woods like some savage adventurer.

Once again he turned away from the raging battle and sat down on his heavy wooden chair, brought of course from his office and stored within his ring. The tent itself was simple, not to arouse any suspicion of where their commander was located.

Words were a powerful weapon and soon he would have to announce to the guards and people of Riverwatch who exactly was besieging them and why. A mistake on his part could cost lives on both sides. He had to be concise and confident. Perhaps the leaders of this independent heap were more inclined to listen to reason than High King Baron ever was.

The pen in his hand snapped at the thought of the arrogant, stupid, childish king. He calmed his breathing and let meditation flow through him, a new pen appearing as he looked over his short speech once more, scratching a word here and there, replacing another. Explosions, shouts and spells resounded from the direction of the town.

A few hours later, the sounds had calmed down. A steady thrum of spells and projectiles impacting walls and buildings had replaced the outright storm from before.

Rowan’s speech was ready. The city knew the extent of their power and had an idea of their numbers. No surprises had popped up after the taken over Vowed. The gates had been closed and reinforced but the continuous attacks were chipping away at the defenses of Riverwatch.

He stood up and inspected himself in the large mirror placed within his tent. Rowan scratched his short gray beard, a little annoyed that he hadn’t reached level two hundred earlier in his life. Slow and steady had been his maxim. At least he looked wiser than most of the green officers he was commanding. His hair had the same color and was cut short too. He would look dignified even in the heat of battle.

He wore black silk pants held up by a brown leather belt. A dark red shirt was covered by an embroidered jacket. He disliked the way generals would pin their chests full of unnecessary medals. Still, he wore his family’s crest and the coat of arms of Baralia. Anybody worth their medals didn’t need to wear them to be recognized.

Scars showed on both his cheek and neck. Scars he was proud of. Any noble worth their name had healers close by in case they got injured. It was meant as a message that he carried these scars with him to this day, each representing certain events that his competition had best not forget.

Light armor appeared on his body, crafted from sturdy reinforced dark steel, colored in dark red shades. His two steel chain whips he kept stored for now, not planning to engage in battle. His helmet too he kept stored. With his ring, he could simply will it onto his head in the blink of an eye. He didn’t however expect to wear it today.

“Lord Harken,” one of his guards said as he stepped out.

“Signal the troops. Cease fire,” Rowan said and teleported twice to reach the front lines. He didn’t believe in charging at the very front but neither did he think effective command could be issued from kilometers away.

Soldiers stepped out from the thicket of the forest, their armor impeccable, their formation impressive. The stage was set.

Many of the guards looked out from behind the top of the battered walls, at the lone figure stepping towards them.

Rowan whistled, a horse stepping out from between the lines of troops that advanced a few meters, lines of soldiers and mages showing themselves.

He gently touched the horse’s head before getting on.

“People of Riverwatch!” he shouted as he spurred the horse to move closer. Everything was silent, not a single arrow of rock flying as he stopped his steed once more.

“Due to your involvement with Wynehold and the murder of my son, I, Lord Harken and with it the Kingdom of Baralia, declare war on your city. I am willing to discuss the terms of complete surrender with your leaders. All following bloodshed is a waste of life, on both sides. It does not matter to me if you surrender now or a week from now, or even in a month. Know that you cannot stand against us. The cease fire will last for half an hour. Make your choice!”

He finished his short speech and turned his horse around, slowly stepping back to the lines of soldiers until he moved past them. The army would remain in the open but he himself would wait in his tent.

“What’s that?” one of the rangers said as Rowan moved past.

Are they already surrendering? Perhaps I underestimated Alistair, he thought with a slight smirk as he turned. He schooled his expression immediately and got off the horse, walking back to the front line.

A few soldiers were pointing up and to the sky.

Squads of elite soldiers who could fly were ready but the black dot flying dot was moving entirely too fast.

Rowan saw his troops flying up, unable to catch up. He got out his looking glass and tried to focus on the thing. *Person, black wings.*

“The Shadow has come,” he said, glancing around as he saw his high leveled officers and soldiers forming up in groups to tackle the dangerous individual.

A single one, he thought, not letting himself smile.

The Shadow flew closer and landed like an arrow right behind the eastern gate.

Looking glass in hand and a ranger by his side, they watched the winged and armored being appear next to one of the guard officers.

Rowan couldn’t tell what they were discussing but he saw the Shadow hug the man. *Personally involved. Then perhaps I can solve this with a deal instead of losing important people.*

They talked for a few minutes before the Shadow jumped down onto the field.

A woman. What is she doing? Rowan thought as he watched her move closer. The guard officer didn't seem particularly pleased with the development either but he made no move to stop the Shadow, instead giving orders to a few people close to him, some running away immediately.

"What should we do?" one of the soldiers asked.

Rowan stepped forward, summoning his helmet and weapons, positioning himself a little in front of his troops. Shadows could move quickly and he had little information on her. If she was the same one, she would use ashen magic. He hadn't bothered with getting a resistance against the rare school of magic.

The woman stopped around fifteen meters in front of them, her body entirely covered in ash formed into armor. Forward facing horns adorned her head and a few tendrils moved lazily behind her back. Her wings were gone. Blue piercing eyes stared right at him.

His instincts told him to run. This Shadow was dangerous, more so than any he had met before.

[Healer – lvl ??]

Two eighty at least.

He nodded. "Welcome, Shadow."

Rowan gauged her every movement but she didn't seem to be bothered at all. No signs of stress or a defensive attitude. Either through true power or madness, the woman was confident in the face of his army.

She will escape and join the defense. Why did she come here?

"Rowan Harken," the woman spoke. "Lord of Wynehold and the surrounding lands. I'm surprised you came personally."

"My son was murdered. Our people taken. You, I presume were the culprit of those actions?" Rowan spoke.

A few of the soldiers around him were shifting. Scared of the Shadow or because they were so close to the two of them.

"You don't give a shit about your son or your dead people, Slaver," the woman said.

Rowan looked at her and chuckled. "You're a healer. Is that how you took out the enchantments?"

Insults, slavery as an argument. Was she here just to provoke an open battle? I have always known most Shadows were madmen. Another one to confirm the reputation.

"I will give you the option to leave this place. Just take your shit and go. Every slave stays here. You will never return," the woman said.

A ridiculous notion and yet Rowan felt cold sweat dripping down his back.

"On what grounds, Shadow? I don't see the Hand rallied behind you, nor an army of Ravenhall descending on my troops. You are mad if you think we will leave. Riverwatch is ours and you won't stop us," he said.

"You came to protect your friend? I will assure his safety and that of his family. You can take them and leave to Ravenhall. No more blood needs to be shed," Rowan said, his offer generous.

A few people gasped. Offending a noble of Baralia was a grave crime. A lord, punishable by death, or worse.

These were wild lands however and Shadows were monstrous creatures.

“I agree. Which is why you should take my offer. You gave the city half an hour? I’ll give you ten minutes. Take your troops and leave. Free your slaves and send them to the city,” she said with a calm voice.

A few soldiers chuckled, some outright laughing at the ridiculous proposal.

Has she faced too many horrors to understand this situation? Rowan wondered. He was about to talk when the woman spoke again.

“Ten minutes,” she said, power surging outwards with the words.

‘ding’ ‘You have heard the challenge of a powerful healer. You are paralyzed for two seconds’

His eyes opened wide as he watched the Shadow spread her wings, flying back to the wall. All the laughs and chuckles had subsided, replaced by palpable terror.

Dale watched on as half the army suddenly froze, his own wall just as quiet as everyone looked on in disbelief.

He shook his head and sighed.

Ilea landed next to him, her expression hidden behind her ashen armor.

“What the fuck was that?” he asked.

“Monster Hunter. Seems like they should work on their Veteran skills,” she said.

Dale watched as the army started moving again, apparently unsure how to proceed. Rowan Harken remained standing where he was.

Entirely paralyzed.

“You have a way with diplomacy,” Dale said.

“Do you think they will agree?” Ilea asked.

She knew the answer already.

“Are you sure you can do this?” Dale asked, seeing Alistair arrive with an entourage of officers.

“It’s more that I just don’t like it,” Ilea said. “Don’t join me out there. Just protect your walls and take care of the slaves afterwards.”

“I know you have ways of surviving and escaping. Alistair,” Dale said and nodded to the man who now joined them on the wall.

“You came, why? Were you in the area?” the man asked and glanced at the two of them.

Ilea didn’t say anything.

“They said half an hour for us to surrender. Are more Shadows on the way? We just now called for immediate aid,” Alistair said and looked at Rowan and his officers forming ranks.

Powerful magic surged from the people now stepping into the field. A challenge.

Ilea touched Dale’s shoulder and jumped down.

“What is she-” Alistair said, looking at Dale.

“She gave them ten minutes,” he said and allowed himself a small smile. He had lost a dozen guards already. Men and women he knew well, had trained, fought and eaten with. He had called her here but everything that happened now was on them.

“Ten minutes... she can’t be serious. We can’t engage... even with her on our side it would be suicide,” the governor whispered.

“She told me not to join the battle. And neither should anybody else,” Dale heard himself say.

“This is ridiculous... she can’t seriously think she can stand against an army,” Alistair said, not a statement but a question, one he asked himself.

“Lilith is allied with Riverwatch. It was high time people learned what that means,” Dale said.

Rowan stepped back, all his high level officers and warriors gathered before him, his army at the ready.

“Kill her,” he said and motioned to his troops.

Arrows were nocked and spells charged, ballistae loaded and aimed.

“Everyone who is just a normal soldier, if you want to flee, I won’t hunt you down. You have my word,” the Shadow said, looking at the group of elite fighters and Rowan.

“Loose!” Rowan shouted.

Spells of twenty schools of magic rushed out at the woman, hundreds of them, interspersed with arrows.

Everything impacted near her for a few seconds before Harken lifted his hand.

“Cease fire!”

One last arrow fired from a ballista rushed at the rising smoke, flames clinging to the nearby grass, crystal, stone, wood and poison all occupying the same space.

Rowan watched the projectile, hearing the sound of metal striking stone.

He held his breath, as did everyone around him.

The smoke cleared, revealing an unscathed Shadow with a massive arrow in her hand. She twirled around the projectile before throwing it behind herself.

Voices started whispering around Rowan, a few cheers resounding from the walls of the city.

Some way to negate damage or projectiles? Or did she teleport away? Might be she's an illusion in the first place.

"Five minutes," the woman said, scratching her armored cheek. "I really, really don't feel like slaughtering all of you. Please. Please just go."

The request sounded sincere, as if it was a burden to her.

The arrogant fall the longest, he thought and lifted his hand again.

"F-" he started, a whistle interrupting him.

'ding' 'You have heard the challenge of a powerful healer. You are paralyzed for two seconds'

"Ah, I really like this ability. Come then, try to take me down. You still have a little over four minutes. I encourage you to run," the woman said before spells once again started impacting her.

"An illusion?" Rowan asked.

"I cannot tell, Lord Harken. As far as I can see, she is here," one of his officers said.

"Impossible," another said and stepped forward.

The man had reached level two hundred at a young age, confidently lifting his two handed mace. Enchantments came to life as he approached the woman.

Rowan lifted a hand, the ranged attacks ceasing once more.

The Shadow tilted her head to the side as she watched the officer approach.

No matter what, it is foolish to attack a Shadow alone. I will have to deal with him after this is over, Rowan thought.

Everyone watched as the officer stopped a few meters in front of the Shadow, his form towering above hers, the head of his mace as large as her chest.

"Feel free to try, big man. Three minutes," the woman said. For the first time, she sounded amused.

A loud noise resounded when the mace found her head. And stopped entirely.

"Oof, quite the strength you have there," she said and grabbed his weapon, easily ripping it out of his hands before she twirled the thing and brought it down on his head.

The man's helmet crunched downward and into his body, blood squirting out from the sides as he fell to his knees.

The Shadow ripped out the mace with a shower of blood, throwing the thing to the side. "I prefer my hammer," she said.

Rowan gulped.

Tendrils of ash slowly formed behind her as wings manifested out of thin air. Ash spread out on the ground and spheres started forming around her.

"Two minutes," she spoke. Every bit of amusement was gone out of her voice, only ice remaining. Her eyes were focused on him.