

“She moved through again,” Sean said, taking a sip of his ale.

Warm light filled the inn, most of the patrons already drunk out of their minds.

It was good that they usually went into the dungeon at a late time. Less competition.

Sophia nodded, glancing at the mark on her hand. *Nothing had come out and killed everyone*, she thought and looked around the room.

Wooden beams covered the ceiling, a few supporting beams reaching up from between the chairs and tables. People young and old occupied the inn, most of them adventurers, a few of them cooks, caretakers, guild workers or travelers and merchants. Some looked sullen, showing fresh scars and injuries, the scent of blood in the air.

Others rejoiced, lifting their mugs high as they sang one song or the other. A rare find or an especially successful day within the dungeon’s suffocating tunnels. Or perhaps they were rookies, excited to delve into the dark for the first time in the coming morning, not yet introduced to the pain and fear that accompanied the dangerous and often paralyzing work.

She wondered if what Ilea had said was true. Beings so powerful they could kill everyone here. Sophia had heard their call, had felt the chill, the need to run. Monsters just like the woman who had placed this cursed mark.

She had played with the thought of leaving, of running away as far as she could. Seeing the Abominations was one thing but to think there was even worse down there?

The gold kept her here and the fear of Ilea somehow sensing that she had fled. Would she come and hunt her down? She doubted it. And yet there was a small part of her that cowered in terror, just thinking of the healer.

She sighed and sipped on her ale. The mug hadn’t been cleaned properly and the ale here wasn’t great. Still, it would help soothe her thoughts.

“What could she be doing down there? Do you think she is fighting those creatures we heard?” Sean asked.

“I don’t want to know,” Sophia said. She was thankful at least for the gold, able to upgrade her room with some pleasantries that she would have otherwise done without. Her plan to retire and buy a small bar in Utach had moved closer by ten years after her recent encounters. The money wasn’t close to enough yet, forcing her to keep this profession. For now.

“I think it’s quite exciting,” Sean said. “What I wouldn’t give to be there and watch it,” he mused.

*Did she infect you? I really hope you stay sensible, Sean, otherwise I’ll have to find myself a new group. And so many are just terribly incompetent.*

She downed her mug when another bard started with the Lilith song. If only they knew.

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Dale woke up and grabbed his sword, loud pounding coming from the door below.

Abby turned to him, barely awake. "What's going on, honey?"

"I'm not sure," he said as magic flowed through him, waking him up immediately. He had few days off and since the Elven attacks, there had been nothing to warrant such an intrusion.

Alaina's door was open, the girl looking out with a confused expression. Rhett slept through the commotion, as expected.

"Everything is fine," he whispered to the girl before descending the wooden stairs.

His house was simple and comparatively small. Officers in his position could certainly afford more but he had been more interested in a secure location and close by guard stations. The price had been higher but he could sleep more sound at night and that was worth every piece of gold.

Abby made them feel at home regardless, decorating the house with beautiful colors, paintings, curtains, furniture, and even a small training room for the kids, library included.

He sighed and kept his blade at the ready. "Who is there!?"

"Captain Langston! There is an emergency, all officers and guards are called upon!" a woman's voice said through the heavy door.

Dale unlocked the three locks and deactivated the enchantment he had someone install last year.

The woman was armed and armored, a warrior close to level one hundred. He had seen her before, knew she was stationed at the nearby guard station.

"What's going on?" he asked, looking around the street but not finding anything amiss.

"I'm not sure. The gates are closed and-" she said and was interrupted by ringing bells.

Dale opened his eyes wide and nodded to her. "I'll be there, go now. Hurry and fulfill your orders," he said, turning around and rushing back to his room.

"The bells, what's happening?" Abby said, already half dressed as she looked at him with worry.

"I don't know yet. We might be under attack," Dale said as he put on his clothes and armor, the motions quick and efficient. "Take the kids and go to the cellar until further notice."

He fastened his sword to his belt and hugged her. "You'll be safe."

Abby nodded. "Don't try to be a hero, Dale. Promise me."

"I promise," he said but averted his eyes, rushing down the stairs and outside into the night.

Alistair and most of the officers had gathered already, plans of the city sprawled out on the tables in front of them. Barrier mages and healers were positioned around them as well as a few dozen high level guards.

“They have taken out our scouts and patrols, only two managed to return, heavily injured. The lack of movement suggests a siege. Why they are here is as of yet unclear,” one of the officers explained.

“The Shadow we hired took out a camp and killed a noble. Retribution perhaps?” another officer suggested.

“Lord Harken isn’t known to be unreasonable, nor particularly sentimental,” Alistair said as he touched his chin, looking at the map. “Defensive protocols have been called. Every guard, mercenary and adventurer is under martial law for the time being. Residents are advised to stay in their homes or offer their service to the nearest guard station.”

“Are we sure it’s Harken? It could be Nipha or even Kroll, there are plenty of armors and flags to be scavenged,” someone suggested.

“We don’t know as of yet. I’m sure we soon will,” Alistair said. “We haven’t directly attacked anybody else but Lord Harken in the past months. The numbers don’t add up however. Why would he send so many?”

“Baralia armor?” Dale asked a nearby officer he knew.

“Yes. They are surrounding the city, have cut off supply lines and are building camps. Trees are being felled as we speak,” he said in a hushed tone.

“How do our supplies look? Food and water?” Alistair asked.

“Sir, the stocks have been mostly filled. The extensions you ordered half a year ago will give us a few more weeks at least,” an unarmored woman replied.

“Did we call for aid?” Dale asked.

Alistair looked at him and shook his head. “Not yet. Not with the extent and the enemy unknown. We cannot drag our allies into a war, not so soon and with so little information.”

“She will help,” Dale said, ignoring the looks he was getting.

“The device Ravenhall supplied doesn’t let us send specific requests. Nor do I think she remains within their walls for much of her time,” he said.

Dale nodded and balled his hand into a fist, very conscious of the mark left behind by Ilea.

Alistair was right. He knew too little as of yet. Nor was Riverwatch defenseless by any means. He had prepared his guards and the hunters for a day like this. Another Elven attack was just a matter of time or a ravaging party of monsters that got the confidence to attack the city.

The fact that they were humans disappointed him more than he had expected. Still, humans at least were familiar, their tactics and capabilities known.

“The Hunters will remain within city walls for now, until we gain a better understanding of the situation. You know what to do, move out,” Alistair said.

Indeed they did. Dale nodded and turned away, signaling to a team of ten high level guards from his station. The southeastern section of the wall was their assigned position and they had already taken it. Dale would be there to command his guards as well as lead them.

He still remembered the chaotic scramble when the Elves had attacked during the tournament a few years past. The response now was calculated, prepared. Everyone had a position to be at, knew what to do. The same would be true if fire rained from the skies and Elves were running through their streets. A siege hadn’t been expected but they had prepared for it nonetheless.

Dale subconsciously rubbed the mark on his hand, a lifeline that made him calm down. No matter what happened, he had a way to call down upon their enemies a monster and a friend.

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Preparations were going well. Most of their scouts had been taken out and the production of siege engines was starting already. Every supply line was cut off.

With such a high population, Harken's advisors assumed the siege would be over in one or two weeks. A lack of food led most people to rebel.

"If our assumptions are incorrect, we can still poison the river," one of his officers said.

Their command had been relocated to an unassuming tent with a good view of the city. Long distance fire or ice mages could otherwise endanger him and his advisors. They had a disturbing lack of information on high level individuals in Riverwatch. Something they would remedy immediately upon taking control.

"Our goal is to take the city, not reduce its population to a graveyard," Lord Harken said. "With all the refugees and slaves they have taken in over the past years, it should be simple enough to starve them out and force them to surrender."

"What about offensive measures?" another officer asked.

They were eager to show off their magic and best engineers. He wouldn't stop them. Glory through battle and genocide were a fine balance, one he would have to consider many times in the coming weeks.

"Focus on the walls, government and guard buildings. We are reasonably certain that the general population will remain within their houses. Do try not to damage them to an unreasonable degree," he commanded.

*Enough to spread fear but not enough to spread unwavering hate.*

"Yes, sir," the officer said, a wicked grin on his face. Most of the others shared his disposition.

*Too young. They do not know the cost of war, nor will they learn from this siege. Once we return to the ashes of Baralia, they will understand.*

"Any sign of Shadows?" he asked.

"None so far. Our troops have worked mostly uninterrupted. The Hunter division created by Alistair Gallian has so far remained within the city."

"Or stationed far enough away not to rouse our suspicions. Keep up patrols and double the guards, especially facing away from the city. They won't break through, not with our numbers," Rowan said.

The officers nodded. They would get their blood and for now they were satisfied, their ambitions focused on the free city. It would prove a challenge to keep them in check.

It wouldn't hurt to let them loose for a little while either. Transgressions will be punished, unnecessary murders and rape as well as pillaging. They weren't animals and right now he did feel like he was inside of a noble's collection of exotic beasts.

*War brings out the worst in people*, he thought and scowled. "Gentlemen. I must remind you that our laws still apply. Every transgression will be punished. The citizens of Riverwatch are to be treated like our own slaves. The guards and soldiers however, are our enemy."

*Let them show their claws. I will know after this who is to be trusted and who will break or lose control.*

"Resume your positions," he said and watched as a few attendants moved the pieces on the map.

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Dawn had yet to come when the first trebuchets and ballistae propelled their payload into the city and its walls.

"Keep your heads down!" he shouted, his own body enhanced enough to easily dodge the stones and even the large arrows.

The wall shook when a steel tipped enchanted arrow slammed into it. The thing nearly burrowed through the whole thing.

*Not just the projectiles are enchanted, the machines too*, he thought as he glimpsed the soldiers loading in another arrow. *This isn't just a war party.*

A few of their own bowmen tried to reach the distant machine, only a few higher leveled rangers able to close the distance. A translucent shield flared to life, blocking the attack without impact.

*Mages too, protecting their siege weapons. This is a prolonged operation.*

"Water and ice mages, ready!" he called out, seeing a few flames burst to life in the thicket. Arrows, boulders and flaming chunks of wood followed. Not enough to overwhelm the defenses, just to test them, strain their resources, their mages.

Most of the nearby houses had already been dowsed in water to prevent a large scale fire. The city's expansion had been more important than planning in regards to a siege, leading to a lot of structures standing close to each other.

A few of the slower projectiles were taken out by ranged magic of their own, some damaging the wall. The sound of shattering glass resounded before screams filled their ears.

Two mages took care of the growing fire.

Dale rubbed his temple, confused why the woman who screamed hadn't relocated to her cellar yet. *People don't even take an army in front of their city seriously. Not until the soldiers break down their front gates.*

“Hold your ground. Group three, switch with group seven, they’re coming up right now,” he said and ducked, an arrow flying past. Dale looked but didn’t find who had shot it. *High level rangers too. Trying to take out officers.*

The extent of the siege would show as soon as the suns were up. He already assumed it to be more than expected but he held on to some hope. *The slaves we rescued simply don’t warrant such a response. Did he come himself? For his son?*

“Reports are in, captain!” a runner called out from below.

Dale jumped down from the wall and joined the young man who was barely two years older than his son.

“Formations are holding, the walls are continuously damaged. Earth mages are to patrol and reinforce the defenses. Due to all supply routes being cut off, the gates are to be closed off too,” the runner said. “Hunter squads are preparing to hit enemy targets and siege engines are being moved closer to the walls.”

“Good, finally something we can send back,” Dale said as he spotted a catapult being moved closer to the wall. He would prefer enchanted cannons but this is what they had. Alistair hadn’t approved the expensive machines, to their current detriment.

So far it seemed the enemy didn’t have that kind of power either, otherwise their walls might have very well been breached already.

Dale would prefer a battle that was a little more personal, face to face with the enemy. The uncertainty of who was even attacking them and how strong they were exactly worked on not just him but every guard that manned the walls, as it worked on most of the population.

*Whoever commands them knows what they’re doing. Either that or they are being overly cautious. A siege like this won’t work. Not if they don’t plan to spend the next two months sitting in the forest.*

Already it was clear that the enemy wasn’t out to destroy the city or kill its population. Unlike the Elves.

“They are here to take what is ours, the city you call your home! For every life they take, we will take ten!” Dale shouted, happy to see his little encouragement timed up perfectly with the first flaming boulders sent back to the enemy lines.

A few guards cheered but the optimism was short lived. Water and ice manifested and quickly quenched the flames, mages of an unknown number still remaining hidden within the line of trees.

*Smoking them out won’t work,* he thought and sighed.

The suns were finally coming up, the sky mostly clear other than a few clouds and swaths of smoke.

Dale now understood why the enemy had waited until now to show their numbers. His eyes opened wide as he walked among the top of the wall.

Lines and lines of soldiers stepped out of the thicket, sunlight glinting off their armor, spears, halberds. The dark red of Baralia stepped out into the open, flags, bows and robes. Clean, well fed, armed and armored.

He watched as a series of projectiles came flying out of the forest behind, ten times as many sources as had fired during the night.

A line of soldiers and mages stepped forward, protected by shields of both steel and magic. Bows and spells were readied before they rained into the wall and beyond.

His men hunkered down next to him, impacts sending debris and dust over the edge, houses bursting into flame as walls collapsed. Horns resounded outside as another volley of spells rained onto the city.

The few shields and counter spells barely managed to stem the flood. A few guards were coughing. Acid, poison and smoke magic spread over the walls, forcing some of them to jump down and abandon their positions.

Dale turned his head at a loud explosion coming from the gate. It hadn't been covered by stone yet.

Explosions rattled the heavy wood as it splintered. "To the gate!" he called out and rushed towards the entrance right as it flung open.

Ten or more people rushed in, teleporting as they slit throats and engaged in close combat. *Vowed*, he thought as he blocked an attack, stepping back as he took in his enemies.

Three of them, slaves, their tongues cut.

The gate remained open. *They're not rushing in, just demonstrating their power.*

Dale focused on the now, his pride giving in at the thought of his family enslaved, his city taken and his people killed. The mark on his hand dissolved and vanished as he deflected the blows aimed at him, a throwing knife grazing his armored shoulder.

Two of the rescued *Vowed* appeared at his side, a few guards joining them to stand against the enemy. *I do hope it's not too late*, he thought and ignored the projectiles raining down from above.

"Close that fucking gate!" he shouted and activated his skills, rushing the closest *Vowed*, his blade cleaving through an arm before he ducked under a slash, coming up with another slice that slit through the slave's stomach.

Dale turned and sliced through his neck with a clean swing. He ignored the messages and rushed to a wounded guard, intercepting a death blow. His shout was lost in the chaos of battle, exploding debris and spells impacting around them.