

# CHAPTER 64 – SWAN SONG

A horde of hulking serpentii rammed the Taamra village's gates, straining the limits of the stout wooden bar. It wouldn't hold for long. Taamra wasn't built to withstand monster incursions. There wasn't enough ambient mana to make it an issue.

The village's walls originally served as little more than a deterrent to passing monsters and any roaming bandits. Since Remal marshaled the townsfolk, the walls were hastily fortified with anything they could get their hands on.

Now the walls were half stacked furniture and sharpened bits of rusty pikes taken from the attics of the townsfolk and the surrounding farms.

Things had taken a definite turn for the worse. Remal, his once-ornate clothes torn and bloodied, shuddered to think of what things might look like if he hadn't uncovered their plot.

Fio, Henry, and even Jerric were just *gone*. Even the snakes, no matter how much he dug into their minds, could not tell him what had happened to his friends.

He slayed the three imposters before they knew what was happening, but they weren't the only ones. Once the jig was up, the other slithering spies must have gotten back to whoever was in charge.

The snakes only knew of "the master" and that was as far as they knew. They couldn't lie. Not to him.

That didn't make it any better. It meant that they weren't dealing with a run-of-the-mill incursion. This was orchestrated by somebody who had time, and until their plan was discovered, patience.

That's not something you'd normally expect in a monster below Iron.

Every night since, Remal laid awake at night, staring at the Guild's ceiling. His mind kept replaying the scenes of that evening, and those that fell before.

*What could I have done differently? How didn't I notice sooner?* Remal asked himself again and again.

It was no use.

But defending the walls was.

He was the only Steel among them, and he was the weakest of Steels at that. His strength was in buffing and debuffing, improving the parameters of his allies while simultaneously reducing the effectiveness of his enemies.

That made him one of the most requested Bards around the Inner Ring for all sorts of contracts, but it meant that on his own he was weaker. And since the bodies of people several Ranks below him were too weak to contain the magic of his Steel Ranked buffs, even his core function was severely blunted.

*I'm only one man! Even Jerric couldn't hold this town by himself and keep everybody safe! There's too many of them. He might be able to hold the town and kill all of the monsters, but countless people would die. I can't be everywhere at once.*

At least they stopped masquerading as villagers. That made it a little easier. Having to worry if your best friend of ten years was really a snake messed with people's heads.

Remal had worked hard to scare them out of town. That was one instance in which his Steel Ranked songs could be put into full effect. Anybody disguised as a human would immediately be compelled to out themselves or explode into a gory mess.

It should not be understated that Steel Ranked songs can have nasty effects on people several ranks below, especially if they're dumb enough to try and resist.

He needed his team. They worked well together. Always had. And now they were gone, leaving Remal with the impossible odds of surviving against a full-scale monster incursion.

If reinforcements of some kind didn't get there soon, Taamra wouldn't just be wiped off the map, but replaced wholesale with those serpentii body snatchers.

And then the rest of the Empire would be up for grabs.

No doubt Haalften manor was already taken, and a lost cause. Remal figured it likely had been to begin with, and that's where the serpentii set up.

But that was just a guess, based on the fact that his "friends" had come back from there.

The Guild had already set out half a dozen runners. The swiftest Bronzes they had on hand, which also severely depleted their strength. Most of the rest were Copper, with a few Bronzes left and one of them was that idiot Lurl, the Barbarian.

You could say this about Barbarians, they were brave. They didn't know the meaning of fear because they couldn't understand what it was they should be afraid of.

It was like trying to scare a brick wall.

And so, even though the Bronze Ranker was in a full-body cast after his idiotic run-in with Jerric over a week ago, he was still using his Barbarian Shouts to empower the citizens and defenders of Taamra.

He looked over on top of a converted second-floor balcony stacked high with sandbags and makeshift barricades. A large brass horn was propped up beside the wheelchair the Barbarian was sitting in.

Every so often, whenever the ability came off cooldown, the Barbarian would Shout. The effect spread over a good portion of the town thanks to the horn, and it helped more than his muscles would have.

With scales of battle like this, you needed Noble stage abilities to deal with the vast numbers of enemies. Even the strongest person could only hew so many bodies at once. All an enemy had to do was give them a wide berth and go for the weaker ones.

Remal had seen it before. The smarter monsters ignored the higher ranked individuals, turning the tables on the defenders and forcing the strongest ones to become the pursuers, wasting precious time.

Even if it had been his decision to make, Remal wasn't sure which call he would have made.

Remal grimaced, strumming his lute, building up mana for another area spell. He was nearly tapped dry. After the grizzly old leader of the Adventurers Guild was slain collapsing a hidden entrance among the sewers and saving them all from a sneak attack, a mousey elf attendant named Sel Vevini had taken control of the defenses.

The Bard helped where he could, but he was not a tactician. That was Henry or Jerric's role, not his. Not that it would have mattered if they were here. There was only so much anybody could do with a town ill-prepared for monster attacks, let alone duplicitous skin walkers like the serpentii.

Still, the village wasn't entirely without individuals of use. Some shined wanly, like rough jewels buried among the coals.

A green glowing potion vial arced through the air and shattered its fuming toxins all over the hulking serpentii battering the gate. Though these snakes were well adjusted to poison, there was one kind they weren't.

The [Featherbloom Toxin] tricked their bodies into absorbing it, which were otherwise designed to restore health and stamina from poisons. But whatever herb that toxin was derived from was heavily aspected towards Light mana.

Fortunately, Konko was an adventurer and alchemist in one. Despite claiming she gave up the adventuring life, she still hunted monsters just fine enough for Remal's purposes.

Though she did have the odd habit of interrogating them before killing them. He had heard her scream, on more than one occasion, "ARE YOU OR HAVE YOU EVER ASPIRED TO MORE THAN WHAT YOU ARE?!" and such oddities.

Clearly the people of Taamra were... strange, but he could work with strange.

She was fine so long as the monsters attacked first, and you didn't bring up any questions remotely pertaining to the morality of slaying sapient monsters.

The hulking serpentii melted into a frothing black puddle. Then more slithered forward, taking their place at battering the gates.

The serpentii's penchant for stealing bodies worked against them. There wasn't much arcane talent out here, so they didn't have mage spells to assail the defenders stationed at the top of the walls.

An old decrepit looking man with a black cat patrolled the rickety top of the walls near the gate. From time to time, he opened his large coat, and from Remal's position seemed to flash the serpentii assaulting the town gate. Just as he did, random items seemed to fly out of his coat, pots, broken chairs, miscellaneous things that might not cause much damage but would surely be disorienting.

A Copper man, nearly as massive a troll, swung a broken iron lamppost at a group of snakes that managed to slither through their defenses. The gates were the prize, but there were gaps in their defenses all over the town and monsters were constantly getting through.

From his lookout, he could survey the battle and apply his buffs where they were needed. More than one well-timed Bard debuff curtailed an ambush by some of the slithery monsters. There was even a pair of farmers who wielded pitchforks and axes back-to-back while they bickered like siblings.

“That’s because they are,” Sel said, stepping up beside him and offering him one of the last [Mana Potions]. She nodded toward the farmers. “That’s Arthur and Roger Aking. Family’s been farmers ever since I could remember. Good boys, though a bit too eager to drink and carouse if you ask me.”

Remal downed the potion in one go. He hadn’t realized he spoke aloud. “The shorter one has a fire in him,” Remal pointed out.

He had a good eye for these things.

“He’s always fancied himself an adventurer,” Sel said. She tucked a strand of auburn hair behind a pointed ear and sagged a little now that she was out of sight of most people down in the street. “Not many people can afford even the weakest essences out here. And the choice to risk life and limb for the low chance of getting one naturally is not appealing. Not when one errant strike or miscalculation means you’ll be crippled for life or worse.”

Remal nodded. He’d come from such a village where the people stuck to what they’d known. It had been fishing for his hometown, here it was farming, but it wasn’t so different.

Climbing the Ranks wasn’t for everyone. Not when even Bronze was far, far out of reach.

Few people could get their hands on three essences and still be in the prime of their life to hit Copper. Not without help. That was meant to be one of the tenets of the Adventurers Guild, but the branch offices were often the least well supported.

You tended to get the strongest crop of adventurers from the Inner Ring. Places where the ambient mana was high and the people living there were stronger as a result. While it wasn’t *common* to have all three essences in one of the big cities, most of the tradesmen had at least one or two. And even if they weren’t *technically* Copper Rank, their levels and attributes mimicked the strength of one.

Out here, even the Coppers were barely the martial equal of a common plumber. Not that Remal would say it aloud. That was just rude, and even the

Mundanes were fighting for their lives and homes. There was no call to belittle them. They deserved to live peaceful lives just the same as anybody else.