

A week more passed before the next upheaval. Operations at the camp had returned to somewhat normal, with the bit of additional security. Irwyn never had fully believed that things were over, though, so when he felt the burst of Void magic from the floor above his room he rushed out without hesitation. He ran for the stairs, meeting Elizabeth just exiting the office storey. That she seemed in a hurry but not ruffled at least let Irwyn know that whatever was happening, the surge of magic was more to gather his attention than to protect herself.

"Let's go, downstairs," she commanded, already descending two steps at a time.

"What happened?" he asked, following.

"I don't know, but I have been notified of an emergency," she hurriedly said. They were almost on the ground floor by then. It was empty so they immediately headed out.

Instead, the pair ended up running into Sergeant Trecha just as they were about to rush out of the front door. The man was enveloped in... perhaps a slipstream was the closest thing to describing it. Like the man passed through space just a bit faster, smoother, with less resistance. Not quite as quick as teleportation, of course, but teleporting into anywhere within the camp was made almost impossible out of prudence.

"Your Ladyship," the man came to a quick halt from his enhanced sprint, clearly a bit out of breath but refusing to waste time catching it.

"Report," Elizabeth demanded.

"I have spotted something moving on the horizon," he said, motioning for them to move outside. "I am unsure of what it is or if it's a threat but it has to be *massive*. I deemed it prudent to notify you as quickly as possible - every minute may count if we need to make preparations."

"Where," Elizabeth asked, nodding. She, as well as Irwyn, had already been led outside but neither could spot anything in the distance.

"That direction," Trecha pointed over the buildings of Ebon Respite. "High in the sky."

Irwyn looked and frankly saw nothing. Squinting did not help. Elizabeth tried to look with mortal eyesight for a moment, then infused her sight with a significant quantity of magic. Apparently, that was enough to witness whatever the soldier had.

"Incredible you have spotted that," Elizabeth admitted. "I would not have without the warning and dedicated spell."

"I always prided myself over my eyesight," Trecha said, gratified by the compliment. "Luck has also played a role. I have been practicing a self enchantment similar to one your ladyship must have used and just happened to be looking in the right direction."

"Who have you notified," Elizabeth nodded. Irwyn noticed the *very slight* signs that she was likely communicating throughout her ring with someone far away - City Black presumably. The tell was mostly that her focus slightly slacked when controlling her facial expression and body language, as any distraction really would - there was no magic or some truly clear sign.

"The Lieutenants only for now," Trecha reported. "Though the few mages directly under my command have undoubtedly grasped something is amiss."

"I see," Elizabeth nodded then fell into silence. Irwyn looked back in the direction. He thought that perhaps he could suddenly vaguely see something there despite his lack of a proper farsight spell.

"It's moving extremely fast," Trecha opined, frowning.

"It will pass overhead in likely just a few minutes," Elizabeth nodded.

"What are your orders," Trecha asked, a bit grim.

"I have contacted City Black and been notified of the nature of the visitors," Elizabeth turned to him. "Spread the word that what is coming is not hostile. In fact, these are reinforcements to our War efforts - be sure to reiterate that, otherwise we might have to calm down panic among the soldiers. Notify the Lieutenants that there is no true emergency."

"As you command, Your Ladyship," Trecha was immediately turning

"Also, inform Alice that I request her presence," she added, the man already sprinting away a moment after her words sounded.

"So, what is actually happening?" Irwyn asked. There *definitely* was something visible on the horizon at that point. North-east, if Irwyn got his directions right, though he couldn't tell much else.

"Foreign reinforcements, coming to support our War effort," Elizabeth nodded. "Just as I said."

"Is that common? Outside nations sending help," Irwyn asked. "I have never heard of anything like it."

"The Undead are the common enemy. If the Duchy Federation falls, the rest of our Realm will soon follow," she said. "Those aware strive to offer what little help they can."

"Does the Federation send help to other nations engulfed in such conflicts then?" Irwyn thought out loud.

"There are no such Wars starting outside the Federation. Not real ones," Elizabeth shook her head. "We are the fulcrum of this Realm, Irwyn. Our ancestors have gathered everything that matters within our borders. This Realm cannot fall before the Federation does but it also contains more than enough resources to make the undead unstoppable should they accomplish it – to the point any strategy except attacking us has been deemed futile by the Rot. From my understanding, it has still been during the Tyrant's reign that an invasion was last attempted from without our borders."

"Still, it's been *months* since the Lich War was declared," Irwyn pointed out. "They are only arriving now?"

"They could have been incredibly far away when the word reached them. This Realm is not small," Elizabeth shrugged. "In fact, they are likely among the first to arrive. Some may not make it before the War ends if things develop well."

"And 'they' are?" Alice finally jogged up to the talking duo, interjecting. There was definitely a distinct dot on the horizon at that point.

"The Skylords of Zarkiel," Elizabeth said.

"I think I have heard that name before," Alice frowned, trying to stir memory. Irwyn was quite sure no bells were being rung.

"They are known to participate in almost every Lich War," Elizabeth nodded. "One of the few outside forces not utterly ruined by their contribution. And actually helpful too – potent air support, if lacking in subtlety."

“Is ‘help’ usually *not* helpful?” Irwyn questioned.

“Most foreign powers cannot provide anything relevant besides horde fodder,” Elizabeth shrugged. “It is simply the nature of the Federation’s power. Many still attempt out of a misguided sense of duty when their ‘reinforcements’ are more burden than a contribution.”

“I have heard some stories,” Alice contributed. “My Grandpa once told about how someone sent a few companies of mostly regular soldiers armed with nothing but steel blades. They apparently expected to fight regular *zombies*, maybe a few ghouls at worst.”

“I cannot imagine that turned out well,” Irwyn could only grimace. Zombies were basically the least of undead, essentially soulless lumbering flesh. Even an inferior mage without intentions could destroy them by the dozens. Ghouls had vestiges of intellect and tended to be more physically potent, still, they were not completely beyond normal soldiers. Any greater undead though? Those equivalent to intentions in power could practically not be overcome by mere numbers – not without a ruinous cost. Irwyn had seen in Abonisle how even the Duchy’s soldiers - trained and equipped extensively for exactly that kind of battle – struggled. Draugr or even Raveners would not be even slowed by bodies in their way.

“They refused to leave when first told they would be useless, if I recall,” Alice nodded. “I think they were almost completely wiped out by Dreambiters. No idea what happened to the remnants.”

“Do I want to know what that is?” Irwyn asked with morbid curiosity.

“Undead worms that attack sleeping victims, burrowing into the brain through the ear,” Elizabeth explained. “They are one of the reasons why the army never camps on untreated soil. Except foreigners do not know how to deal with all the common hazards.”

“Those are *common*?” Irwyn asked worriedly.

“They are lesser undead, extremely efficient in both biomass and invested power,” Elizabeth nodded. “Their necromancers can just scatter them across any random field they pass, let them hibernate and hope the critters get results. Often long after the Lich War itself is over.”

“And that doesn’t cause issues?” Irwyn asked incredulously. “There is a lot of traveling happening all around.”

“Roads and the areas around them are carefully cleansed and regularly checked for any such issues,” Elizabeth said. “But yes, absolutely never sleep in the wilderness unwarded. The Federation tries to root out all of the Rot remnants after each War but it is practically impossible.”

“I think I can see them now,” Alice interrupted. “What actually are these ‘Skylords’? And what is Z... Z-something.”

“Zarkiel,” Elizabeth repeat. Irwyn was not even going to try with that one. “And I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise. It is quite the spectacle.”

“You have seen them?” Irwyn asked. “I thought they would only come for the Wars from what you have said.”

“I have seen a recording,” Elizabeth nodded. “When I first heard of them I simply had to – and it did not disappoint. I was quite young then and just the concept was very fascinating.”

"I think there are several things flying," Alice pointed out. They were, indeed, getting closer quite quickly. And bigger because of it.

"I see a bit dot at the center and much smaller ones kind of around it," Irwyn described.

"Still not telling us what it is?" Alice pouted.

"No," Elizabeth just smiled.

By then the regular soldiers too had grasped something was happening and gathered outside their barracks and buildings. Their company had very limited responsibilities for the size after all. That meant there was little actual work to do on most days. Distractions were welcome and none of the officers seemed inclined to cut short an impromptu break, joining in instead. The grounds became almost crowded with most of the soldiers outside, watching the skyline as word spread.

"Do I see wings?" Alice said eventually.

"I do not," Irwyn contributed, squinting again.

"Definitely wings, at least on the big thing in the center," Alice nodded.

"Maybe," Irwyn shrugged.

"It will be much more visible soon," Elizabeth contributed, smiling at their anticipation.

It was a strange kind of feeling, though not unpleasant: To stand there in anticipation... yet without fear. Chattering about nothings as something large made rapid approach from the horizon, yet with understanding it would not be hostile towards them. At least for a while, before more of its nature became apparent.

"Tell me that isn't a dragon?!" It was Alice who broke that serenity when the dots got close enough to better see. The wings were, by then, quite distinct, swinging up and down. It was not a question of *if* it was some manner of flying creature but rather what.

"That is impossible," Irwyn frowned. Alice saw significantly better than him so he could not yet quite tell the exact shape of the thing approaching them. It was, however, getting bigger faster as it got closer and closer.

"I am not an expert," Alice pointed, clearly shaken by her assumption. "But that looks like a dragon, I have seen drawings."

"It is a dragon," Elizabeth revealed with a grin.

"Dragons are monsters," Irwyn stared at her. Monsters did not have minds or souls. It was essentially their defining trait beyond the instinctual ravaging. "The most fearsome of them. How could there possibly be a tamed dragon?"

"And notoriously hostile to everything and anyone," Alice added.

"Tamed is the wrong word for it," Elizabeth shook her head. "Perhaps it is not even truly a monster anymore - I think this would be one of those debates many scholars disagree on."

"What is it then?" Alice asked, voice still a bit harried. It was not difficult to spot that some trace of fear had grasped her despite Elizabeth previous assurances of safety.

"That would be Zarkiel, the god of Skies, Destruction, and Sanctuary," Elizabeth explained.

"Though once it had most likely been a dragon, until from centuries of misguided tribal worship

of an often slumbering calamity, a deity was born within its flesh, overtaking the monster's body with actual intellect.”

And as the dragon got closer, Irwyn could see it - perhaps in part because he knew to look for it. A black body with scales that each had to be as large as houses to be somewhat distinct from so afar. Large and long head attached to an even longer neck, and the closed maw; eyes as black as the scales. Four limbs, aligned with the body rather than hanging, yet seemingly stunted - almost degenerated.

“And those around it?” Irwyn questioned. What he saw was still only the central creature. There were many far *far* smaller dots swarming around it.

“Perhaps its spawn,” Alice had a guess. “I could see the big one somehow controlling the smaller dragons.”

“How would that work with mating and such?” Irwyn pointed out.

“Dragons are hermaphrodites,” Alice said as if it were obvious.

“What?!” Irwyn paused, staring.

“They do not need any help with producing progen...”

“I know what a hermaphrodite is, I am just baffled,” Irwyn interrupted Alice. “How have I never heard about this?!”

“It had been deemed unwise to let the public know that any dragon can, in theory, just self-breed into a calamitic swarm over a few decades,” Elizabeth said.

“That can happen?!” Irwyn stared.

“Purely theoretically,” she shrugged. “Dragons have incomprehensible breeding patterns. And I mean incomprehensible to dedicated researchers spending centuries on the topic - Some go millennia without hatchlings, then suddenly produce four in half as many years. Among the leading hypotheses are that dragons breed only to maintain an exact same number of them across the entire universe or that they only bear progeny when it is necessary for a specific whim of Fate.”

“Are those an exception then?” Alice pointed. “Because even though I cannot see them I would bet those are smaller dragons.”

“If you made that bet I think you would be quite happy at first glance,” Elizabeth turned to her. “And then very disappointed when you found out you are actually wrong.”

“So, the huge dragon is *not* surrounded by smaller ones?” Alice frowned. “That is incredibly anticlimactic.”

“Well, it’s better you see it for yourself first,” Elizabeth chuckled. She had been clearly enjoying this entire thing, a grin on her face.

“My bet is on wyverns, or something of the sort,” Irwyn added. Such monsters were close enough to dragons to be mistaken for them at first but were, in fact, orders of magnitude less dangerous - and presumably easier to control and propagate. Irwyn had little idea how taming monsters was actually done, only that it required specialized mages and grew exponentially harder on more powerful creatures.

“Care to wager then?” Elizabeth turned to him.

“On second thought, it’s never a good idea to put money against someone smiling like that,” Irwyn corrected himself, frowning. Clearly, he was not right.

“She could be bluffing,” Alice added. “It *has* to be dragons.”

“Wait and see,” Elizabeth just shrugged.

The massive dragon flew closer by the minute. And it was gargantuan, that much was clear. Irwyn could see that better as it approached. The skies were cloudless but otherwise it would be flying well above that line, likely casting a shadow over the landscape far and wide around the city – not that Irwyn could see much aside from the skies with buildings in the way. The smaller shapes flying around Zarkiel slowly arrived at a distance where they were legible. First to Alice, who frowned as if disbelieving, then to Irwyn who had to say they looked very similar to the gargantuan god in the flight’s center. Almost like copies even, black and with similar proportions.

“They *are* dragons!” Alice shot Elizabeth a determined death-stare as soon as it became apparent.

“Or so it seems at first glance,” the other heiress just smiled, smugly even. “It is a reasonable assumption: It looks like a dragon, flies like a dragon, follows around a dragon. Common sense says that the swarm should, indeed, be of dragons.”

“But they are not,” Irwyn grasped from her speech.

“They are Cherubim, servants of a god,” Elizabeth nodded. “These merely happen to be shaped as dragons... Best not mention that in front of the Skylords though, they are supposedly touchy about the subject.”

“The difference sounds academic,” Alice grumbled.

“Dragons, for one, are an order of magnitude more dangerous,” Elizabeth inclined her head.

“And don’t forget acting their part as mindless ravagers. These are docile servants and mounts.”

“There are people up there?” Irwyn asked. *Mounts* implied riders.

“A god can only exist with worshippers,” Elizabeth nodded. “There is an entire city on its Zarkiel’s back, the people call themselves the Skylords, standing atop a living, flying fortress..”

“How would an entire town?” Irwyn questioned. It was still just one creature, even if massive.

“Just wait,” Elizabeth pointed. The dragon and its swarm were drawing ever closer. They seemingly moved faster since the distance was not so large anymore.

Then Irwyn realized he had *vastly* underestimated the dragon’s sheer volume. He had thought that perhaps its scales were as large as buildings - he saw each was closer in size to an entire street. And as the flight was upon them Irwyn realized that, perhaps, between the dragon and Ebon Respite it might be the city which was smaller. Such majestic size did this titanic creature reach.

“Wow,” Alice gaped.

“Alright, that is much bigger than I thought,” Irwyn stared as a shadow engulfed the city. For all they flew above cloudline, the sun itself was eclipsed while Zarkiel passed over their heads...

And then revealed again, not long later, as the dragon passed over Ebon Respite and carried on, not even a strong breeze hitting the city despite the massive wingspan – which could have been intention or just the thing being too high for that to be necessary. For all it was gargantuan

beyond anything living Irwyn had ever witnessed it was also flying incredibly fast. The city had rested in its shade for perhaps less than a dozen seconds. Smaller draconic creatures - its Cherubin according to Elizabeth - swarmed all around it most with riders on their backs clearly visible.

Then everyone had to turn around to watch the dragon fly away. Its speed was exactly as rapid as when heading towards them, less than 15 minutes later they would disappear over the horizon.

"I have to say, I had honestly been more fascinated by the recording I have once seen," Elizabeth broke the awed silence. "Perhaps... the juvenile excitement I once held for dragons has long passed."

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"Irw, get the girls, we have a problem," Waylan spoke. It was not an hour later that he appeared behind his room's door.

"The dragons?" Irwyn guessed after letting his friend in. "They were not hostile, though I presume it might have caused an upheaval across the city."

"Sure, but that is not what I am talking about," Waylan shook his head. "I think Aaron has new clues for your disappearing soldiers... and it don't look good."