

# CHAPTER 65 – SWAN SONG II

“Keep an eye on that one,” Remal said, nodding to Roger Aking. “I think he might be worth sponsoring.”

Sel looked over the edge of their lookout. “If we survive, I’ll garnish my own wages to see it done. He fights like a cornered badger.” She looked over at Remal’s expression. “Don’t give me that look. The Guild hasn’t had the extra essences or funds to sponsor anybody from their coffers for three generations now. Nobody cares about the branch offices.”

*We’ll see about that,* Remal thought to himself. With his mana on the rebound, he looked for anybody who needed a little pick-me-up.

The Barbarian Shouted out another war cry, radiating translucent shockwaves of blue across the townspeople gathered around his wheelchair. Some of the more brazen of the lot had gotten the bright idea to wheel him down to the street and push him around into range of the monsters.

A serpentii lunged at the Barbarian. At the same time, the townspeople near the Barbarian dropped flat to the cobblestones. All except one. A small, runty little guy with tattered leather and spiky accessories that had seen better days.

Frederick, gripping the handles of Lurl’s wheelchair, backpedaled, then spun in place, twirling the wheelchair and the axes strapped into the unmoving arms of the Barbarian. Their edges glowed a hateful red, an essence power at work.

His twin axes swung out like blurring guillotines, cleaving the serpentii into two halves all around Lurl and Frederick.

“We’re going to need to fall back to the guildhall,” Sel said, surveying the scene.

Remal was surprised that she was willing to give up the bulk of the town. But he agreed with her assessment. He just figured he would have to bring her around to it.

“Surprised?” she asked with a sour grin. “I may only be a Bronze, but I’m not stupid, Mister Remal. I know we’ve lost this position and come nightfall when

their attacks strengthen, we won't be able to defend all positions like we are. We're losing, slowly but surely. Our only choice is to fall back to the guildhall before night comes. The walls are sturdy and all guildhalls are designed to withstand some level of monster incursions."

"Remal."

"What?"

"Just Remal. None of this 'mister' or 'sir' nonsense."

Sel gave him a weary smile. "All right then, Remal. Think you can buff our flanks as we close in and begin the evacuation?"

As much as he wanted to give her a winsome smile and assure her that everything would be okay, now wasn't the time to ply his Bardic charms. "I can't be everywhere at once. People will die, but fewer people than if we stayed fighting here. The bar for the gate is nearly done for."

"I know." Sel leaned on the wall as much to get a reprieve from the view of the fighting below as for something to help hold her up. "I should have called for the retreat earlier, but we were so dug in—"

"That you hoped help would arrive and we could employ the hammer-and-anvil tactic to crush them."

"Yes," Sel admitted. "I don't even know if the runners have made it out of the hills. They were our fastest and I still wonder if... well, I didn't make the decision, so I have to stand by what's going on now, don't I? You sure you don't want to take command? You know people would follow a Steel better."

Remal waved the compliment away. "Not on your life. I've been sent out here because I buck authority a little too well and I was meant to cool my heels along with my party. I'm not exactly what you would call a model adventurer."

"Yes, I've heard." Sel sighed and stood up, straightening her spine and getting ready for what was to come. "No harm in asking. Besides, if you hadn't been here, we'd all be murdered in our sleep and replaced by those *things* down there."

The elf wrapped her arms around herself and sighed.

"You're worried about the little shrub guy, aren't you?"

“Shrubley,” she corrected absently. “And yes. He was only Mundane Rank. What if he got tangled up in all of this? Even if he came to try to fight, what would you think a defender would do, seeing what they thought was just another monster approaching? The poor thing. And now that he’s completed a contract, he’s no longer protected from other adventurers.”

“At least the serpentii probably won’t go after a monster,” Remal suggested, trying to keep his lack of hope out of his voice.

“You believe that as much as I do. Which is to say, not much. They’re in a frenzy out there. Anything that crosses their path they’re likely to kill just for the sport of it. I just hope nothing happened to him, is all. He was so optimistic.”

“If he’s not out there dead—don’t give me that look, you said he was only a Mundane and a low level at that—then he’s not likely to return to a nest of monsters fighting to take over the town.”

Sel didn’t quite believe that. If only because she could see, quite vividly in her mind’s eye, that Shrubley would stand up on a hillside as the morning sun backlit him like a hero and demand the monsters stop attacking.

She hoped, desperately, that she was wrong, but she couldn’t shake the mental image. It seemed so... *him*.

Of course, the serpentii would immediately overrun his position and kill him. That was just logic. He might buy the town a few minutes, but there was nothing that Shrubley could do short of a full-blown miracle that would turn the tides without heavy losses.

As it was, Taamra wasn’t likely to survive the week. Even if they managed to hole up in the guildhall, there was only so much food stockpiled. Eventually, the serpentii would win through a war of attrition.

And she knew, though she would go to her grave before admitting it aloud, that the more people they saved, the less time they would survive in the guildhall. There had been bad seasons, crop failures, and a host of other bothers over the last years. The Guild always did its part to keep Taamra safe from all threats.

Even if that threat was starvation.

Of course, that meant that they were criminally short on the required rations and foodstuffs they should have had on hand at all times.

If they had tried to requisition more to replenish their stocks, the Auditors would have been called in.

And that lot would only see corruption. Which, no matter how you justified it, would be accurate. But who could see people starving and *not* do something when the Guild had countless supplies and there hadn't been a monster incursion in the region... well, ever?

"Do what you can," Sel told Remal. "I want the weakest flanks bolstered the most, second only to the front. We're going to hold the door while the flanks slip around and clear the houses."

Remal nodded and plucked a few strings on his lute, picking out his targets. "Make them think that we mean to dig in and hold the door. Not a bad play, considering there aren't that many here to make. You don't happen to have any sort of secret tunnels or anything, do you?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but I was only an attendant. Seniority is the only reason I took command." Her lips twisted into a grimace. "That and nobody else wanted the job. Now there's nobody left to take it, unless we want to start handing out the role to the townsfolk. They're good people, but they would scatter to defend their neighborhoods and businesses first if we didn't hold them together."

"For what it's worth," Remal told her, strumming a [Bolstering Etude], "you're doing a great job. I've been in monster incursions before, and for all its failings, this town has done a great job surviving this far."

"Doesn't matter how impressively long we survive if we end up being wiped out, does it?"

Remal wanted to comfort her, to give her hope, but he didn't see much. "No. There are no prizes for second place in war. The best you can do is save as many people as possible and hope to see another dawn."

"I better see you in the guildhall," Sel told him as she climbed down from the rooftop. "That's an *order*."

Remal grinned to himself, striding from one side of the rooftop to the next as Sel barked out orders below. He didn't have much mana, even with that potion, but he had an idea.

He glanced down at Sel, unsurprised to find her watching him. *You know I don't do well with authority.*

Remal played for all he was worth, bottoming out his mana until little purple and black spots filled his vision. From his position, he could see the flanks were already crumbling. The door was held together with little more than luck. Any moment now, the gates would burst open and they would be overrun from all sides.

He gathered up his strength and bounded from one rooftop to the next. He never understood Jerric's penchant for being in the thick of things. The man always managed to insert himself where the fighting was hottest, but now he understood.

Even a border town like this was worth saving. *"It is what we do,"* the Paladin had told him when asked.

Now he understood.

*Sorry, Sel. I really would have liked to take you out for a drink.*

With a flourish of his tattered cape, Remal flipped off the roof nearest the wall, executing a flamboyant swan dive right over the wall and into the thick of the enemies.

His daggers were out in a flash. The serpentii nearest to him fell with a dozen cuts as he blazed a line of pain through their ranks.

There were so many that it was hard for Remal to wrap his mind around. *Where did they all come from?!*

He had been right. The town was doomed. There was no way they could hold out against so many monsters. *But at least I can distract them.*

Daggers weren't the best weapons when fighting in the thick of things, but Remal's pathetic reach hardly mattered when he was in the middle of dozens of slithering sinuous bodies, all hoping to take a bite out of him.

All he had to do slice any old where and he'd hit something. *No wonder Jerric thinks this is fun! He doesn't even need to aim.*

Whirling for all he was worth, moving to a tune only he could hear, Remal danced death among the serpentii at the gates. For a brief moment, there was a reprieve for the defenders.

He could hear Sel's orders to pull back.

*Smart girl.*

For one bright moment, Remal thought he might actually be able to take them out. But more than their venomous bites capable of delivering a potent poison, and even his Steel Rank body eventually succumbed to the toxins.

With every graze, every bite, Remal moved slower than before. His limbs felt like tubes of wet sand, but he still had enough strength to disembowel a sneering serpentii that thought it could stab him in the back.

Reaching around awkwardly, he felt a surge of cold pain as he ripped the dagger free. *Correction, looks like he did stab me in the back. What a poor sport!*

Blood trickling from the edges of his mouth, his body a mass of bites and cuts, Remal pushed on.

There was no going back.

Every minute he fought was another life saved. He always had a talent for drawing a crowd, now he held the attention of all the serpentii, and he wasn't about to let that go for anything short of his life.