

## Chapter 686 The Fires of Creation

“Sure the boss won’t notice?” Grahn asked. The barkeep of the Somber Core Smithy glanced around the dimly lit room. Three people were present, one passed out and two entranced within a deep conversation about sword enchantments.

Bralin downed his whiskey. He looked at the dwarf and grinned. “You know him. When have you last seen him working on his machine. He doesn’t know what half the inventory even is, and the rest he uses in downright offensive ways.”

Grahn huffed. He filled himself a tankard and sipped on it, leaning back against the reinforced wood. To anyway worth their steel, the dwarf would immediately stand out. The way he moved his old machine. Only someone with decades of experience could make it seem so casual.

The inexperienced dwarves either young or coming from outside often looked up to those with the most shiny and impressive suits. The problem with high quality machines was the fact that they did a lot for the wearer. *Lilith is the same*, Bralin thought. Living steel was some of the highest quality someone could get. He was most interested in the person who made that for her, more so than the suit itself. With her ridiculous level, she’d see it as a toy, but if he could get in touch with the maker. That would change things.

He only knew of one, maybe two people in the Pit who could make something comparable. Four or five perhaps with unlimited resources. But she looked like a child piloting the thing. If she fought anything worthwhile in the pit, things would’ve changed by now, the armor adjusting to her and she to it, but it would never be a replacement for decades of experience in a hard to maneuver suit. *Ah I have to be honest. I’d love a suit of living armor.*

A red light flicked on above the entrance, another near the restroom, and a third above the bar. Every dwarf in the room stopped their conversations. They looked around and got up, visors coming down to cover their faces.

“Wouldn’t be surprised if that was her,” Bralin joked, giving the barkeep a smirk as he too stood up to leave. He considered getting his actual machine but that would bring a lot of unwanted attention, and other long term issues. It would take another century to lose his reputation once again. He poured himself another whiskey and took the glass with him, Grahn walking next to him with his tankard in one hand and a massive hammer in the other.

He could hear the alarms now that they were outside, everyone at least at level two hundred would join the front line to defend the Pit against whatever creatures were unleashed today. Always a massive event but sometimes a little inconvenient. *They activate it a little too often as well*, Bralin thought, downing the whiskey before he threw the glass away.

“On your tap,” Grahn said, taking a drink from his tankard.

Groups of war machines rushed past, heavy breaths audible from within their helmets. High end machines flew above, next to mages and Dark Ones only wearing normal armor. The first cannon was fired, the sound reverberating through the entirety of the bowl like Pit as the ground shook. If anybody had failed to receive the message, now they would know.

As much as the battles were usually quick and underwhelming, Bralin did enjoy the spectacle. Every time. It was one of the reasons he had come here after all. The life of nobility just didn’t

appeal to him. The smell of heated metal permeated the streets now, smoke and fire rising in the distance. Explosions resounded. More cannons started firing. The two changed into a jog, both closing their visors as they activated their magic. A thick stone armor formed around the most important bits of Bralin's suit, runes etched within. They glowed with power as his speed increased. "See you later," he said to his friend and rushed forward. Each step propelled him through the smoke. He jumped and landed on a simple square stone building to get a better view.

His eyes opened wide when he saw a dozen flying war machines above the pit, their arms raised with green projectiles shooting out at both the cannons and defenders. He had seen them before, the design unmistakable. Not in person. Few alive still claimed they had. But the history books remembered them, mostly as a way to scare children and dissuade experimentation with both soul magic and necromancy.

"Soul Wardens!" he shouted, both as a warning and a call to rally. They wouldn't beat these things with their usual arrogance and competition. He would organize the front and push them back. *Fuck. And I liked my anonymity so very much.*

Bralin ran and jumped again, several machines landing next to him, three at the front with heavy shields and four at the back with both magic and slug cannons.

"Damage their weapons. Anti soul and magic spells only. Defend!" one of them shouted as the first projectiles impacted the shields. Another five Soul Wardens had appeared, joining the rest of them.

Dozens of spells impacted the floating machines, the outer cannons now taking aim despite the damage they would cause in the town. Bralin heard the nearby cannon power up, energy brimming along the tubes before a one meter thick slug of enchanted steel was propelled and shot at one of the machines.

He saw the Soul Warden explode in arcane energy, both its form and the slug rushing off into the city, crashing through the homes and smithies of a few unlucky residents.

His stone magic wouldn't do much, but if he could get close enough, some of his runes might do some damage. He instead focused on deflecting the acid like death magic shot out by the machines. Another one went down, falling as if invisible strings had been cut. *We have to keep them here,* Bralin thought when they reached the edge of the pit, hundreds of spells exploding above, three of the fourteen cannons already taken out.

Valves opened all around the pit, acid pouring out into the depths. Barriers formed and were shattered, most of the better runes already destroyed. *There are too many.*

Something white lit up the darkness far below, silhouettes of dozens of Soul Wardens visible. He paused as an acid bolt impacted his shoulder, unable to get through his reinforced and rune protected armor. Bralin formed a wall of stone to add to the perimeter, the dozen Wardens above reduced to four as another volley came from the outside cannons. Teams of flying war machines went after the damaged enemies.

"Keep them here! We must not let them roam into the city!" a dwarf shouted nearby, expertly dodging a bolt before he aimed his arcane cannon, a beam of red energy flashing out before it struck.

Each team that went to fight and hopefully finish one of them would weaken their position, but there was nothing else they could do. The shields had to hold. Already Bralin could hear the runes power up, hundreds of mages pouring in their mana, waiting for the signal.

He looked down into the depths again, another volley resounding from the cannons. A horn resounded. Immediately a shield of grayish quality came to life, covering the entirety of the pit as the last remaining Wardens above it were targeted with everything they had.

*Flames*, he thought and jumped in front of a damaged war machine. One of the Wardens had landed. Its sword had separated the legs of a now screaming dwarf, the only defender of a group of terrified mages.

Bralin shot a few heavy chunks of rock onto the machine. He raised the ground and pushed the injured warrior back and out of the way. "Spread out and aim!" he shouted and ducked under the horizontal swing of the enemy machine. His own suit was quite a bit smaller and not near as heavy but it didn't look like an experienced or conscious dwarf piloted the cursed thing.

He dodged to the left, a blast of death magic missing him just barely as he formed a shield of stone, the enchanted sword cutting through like paper. It still gave him enough time to take a single step back, the tip of the blade leaving a deep scratch on his chest.

Several blasts impacted the Soul Warden, its attention diverted for a split second. Enough for Bralin to form and charge a heavy boulder. He let the spell loose, aimed at the machine's right hand and sword arm. The blade was pushed aside but it hadn't been enough to disarm the thing.

He made some distance when a human clad in flames appeared, twirling in the air before a kick impacted the steel hand of the Warden, ruining its already weakened grip. The blade flew away and clattered to the ground a few meters away.

Bralin covered it in stone and jumped aside when a projectile flashed past. "It's other arm," he said to the woman.

Blasts of flame impacted the Warden when another two of them landed nearby. Their section of the pit had retreated a few blocks back. "Cowards," Bralin exclaimed with a broad smile. At least the mages had taken the injured dwarf with them.

The human grinned as well, landing next to him as spheres of fire formed around her.

"Where are your friends?" Bralin asked.

"Any moment now," the woman said.

The Soul Wardens raised their arms, death magic gathering on their arm mounted cannons.

Bralin stepped in front of the human and formed a wall. He braced for the impact but nothing came. Moving the stone away, he saw the war machines were gone. He looked up to see a winged humanoid clad in white flame floating over the center of the pit.

"There you go," said the woman next to him.

He looked at the flying being, squinting his eyes before he recognized her. *Lilith*, *eh*, he thought. "You seem pretty confident," he said, noticing Verena now entirely relaxed.

"Just enjoy the show," she said and walked to the edge of the pit.

Bralin raised an eyebrow and followed. When he looked up again, the white flame covered Lilith was gone. Their barrier usually took a while to activate because they had to switch out the enchantments against whatever magic type the enemy used. This time it took even longer, soul magic not something that came up more than once every other decade.

Bralin expected to see dozens of Soul Wardens cutting into the barrier from below but what he found instead were war machines covered in white fire, all trying to to hit three fast moving beings of ash. Copies, he noted. *She's beyond just Creation*, he thought with a grin. *Didn't expect anything less from a three mark human.*

"Are they... teleporting?" he remarked, seeing more of the Wardens appear below the barrier. Some mid swing and charging down before they looked around and joined the ashen hunt.

"That should be all of them within the city," another voice said.

Lilith now stood next to them, her entire form clad in white flame, a smooth set of ash protecting her below. Bralin estimated there to be at least three layers. Her wings folded on her back, wisps of burning ashen limbs coming out from between the two extensions. Two horns grey from her head, the blue eyes barely visible between the moving flames.

Dozens of war machines had advanced again due to the lull in battle, many sections of the defenses never breached like the one they stood at. "How long is that barrier going to last?" Lilith asked.

"Not made to last. They will open up to let a few through, then close it again. Until the enemy is dealt with," Bralin explained. "This one will be hard fought."

"Ah well. Kind of our fault in the first place," Lilith said.

A whistle resounded through the vicinity before she vanished.

***'ding' 'You have heard the call of a powerful being. Stand down'***

Bralin saw bright white light flash up, the barrier shaking as a part of the spell struck it from below. More magic lit up. Heavy impacts resounded as the ground shook, the grayish barrier and flames below now shrouding visibility.

"She went past the anti teleport runes. To fight them alone?" he murmured, looking at Verena.

The woman had sat down to meditate, a few wisps of flame moving around her as she calmed her breathing. "We would only be in the way. Just keep that barrier up as long as you can."

"Keep the barrier up!" Bralin shouted at nobody in particular.

The shout was repeated by a few others as some healers made their rounds, defenses set up and teams regrouping. The cannons were loaded and charged, aiming down into the pit with the barrier a few dozen meters further down, shimmering gray light with still spreading fires below. The entire vicinity was lit up from time to time, the impacts now less frequent.

"I didn't know you were high ranked enough to give commands," Verena mused, one eye open to look at him.

Bralin formed stone walls farther back, new defensive positions for war machines and mages. "I don't. It's all about confidence and logic. Nobody is in charge here."

He could see the heavy suit of Maulstroem standing on a half destroyed stone house, a few other influential dwarves near him. They seemed just as happy as everyone else to leave this cursed enemy to whatever being had showed up to assist them. A grave offense with everything they could handle normally. But it seemed even the Champion of the Forged Dome would agree that the reemergence of the Soul Wardens was not something they wanted to take lightly.

*Good thing that he's more reasonable than the last few.*

Bralin chuckled at the idea of them opening the barrier and storming down, only to be slaughtered in the crossfire. It would've been quite a glorious sight. But plenty of impressionable youth would've died as well. Always regrettable that, with shit leaders.

*"Hey Bralin, make the cannons prepare to fire,"* Lilith's voice invaded his mind.

"Prepare to fire!" Bralin shouted with his voice a little deeper than usual. *"Telepathy too?"*

*"Of course. Well it's new,"* she answered.

*"Something coming through?"* he asked, trying his hardest not to be fazed by the whole situation and the woman's behavior. He had seen a lot in his many years, but a single flaming winged creature facing down the war machines of Khan Joggoth was not on that list. If anything he expected her to be a dragon, and yet he knew she wasn't. The former would've been easier to comprehend.

Shouts went through the groups, the cannons charging up as the barrier wavered.

*"I am,"* Lilith answered.

Bralin heard the barrier shatter, a beam of near white flame rushing up and out of the pit. He was deafened a split second later when the cannons fired down into the burning debris. A high pitched noise remained in his ears as he walked towards the edge again. He looked down and waited for the dust to clear, all traces of fire entirely gone. A distant set of impacts resounded, but not as many as they had functional cannons. He grinned and shook his head before he walked to Verena. "No Wardens left. Come, before someone unpleasant starts asking questions."

"I don't have anything to hide," the woman said.

"Yeah, but I do," Bralin said. "And I'd rather not have them connect you lot to me."

The woman smiled and vanished, appearing in a half destroyed stone house about twenty meters away. Bralin glanced around, wondering where the third in their group was. The telepathic connection was gone, and with it any trace of the mysterious flaming creature.

"Hail the wrath of King Valkor!" someone shouted, other cheers chiming in similar things. A few started praising one god or the other, but assigning this victory to the ancient King who had defeated Joggoth in the first place made the most sense in their euphoria of a glorious triumph.

"Quite something, that Lilith of yours," he said after they had walked together for about half a minute.

"She's rather ridiculous," Verena said.

Bralin saw a war machine walk out of a nearby alley. Quite large and well made, dark steel enchanted to the very limits of the materials. He knew the owner too, or knew the name at least. *Didn't he use another model to fight?* Something felt off about his movements. "Master Helm. Are you injured?"

The dwarf didn't respond. Instead the visor opened to reveal a human woman, a confused expression on her face. "You must be mistaking me for someone else, young man."

"You three are mad," Bralin said and started laughing. "Make that thing vanish, I'll help you make it unrecognizable later. You look like a noble child stuck inside a bloody war machine!"

The heavy armor vanished, a normal woman revealed and bowing.

“I must’ve missed the battle,” she said.

Verena grunted.

“She dealt with it, didn’t she,” the woman said. She giggled and slapped Bralin’s suit as she walked past. “Of course she did. See, and my financial situation looks much, much better now too for some unknown reason. First round’s on me.”

“As long as you spend your gold in our fine establishment,” Bralin said, checking behind them to see if someone had seen the spectacle. It seemed most people were either hunkering down inside of their homes or still near the pit. Celebrations would start soon but they managed to slip through.

They reached the smithy about ten minutes later, the few workers downstairs all gone.

Bralin found a black haired woman sitting at the bar upstairs. With the absence of any ash and fire, she almost didn’t look like a monster. “Grahm doesn’t like people serving themselves,” he said and walked behind the counter, doing the same.

“A special occasion,” Lilith said and raised her mug.