

Brennan's captors loosed his feet from the gondola's stirrups and hurled him onto the ground. Groaning, his face pressed against frigid stone, Brennan tried to right himself, but his arms were still manacled behind his back and unresponsive. The mercenaries ignored him and snapping visors onto their masks to aid their night vision, they hunkered down around the perimeter of the ruined fort. Brennan lay there upon the broken flag stones, limply picking at the slippery blades of grass, trying to keep the blood flowing in his fingers, and abandoned himself to uncontrollable shivering until he could no longer feel the pain in his extremities. The night became a void to all senses, and Brennan had finally drifted into an uneasy slumber when a steel-toed boot planted itself in his ribs.

Crying out, Brennan lurched up as a heavy pair of armored legs landed prostrate across his chest. The mercenary cursed and rolled away, clamoring out of sight, and Brennan forced himself onto his knees. He could only see the mercenaries' frozen breath in the darkness, but several of them were communicating in anxious whispers and loading their repeaters with bolts; obviously there was trouble.

"There! Look. It's huge..."

"I still didn't see anything. Was it an animal?"

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like it."

"Highland elk maybe? Or an aurochs?"

"No. Way bigger. Like... like a small house."

"It's the whisky, man. If the Cap'n catches you drink'n on duty again..."

"Dragon?"

"Mountains in these parts aren't high enough for dragons."

"It wasn't a dragon either. It was walking."

“By the Morrigan! I think I just saw it. There’s someone with it too. I saw at least two people over there.”

Then an authoritative voice broke the chatter, “Alright. Garvis, Bintah, Drein, you three watch north, east, south. Everyone else, get the ballista over here, quick.”

There were mumbled acknowledgements as the mercenaries scattered. Brennan scrambled back as the clink of boots approached. Even with his eyes accustomed to the dark, he could barely make out three of the cloaked mercenaries removing hardware from their supplies to assemble what must have been the ballista. This they loaded with a long, metal harpoon and drug the armed weapon upon its carriage to the crumbling stone wall.

“Is it still there sir?”

“I’ve yet to see it at all, but point the ballista down the hill. We’ll not be caught surprised by...”

The captain’s voice was cut short by the sound of an arblast bolt ricocheting off the nearby rubble. “We’re under fire!” he barked.

Steel armor clattered as the lot of them dropped to the ground, glinting arblasts trained toward any sign of motion. When there was no further enemy fire for the span of a long minute, they dared again to whisper.

“They’re out of range. We need the longbow over here.”

“They must have snipers. That’s pretty tough for bandits.”

“Yeah, and how many bandits keep trained monsters?”

“Shut up!” growled the captain. “Keep focused downrange. I’ll get the longbow. Stay low.”

For a moment the mercenary captain crept close and eyed Brennan through his amber visor as he removed a long-chambered arblast from the weapons stashed by the gondolas.

Another sharp clatter, as a steel bolt carved a chunk from a nearby wall, sent him scurrying back to the others who cursed and shifted their positions.

“Bailhe, you’ve got the scope,” he said to the one manning the ballista. “See anything?”

“They’re hiding behind that outcropping at the base of the hill,” replied the man.

“Alright, let ‘em know we mean business. Put a harpoon into that rock. That should get them out in the open.”

“Aye, sir.”

Bailhe struggled with the ballista’s arming lever and Brennan could hear the whirring of the internal rings. The report itself was only somewhat heavier than an arblast’s, a deep crack as the insulators were removed and the harpoon flew out of the muzzle. A few moments later Brennan could hear the reverberation of shattering stone and distant yelps.

“They’re out!”

“I see them.”

Brennan could see a faint glint from the longbow as the captain took aim.

“They’re coming about on the right. I’ve got them in range.”

“I don’t see the monster though. Where’d it go?”

“Look out!”

A series of ricochets announced incoming fire. Brennan heard one bolt fly past the crumbling wall and land in the soil not far from where he was crouching. Instinctively he rolled away toward the gondolas for cover. The captain was forced to duck, but the others started arming the ballista for a second shot.

“Have you got a shot captain?”

His reply came as a crack from his longbow a moment later. The shot reverberated off the stone walls, but Brennan could not hear if it had hit its mark. The attack was met with a quick reply, another volley of bolts against the old fort walls.

“That was close,” grunted Bailhe, pulling a black shaft from the ground near his foot. Then gazing through the ballista sight he reported, “Now they’re behind that next big rock, up the slope.”

“Give it to them again.”

“Aye, sir.” And once again, with a dull crack, a long shaft left the ballista’s muzzle. This was followed immediately by a terrified yell—but not from outside the fort. The mercenary who had been sent to guard the eastern approach stumbled away from the old wall only moments before it shredded into debris and dust.

Brennan very nearly cried out himself at what he saw next: a gargantuan form emerging through the flying rubble, roughly humanoid though it crouched like an ape. In the poor light Brennan could make out none of its features, but even hunched over it was easily as tall as the old wall it had just torn through. A long arm shot forward with staggering speed and caught the fleeing mercenary. The creature reared upon its hind legs to take hold of him with both hands. With a twisting crunch, the man’s screams were silenced. The body dropped back to the ground like a wet rag.

“Oh... my...” the captain began, and then cried, “Reload the ballista! Quick!”

Clumsily, the mercenaries struggled to obey, but as if comprehending the danger, the beast rushed them. They had scarcely raised a harpoon to the big bow’s muzzle before the monster was upon them and with a blow of its great hand, it swept the ballista out of the fort and down the hillside. Yelling in panic the mercenaries fired blindly, but the bolts seemed to barely stick in the creature’s hide and its foot, striding upon its massively nailed

toes, almost crushed the nearest of them. They fell back, circling the fort to keep their distance.

Then two more figures appeared through the destroyed perimeter. Not monsters, they were people wrapped in black and armed each with a longsword—Raven warriors, Brennan recognized. They flew into the fray as if sped on by invisible wings. Only the mercenary captain was quick enough to fire before they closed. With a nimble flick of a blade, his Raven target deflected the longbow bolt in midair. Some supernatural insight seemed to guide the Raven swords; as they pursued their scattering prey, each swing cleaved steel and claimed a life. It was the giant, however, that caught the mercenary captain. Though the deft man put a bolt into its massive throat, the creature knocked him back, caught him by the feet, and slapped his writhing form against the ruined flagstones like a fish until it was limp and horribly twisted.

The fighting had stopped. Brennan remained hidden behind the gondolas, praying that somehow he might not be noticed—a futile hope. As one, the Raven warriors turned their heads toward where he cowered. They had come for him.