

## Chapter 63: A Monster Emerges

The monster came at midday.

In spite of everything, they had still been watching the hole. Three men at any time. Jason and Charles and General Graten were standing by the hole, keeping the usual watch. And since there was nothing else to do, they had started talking to each other and making small talk.

General Graten was talking about his favorite subjects--the battles he had been in, and the men he had killed. Graten was able to give graphic descriptions of the way he had killed men in the battlefield in a way that horrified Jason and Charles, although they didn't know what to say in response. Soldiers fight in battles, after all, and war was a way of life in their world. It was normal and expected for a man to take pride in his accomplishments on the battlefield. But at the same time, they both felt that a man should never spend too much lurid detail in the description of taking another life. And yet, they knew all soldiers had a right to tell their stories of the battlefield, so they didn't stop him.

It was the shaking in the ground that stopped Graten. The ground began to shake beneath them, and threw all 3 of them to the ground.

General Graten was the first to his feet, unsheathing his sword instantaneously. "This is it," he said. "This is the moment we knew would come. I'll be honest, boys, I wouldn't have chosen your company to die in if it were up to me. You're not my type--you're too soft. But sometimes a man doesn't choose who he gets to die with. Let's make the best of this."

Jason and Charles noticed that General Graten seemed very nonchalant about the fact that he thought he was going to die. It was as if this was something he had been waiting for for most of this life. They, on the other hand, loved their life, and their hands were shaking as they drew their swords out. General Graten noticed this with disgust, but said nothing.

Instead, General Graten simply said, "Someone has to alert Catherine. It's our duty to protect the queen."

"You go," said Jason. "You're the only one here who's loyal to her."

"This isn't a question of whether or not you like the queen," said Graten. "You've all got family in that castle, and you want to protect them. You need to alert the queen so that she can raise the castle defences. We don't have time to argue about it. I'm not leaving the fight. I've been waiting for this death, and you're not going to cheat me out of it. If neither of you wants to warn the castle, that's on you."

Charles turned to Jason. "You go," he said. "You were never any good in a fight anyway."

Jason would have argued about this, except a hand came through the dirt just then, which was a sign the monster was emerging. "I hate you," he said, and ran for the castle.

Meanwhile, General Graten focused on the hand. "You're not getting out that easily," he said. He hacked at the hand with his sword. There seemed to be a cry of pain and outrage from beneath the soil, but only a small cut was visible on the hand, despite the fact that General Graten had hit it with all his strength. "That's not good," said Graten. "These monsters are going to be

tough to kill.” He went to attack the hand again, but the monster emerged from the ground with a yell. He threw General Graten to the ground, and then looked around to see what to attack.

The monster was a hideous beast. It stood on two legs like a man, but was covered in thick blue hair. It was ten feet tall, and had huge curved horns on its head. It roared, and its mouth was full of razor sharp teeth. It roared, lowered its head, and charged towards Charles.

Charles held his sword and readied himself for the attack, but before the monster reached him, General Graten, who had gotten back to his feet, swung his sword and cut the monster in the back.

The monster had a thick hide that was difficult to penetrate with a sword. Difficult, but not impossible, because the sword did make a cut. Not enough to kill the monster, but certainly enough to wound him. The monster turned around and faced General Graten. It swung its huge claw at General Graten. General Graten swung his sword, and hit the monster right in the paw. Again, the monster had tough skin, but it was possible to do some damage, and General Graten had made a cut. The monster roared with anger. He swung at General Graten again. General Graten again dodged the blow that was coming for his head, and again cut the monster on the paw. The monster yelled, opened his mouth wide, and came down on General Graten as if to swallow him whole.

“Graten, run,” yelled Charles(who was now getting to his feet).

Graten held up his sword vertically to block the monster’s mouth. The sword was just slightly larger than the height of the mouth of the monster, and so he could not close his teeth down on General Graten.

Charles was now back on his feet, and joined back in the fight. He swung his sword and hit the monster in the back. The monster howled with pain, but no matter how many times they cut him with their swords, they barely seemed to make a dent in its thick hide. They could cut the monster's skin, yes, but only on the surface. They could not pierce his body.

Nevertheless, the monster was beginning to show some signs of fatigue and exhaustion. “Had enough yet,” asked General Graten. “Or do you want to feel this sword again?”

“You are a coward to hide beneath that sword,” shouted the monster. “I do not use weapons. I fight you in just my bare skin.”

“Humans use weapons,” said General Graten. “If you want to find a creature with just their bare skin on, you had best fight the animals instead.”

“I will eat you up, human,” said the monster, and its voice sounded terrible.

“Come on then,” said Graten. “Let’s have it.”

The monster charged at Graten. Graten swung his sword again, and he did manage to cut the monster this time, but the monster did not stop charging. The monster received the cut, and kept running, bowling into Graten and knocking him down onto the ground. Graten went flying through the air, and landed flat on his back. But Graten kept his grip on his sword the whole time. As soon as he landed on the ground, he rolled over, and would have leapt to his feet, but the monster was already upon him. The monster opened his mouth wide, and when he opened

up his jaws, it was wide enough to fit Graten's whole head in, and the teeth were sharp enough to cut through flesh and bone, and the monster surely would have bitten Graten's head clean off right then if something had not stopped it.

Suddenly, there was a flash of blinding light as the whole sky lit up, and a loud boom followed as if by thunder. Both Graten and the monster stopped to see what had caused it, and they turned to see Catherine emerging from the castle, followed by Jason.

"Catherine, use your magic. Stop the monster," Charles yelled.

"Now we're glad to see Catherine, are we Jason?" said Catherine sarcastically. "I wish you had been so glad to see me two weeks ago."

"Argue with the boy later," said Graten. "If you intend to kill the beast, do it now."

"Tut-tut-tut," said Catherine. "How you all misunderstand me. I have no desire to kill the monster. Not when we can join the monster."

"What do you mean?" asked Graten.

"You are very strong," Catherine said to the monster. "I could use a beast like you. Will you join with me?"

"I will destroy you!" roared the beast. "Who is this human who dares to talk to me?"

"Ahhh," said Catherine. "You don't know who I am. An understandable mistake, I suppose. After all, you've been stuck in that other realm for hundreds of years." And Catherine began to hum softly, and chant in the ancient forest language. A small ball of light began to appear at her fingertips, and slowly grew larger as Catherine chanted.

The monster's eyes widened in recognition. "Ah, you are a witch," it said.

"I am," said Catherine softly.

"I've eaten witches before," said the monster, and it charged towards her. It bounded large distances in a simple step. The earth shook below it, and the very foundations of the castle seemed to be unstable as the castle shook.

Catherine was taken off-guard by how quickly the monster moved. She didn't have time to use any complicated spells, and simply used a simple spell to throw the ball of light at the monster. It briefly knocked him down, but then he was on his feet again just as quickly, and bounding forwards towards Catherine. While Catherine was still forming her second chant, the monster knocked into her, breaking off her concentration, and sending her flying backwards. Catherine had to start the chant all over again now, but there was no time as the monster opened his mouth up to eat her.

And then, something neither the monster nor Catherine was expecting, another bolt of magic came up from the tower of the castle. It was Talon, who had been watching everything from up in the castle tower, safely away from the fighting, where he liked to be.

The monster's eyes widened in surprise as its body transformed. And then, where there had been a monster only seconds before, there was now a cute little hamster. Catherine picked it up, and tried to hide the fact that the monster had almost defeated her. "I have a cute little cage just waiting for you," she cooed. "Of course, how long you stay in the cage is up to you. If you

behave yourself, we may let you out. We may even transform you back to your old form, if we can reach an agreement. But for now the cage.” And Catherine walked away holding the hamster.

Charles and General Graten slowly picked themselves up. They were walking stiffly from being thrown everywhere by the monster. Charles walked over to meet them.

“That was it?” asked General Graten. “That was the monster we’ve been fearing all these weeks? That was hardly anything.”

“Hardly anything?” Charles said in surprise. “He would have killed us if Catherine hadn’t shown up.”

“Yes, but Catherine did show up,” said Graten. “And so did Talon. So if we have two wizards on our side, what do we need to worry about these monsters.”

“You saw how easily it knocked over Catherine,” said Charles. “If Talon hadn’t been there...”

“Yes, yes, Catherine got too close to it, I’ll admit that,” said Graten. “But she won’t make that mistake a second time I bet. As long as Catherine and Talon keep a safe distance away, it seems like we’ve got nothing to fear from these monsters.”

“None of us really know how powerful the monsters are,” said Jason, who was joining the conversation. “They haven’t been released for centuries. No one alive can remember fighting them. But there were legends that some of the monsters themselves had magical properties. Some of them have charms that can protect them from magic. Some of them have magic themselves.”

“The one we fought didn’t have any protections,” said Graten.

“I didn’t say all of them,” said Jason. “This one was apparently one of the non-magical ones. But the next one might be one of the magical ones.”

“One got through the portal already,” said Charles. “How long do you think before the rest figure it out.”

“It shouldn’t be long,” said Jason.

“Well, in that case, we need more men guarding this area,” said Graten. “Three aren’t enough. We should have fifty from now on. I’ll see if I can recruit any from my soldiers.”

“What about the goblin army,” said Charles. “There’s no point in having them all just annoy us in the castle. They can join in the guarding.”

“I don’t think Catherine would allow that,” said Graten. “She sees them as her personal bodyguard. And I don’t want the goblins out here either. They’re not trustworthy, and they’d just annoy the humans who were guarding. I’d probably end up killing some of them myself if I were standing guard alongside them.”

“Hopefully we’ll be ready for the next one,” said Jason.