

17th August 2012

Kontia.

Delilah, Lieutenant of the 111th Company.

It was frustrating, maddening that my Company had been overlooked for the assault upon the palace. We had likewise been overlooked in the push along the city walls, leaving us to do little but guard a gate no enemy contested. When once I had questioned Enya's passivity, I now cursed the chance to gain honour and recognition offered to others but denied to me.

Well, denied to me and the newly-arrived Companies of Lepus upon horse that were mostly situated in a large stablehouse just outside of the wall. The rest of their number were bedding with the freed slaves. Enya had ordered that they be ready should they be needed, but I questioned the need for them to have their horses barded. We could run through the streets of a city with more grace and speed than a horse could, even if a horse was faster upon the plains.

I looked out from the gatehouse tower at the streets below, at the section of the city we had barricaded and claimed as our 'beachhead'. I took note of the freed slaves now defending the streets with all but my company and the cavalry companies pushing into the city. So high above the city below me, I took note of how our section was lit only with some small, necessary lights in the darkness. We required little light to see. Surrounding the area of the city we had taken was darkness before a band of bright light marked where the defenders of the city had arrayed themselves.

The dark middle ground between us was where we had fought against the Saderans in the days past, and the attacking companies would have little trouble navigating in the darkness. There would doubtlessly be people laying in wait, but there was no doubt that, by dawn, the city would be ours. Only the truly delusional would seek to continue the fighting inside the walls, at least.

It was the Saderan Cavalry outside the walls we had to consider now. I turned about and looked out of the murder hole towards the farmstead close to the bridge where the Saderan force had made their camp. I had to agree with Enya's decision to withdraw from the blockade of the city: in order to maintain that blockade, companies needed to have been arranged outside of the various gates around the city. It had taken our entire number to just barely maintain our presence and have enough left over to secure our position inside of the city.

From their position at the farmstead they could strike out at any attempt to blockade the roads leading towards the gates situated around the city, meaning one company of one hundred Lepus could be threatened by thousands of cavalymen. The only safe way to defeat the Cavalymen would be to collect all of our forces together and strike at them, but given that the humans were mounted upon horses they could just refuse us battle and confound our attempt to establish the blockade.

I could see the burning fires of their camp from here. Lookouts placed upon the walls had reported the cavalymen pulling up unripe crops from the fields during the day. It was curious behaviour. I had spoken to Breha, a Tanaoi commander who had impressed upon the ladies her good humour and cheer, who had argued the Humans were likely starving and desperate.

A person does not recover from lack of food from a single meal and, if Breha was correct, it would mean the Saderan cavalry were vulnerable at the moment. All conversation about attacking the cavalry had ceased when Enya had readied herself for a night raid on the palace, but perhaps if all went well in the night it would be prudent to strike outside of the walls before daybreak also.

I sighed. Perhaps I was simply contriving a way in which I could prove myself an able commander. I could not say I had accomplished much beyond building a wall of tables and chairs, save for the fighting that had occurred the day we had taken the wall. Enya knew well of my command of the blade, but while I was not of pure blood I had learned how to lead women in battle.

Still, I turned up my nose at the good fortune that had seen the Tanaoi give me such a responsibility. With our very way of life under threat by the Saderan hordes who sought to enslave us, there was little room for women to seek pointless glory. From that perspective I did feel somewhat guilty for contributing to the mutterings of discontent behind Enya's back.

I should strive to repay the woman for the respect she had paid to me by good and loyal service. If that meant sitting here and doing nothing, just waiting for someone else to win the day, then so be it.

...I was going mad, I decided.

I laughed at how ridiculous everything had become since word had reached the Pomi of the Saderan incursion and leant against the cool stone wall. A fire crackled in the corner of the room, but then a little floating light far away caught my attention. Soon another joined it, and another.

I pushed through the reinforced wooden door leading to the wall proper and jumped atop a crenellation with a panicked grace, casting my arms out at my sides so I would not tumble down into the shallow ditch around the walls as I beheld a host of tiny lights approaching the bridge.

No, not just approaching. I could just about see lights traveling up and down the bridge...

They were escaping!

I cursed, dropped down onto the wall, and rushed back into the gatehouse, throwing myself towards the cramped spiral staircase as a million thoughts cascaded through my mind. I had reached the ground floor after what felt like an eternity of steep steps and exploded out into the midst of young girls snoozing and hugging warm drinks.

"Breha! Breha and Zara! Find them and bring them here now!" I commanded several youths, who scrambled to follow my commands. I rounded upon the others as they stared at me, dumbstruck. "Where is Enya? Have they left already?" I demanded, only to get a flurry of nods in return.

"They left a short while ago." As she spoke I could hear clanging and bells ringing out in the city, denoting the assault had begun across the city in earnest. I let out another curse in frustration as one of the girls looked around, confused.

"What is wrong, are we under attack?" She blinked, running a hand through her tightly-cropped black hair.

"No!" I shouted. "It's worse, they're running away!"

With Enya gone I had no choice: we would need the supplies the Saderans were currently escaping with in the days ahead. If we survived the next few weeks, we would also need the people as slaves later on. Moreover, the Saderans were being utterly stupid, traveling across even the lower Steppe at this time of year in such numbers would lead to many of them dying of exposure while underway.

They were just going to get themselves killed if they tried to escape now. Few would make it back to their far flung great bastion wall. It had to be stopped, but the Imperial horsemen were by the bridge and Enya, as well as the majority of our equipped and organised women, were currently occupied with taking the city.

I had no choice, I would have to lead an attack upon the bridge and stop the attempt to escape from the city. Enya had given me my orders without understanding the Saderans were plotting to flee in the night, so it was understandable I could no longer obey said orders...

That made sense. I could only hope that Enya agreed.

Casting aside any doubt, I watched as a very confused Breha and Zara followed the young runners I had sent out. I considered the assets available to me. My company was well-armed and -armoured, and we had several hundred well-equipped Lepus horsewomen commanded by Breha and Zara, as well as many hundreds of Lepus who were not so organised or well-equipped in the freed slaves.

And I had to organise them as quickly as I could, march them over half a mile at night to the bridge, and shatter the Imperial horsemen as well as disperse the Saderans fleeing Kontia before securing the bridge.

Despite all of the dangers, despite the very real risk of failure, I felt light. Like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. No matter what the coming battle would bring, it was better than sitting and waiting.

Breha and Zara, unsurprisingly, agreed.

Kontia.

Lucious Trier, Governor of Kontia.

I looked out of the fine glass into the garden below as shadows clambered onto the walls and began to pull at the spikes atop them, bending them and breaking them off as the handful of men remaining in my estate quickly abandoned any attempt to hold back the attackers and rushed towards my home itself.

It had happened so suddenly, the beasts had been almost passive until Graci arrived to throw everything out of balance. Now no one could find the man, and shortly afterwards the palace came under siege. A remarkable coincidence; at the very least he knew about the coming attack somehow and conspired to leave before he was caught up in it.

The situation was dire. Godasen was gone, he and his men. And the Tribune took what Orcs he could to the walls when the reports came in of an attack, leaving only a handful of conscripts and my slaves to defend the estate. Not that I had any intention of doing that, I just had to-

"Master!" I turned about to find Aief the Lepus trot into the room, somewhat short of breath, accompanied by a pair of conscripts. "You were looking for me?" He asked, and I felt a wave of frustration that I set aside. It was hardly his fault that things had spiraled out of control so quickly.

"Where were you?" I asked with perhaps more force than I intended, as his ears fell flat against his skull and he clasped his hands behind his back while shrinking back from me.

"Master Luci wanted to ask some questions of me," he began as I sighed. "About my people," he clarified before adjusting his hair somewhat and looking suitably embarrassed.

"That man..." I muttered before shaking my head. "It hardly matters now. Come on, the rest are already underway." He asked what was going on, but I ignored him and merely grabbed his hand to lead him though the estate towards the rear of the estate. The two conscripts, with nothing better to do and a war going on all around us, simply trailed behind me like lost lambs.

Making my way towards the private kitchen, I hurried through into the estate undercroft. It was an expansive space with vaulted ceilings holding up the rest of the palace. The underground room was a maze, intentionally so. I took my slave and the conscripts on a winding path through the storage area until we came to a dead end. Or what would resemble one had the caskets of wine not been left aside and the camouflaged door not been left open.

"What is going on?" Aief demanded again as I was about to order the Orcs to pull the barrels closer to the door and close it after us. "Are we escaping the city?" He asked, and I turned to him with a sigh.

"They are attacking. The Tanaoi and the slaves, they are all around the palace and we don't have the men to hold them back. We must flee," I explained, only to feel my heart skip a beat as his eyes widened and he took a step back away from me.

"The Tanaoi, they are outside?" He asked slowly, looking upwards as if he could see the savage women of his people breaking through the walls and taking my home.

"Aief," I said slowly, holding out a hand to my slave, "we need to go now or they might find us." He looked at me as the Orcs looked between us with unreadable expressions. For a moment I thought that the man would turn away from the civilisation I had offered him and submit himself to the barbarians at the gates.

He had enjoyed but a taste of Saderan life, spent barely three weeks in my home. I felt foolish; what possible loyalty could I have instilled in the man in such a short time? The murderous brutes above us were his people. That he felt any sympathy for them was hardly something I could blame him for, but regardless, I knew there was something special about him. Something greater, as if he was meant to be at my side. I just knew it.

Saderan high culture, it was the gift of Humanity to the other races. It was us who uplifted, who brought peace and order, and it was people like Aief who deserved the kindness of Sadara, not the many millions of ungrateful criminals that only strove to weigh down Humanity with their base submission to inhuman instincts.

Just when I thought I had failed, he stepped forwards and took my hand. "Alright, let's go," he said, and we turned about to the hidden tunnel as one of the Orcs gave me a deadpan look.

"What are you waiting for?" I snapped at the man as he picked up a wine casket with a strained grunt and walked backwards as the four of us funneled into the small tunnel. Soon we were in the inky gloom of darkness, but the escape route was well-maintained and only went in one direction.

My wife, daughter, and the rest of my estate were already ahead of us. Soon we would be away from the monsters of the steppe.

Soon the nightmare will be over.

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