

The remnants of the 9th Cavalry Division trudged through the brown snow in silence. Every now and then a soldier would break the silence with a quick cough, but it never lasted. The quiet seemed to envelop them like a fog now that they had lost everything. Not a single horse, dragon, or raptor accompanied them on their trek. Defeat after defeat has stolen the once bright smiles from these soldiers. Watching their countrymen be picked off by an unseen force like nothing more than practice dummies has drained them of their humor.

They had been walking through these backwoods and swamps for weeks, but have yet to find their way back home. The Army probably thinks they're all dead or deserters. Once a formidable force numbering in the thousands only one hundred remain. It didn't matter if they came back anyway because they failed. Would there even be anyone waiting for them, or were they all slaughtered?

The General looked up to the orange sky and gave a brief sigh. Climbing a boulder with an arm in one sling and his sword in the other he scanned the forest around them. Nothing, but dead trees as far as the eye can see. The man turned to face his troops looking up at him with sleep in their eyes.

"The sun is setting we should set up camp here," shouted the General.

"I didn't know we had supplies to make camp General. Let me just unload the horses and go get them," retorted a small man. The colors on his battered tunic had faded, but the shape of dragon could still be visible. He was a dragon knight hand picked from the royal guard that protected the King and his family.

"This war has been hard on all of us, but that does not give you the right to talk back to your superior."

"My superior? You and the rest of the field strategists got us killed. If it wasn't for my squad's quick thinking we wouldn't have gotten out of that damn mountain pass. So don't think you can take the high ground and claim rank after everything that's happened."

"Gabriel you're just upset that you're flying lizard died," shouted a voice from the back.

"No shit I'm mad that Avalon died. How would you feel if some bastard killed your drinking buddy? Am I not allowed to mourn the loss of friend?"

"Lizard's ain't friends. Just shut up and do as the general says."

Gabriel pushed to the back of the line to find the poor soul that insulted his partner. Some of the soldiers tried to hold him back, but others cleared a path for the two to fight. The man in question was twig of a human with very little fat or muscle left on him. It was a miracle he was even alive let alone in the army. Gabriel broke free from those restraining him and tackled the lithe man to the ground. They rolled around on the ground punching each other's sides and clawing at whatever soft flesh they could get

ahold of. The crowd of soldiers cheered and laughed at the fools wallowing in the dirt like a bunch of pigs.

Gabriel soon got the upper hand and sat on the man's chest stopping the rolling. He grabbed a nearby stone and bashed his face with his remaining strength. As the screams roared from his lungs the crowd slowly stopped cheering. Blood sprayed his face and hit the soldiers behind him as he swung the stone up behind him after stone struck bone. The screams stopped as soon as they started leaving the uncomfortable squishing of flesh and crunching of bone. The General ran down from the boulder threw Gabriel off the dead man.

"I think you've made your point. Now put the stone down and let's get some rest."

"Sir, what do we do about him?" asked a soldier nodding to the faceless corpse.

"Leave him. At least he'll keep the wolves away from us for the night."

The men made their fires away from the dead body leaving their comrade to freeze and be forgotten by a coming winter flurry. Perhaps someone will dig him up in the spring, but he was no longer there concern. The General sat at a small fire away from the rest of the men staring into the dying coals. He would occasionally prod them with his a piece of wood or toss some twigs on them to keep the fire going. Gabriel walked over to the General and sat across from him looking into the fire.

"You need something soldier?" asked the General not looking away from the fire.

"I would like to apologize for my behavior earlier. It was unbecoming of me as a dragon knight and I hope you would forgive my outburst."

"You want me to forgive the insubordination, but not the murder?"

"He deserved it. Avalon was more than some steed to be ridden into battle. She was smarter than any of these farm boys. Even among my squadron I wasn't liked very much."

"I can believe it," said the General interrupting.

"Anyway, as I was saying she was the only one that actually tried talking to me. You know dragons aren't just lizards. They have feelings and dreams and all the things us humans do."

"And yet we breed them for war as if their lives didn't even matter."

"Exactly! She didn't want to fight, but she never got a say. She could never live her own life. I think that's why she collapsed the mountain pass to save us. She wanted to do what she thought was right and make her own decisions for once."

"Do you think it was the right decision?"

"What do you mean?"

“I mean do you think she should have collapsed the pass to save us. Yes you and I are still here to talk about her sacrifice, but had she followed orders she might be here with us now. My question to you is do you think that just because it was her decision it was the right decision?”

Gabriel looked back towards the woods where he had beaten the soldier to death. He opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't find the words to answer the General's question. Instead he just went back to staring at the coals. As the night grew long and the fires grew small more and more men fell asleep. Gabriel and the General just sat there keeping their fire just barely lit. When the wolves came they thought they heard a man screaming amidst the howls, but they decided it was just the wind.

As the sun rose the men rolled around in the dirt trying to push themselves up. When the last of the fires were put out and what little supplies they had were packed they continued their long march home. Gabriel walked at the head of the line with the General, but kept quiet. Some of the soldiers behind murmured amongst themselves about various things from families back home to how they were going to get paid. Anything was better than the maddening silence that they had succumbed to for the past few days. Something off in the distance had caught the General's eye. It wasn't moving fast, but it was certainly moving towards them.

“Does anyone have a spyglass?” called the General.

“I have one sir,” said a young man with bandages over the left side of his face.

“Thank you. What's your name soldier?”

“Ivan Holt, sir.”

“How's the eye holding you?” asked the General pointing to the bandages.

“It hurts, but I can carry on sir,” Ivan said choking on his words.

“Very well then. This won't take too long,” he replied lifting the spyglass to his face. “Dear lord.”

“May I see General?” asked Gabriel. “What in the name of all that is holy is that?”

The General just handed him the spyglass without breaking his gaze. Looking through the spyglass Gabriel just saw a mass of bodies clawing their way through the forest towards the soldiers. The bodies writhed and wormed trying not to be trampled into the dirt by those on top making a wave of rotting corpses. The faces felt familiar, but were unidentifiable. Their skin was flayed from exposure to the elements and the constant rubbing of bodies, but some flesh still clung to their muscles.

“We need fire now! Whether it's magic or a burning arrow we need it now so get moving,” called the General. The soldiers scrambled getting out what little supplies they had to light arrows on fire or trying to find any spellbooks they had left. A line of soldiers lined up beside the General arrows a blaze ready to fire.

“What's our target sir?”

“Your target is an Insatiable Crawler. They’re nasty beasts that will make you hallucinate to draw you to them. Living flesh, whether it’s man or beast, is the only thing that satisfies their gluttony. Swords will just bounce off their elastic hide and spears will just get stuck in the pile of corpses that makes up their armor. Fire is the only thing that will kill them so take aim and fire on my mark. Gabriel approximate distance?”

“150 meters.”

“Do we have any magic users here?”

“100 meters.”

“I can use a little magic sir,” replied Ivan meekly.

“Then you’re going to finish that thing off.”

“50 meters.”

“Fire!”

The bow strings twanged as the row of archers released their flaming volley on to the beast. When the arrows plunged into the beast there was an ear piercing shriek sending all the men to their knees. Despite cementing their hands to the sides of their heads the wailing burst their eardrums and let blood flow like water. The flames slowly crawled over the bodies looking for anything dry to ignite. When the cries faded the beast increased its pace and barreled towards the soldiers.

“Ready another volley. Ivan, what do you know specifically?”

“I don’t know a lot, but the monks in my village taught me how to control the elements a bit.”

“That will be fine. What I need you to do is once it gets within ten yards you take all the fire sitting on that thing and make it grow. I want that thing to be a funeral pyre.”

“Yes sir.”

“We’re ready General.”

“Fire!”

Once again the arrows sang as they flew through the air. The thud from their impact was covered up by another round of inhuman wails. The beast stopped its charge to convulse and flail in pain. As it swayed from side to side the corpses fell off the beast revealing a wrinkled, egg white skin. What little blood left on them flaked off and mixed with the snow turning it pink. Ivan scoured the battlefield looking for a way to make the most of his magic.

“General, the arrows won’t be enough. As the bodies fall off I lose more flammable material touching the beast,” Ivan said frantically.

“Well then what do you need?”

“If we can chop down some of these trees and lure it over them I’ll be able to use the flames from arrows to ignite the wood underneath it.”

“Are you sure that will be enough?”

“Absolutely.”

The General licked his lips pondering the situation. “Very well then. Anyone that isn’t shooting and has steel on them your job is to topple trees on either side of the trail. Make sure they land in a pile or so help me you’re moving that shit yourself.”

The men sprung into action whacking and hacking the withering trees with their swords and axes. Swing after swing wood chips flew from the trunks and strips of bark clung to the metal. As the creature advanced the archers backed peddled to maintain their distance. Meanwhile the trees beside them creaked and groaned as they toppled to the forest floor. When the forest floor was littered with splintered wood and broken trees the General gathered the troops back behind the line of archers.

“Wait, I see something,” yelled Gabriel.

“What is it?” asked the General directing the troops.

“I’m not sure, but it looks like,” Gabriel faltered off as he lowered the spyglass from his eye. “It’s her.”

“What do you mean it’s her?”

Gabriel dropped the spyglass in the dirt as his eyes grew wide. He slowly staggered to the beast flailing and falling over on itself making its way to the soldiers. The archers continued to fall back as it came closer, but the rest of the soldiers had fallen back now that plenty of trees had been felled. The General looked to his side looking for Gabriel only to see him standing face to face with the beast.

“You fool what are you doing.”

“It’s her. It’s my dragon, my friend, Avalon.”

“You idiot she’s miles away under fifty feet of rock get out of there.”

“General, what’s happened to Gabriel?” asked Ivan.

“He’s been tagged by the beast. I’m going to get him. Don’t fire until I give the order.”

The General sprinted to Gabriel’s position jumping over logs and branches. A volley of arrows landed in a log at his feet with a solid thud. He turned to the archers and waved for them to stop along with a handful of other rude gestures. A loud roar pulled the General’s head back to Gabriel as the beast was now hovering over him. He returned to his sprint and readied his sword as he approached Gabriel.

When he was just behind Gabriel he swung his sword striking his lower calf. Gabriel screamed and buckled under the pain allowing the General to get in front of him. With one kick to the chest Gabriel

was sent flying away from the beast landing on the lumber. He turned back to face his certain demise and was met with the face of a beautiful woman.

Her hair was long and shined like an energetic flame. Her face was smooth, but showed signs of wear and tear. The pale white was offset by spots of light brown all over. Her blue eyes felt so warm and inviting that he wouldn't need a fire if he had her. She felt familiar, but decades of skull bashing had done a number on his memory. The sounds all around him blurred together into a faint buzzing.

The woman held out her hand to him and dangling around her wrist was his family's crest. He took her worn hands and the memories came flooding back to him. He was back home on his family's estate in the garden. He was just a young boy still too young to even move in a suit of chainmail. He was laughing and running around swinging his little wooden sword. His dog chased him around in the hopes that he would throw the stick of a sword and play fetch. The woman that stood before him was sitting on a bench under a little veranda. He was home, enveloped in warm air, when a smile would still dare to form on his face. The woman was his mother before the Sickness had taken her from him and his father sent him away.

Gabriel groaned as he finally came to his senses. He raised his tensed arms to the sky not knowing whether to clutch his bleeding calf or hold his throbbing head. His vision blurred and spun as he sat up on the pile of logs. When he could finally see clearly the General had taken the hand of an emaciated corpse. It's flayed visage smiled while other corpses struggled and grasped at the General. He tried to scream, but the only thing that came out of his mouth was a silent wind. With a swift yank the corpse pulled the General inside the mass of writhing bodies. Gabriel scrambled off the logs as the soldiers behind him fell silent.

"Fire everything!" yelled Gabriel as he fell into the snow on the side of the trail.

The archers resumed their volley at the beast as it continued to advance. All the arrows hit their mark creating patches of fire and burns where previous arrows struck. It was a rolling pin cushion of death and decay. When the beast rolled over the fallen trees the wood made sharp cracks like a whip. Ivan took in a deep breath and swung his arms to the sky. The flames on the beast's body reacted to his motions as if it were a puppet. The higher he threw his hands the higher the flames grew. The further he moved his arms from his center line the more the flames spread and reached out to each other. Soon the beast was completely engulfed in flames letting out its deafening shriek and reaching for the heavens. The beast froze in place and trembled from the pain. When the shrieking stopped it collapsed on the ground letting the corpses spill onto the dead soil.

The soldiers hesitated in moving forward unsure if it was truly dead. Gabriel spotted a glimmer behind the beast and crawled towards it. As he approached he saw a shining piece of steel lying in the dirt

covered in blood. It was the General's sword that he dropped before being devoured. He let out a long cry and stabbed the sword into the now exposed hide of the beast. A green ooze leaked from the wound and solidified almost instantly on the pale hide. He was so engulfed in stabbing the dead beast he hadn't noticed the crowd that formed around him.

"Gabriel it's over. We need to move on," said Ivan putting his hand on Gabriel's shoulder.

"Are we not even going to try and save the General? He could still be alive in there," Gabriel growled back.

"Even he was in there he was probably burned with the beast. We can't waste time trying to save a dead man."

"We have to try. None of us would have gotten this far if he hadn't been there to save us," he said choking on his words. "He's in there because of me. If I hadn't gone mad he wouldn't have had to save me. It's my fault so I have to try and save him."

"The General gave his life to save yours. Are you really going to waste away skinning an abomination from Hell just to find his corpse? What are you going to do when you find it if you find it? Are you going to waste more precious time and energy burying his body that may not even be completely together?" yelled Ivan.

Gabriel stopped stabbing the beast and turned to Ivan. The fear that had masked his face had shattered to reveal seething rage. His brow furrowed and teeth clenched staring Gabriel dead in the eye. His fists stood still and glowed like the embers the beast roasted on.

"What are you going to do fight me? Do you remember the last time someone thought they could insult me?" Gabriel said puffing out his chest.

"Bashing the skull of skeleton isn't much of an achievement."

Gabriel let out a weak cry as he flung himself towards Ivan. Ivan sidestepped his first two swings letting him stumble in the dirt. He landed at the edge of the clearing and was kicked back to the center by one of the observers. He scrambled back to his feet and spun around looking for Ivan. The world was spinning around him and colors were beginning to fade together. Ivan grabbed his shoulder and spun Gabriel around to face him. Ivan struck Gabriel square between the eyes with a single crimson punch knocking him into the beast. Gabriel cried and writhed covering his face.

"What did you do to me? What was that?" he yelled.

"That was fire. You are not in control of this party and we will not waste anymore time here. Will you be joining us, or do you still think we should save a dead man?"

"See that tree over there?" Gabriel said pointing to a tall pine behind Ivan.

"Yes, what about it?"

“Go hang yourself from it.”

Ivan looked down at his feet, nodded, and left the circle. Slowly the other soldiers followed suit and continued down the trail. Some stuck around a little longer to watch Gabriel suffer while others spat at his feet as they left. As the last of the soldiers abandoned him he could feel his eyes welling with tears and his limbs shaking. All that remained was the snapping of limbs from the fire and the occasional howl of the wind. As the adrenaline left his body the pain from the burn grew increasingly intense. Panicking he shoveled brown snow from the ground into his face to cool the burn.

“Well well well. Look at what we have here,” whispered a familiar voice from behind the beast. “It must be so upsetting knowing that you’re so powerless. No matter how many tantrums you throw or how much violence you use you’re just a weak, helpless man-child.”

Gabriel peered up over the beast to see the man he had killed a few days ago standing before him. While he still looked horribly gaunt he was free of any scars or wounds. He was no longer wearing the blue and violet armor unique to the 9th, but he wasn’t exactly nude. The only truly defined features were his extremities, face, and rib cage. The rest of his body looked like it was worked clay. Gabriel could feel his heart drop into his stomach and all the blood in his follow suit.

“How are you?”

“How am I alive? Well that’s quite easy when you’re not human. You apes are so fragile that almost don’t understand how you can survive in these fragile forms,” he said looking over his own body. He twisted and contorted his limbs in ways normal humans couldn’t to get a better look at their features. Gabriel glanced down at the beast and back up to the abomination now standing before him.

“What are you?” Gabriel asked breaking the man’s fascination with himself.

“That’s a tougher question. I could say that I’m the guardian of this forest and all of its lovely creatures, but then I’d be lying. I hate each and every living creature in this forest and want to see them suffer including humans. A more accurate description would be that I’m a relic. Broken and forgotten like the rest of the poor souls in this forest.”

He held his arm out in front of his body and tensed every muscle in it. The skin rippled with movements of sinew and bone. Squishing of flesh and crunching of bone permeated the air as the arm snapped into different angles and flesh fell to the ground. A thick black ooze bubbled over the exposed flesh and dripped between what used to be the bones in his forearm. When it hardened what used to be an arm was replaced by a saber made of bone. Gabriel was paralyzed by fear and disgust. The hairs on his neck rose, his limbs trembled, and his stomach boiled like an overfilled cauldron.

“Of course shapeshifting too much takes a lot of energy out of me, but this forest has no shortage of food. Luckily for me I just found my next meal.”

Ivan and the remaining soldiers marched onwards despite the devastating blow in morale. The trees were thinning and blades of grass could be seen shooting up from the ground here and there. They were almost out of the forest and that much closer to being home. A scream rang out from behind them sending chills down their spines. The handful of birds that decided to perch on the trees to rest suddenly had a second thought and flew off once more. After a few minutes the forest was silent once more.

“At least we’re almost out of this god forsaken forest,” whispered one of the soldiers.

“We still have a long way to go before we’re home,” whispered another.

The trees began to grow thicker once more, but this time they weren’t spaced normally. The trunks were twisted and woven vertically while the branches weaved in and out horizontally. They created a wall that blocked any light from entering spare one single person wide arch. The sun shined through beckoning them onwards through the gap. One by one the soldiers created a column and walked through the gap not knowing what awaited them on the other side.

Ivan fell to the back of the column as he was the group’s only true magical protection. He also wanted to be the one to greet Gabriel if he had a change of heart. Slowly the soldiers made their way through the gap filling out into the open space just beyond forming a crowd. As the last man made his way through Ivan looked back into the forest as one final farewell to this frozen hell. Off in the distance he thought he saw Gabriel standing behind a tree staring at him, but when he tried to focus his eyes Gabriel disappeared.

As Ivan left this dead nightmare behind he was greeted by a living one. The pass they had come through to enter this forest stood before him. The pass they had lost more than half of their troops towered over them carrying the cries of the dead on the wind. Turning back to face the forest the wall had disappeared and the sparsely grown trees opened back up to them calling them back in once more.